
THE BEST CUTS
MARK DALEY

The Best Cuts

By Mark Daley©2022

The Best Cuts
©Mark Daley 2022
Edited by Sean O'Keefe
is published by TrekkieFanFiction.com

Based on Star Trek, created by Gene Roddenberry

This book is in no way meant to infringe the copyrights regarding Star Trek in any of its incarnations or the intellectual property of CBS, Paramount or Simon & Schuster. No profit whatsoever is being derived from this book. It is offered free of charge. Star Trek and its associated marks are trademark CBS Studios Inc. and Paramount Pictures Corp.

The Best Cuts

Facing off opposite Rem was weapon's specialist crewman Keilly, recently joined from the *USS Paris.* Keilly was human and stood at 1.75 meters. He weighed 110kgs.

Rem was Baatixian and stood at 1.40 meters. He weighed 90Kgs, his heavier mass despite his height courtesy of the high gravity planet of his birth. He was the section leader in security on this ship, the *USS Lincoln.*

This little physical contest was an assessment exercise to determine strengths and weaknesses in unarmed combat. Keilly had just joined the team, and it was his unenvious task to take on Rem as part of his initial assessment.

The contest about to start pitted two opponents against each other in unarmed freestyle combat. Both contestants wore thick padded gloves, head protectors, and tooth guards. The object was to demonstrate skill, not to injure your opponent.

Rem summed up his opponent in a few short moments while the man was warming up. He had already noticed that Keilly favoured his right and tended to drop his guard on the left. Some of the moves were sloppy and needed finesse. The worst thing that Rem noticed was how slow the man was; he would need to add speed to his fighting repertoire.

Keilly was clearly 'showboating' during his warmup, there were one or two human females in the audience, and no doubt Keilly wanted to impress.

Rem wondered if Keilly would take him seriously enough to put up a serious fight. Rem was short and slightly built with a blue mottled hairless body save the bristles on his head. His opponents in these matches consistently underestimated him.

Keilly spent a few moments looking over Rem. This contest will be too easy, he thought to himself. I'd better be careful not to hurt him too much. He couldn't resist smirking to himself.

There was no noticeable warmup for Rem. He did that out of sight before the contest. Never give away anything about your abilities, and prepare in advance. That was his mantra.

Rem and Keilly approached each other to touch gloves and back off, Rem gave the traditional Baatixian right-hand palm-out gesture before preparing himself.

Keilly circled with both hands up to guard his face. Then, he dropped his left shoulder slightly and advanced on a motionless Rem. In the blink of an eye, Rem moved forward and had Keilly down on the mat with a simple leg sweep. Then, he backed away and allowed Keilly to regain his footing.

Rem allowed Keilly to compose himself and advance again. Keilly launched his attack with a right leg roundhouse kick that Rem batted away before kicking out his opponent's left knee. Keilly was down again; the exchange had lasted seconds.

Keilly was beginning to lose his temper. He had been on the matting twice and had not even seen Rem move; he had been so fast. He tried to calm himself and advanced again. He rushed Rem and launched a left cross followed by a right uppercut, and both missed their target. Rem dodged the punches and moved forward blindingly fast inside the man's

reach to deliver a right-hand palm blade blow to the throat and a stiff-fingered left-hand jab to the ribs on the left. Both impacts were mere touches. Keilly staggered back and then roared with anger. He launched a fresh assault with arms wide to catch Rem and force him to the mat.

Rem jumped into a spinning kick; his right foot connected with a glancing blow to Keilly's head. The man fell to the matting, disorientated from the blow. Rem quickly put his foot on the man's chest and grabbed his right wrist in an iron grip. It was too painful for Keilly to move.

"Submit," said Rem.

Keilly gasped, "No."

Keilly was a little dizzy from the head blow. How could this pipsqueak be so devastating in a fight and be so strong? Despite putting everything into this little contest, he had been bested in less than two minutes. He felt humiliated and weak. The pain in his hand was overwhelming. He couldn't hold out much longer.

Rem squeezed the hand back a fraction, and Keilly yelped with the pain. "Submit," he said.

"Ok, ok, I submit," Keilly blurted.

Rem released the man's wrist and helped him effortlessly to his feet.

Keilly stood massaging his hand and wrist with his head down, no doubt feeling sorry for himself and at the same time astonished at the speed and strength of Rem. He had been picked up off the mat as though he weighed nothing.

Rem moved forward in the ring and addressed the room. "It is not my intent to embarrass or humiliate anyone. Keilly fought well but made the mistake of underestimating his

opponent and only using one or two techniques. As a result, he was ill-prepared and too self-assured he could beat me. He also made the mistake of getting angry. When you get angry, you lose focus. So instead, focus on your opponent, study every movement, and use every perceived weakness. Keep composure at all costs.

"You should be able to defend or attack by equal measure and have strength and balance. I want to make every one of you a practiced fighter. So please take on board what I teach you here."

"I want you all to give Keilly a round of applause. He should not feel ashamed at all. You will all have the experience of fighting each other. Be humble in defeat."

Rem clapped Keilly on the back and walked with him off the mat while his colleagues clapped.

There would be a debrief with Keilly later in private, and Rem would give the man some one-to-one training and joint and muscle exercises to improve his suppleness and skills.

Rem's superior officer, Commander Hughes, had asked to see him shortly after the assessment match against Keilly. Rem had been expecting a call from him to review his recent officer's exam and peer review results.

Rem waited nervously outside Commander Hughes' office after buzzing for entry.

"Come," said Commander Hughes over the intercom. The door swished open. The officer was rising from his seat.

"At ease, Mr. Rem, please take a seat." He gestured to a chair facing his desk. With that, he sat back down and took a moment to consult his tablet.

"I have some good news for you and also a proposition!" The officer said, looking up from his tablet with a smile.

"It seems the *USS Lincoln* has a new Lieutenant and head of Security. Congratulations, Lieutenant Rem. You passed the paper exam, and the peer review process recommended you for the position." With that, the officer rose and offered his hand to Rem.

Rem bounced out of his seat and shook the proffered hand giving the Commander one of his sharks' tooth grins. He stood at attention, still unable to take the grin off his face. "Thank you, Sir. This is a proud day."

"This brings me onto the proposition I mentioned when you came in," said Commander Hughes as he sat back down, adjusting his tunic as he did so and waving to the vacant chair.

"There is a Starfleet-wide competition that you may be interested in; it's a mixed martial arts contest held every year, and this year it's hosted by Captain Edwards on the *USS Troy.* It would be a good idea if you were to represent the ship in this tournament next month. What do you think?" He regarded Rem for a long moment.

Rem was still reeling from his good news to think the matter through in any great detail and blurted out, "Yes, Sir. I would like that."

"Excellent. I think you have what it takes to do well in this event after what I have seen you do in training. There is, of course, that little escapade with the Romulans on Beta Canum I. Not a single crew member could have done what you did down there to survive the harsh environment and beat off an attack by Romulans." The officer paused for a moment and added: "I will

make the arrangements with Captain Edwards and let you know."

The officer rose from his seat, prompting Rem to do the same.

Rem said, "Thank you again, Sir. If that is all, I have a briefing in ten minutes."

Commander Hughes smiled broadly and replied, "Nothing more, Lieutenant. Dismissed."

Rem gave the officer another one of his sharks' tooth smiles. "Aye, Sir," he said and came to attention once more before turning to leave. His head was reeling as he walked along the corridor to the briefing room.

Today was the day that Rem had to leave for the *USS Troy*. The last three weeks had been a blur. He had new quarters as befitting his newfound position. That was the good news. The bad news was the mountain of information he had to learn and the endless meetings he had to attend. This trip should give him five days off from his duties. Not that he was regretting his promotion and all the extra work. He wanted some time to absorb everything and get back to his physical training, which had taken somewhat of a back seat the last three weeks. He hurried his step, entered the hangar bay, and approached the shiny, streamlined shape of a type 6a shuttle, the *Medusa*.

Crouched next to it with his head inside an inspection panel was, he presumed, Chief Aaron Copeland. His pilot for this mission.

Rem cleared his throat loudly. The Chief popped his head out of the panel and then quickly stood up to present himself at attention. The man must have been 1.9 meters in height but was

slightly built. His service record had his age at fifty-nine standard years.

He knew that some crew called him ‘Pops’ behind his back. He had heard Pops was a slightly derogatory description of an older man past his prime.

Rem offered his hand and said, “At ease Chief. Lieutenant Rem, I am pleased to meet you.”

Chief Copeland shook the proffered hand firmly, smiling as he did so, and said, “I am pleased to meet you, Sir.” Unfortunately, to Rem's ear, it had sounded like “I om pleased to meet yow, Sir.”

“Pardon?” said Rem.

“Chief Copeland, Sir. Pleased to meet you.” Rem got it, despite the accent.

Rem could understand the man, but getting used to the accent would take practice.

Standard English, or “Federation Standard”, was the Lingua Franca across all Federation ships. Despite everyone wearing a comm badge that doubled as a translator, all learned English as a backup for when badges were lost, not working, or when you were in the field.

Copeland's speech was unusual because some words had missing letter sounds. In addition, the accent was not easy to follow, especially if he spoke quickly. The man's file said that he hailed from the northern temperate area of Earth, a country within the small group of islands west of the European mainland. A group of countries collectively once called Great Britain. Rem didn't know much about the differences in mannerisms and customs between the differing landmasses of Earth, but he

hoped to learn more. Humans were fascinating to study. Assuming he could get past the problematic accent, that is.

The man's file had also mentioned the vast experience of the man as a pilot and teacher. He had been training pilots for twenty years and had written training guides for four models of commercial craft. The man was probably one of the most experienced pilots in the fleet.

Chief Copeland had volunteered for this trip to get more flying hours experience in the type 6a shuttles. He had flown as a commercial pilot for thirty years but had only been with Starfleet as a Chief Petty Officer for the last three. His experience and ability earned him a rapid promotion into a Starfleet teaching role. He was bored training pilots on commercial vessels and wanted a few years of training on cutting-edge stuff. Starfleet was the obvious choice.

Type 6a shuttles were much larger than standard and were armed. He loved flying these newer ships, but he still had to acclimatize to them before he could start training recruits. He would need 300 hours or more flying time at least.

His orders were to transfer his passenger, Rem, to the *USS Troy*, pick up some medical supplies, and return to a designated rendezvous point where the *USS Lincoln* would pick him up. Seemed simple enough.

There was just one thing he was initially uncomfortable with – his passenger.

He could not help but notice the double row of sharp pointed teeth as the Baatixian smiled. It was a shark's mouth and unsettling to see. He wondered if the Baatixian race was a predatory species and had to eat live or raw meals as Klingons

did. Either way, it would take some getting used to having Rem on board.

With the shuttle checks complete, the hatch was closed and checked. Then, the small craft slowly rose and pirouetted one hundred and eighty degrees before making its way out of the shuttle bay. Once it got to the predetermined spot five thousand meters from the *USS Lincoln*, it initiated warp drive and was on its way. Its destination was the Eridani system, where the *USS Troy* would rendezvous.

The total time for the trip would be two days at warp six.

As the trip got underway, both men began chatting. As they talked about their backgrounds, homeworlds, and so on, Aaron was warming to Rem. He seemed genuinely interested in his background and experience and wanted to know more about him. He thought that Rem was a keen student of human behaviour and wanted to learn as much as possible.

Aaron was just as interested in Baatixian culture; they were a relative newcomer to the Federation and were spread pretty thin amongst Starfleet. Rem was the only example of his race that Aaron had ever seen. He had read the race bio as such, but it was always better to get to know an individual first-hand rather than rely on literature.

It was twelve hours into the journey, and both men were busy. Aaron ran flight simulations and noted down readings, possibly for inclusion in training manuals. Rem used this quiet time to read and absorb all he could learn about human civilization. He was fascinated. Humans were so bold they would take massive risks with little thought of the consequences. The Vulcans had held humans back as much as they could in the early

days of the Federation. They feared that humans were not ready for space.

Nevertheless, they were impulsive and ferociously curious. The Andorians saw something of themselves in humans and were happy despite the reservations of the Vulcans and Tellarites to allow humans into space unfettered. The Vulcans had taken the mentor role and ran the early Federation as they saw fit.

Rem put his books down; there was only so much reading he could do after three weeks of intensive study for his new role. He struck up a conversation with the Chief. Their friendship meant that they were now on first-name terms.

Rem was deep in thought about what the Chief had said about his homeworld of Earth. Rem had briefly visited Earth but was there for only thirty-six hours, so he didn't have much time to sightsee. In fact, he had hated the experience. It was a rushed visit and was all work.

“So, Earth is divided into countries and not large prefectures, like my homeworld of Baatix?” Rem asked.

Aaron momentarily turned from his console to reply, “It's a global government now after the last world war, but each country ruled itself and was independent of the others in the past. They would trade with each other, but some countries were often hostile to the others because of ideology or religion, sometimes even politics.”

Rem said, “I have read about this last war on Earth, but on Baatix, we had no world wars. There were skirmishes over resources and the like, but no planet-wide wars. We were too eager to get to the stars and pooled what we had as a species

into doing that; it was all-consuming, and we thought we had been so clever."

He struggled for the right word in English. "Hubris, yes, hubris. We know it as 'S'haqu-il-nuk' or 'empty knowledge from arrogance'. We were too eager to meet other species. We thought ourselves so clever in becoming warp-capable in so short a time. Our ships were sleek and beautiful, or so we thought. Then we met humans.

"Human technology was hundreds of years ahead of our own. Their ships are beautiful to our eye, better designed, and much faster. The scale of the organization was breath-taking, a United Federation of Planets with hundreds of species! Yet, we knew only of humans. After our first meeting, we slunk off back to our world; we had found out what our species wanted, and we had a long way to go before we could stand shoulder to shoulder as equals in the Federation. It's why there are so few of us in Starfleet.

"We are now a much more cautious and self-effacing people."

Aaron was listening intently to Rem's story. It was a fascinating one. But then, a low-level alarm on the console behind him got his attention.

He said, "Excuse me for a moment, Sir," and turned in his chair to study his instruments.

Aron studied the console with a furrowed brow; an Ion storm had been detected dead ahead.

The storm front was enormous; he had never seen anything so significant before in his decades of commercial flying. He cross-referenced the storm intensity and size against the plotted course; it wasn't looking good at all. He adjusted the

route to skirt the outer edge, flying close to the exclusion zone around the third planet in the Beta Corolis system. The planet was M-class and home to a pre-warp civilization; at least it was fifty years ago. This part of the quadrant was limited on trade routes and was not explored.

"Sir, I am dropping out of warp," he said without turning from the console. "An Ion storm is dead ahead; it just got picked up on long-range scanners. We can't go through that at warp. It's a big storm, and it would take us two days to get around it safely. I think I can plot a course to go through the edge, it will mean approaching a class-M planet that's off-limits according to the old charts, but we should be able to pass it outside of the planet's exclusion zone. If we increase warp to the maximum once the storm has passed, we can make up some of the time."

There was a slight shudder as the craft dropped from warp.

Rem was studying his console and had studied the suggested course. "It looks tight but fine. Proceed when ready."

"Aye, Sir. Course laid in. Approaching the storm's outer edge in two minutes. Shields on full power and holding."

There was a sizable jolt as the ship impacted the storm, much bigger than expected. The shuttle computer interjected: "Warning, shield strength at eighty percent and falling. Ion storm intensity increasing." Rem discontinued the computer warnings from his console. The last thing he wanted was the computer constantly telling him what he could see for himself.

Aaron had his hands full in trying to maintain course; the ship had taken on a blue glow as the electrical charge of the storm interacted with the shields.

Rem was becoming increasingly concerned; internal shield sensors reported that the storm's intensity had increased by forty percent.

The onslaught of a high-intensity barrage of electromagnetism and charged particles could easily overwhelm their small craft. The shields were overloading, and the warp coils showed signs of stress. The situation looked bleak; warp coils and plasma conduits were often the first to be affected, even with complete shielding. It wasn't something that Rem wanted to consider. As he saw it, the only way out of their predicament was to head for the planet. The planet's magnetic field could offer some shielding from the storm if they could get to the magnetic north or south pole. It meant going inside the exclusion zone, but there was no other way.

Aaron had second-guessed Rem because he said, “Sir, I am changing course twelve degrees to port; we need to head for the planet's northern hemisphere before this storm knocks out everything.” He needed to shout above the crackling noise of the storm interacting with the shields. He added, “Sensors have picked up several artificial satellites; this civilization might be more advanced than first thought.”

The shuttle painfully eased itself to port. Then, finally, the planet came into view; it was dead ahead. Then, the aft plasma conduit ruptured with a loud coughing sound, filling the cabin with smoke and sparks.

Rem quickly accessed the environmental controls to clear the smoke and grabbed a fire extinguisher to fight the small fire that had broken out. It was tough going as the ship was bucking violently.

Aaron was still fighting the controls to get the ship around to the leeward side of the planet. His fingers danced expertly on his console, making minor course corrections.

It was a losing battle after the plasma conduit rupture. The storm was tossing them around like a pea in a gale. The ship wasn't going to make it around the planet's edge.

Loss of mains power meant limited directional control; their only energy source was the battery backup. Planetfall was possible, but it would be a bumpy ride, and it would be one way.

“Brace for atmospheric entry!” yelled Aaron. “We are going down!” He thought that if he diverted some power from shields, he could boost the inertial dampers. However, it would be a rough ride and impact, and the shields were more than sufficient, even at sixty percent efficiency. So, he pulled his seat harness tight.

Rem gave the smouldering plasma fire one last blast of fire suppressant spray before lurching over to his seat to strap in. He tried the comms system, but the storm had fried the circuits. He couldn't even launch a buoy as the storm would fry it and push it out of the system.

He knew nothing of the planet he was about to collide with other than its designation and the fact it had intelligent life at a high industrial level, but not yet warp-capable. Artificial satellites in orbit meant they had some spaceflight capacity, but at what level? However, he hoped they were at least friendly!

He would inadvertently violate the prime directive, but he currently had a bigger mess on his hands.

Aaron fought with the controls to keep the nose of the ship up and to maintain altitude control. His years of training made all the difference. A red/orange plasma glow began to

envelop the front of the craft as the atmosphere in front of the nose compressed and was heated by friction. The temperature outside the shields was two thousand degrees Celsius, yet the vehicle's skin temperature was only one hundred and twenty degrees and rising.

Things began to smooth out once they got within twenty thousand meters off the ground, but the vessel had the aerodynamics of a brick and was descending too fast. Aaron initiated some slow banking turns to scrub speed – gently does it! There would be one chance at a landing using the orbital thrusters to ease forward momentum. The ship was now at five thousand meters and was approaching an inland body of water. It was now or never. Aaron fired the thrusters in short blasts to drop speed while aiming at a far sandy shore. Each thruster blast was a massive jolt to the craft. The ship dropped and hit the water with a huge impact that all but wrenched Rem and Aaron from their seats. It would have been certain death without the inertial dampers.

The shuttle submerged briefly before rolling over to starboard and then righting itself. The shuttle had made it and was only a few meters from shore!

The impact had momentarily dazed Rem; he shook his head to clear the stars in front of his eyes. His hands fumbled with the strap holding him into his chair. He stood up and promptly fell over as his balance was off in the unaccustomed gravity. The slight difference between the 1g of his familiar environment and this lighter gravity was enough to cause a momentary shift in balance. He regained his feet and quickly went over to Aaron, who was already fumbling at his straps.

“Easy, easy, Chief. The gravity is a bit lighter here, and there will be a moment to adjust,” said Rem as he helped his friend with the buckle.

Aaron appeared uninjured, although his eyes were glazed, and he seemed slightly confused.

“Wha...Where are we?” he mumbled, rubbing his face with his hands.

Rem helped him to his feet, where he swayed a little adjusting his balance. As he did so, he took a moment to survey what was happening outside the ship through the intact forward window. It was brilliantly sunny outside. The shuttle was lying in a small lake a few meters from shore. The vegetation surrounding the lake was a strange red-purple colour. He sat down for a moment to collect his thoughts.

Rem said, “We need to move quickly. We need to collect equipment and supplies and get off this ship. The intelligent life on this planet will have seen the ship's descent and noticed that it was controlled and, therefore, not natural. So, they will be here very soon to take a look.”

Aaron, who had recovered his faculties by now, said, “I’ll try to send out a distress call. The shuttle should have done that automatically, but the plasma fire damaged most systems.” He set to work on the console, but the subspace radio was offline, as were the UHF and VHF systems. So, there was no communication unless another ship was in orbit and within commbadge range.

“Damn, everything is offline; the shuttle battery is dead, probably from electrical overload or water ingress. The reactor is offline too. We are literally dead in the water.” Aaron unclipped an access panel under his console. He crawled around

on the floor to access its contents. As he was doing this, he could hear Rem opening lockers and cupboards and putting together everything that they would need to survive.

Aaron carefully removed the power inverter and the radio modules. He had the idea of boosting his commbadge range with them; a phaser power pack could supply the energy needed. He put together all of the electrical components in a small pile and went over to Rem.

Aaron said, “I have what I think we will need to try to establish communication once we leave the shuttle. What else do we need?”

Rem looked up at him from the floor as he was stuffing two backpacks with supplies. “We have rations for a week, two canteens of water, and four phasers with an additional power pack for each. I also added binoculars, tricorders, and a flashlight each. We need these, too.” He handed Aaron a ceramic knife, a pair of gloves, and a thin wire coil. “Attach the blade to your belt and wear the gloves at all times; the wire goes where you can get to it quickly,” he added.

Aaron had to think about the wire and gloves before it dawned on him; his blood ran cold. It was garrotting wire, and you wore gloves to stop the wire from slicing your fingers. How ruthless and cutthroat was Rem to consider using wire to garrot someone?

Rem noticed the expression on Aaron’s face. He said, “Relax, we will never use it. It’s just a precaution. We don’t know what these aliens are like; we may have to fight to survive. Always prepare for the worst outcome. Hope for the best but prepare for the worst.”

The tooth-filled smile that Aaron got after that statement didn't ease his fears any.

A few minutes later, they were ready to leave the small ship.

Rem turned to Aaron. "Ready? We will get to the shore, where I will puncture the hull with my phaser. Once the shuttle is underwater, the hand phaser overload I have rigged should destroy the shuttle. Hopefully, the water will mask any flash from the blast and give away our exact location. However, we can't risk this advanced technology becoming available to a pre-warp intelligence.

"There is one more thing; you have to carry both packs on your shoulders to wade ashore. The water is over my head but only chest high for you."

As Aaron waded to shore, he could hear the high-pitched whine of the phaser overload in the shuttle. Rem was in front and had swum the distance at astonishing speed—courtesy of his species' partly amphibious heritage.

As he reached the shore, Rem was already adjusting his phaser to full power and readying himself. Aaron dropped the packs and quickly moved off to get some cover.

Rem fired a short burst on the port side of the shuttle just into the water. The explosion of steam pushed the craft into deeper water. A second blast blew a hole at the waterline. The shuttle drifted off slowly and began to list as it took on water. In a moment or two, it had sunk beneath the water.

A full thirty seconds passed while Rem and Aaron waited for the inevitable explosion.

Suddenly there was a massive thump that shook the ground. It was followed by an enormous dome of water and

steam that erupted from the lake. The noise was deafening but was over in a second. Rem stood there for a moment before he turned and joined Aaron. Rem looked around before retrieving his tricorder to study their surroundings.

"We need to head off to the distant hills. They give us a better view of the terrain and may afford some shelter." Aaron nodded his ascent.

They both wordlessly shouldered their packs and moved off, Rem leading with his tricorder in hand. The ground was rocky but had plenty of weirdly coloured vegetation for cover. You could have called them trees at a push, a single thick stem with an umbrella of foliage at the top. The air was dry and had a strange vegetable smell to it. Rem had scanned the atmosphere and vegetation at the start of their trek and found that the air was more than adequate, with a temperature of nineteen degrees Celsius. His tricorder told him that the vegetation was highly toxic—high levels of cyanide and hydrazine compounds in everything.

It was three hours and fifteen kilometres later before Rem or Aaron noticed any alien activity. Two flying machines flew in tight formation over their hiding place towards the lake they had crash landed in. The machines were ridiculously noisy and were, according to Aaron, a rotating wing vehicle. That was something he was familiar with from Earth history. The two men hid from sight until it was clear and proceeded on their journey. They used as much natural cover as possible and constantly scanned the skies for any more aircraft.

The light was falling as dusk was drawing in. Neither had stopped in their headlong rush to safety in the hills. They had to get to a secure spot to try and signal for help. Rem's tricorder

had picked up a series of voids in the ground ahead. If they could find an entrance to these voids or tunnels, it could give them the time they needed.

In the distance behind them were circling lights, growing signs of activity.

Rem guided Aaron to a small opening under a lip of rock. It was just wide enough to crawl through. The tricorder readings indicated a large stable underground cavern that would be perfect for hiding in and begin working on the radio. Perfect! Rem pushed the two packs through the opening before gesturing for Aaron to climb in too. Aaron quickly scrambled through. Rem went in legs first, brushing his footprints in the dirt away as he did so.

Aaron quickly took out his flashlight and surveyed their surroundings while Rem was rooting through his pack. The cavern was dry and had a level floor, probably washed in dirt from storms. The roof had roots growing down through it. Otherwise, the space was unremarkable. More importantly, the area was big enough to work in.

He realized that he had been running on adrenaline and was very tired and thirsty; he needed rest before adequately focusing on what to do next. So, he sat down and took a drink from his canteen.

Rem unpacked. Apart from a small medkit, the rations, and the extra phaser power packs, he thought he had everything he would need. He was confident they could survive two weeks easily enough. He got to his feet and turned to Aaron.

Aaron was fast asleep, lying flat out in the dirt, his uniform streaked with dust. Rem was pretty tired too and decided it was as good a time as any to get some sleep; he

stretched himself out and prepared for rest. It was no good being exhausted when he didn't know what lay in store and what they needed to do to escape.

Rem was jolted awake. There had been a sound. His keen ears had picked it up. However, he couldn't place where it was coming from or what was making it. He switched on his flashlight and scanned the cavern. Aaron was still soundlessly asleep a few meters away. He looked at his tricorder; five hours had passed since they had found shelter here.

He quietly moved over to Aaron; he gently placed a hand over the man's mouth and shook him awake. Then, as Aaron's eyes flickered open, Rem motioned with his free hand for quiet. Finally, he got to his feet and helped Aaron up.

Being as quiet as they could, Rem had motioned Aaron to put his phaser on stun by doing it to his own, making sure that Aaron could see what he was doing. Aaron nodded and checked his weapon before putting it on his belt. The sound that had awoken Rem was now louder, a scratching sound that seemed to be coming from the cavern's roof.

Rem and Aaron trained their flashlights on the roof, and there were now small particles of dirt falling. It was evident that there was activity directly above their cavern. They started putting equipment and supplies they had unpacked away as quietly as possible. It seems as though this planet's intelligent species had found them.

Finally, they stood ready with phasers drawn. Do they charge out of the entrance or wait for what was above to come calling?

They did not have to wait long as an amplified voice in perfect English suddenly came from outside.

"Please do not be alarmed. We wish you no harm. Come out of the cave and be welcomed."

Rem was shocked; he could not help but feel disarmed by this. To be calmly asked to leave his shelter was unusual, to say the least. He looked over at Aaron, who shrugged and made a face that Rem wasn't familiar with, but he thought it meant 'oh, well.'

Rem and Aaron lowered their phasers and got ready to exit. Rem went first, followed by Aaron. They both emerged into bright light cutting through the darkness.

Their eyes were still a little blinded by the light. Both Rem and Aaron had their hands up, trying to shield the light from their eyes and show that they were no threat.

The voice they had heard earlier addressed them again, but at a lower volume and from in front of them.

"Welcome. Please place any weapons you may have on the ground. We are not armed."

Rem looked at Aaron before removing his phaser, ceramic knife, and coiled wire and dropping them. Then, he motioned that Aaron should do the same.

"Excellent, may I introduce myself. I am Kraalto of the Kuth-maga, and I welcome you to our world. Forgive the intrusion." The voice was rich and in perfect English.

Rem lowered his hands from his eyes as the light intensity dimmed a little. He was now able to see what was before him. There were two multi-wheeled vehicles nearby and some lights set up on stands. High above, the flying machines were circling. He turned to see some device on tripod legs

directly above where they had been hiding, some kind of scanner, he thought. They had been found very quickly. He turned back to see what faced them.

A figure stepped forward from a group of around fifteen humanoid, naked figures. Seeing any detail as they stood behind the lights was difficult. First, the figure bowed low with arms outstretched and palms facing up in apparent greeting. Then, the figure straightened and walked forward to stand two meters away.

Rem assumed that this was the creature that had addressed them, Kraalto.

Kraalto was covered with short, dense black fur that appeared to be ornately swirled and combed into complex shapes. He was around 1.6 meters tall with large lidded black eyes and a broad, flat nose. The mouth had thin lips with surprisingly human teeth glimpsed behind them. He was wearing some webbing with pouches and pockets, which served as the only clothing seen. Rem noticed a strange, wet, animal smell to the creature, not unpleasant, however not the humans' earthy smell.

Rem gathered his thoughts as best he could and carefully positioned himself into a relaxed but ready posture. He didn't know if he may need to fight his way out of this.

He said, "I am Rem, and this is my colleague, Aaron."

He looked around at Aaron when he said this. He was still a little shocked at what was happening. It was apparent that Aaron struggled to understand what was going on, if the look on his face was anything to go by.

"We crashed here during a storm. We know our presence may be alarming to you as we are very different from

your kind. We are peaceful travellers. The weapons we have are for defence only. As soon as our friends arrive, we will leave you peacefully. We destroyed our downed craft to hide technology that could have upset your technology and culture. We do not know your intent towards us."

Kraalto listened patiently before smiling disarmingly in an all too human way. "We tracked your craft and got here as quickly as possible. We understand perfectly. Your Prime Directive forbids you to interfere in pre-warp cultures."

Rem's face must have registered surprise as Kraalto continued. "You are surprised that a seemingly pre-warp species could know of the Federation and Starfleet?"

Rem sputtered, "Of course, yes, all ships give your planet a wide berth to avoid contaminating your culture. Our records show a high industrial capacity, but still a pre-warp one. How do you know of the Federation?"

Kraalto replied, "We know a great deal through monitoring subspace communications in this sector. I have said too much, though. It is the Administrator that must answer your questions in full. So first, let me take you back to the city where you can contact your ship and perhaps enjoy a little of our hospitality. Please, come this way." He gestured to one of the wheeled vehicles nearby. "The trip should not take long."

Rem and Aaron collected their meagre possessions but left their sidearms and gloves on the ground before walking over to the vehicle indicated by Kraalto. They seated themselves as best they could. Aaron had trouble fitting into the seat because of his height but could adjust the seat back as far as possible before the vehicle set off. The vehicle driver kept glancing nervously behind him but made no sound. Finally, the second

vehicle pulled in behind them, and the short convoy was on its way.

Aaron was thirsty and hungry and utterly confused by their reception. He could not fathom what had happened; his head was whirling from it all. He had been to plenty of worlds and met species from every sector of the Alpha Quadrant. However, this was the first time he had crash-landed despite a lifetime of flying.

The vehicle he was in was uncomfortable. Everything he sat in was awkward because of his height. Every bump jarred his spine, and the dust stirred up by the vehicle irritated his nose. The sooner he could get out of this contraption, the better. He had signed up to Starfleet to fly the state-of-the-art craft. Now he was stuck on a backward planet at the mercy of unknown but surprisingly polite aliens.

After hours of driving across a dusty plain, the vehicle came across a road. Aaron was only too happy to get some relief from the bone-jarring journey up until this point. He stuck his head out of the side of the vehicle. There were some buildings and lights in the distance. More than likely, that was the small convoy's destination. His alien passengers had not said anything to him or Rem the whole journey, and Rem had been dozing anyway. After an intense ion storm and crash, fleeing unknown aliens tended to tire you out!

It wasn't long before the two vehicles entered a large plaza with magnificent buildings. The area was resplendent with potted native trees and vegetation. It was all very pleasant in the cool night air.

A small welcome committee was waiting as the vehicles came to a halt. Rem and Aaron were getting out of the vehicle when Kraalto appeared behind them.

"I apologize for the bumpy ride and the length of the journey. This is the local administrative centre. The area administrator and staff have gathered to welcome you." He made that strange bow with arms outstretched again before meeting an approaching group.

Rem and Aaron barely had enough time to register where they were and what was happening before the delegation approached. A group of five aliens came forward with a single figure at the front. This one had the usual swirled fur patterns as the others and that same wet animal smell, but there was a lot of grey in the fur, and the individual walked with a slight stoop. Rem guessed that they aged much like humans, and this individual must be pretty old.

"Welcome to Hretoth," said the lead figure bending low with arms outstretched. "My name is Lithtra. Myself and my team here are excited and honoured to meet outworlders."

He gestured to the others in the little group, who were all smiling warmly. "Let me show you to your quarters for some rest and recuperation before we can answer all of your questions, of which there will be many, no doubt. First, however, before you eat our food and drink our water, we need to make sure that there is nothing that can harm you. So, my technician will take some scans and samples to ensure that there is nothing in the food and drink we give you that could harm you. Moreover, our native vegetation, while harmless to us, could be hazardous for you."

He smiled warmly and motioned a figure behind him to approach. A figure came hesitantly forward wearing gloves and a shiny apron carrying a tray of sampling equipment and a medical scanner.

Rem thought nothing of the scans. He was just too tired and stressed to even think about it properly. However, he did have the one thought that it was only due diligence to make sure the food or drink didn't kill the guests through poisonous micronutrients or poisons. The local fauna was very high in cyanide compounds, after all.

He opened his mouth for a cheek swab when asked. He looked over at Aaron, who was also being sampled and scanned. He had to smile when he saw Aaron bending forward so that the little technician could reach up to take samples. He couldn't help but notice how the technician was shaking through all of this; it was probably the first alien species they had ever seen.

Once the sampling had finished, Lithtra introduced each delegation member to Rem and Aaron. The entire council took that strange low bow in greeting before politely, in turn, asking a question or two.

"Where is your world?" asked one. Another asked, "What species are you? Where is your fur?" Yet another grasped Aaron's hand and articulated the fingers before turning his hand over to study the back. Aaron pulled his hand away but smiled at the delegate to show he wasn't offended. Rem had one or two representatives examining his clothing and trying to touch his face. He gave the one trying to touch his face a shark's tooth grin. It had the desired effect as the alien shrieked and stumbled backward.

“Please, please,” said Lithtra raising his hand. “Allow our guests dignity; there will be ample opportunity for questions later.” At this, the delegates fell back, muttering amongst themselves. “Allow me to escort you to some quarters we have prepared. You no doubt need some food and rest.”

Lithtra escorted Rem and Aaron to a comfortable and well-furnished room a short walk from the plaza. He politely made excuses and said Kraalto would come for them after a few hours.

The room had a large worktable and two couches – or beds – there were low tables, and chairs laid out with ornately woven cushions and throws throughout the room.

A toilet and washing area were discretely positioned in a corner hidden by ornate hanging fabrics. There was no food replicator, but water and food were laid out for them.

It was a relief to be safe after the terrors of the Ion Storm, the crash landing, and the frankly bizarre alien encounter. Finally, they were alone in comfortable surroundings, with plates piled with fruits and what looked like dried fish and meats. Jugs of water and drinking vessels were laid out next to the food.

Aaron took his tricorder out of his pack to scan the water and the food. Once he was happy that there was nothing untoward, he helped himself to some water and offered some to Rem, who was busy trying the dried meat and fish after getting the all-clear.

“What do you make of these people? I have never seen people so polite and trusting; it’s bizarre.” Rem thought for a second to try and decipher the meaning from the strange accent before answering around a mouthful of dried meat.

“It's baffling, genuinely baffling. Why be so friendly to alien species you have just seen crash land on your planet? There was no xenophobia from a species that had never seen other species as far as we know. All Federation ships will have avoided the planet; not that many pass this way. How can they be so accepting? At first, my species struggled with xenophobia, and I know that reaction is often found in first contact situations. Here, there is acceptance and friendship right from the start.

“Having aliens suddenly appear could destabilize religions in any culture. I was shocked that Kraalto had heard of the Federation and Starfleet just through sub-space eavesdropping. They must have been listening in for years. We did notice some artificial satellites in orbit. This species is more technologically advanced than the Federation gave them credit for.

“We were allowed to keep the phasers in our packs plus all of the radio kit and equipment to contact Starfleet; that is astonishing. It's total trust; these Kuth-Maga don't know what we are, what we are capable of. We could have ships ready to conquer the planet for all they know of us.”

Aaron replied, “For now, I am taking everything at face value until I know better. We still have commbadges and the rucksack with the subspace radio parts. I will start rigging up a subspace radio using my commbadge. Then, hopefully, I can contact our ship or the *Troy*. Both ships will have seen the Ion storm and would have noticed that our shuttle is missing.”

“Excellent, but you must try this dried meat. It's delicious,” said Rem turning to stuff more meat into his mouth.

Aaron tried some of the meat, and it was just as delicious as Rem reported. However, he had work to do. It would be fiddly

and detailed, getting the jury-rigged radio to function. So, he set out all of the limited equipment and tools and made a start.

It was two hours later that Kraalto made an appearance. There was a chiming sound, and the door to the room slid open. Kraalto stepped through.

He smiled broadly at both men and said, “I trust the food was to your liking, and you are both rested adequately? Have you contacted your ship yet?”

Rising from the pile of subspace radio parts spread out around him, Aaron said, “Not yet. But I should be ready in the next thirty minutes.”

Rem walked over to look Kraalto in the eye. “Are you ready to explain how you know of the Federation and the Prime Directive? How are you monitoring subspace comms? You seem to know a lot.”

Kraalto smiled again and said, “Please be seated. I have a lot to tell you. The Administrator has given me the discretion to speak with you.” Then, he indicated the chairs in the room with a very human-like gesture.

He began: “We as a species are curious; our forebears looked up at the stars and imagined what life could be like on other planets around other stars. There were no deities to cloud our judgment.

“Our energies were used to discover the Universe's secrets as much as possible. Each discovery or insight made us crave greater knowledge. Finally, we developed limited warp drive and, consequently, sub-space radio. Suddenly, we were not alone; there were other voices in the darkness of space!

"We quickly learned that there were limits on what could be gleaned from eavesdropping on open communications in a foreign language. We carefully monitored subspace radio for some time. Every ship that enters our system is tracked and monitored. We found that most ships were Federation vessels on scientific or commercial trips. We knew we had nothing to fear from them, we are an open and trusting people, but we ensured that any short flights we made were done discretely. We were not ready to meet anyone until our technology was mature.

"Finally, our scientists put together the syntax of the most common language we found. The language has all but replaced our own in scientific circles. I have learned this language to better communicate with you, our new friends.

"Our excitement about joining our new friends in space has spread worldwide. Your arrival has been seen as a new beginning for us. Our people only ever had one goal: to visit the stars. We have no belief in deities, and science is our master in everything. So, when your ship arrived, we are now able to convey that we wish to join the Federation as quickly as possible."

A shocked Rem interrupted Kraalto with a raised hand. "We use universal translators to communicate with other species. I thought my commbadge was converting your language into my own. Your speech is perfect, and I was too tired and shocked to realize that you were speaking in English without translation." He looked down at his commbadge as he said it. "What you have told us has changed everything. We thought we had violated the Prime Directive just by coming here and had contaminated your culture. However, our arrival was not as catastrophic as I feared. You already know a great deal about us."

Kraalto beamed his human smile. “I am pleased that our new friends understand us a little better. However, I will leave you now as no doubt you need to finish your repairs. We could have let you use our subspace radio facilities, but that is on the southern continent. It would take too long to get there. We know of your transporter technology but do not have it for ourselves.

“There is a formal dinner in your honour this evening. You will have the chance to meet our space flight technical team. I am sure they will have a great many questions for you.” He rose from his chair and bowed low; arms outstretched. “I will send for you later.” He turned and left.

The evening air was cool as they crossed the plaza. Tiny, winged creatures were flitting from tree branch to tree branch, calling each other as they did so. Rem may have enjoyed sitting under the branches to enjoy the evening in different circumstances. However, he and Aaron were far from home, and their time was not their own. It would be tomorrow before the *USS Troy* could get to them.

The makeshift radio had worked as planned, and they contacted the *Troy*. Everything had been explained in detail; the captain was doubly excited about getting Rem and Aaron rescued and being the first to initiate first contact with a new species. None other than the *Enterprise*, the fleet's flagship, would also rendezvous in four days.

Rem and Aaron were pleased that they were going home. Aaron had said that the first thing he would do was have a long soak in the bath. Rem was looking forward to a drink of Guinness with his friends in the ship's bar and just getting back to normal.

Kraalto had shown up as promised later in the evening and bought some clean clothing for the two men, hastily made and not exactly form-fitting, but it would do.

The plaza ended and the colossal administration complex loomed ahead. The area to each side was filled with Kuth-Maga carefully screened off from their approach; their excitement was palpable and very noisy; the noise of hundreds of alien voices was deafening! Rem and Aaron felt like the music stars of past ages.

Both men were led into a vast hall where a huge feast was laid on a single table. Some vessels of freshly cooked meats were steaming, and the smell of exotic spices and strange but wonderfully smelling foods hung like a perfume in the air. Rem thought he could smell one of his all-time favourite human dishes, lamb curry! There was a lot of background noise in the room, but that died off as they approached the table. Everyone in the room was looking at Rem and Aaron. Lithtra led a small group over to them.

“Welcome, welcome,” he said with a beaming smile and sparkling eyes. “We hope you will find the meal we have laid in your honour to your satisfaction. We have assembled the finest ingredients from across our world for your delectation. Please be seated and accept some of our wine.”

Rem had barely sat down when a waiter appeared as if from nowhere. Rem took a small ornate glass vessel full of a red pungent liquid from the proffered tray. Aaron was offered one as well. Both men looked at each other before smiling and tapping their glasses together. Whatever the drink was, it wasn't wine. However, it was delicious.

Aaron looked around at the female Kuth-Maga politely and quietly sitting next to him. He smiled and introduced himself. He couldn't help but notice how nervous she was; her hands shook. Finally, she composed herself a little and said, “My name is Loothro, and I am a computer scientist in the science academy attached to the flight team. I was hoping to talk to you regarding Federation computer systems. In particular, bioneural systems. I have heard talk of them but nothing other than the concept.”

Aaron considered his reply for a moment and replied. “I am a pilot and flight engineer by training, so I can't go into specific details. But our more modern ships use bioneural circuitry, a hybrid organic-electric computer system comprised of neural packs containing neural fibres in a supporting gel. The system's advantages mean faster processing speeds as the fibres interconnect like brain tissue. As a result, computers can think like a living organism and use elements of fuzzy logic to elicit best guess answers rather than working through each possible calculation.

“It could be a few months before you even see the inside of a Federation or Starfleet ship. There are hurdles to overcome and some degree of investigation.”

Loothro seemed a little crestfallen at the prospect of waiting months before she could look at Federation computer technology. She excused herself and wandered off to sit next to one of her colleagues. At once, another Kuth-Maga took the previous occupant's place; this one was male. He smiled and introduced himself as Kuthma. “May I ask you about warp technology? Our ships have limited power output; we can only achieve low warp for short periods using fusion power as a

source. I understand that the Federation uses dilithium crystals that are porous to antihydrogen?

Aaron pondered the issue and said, “I can give you the basics as most pilots have some training in field dynamics and propulsion. However, as you already have warp drive, I won't be giving away too many Federation secrets.” He then gave a basic overview of the processes involved, Kuthma was nodding vigorously through it all while taking notes on a computer tablet.

The dinner seemed to be going very well, with lots of animated conversations with Rem and Aaron being the topic of discussion. Aaron helped himself to some more excellent hot meat while talking to Kuthma. It was a bit spicy but not too much so. He was used to spicy food and was enjoying it.

He faintly heard Kraalto address him. He turned and put down his knife. Kraalto raised his voice to be heard and said, “I see you and Rem are enjoying the dish of Rektoo. I personally selected the female slave that went into the dish. It is delicious. It’s reserved for our most honoured guests.”

Rem was halfway through a discussion of Federation history with one of the delegates when he heard what Kraalto had said. The bristles on Rem's scalp started to rise. He dropped his knife with a loud clatter that got people turning around in their seats. He could not comprehend what he was hearing. He turned to look at Aaron to see if he had heard it. But unfortunately, he had heard only too well. The man had gone deathly white. The blood had drained from his face.

Kraalto, upon seeing what he perceived as shock on Aaron’s and Rem's faces, hurriedly said, “Did you not enjoy the best cuts of meat we have honoured you with? I don't understand. Have we offended you?”

There was deathly quiet in the room. No one spoke. All eyes were on Kraalto, Rem, and Aaron.

Aaron straightened from his chair, shaking with utter shock and horror. His eyes never left Kraalto, who was looking a little bewildered. Kraalto was looking from Rem to himself in utter confusion.

Aaron summoned the strength and pushed away from the table. He rose and walked on what felt like rubbery legs to stand next to Rem. It was clear that Rem was struggling with his own emotions on finding out that he had just eaten.

Rem glanced at the ashen face of Aaron and summoned the strength to speak even though the inner strength to articulate his emotions properly was weak. He was shaking as he spoke.

“You have openly indulged in cannibalism, and we have participated unwittingly. There is no greater taboo than cannibalism in all known sentient species. The fact that you slaughtered a slave for food is beyond comprehension.

“You did not know about these cultural taboos, but that does not make it any less appalling. You must excuse us. We cannot participate any further in this evening's proceedings.”

Rem rose to turn and gripped Aaron by his upper arm to guide him from the room; the man was still shaking. Both men started to walk from the room. Behind them, the room erupted into noisy shouts of alarm.

They made it halfway across the now deserted plaza before Aaron vomited into one of the potted trees. Rem did not have the luxury despite his stomach-churning; his species could not vomit. At this moment in time, Rem envied human anatomy.

Once back in their quarters, Aaron locked the door. However, it wasn't long before the door started chiming. They had visitors…

Rem asked Aaron to get in touch with the *Troy*. It had to make maximum warp to get them off this planet as quickly as possible. Although perfectly polite and friendly, their hosts killed and ate an enslaved person for a celebratory meal, and Rem and Aaron partook of the meat. Neither man could adequately process what had gone on. How would their hosts react once they gained entrance to the room?

Aaron was on emotional autopilot, speaking to the comms officer on the *Troy*.

Rem went over and gently took the radio; he could see that Aaron was having difficulty.

Aaron sat down and slumped with his head in his hands. Rem addressed the captain as he came on the line.

“Captain Edwards, Lieutenant Rem here. The situation here has changed for the worst, and we will need to return to the ship sooner than planned. I will do my utmost to calm the problem, but I don’t know what will happen. I do not think we are in physical danger.”

Captain Edwards replied, “The ship will be there in four hours. Can I ask what the situation is and how it has deteriorated so quickly? Your last communication was in glowing terms of your hosts.”

“I can't go into the intricacies of the situation until I can brief you and the first officer, Captain; suffice it to say that although our hosts are polite and generous, they have some practices that are difficult to reconcile with Federation values. So, the delegation that you send has some real work to do. First,

chief Copeland and I will need an extraction, though. I will tell our hosts to expect a diplomatic team to arrive soon."

"Very well," said the captain. "Do what you can to smooth things there; we will beam you aboard as soon as we are in range. Tell your hosts that a team will beam down at 14:00 the day after tomorrow.

"I expect your full report on returning to the ship, Edwards out."

Rem turned his attention to the door, which was chiming continuously. He was going to have to let them in.

Aaron was trying to get some focus, to snap out of this sickening horror that had enveloped him. He watched as Rem retrieved his phaser from his pack and set it to stun. Rem motioned him that he should get his phaser and do the same. Aaron rose and retrieved his phaser. A practiced hand adjusted it to stun. They exchanged glances. Neither of them said a word. The focus was on what to do when the door opened.

Rem walked over to the door and keyed it open.

The door opened with a swish to reveal Lithtra and Kraalto. A good many people were milling around behind them. Rem motioned the two leaders in with his phaser and then shut the door behind them. He spoke before either man could say anything. "Please excuse the phaser; I could not tell your mood after leaving. We feared violence. It is only a precaution." He lowered the weapon as he finished.

Lithtra addressed Rem and Aaron as Kraalto stayed strangely silent behind him. "Please let us be seated and speak openly of our differences. I beg you to put away your weapons; we allowed you to keep them as a token of our trust." He looked

from Rem to Aaron as both men attached their sidearms to their belts.

"Excellent, thank you. You need not fear violence from us. On the contrary, we are a peace-loving people.

"However, back to the matter at hand, as I see the issue, you are grossly offended by our cultural practice of slavery and the consumption of enslaved people. Starfleet and the wider Federation would see this practice poorly. This reaction to our cultural norms gives us a dilemma. I hope we can work through this with mutual respect and understanding." He smiled broadly after this.

Rem thought carefully before answering Lithtra. "It is true that the enslavement and the consumption of individuals within your species represent the two biggest taboos within the Federation. But unfortunately, neither my friend Aaron here nor I are trained negotiators. I am a security specialist, and Aaron is a pilot and flight dynamics expert. Therefore, neither of us knows the next steps. A delegation from our ship will replace us, and they will be here at 14:00 tomorrow. You must plead your case to join the Federation. Our ship will be in contact to make the preparations. Our part in this is done; we will leave as soon as our ship is in range, in around forty minutes."

Lithtra was listening intently, and when Rem had finished, he looked at the silent Kraalto as if for permission to speak before saying. "I thank you for your honesty. At least let us part company as friends. I will send Kraalto to clear the plaza so that no one will be disturbed by your departure."

At this, he nodded at Kraalto, who rose and left wordlessly.

Lithtra spoke with Rem and Aaron about what he should expect from the delegation. He was adamant that thousands of years of cultural practice could not be abandoned on a whim. Society, on the whole, could not accept such massive changes. It would be generations before any change could be achieved, even if the process were started now.

The small group walked out into the middle of the deserted plaza to await pick up. Rem and Aaron had carefully packed everything they had bought and were anxiously awaiting beam up. Lithtra shook each man's hand firmly and stepped back. There was a noticeable frisson in their last goodbye. Both parties understood that there was a precipice to be crossed. Cultural values held dear for generations would have to be changed. The fabric of Kuth-Maga society would have to be changed forever if they had any chance of being accepted into the Federation. As it stood currently, joining was impossible, but at least the Kuth-Maga knew that, which was half the battle.

Then, right on cue, the was a familiar electronic hum, and Rem and Aaron faded from sight.

Rem's briefing to the captain and the first officer was a tense affair. The Federation had never initiated first contact with a cannibalistic species. It was a mere formality that the request to join the Federation was dismissed. The problem was how to explain that to a species that until very recently saw nothing wrong in the practices of cannibalism and slavery. Until the whole of Kuth-Maga society was free, the practice of cannibalism was outlawed entirely. There was a simple choice to be made. Abandon cultural and societal norms to join the Federation or forever be shunned. Until then, there could be no contact

between any of the Federation races; trade would not be allowed in the interim. They had been bitterly disappointed by the decision to refuse entry; in their eyes, they had done nothing wrong. The grand plans of working with the Federation to improve their technology were dashed.

Rem's eyes had been opened wide. He had trusted the Kuth-Maga even though he didn't know them. He had been taken in. How could he have known what they were like on such short exposure?

A trusting, open, and friendly race with no perceivable malice had an undercurrent of evil running through their culture. An evil that was normal – to them at least. The Kuth-Maga had said that they were sorry. Were they sorry? Did they see the Federation perspective at all? Would they abandon their pernicious norms for a perceived greater prize?

Forgiving someone is easy. Trusting them again – that's hard.