

IMPOSSIBLE CHOICES



by Sean O'Keefe

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It was his turn now, he knew. Everyone who had plans on eventually becoming a captain had to do this. He knew. However, what was supposed to be a secret from the candidates was probably the worst kept in Starfleet. Everyone knew about the *Kobayashi Maru* test. The no-win scenario. Just the thought of it made him shiver.

Krashtallash was one who was no stranger to adversity. A native of Cait, unlike most of the people of his world, his fur was pitch black. On his planet, it set him apart, unfavourably.

Ostracized by his family and people, he had naturally been drawn to Starfleet, an organization devoted to the notions of IDIC. It had started out on Earth, but with the formation of the United Federation of Planets, the red carpet had been thrown out to species from all their member planets. A being designed for service, he felt at home here.

However, as he sat in the centre seat of the simulator, with his crew members selected from his academy mates, the buck now stopped with him. It had been a long time since he felt like all eyes were on him, and it made him uncomfortable. At home, he was always receiving unwanted attention due to his colouring. Now, his crewmates were wondering how he would handle this situation. Was he worthy of following?

Even he wasn't certain at the moment. However, he recalled a word from his mother she had given him shortly before he left. "Whatever you face in life, my son, you should just be yourself. Despite what life had thrown you, you have stood tall. You're a good male."

He looked about him at his crew and gave them all a nod. "We're in this together," he said in his natural baritone. "Let's give fate a run for its money."

He received a number of cheerful grins in response, and that simple gesture warmed him. He could do this.

The clock above the viewscreen began ticking. The simulation had begun.

“Status?” he asked.

His XO at present was a good friend. Miska Unatti was from a region near the head of the Nile. Her skin was so dark it had a blue tinge, and her eyes glistened brightly white, testifying to her incredible intelligence. She was tall, even taller than Crash, who was himself over six feet in stature.

She gave him a delighted grin. Her voice was highly pitched and almost musical. “Captain,” she said, the *Enterprise* is running at .5c along the Romulan Neural Zone a light year from Galorndon Core. All systems are green.” She sounded almost giddy with excitement.

Crash flashed a small smile himself, revealing some of his incredibly sharp teeth. “What do your people say about “mozzing” something?”

Miska shrugged. “*C’est la vie*,” she said, once more flashing a broad smile.

She’s really enjoying this, Crash thought to himself. *Maybe I should too.*

They had every reason to. This was Crash’s *second* attempt in the simulator. The first time around, he had discovered a logical flaw in the simulation. The message had not been sent by subspace, and where the ship had found itself was too far for a sublight message to arrive in less than a year. Crash’s expertise in communications had highlighted the obvious flaw. He had simply stated: “Whatever happened to the *Kobayashi Maru* had to have happened a year ago. It is not worth risking an engagement with the Romulans. Continue on course.”

The simulator had immediately shut down and he was told to return tomorrow.

“Captain,” came a voice from over his left shoulder. “We’re receiving a distress call over subspace.”

Here we go again. Nice to see they’ve fixed the problem. “On screen,” he said.

“Voice only.”

The only sign of Crash’s annoyance was a twitch in his whiskers. “Let’s hear it.”

The sound was garbled and oddly broken by static. *How old is this recording?* he wondered.

A voice emanated from the ceiling speaker. It was very agitated – desperate. “This is the *Kobayashi Maru*. We’re nineteen days out of Altair Four. We have struck a gravitic mine and have lost all power. We have sustained many casualties. Can you assist us, *Enterprise*? Can you assist us?”

Crash’s mind turned over the content of the message. Before he could utter a word, Miska stated: “For a ship that’s supposed to be so badly damaged, how on earth did they know who we are?”

Krashtallash looked up into his friend’s eyes. The notion had just come to him as well. “This situation smells like a dead rodent,” he said.

Around him, his crewmates were nodding to themselves in agreement.

All the same, as a captain of a Federation starship, he could not ignore *this* call for help. He spoke for the comms officer. “Signal that we’re on our way.”

Miska stepped close. “I don’t like this,” she said quietly.

Crash curled a lip. “Neither do I,” he said. “I have a duty to Federation citizens, but I also have a duty to our crew.”

His friend smirked. “I don’t envy you, Captain,” she said quietly.

He flashed her a quick grin. “Wait ‘til it’s your turn.”

He shifted in the seat and was reminded once more that they were not designed for felinoids. He had slipped it through the gap in the middle of the chair and now playfully snapped it as if it was a whip at Miska.

A thought came to him. The motion reminded him of something from his youth. “Miska, the *Enterprise* is *Constitution*-class, right?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

Crash stood, his strategy clear in his mind. “Prepare for emergency saucer separation.”

His crew looked at him, stunned. This was something done only in drastic circumstances.

Miska was also surprised, but a quick glance from her captain reminded her of her responsibility. “Move it, people!” she shouted. “All non-essential crew to the saucer!”

Crash continued. “Set course directly *away* from the Neutral Zone. Bring us to .75c.”

The student at the helm nodded. “Aye, captain. Impulse engines engaged.”

Crash turned to his XO. “Miska, I need you to command the saucer. Get our people to safety.”

At first, Miska felt the impulse to refuse, and Crash could see it. He placed his paw on her shoulder. “I need you here, my friend.”

The XO took a deep breath between her teeth and let it out slowly. “Yes, Captain. Would you like me to select a crew for you?”

Crash nodded, and Miska barked out her orders for selection as he walked towards the turbolift. As he stood at the door waiting, he was joined by those Unatti had called. With a whoosh, the rarely used turbolift door opened and the team stepped through. The Captain turned and saw Miska mouth “Good luck” as they closed.

Krashtallash stepped into the Auxiliary Control centre housed in the secondary hull with his team, who all took their places. Standing behind them, Crash could see everything at a glance.

A call from the Bridge came in. “Ready for separation, Captain,” they heard.

Crash made the call. “Separate.”

In the real world, they would have heard a resounding clang as the huge locks holding the two halves of the ship together released.

Crash wondered if anyone had ever done this before, as it would seem no one had ever programmed the simulator to make reproduce the sound.

Perhaps they’ll change that too, he thought.

From the comms speaker, he heard Miska’s voice. “We’re free and clear to navigate. Good voyages, Captain.”

The Caitian chuckled to himself. “Mozzing me again?” he said.

It was loud enough for the comms to pick it up. Unatti cheekily said: “Any day, my friend.”

Time to be serious, Crash thought to himself and he steeled himself for his next commands. “Navigation, bring us on a circular course that’ll bring us to IP with the *Maru*. I want us to be less than a kilometre from her when we drop out of warp.”

He turned his attention to comms. “Call engineering and have them warm up the tractor beam.”

His crew were beginning to understand the plan.

Crash put his paw on the shoulder of a young Andorian chan who was acting as his security officer. “Mister Brankovian, I’ll need you to act as my XO.”

Brankovian nodded his acceptance, a smile playing around his lips. It seemed the man relished the opportunity for battle. “Thank you for the honour, sir,” he replied.

“The honour is mine. Now, what do we have to fight with?”

Brankovian gave it a quick think before he checked the computer to check. “We have forward and aft torpedoes – that’s all.”

Crash allowed a little growl. A design flaw, in his estimation. Starfleet should be able to do this more often without hamstringing the ship. “It’ll have to do. So, Brankovian, do you have any problems with the strategy?”

“Captain, I gather you want to hit and run? No, sir. I think it’s our best option.” Brankovian seemed confident.

Taking a deep breath, Crash then said: “Let’s do it.”

His team galvanised, they held their breath as they hung on his orders.

“Okay, this is what I want to happen. We come in hot from warp six. As soon as absolutely possible, we snare the *Maru* in a tractor beam and go back to warp. Our warp power will be available for our shields if we need them, and I expect them to be raised the moment we come out of warp. Mister Brankovian, load the torpedo bays. Does everyone understand the plan?”

“Yes, sir.” The acknowledgement was unanimous and simultaneous.

“Do it.”

On the viewscreen, the stars began streaming as the ship jumped to warp. With only a lightyear to fly, the ship was only at warp for two minutes before they drew close.

“Do our scanners show anything other than the *Maru*?” Crash asked as he noticed they were getting close.

“Nothing on scanners, sir,” Brankovian reported.

The helm officer reported: “Dropping out of warp... NOW!”

The faux *Enterprise* dropped out of warp practically on top of the *Kobayashi Maru*.

Crash had just started ordering for the tractor beam as it reached out and took hold of the vessel.

“Captain!” Brankovian stated, excited. “Three Klingon D-7 battleships to starboard!”

“Warp drive!” Crash called.

Brankovian reported: “We’re not close enough to extend our warp bubble around the *Maru*.”

Crash knew instinctively this whole scenario was a setup. All the same, there was a Federation ship out there that needed help. “Bring us closer!” he ordered, knowing that it was to really possible.

At helm, the young trainee, frightened, said: “We don’t have impulse, only thrusters!”

Crash placed his paw on the young human’s shoulder. “Burn them at one hundred and twenty percent if you have to.”

The young man turned back and grouched: “Half of them were on the saucer.”

Another design flaw, Crash thought to himself.

“The Klingons are arming torpedoes!” Brankovian reported, excited.

Crash made an instant call. “Fire at will.”

On their smaller viewscreen, the *Enterprise* fired two globes of antimatter violence at their aggressors. They bounced off their forward shields. Brankovian waited the two seconds for reload and fired again.

In the meantime, their room shook as the secondary hull took a direct hit to their exposed hull. Sparks spat from several consoles as they overloaded.

“Are we close enough yet?” Crash asked, already knowing the answer.

Helm answered. “No. We need another thirty seconds.”

Talk about the impossible choice, Krashtallash thought. All the same, he had never forgotten his primary concern, and it wasn't necessarily their safety. “Cut the tractor beam. Warp drive!”

The stars turned into streaks, and they left the Klingons behind them.

Brankovian gave Crash a suspicious look. This was not the Andorian way.

Neither was it the Caitian, he was about to find out.

“Take us out of warp,” Crash ordered after five seconds. “Give the Klingons time to catch up. They should be mad enough to follow us and leave the *Maru* alone.”

In a flash, Brankovian understood what his captain was doing, and he approved. He gave the magnificent Cait a nod of acceptance.

Crash reached out and touched the comms button on the helm panel. “Engineering, prepare for self-destruct. Order one-seven-three, section nine, paragraph two.”

Over the comms, the young female could be heard to gulp. “Understood, Captain. Awaiting your order.”

Away from the cadets, in the simulation control room, the Lieutenant in charge took in his visitor, wondering why on earth she was here. All the same, he could not help but utter: “Are you seeing this?”

The tall human female gave a smirk. “Yes, I am. He's quite resourceful.”

Her Tellarite snout puckering in amazement, Lieutenant Erian turned back to the huge display panels which showed all three rooms now in use. This in itself was highly unusual, as most cadets forgot about the ship's ability to separate. Indeed, they usually only used the Auxiliary Control Room in the event that the ship and crew lasted long enough for it to be useful.

“What next?” she uttered.

Her visitor knew exactly what he planned. She smiled to herself. “Brilliant,” she breathed. She quietly added: “Honourable.”

The Klingons arrived about ten seconds later, spewing torpedoes as they came.

Now fully shielded, the “ship” took the first salvo and repelled it.

“Keep firing,” Crash ordered, and Brankovian kept up a continual barrage. He wondered if his family would be proud of him if his life would finish like this. It was a good death, the young Andorian thought.

The air was filling with acrid smoke as circuits began overloading. The cadets stayed at their posts.

“We have to give the *Maru* a chance to come out of this. Even if it takes our sacrifice,” Crash said with dread certainty. “This is what we signed up for.”

The cadets all straightened up a little. They were not going down without a fight.

In the control room, Lieutenant Erian watched in wonder. “He’s certainly giving them everything in his cargo hold,” she said, reminding his visitor of her people’s trading nature.

“He is that,” the visitor said quietly, with a nod. Reminding herself her time was limited, he checked her antique gold watch. She still had time.

Erian noted the odd affectation, but she was fully aware of her visitor’s reputation. She was known for using all kinds of peculiar things to her advantage.

“Do you think he’ll go down fighting?” Erian asked.

Her visitor gave her a broad grin. “Something like that.”

Crash grabbed the back of the chair in front of him. “Open a channel to the saucer section,” he ordered.

With a beep, the pristine bridge appeared on the screen.

Their captain stated quickly, “It’s in your hands now, Miska. Make sure Starfleet is aware of the situation.”

His friend gave him a quick nod, and then they were gone as the screen was destroyed in a spray of sparks.

“Shields are nearly gone!” he heard from Engineering.

Time had run out.

“Are we close enough to the Klingons?” Crash asked Brankovian.

The Andorian gave him a nod. “Yes, Captain.”

Without a pause, Crash gave the order. “Now, Engineering.”

It took only a pause, and then a siren sounded. “Simulation over,” the computer announced.

The doors opened and the cadets sauntered out, wondering what their grade would be on this test.

As Krashtallash turned to leave, he felt a hand on his arm and he turned to see Brankovian, curious.

Their eyes having met, Brankovian came to full attention. “Well done, Captain,” he said, his voice rough. “I would be glad to serve under you any day.”

Crash was touched. He had never expected this level of respect. He had just done what he thought was best at the time. Returning the Andorian’s tight grip, he shook his hand and said: “The honour is mine.”

They turned to leave, but were caught short by a stranger standing in the doorway. The human was tall by their standards, with fair hair and oddly green eyes. Crash wondered what she was here for.

Then he saw the gold Captain’s bars on her shoulder strap. He quickly came to attention, as did Brankovian.

“Captain!” they said in unison.

“At ease, gentlemen,” she said, her face giving away nothing. She paused for a moment, and both of them began to sweat. She finally broke the silence with: “You destroyed the stardrive section of the *Enterprise*, cadets.”

Crash looked directly ahead. “Yes, Captain.”

Their visitor broke the tension with a smile. “You also destroyed three Klingon cruisers and saved the *Kobayashi Maru*.” She gave a brief chuckle. “That’s far more than most of us.”

Krashtallash and Brankovian shared a brief glance. They were genuinely surprised.

They were brought up short by the captain's declaration: "Most students trash the whole ship. You showed remarkable poise in this situation, and I note, Cadet Krashtallash, that you put the needs of your crew ahead of your own by splitting the ship and going into battle with a skeleton crew. You are to be commended."

Both males straightened up, honoured. "Thank you, Captain!"

The Captain continued. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You exemplified this in that you first protected your fellow cadets while still putting your life on the line for those on the *Kobayahsi Maru*. You did quite well, considering the limitations." She paused for a second, then focussed on Krashtallash. "Mister, you might consider writing a paper based on the limitations you faced. I would personally vet it and forward it to Command. There are lessons to be learned here."

Krashtallash's eyes widened a little. *How did she know what I was thinking?*

The Captain caught his eyes. "I see real command potential in you, Cadet. My name is Piper, and when you've finished this last year, I plan on having you seconded to my command on the *Exeter*."

Once more, the cadets straightened up, but this time to complete attention. They realised they were in the presence of a Captain of a ship of the line. The respect was due.

"Thank you, Captain Piper," Crash croaked out through a tightened throat.

Piper gave them both a broad grin. "Thank *you*, gentlemen. You put on quite a spectacle today. Well done!" She then honoured both men with a handshake, then quickly turned and left them to wonder.

Before then could exchange a word, they were joined by Miska who barged in through the door, excited. "I waited until the Captain was finished with you, Crash. I didn't want to interrupt. What do you think that was all about?"

The Caitian shrugged his black-furred shoulders. Brankovian summed it up: "I think our humble friend here is too good of a Cait to

admit that we just saw through a window into his future.” He gave him an uncharacteristically bright smile. “It’s looking bright.”