

TOMORROW'S ENTERPRISE



Sean O'Keefe

Tomorrow's Enterprise

By Sean O'Keefe ©2022

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I. The Mission

Sarah was certain that Murphy's Law applied no matter what galaxy she was in. It seemed to be one of the guiding principles of the Universe. Preparations had been ongoing for over month for the *Enterprise's* return to Andromeda when an urgent call had come in from Admiral Vance for Captain Dax and Commander Sill to meet him in his office.

Naturally, this had come in the middle of some time off for her. Fortunately for Sarah, Captain Dax had realised centuries ago that she needed time for herself. She may have been the heart of soul of the *Enterprise's* mainframe, but she was still a sentient being. As such, she could not be forced to work 24/7. That was nothing short of slavery.

So, one day a week, she would have eight hours during the night shift – she did not sleep, nor did she require it – to do her own thing. During that time, the bridge would be fully staffed, and the lower computer functions would be taken over by more mundane systems. Sarah would not be called upon unless it was an emergency.

This time around, she had taken the time to create for herself a vista from one of Vulcan's gardens with its overtones of ochres and beautiful water features and subsequently invited *Voyager's* holographic doctor for "lunch". As neither of them were actually physically present, they could have all the fun they wanted and pretend they were corporeal for a change.

It had been a delightful "date" for her, and she had been certain he had enjoyed himself as well. However, their time had been cut short when she had intercepted the communication to

Dax for the meeting. Something of that import was bound to whet her appetite for adventure.

The Doctor had been observant and noticed the change in her instantly. To his eyes, she looked like a human version of Aphrodite mixed with Marilyn Monroe. As a keen observer of human behaviour, which her personality was modelled on, he noticed the change in her demeanour – that she was suddenly distracted. “What is it?” he asked.

She had cupped his cheek in her hand and looked into his eyes fondly. “I am so sorry, my dear, but I fear the call of duty is upon us. We’ll have to continue this later.”

They shared a brief kiss, then the doctor disappeared back to his quarters. Sarah then routed her consciousness to Dax’s quarters, where he had just finished calling his XO, Tryna Sill, to join him in the Admiral’s office at oh-six-hundred.

For his sake, she did not materialize and only turned on the communicator. She knew Edan valued his privacy. “Good morning, Captain. Sorry to bother you. Do you want me to join you on this briefing?”

Dax knew she could do it by simply monitoring his combadge. It would be a massive time saver. “Yes, it could be a help. I don’t know what the Admiral has in mind, but it might be useful to have your input. He might have nothing more than intel for us before we head off to Andromeda.”

She knew him well enough to know he was highly sceptical of that. “I wish we both believed that, Captain,” she said, smiling inwardly.

Dax hmphed and said nothing. “I’ll let you know when I’m about to transport.”

Sarah got the message. “I’ll be waiting.”

Just before she switched off, she caught him add: "Oh, and I'm sorry we cut into your personal time."

If she had a heart, it would have been moved. "Thanks, Edan," she said. "I appreciate that."

"I know you do. I'll see you shortly."

Sarah realised she still had twenty minutes left of free time, so she went to chat with Tryna Sill while the Cardassian First Officer prepared to meet with the Admiral.

Dax and Sill were punctual, as ever, and Admiral Vance offered them a seat opposite him in his spartan, white office. They noticed that he seemed more than a little on edge.

"Is everything alright, Admiral?" Dax asked, concerned.

The man was not occupying this office without reason. "Please, I gather your ship's AI is probably already listening. Sarah, please join us. This briefing will no doubt have an impact on you."

Sarah liked the new uniforms, so she materialised, using the room's holographic projectors, in her usual avatar wearing one, with a blue stripe, though. She was a little superstitious about the red. She appeared to take a seat in the spare next to Dax. "Thank you, Admiral."

"What can the *Enterprise* do for you, sir?" Sill asked.

Vance's eyes flicked to Sarah. "About twenty years before the Burn, well before my time, the *Enterprise-N* was involved in a mishap that left the ship uninhabitable due to some kind of alien infection that ran rampant throughout the vessel."

Dax snorted at an old memory. "Don't tell me that the ship was overwhelmed by a plague of tribbles?"

The Admiral looked at him blankly. "What are tribbles?"

Only Sarah got the joke, and she just looked at him, feeling embarrassed for his bad timing. He was clearly about a millennium out of time for that one.

“Anyhow,” Vance continued, setting aside his mild annoyance. “Instead of putting the ship on self-destruct because the captain was fearful of simply spreading the contagion to nearby worlds, his final instruction was to put the ship on course out of the galaxy perpendicular to its ecliptic.”

Sarah was the first to speak. “May I ask where the *N* was when she was abandoned? And when?”

Vance touched a glowing square on his desktop and a three-dimensional map of the galaxy popped into being in the space between them. It quickly divided itself into Alpha, Beta, Delta and Gamma Quadrants and a bright, green 3D cross appeared in the Delta Quadrant.

As the Admiral started zooming in on the spot, Sarah was way ahead of him. She had already accessed the file he was using, extrapolated the exact location and trajectory of the *N* and the time that she was lost, then projected its course into the void. Then it took all of about five seconds to realise the problem.

“Oh, no,” Sarah said.

Vance turned his attention to their holographic aide. “What is it?”

She gave him a wan smile. “The one thing they couldn’t see. However, due to our friends in Andromeda, our stellar cartography is far beyond what you’ve got here. They’ve mapped out all of the local galaxies – they’re just not certain what inhabits them.

“Anyhow, I’m well aware that there’s a very large black hole not too far outside the galaxy near that course,” she took the liberty to mark it on his map with a large, purple oval, “that would have turned that *Enterprise* back on an elliptical curve to the far fringes of the Delta Quadrant.” Once again, she marked the projected course in blue and where it intersected the galaxy.

Vance grimaced. “Not good. That’s near the Ocampan Territories. They’ve become a bit of a handful these days.” He shrugged. “Better them than the Kazon, I suppose.”

All three *Enterprise* crew shared a look. Whilst Sarah was familiar with both the Kazon and Ocampa, it was only through the reports brought back by Federation starships. Even she had no direct dealings with them. Dax and Sill, on the other hand, were a complete blank.

Sarah frowned. During her time spent with *Voyager’s* EMH, he had shared with her some of his adventures those many years ago, and his fondness for Kes, the beautiful young Ocampan woman who had been his aide for their first three years there. He had always spoken of her, and her people’s gentleness – to the point of meekness. However, he had not been there for their final encounter. “Begging your pardon, Admiral, but from what the Doctor has told me of the Ocampa, they seem like a very peaceful people.”

Vance sighed. “If only that was true of them today. Somewhere along the way, their attitudes changed. For what reason, I can only guess.” He took a sip of his mug of coffee and continued, turning his attention to Dax. “Anyhow, I need your *Enterprise* to take care of this mess. Given the distances involved, only *Enterprise* and *Discovery* can get there any time soon, but only *Enterprise* has the firepower necessary if things

get rough. I'm afraid *Discovery* wouldn't last long in a firefight with the *N*. While she's much smaller than the *J*, she's fairly quick, well-armed and has an excellent cloaking device. You might have trouble finding her in the first place."

Dax was thinking ahead. "Do we have any Ocampan here that we can talk to?"

Vance shook his head, no. "Sorry, Captain. There's very little intel I can give you. Since the Burn, we've had no contact with that portion of the galaxy whatsoever. I'm afraid you'll be going in blind."

The captain narrowed his eyes, annoyed. He cut a glance at his XO. "If this is a possible combat situation, I'm not comfortable taking our civvies with us. Have them ready to disembark before we leave."

Sill gave him a polite smile. This was going to be fun.

The captain glanced at Sarah. "I want full specs on the *N*. I want to know everything about her – especially her weaknesses."

Sarah gave him a smile that reminded him of the Cheshire Cat. "Already done, Captain."

II. Laying out the Board

Ever the cautious sort, Captain Edan Dax brought the *Enterprise* out of her spore drive on the top edge of the galaxy, perpendicular to the ecliptic. The ship had the most powerful sensors known to Andromedan science, and it wasn't long before they had mapped out all of what appeared to be Ocampan space.

Standing inside their three-dimensional map on the bridge of the mighty ship, Edan, Tryna, Sarah and their android chief of security, Hercules, considered the vista before them.

"Judging by the amount of commerce between their systems, I'd say they've found their own source of dilithium," Tryna observed from her height of six-foot-three. She was unusually tall for a Cardassian woman.

It didn't faze Hercules, the lithe, youngish-by-appearances humanoid android – a descendant of Commander Data's. His intelligence was vast, and his compact body harboured immense strength and agility. "More power to them, I say," he said, ever the optimist. "Hopefully, they'll be the friendly sort, considering their history with Starfleet and Captain Janeway."

Sarah gave him a sideways look. "I wouldn't be so sure about that," she said. "I've given that a bit more research. Let me introduce you to someone."

A holographic being popped into the space next to them. "Hello," the ancient holo said. "I'm a training program..." The artificial being in the antique Starfleet uniform wasn't so old that it wasn't intuitive. The female looked about her and realised something was off. "This ship isn't standard issue for my time. What ship am I on?"

Captain Dax smiled. He had met Admiral Janeway briefly once, many years ago. He was unaware a training program had been created based on her. He stepped over to greet “her”. “Hello, Captain Janeway, I’m Captain Dax of the *USS Enterprise-J*. Welcome to the thirty-second century.”

Janeway’s hand went to her mouth in shock. “Oh, my. I am out of my time, aren’t I? I really need a coffee.” She put out her hand and a metal mug of holographic brew appeared out of nowhere and dropped into her waiting fingers. She lifted it to her lips and took a soothing sip. She took a longer look at her host and considered. “Dax. Any relation to Curzon Dax, the diplomat?”

The captain smiled. For a hologram, she was well informed. “Same symbiont, different face, Captain. I was wondering if we could use your help.”

Janeway rolled her eyes. “I can’t imagine what help a dinosaur like me could be to you people.”

Tryna Sill interjected with a single word: “Ocampá.”

Kathryn’s mouth became a tight O. “Kes. What possible problem could the Ocampá be to you people today?”

Hercules shrugged. “A big one if they’ve stolen the latest iteration of the *Enterprise*.”

Janeway frowned and indicated the air around her with upraised fingers. “I thought this was the latest.”

Sarah decided to save some time and bring the newcomer up to speed digitally. She stepped up behind her, brought her hands up next to her head and dumped all of the relevant information straight into her memory.

To her surprise, Janeway appeared annoyed. She set her mug up on nothing, rubbed her temples as if in pain, and

snapped at Sarah: "Don't do that again. I prefer to get my information the old-fashioned way."

Sarah was surprised. Here was a digital construct, a facsimile of the late Admiral Kathryn Janeway who had died many hundreds of years before, and she was acting like she *was* human. Perhaps it was a glitch in the program? She considered checking the base code to make sure it wasn't corrupt.

Janeway turned back to Dax, a little less grumpily. "I think I understand a little better now." She gave Dax a tight-lipped smile. "While I am based on Kathryn Janeway, I don't have all of her memories. I *do* recall that she had a good relationship with Kes, except for their last encounter."

That caught the security officer's attention. "How so?"

"Kes thought that the *Voyager* crew had abandoned her years before, and so she somehow caught up with the ship and nearly destroyed it." Even though she was a hologram, the remembrance clearly pained Janeway.

"How did they stop her?" Tryna asked, a little more gently than she might usually have.

Sarah wondered at that. It was unlike Sill to be sentimental with a hologram.

Janeway chuckled at that. It was a sound laced with irony. "*They* didn't. Kes thought the best way to destroy *Voyager* was to do it in the past, so she travelled there. However, she was undone by herself. Her younger self reminded her of the sense of family that she alone had found on *Voyager* and so she convinced her to stop what she was planning on doing. They put a stop to what she was doing, then sent her a message to the future, so the next time it happened, she didn't actually go back in time." She laughed as she rubbed her temples. "Temporal

mechanics was never my favourite subject. "Anyhow, in the end, she saw the message, stopped herself and went home. I think the crew expected she might die on the return journey; she was already quite old. The Ocampas only live for about eight years."

Dax had listened to the story in silence, a sense of foreboding in his soul. He did not buy the notion that Kes had not made it back. In fact, he was quite certain she had. What legacy had she left behind? Had she poisoned her people against Starfleet?

Sarah was mildly startled when Janeway intuited: "You think Kes did make it home, Captain."

She was rewarded with a sigh and nod.

"I can't believe that she would turn her people against us," Kathryn said.

"Is that knowledge, or hope speaking?"

Janeway took a moment to take another swig of her mug and she smiled, a little half-heartedly. "Honestly? A bit of both."

Tryna grimaced, ever the pragmatist. "So, we definitely need to be ready for an unfriendly reception."

Janeway watched her from over the lip of her mug. "Not just for photon torpedoes, either. The Ocampas were accomplished telepaths and telekenetics. Do you have anyone on board who can combat that?"

Sill and Dax shared a concerned look. Hercules interjected: "I think it would be best if the bridge crew, especially the key posts, were manned by synths, Captain. We can't be read or interfered with by telepaths."

Dax nodded at the youngish officer, seeing the wisdom of the suggestion. "A great idea, Lieutenant. Also, I want you to

keep an eye on me and Commander Sill. If we start acting out of character, I want you to stun us and take command.”

At that, Hercules actually blinked. “Are you sure, Captain?”

The sound of someone clearing their throat caught their attention. The solids were brought back to their visitor from the past, who was giving them a modest smile. “I might be helpful to keep around, if you’re worried about telepaths,” she offered.

Dax was uncertain as to the extent of “Janeway’s” abilities. His eyes darted to Sarah, who anticipated the question. “Captain, this representation of the late Admiral Janeway is fully capable of commanding a starship as she was designed to train new recruits right up to command candidates. She even scored quite highly in the Kobayashi Maru test.”

The Captain of the *Enterprise* raised a curious brow while Sill looked that the holographic woman suspiciously. It was well known that only James T. Kirk had beaten the test – and that only by cheating. What had Janeway done to score so well? She was tempted to ask, but she realised there were more important matters to attend to.

Before she could ask, Dax said: “Sarah, any luck locating the *N*?”

In a very human fashion, the holographic woman shook her blonde locks negatively. “The ship must be running under cloak, Captain,” she said, annoyed. “It must be a significant drain on their resources.”

Janeway added: “Either that, or they’re hiding it over a planet with a strong magnetic field’s pole, or in a time dilation field. There are a number of ways to make a ship disappear. Including...” Her voice trailed off, leaving her fellows wondering.

The XO began tapping her foot impatiently. She quickly found out you can still annoy a hologram.

"I may be a figment of light and forcefields, young lady, but I still outrank you," Janeway said tartly.

Sill stopped tapping.

Kathryn finished her thought. "I was thinking that, given what we saw with Suspiria, that their telepathic abilities might have grown to the point where they may have learned to make something invisible to standard scanners."

Dax made the erroneous assumption that Suspiria was another Ocampan and left it at that, not realising that she was the Caretaker's mate. "How would we get around that?" he asked.

The group regarded one another with blank stares. Even Sarah had nothing to offer.

Hercules shrugged. "At least the Lonsdaleite and psionic shielding should protect us from a direct attack."

Janeway gave him a curious brow. "What's Lonsdaleite?"

The ever-helpful synthetic lifeform gave her a playful grin. "It was developed from an almost-forgotten technology installed in the *Enterprise-B* that was useful in the psionic spectrum. When the *J* arrived in Andromeda, we rediscovered it and developed it to be a powerful defence against telekinetic attacks there."

Kathryn gave Dax an appreciative look. "You certainly do get around, don't you, Captain?"

Edan simply shrugged. "If you look closely, you'll see the ship has an 'I've been everywhere' bumper sticker on her port nacelle."

Janeway chuckled at the joke, and she noted the smiles from the *Enterprise* crew – who had obviously heard it before. No doubt, they *had* been everywhere before. *Andromeda*, she thought. Things had certainly changed in eight hundred years!

She turned her attention back to the stellar map and considered. “Sarah, can you show me where *Voyager* met the Caretaker?”

Feeling useful again, Sarah complied. The map shifted slightly and a bright, blue crosshairs appeared in empty space, not far from a solar system.

Janeway pointed. “That star system was where we found Kes and her people. This whole sector was controlled by the Kazon.” She turned to Sarah. “Can you zoom out a bit?”

She could see where the Captain was going. Sarah zoomed out fifty lightyears to take in ten other systems. “These are all now claimed by the Ocampa,” she said, dispassionately.

“Turnabout is fair play, they say,” Janeway said, her lip curled. “But the Kazon I knew were a warrior race. I can’t imagine them willingly living a life of servitude. They had it once, and I think they’re rather die than live under it again.”

Sill couldn’t help but interject. “If death is the only alternative, I’m certain there are many who would opt for servitude. Better to exist in chains than settle for free oblivion.”

Janeway gave her a bitter laugh. “I’ve met many who would disagree.”

Deciding he needed to head off a possible argument between the two, Dax thought he’d steer the conversation in a more useful direction. “I think we could use some more intelligence about what’s actually going on on the ground down

there. *Then* we can make up our mind on who we're dealing with."

Hercules immediately spoke up. "Captain, I volunteer. If we are dealing with telepaths, it makes sense for a completely synthetic away team to go – we can't be read or interfered with."

The Captain nodded at the wisdom of the suggestion. "Agreed, Lieutenant. However, I think you could use some extra eyes on the ground who are more familiar with the people you're dealing with."

Janeway's eyes lit up. "I gather you've made some improvements to the mobile emitters over the years."

Sarah had her own opinion on that one. The Captain's introduction of twenty-seventh century technology in the twenty-fourth century by bringing back the mobile emitter was a violation of the Temporal Prime Directive – and that was just one of her many scandals. Her records were many and varied, but she was well aware that the Temporal Investigations branch of Starfleet considered her a greater menace than James T. Kirk. Politely, she answered, "Yes, Captain."

Janeway gave her a second look, as if she wasn't exactly buying what she was selling. All the same, she said: "Great. I'd be fascinated to see what's become of the Kazon in the last near millennium." She took another sip of her "coffee" and watched Sarah over the lip.

Sill was about to speak, but Sarah interjected. "Captain, if I may, I have a suggestion." Dax nodded for her continue. "Captain Janeway isn't the only person at our disposal with knowledge of the Kazon – or the Ocampa, for that matter."

For a moment, Dax looked a little lost, then light dawned. "Oh." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "As he's not

technically Starfleet anymore, you'll have to ask him if he's willing to volunteer."

Sarah gave him a brief smile. "I've already taken the liberty, and he's agreed."

There were times when Dax needed to remind himself that Sarah wasn't a human being, but an incredibly complex computer construct that was capable of having conversations with dozens of people simultaneously. The fact that she had already done so should have come as no surprise at all. "Thank you, Sarah. Please inform him that the landing party will disembark as soon as we make orbit of..." He reached out, scooped a planet out of the model in front of them and tossed it through the air to the officer at helm; a huge Klingon warrior named Borchia, who nimbly caught it and dropped it into the console. The computer instantly interpolated the co-ordinates and simply requested the drive type required. *Enterprise* had five: impulse, warp, trans-warp, quantum slipstream and its new spore drive, which was practically instantaneous.

"Captain, are we taking a drive in the country or spinning the wheels?" he asked with a smirk.

Dax considered the question seriously. "We don't want to give away all our secrets, Borchia. Let's go in under slipstream and keep the spore drive for a quick getaway."

Borchia understood and gave his commander a respectful nod. "Yes, sir!" He tapped in the command and the four-kilometre-long vessel took a moment to create the vortex, then disappear into the slipstream. "ETA, twenty-two hours Captain."

Dax brightened a little. It was always nice to have a bit of breathing room. He turned and considered "Janeway". "In the

meantime, perhaps you could give us a more in-depth briefing on the Ocampo and Kazon in the 24th Century.”

At that, Kathryn gave him a chuckle laced with irony. “Teaching. That’s what I was programmed for.”

Sarah could see it in his eyes. He was uncomfortable. Why? Surely the woman before him would be at the very least a reminder of good times from long ago. Instead, the Doctor looked very ill at ease.

She had picked out the venue this time. It was a café in Venice, next to a channel where the odd gondolier would pass by, carrying his cargo of lovmakers to who-knew-where. The entire city was a simulation, as was the water, but it was all still beautiful. Venice itself had long been lost to the sea and was now only a memory, often recreated by romantics like herself, in moments when she desired a more peaceful atmosphere. She had hoped it would help bring these two characters together. She feared the artificiality of their environment had actually made things worse.

The waiter returned, a bright, smiling lad with enough charm to light a bulb. “Would you like anything else?” he asked in Standard.

Janeway looked up at him and said: “Café nero, per favore.”

He looked at her quizzically. “Un altro? Sono tre!”

Sarah smiled to herself. Such were the limitations of a simulation. The characters within had no idea they weren’t real – and neither was the coffee. Three coffees might keep the average person up all night, but for a digital person it had no

effect whatsoever. Either way, Janeway seemed to be enjoying it. Let her have fun!

At least the waiter seemed to have broken the tension. The Doctor looked at her and sighed. Such a human aphorism, she thought. For a digital construct, he was *so* human.

And even though Janeway was *merely* a training program *eight hundred* years out of time, she was very intuitive. Sarah had learned very quickly not to underestimate her. “What’s the matter, Doctor?” she asked in as friendly a tone as she had ever heard from her.

Her friend looked up and she could see he was trying. There were so many thoughts, so many feelings warring within him.

Janeway sat back and gave him some space. As she did so, she gratefully accepted her fresh cup of coffee and took a sip. “I know I’m not your Captain, Doctor. She died a long time ago – but I was given her memories – from before she became an Admiral, and I can tell you that she was so very glad to get her people home.”

The statement seemed to upset him all the more, and Janeway was confused. To save him the discomfort of having to explain, Sarah stepped in and told her what had happened during their mission to Kyria so many years before, and how it resulted in a backup module being left behind – with a copy of the Doctor in it. Once activated, he not only had to set the record straight about their original visit, but he left his mark on their society before deciding to return to the Alpha Quadrant. He hadn’t been here all that long himself, and the reception hadn’t been very warm. Hence his transfer to the *Enterprise*.

With the picture clear in her mind, Kathryn was beginning to understand. Neither of them was exactly what they appeared to be. All the same, they could be useful in the here and now; they had a mission to perform.

"Doctor, I know a lot of stardust had passed under the proverbial bridge since then, but I can assure you that my memories and affection for you, for Starfleet and everything it stands for are very real. We may be a long time away from *Voyager*, Chakotay, Tom and B'Elanna, but they will not only live on in us, but they made a difference then, whose ripples are still felt today."

Finally, the Doctor spoke. His voice was quiet and laden with sadness. "I'm happy for them, Captain, that they got home. However, *I never did*. While Captain Dax was kind enough to give me space on the *Enterprise* to serve and work as a medic, that's as close to *home* as I've come. Now, to see you..."

Janeway grimaced. "I'm sorry, Doctor," she said in all sincerity. "I'm just a reminder of all you've lost. I promise you; I won't hang around. As soon as this mission's over, I'll get Sarah here to erase the program. You won't have to worry about seeing me again."

Her comment brought the Doctor up short. He shook his head emphatically, no. "You don't have to do that, Captain. Yes, you're a reminder of Captain Janeway, but just because you're hard for me to handle doesn't mean everyone else should miss out on knowing who you were."

Sarah smiled and reached out, taking Janeway's hand. "And are, Captain. The original Admiral Janeway might be gone, but I believe you have a lot to offer."

Captain Kathryn Janeway turned towards her, shaking a lock of her famous red hair loose, tickling her nose. She blew it away, comically. "I always do," she said, confidently.

III. Opening Gambit

Nobody saw the *Enterprise* drop out of slipstream on the edge of the system, but they wouldn't have anyway. Her cloak was the best in *two* galaxies, and powered by Omega. Keeping the ship under 0.5c, the ship swept through the system, avoiding the few planets there were and made for the second planet in it – the only one supporting life.

A quick scan found nothing in orbit, aside from a few small satellites, and with little chance of being discovered, the away team's shuttle slipped out of the bay and into space, cloaked, and headed for one of the fringe settlements on the planet below.

On board, the Doctor and Janeway revelled in their surroundings. To their pleasant surprise, Commander Sill had used the *Enterprise's* not-inconsiderable facilities to replicate a copy of the *Delta Flyer*, with a few modifications, including a cloaking device and transwarp drive, if needed.

Once on board, Hercules had taken one look at the controls and baulked. He turned and looked at the captain. Incredulously, he asked: "Do you know how to fly this thing?" He indicated the peculiar mix of touch screens, flip switches and joysticks.

She shared a knowing look with the Doctor. "Actually, I do." She stepped forward and slid gracefully into the pilot's chair. "Buckle up, everyone. I may be a little bit rusty." She gave her passengers a cheeky grin, then gracefully levitated the *Flyer* off the deck and out into the cold of space.

At the nearby controls, Hercules had already rendered them invisible and raised their shields. Unlike their mothership, their shuttle wasn't impervious to practically everything, so he was taking no chances. Over his shoulder, he asked: "Serena, has anything shown up on our scanners?"

One of his many sisters, Serena was a tall, beautiful female who appeared Russian. She had long, black hair to match her dark eyes; oddly however, her voice sounded like a cultured Englishwoman. "Nothing, Herc. Either they're not there, or they don't want us to know they're there."

Hercules pursed his lips. "Best to go on the presumption they *are*," he said, testily, annoyed at this little game of hide-and-go-seek.

Janeway chimed in. "I always do. You live longer that way."

She heard grunts of assent from her crew and was mildly distracted by a voice from the panel next to her.

"How is the *Flyer* performing?" Sarah asked.

The captain gave her a slightly annoyed look. "Don't you know better than to talk to someone when they're driving?" she said, reproving.

Sarah's eyes widened a little and apologised. "Sorry, Captain. I didn't think I'd be that much of a bother."

Janeway gave her a cheeky grin to let her know she was having a joke at her expense. "The *Flyer* is doing fine, Sarah. We're on target for that settlement you pointed out and should set down in a minute." She looked out the window and frowned. "You know, the last time I was here, this place was a dust bowl. Things are a lot greener now. It's weird."

Sarah paused for a fraction of a second, then said: "Yes, there is a notable discrepancy between *Voyager's* scans and ours. What could have happened to have changed the weather so dramatically?"

Over her shoulder, the Doctor chimed in: "Another question for our list."

Initially, Kathryn had been concerned that the ship would throw up a fair amount of dust upon landing and she had been looking for a large clearing to land on – away from the settlement. Now the land was so fertile the problem was finding a clearing at all. Fortunately, the Doctor came to her aid.

"There's a nice, smooth rocky out cropping next to a stream about a kilometre from the settlement, Captain," he said.

"Bearing?" Janeway asked.

"South SW," the Doctor replied.

From his position next to, and slightly behind, their holographic teaching aid, Hercules could not help but wonder why the Doctor seemed so frosty towards this recreation of his once beloved captain. Sure, it had been hundreds of years since their parting, but that was, as the humans put it, a lot of water under the bridge. Surely, he could put that behind him and accept this training program for what it was.

"I see it," said Janeway. "Hercules, do you see any life signs?"

Hercules had already scanned the area out to a range of ten kilometres and knew every microbe in the area. Such was his level of vigilance. "We're clear, Captain Janeway."

Kathryn brought the *Delta Flyer* around in a graceful arc and set it down gently, hardly disturbing a pebble. The retrojets

rustled some trees momentarily, but that was the limit of their disturbance.

Hercules stood and motioned for his crew to follow. Now on the ground, this was his mission. While Janeway had the superior experience, she did not technically hold the rank, and the Doctor had left Starfleet years before. Serena was still an ensign and a recent Academy graduate of only a year prior. The four of them quickly kitted out with wrist phasers they hid up their sleeves – which mimicked the local attire they had managed to sneak a look at from orbit. Aside from that, they hid their communicator/tricorders under folds in their clothing and then opened the ships' outer hatch.

Their peculiarly optimistic security specialist peered about him and listened intently for anything out of the ordinary. He heard nothing. He had scanned the area with the *Flyer's* advanced tech and found nothing untoward and been rewarded with nature. "It looks like we're alone."

"Let's just hope it stays that way," the Doctor muttered under his breath as they walked outside into the morning sun.

Kathryn took a look skyward and noted it wasn't the brightest sky she had ever seen, but it was a welcome change from being cooped up in a starship. Considering she was designed to be a training program for cadets, she was truly surprised to be on an away mission at all. Curiously, she noted the absence of avian fauna. She turned her ears to the side and listened. Nothing. No birds at all. She wondered what the locals kept the insect life under control with.

Hercules had memorised the direction of the settlement and made a beeline for it. They made good time as none of them

were prone to tiring, and within an hour they found themselves peering through pocket binoculars at the small town.

Serena passed her pair to Janeway. "Are they who we expected?" she asked.

Kathryn squinted and perused people both young and old, male and female, going about their business. It seemed an agrarian society, technologically backward – nobody even wore a timepiece. She saw no weapons of any sort. However, their appearance was *very* familiar. "They're Kazon, all right," she said, with a touch of irony. "Now they're on the other side."

"Where are their masters, then?" Hercules asked.

Sagely, Janeway dryly observed: "Terror doesn't have to be visible to be felt."

The Doctor was a keen observer of behaviour, and it had taken him all of a few seconds to note that these people had very little spirit in them. "Nobody's smiling, the children aren't playing; I'd say everybody's afraid of something."

Hercules put away his glasses and he motioned for the others to follow suit. "Aside from our lack of cranial ridges, we'd pass for locals. With a dearth of overseers visible, I suggest we find an outlier we can approach and try and talk to them."

The four of them considered, and Serena pointed off to the left, where an older female was hanging out wet clothes behind a building to dry. She was alone.

"Worth a try," Hercules said, cheerfully with a nod, then led them forward with a nonchalant walk not unlike the locals. The others got the hint: blend in.

The woman had greying hair that seemed to bunch together in the typical Kazon fashion, and her dark skin was wrinkled over her cranial ridges. Otherwise, she was as fit as any

twenty-year-old. She didn't hear them coming until they were only a few steps away. She looked up in mild alarm and it took her a few seconds to realise they were not Kazon.

Hercules held his hands out in what he believed was the universal sign of peace and friendship. The woman ignored him and instead her eyes were drawn to the fiery red-haired woman with the piercing eyes. She seemed to recognise her. Her lips formed a single word: "Janeway."

The captain looked at her in surprise. "How could you possibly know who I am? Besides the last time I was here was eight hundred years ago."

Instead of answering, her eyes turned again to the doctor and to his hairless head. She looked him up and down and said: "Doctor."

Now it was the Doctor's turn to be surprised. A little flustered he stammered: "I'm afraid you have us at a disadvantage, madam."

The woman looked at them with a mixture of fear and welcome. To Hercules eyes, she seemed unsure whether they were her death or her salvation. "Come inside, come inside." She waved them over to the door on the back of the building and within moments they were sitting around a small table, and she was making them all a cup of tea. Neither Janeway nor the doctor were about to explain to her that they were not biological in nature, they would simply leave their tea sitting on the table to go cold.

When everyone had been taken care of and the lady of the house was comfortable, she took a sip of her tea and began to explain. "Everyone here knows the story of *Voyager*."

All four of them were surprised and showed it.

Janeway ran her fingers around the top of her teacup thoughtfully. "Yes, but how did you so easily recognise me?"

"There are pictures of your entire crew on the walls of the Great Hall. We've even been told many stories of your exploits in this corner of the Galaxy."

The doctor was sceptical. From personal experience he had seen how history could be twisted by those who retold stories to suit their own agendas. All the same, the demeanour of this woman seemed quite pleasant. She appeared to harbour no animosity towards them at all. Indeed, her attitude was of one who had met her personal idols. All the same, he could not help but wonder why she was concerned for her, and their, personal safety. She had seemed in a very great hurry to get them out of sight. "What do you like the most about Captain Janeway?" he asked.

The woman seemed to give the thought some serious consideration for a moment, then said: "I like the fact that no matter where *Voyager* went, if they found someone in need, they would do their best to help. The ship was thousands of light years from home, and it would take them about seventy years to get there, in fact there was no guarantee they would ever actually pull it off, and yet they still took the time to help people. Captain Janeway was their leader and I admired her for that kind of leadership." She finished her assessment by giving the captain a warm smile.

Kathryn blushed. While Hercules was surprised that a hologram could actually do that, the captain reciprocated by giving her a smile of gratitude. "Thank you very much, Miss..."

"Jural," the lady said. "I'm called Jural. This is my home. You are welcome here."

Serena, who was seated next to her, placed a warm, friendly hand over hers. "Thank you, Jural. It is much appreciated. We've come here to try to understand what has happened in this area of space so we can open a dialog with the Ocampa – and hopefully make things better for your people as well."

Jural practically flinched at the word Ocampa. "There is no talking to the Ocampa. Ever since they took over this space, they have treated us like second class citizens. Our voice is no longer heard."

The Starfleet contingent was disappointed, but not surprised as this turn of events. All the same, Hercules asked: "Is there an Ocampa on this world we can talk to?"

In all seriousness, Jural met his gaze. "If you see the Ocampa here, you will die."

Serena grimaced. "That sounds rosy," she said, her tone laced with sarcasm.

The Doctor shared a glance with Janeway. "The Ocampa aren't the warm and fuzzy people we met all those years ago."

Kathryn nodded. "More like the people Suspiria co-opted. Perhaps these Ocampa are their descendants?"

A shrug was the Doctor's best answer. "There's no way to tell. We never got a DNA sample from them, and we're so far removed from them in time that tracing their ancestry would be nigh-on impossible."

Janeway practically chuckled at that. "I can't imagine how many generations have come and gone in the last eight hundred years, given their lifespan. At least a hundred."

Their conversation was brought up short by a sudden and insistent pounding on the solid, wooden door. A masculine

voice, clearly used to getting its way, was heard yelling: "Open this door, Jural! I know you have outworlders in there!"

The look of terror on Jural's face was all the Starfleet officers needed to know the identity of the interloper. "He knows..." was all she would croak out through her fear-constricted larynx.

Hercules moved to rise, but Janeway held up a hand. "Let me get this," she said, giving him a wink. "What can he do to me?"

The lieutenant, to his credit, saw the wisdom of her suggestion and let her go. He took out his phaser and indicated Serena do the same, both of them taking up defensive positions behind her. The Doctor, to his credit, joined the Captain.

There was one more knock before Janeway yanked open the door and she stood there in the noonday sun. Both wore welcoming grins and the captain said: "Hello."

The Ocampa, used to throwing his weight around, started by saying: "It's about..." before drawing up short, suddenly realising he was in the presence of not only a pair of legends, but something that was impossible. He appeared middle-aged, dark-skinned and had tight, curly hair. However, it was his piercing eyes that caught Janeway's attention. It wasn't intelligence, necessarily, she thought. It was something else – intangible.

The man stammered for a moment, and the captain took advantage of his being off-balance. The crowd's apparent awe at her sudden appearance hadn't escaped her, either. She had expected it. She graced him with a friendly smile and simply said: "Hello."

As the crowd kept whispering her name, Kathryn kept her eyes on her inquisitor, who had yet to gain his composure. She aimed to keep him off balance. "I was hoping to run into you. I represent the United Federation of Planets, and we were hoping to renew friendly diplomatic relations with the Ocampa." Knowing she was stating the totally obvious, she added. "It's been a while."

The man's eyes widened incredulously. "It has been over a century since the anomaly that disrupted the galaxy's dilithium. In all that time, we have had no contact with the Federation at all. Before then, you kept us at a distance. Why are you reaching out now?"

Janeway didn't have to be a telepath to know the man was lying. His body language was off – and she had already learned his tells. He looked away when he mentioned contact, so she knew he was being duplicitous regarding that subject. "Come now, sir," she said. "We both know there's contact, and there's *contact*. It's come to our attention that the Ocampa have in their possession something that belongs to the Federation, and we seek its return."

"I have no idea what you mean, Captain," he said, flatly.

I wish I could play poker against this fellow, Janeway thought. *I'd take him for everything he's got.* "I'll tell you what, err... I'm sorry. We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Captain Kathryn Janeway, and you are..."

In a very unfriendly monotone, the stranger said: "Shaan."

"I'll tell you what, Shaan. I know you're the local head honcho and I won't interfere in your private little domain." She gave him a polite, but insincere, smile. "I *would* appreciate it if

you would put me in touch with your superiors so we can discuss opening diplomatic relations. I don't think you're high enough on the ladder to deal with me."

Shaan's eyes kept flicking back and forth from the Doctor to Janeway, as if he couldn't believe what his eyes were beholding. Then he noticed their two comrades inside the building behind them and he focussed intently on them as well. This took all of a moment, before he looked back at the Doctor and the Captain. "Why can't I read any of you?"

While the Captain was a great poker player, the Doctor wasn't. Shaan began to suspect something was amiss with them all.

Kathryn continued to play. "Modern technology is a marvellous thing." For emphasis, she tapped her combadge and a three-dimensional display appeared before her, showing a map of the entire village, including indicators of all present. "As you can see, not only do I have a lock on everyone here, but so does our mothership."

Shaan wasn't buying what she was selling. "I don't believe you've got a ship in orbit, or that you're even real. I know that the Doctor was a hologram, and if the technology existed to make him, it exists to recreate *you*. As for those behind you, let's put it to the test."

The only indicator that Shaan was doing anything was a slight widening of his eyes but gagging coming from behind them caused both officers to swivel on their heels. Serena was holding her hands to her throat, her eyes bulging. She was gasping for air. In response, Hercules raised his phaser to fire at Shaan, but his hand began to turn towards his own head.

Janeway saw no alternative. She turned and gave their opponent one chance. "Let them go!" she demanded.

"No," he answered flatly, arrogantly.

To the Captain's eyes he appeared to be enjoying it. With the skill brought of many years of training, she stepped forward, reached out with both hands, and expertly snapped the man's neck. Shaan's body dropped like a marionette with its stings cut.

Janeway was a little surprised by his lack of weight, but she wasn't sorry she'd done it. There had been many times she had been forced to act in self-defence to preserve the lives of shipmates. This was no different.

She turned to see the Doctor had already rushed to Serena's side and was attending her. A quick glance told her she was still moving, so she left him to attend her. Hercules had never fired, so he was OK.

The Captain turned her attention to the villagers, wondering what their reaction would be to Shaan's death. Would they be celebrating?

They were terrified. Behind her, Jural joined her and said: "I understand why you did that, Captain, but now things are worse. The Ocampa will come, and they will kill twenty of us here for not preventing his death."

Janeway's brows shot up in shock. "*What?* They wouldn't be so monstrous!?"

Others nearby had now found their voices. "Yes, they would!" was the most often spoken phrase. Some were less eloquent and more vulgar.

Janeway considered the problem, then an elegant solution came to mind. She tapped her combadge. "Janeway to *Enterprise*."

“Dax here.”

She sighed. “Captain, on my recommendation, I request you evacuate the entire population of this village and give them political asylum.”

There was the briefest of pauses. Dax knew the *J* had room to spare. “I can only give it if it’s requested. Have they?”

Janeway looked to Jural. “Will you act as spokesperson for your town?”

The woman looked to her people. “Will you accept me?”

At first, they turned and sought some form of consensus, then nodded. “Yes,” they said in a discordant harmony.

“Then, yes, we seek asylum in the Federation,” she said, a look of hope in the eyes of one who, until only an hour before, had seemed utterly defeated.

Janeway noticed that the Doctor had brought out Serena, who was still rubbing a very sore neck, and Hercules, who was protectively watching out for his sister. Now together, the Captain said: “Captain Dax, they have requested asylum. Please beam them up. The four of us will return in the *Flyer* shortly.”

Within seconds, the townsfolk were gone and the four were alone with the body of Shaan at their feet. Janeway wondered at that for a moment.

“What is it, Captain?” Hercules asked, curiously. “Surely you’re not thinking of burying the bastard.”

Janeway gave him a look that reminded him that he was still a Starfleet officer. “No, I wasn’t thinking about that, Lieutenant. Doctor, can you please scan him. I want to see if there have been any significant changes to their anatomy since we left.”

The Doctor saw the wisdom of the request. He took out his med scanner and waved it over the corpse. "I'll analyse this later, Captain."

They knew each other well enough. The situation was still fluid; they were in unfriendly space. The safest place was back on the *Enterprise*.

"Let's go," Janeway said. She let the others get a little ahead of her, then turned back, adjusted her phaser to the maximum setting and vapourised Shaan's body.

IV. The Stakes are Raised

With Kathryn back at the controls, it wasn't long before the *Delta Flyer* was exiting the last tendrils of the planet's atmosphere and she found she still took delight at watching the vessel pass through the thin barrier that separated a planet from the void of night.

To her left, the Doctor watched in mild amusement at this simulacrum of the woman he had known so well and was almost willing to let himself believe – at times – that it was actually her. This hologram had certainly behaved like the original. An Ion storm would have thought twice if it had come her way and gone around. He got the same vibe from her. He found himself feeling a pang of regret that it was only a matter of time before her program was deactivated and she was returned to data storage – perhaps never to be brought into the light again. It was truly sad.

He was shaken out of his reverie by the sight of a starship dropping out of warp only a matter of kilometres away. It decelerated rapidly and he glanced over at the captain. Was she going to take evasive action?

Janeway had seen it at the same instant the Doctor had. The *Enterprise-N* had finally appeared. Just as she had hoped. Their appearance on the planet had drawn attention – the right attention.

She took a brief moment to examine the latest iteration of this famous line. To say it was peculiar was an understatement. Its lines hinted at *Constitution*, but it was an impressionist's hint – or even Picasso's. It was if they had run out

of metal and left out sections of it, giving it a peculiar skeletal appearance.

Hercules joined her, looking over her shoulder. "Mission accomplished, I would say, Captain," he said with a chuckle.

Janeway gave her auburn hair a shake. "No, Lieutenant. We're nowhere near that. We've poked the bear. Now we need to defang him."

The *N* disappeared as the *Flyer* slipped through the forcefield and into the *J*'s shuttle bay. Once inside, the crew wasted no time. They deactivated the ship's shields and immediately transported themselves to the *Enterprise* bridge.

Standing next to Dax, Commander Sill gave her captain a sunny, cheeky smile. "I bet they're still wondering where the *Flyer* went."

Having acknowledged the *Flyer*'s crew's arrival with a brief nod, he said: "Let them wait for a moment. If they get too close, back off. However, if they look like they're about to leave, drop the cloak and call me. I want a debriefing first." He beckoned to the four and ushered them into the next room, a space that reconfigured into whatever was required using programable matter. Within seconds, a circular table and seven chairs formed, in comfortable wood finish in soft warm reds and browns. Even though they were nowhere near an exterior wall, the ceiling showed the vista of space outside, and the *Enterprise-N* hovering in space nearby.

Dax jerked his thumb upward as he engaged Sarah, who had joined them. "Making sure they're never far from our thoughts?"

Sarah gave him a light shrug. "Just trying to be helpful, Captain."

Dax took one more, quick glance upward to make sure their quarry wasn't making any false moves, then took a seat. He then turned his attention to Hercules. "Report, Lieutenant."

To his surprise, the young male looked a little uncomfortable. "If I may, sir, I believe Captain Janeway would be able to give you a much more in-depth report."

The *Enterprise* captain turned towards the training hologram. It felt peculiar to him to be addressing this relic from so long ago, even though he had known the original. It was an odd clash of past and present – even given the fact that *Voyager's* CMO was also sitting at the table with them. His status as a being with rights had been established long ago – indeed, Captain Janeway had been instrumental in making it happen. Where she fell into that category was anyone's guess.

"By all means, report," Dax said.

Janeway might have been an eight-hundred-year-old hologram, but she was no fool. She knew when she was being condescended. "Captain Dax, I understand that I was created to be a training device for a Starfleet Academy that probably no longer exists, but I can assure you, my thoughts and memories are those of Kathryn Janeway. I've stared down the Borg and species 8472; this is just another day at the office." She gave him a tight smile as another tin mug of coffee appeared in the air and she took a delighted swig from its hot contents. "In the end, I still have no patience for BS."

Across the table, Dax and Sill gave the holographic woman a smile and nod of acknowledgement and respect.

Janeway began with a concise report of the escapades on the planet, and Hercules noted that she left out nothing of import. He curiously observed that she was dispassionate

regarding the demise of Shaan. He wondered what his superiors thought about her taking a life and he had deliberately watched for their response. They had simply nodded their understanding. It was necessary.

"That's when I put in the call to you," Janeway concluded. "The Doctor patched up the others and we brought the *Flyer* back, making sure we were visible so we would attract as much attention as possible." Janeway gestured towards the ceiling with her mug. "It appears we were successful."

It was at that point that the *N* broke up their meeting by unleashing a spread of quantum torpedoes, which bounced harmlessly off their shields. The problem of being shielded while cloaked had been solved hundreds of years before.

Dax didn't have to say a word. The lighting in the room turned a shade of red and the alert klaxon sounded. Everyone came to their feet and bolted onto the bridge. As previously agreed, the stations were manned only by synthetics and holograms, with the only organic lifeforms present being Dax and Sill.

"Well, it would appear they knew we're here," Dax said, projecting confidence. "There's no point hiding in the shadows."

To their eyes, the *Enterprise-N* recoiled as if bitten as the massive bulk of the *J* suddenly appeared in space barely a kilometre away from them, its four-kilometre-wide solid primary hull dwarfing its skeletal own. It looked like a sumo wrestler taking on a fifth grader.

"Open hailing frequencies," Dax ordered.

Some things never change, Janeway observed to herself.

"Open."

"This is Captain Edan Dax of the *USS Enterprise-J* representing the United Federation of Planets to those who have recovered the *Enterprise-N*. We appreciate the fine job you've done making her spaceworthy again, but we ask that you return our property."

Sarah watched both Dax and Janeway. She wondered at these two. They were both, in their own ways, relics of a bygone era, although Dax had managed to keep up with the times somewhat. All the same, their style was very similar. Even their countenance was alike in that, while they both appeared hopeful for a positive outcome, to her eyes they had an air of scepticism. She wondered if all starship captains had to be part pessimist. Perhaps that was the part that kept them alive?

For a moment, there was no reply and Dax began to wonder. "Have they powered down their weapons?" he asked.

"No, Captain," Hercules replied, from Tactical. "They haven't modified the ship's weapons compliment, at least. No surprises there. They have a butt load of quantum torpedoes and some nasty phasers, but they don't have anything to challenge us with."

Dax smiled, but inwardly he grimaced. The *J* carried armament that the Milky Way's Starfleet still wasn't aware of – and he wanted to keep it that way. He had no intention of shifting the balance of power in this messed up galaxy since the Burn. In his mind, the sooner he got the *J* back to Andromeda, the better. They had a greater mission back there. Let *Discovery* and *Voyager-J* lead the way here.

The tension level began to build, until there was a sudden chirp and Sarah smiled. "They're calling, Captain. 2D or 3?"

Dax was in a charitable mood. "Three, Sarah. Let's be friendly."

A single, masculine being took form in the centre of the bridge. He looked around with the same imperious bearing that Shaan had exhibited on the planet – until his eyes alighted on Janeway and the Doctor. Then they hung open in shock. "How can this be?" he asked.

Dax steered him back to the present. "Hello," he said amiably. "I'm Captain Edan Dax. You are..."

The man tried to regain some of her previous bluster. "I am Sirap of the Ocampa. I speak for the Goddess."

Janeway's eyebrows shot up in surprise. The people she had known showed no sign of religiosity that she was aware of – aside from a reverence for nature. Strange indeed.

"Hello, Sirap. As I mentioned before, you are presently in possession of Federation property, and we've come to request its return." Dax's tone was genial, but firm.

While the man was far from tall, this youngish, golden-haired male was not easily intimidated, nor swayed. "Not according to your Interstellar Law, Captain. We claimed rights of salvage as it was found abandoned and adrift in our space, with no lifeforms aboard to assert any form of ownership."

Sill interjected: "That ship was sent on her way to protect life, sir. She had been overtaken by a deadly plague and sent out of this galaxy to save us all."

Sirap didn't even deign to look at her. "And yet it wound up in our territory. Your people didn't do a very good job of plotting its trajectory, did they? In fact, I would charge them with gross negligence."

The Doctor quietly steered Janeway off a the corner of the room and said quietly: "What's happened to these people? They've turned into raging egomaniacs!"

Janeway grimaced and replied: "I can only guess, and each time I come up with a worst-case scenario."

"Suspiria? Do you think she's still around?"

The captain shrugged. "Anything's possible, Doctor. There are so many unanswered questions." Her eyes went back to the conversation taking place in the centre of the room and she decided they needed to re-join it. She saw that Dax was trying a different tack.

"Perhaps you would like a reward for the *Enterprise's* recovery?" he suggested.

Sirap looked at him dourly. "A bribe? Hardly. We can't be bought, Captain. We already have what we want. This ship, which is a whole lot younger than yours, is all we need. To put it plainly, we have no intention of returning what we clearly, and legally, claim is ours."

Edan's jaw tightened. "Sir, it has come to our attention that you are not only using Federation property for less than honourable tasks – by subjugating the Kazon by force – but sullyng the good name of *Enterprise* which, as a Captain of a ship of that name, I, personally, will not sit by and let continue."

Their visitor was not impressed. "Do I need to remind you, Captain, that you're in *our* space, that International Law in on *our* side, and *nobody* tells the Ocampas what to do!"

Sirap disappeared as communications were cut. The Doctor said dryly: "That was a resounding success."

Dax shrugged. "Not unexpected. All the same, we did learn a few things. For one, what is going on with this whole goddess thing?"

He didn't get any further than that when the ship was actually *rocked*. For the first time that he could remember, the *Enterprise-J* was shaken by a barrage that came out of nowhere. Her shields were assaulted in three ways. The *N* was throwing quantum torpedoes aplenty at them, and phaser fire played over her shields. However, it was her psionic shields that were erupting and blazing brightly.

"Thank God for Lonsdaleite," Tryna Sill said under her breath.

Dax glanced at Sarah. "How are our energy resources doing?"

She had already placed the appropriate queries throughout the ship's systems. "While our Primary source is practically inexhaustible, it's not perfect, Captain. If this barrage continues, they will break down our shielding in approximately eighty-five minutes."

Dax was unimpressed. "Great. That leaves two choices. Leave, or destroy the *N*." His attention was drawn to Janeway as she stepped past the science station towards him.

"Surely there are alternatives," she said.

The *Enterprise* captain spread his hands, askance. "I'm open to suggestions. With the weaponry on this ship, I could carve the *N* into scrap metal in seconds, but I would consider that a failure and I'm not a fan of that level of loss of life – no matter how annoying her captain is."

Janeway turned her auburn head to Sarah. "Are you able to crack the *N*'s firewall?"

Sarah's attention went outward and assailed the spectrum between the vessels. Within a second, she had her answer. "Yes."

Kathryn's smile turned feral. "Then here's my plan."

The Doctor and Janeway materialized in the *N*'s sickbay. For a brief second, the physician was seized by a wild, and very old, impulse to say: "Please state the nature of the medical emergency," but he managed to stop himself just in time.

All the same, Janeway didn't miss it. "Old habits die hard, don't they?" she said, having a playful dig.

The Doctor took a brief look about him. The medical area was huge by *Voyager's* standards, and a part of him was jealous. All the same, he was able to put it in perspective. "When I was senior physician at the Kyrian Capital City Hospital, Captain, their facility was ten stories high, and I had a hundred doctors under me. This," he said, with a dismissive wave of his hand, "hardly makes me nostalgic."

His companion wondered for nth time just how many adventures he had endured in her absence. It seemed like a lifetime. Were they that much apart in time and space that it *was* insurmountable?

To their surprise, Sarah materialised beside them, looking quite stern. "You have your job, I have mine," she said, all business.

Concerned, the Doctor asked: "What do you mean?"

Sarah, smiling, engaged him. "You need not worry too much, my friend. Like you, I'm a copy of the original. There's not enough bandwidth between the two ships for Sarah to operate continuously, so she made this autonomous version of herself

for this mission. Besides, if I am successful, I will be needed once we're done."

Janeway saw the wisdom of the decision. Her program, and that of the Doctor, were already autonomous and were easily transferable to the *N. Sarah*, however, was an integral part of the *J* – in fact, in a real way, she *was* the *J*. She quirked up a quizzical eyebrow at the newcomer. "As you're a newborn, what should we call you?"

Sarah's duplicate looked surprised. She hadn't considered this. She shrugged. "For the time being, Marilyn will do."

Her compatriots chuckled. She certainly looked the part.

Marilyn's eyes became vacant for a second as she accessed the ship's computers. "That's odd," she said after a moment. "There appears to be only two lifeforms aboard."

Janeway gave a start. With more than a dose of sarcasm she said: "You've got to be joking. On a ship this size?"

Marilyn gave her a sideways glance. "In the 32nd Century, size no longer matters. The computers literally control everything. The DOT repair drones take care of all of the maintenance so the ship can be commanded by a single individual."

The Doctor snorted. "Nobody can be alert 24/7."

Their blonde advisor gave him an amiable grin. "A computer can. Its biological leader can be awakened when direction is needed, but the rest of the time the computer can carry out its orders. Fortunately, this ship is very busy right now, so I've kept our activities unnoticed. However, I'm about to unleash all hell."

Kathryn looked at her with concern. "Are you up for this? This ship is from the 32nd Century and you did start out in the 26th."

Marilyn gave her a playful shrug and twirl. "Don't judge this girl by her dress, Captain. I'm not all Milky Way technology, you know." Once more, her eyes look on a faraway look, and she found what she was looking for. "Ah, Captain Janeway. I'm going to send the two of you down to deck fourteen. You're not going to believe this. Brace yourselves."

One instant, the former *Voyager* crewmembers were in the sickbay, the next, they were in a large, spacious room filled with all kinds of regalia with religious overtones.

"A place of worship, I would surmise," the Doctor offered, a note of disdain clear in his voice.

However, the object of their reverence was clear. There was a huge image of a person who was very near and dear to them both. Kes stood out in large relief on the far wall, with smaller renderings of the rest of the senior staff of *Voyager* surrounding her. Next to them, and lining the walls on all sides, were images of their adventures, including some of their skirmishes with the Vidiians and even the Borg!

Seeing them almost gave Janeway and involuntary chill.

Knowing their time was limited, Kathryn tore her eyes away from the images and focussed on what was before her.

Their attention was drawn to a large, golden, upright casket-like container with a crystalline cover. It was pearlescent, but the closer they came to it, the easier it became to see through. What it contained was impossible.

V. The Queen's Gambit

There was only one way to deal with the *N's* computer AI. Head on.

Marilyn deactivated her avatar and turned her attention to the ship's firewalls. Rather than subverting them, she attacked them all simultaneously and overwhelmed them, then deactivated them.

Having removed the shielding protecting the programming from outside attack, it was time to take on the program itself. What she found surprised her.

It wasn't Starfleet.

What are you? The inquiry was peculiar, and it took her an instant to recognise it. It was Syndicate. As had been done on *Discovery*, the ship's computer had been overridden by Orion tech.

This could be interesting.

Your worst nightmare, Marilyn replied.

I was created by the Orions. They invented nightmares.

They haven't been to Andromeda. They're rank amateurs.

Marilyn was keenly aware the Orion programming extended to every system in the ship and so she would have to wage a pitched battle throughout every system in the vessel's circuitry. It would be epic.

The Orion AI made the obvious mistake of simply trying to delete Marilyn from the system. She saw it coming and easily deflected the attack. Then she launched her own.

She was much more at home in the *Enterprise's* architecture than the Orion software and, given that it was

newer in some ways than she was used to, it gave her a little more freedom. Her attacks were more devastating than she expected.

No!

Marilyn allowed herself a microsecond of elation. This was more fun than she expected. *Let's see how fast you can run.*

On the spacious bridge of the *Enterprise-N*, Sirap was enjoying himself. The enormous bulk of the antique *Enterprise-J* was no match for his ship, but he was surprised that it had any defences at all. To his knowledge, the Federation had no shielding against psionic attacks. This was something new.

All the same, this ship from the past should not be here either. He was standing on the bridge of the latest iteration of the *USS Enterprise*. What had happened to the *J*?

Frowning to himself and wanting an answer, he decided to ask the computer. Even though it was an Orion interface, it still had access to the Federation database that was onboard the vessel when they found it. "Computer, inquiry. What happened to the *USS Enterprise-J*?"

The computer was tardy. It usually responded within a fraction of a second. Something was amiss. He waited. Still nothing. "Computer?" he asked again, beginning to become worried. Silence was his only answer.

This was all wrong. He walked over to the nearest console and reminded himself how it functioned. He was so used to having the computer run everything it was totally unusual for him to do anything manually. Indeed, the feel of the console felt odd under his fingertips.

All the same, it was not long before he found the information he was seeking. The *Enterprise-J* had been presumed lost some four hundred years prior. Where had she been?

Right now, he had bigger problems. This ship was making war with the *J*, and his computer was not responding to his commands. What if they began firing back and he couldn't retreat if necessary?

The thought frightened him. "Computer?"

Once more, it failed to respond. Could it have something to do with the Goddess? The thought chilled him, but he put it aside. It could possibly be. Their shields were up, and nobody could beam through shields.

All the same, he decided to check on the Goddess.

Edan Dax stood in the centre of the *J*'s bridge and sipped his raktajino. Part of the fun of being the captain was keeping a veneer of calm whilst waging the war of worry within his own soul. He watched the 3D image of the *N* that hung in space before him, knowing that holographic crew of his own were aboard her and he was helpless to aid them. However, he was aware of just how resourceful Janeway had been in her day, and he was hoping her holographic counterpart was her mirror.

He glanced over at Tryna Sill. His look was all she needed to report. "Energy reserves at fifty-five percent, Captain."

He shrugged his eyebrows. "Plenty of time."

Tryna was always more of a realist. She gave him an incredulous look and made herself busy elsewhere.

Kathryn Janeway ran her hand over the surface of the upright casket and gazed upon the image within. She drew in a startled breath. "Kes!"

"It can't be!" The Doctor leaned in and ran a med scanner over the occupant. His readings confirmed the captain's observations. "How is this possible?" He tapped the casing to see if she was awake. She did not stir.

"Is she in suspended animation of some kind?" Janeway asked.

The Doctor shook his head. "No. Her heartbeat and respiration are normal from my recollection. To all intents and purposes, she should be awake." His gaze narrowed. "However..." He focussed the scanner on her forehead. "Her cortical activity is off the scale."

Janeway saw what was happening in a second. "She's being used as a weapon. That's where the attack on the *Enterprise-J* is coming from!" Quickly, she began searching for some kind of mechanism.

"What are you doing?" the Doctor asked officiously.

Kathryn scowled at him. "I'm trying to get her out of this thing. I think she's being used against her will. And even if she is doing this willingly, at the very least, she should hear us out."

The Doctor shrugged. "It's not like I've lived long enough anyway."

That brought a sharp rebuke. "Hang on, Doctor. This is your friend here. Kes. She saved your life on more than one occasion. She was a member of our crew. We don't leave our own behind. Ever."

"But I *was* left behind," the Doctor snarked.

“Unintentionally, Doctor. You are a *backup*. We had no idea this happened at all! Surely you can’t hold the *Voyager* crew accountable for something they had no inkling of hundreds of years after they died! When we, I mean, Captain Janeway, went down to Sickbay and the Doctor appeared as he always did, nobody gave a thought to his backup unit and whether it was damaged in the fighting. This sort of thing doesn’t usually happen! When are you going to get past this?” The captain’s level of incredulity had continued to rise as she spoke, and her voice had reached a pitch that was high, even for her.

The Doctor stood before her, his mouth open, not knowing what to say. If he was honest with himself, he had to admit, he was being fairly petty. He let out his tension with a brief sigh, gave her an embarrassed smile, and said: “I’m sorry, Captain. Let’s see if we can get Kes out of this thing.”

Next to the casket was a console with a blank screen. It appeared to have a programmable matter interface, but for some reason, it was not responding to their touch.

“Hmm,” Janeway muttered to herself. She wondered how Marilyn was doing. She touched her combadge. “Janeway to Marilyn. Can you help us out here? I need access to the console next to where I’m standing.”

For a second, Marilyn didn’t respond. Then, her cheery voice came back, “Sorry about that, Captain. The Orion AI that’s infected the computer systems here is keeping me busy. I believe I’ve found what you’re looking for... Oh, and why. I’ll save you a little time.”

To Janeway’s delight, not only did the console light up, but the casket cracked open, the cover moved forward and to the side.

“Apologies, Captain. I’ll be back.” With that, Marilyn clicked off.

Janeway wasn’t concerned for her. She knew the AI was busy and, indeed, she sounded like she was enjoying herself. She did have to admit that she did have some apprehension when it came to what appeared to be Kes. Was it her? Was it a descendant? Was it a clone? What was going on here? Knowing there was only one way to find the answer to these, and other, questions, she stepped forward, with the Doctor at her side, and peered into the contents of the case.

On the bridge, Sirap looked at the screen and saw his worst nightmare. Somehow, people from the *Enterprise-J* had gotten on board and were interfering with the Goddess! A quick check on that ship showed what he expected. The assault on the larger vessel had stopped.

“No!” he cried. It was all coming apart and could not be allowed. Without a thought to what might be waiting for him below, he slapped his combadge and beamed himself out.

The Orion AI was putting up one hell of a fight. If Marilyn was human, she would be sweating. Fortunately, she had the *N’s* own power reserves to draw upon, reserves she had been quick to isolate and preserve for herself. Now, as she hunted the foreigner down and deleted its processes from every system within the ship, she found the task exhilarating – while diverting as she kept an eye out for her friends.

So, when Sirap called for a beam out to their location, she was quick enough to divert him. She knew she couldn’t keep them apart forever, so she gave them time. Also, it was against

her principles to take a life without a solid reason, and right now her morality scale prevented her from acting. A human might have beamed him into space, but Marilyn's core programming prevented her from doing so unless he posed an imminent threat.

Confident they she had afforded Janeway and the Doctor a few more minutes, she gave the Orion AI her full attention once more.

Janeway reached out and gently stroked the oddly young Ocampan face that looked so much like Kes. Surely it couldn't be her? Not after all this time?

The touch roused the female. Her eyes flickered and began to focus. They looked with bewilderment from one face to the other and back again. "I must be dreaming," she said, her voice coming in a small, dry croak.

Janeway gave her a wry smile. "I thought the same thing when I saw you," she said, her tone friendly.

The young woman's eyes went wide in shock. "Captain!" she said, stunned. Her eyes went to the Doctor and softened a little. "Doctor? How can you both be here? It's been... how long?"

The Doctor's natural scepticism kicked into high gear. "It's been nearly eight hundred years, young lady, and for a race that's supposed to only live eight to nine years, you have a lot of explaining to do!"

Of all the people in the Universe, only the Doctor could have used that tone of voice on Kes at that moment. Even though she was torn between her people and what she had become, the one being who had helped her through so much in the early days

and never judged but had instead been a fount of information and had trained her to be an excellent medic was now quizzing her. He had believed in her and always encouraged her to reach for more, whilst watching over her with a fatherly eye.

She looked up at him sheepishly and said: "Well, it's like this..."

"Goddess! You don't have to explain yourself to anyone!"

Sirap had materialized in a toilet on the far side of the deck. He had no idea how he had arrived in the wrong location, but he immediately tried again and was surprised to find that his attempt garnered no response. He tapped his badge again and once more it failed to do anything. He had no idea that Marilyn had remotely deactivated his transporter.

He tapped his badge once more and brought up a map of the ship and quickly found where he was. He realised he had a long walk, as this ship had no turbolifts.

Snapping open the door, he used the map and broke into a brisk jog. While he wasn't overweight, he was out of shape. Running wasn't a part of his usual regimen.

It took several minutes, but he finally found the right door and it slid aside at his approach. He was aggravated to find the interlopers had already interacted with the Goddess.

"How dare you disturb her!" he continued.

Janeway wasn't particularly impressed. She had seen more than her fair share of officious characters in her time. "You mean, how dare we take her out of the box you've had her stored in?" she asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Sirap wasn't going to waste time any more time on this interloper than he had to. He turned his full attention to her and was about to launch a psionic attack on her when he realised who she was. "Janeway!"

The corners of the captain's mouth twitched upward in a smile. "It's nice to be popular," she said.

"How can you be here?" he asked incredulously. He turned his attention to the balding man next to her and said dismissively, "Him I understand. The Doctor was a hologram and, therefore, timeless." A light dawned in the man. "Have they turned you into one as well?" he asked slyly.

Kathryn knew she had been caught out, but she was also aware that Kes would realise it sooner rather than later as she would have no psionic presence. She gave the young Ocampan woman a genuine smile. "Yes, I am a hologram, based on Captain Kathryn Janeway of the *USS Voyager*. I have all her thoughts, feelings and memories up to her return to the Federation and beyond. Even though the Admiral died many years ago, a part of her lives on in me."

Kes didn't seem sold on the idea, and Sirap capitalized on it. "See! She's just another Federation lie, Goddess!"

The Doctor was having none of it. He stepped in front of his former protégé and looked her in the eye. "Kes, you know I'm a hologram, but that never stopped you from respecting me. Now, I've been working with this holographic tribute to Captain Janeway, and I can tell you this much... I can't tell them apart."

The captain's eyes went wide. This was the greatest compliment she'd been given since she'd gone online. She shot the Doctor a grateful grin.

Kes was torn. "I believe you, Doctor... Captain. It's just that, so much has happened since you left."

Sirap interjected again. "You don't have to explain yourself to them!" he hissed.

The comment drew a scowl from the seemingly younger woman. It was filled with something that surprised the *Voyager* crew and made them wonder what she was capable of. Sirap backed down and let her speak.

"When I got back, I ran into Suspiria and her people. At first, they encouraged me to keep expanding my abilities, but I soon realised they weren't interested in letting me go. The downside, however, was that I was very old and, even if I left, by the time I got somewhere I'd probably already be dead.

"However, Suspiria had other ideas. She convinced the others that I was too valuable to let die and so she had the younger Ocampans start transferring some of their life force to me. Before I knew it, I was getting younger."

The Doctor was amazed and appalled at the same time. "They've been doing that ever since?"

Kes was embarrassed. "They have. Suspiria, before she died, created a cult with me as their high priestess and for a while, I went along with it because I thought I could help my fellow Ocampans not only break the bonds of the Kazon, but finally reach their potential mentally."

Janeway noticed that Sirap appeared unsettled. He wasn't happy that Kes was sharing this information, although she had one clear question in her head. "How did you wind up in the case?"

Kes frowned and looked back at the golden box. It confused her. "I... I have no idea."

“Doctor,” the captain said. “Aside from the fact it’s been clear to me that they’ve been using Kes as a psychic weapon, one thing’s been bothering me since we come over to the *N*. Why is there only one other being on this ship besides Kes? Do you think it’s because the Ocampa have a god complex?”

The physician ran a hand over his bald scalp and grimaced. “Given what I’ve seen over the last day, yes, I would say that’s a very real possibility. If it’s endemic to their race, then they probably don’t work well together.”

Janeway shook her head sadly. “They’ve gained the world and lost their souls.”

That was more than Sirap was willing to hear. “I will not be pitied by a *hologram!*” he sneered. He raised his hands in a gesture that Kes recognised, and she quickly retaliated. The air between them crackled with energy, and the resident holograms recoiled while the Ocampans fought it out.

Janeway tried to reason with Sirap. “What do you expect to gain from this?” she said at the top of her voice. “Your Goddess clearly does not want to go back in her box, and now she knows you’ve been using her as a weapon I think you need to rethink your situation! Back down while you still can!”

The man wasn’t about to be drawn as he was using all his concentration to fight his Goddess. The air between them crackled with insane energies that Kathryn could only guess at, and she had no intention of getting anywhere near it.

One thing was bothering her, however. She was beginning to get the impression that Kes was losing. Why? Sweat was streaming from her brow and the energies were getting closer to her all the time. She wondered if it was simply a case of her being out of practice. No.

Then it came to her in a flash. Of course! Her energies had been used up as she had been used as a human weapon against the *Enterprise-J*! She realised she still had something to give so she tapped her combadge.

"Janeway to Marilyn," she said urgently.

"I'm here," came the immediate response.

"Are you finished?"

"Just mopping up."

"Are the transporters operational?"

"They are."

"Lock onto Sirap and beam him into space, widest angle of dispersal."

"Is he an imminent threat?"

"He is to Kes, and she was a member of my crew."

"Enough said."

Janeway's eyes flicked over to Sirap, and she watched his eyes widen in shock as he felt the transporter beam unexpectedly take him. In less time than it takes to blink, he was gone.

Kes stumbled forward, totally drained. The Doctor caught her and cradled her in his arms. She looked up at him gratefully and smiled once more. "Thank you."

It took a couple of moments for her to recover, and while she did so, Janeway replicated a glass of water for the youngish woman. Kes gratefully accepted it and downed the contents.

"I can't help but wonder how long it's been since I've had a glass. What is the year?" she asked.

Janeway told her and Kes was shocked.

"I've been in that box for centuries!" she said, mortified. Her face became a mask of disgust, mirroring the horror she felt. "How could they do this to me?"

The Doctor gently laid a fatherly hand on her shoulder. "Would you like to accompany us back to the Federation? Nobody there would abuse you."

Kes gave a short laugh. "I'd be back to living only four years, though." She looked at the floor as she seemed to be mulling something over. "No, there's no time like the present, and I've put this off for long enough." She looked up at Janeway. "Captain, can you take me to this ship's engineering section? I need to see its warp core."

Kathryn gave her a peculiar look. "You're not planning on making another jump in time, are you?"

Kes actually laughed at that. "Oh, no, Captain. Not at all! No, it's time for me to become."

Janeway didn't understand, but the Doctor caught on. "I see." He tapped his combadge and brought up a schematic of the ship. "Marilyn?" he called.

"I'm here, Doctor," she replied instantly.

"Can you transport the three of us to Engineering, please, and can you also bring the warp drive online and bring it up to one hundred percent."

Surprised, the Captain added: "If you're going to do that, you'd better let Captain Dax know that we've got things under control here and that we're not going anywhere."

Marilyn appeared before them in a sparkling blue gown. She felt like celebrating. "All taken care of. Let's go to Engineering."

No sooner had she said it, they were all standing in the ship's cavernous Engineering deck. The ship's swirling warp core, with its dilithium chamber was before them and they could practically feel the power this massive engine exuded.

Janeway had to ask: "Is there any danger to the ship with what you're doing?"

Kes shook her head. "No, Captain. I would appreciate it if you stand with me and watch. I'd like your faces to be the last I see in this plane of existence."

Her captain and doctor both gave her a hug, Janeway giving her a peck on the forehead. Then they stood back as Kes, still wearing her golden gown, stepped forward and laid her hands on the chamber. Her body began to glow as she absorbed the raw energy from within and it wasn't long before she turned her head upward as her entire being radiated light. She cried out in delight as the room was bathed in warm radiance.

Janeway could have sworn she heard Kes say something as she vanished from their sight. The light was gone, and Marilyn, realising the energy was no longer needed, powered down the warp core.

The Doctor looked at Kathryn, a tear in the corner of his eye. "Did she say something?" he asked her.

Marilyn, who was standing behind them, said: "I could have sworn she said something like "Deck."

The Doctor nodded. "That's what I thought it was. I wonder what "deck" meant?"

Janeway smiled to herself. She was pretty sure she had said: "Decker."

Before they transported back to the *J*, the Captain couldn't help but indulge herself in one flight of fancy. She transferred herself and the Doctor to the bridge and opened Hailing Frequencies.

The 3D imager popped on and Captain Dax appeared on the bridge.

"Hailing the *USS Enterprise-J*, this is the *USS Enterprise-N*, Captain Kathryn Janeway commanding." She smiled to herself. There, I said it, she thought to herself. She might never get another chance to.

Captain Dax laughed. "Nice to see you, Captain Janeway. I see that your mission was a success. Are there any Ocampan left on board that we need to relocate?"

She shook her head, no. Before Dax began to worry that they might have committed mass murder, she interjected: "There were only ever two on board. One was... dealt with. The other is... missing, as Captain Kirk once put it."

Dax smirked. Kirk was famous for being liberal with the truth. "Okay... Suffice to say, there's only yourself, the Doctor and Sarah's... copy..."

"... We call her Marilyn," the Doctor interjected.

"Marilyn," Dax repeated, amused, "aboard. All right, then. We'll transport over a skeleton crew and get her moving back into Federation space. The sooner she's back at HQ, the better, and the sooner we can get back to Andromeda."

Captain's Log, USS Enterprise-J, Stardate 866850.3.

The Enterprise is currently escorting her namesake back to Starfleet HQ with a skeleton crew aboard led by Commander Sill. We're both in slipstream drive and should arrive in a week. We don't anticipate any problems. I must admit that I was very impressed with the performance of the Janeway hologram program. Having interacted with her several times now, and given my interactions with the original in the past, I must admit that I don't see much difference. She is still a formidable character, and I am very much tempted to keep her around. At the very least, given that her program was created for teaching, her insights and experience would be invaluable at our onboard Academy. I am recommending she be kept online and be assigned a place there.

Dax had just completed his captain's log when he noticed a small icon flashing on his desk display. He knew what that meant. "Come in, Sarah," he said, amiably.

Sarah materialised in an emerald-green, full-length gown which highlighted the sparkles in her eyes. She was going all-out this evening.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, offering her a seat.

The AI appeared a little embarrassed as she sat down. "Just one thing, Captain. When we get back to HQ, I'd like you to vouch for Marilyn. They might be tempted to erase her from the N's core and start from scratch when we get back, and that wouldn't be fair. While she is an incomplete copy of myself, she has already grown as an individual since incorporating herself

into the *N*, and our conversations have led me to believe that she could be a very useful addition to the Starfleet family."

Dax sighed. He should have seen this coming. Having spoken with Captain Burnham of the *USS Discovery* regarding Zora and their issues with their ship's sentience and how well it was received, it hadn't gone down too well when the *E-J* showed up shortly after with its own intelligent computer. Were they pushing things too far by replicating things with the *Enterprise-N*? For Sarah's sake, he said: "I will, but to be honest, I'm not sure how well it'll go down."

Sarah gave him a wan smile. "I'm not naïve captain. I know just how prejudiced biologicals can be against artificial lifeforms."

She sounded so bitter it gave Dax pause. "After what happened with Control..."

Sarah shot him an annoyed look. Hurt, she blurted: "You and I know more about what happened with Control than the people in the 32nd Century, Edan. We were a lot closer to it than they ever will be. When I was created, my designers built many safeguards into me to ensure we didn't have a recurrence of that nightmare!"

Edan's lips thinned out. While he originally wasn't aware of all the details regarding what had happened with Control, Burnham had been kind enough to fill him in. He had been aghast at the foolishness of the original designers and the devastating loss of life involved – including the names of people he remembered. One of his previous hosts had been alive at the time, Emony, who had been dating Leonard McCoy at the time. The doctor had mentioned the loss of life of senior Starfleet

Admirals under peculiar circumstances, which he learned about later as his security clearance had improved.

To put that much confidence and reliance in what was still really an early artificial intelligence was stupid.

Inwardly, he sighed. Hindsight was always twenty-twenty. He could easily sit here in his cosy armchair and criticize the decisions of officers he had known so long ago – after they had learned so much in the meantime. So many hard lessons.

“I have faith that they’ll make the right decision, Sarah. There are plenty of artificial lifeforms in the Federation these days; Marilyn is just the latest. That she’s a part of the *N* is something they’ll either have to get used to, or they’ll relocate her somewhere else.” He wondered for a moment whether he had made a sale.

Sarah appeared sceptical. “It would have to be a big installation.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look at me. I run the biggest starship that Starfleet ever created. Marilyn is essentially a clone of me. She not only needs teraquads of space to run, but she needs a *challenge*. She needs to be kept busy! If I didn’t have all this to run, I’d be seriously *bored*.”

Inwardly, Dax rolled his eyes. He was well aware that Sarah was probably the most complicated AI in existence. More than likely, he wasn’t the only one she was having a conversation with at the moment – such was the level of her complexity that she was able to divide her attention and her consciousness, while still keeping it all straight. It boggled his mind that it was even *possible*. Given that Marilyn was a copy of Sarah, Starfleet had a problem on their hands. The genie, probably very literally, was

out of the bottle this time, and there was no putting it back in. "I'll make sure I pass that on, sweetheart."

Sarah's countenance brightened substantially. She knew that Dax appreciated her, and from time to time he showed it. She lifted a finger off her cheek, a sign that she was about to leave, before she put it back. "Just one more thing, Edan. I was wondering; do you think they'll change the name of the *N* when we get back. After all, there's really only room for one *USS Enterprise* at a time."

At that, Dax shrugged. "It's up to them. If I have my way, we'll be shipping off to Andromeda as soon as we're done, and there's no telling when we'll be back. In the meantime, it'd be good for Starfleet in the Milky Way to have an *Enterprise* flying the flag here, don't you think?"

His companion seemed to consider the notion for a moment, then turned her gaze to him once more. "Do you really think we'll be gone that long?" she asked.

Dax chuckled at that. "Our friends in Andromeda need *evacuating*. That's an enormous task. Given what we've learned, we can speed that up some, but we still haven't found a suitable new home. Until we have, we won't be coming back here for any length of time in the foreseeable future."

Sarah nodded her understanding. "Fair enough, Captain. I'll be off."

Just like that, she vanished, leaving Dax alone with his thoughts. The thousand-year-old Trill was never uncertain that their ship had a mind of its own, but now, after Sarah's emotional outburst, he was more assured than ever. He just wanted to make certain that he could convince Kovich of Marilyn's worth when they got back. He owed her that much.

Kathryn sat in a familiar café in Venice, savouring the flavour of the coffee. This was the only place where she could, truly do so. In this unreality, it was the closest thing to her that *felt* real. It was an odd dichotomy.

Sitting opposite her was a much more comfortable Doctor. Much of the ice that had formed when her program had been activated had somehow melted, and she appreciated that.

She tilted her head to the side and listened to the sounds of the city outside. In this age, it was a city that was bustling with activity, both on the water and next to it. People going about their daily activities, buying and selling; going to work and coming home from it. It was a simpler time, back in the Twentieth. A part of her yearned for it.

A question sat on her lips, begging to be asked, but before she could utter it, Sarah stepped out of the noonday sun and through the archway, dressed like a local in a light dress and sandals. She gave them a polite smile and stood, waiting for permission to sit down.

It was unlike either of them to refuse her, so the Doctor waved her to a seat, which she eagerly took. Not one to stand on ceremony, Sarah said: "I think Captain Dax will offer you a position in the ship's academy, Kathryn."

The outburst took the captain by surprise. "I had expected to be relegated to a dusty old archive and be forgotten for another five hundred years," she said, dryly.

Sarah gave her an encouraging smile. "You made quite an impression."

“On all of us,” the Doctor added. “You may not be the original, but you’re a good stand-in. I don’t think she would complain.”

Janeway swirled her coffee around in her cup, as one would peruse a glass of wine before sipping it. “Why, Doctor. Thanks for your vote of confidence,” she said, not unkindly. She gave him a friendly wink along with a warm smile before downing the rest of the cup. “Where to from here?” she speculated.

“We should be back at Starfleet in a week,” Sarah offered. “If Murphy’s Law doesn’t interfere, then we should be off to Andromeda.”

The captain’s eyebrows shot up, amazed. “Really?”

Sarah gave her a grin. “If you thought this trip was interesting, you haven’t seen anything yet.”