

## COMING HOME

*”Captain’s log, stardate 56060.1. The Athena is on the final approach to Earth, and there are mixed emotions among the crew. For some, the end of this mission is the end of their time in Starfleet, and for others, there are promotions and reassignments and the like. A full crew rarely stays together for any length of time, and in some sense, this crew is broken. In retaking Philentrophia, and the circumstances surrounding that, we lost some good people. The memorial on the newly-liberated planet still haunts me. There is a great deal of uncertainty in what is to come next. Even I don’t know what to expect next, beyond a great deal of debriefing.”*

Captain Leonard Thorpe of the Federation starship *Athena* was seated in the centre seat on the bridge command deck, with his first officer Julia Bayanhong to his right and his chief medical officer, Ger Psakolaps to his left. The other regular bridge officers were at their posts, as the *Nebula*-class starship completed its journey to Earth.

At the tactical console behind the command deck, tactical officer Henrietta Vorwoorts reported, “Captain, we’ve been given clearance for final approach to Spacedock, and we have an approach course and a docking berth.”

“Very well,” Thorpe replied. “Relay approach information to the helm.”

“Done,” Vorwoorts simply said as she tapped at the console.

“Sanjay,” Thorpe said, “how long?”

“Five minutes,” replied Sanjay Indesakar, the ship’s pilot. He looked up at the viewscreen at the front of the bridge. It now showed mostly stars and the small blue dot that was Earth. The huge orbital structure known as Spacedock was not yet visible, but that blue dot was growing larger.

“So this is the end of the mission,” Bayanhong said to the captain.

“I know. What’s next is what is worrisome to me.”

“The debriefings?”

“No, not so much that but meeting Damiko and Hiroshi when I get back to Earth. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen them.”

“It sounds like you should be eager to see them.”

“But that assumes they’re eager to see me.” Bayanhong let the com-

ment slide, knowing what it meant and that the bridge might not be the best place to discuss this issue. She was thinking about her own issues, with her brother and a man named David who had been a lover once until he went through the Federation psychiatric system—sometimes referred to as “re-education camps”—and suddenly lost all interest in her. There was also Dusty, the last surviving comsosaur from Cretaceia, now residing at the San Diego zoo. Could she see him? Sometimes, she had the feeling that there were some people who joined Starfleet to run away from personal issues and their previous lives on Earth—and she was one of them.

Indesakar was piloting the ship to Spacedock seemingly on autopilot, as he was thinking of his own issues, and the damage he had done to his career from the events that culminated at Rigel, in particular his relationship with Sunni Lopodhur. He had the fear that his evaluations would be negatively affected as a consequence of what had happened. He was dreading the performance review that he was sure to face, and which was going to have repercussions towards his dream of moving into the command track, with the chance of being the first officer on a ship. Such a ship would not be a prestige assignment like the *Athena*, but would be a smaller ship, perhaps with a more limited mandate and a smaller crew. However, it was a first step. As much as he had enjoyed his stay on the *Athena*, he knew he could never be on the command track here. He did understand that he had to start at the bottom and was prepared for that. His worry was that he might not even get the chance to do that.

Grace Brigson sat beside Vorwoorts at the centre console. She knew that her assignment to the *Athena* was temporary, while her own ship, the *Socrates* was refitted. The captain of that ship, Martin Mbala, wanted her back, but she was not too sure that she wanted to go back. The *Athena* had done far more than the *Socrates* had, and she has conducted far more useful work on this ship than on the other vessel. Being in the Omerra Open Cluster did help, but that was the kind of missions a ship like the *Athena* got. She knew she wanted a permanent transfer to the *Athena*, and would have to face her former commander, who had loaned her out on the expectation that he would get her back. Even so, she knew this was the right thing to do.

Indesakar reported, “Captain, one minute to Spacedock.” The massive orbital station was starting to come into view.

“Heni,” Thorpe said to his tactical officer. “Put me on shipwide.”

After tapping at some icons on her console, Vorwoorts reported, “You’re on.”

“This is the captain,” he started, using that authoritative voice that he would occasionally display. “We’re about to arrive at Spacedock. When we dock, the current mission of the *Athena* will end. At some future date, the ship will launch again, but as of now, we do not have a mission and so no

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launch date. Each member of the crew will have a meeting with a Starfleet personnel officer to evaluate and discuss your career in Starfleet and possible career paths. We had undergone a dramatic and trying time in the Omerra Open Cluster and on Philentrophia, and we all know people who are not coming home again. You all went above and beyond the call of duty, and I am proud of you all. To those who will not be returning to the *Athena* when we launch again, I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors, inside or outside of Starfleet. This has been the captain. That is all.” The last three words were a signal to Vorwoorts to end the shipwide broadcast.

Thorpe now looked up at the screen and saw the very large presence of the orbital station, so large that tidal forces with Earth went into the consideration of the design and operation of the station. The main hatch was opening, even as Indesakar, using the gravity drive now, guided the ship into position so that the station tractor beams could take hold and guide the large starship to its berth. When that happened, when they all felt the jerking sensation of the tractor beam taking hold, the pilot said, “We’ve arrived.”

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On board Spacedock, standing by the observation deck to docking berth six, were a number of people, all waiting for the arrival of the *Athena*. Some were members of the crew who had brought the *Dublin* back to Earth, as that ship with its quantum slipstream drive had beaten the *Athena* here. A few of the others were fellow Starfleet officers and even some significant others who served in Starfleet in some other capacity or who were on other ships.

One of the latter was Damiko Matsubara, and she did not come alone. In her arms was her son. Hiroshi, who was now over a year old and about to see the father he had not seen for much of his life. Of course, Damiko knew, the boy would not recognize his father. He was not a presence in his life, and though she understood why, it still was not easy. Her parents and her grandfather had been very supportive and she had not been overwhelmed by the need to raise her son. She even had time for some Starfleet work. She had been asked to vet and fact-check some papers produced by fellow Starfleet officers before they were published in scientific journals. She found it interesting work, and it occupied her mind, even as she thought about the *Athena* being in space, on distant missions, conducting some interesting research and she was not there to be a part of it.

A horn sounded, alerting those on the observation deck that a ship was approaching this dock. Hiroshi was momentarily startled by the sound, so Matsubara said, “Daddy’s coming home.” The child garbled some response, as he was not quite talking yet.

The interior of Spacedock was huge, the largest enclosed space ever built by mankind, and Matsubara could see why. Some of the ships built by Starfleet were very large, including the one that was approaching this docking berth, and only by standing here did Matsubara get an appreciation for the size. It was like a building that was floating in space, a very large and yet sleek building, even if aerodynamics was not a requirement of starships. People just preferred to build them that way. As the ship loomed closer, pulled into position by an unseen tractor beam, Matsubara could see the saucer section grow ever larger, and with increasing detail. She saw the windows and the escape pod ports and the main gangway. She could imagine members of the crew standing in those windows, seeing the approaching dock and perhaps the people standing on the observation deck. She was pretty sure that Thorpe was not one of them. Besides the saucer section, she could see the lander, which from this vantage point looked larger than she imagined it to be. The secondary hull was huge, a building in its own right, and the navigational deflector looked like it could swallow the observation deck whole. The nacelles, which were dark as the warp engines had been powered down, were imposing seen at this angle. Seen from this vantage point, the *Athena* looked larger than Matsubara imagined it to be. And the ship kept coming closer and getting larger and looming ever more over them that it seemed like it was going to crash into them. That was Hiroshi’s reaction to it, as he started to cry out and turned and buried his face into his mother’s shoulder.

“Relax,” she said soothingly. “It’s not going to hit you.” Once he was not looking, Hiroshi stopped crying because he could hear nothing. That included the moment it reached the dock. It connected to the docking port, and the clamps secured it in place, all without a sound or any other sensation.

“He’s home,” Matsubara said softly, “but the only question is for how long.”

A number of the others on the observation deck made their way to the gangway port, awaiting the arrival of the person or persons that they had come to meet, but Matsubara was not one of them. The person she was meeting would not be among the first persons to leave the ship, but would be among the last. She just wanted to be there to see the ship arrive. She knew it had survived its time in the Omerra Open Cluster, and it had come through the retaking of Philentrophia unscathed—though the same could not be said for the crew—but there was nothing like seeing the ship with her own eyes.

On the bridge of the *Athena*, Indesakar reported, “Captain, we have arrived at the dock and we’re secured without incident. Docking mechanism is secure.”

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The chief engineer, Rodall Dewuchun, who was an Odonan directing the operation of an Odonan warp core on a Starfleet vessel, spoke up, “Captain, getting a request to transfer power and control of the ship to Spacedock.”

Thorpe entered an access code into the console between him and Bayanhong, and when he saw the result, he replied, “Do it.”

On the engineering panel, Dewuchun tapped at some icons and watched the changes on his displays. “Process complete,” he said once the changes stopped. “We’re on external power and control.”

To his first officer, Thorpe said, “And that means that for all intents and purposes, this is not my ship.”

Dewuchun added, “Data download starting.”

“How much?”

“Three point two exobytes,” the engineer reported. “It’ll take a bit of time.”

Vorwoorts spoke up, “Captain, incoming message, text only, for you; directing to your console.”

“Okay,” the man glumly acknowledged, thinking it could be from one of two sources. It could be his immediate superior, Drake Holloway, or another person he might have to answer to, Damiko Matsubara. He accepted the message and read it, and in a sense, he was not surprised. To Bayanhong, he said, “It’s Damiko. She’s on the station.”

“With Hiroshi?”

“Yeah.”

It was the end of the mission, and on the journey home, many of the crew had been informed of what they were to do upon arrival in Earth, based on their status in Starfleet and their preferences and commitments. Some would be leaving Starfleet, having completed their obligations and realizing that their reasons for being in Starfleet had been fulfilled. Others would be reassigned to other ships or other positions, as per their requests and promotion tracks, and others would be returning to the *Athena*. Some were going on leave, and others were heading to Starfleet Academy or other institutions for skills upgrading. Thus, as some of the crew gathered just outside the main gangway airlock, there were many calls to keep in touch, to wish one well and good luck. After the ship docked, there was a delay of several minutes before the hatch was opened.

One of those standing there was Denise Gebuni, who was not interacting with the others as much. Ever since that memorial at Philentrophia, she had been sad. The worst thing was that the ship could bring back nothing of Kelsey Hahn to his family on Earth. When the central government building in Abydos, where the Ksassans had their headquarters, was de-

stroyed, it and everybody within it had been obliterated. The self-destruct device left nothing behind, nothing with Hahn’s DNA. The only memorial for him would be the one on Philentrophia. All she would be bringing back would be his personal effects and the memories.

She remembered the meeting she had with Lucia Quintollez, the ship’s counselor, on the journey back to Earth.

She asked Gebuni, “Were you two lovers?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” the woman replied. “Because of what he was, because of the telepathy that the Muirians had given him, he did not want to get too close to people. He had an unfair advantage. However, we knew each other before his, ah, transformation, if briefly, and so he did allow me to talk to him, and to get as close to him as possible. I would accept that he could read my mind, even if accidentally. It was cute in a way when he would answer my questions before I even got the words out. At times, I feared him, feared he would learn the possibly dark thoughts in my mind, but I think that with that ability, he had to develop a tough skin, a tough mental shield.”

“So you miss him?”

“I do,” the engineer replied. “At first, I wasn’t sure, but when I went to his cabin—which as you know was sealed—to pack his things for shipment back to Earth, I did realize how much I missed him, and the little moments we had.”

“You do realize they Kelsey’s abilities are the reason that we got through this, that we survived the Omerra Open Cluster and the subsequent events at Philentrophia, that he contributed more than any other crewmember to the outcome?”

“I heard that said,” Gebuni replied. “I’m pretty sure that was what the captain said in his message of condolence to his family.”

Quintollez added, “I’m pretty sure that Starfleet is going to award its highest honour for valour and bravery to Kelsey.”

“I’m aware of that too. I know I’ll be asked to meet his family, along with the captain, because I was his closest friend on the *Athena*. They know about me. Kelsey had told them that much. The one question I do not know is whether or not he told them what the Muirians did to his brain and what they made him.”

“Starfleet might not permit that information to be made available.”

“I know that, but it’s still an important part of what he was and what he did. I guess I don’t know yet how to approach this.”

“I’m sure that you’ll do fine, Denise,” Quintollez said reassuringly, but Gebuni was not so sure. That was what was playing on her mind as she waited by the main gangway, and why she did not really get involved with the cheerful banter among the others.

Then, finally, the hatch was opened and those crewmembers who

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were departing flowed through the airlock and into the station reception area. Gebuni was among the last to leave in that initial group. She did remember the last time she had come this way, when things were so different.

Thorpe was in the ready room. The *Athena* had been at the dock for about a half hour, and in that time, about two-thirds of the crew had left. Most of who were still on board were the engineers, making sure everything was shut down and secure. Station personnel were also on board assisting. Thorpe knew that he would soon leave the ship and deal with what he knew lie ahead, but he was unsure exactly what to do or to say when he saw Matsubara. Part of him told him his reaction to her presence, and especially Hiroshi's presence, would be guided by instinct and could be the proper and correct way, but he was not so sure. He did recognize that he was stalling, allegedly reviewing the inevitable debriefing and the meeting with Holloway. If the admiral wanted to meet him right away...

Then the communications terminal beeped, indicating an incoming message. He saw that it was from Holloway's office, so he accepted it. A few seconds later, the admiral's face was on the screen, and he did look old, the full head of hair now completely white and the face rather lined with age. Yet, when he spoke, the voice was still firm and indicating clearly that the man behind it was very much in charge. "Welcome back to Earth, captain," he said.

"Glad to be home," Thorpe answered, fighting down the nervousness that he suddenly felt. After all the years in the centre seat, he thought he could get over feeling like this. "Now that I'm here, I'm not sure what's next."

"At the present time, captain, you can just rest. During your journey home, you and your crew must've done nothing but write reports, and it's taking us some time to go through them, but no doubt we'll have questions. However, you just got back so there's no need to rush into things. That being said, I'll expect you in my office here in San Francisco tomorrow morning local time. Until then, captain, just relax. It's my understanding that you have some visitors on board the station."

"Yes I do."

"Then perhaps you should not keep them waiting. Until tomorrow, captain."

"Very well, sir," Thorpe replied in a softer tone of voice. "*Athena* out."

As soon as the message on the screen cleared, Thorpe heard his commbadge chirp. He tapped it, and said, "Thorpe here."

"Vorwoorts, sir," came the reply from the tactical officer, who was still on the bridge and still handling the large number of communications that were coming to and going from the ship. "Sorry to bother you, sir, but a certain Lieutenant Commander Matsubara is at the main gangway requesting

permission to come on board.”

There was something in the way that Vorwoorts said that, Thorpe thought. He said, “Understood. I’ll meet this... lieutenant commander in person. I’m on my way.”

“Very well.”

Thorpe left the ready room and headed for the nearest turbolift, seeing that his tactical officer was by herself on the bridge and that she did not really even notice him. She was already onto the next call.

The captain made the long, slow walk to the main gangway. A security officer was standing there, making sure that no unauthorized individuals got on board, though this was just a formality since no unauthorized person could get this close to the docking bays. However, Matsubara respected the regulations of Starfleet and remained on the other side of the docking port. Now Thorpe was starting to feel that upwelling of emotions, or perhaps that was an upwelling of uncertainty. He just could not anticipate what her reaction would be.

He saw her sitting there on one of the benches in the arrival area. The others who had come this way had already moved on, leaving just Matsubara and her son. Curiously, she was in uniform, though that was perhaps necessary to allow her to get this far

He walked over to her, his heart thumping in his chest and the knots in his stomach tightening. When he saw her and had her attention, he simply said, “Hi.”

Matsubara replied in kind, “Hi.” Hiroshi was standing on his mother’s lap, facing her, when Thorpe approached. He turned and looked at the man. Was there a flicker of recognition? Did the boy know who was standing there in front of him?

“Hi, Hiroshi,” he said softly. “How are you? How do you like being in space?” The toddler just looked at him.

Matsubara said, “I’m glad that you and the ship made it back from the Cluster and Philentrophia, and I sympathize with you on those were lost. I mean, many of them I knew, but most of all, Toh.”

“They all died heroically,” Thorpe said, as he took an unspoken invitation and sat down beside his one-time science officer. “That includes Toh, and Kelsey Hahn and the rest of them.”

“That ceremony at Philentrophia, I felt I should’ve been there. Some of those were officers under my command. I saw the recording, but even so, the way that the media were talking about this, there was fear. It was worse than the Dominion War, perhaps because of the Borg cube that was at Earth, showing what the Ksassans were capable of. Then when word got out that the counterattacks were underway, well...”

“You were worried about me?”



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“Very much so,” Matsubara replied, keeping her voice down. “That was especially true when Starfleet imposed a communications blackout. They wouldn’t even tell me that you were given Philentrophobia, but I did find out.”

“How?”

“I met Lily Gagnon.”

“Oh,” Thorpe replied, and immediately he wanted to know more, but realized it was not good form to ask her about that meeting. He had a feeling he would be meeting Gagnon at some point during his time on Earth.

Matsubara continued, “She told me about the *Dublin* and the quantum slipstream drive, and I did read some papers on it, mostly from the *Sun God* experiment. It was an Overseer ship no less. I would’ve loved to have seen that ship, and seen it in operation.”

“I’m sure they took it to a Starfleet research facility somewhere, with the intent of reverse-engineering the systems.”

“So that the Federation might own this technology?”

“That might be a problem, since I got the feeling that Rodall, in his time with the ship, was understanding a lot of what was going on.”

“So the Odonans will get this technology too?” Matsubara asked.

“That’s inevitable. The Odonans had the only materials needed for the probe weapons to work. Without it, there was no way we could’ve defeated those Borg cubes.”

“So access to the technology was traded for, I’m assuming, higher orders of hypermatter?”

“Yeah,” Thorpe admitted.

“Does Starfleet Command know about that?”

“I suspect so, since the Odonans were intimately involved in the planning of the counterattacks, and to build all the probe weapons, they had to provide a lot of hypermatter. Clearly they’re going to expect payment for that, so Starfleet has to know what that payment is.”

“I can’t imagine that they would be happy.”

“Choices were limited. Besides, the Odonans are not the conquering type. Without that bargain, we would not have survived the Ksassan incursion into the Cluster.”

Now Matsubara turned to look at Thorpe, with Hiroshi now sitting patiently on her lap. He had the feeling this conversation was about to turn personal. “That was what I was so worried about,” she started. “I knew, before the communications blackout, that you were in the Cluster. I was so worried, especially when I heard what happened to the *Devon*. I kept asking myself what you were doing out there.”

“You were once there too.”

“But that was before our son came along. Perspectives change when there is someone dependent on you. Before Hiroshi was born, it was just me,

really, and it was possible to do the things I had done, but when you become a parent, priorities change.”

Thorpe had no easy answer to that, because he knew what Matsubara wanted. She wanted Hiroshi’s father to be around, to be part of his life, and not thousands of light years away. Thorpe wanted that too, but he also wanted to remain in command of the *Athena*. That was important to him, and he was pretty sure that Matsubara could not understand what that meant because it had not been her position. She had rarely been in command of anything. The two desires were contradictory, and it was impossible to choose one over the other. The only way that he could combine the two was to command a space station, like *Deep Space Nineteen*. If he did, he was sure that Matsubara and their son could live with him on the station. Thorpe could have also mentioned that he had played a role in stopping the Ksassan incursion and it was possible that no other Federation ship could have done that, could have achieved what he had achieved—but he did not say that since it was an attribute of the whole crew and not the captain that allowed the events to unfold as they did.

Finally, Thorpe said, “This is the kind of discussion that is perhaps best not done here.”

“It’s a decision that you can’t make, is it?”

“You know that. It’s a choice of two things, and if I choose one, will I regret not being able to experience the other?”

“Yes, you will feel that.” Once more, Matsubara looked at the captain, and said, “Aren’t you going to invite me on board?”

“You do realize that the ship is hardly different than when you were on board, and most of the crew is off the ship.”

“Then for old time’s sake, then... and for his.” She gestured at his son. “He’s not seen the ship before... or at least since he was born.”

“Okay.”

Matsubara accompanied Thorpe onto the *Athena*, and as he had said, there were no real changes. The ship was as she had left it and it was very familiar. Hiroshi was not particularly impressed, and spent most of the time leaning on his mother’s shoulders, his eyes closed. The ship was just another place to be. They did end up on the bridge, where Vorwoorts got to see Hiroshi and see how he had grown and to make sounds with him and attract his attention and make him laugh and smile.

Eventually, Thorpe got Matsubara off the bridge, and said, “We should be going. Tomorrow, I have to meet Admiral Holloway.”

“That won’t be fun,” his companion replied.

“I did get another apartment assigned to me while I was gone—Starfleet believes I need some place to stay when I’m on Earth—and you’re welcome to stay with me, or do you prefer to head back to your parents’ place in

Kyoto?”

“Have you seen this apartment yet?”

“No.”

“Is it furnished?”

“Starfleet generic, I’m assuming.”

“This I’ve got to see.”

The two left the ship and headed to the Spacedock reception centre and the transporters there...

It was sunset in San Diego when Bayanhong, now in civilian clothes including jeans and one of those old-school hooded sweaters, transported to the Starfleet office in that city. She signed out a civilian communicator and inserted her identification chip into the slot and turned it on. She saw that the servers had several thousand messages waiting for her, held back because of the communications blackout and then she had not bothered to have them sent to her while the *Athena* was en route to Earth. Now, she stepped outside, making sure her commbadge, her real identification as a Starfleet officer, was in her pocket along with her cash card. That had quite a number of credits on it. That was what happened when she was away from Earth for an extended period of time and Starfleet took care of all of her needs and there was nobody back home that she needed to support.

Outside, she found San Diego in October to be a little warmer than she anticipated, so she walked slowly towards the taxi stand, where several of the vehicles, both hover-style and wheeled, were waiting for business.

She approached one and asked the man behind the controls—assuming it was a man and not an android, “Are you available?”

“Of course,” the man replied. To Bayanhong’s eyes, he seemed a little old. Perhaps he was doing this because he was bored with the life of leisure that the wealth of the Federation allowed its citizens. That was one explanation why Bayanhong did what she did. The man asked, “Where are you heading?”

“San Diego Zoo.”

“I heard that it’s closed to the public.”

“I’m not the public. I have authorization to be there.” At least Bayanhong hoped she had authorization to be there. Her comsfosaur, the last of his kind, was there. It had been awhile since she had seen him.

“Okay,” the driver said, as he started up his vehicle and got underway.

The journey was not a long one, so Bayanhong took the time to sort through her messages. She had a number of them from her brother Brad, but she skipped them for now. She would not have been surprised if he was merely asking for financial assistance. After all, she had a lot of money that

she was not using, and he had financial needs. She could read those pleas later. She also skipped the messages from the Zoo and the people that worked there because she would be seeing Dusty in the flesh soon enough. She was looking for messages from her friend David Rogers, or was that her lover David Rogers, a man who along with her had probably violated some Federation ethics on genetic manipulation and unethical research during their time on Cretaceaia. For that, Rogers had his mind rebuilt in a re-education facility in New Zealand, while Bayanhong got to be a first officer on a front-line ship. That seemed hardly fair, but that was the way that life was sometimes, she thought. That was the advantage of being a Starfleet officer. The reprogramming of his mind also took away whatever sense of attraction that he had for Bayanhong. Now he was neutral towards her, and as a result, there were no messages from him, and she had no contact information for him beyond the Lilongwe Preparatory School in Malawi.

The taxi arrived at the main entrance to the San Diego Zoo, and after paying her fare, she left the cab and approached the entrance. A person at the entrance came to her and said, “The zoo is currently closed to the public.”

“Why is that?” the *Athena* first officer asked.

“It was deemed better for the animals not to have a lot of people around all the time. The zoo is mostly a research site, not a tourist site.”

“Okay, but I’m not a member of the public. I have an animal at this zoo that I am responsible for.”

The person at the entrance was rather skeptical of that, and so asked, “What’s your name?” She gave it, and had to spell it, even the “Julia” part. The person entered the information into the padd she was carrying, and then said, “I see. I’ll contact the person responsible for the Off-World Species Reserve and they’ll take it from there.”

“Okay.”

The wait was not long, as within five minutes, a man that Bayanhong did not recognize appeared. He introduced himself, saying, “I’m Dr. Gordon Pleuene, now in charge of the Off-World Species Reserve. You’re Julia Bayanhong, I understand?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“And you’re here to see Dusty?”

“Yes. I believe I’m allowed to do that.”

“Yes,” Pleuene replied. “You have authorization to see that particular animal.”

“How is he?”

“It’s hard to say. We’re not experts on that species, or the last-of-its-kind animals in general. With animals like that, we’re just basically watching its approaching extinction.”

Little more was said as Pleuene led Bayanhong through the maze of

structures, and she had the feeling that the man did not care much about the comsosaur, because most handlers and scientists in a place like this would talk almost incessantly about their animals. Yet, she also knew, there was a sense of helplessness that came when dealing with sole survivors, those animals that when they die would end the species. What could be done with such animals in terms of research? Within a few days of his arrival, they had learned all that could be known about his physiology and his biochemistry, and after that, what else was there to learn? Dusty did not exist in his natural environment, and so there was little to learn about his behaviour. All they could do was to keep him alive, and sometimes, Pleuene knew, Dusty was little more than a curiosity, or just an exhibit.

The two arrived at the enclosure, which to Bayanhong's eye looked the same as the last time she was here. The entrance to the enclosure was closed. Bayanhong looked through the windows, and saw Dusty dozing on the patch of sand that would have been among the last patch of the enclosure that would have received sunshine. "He seems lethargic," Bayanhong remarked.

"I know," Pleuene answered. "It's as if he knows he has no future and no purpose."

"Really?"

"Yes. The purpose of a living organism, ultimately its only purpose, is to pass on his genes. Dusty can't do that. A few times since he arrived here, he seemed to enter an aroused state, going into estrus seemingly. Lately, that behaviour has not been observed."

"Because he now accepts that there are no mates for him."

"The alternative explanation is that he is getting old and is past his reproductive stage."

"He's not that old," Bayanhong retorted.

"We have no data on the length of time these animals remain reproductively viable."

"The information was provided."

Pleuene ignored the comment and went on to say, "There is talk of putting Dusty into an exhibit tour, perhaps just here on Earth but perhaps to other nearby planets as well, a tour that would give people a chance to see animals that they otherwise would never see or perhaps even imagine."

"I don't think that is a good idea."

"Why?"

"How would you like it if you were captured by a hyper-intelligent species and put on tour as a zoo exhibit?"

"Dusty has shown no sign of being an intelligent species. He's an animal, and his best purpose now would be education and enlightenment."

Listening to this, Bayanhong thought that the person saying that

needed “education and enlightenment.” On the other hand, she had to accept that Pleuene and his associates had far less knowledge of the comsosaurs than she had, as to them, Dusty was just another exotic alien animal whose home had been destroyed and whose future was uncertain. She turned to face the man and asked, “Can you open the door so that I can see him?”

“Is that wise?”

“Has he attacked anybody?”

“No, but he has made threatening gestures, and that is with people he has become familiar with.”

“That’s okay, I’ve got protection.” She lifted her top just enough to reveal that she was wearing an Odonan forcefield belt underneath the garment.

Even Pleuene could recognize the device, a piece of technology that the Federation could not duplicate, mostly because they could not duplicate the manufacturing technique used to make dilithium fibre, an essential component of the device. He asked, “How’d you get one of those?”

“The perks of being a Starfleet officer. Now, I don’t believe I’m in any danger from Dusty, but in case I am, I have backup.”

“Very well,” the man said with a shrug. He used the palm-plate reader to inform the system that he was authorized to open the door, and the system complied. The inner door opened first, and once Bayanhong was in that, that door closed and the outer door opened. That allowed Bayanhong to step into Dusty’s world, which consisted of an indoor and an outdoor area, but of course, the space he had here was nothing like the space he had on Cretacea.

The sound of Bayanhong approaching did draw the attention of the comsosaur, who turned and looked at the newcomer to his world. He held his head close to the ground and made a deep growling sound. The down-like feathers over his body stood on end, to make him look bigger than he actually was. Then, looking at Bayanhong with his deep yellow eyes, a sense of recognition overcame him. The down flattened and he lifted his head.

“Yes,” Bayanhong said softly. “It’s me. I’m here although I don’t know for how long I can be here.”

The comsosaur approached Bayanhong slowly, looking at her and confirming memories that he had. Once he was against her, it was as if he remembered the scent from many years ago. He started to rub his head against Bayanhong’s side and she responded by stroking the back of his head and his neck, in the manner he remembered when growing up on Cretacea. It brought some comfort and familiarity in a place that was still unfamiliar to him. Worse, none of his kind were here either. He could not explore and find out what happened to the others. He was in an enclosure that he could not escape from, and he did understand the reasoning for that. This world was

not his world; everything about it was different. There could be dangers he could not comprehend beyond the enclosure, which was why he was put here, he assumed. What really concerned him was that none of his kind were here with him. When he saw the familiar face of Bayanhong, he was hoping that she was here now with more of the comsosaurs from Cretacea. The last time he saw her, he was disappointed that she had brought none of his kind to join him. Would he be disappointed again? Was it something that he had done?

Bayanhong continued to talk to the creature. "How is it here?" She was speaking to Dusty knowing he would not respond, even though the animals had shown to be highly intelligent. "Do they treat you alright? I hope that you've gotten used to the replicated food. It's all that we can provide, since the Cretacea that you know doesn't exist anymore. I hope that you're not being mistreated or anything."

Dusty then made a distinctive sound, a howling sound that started off low and rose in pitch and volume, as if the comsosaur was throwing the sound into the air. On Cretacea, she had heard that sound before, but never from Dusty.

Pleuene heard that sound from the other side of the airlock-like entrance. He turned on the intercom, and said. "Julia. I know that the comsosaur accepts you, but I'd be nervous about that sound. Others have heard him make it."

"It's a mating call," Bayanhong replied, looking back at the entrance. "He's calling out for a mate."

"He's not going to have a lot of luck finding one."

"I know that, and Dusty perhaps knows that too, but he still makes the sound."

"It has bothered others who have heard it. You should not stay there. You do realize that that animal is essentially a small alien dinosaur, and they can be dangerous."

"I know...."

\* \* \*

Captain Thorpe and Matsubara, the latter carrying Hiroshi because the toddler was a little fearful of the man, arrived at one of the Starfleet receiving centres in San Francisco, and from there they made their way into a plaza that led to a series of apartment buildings. The whole district had been destroyed by the Breen attack on Earth during the Dominion War, but it had been rebuilt. These were apartments for use by senior officers who served on starships and needed a place to stay when they were at Earth. They were not large nor luxurious, but they were functional. Thorpe had been assigned one of the apartments, and had received while on the ship the unit

number and the information needed to create a pass card. He had that now. It would be the place he could stay when he was on Earth, and it was the only place he could call home—and he realized that all of his worldly possessions were there, given that pretty well everything he had was lost in the Breen attack.

The couple and their son entered the building and took the lift to the appropriate floor. The corridors were narrow and functional and had standard carpeting and duroplast walls. “Reminds me of being on a starship,” Matsubara remarked.

“They probably used the same interior decorating team,” Thorpe replied. They reached the door to his apartment, and he used the pass card to open the door. The two entered the apartment, and looked around. It was furnished, in the sense that a starship cabin was furnished. To Thorpe’s eyes, it seemed that Starfleet used as well the same furniture provider that it used on its ships to furnish its planet-bound apartments. Thorpe saw that the main room had a couch and a couple of chairs and a table, and there was a viewscreen built into the wall, no doubt connected to Earth’s entertainment and information nets. The bedroom was small and functional, with a queen-sized bed and a dresser, basically the same design as his quarters on the *Athena*, but with a larger bed. Matsubara checked out the other bedroom, and then called out, “Len, did you authorize this?”

“What?” asked the man.

“The other bedroom.”

Thorpe checked out the second bedroom in the two-bedroom apartment, and saw that it was kitted out for a baby, with a dresser, a change table and a crib. Thorpe was quite surprised to see this. “No, he finally answered, “I had nothing to do with this. I said nothing at all about how to furnish it.”

“I guess they knew you were a father then.”

“I guess so.”

There was the bathroom, complete with a shower that also functioned as a sonic shower for the Starfleet officer that could not do with anything else. The kitchen and dining room were combined. There was no fridge, but a stove and oven for those that wanted to cook their meals in the old-fashioned way. Food, either raw ingredients for cooking or finished meals for eating, we’re provided by the replicator terminal, but it was metered and Thorpe would have to pay for its use, in the same sense that in the days of yore, a person had to go to the grocery store to do their food shopping.

Matsubara said, as she walked into the kitchen while still carrying Hiroshi, “It looks like Starfleet goes all out for its captains when they’re on Earth,”

“Yeah,” Thorpe replied, “considering how little time I spend at Earth.



## Coming Home

Of course, if you are in San Francisco, you can always stay here.”

“Thanks,” the woman replied. She looked down at Hiroshi, who was sleeping in her arms. She had the feeling that she could be spending the night here, so she spent a little time setting up the boy in the crib and making sure he was comfortable.

When she returned, she found that Thorpe had made Orion coffee, using the pattern available in the replicator. Thorpe tried it, and though it was not quite the same as the coffee from the *Athena* and its carefully-tweaked pattern, it was still pretty good. Matsubara agreed with that assessment.

“Now,” Thorpe continued between sips of coffee, “although this is my place, it really does not feel like my place. I’m not any kind of interior decorator, but some of the choices made here are not ones I would make. Even worse, of course, is that my personal possessions were destroyed in the Breen attack. There’s nothing really of me left here on Earth. Sometimes, I feel my real home is the *Athena*. It’s the closest thing to home that I have.”

“I know,” Matsubara started, “but you can’t be the commander of that ship forever.”

“True, but I’m pretty sure that Starfleet will keep me there until I decide otherwise. I mean, the *Athena* has done some good work since it was launched. Sure, the crew has a lot to do with that, but so does the captain.” Matsubara could not dispute that statement, and nodded her approval. “I don’t think that Starfleet would want to mess with that. Oh, if I tell them that it’s time for me to move on, I’m sure that they will not oppose that, but I feel that they will want me back as the captain when the ship relaunches.”

“When is that going to happen?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t know what the next assignment is. I suspect that I’ll find out tomorrow when I meet with Admiral Holloway.” Thorpe finished the coffee, and was considering trying for another one, although this particular beverage was known for being rather rich.

Leaning a bit across the table, Matsubara said, “But you can’t be the captain of that ship forever. At some point, you will have to move on.”

“And yet, I don’t feel I’m ready for that. Being on the ship is still important to me.” As he said those words, he was looking more carefully at the woman sitting across from him, so he added, “But you have quite a different opinion, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Matsubara replied, now keeping her voice down. “You have a son now, and at this stage in your life, the family should be together. It’s what your parents did for you, remember?”

“But their careers were never the same. They never got back to where they were.”

“Is that what you’re thinking about? You’re thinking about your

career?”

“It is important to me. My parents were told that parental leave would not harm their careers, and they were pressured to return to active service, so much so that a lot of my childhood was actually spent with my grandmother—and still their careers were never the same. They did not have the rank I had, and should have gotten back in more easily than they did. The higher the rank, the harder it is to get back in. That’s why I have been thinking that a starbase command is an option. Depending on the station, you and Hiroshi could be with me.”

“You’d do that?”

“It’s an option,” Thorpe started, feeling a little nervous about revealing this. “During our time in the Omerra Open Cluster, I was exposed to an Overseer mental simulation where I was the commander of *Deep Space Nineteen*. Thinking about that experience. I realized that station commander is something I could do. It’s the closest I can get to merging two desires, the desire to continue to command with the chance to make a difference, and the desire to be with my family.”

“Such commands are even more exclusive than a starship command.”

“I know,” Thorpe said, as he settled back into the chair. It might not have looked like much, but it was surprisingly comfortable. “But it’s something that I have been thinking about.”

Commander Vorwoorts was finally relieved of duty, as a station officer took over the communication operations. Somewhat to her surprise, she was the last non-engineering member of the crew to leave the ship. Even the captain had already left, but she could understand why he had. He had a son that he had not seen for a long time, and no doubt wanted to spend time with him. She headed to her quarters and changed into civilian clothes and left the ship the way that most of the crew did, through the forward gangway. From the station, she beamed down to the Starfleet office in Amsterdam, arriving in that city just before dawn. It was a cold morning too, and she looked the part of the unprepared traveller in her slacks and sweater, without the jacket she should have anticipated. She took a local commuter train to the nearby city of Weesp, which was in some way merely a suburb of Amsterdam, but also her home. Strangely, she had no other place to call home. She left for Starfleet Academy what seemed like such a long time ago, and in the time since, had not really established a home for herself anywhere on Earth. In that respect, she was a lot like other Starfleet officers. Her only home was the home she grew up in, which was why she was heading there now. Of course, her parents knew she was coming, though they did not exactly know when.

Dawn was just breaking when she got off of the commuter train and

completed the journey on foot. It was a dull, cool day with overcast skies, and strangely, that seemed to fit Vorwoorts' mood. She had no idea why she felt that way when she was coming home. It was not that her family did not support her decision to join Starfleet, but they did not see that as a permanent career choice, especially as she got older. They were worried too, especially during the Dominion War and during the recent crisis with the Ksasans. At least that was the tone she detected in the letters from home, letters she knew had been decreasing in their frequency over time.

She arrived at the small house on the east side of Weesp, within a stone's throw of the small river where she swam with her brother Erich when they were young. The neighbourhood looked very familiar, as it rarely changed and it was printed firmly on her memory. Many of the same people lived in these houses, including her father Gaetan, who was born there and would likely live there until he died. After all, his parents had "bought" the house and the property, although what they really bought was a hundred and forty-nine year lease. After that point, the property would revert back to the state. This did suppress the real estate market, because the lease would not reset with a new owner. It was more practical for the Vorwoorts family to continue to live there, and she was sure that Erich would inherit the place from the parents.

She stepped up to the small house on its small lot, the gardens around the structure fading with the deepening of autumn. She knocked on the door, hoping someone was up. A few seconds later, the door did open, and standing there was Verna Vorwoorts, her sister-in-law, and about the only person in the house who did not have blond hair. Hers was a light shade of brown. "Well," Verna said, grinning, "if it isn't Heni, the prodigal daughter."

"Very funny," Vorwoorts replied.

"But you have certainly travelled a long distance to get here, how many thousands of light years?"

Vorwoorts entered, putting down the small travel bag that she had. As it turned out, Verna was the only one up, mostly because she was the only employed member of the household. The rest of it was run on Vorwoorts' earnings in Starfleet, as she was paid but while on the *Athena*, she had no expenses. Her salary was deposited into her account, and her parents had access to it. That was another reason that opposition to her presence in Starfleet was not too opposed by the rest of the family. Erich had no job at the present time, while Verna worked as a teacher, since humans still learned better when taught by an actual person. She was up because her day would start soon while the others could sleep in. However, the other three soon were up as well, once they learned that "wandering Heni" was home. There were hugs and offers of congratulations all around.

It was Anna, her mother, who said, "Thank the Fates that you're

home. With all the troubles that had been going on, I was always worried.”

“You needn’t be,” the daughter replied. “I always had a good ship and a good crew around me.”

“Even so, when the information blackout was imposed, we were nervous and feared the worst.”

“But it’s over and I’m okay.”

“Until the next time.”

Later in the day, once Verna had gone to work, the Vorwoorts family sat around the kitchen table, drinking tea and eating blueberry croissants, authentically made and not replicated. They listened to Heni relate her tales of her recent times on the *Athena*, and the places she had seen and the things she had witnessed.

Erich said, “You know, there are already space operas about some of those planets.”

“Really?” Heni asked. She knew that “space operas” were fictional stories set on real places that Starfleet had encountered, and of course, the limited information released by Starfleet did not prevent the imaginations of the writers from going wild with what could be found there.

“Yeah,” the brother continued. “That planet of Cork, that planet was a kind of horror site.”

“Nothing like being there, though.”

“The places that the galaxy has to offer are amazing.”

The father added, “It sounds like you would’ve wanted to be there.”

“I would have, had I passed the entrance exam. They allow three tries, and I failed all three times. Heni made it in one.”

That was always a sore point between the siblings, as even Heni would admit there was not much difference in abilities and intelligence between the two, but she got in and he did not. It was not she that set the test or graded it. “I know,” she finally said.

The mother then asked the question that Vorwoorts knew would eventually come. “How much longer are you going to be in Starfleet? When will you settle down? Your tour of duty has one more year to run, right?”

“Yes,” the daughter answered.

“Is being in Starfleet, the position you have reached, what you have wanted?”

That was a somewhat harder question to answer, Heni knew. When she went into Starfleet Academy, she underwent some aptitude tests, to see what she was the best at. She never thought of herself as the kind of communications and tactical officer she became, and how that involved learning a little bit of everything, and that included command, though she did think about her time on Cork and realized how hard command could be. “Well,” she finally started, “Starfleet figures out what you’re best at, and that’s what

they train you for.”

Her father pointed out the obvious, “And that involves you firing weapons.”

“That doesn’t happen that often. Most of the time, I’m handling communications and backing up the others. I’ve done science work, using the sensors, and I’ve piloted shuttles and led away missions. There are quite a few things that I’ve done.”

“And you put yourself at risk too.”

“I know,” Heni answered, “but on the ship, I rarely felt like I was in danger. The others on board are really good people, and we look out for each other. They’re like another family for me.”

“But in time, they will scatter, get promoted and reassigned to other ships. Crews rarely stay together for long. That’s just the nature of the job, and sometimes being a Starfleet officer can be a lonely thing, because those you know move on, or worse. And when you spend time in Starfleet, your friends on Earth abandon you.”

“Don’t talk about him,” Heni implored, recalling in disgust the letter sent to her shortly after she got assigned to the *Athena*.

“But the question remains,” her mother continued. “When your tour of duty ends next year, what are you going to do?”

“In truth, I have not decided yet.” Vorwoorts knew that to be the honest truth; she really did not know.

Sometimes, Grace Brigson found it hard to believe she had a Starfleet career before accepting a “temporary” transfer to the *Athena*, while the ship she had been on previously, the *Socrates*, was undergoing a refit. Being on the *Athena* was more like she envisioned a Starfleet career to be, out there on the frontier, seeing things that no human had seen before, going to places where humans had not gone to before, and always learning and advancing more. Her previous ship had originally been more towards long-term missions at sites the frontier vessels had discovered, and then it was increasingly assigned to colony support. That was okay, she knew, because colony support did have a science component, especially in her geology and geophysics specialties, but being on the *Athena* was better. However, she had been told by her former captain, Martin Mbana, that she had been merely loaned to the *Athena*, and soon she would transfer back to her previous assignment once the refit was complete. Now, she did not want that. She was going to meet her former commanding officer and tell him that she was going to transfer permanently to the *Athena*, and she was pretty sure that Captain Thorpe would approve the move. On the other hand, Captain Mbana almost certainly would not approve. As long as Matsubara was not ready to return to active starship duty, she felt that her case to stay on the *Athena* was pretty sound.

Mbana and the *Socrates*, an older *Galaxy*-class ship, were at Earth, as that ship had undergone an extensive refit to bring it up to current standards. She had heard from her previous crewmates, as she had kept in touch, about the upgrades, making it one of the more advanced ships in the fleet, despite the old spaceframe. It was that the *Socrates* had never really been stressed or tested, and had been built with well-proven designs and technologies. The ship had undergone its trials and was ready for a return to active service. Now that the Ksassan situation had been resolved, the *Socrates* was able to get back to its original purpose of colony support—and Mbana was waiting for the return of his science officer. There were rumours to the contrary, but Brigson did not want to take the chance.

Because Mbana had no office or meeting space on Earth, and his ship was still out on test flights, he asked to meet Brigson in one of the seafood restaurants that overlooked the bay. The evening was overcast and cool, cooler than Brigson had anticipated, and some rain was threatening. She approached the restaurant that Mbana had named, and it was familiar to her. She had been there before with her sister Kathy and some friends. The food was not bad.

She arrived at the restaurant, and noticed that it was surprisingly crowded, or should she have been surprised, given all the Starfleet officers that were around. The mood was nautical, as the interior was made to look like they were on an old-style wooden sailing ship. Everything was made of wood and made to look old and even creaky, even if it was quite comfortable. She moved to where the booths were, and had no problem locating Captain Mbana.

He was not a tall man, but was trim and in shape. He had a rather square face, and deep brown eyes that seemed so friendly. His hair had once been black and tightly curled, but was now laced with gray. He was in his fifties, and had been a captain for many more years than Thorpe had been, but he had come through the science ranks and so would only command second-tier ships, and not the larger, more important multi-purpose ships like the *Athena*. Of course, Mbana was the commander of a *Galaxy*-class ship, which once had been the pride of the fleet, but that was several generations of ships ago. Then again, the *Nebula*-class ship was a contemporary to the *Galaxy*-class, and it was getting the assignments that she wanted. That was possible with the upgrades that Starfleet was constantly developing, and which ships like the *Athena*, and the *Socrates* too, could accommodate. That made them almost as good, although not necessarily in prestige, as ships in the *Sovereign*-class. Really, she knew, it depended on what kind of mission her old ship—and the only other ship she had ever served on besides the *Athena*—would be getting.

Mbana looked at the science officer, who was actually a few centi-

metres taller than he was, and said in his deep and yet comforting voice, "Welcome back to Earth, commander."

Politely, she said, "It's good to be back." She did not mean it. She would have much preferred to be still out there in space.

"It's my understanding that you have had quite a time on the *Athena*. Starfleet has not released all the details to other captains yet, but based on what is known, the *Athena* was in the middle of it and it and the crew handled themselves well."

"Yes."

"And you were an active participant in it?"

"Yes, I did what I had to do to help us get through that. It's a good ship and crew."

"I have no doubt," the dark-skinned man replied. "But are you ready to return to the *Socrates*? We're almost ready to resume operational status."

That was a problem, Brigson knew. She could say that she was assigned to the *Athena* until Matsubara was ready to return to duty, and she had no knowledge of when that was going to happen. She could also argue that since Debanggalo Toh died on the Overseers' Planet, the ship had no science officer ready to take over the position of head of the department, so she had to stay. She did not mention that, as she was hedging her bets. It was in her best interest to see what Mbana and the *Socrates* had to offer. Would Starfleet really upgrade that ship to the level it had for colony support? She finally did say, "It's my understanding that the *Socrates* got significant upgrades, more than was anticipated."

"That's true," the captain replied.

"So what is its mission?"

In a more subdued voice, Mbana answered, "We're still scheduled for colony support."

"Really?"

"Yes," Mbana replied. "It's like the part of Starfleet that handles the ships and the upgrades is completely separated from the part that handles missions and assignments. I was talking to various officials at HQ, trying to get the ship reassigned into something closer to the upgraded abilities. There is talk about an exploration push into what was Arosian space. Who knows what can be found there?"

"And given my experience in the Omerra Open Cluster, I'd be a natural on that assignment."

"Yes," the captain replied, as he finished his meal. Brigson was showing real restraint in not ordering something for herself. "However, as is often the case, there is competition for the assignments."

Brigson was thinking that the *Athena* might have been one of the ships that could get the assignment. She asked, "What other ships are trying

for that assignment?”

“Starfleet, naturally, does not identify the other ships, to prevent rivalry and the like.” Mbana did know what ship Brigson had been on while his ship was getting its upgrades, so he said, “The *Athena* is not among them, though.”

“And how would you know that?”

“As far as I know, that ship is scheduled to get the upgrades, and besides, they’d never send a ship there with an Odonan on board for fear of coming across a survivor population that is vulnerable to overhimpennyon disease.”

“Of course,” the science officer said softly, knowing that the Arosian Empire fell because the people had no immunity to that disease, believed by many to have been an artificially-created disease that was lethal to all Kroosian descendants who did not have the necessary genetic sequence. The Arosians did not have it, but every existing Odonan did, naturally. Brigson could see the reasoning for not sending a ship with an Odonan on board, because Dewuchun and all Odonans carried the disease—and in fact, the disease organism was now a vital component of the Odonan immune system.

Mbana added, “I hope to hear back soon from Starfleet Command about the reassignment.”

“If the *Socrates* does not get it, would it get colony support instead?”

“Probably,” Mbana admitted. “Even so, I can’t imagine that they would keep us on colony support for any length of time.”

Now came the moment of truth, as Brigson had to tell her former captain what her decision was. She had been intrigued by the idea of exploring the space once occupied by the Arosian Empire, but Mbana’s admittance that he was not sure the *Socrates* would get the mission did cool her enthusiasm. On the other hand, his mention that the *Athena* could go out of service for the upgrades had to weigh on her mind. She had the feeling that was going to be news to Captain Thorpe as well. She was a senior officer and so would have been informed if Thorpe knew.

She finally said, “Captain, there’s something I need to tell you. I won’t be returning to the *Socrates*. I’m staying on the *Athena*.”

Mbana looked at her with some concern, as if he had not been expecting to hear that. He did say, “May I ask why?”

“The main reason is that the person I replaced, Commander Damiko Matsubara, is not returning to the ship, at this time.” At least Brigson assumed that to be true. She was pretty sure that if Matsubara was returning, Captain Thorpe would have already informed her. She added, “The logical replacement, Debanggalo Toh, was one of those that died in our time in the Omerra Open Cluster. My leaving the *Athena* would leave it without an experienced chief science officer.”



“What about the *Socrates*?”

“Lieutenant Matthew Reid is ready for a promotion, don't you think? I'm sure that he would jump at the chance to be the chief science officer on a ship like the *Socrates*.”

“I seem to remember that you and your second-in-command did not always get along.”

“That may be so, but that does not mean he is not competent and ready for the position.”

Mbana was still tentative with the decision, since he wanted to get the old crew together on the *Socrates* because he felt they had worked well together and would continue to work well once the ship relaunched. He seemed to remember that Brigson was a little reluctant to take the temporary transfer when Starfleet offered it to her—and of course “offered” was a misnomer because their offer had the strength of an order. Now she did not want to leave that ship. Sure, the *Athena* was getting a reputation, but the *Socrates* was capable of doing some extraordinary work too, if they ever got the chance. Mbana added, “And your decision had nothing to do with the mission that the *Socrates* might get?”

“Like colony support?”

“Or the Arosian Sector?”

“No,” Brigson replied, although she knew that was not strictly true. “The decision had been made earlier.”

“I see. I might have to discuss this with Captain Thorpe.”

“I know,” the woman replied, but she also knew that Starfleet would be more likely to keep her on the ship she was currently assigned to rather than the ship she had been on before. If she wanted to remain on the *Athena* and Captain Thorpe wanted her in his crew, it was extremely unlikely that Starfleet would reassign her. That was always a risk when a captain allowed a member of the crew, especially a senior officer, to take a temporary assignment on another ship, and especially for how long Brigson had been on the *Athena*. Mbana had agreed to the reassignment because he had heard that Matsubara and Thorpe were in a relationship, and he assumed he would want her back on board as soon as possible. Mbana knew that feeling, because he was doing the same thing. His wife Rodina was the pilot on *Socrates*.

The captain said, “I am at least asking that you give your decision some further consideration. The official relaunch of the *Socrates* is still a short time away.”

“Okay,” Brigson replied. She could at least give the captain that. She did wonder what the meeting between Thorpe and Mbana would be like. Doing what she was doing now was not easy, but she had to do it. She just felt that her career had better opportunities on the *Athena* than on the *Socra-*

*tes*, but she could not really tell Captain Mbana that—but she suspected he already knew that. She stood up, saying, “Meeting in a restaurant might not be the best thing for me, given all the temptation and my known love of eating. Therefore, I should be going...”

\* \* \*

Sanjay Indesakar beamed down to the Starfleet office in Tondi. It was early morning in the southern Indian city, the sun burning through some early-morning haze and the breeze off of the Palk Strait was just starting up. His parents knew he was coming home, of course, since he had sent a message home earlier giving his arrival time. No doubt, he would be greeted warmly, and there would be a lot of questions about the things he had experienced since he was at last at home, though he had been given a list of topics that he was not cleared to talk about. He had to respect that. Right now, he had to be on his best behaviour, with a key evaluation meeting coming up, a meeting that would be instrumental in how his life and career would proceed.

He arrived home at the family house after a fifteen minute walk in the increasingly warm sun. He had forgotten what it was like to be in such an environment, given how much time he had spent in space. He arrived at his house with just a sheen of sweat on him, something not uncommon for a resident of Tondi. He knocked on the door, and then heard his father call out, “If that’s you, Sanjay, you know you can come right in.”

The man walked into the house, where it was a little cooler than the rising steam outside. This was the house that Indesakar grew up in, the only house he has ever lived in besides Starfleet residences, which were always viewed as temporary. It would be many years before he would have a more permanent home... somewhere. He always felt that his future was in some other place than Tondi. It was not as if this was a bad place to live, but it seemed more backwards than some of the other places he had been to. The people that lived here and built here wanted a more traditional place, with traditional styles and building materials and even traditional construction techniques, though inside, the houses had all the modern conveniences. The place might have looked similar to the town on the past ages, although underneath was a fair degree of modern technology. It was that Indesakar wanted to some day live in a place that looked like it was from the current century.

“Hi,” Indesakar said when he saw his father in the front room.

“Hi,” the older man said after a slight delay. “I see you made it back, and that you’re okay.”

“Yeah.”

“We were worried about you, especially when Starfleet put up the

communications embargo. Was it really as bad as the rumours said it was?"

"Rumours?" the son asked.

"The rumour going around was that the Federation was in danger and was on the verge of falling."

"No, that was not even close to happening."

The elder Indesakar turned to look at his son, and found him in civilian clothes. That was not unusual as Starfleet officers rarely walked about civilian areas on Earth in uniform if they were not on duty. "It's just that many people in this city, especially our neighbours, know you're in Starfleet, and that seemed to suggest we had inside information despite the communications embargo."

"But Starfleet would not release that information."

"I know, but try telling panicky neighbours that."

"Was it really that bad?"

"It was after the communications blackout started, as the mention of Borg-like androids that the Ksassans could make in infinite numbers started to spread, especially after Starfleet stopped communicating. They did that to avoid spreading panic, but the opposite was what happened. They did cause a panic. Then suddenly, they say that the situation was resolved, the threat was gone and they did not really say how it was done. We did learn, however."

"How?"

"Starfleet families started to receive messages of family members, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, who died in the line of duty. We're part of that informal network, so when we heard of that, we started to worry about you. We dreaded each time an unknown person attempted to contact us. We contacted Starfleet, asking for updates, but they did not provide any. We were only sure you were okay when we were informed that the *Athena* was one of the ships that made it back and that the communications blackout was lifted. We are glad to see you."

"I'm glad to see you too."

"I still cannot believe the organization that Starfleet has become, so secretive and hiding, not letting us know what is happening."

"I don't know either," Indesakar replied. "I'm sure that they have their reasons for what they did. I was not really aware of these things while we were out there."

By this time, father and son had made their way to the kitchen, and the senior Indesakar got a couple of mugs of tea out of the replicator. It was the easy way to make tea, especially when the father did not want to make it the proper way. Indesakar asked, "Is mother at the school?"

"Yes," the father answered. "It's just another working day here." He

handed his son the tea and added, “By the way, there are several messages from Sunni.”

“Oh,” sighed the younger man. Sometimes, the last thing he needed were any reminders of his one-time lover Sunni Lopodhur, as he was pretty sure she was bad for his career, as he had been duped by her—or had he? The feelings were still there. When she professed her feelings for him, he was pretty sure they were genuine. His feelings for her were real. When he was with Lopodhur, he thought that he had found the woman that he had been looking for. Perhaps in the beginning, she was using him to further the unconventional goals that the organization she was part of was working towards, but being with him had changed her outlook—at least towards him. Since that moment when she was arrested, though just on some Starfleet charge of tampering with communications, he had no contact with her, and he was doing his best to try to avoid learning anything about her. After all, if he tried to find out what had become of her, he would start thinking about her and the good times that they had. Finally, Indesakar asked, “How many?”

“Several electronic signals, requests to communicate. And, there’s this.” The father went into the room used by his wife as an office and returned with what looked like a piece of paper that was folded over and sealed on the sides. “A hardcopy message, delivered by post.”

Indesakar was handed the envelope, and he saw his name and the address of his home. “A letter,” he said softly, “from Sunni. How quaint.”

“That’s what your mother said. We told her that you were on the *Athena* on a tour of duty... somewhere, since we had no idea where you were, and to direct your messages through Starfleet. She said she could not do that. She was sending her messages here.”

“Waiting for when I return home.”

“Yes.”

The father did know something about what had happened between his son and Lopodhur, and so asked, “What could she possibly want from you?”

“Perhaps to have me as a character witness at her trial.”

“That’s not a good thing.”

“I know,” Indesakar replied softly, while turning the letter over in his hands. He felt a real reluctance to open it, and definitely did not want to open it in front of his father. The older man eyed Indesakar and was almost expecting him to open it and read it in front of him, but then understood why that was not happening. He simply said, “I’ll look at it later.”

The elder Indesakar changed the topic as he asked, “How long will you be home?”

“Until I get word that the *Athena* is ready to launch.”

“And you have no idea how long that will be?”

“It depends on what upgrades and changes Starfleet wants to make. I haven’t heard, but I would imagine I’ll know soon enough. If the delay is long, I’ll head to San Francisco and take some upgrade courses.”

“So you still want to transfer to the command track?”

“Yeah,” the son admitted. He also knew that a transfer off the *Athena* could be possible, although he would not mind being promoted on that ship. Could he one day be the first officer? As far as he knew, Bayanhong had no ambitions to be captain, and was the first officer more by default than anything else. How long would she remain? He had no reason to complain about Bayanhong. When she got the position, he was nowhere near ready for the responsibilities of being the first officer, and in the time since, she had certainly shown that she was competent at the position. In fact, watching her learn and grow into the position was something that Indesakar had observed and hopefully learned from. It was for that reason that Indesakar speculated that he might have to transfer to another ship, perhaps a lesser-ranked ship, but if it came to that, he would do it despite leaving a lot of friends and good times and good memories behind. Then he looked at the letter in his hands and realized that perhaps not all the memories were good ones.

Indesakar and his father talked a little more, with the younger man sharing the stories that he could, always respecting the limit of what Starfleet allowed for general release. Even to his own family, the members of which he trusted implicitly, he had to respect the restrictions that had been put on the senior officers. His father was frustrated by this, as he had been when the communications blackout was in place. “Sometimes,” the elder Indesakar concluded, “Starfleet has become the Federation government. The council should be directing Starfleet, not the other way around. Lately, the politicians have been listening too much to the admirals. That should stop.”

“If you say,” Indesakar said to his father. “I’m pretty sure that Starfleet has reasons for doing what it does.”

“But it does not communicate those ideas very well to the people.”

Indesakar eventually found his way to the bedroom that was once his, but now served as a guest room. He did feel like a guest here. The furniture was his, but the drawers were empty and the walls were devoid of any of the artwork and holoimages of Indian cricket stars and pop performers that he had put up when he was growing up. He was pretty sure that all of those items were still around, but put away in storage totes up in the attic.

Once alone on his room, Indesakar sat down on what was once his bed, though it did not feel like it. He again looked at the letter in his hands, and after turning it over and over a couple of times, he finally gave in to temptation and opened it. Lopodhur had written it in longhand, something that Indesakar had not seen too much of, but he was able to read it. Basically, the woman had told him she had received a dishonourable discharge from

Starfleet and was serving time in a Starfleet stockade for her sins. She also mentioned that a civilian trial will likely follow, and that her future was uncertain. She admitted that she was misled, but still believed that the things she had told him were true, that Earth would be much better off ruling its own space and letting other species rule their own destinies. Alliances and trade agreements could link the races, and there could be joint operations, like the recent one between the Federation and the Odonans against the Ksassans, and the alliance with the Klingons during the Dominion war. That was the better way, and Lopodhur still believed that. Indesakar was not too surprised to read her own words about that.

The second part of the letter stated simply that Lopodhur still had feelings for Indesakar, and she was sorry for any harm that came his way. She actually wanted to see him again, as she said, “The feelings are still there, and what we had when we were together on the *Athena* was genuine. I do recognize that due to what happened, we can never recapture what had then, but I just hope that you don’t hate me and we can remain friends.”

Indesakar sat there and reread the letter, and had to admit that the feelings he had for Lopodhur were still there, even if he hated to admit saying that, even to himself. It was not easy to let her go, despite what happened. He had rarely experienced the sort of thing that he had experienced with her. He missed that.

As Indesakar pondered those thoughts, he heard his commbadge chirp. He was not wearing it, but it was in his duffel bag. Like most senior Starfleet officers, he was expected to have his commbadge with him at all times, even if he was not wearing it. He heard that distinctive chirp, and quickly retrieved it from his bag. Tapping it, while wondering who was contacting him, he said, “Indesakar here.”

The voice that answered was not one he recognized. “This Ensign Gaylo from Starfleet Headquarters. I’m contacting you now to remind you that you have an appointment tomorrow at ten, San Francisco time, with Admiral Jon Guerts.”

The name did not register with Indesakar, so he asked, “Who is he?”

“He’s with personnel and assignments.”

“Oh,” the man sighed, as he now understood what this was about, and he suddenly felt nervous too.

“It’s best not to miss this meeting or be late.”

“Understood.”

It was morning in San Francisco, and like many mornings this time of year, it was on the dull side, overcast with a hint of rain and cool conditions. Thorpe was in uniform, using the heavier jacket designed for cooler, damper conditions. He made the trip to Starfleet headquarters and his ap-

pointment with Admiral Holloway. Despite having met the man before for similar reasons, Thorpe still felt nervous.

He went to the headquarters building on foot from his apartment, since they were close to each other and walking was always good. He did think about the night, having Matsubara in his bed with him for the first time in a long while—and Hiroshi only woke up crying once. It was odd, he thought, as he laid in bed with a person he was familiar and comfortable with, and that bed was in a place that was his alleged home, and yet the whole time, he felt like he was in a hotel or something. It was like he was just visiting, and being in his own bed felt hardly different than being with Matsubara at her parents' place in Kyoto. It was like the only true place that was home for him was his quarters on the *Athena*—and when he was going to see Holloway, there was always the non-zero probability that Starfleet was going to take the ship away from him. There were always things that had been done that if Starfleet found out could get him into trouble, and he had a few ideas of what they could be

He arrived at the rather large and elaborate building, or collection of buildings, that housed Starfleet headquarters, and went through the first security checkpoint, where a couple of holographic security officers checked him over and confirmed his identity. One, in the shape of an attractive dark-skinned female, asked, “What is your purpose at Starfleet Headquarters, Captain Thorpe?”

“I have an appointment with Admiral Holloway.”

After a few seconds, the hologram said, “Confirmed. You may proceed, captain.”

“Thank you,” he replied, and then realized he had just thanked a machine that was obediently following its programming. Then again, it did look very human-like.

Thorpe took the lift up to the floor where Holloway had his office, and he had to pass through another security check. He entered the office area, and the receptionist—who may or may not have been a hologram, as it was hard to tell—saw him and simply said, “The Admiral is waiting for you, captain. You can go straight in.”

Thorpe had never seen that receptionist before, but she knew who he was. That was not really surprising since the first security check had confirmed his presence and no doubt relayed the information to the receptionist, who could then track Thorpe through his commbadge and know to the second where he was and when he arrived. Thus, she could tell him to go right on in.

Admiral Holloway looked to be unchanged since the last time Thorpe had seen him, the last time he was in this office. He looked his age and then some, especially with a crop of hair that had gone completely white. He looked like a man on the verge of retirement, and that made Thorpe wonder

how long the admiral was from that day. Was he looking forward to it?

“Welcome back to Earth, captain,” Holloway said, as he gestured for Thorpe to take one of the chairs in front of his desk. He did not stand up and offer a handshake.

Thorpe sat down, and answered, “I’m at least glad that we completed the mission and brought the ship back, although with losses among the crew.”

“You have my condolences for your lost crewmembers. I know what that’s like, and it’s never an easy thing to deal with.”

“I know.”

“But,” the admiral started, referring to a padd in front of him, “at least the mission was accomplished. We got the Ksassans off Federation planets.”

“At a cost, but we know that sometimes there is a cost when we are defending our society, our way of life.”

Now, Holloway looked more sternly at Thorpe, leaning just a bit over the desk

“Yes, the cost, the cost can be high, but it should never be at the cost of our principles.”

Thorpe was a bit confused, as he said, “I don’t understand.”

“There are two incidents that have been noted in your logs, and which the analytics staff here at Starfleet Command picked up on. The first concerned what happened at the Overseers’ Planet after the Ksassan ship deceived you and destroyed your base on the planet and killed a number of your officers.”

Thorpe recalled the incident, as it had been rather vivid in his mind even now. He instinctively wanted to jump to his own defense, but knew enough to let the admiral finish talking first.

“You were on the *Dublin*, and naturally responded with the probe weapons, quite rightly fearing that your ship would be targeted next. Of course, the Ksassan did not anticipate the effect of the weapon, and once you used them, that ship was doomed. Captain, so far, am I right?”

“Yes.”

“Captain, am I also correct that that was the second time you confronted a Ksassan warcruiser and used the same weapon to destroy it?”

“Yes,” Thorpe repeated. He had a sinking feeling where this was going and the possible trouble that could result.

Holloway continued, “In that first encounter, you were able to beam out the surviving Ksassans with the mass transporter abilities of the Overseer ship?”

“Yes, we did that.”

“But you did not attempt it the second time?”



Holloway had read the log reports and so already knew the answer to that. Thorpe saw no need to deceive the admiral. "No, we did not."

"What was the reason for that? Captain, need I remind you, captain, that the Ksassans are considered prisoners of war and so should not be mistreated. If you have achieved an objective, it is not Starfleet policy to allow combatants, even enemy combatants, to die when it is not necessary."

Thorpe knew this moment would come, and he had thought about what he would say when the question was asked of him. He was expecting it at a board of inquiry, but was hearing it now. He could not give the real answer, that it was because he was angry at what the Ksassan commander had just done and the deaths of his officers, though he was sure a skilled interrogator could get it out of him. He did answer, "I was not fully confident that the *Dublin* and the crew I had on board could control that number of Ksassans."

"And in the heat of the moment, you came to that conclusion?"

"No, sir," Thorpe answered. "I had determined that earlier when I agreed to the deal to beam over the Ksassans back to their ship. The group I had on board worried me, and I was really concerned about a group twice as large being on the *Dublin*, a ship we were not fully up to speed on. I believe, admiral, that you would not want the Ksassans to gain the secrets of the Overseer technology."

"And what happened moments earlier, the destruction of the base camp and the deaths of a number of your crew had no bearing?"

"No, sir," Thorpe answered. "All I was thinking was that the Ksassan captain was untrustworthy. I had given him a deal that, had he carried it out could have had repercussions for the Federation. The Ksassans now had knowledge of the probe weapons, and could have used that to develop defenses against the weapons. He decided not to, and so, given that, I did not want to trust him should I have two ship's worth of Ksassans on an alien starship that we were operating and still learning about. If we had beamed them on board the *Dublin*, I can't see how that would've turned out well. Would it have been better if the Ksassans had gotten control of the *Dublin*? If that had happened, what questions would you have been asking me then?"

"And all of that occurred to you in the short time between firing the weapons and the destruction of the Ksassan warcruiser?"

"No. As mentioned, I already knew that the Ksassans I had on board were stressing resources and manpower. Doubling that number was impossible. It's why I let them go. When the commander betrayed the trust of the deal, then I knew there was no chance I was going to risk the remainder of my crew for him."

Holloway sat there and looked at Thorpe, thinking again about the idea of the "fog of war." He was not there and had only crew reports and log

entries to inform him of the conditions. He also knew that Ksassans were cunning and intelligent and resourceful. A ship full of them, vastly outnumbering the *Athena* crew, was not a good circumstance, and Thorpe was right, that might not have led to a good outcome. Even so, Federation ideals and principles were there for a reason. He was sure that in subsequent meetings, more would come out. “Now,” he started again, staring at the younger man. “There’s the second matter, your decision to trade information on the Overseers’ slipstream drive with the Odonans in exchange for the hypermatter used in the probe weapons. You had no authorization to make that decision.”

“I believed it was the best decision at the time. Without the hypermatter, the probe weapons would never have worked and the Ksassans would still be holding Philentrophia and the other worlds and planning more invasions.”

“I’m aware of that,” the admiral replied. “In real negotiations, we would have been able to acquire the hypermatter for a lesser price than sharing with a non-Federation race what is likely the next advance in faster-than-light propulsion.”

“Are you sure?” Thorpe asked. “How desperate would the Federation get before agreeing to their terms?”

“But the Odonans now have this technology.”

“Then it’s our good fortune that the Odonans aren’t the conquering kind.”

“That could change.”

“And so could we,” Thorpe retorted. “We can’t predict the future history of the Federation.”

“It’s highly unlikely that would happen in the future of the Federation.”

“Nevertheless,” Thorpe started, “at the time, I thought that was the best available option. Of course, I also have an Odonan chief engineer who worked extensively on the *Dublin*, and so would’ve learned a lot. What happened was inevitable.”

“Except,” Holloway started, again leaning a bit over the desk, as if looking at Thorpe more intently. “Starfleet Command doesn’t see it that way, captain. They believe that things went wrong in the Omerra Open Cluster, and that you did things that were contrary to the aims and goals of the Federation and Starfleet. That’s the reason why you and your ship were replaced in the Cluster. It was only the words of Admiral Quinn and the fact that you had familiarity with the *Dublin* and crewmembers that could operate it in the manner the Overseers could that gave you the assignment at Philentrophia. I was personally against it, but was overruled.”

“Why were you against it?”

“Because of what you had done, and since you were working with

Odonans, and also because of the personal stake you had in it. I was overruled, however, and Admiral Quinn got final say on the deployments. I was worried that you could not do it, or do it in a way that reflects negatively on the Federation.”

Thorpe was starting to worry that Holloway would next bring up the destruction of the government building in Abydos where the Ksassan headquarters had been, and blaming him for that one. All indications were that the Ksassans had set a self-destruct mechanism once they knew the androids had been deactivated and that was why they were all killed, along with Kelsey Hahn and some other members of his crew. Surely, Thorpe thought, he could not be blamed for that.

“I see,” Thorpe finally said. “In the end, things did turn out right, but at a cost.”

“There’s the immediate cost and the long-term cost, and that’s the one that we don’t know yet. Now, though, you are here at Earth and you’ll remain here until the board of inquiry has met and dealt with the matter of your actions in the Omerra Open Cluster.”

“How long will that take?”

“I do not know. It could be weeks or it could be months. Those who are going to sit on the board are busy with other matters for now. You will remain here on Earth until this is dealt with.”

“What about the *Athena*?”

“It’s scheduled for some upgrades and maintenance procedures best done in a drydock. No decision has been made on what assignment it will get after it is back in active service, or who the captain will be.”

“Really, admiral?”

“Yes, really.”

Indesakar was also at Starfleet Command in the morning, and he was in the complex at the same time as his captain, but neither knew the other was there. Indesakar was in a different section of the building, and followed the directions to the office of Admiral Jon Guerts, whom he knew was going to decide his fate. He was worried, because what he was working towards was not something that he could do all by himself. He was going to need assistance. He felt nervous. He had talked to others who had worked on command training and shifted from a specialty to the command track. He had an idea of the kind of questions that Guerts could ask and he had considered his answers carefully. One thing he was realizing was that he was always being judged and his career and promotions were really in the hands of others. He had surprisingly little influence beyond doing the best possible job and avoiding career-killing mistakes.

He arrived at the office that Geurts used, and the receptionist, after

confirming his identity, said, “Admiral Geurts is expecting you. You can go in.”

Indesakar entered the inner office, and found that it was on the small side, with a desk, some chairs, and the man that was going to decide his fate behind that desk. There was just a single padd in front of him. The one thing that struck Indesakar about the man was his youthfulness, as he could not be much older than the *Athena* captain himself was. Maybe it was that blond hair, full and worn just a little longer than regulation, and the unlined, unmarred face.

“Welcome to Starfleet Command, Lieutenant Commander Indesakar. Do have a seat.”

“Thanks,” the *Athena* pilot replied softly, as he sat down.

“Now, the current tour of duty of your present assignment, on the *Athena*, has come to an end, and naturally that means that some people are moving on to other ships, or even leaving Starfleet entirely. Some are like you in that you want to change your career path.”

“Yes.”

“To the command path?”

“Yes,” Indesakar repeated. “That was my goal in the long run.”

“And over the past couple of years, you have used your holodeck time on command training simulations.” Then Geurts looked down at the padd and added, “For the most part.”

“Many people use their holodeck time for additional training and personal learning, and also for some entertainment and rest and relaxation too.”

“That’s true. You have worked your way through the command officer training simulations with satisfactory results. You have fulfilled the training prerequisites for promotion to full commander, and you have filed the paperwork for transfer to the career track, and you have satisfied the requirements for that too.”

“Yes,” Indesakar replied. He knew that on the various training simulations, he had done very well. He had not reached the exceptional outcome he was hoping for, but his results were firmly in the top quarter.

“There are some constraints, however, on this request and the promotion. First of all, Starfleet prefers that there are no more than two officers with the rank of commander on a ship such as the *Athena*. On board are both Commander TKor and Commander Bayanhong. Starfleet would prefer that there not be a third.”

“But there is already a third in Commander Dewuchun.”

Geurts answered, “Commander Dewuchun is a non-Federation exchange officer. His rank in the Odonan Space Service is the equivalent of commander, so he retains the rank here as a courtesy, but the ranks of alien

exchange officers are not included. You do understand that?”

“Yes,” the younger man replied. He did know about that rule, though it was not hard and firm. “I understand that a promotion to full commander and a transfer to the command track could mean leaving the *Athena* and heading to another ship. I’m prepared to accept that.”

“Even if the ship you transfer to has lower status than the *Athena*?”

Indesakar had anticipated that scenario as well and was prepared to go that route. He answered, “Yes.”

Now, Indesakar noticed that Geurts had switched on the padd, having apparently already reviewed what had been said. Then the youthful admiral looked up, and in a more solemn voice, reported, “I’m sorry to inform you, lieutenant commander, that both of your two requests had been denied.”

Although in the back of his mind, Indesakar knew this outcome was possible, it was still somewhat of a shock to actually hear it. For a second, Indesakar was speechless, but then he recovered and asked, “Can I ask why the requests were denied?” Indesakar knew he could ask but also knew that Geurts could refuse to tell. The first thought that came to mind was that Captain Thorpe had not approved of the request because he did not want to lose his top flight control officer. That was one reason why Starfleet might refuse to disclose the reasons. However, Indesakar did not feel that was a likely reason because Thorpe had been in this position before and knew what it meant to have such transfer requests approved by the current commanding officer. He was sure that Thorpe would not stand in his way. Lieutenant Sandra Ochi was a very qualified starship pilot.

Geurts did not hide behind the excuse of confidentiality, but simply stated, “In the opinion of the board that decides such things, we believe that you showed poor judgement concerning your relationship with Sunni Lopo-dhur.”

“That was not exactly my fault.”

“Perhaps, but if it happened once, it can happen again. Remember, her whole scheme was to connect with a senior officer on the *Athena* for the purpose of spying on the senior officers and attempting to convince you of the validity of her cause.”

Feeling just a little bit defensive, Indesakar replied, “But she did not succeed.”

“She succeeded enough to possibly compromise the mission. Again, that you fell for it shows poor judgement on your part. That’s part of the evaluation procedure for the command track, and your evaluations in that aspect were not satisfactory. Contrary to what you might have believed or heard, the command simulations are not the only determining factor, nor even the most important. Any competent Starfleet officer can do well in those. That’s just technical details, knowledge and abilities that you need to

have, but it’s not the final stay. We evaluated your career to this point, and compared them to available positions in the command track and our anticipated future needs, and the conclusion is that there are no advancement opportunities beyond what is available to you in your current assignment.”

Indesakar took a few seconds to take it all in and figure out exactly what Geurts had just told him. In essence, he did not rank high enough on the evaluations to earn an available spot. He could still get command experience staying on the *Athena* and taking mission command when offered and perhaps moving into a command position should someone move on, but he was not going to transfer to another ship and enter a command-level position. He did ask, “So the promotion to full commander is not going to happen?”

“No. There are two Starfleet officers on board with that rank already, and for a ship like the *Athena*, that is sufficient.”

“I see,” the dejected man replied. He was about to get up, as he had no further purpose here. “Is that all.”

“We can transfer the full report on the evaluation to your personal storage.”

“Okay.” After a slight pause, Indesakar repeated, “Is that all?”

“Yes,” Geurts replied. “Thank you for taking the time to come to this meeting.”

Indesakar had no idea how to respond. He simply got up and left, feeling a bit of anger over what had transpired in that room. His future had been, if not shattered, at least altered and delayed. It was all because of Lopodhur, he realized. After all, that was the only failing that the admiral had brought up. Was it really that bad? Apparently in the eyes of Starfleet Command, it was. Now what was he going to do? It seemed pretty certain that Starfleet expected him to stay on the *Athena*, and being on that ship was not so bad, just not the path to the command track that he wanted now.

After leaving Starfleet headquarters, Captain Thorpe headed in the direction of his new apartment, where Matsubara and their son were staying. While walking on the streets, he got a message on his personal comm, which said, “We really need to have a dinner meeting to discuss your upcoming board of inquiry and what’s next. You’re in serious trouble and we need to talk about it. Lily Gagnon.”

Thorpe had just one thought, that woman was trouble. On the other hand, she seemed to have inside information on the workings of Starfleet, and it did unnerve him that she said he was in “serious trouble” and she mentioned “what’s next.” What did she know that Admiral Holloway had not told him? He sent a response, “Where?”

A moment later, the answer came back, “Reykjavik.”

“Oh great,” Thorpe said to no one in particular. It would not be a

complete experience during a stay on Earth without meeting Gagnon in some exotic location, but the capital of Iceland? Of course, there was a major civilian spaceport there, the entry and exit point for those using the northern polar ejection course. A lot of people were around and transporter access was simple. He sent one more message, "When and where should I meet you?"

The reply that came back said, "Seven o'clock local time—you figure it out—and I'll be hanging out at this restaurant you probably never heard about..."

Bayanhong met with Brendan Myers, who was the curator of reptile and reptile-like non-terrestrial animals at the Off-World Species Reserve. He was relatively new to the position, having taken over the position from his retiring predecessor, but even in that short time, he had become aware that Dusty was not like the other animals. "There's something about him," Myers told Bayanhong over lunch. "He's not like any animal I've seen here."

"He may not be sentient," Bayanhong explained, "but his kind were evolving in that direction. They have all the tools, but just needed the time to develop."

"You make it sound like that development was something you could observe in your lifetime."

Of course, what Bayanhong knew and what she would not admit was that she and the researchers she had with her were attempting to speed along the process, and had some success. Now, of course, further development was impossible. "I'm aware of that. In the time frame of our lives, of the existence of our society, evolution appears to not move much at all. In the case of Dusty, of course, evolution is over since he is the last of his kind."

"Has that been confirmed?" asked Myers.

"On an unrelated mission, my ship was at Cretaceia, and we did some scans. As far as they showed, Dusty is the last of his kind. Our analysis showed no survivors among his species."

"As we feared. Starfleet has closed the Cretaceia system and does not allow civilian access."

"I was not aware of that," Bayanhong answered, and she made a mental note to herself to look into that.

"The problem with Dusty is that he's in the mating drive. That's the thing we're not really aware of, since one of the hallmarks of sentience is that the mating drive becomes continuous, and we respond to sexual stimuli at all times—Vulcans excepted. Dusty, though, is not like that."

"I'm aware of that."

"But it has become apparent that failing to satisfy that need, which in him is instinctive, is having an effect on him. It is causing mental deterioration in him."

“That I was not aware of,” Bayanhong replied, with some concern.

“It is not the policy of the zoo to keep Starfleet officers informed of what is happening here, and there was that matter of the communications blackout during the business with the Ksassans. However, some of the handlers have reported increasing aggression and more threatening behaviour in Dusty. He’s like the cranky old man who can’t get satisfied. Around you, he seems okay, but around the others, he’s aggressive and frankly, dangerous. We need to do something.”

“The one thing that would work we cannot do. We can’t get him a mate.”

“We could neuter him.”

“That might not work. He’s a semi-intelligent animal, and the rutting instinct is intellectual as well as physical or genetic.”

“Then perhaps we can fake it,” Myers started. “I know that the average human male in a holosuite cannot really tell that his partner is a hologram, so what about your semi-intelligent comsfosaur?”

“A holographic mate for Dusty?”

“Are comsfosours known to be monogamous, picking a mate for life?”

“Both monogamous and non-monogamous behaviour were observed.”

The man gave Bayanhong a puzzled look as he asked, “What does that mean?”

“It means that they would prefer to mate with their mate, but if that mate is not around, they’re not averse to doing it with whoever is convenient. Whether or not he responds to a hologram, I do not know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Holograms can get a response in touch, sound and sight, but not to smell or taste. I’m not sure if there is a smell component to the comsfosaur mating practice, and if there is, there’s no way to duplicate that.”

“But it’s worth a try,” the man said. “Something has to be done...”

Captain Thorpe arrived at the Starfleet office in Reykjavik, through the transporter. He had told Matsubara where he was going and why, and offered to bring her along, but she refused. She did not want to leave Hiroshi behind. Thus, Thorpe arrived alone. At this time of year, and given the location of Iceland, dusk came pretty early, so when Thorpe arrived, it was already dark. He ended up in the sprawling spaceport, with the spaceport in one section, and then at the other end of the long hall of customs offices and the like, linked with moving sidewalks, was the airport where passengers made airline connections to many other destinations on Earth. There were a lot of people around, and there were lounges and a lot of hotel space because the one weakness of interplanetary travel that had never been solved was that of connections between the spaceships and the aircraft. There were two



## Coming Home

primary spaceports for Earth, one in Iceland for ships using the north polar ejection course and one in the Falklands for ships using the south polar ejection courses. Civilian airlines using hoppers—aircraft that got their lift from antigravity—linked those remote locations with cities and more populous areas of the planet. Thorpe could see some of those hoppers taking off. Of course, transporters were an option, but at a place like this, there were just too many people going too many different places. There was always the risk of annular confinement beam interference, and when that happened, the outcome was always bad.

Some transporter activity did occur, such as Starfleet officers coming and going, and for emergency reasons, but for the most part, civilians had to come and go the old-fashioned way. Most expected it that way, as Thorpe had once heard, two-thirds of the population had never experienced the atoms of their bodies converted to the wave state of matter and transmitted to another location and then restored to the particle state. Because of the nature of the location, a lot of people were around, including a number of aliens. There was a lot of noise and commotion, and bored children running around. Thorpe, wearing civilian clothes, did not draw any unusual notice.

Thorpe made his way through the complex to the exits, where flitter cabs were waiting. The man behind the controls asked, in English, “Where are you going?” Thorpe told him the name of the restaurant that Gagnon had given him, and that proved to be a relatively short ride away, but it was still a transition from the massive, high-tech spaceport to more traditional structures. They may have been of recent construction, and may have been high-tech on the inside, but on the outside, they looked like they had been there for hundreds of years. The restaurant where the flitter cab dropped him off was like that, a building that looked old, and might have actually been old. He paid the driver and then stepped outside. For a location this far north at this time of year, the air outside was surprisingly warm. Such was the wonder of the Gulf Stream, Thorpe thought.

He entered the restaurant, and found it on the dark side, with lots of dark wood panelling and a somewhat cozy atmosphere. It was the kind of place that Gagnon liked to meet him in. He was not sure why she liked to meet him in dim surroundings. It was not because she was unattractive or anything; she was actually quite alluring. Thorpe found her wearing a colourful sweater mostly in red, with her long, dark hair down her front. Her body was not what anyone would call svelte, but she did have a presence about her.

Gagnon spotted Thorpe seemingly before he spotted her. “Welcome to Reykjavik, captain,” she said, as he slipped into the booth, sitting across from her. “So how is the hero of Philentrophia?” The sound suppression field came on, silencing the rest of the noise in the restaurant.

“I’m not a hero,” Thorpe replied, “just a man doing his job.”

“And a man with a burden to bear.”

Thorpe looked around, and saw that the restaurant was packed, but he could not hear the voices of the other clients, most of whom were speaking Icelandic anyway. He asked, “What brings you here? Why Reykjavik?”

“This restaurant. The halibut here is amazing.”

“So their replicator program is good.”

“Their secret is that every month, the fishermen go out and catch one halibut and use that to recalibrate their program so that it is not always the same.”

“I see.”

“You should order it. It’s really good.”

The waitress came around, and Thorpe did that, ordering the halibut, a side of french fries and a salad, and a beer to wash it down. A couple of minutes later, she returned with the food, and as Gagnon had said, it was pretty good. On the other hand, Thorpe had not eaten a lot of fish in his life, as Winnipeg was not in prime fishing country.

As he ate, and since she was largely done, Gagnon did the talking. “I understood that Admiral Holloway gave you a talking down earlier.”

“And you know that?”

“I read the reports you filed, and I know the thinking of that man. Let me guess, he criticized you for your decision to share with the Odonans the technology of the slipstream drive in exchange for the hypermatter that made the probe weapons possible, and he criticized you for standing by and doing nothing when the probe weapons were used on the Ksassan ship, and it was about the principles of the Federation and the best interests of the Federation and not necessarily in that order.”

“I hope you’re not expecting me to defend myself to you too?”

“Of course not,” the woman replied with a laugh. “For the record, I believe that you made the right call with those decisions. We wouldn’t be sitting here having this conversation right now if you had followed the letter of our principles. In addition, Holloway knows that too, and he too believes that you made the right calls out there.”

“Then why a board of inquiry?”

“Because that’s how the Federation works. A person’s views cannot cloud his opinion when he judges another. He must stay true to the principles and rule according to the law, not to his feelings, emotions and beliefs. He must base his decisions and judgements solely on facts. In that department, you did make the wrong decisions out there. Against the cold reality of the words in our laws, you messed up, and Holloway has to call you on that—he has to.”

“So, as you said when you sent me the message, I’m in a lot of trou-

ble.”

“It looks that way. Sure, if you had done things the right way, things would still be hot, and it would be diplomats falling on their swords for selling out to the Odonans to get the hypermatter, but that’s part of their job description. When necessary, they sacrifice themselves when principle clashes with reality. They do that, but starship captains don’t.”

“So...what’s likely to happen to me?” Thorpe started, and he had visions that he would lose command of the *Athena* and be confined to Earth if he remained in Starfleet. At least Matsubara would like that.

“Nothing much,” Gagnon replied.

“Sometimes, I really don’t understand Starfleet.”

“I’m sure you understand perfectly well, captain. Everybody who has read your report understands what you did. They might question it, especially the part about the Ksassans, but appearances are everything. The Federation is built on principles and standards, and those have to be maintained—or shown to be maintained—so that the people will continue to believe in them and follow them, and that includes other starship commanders. Afterall, if those that command starships can go off and do what they want without repercussions, Starfleet would dissolve into chaos.”

“In essence, what I did was to preserve the Federation and maintain what we have built, but sometimes high-sounding standards can conflict with reality in some remote section of space.” As he spoke, Thorpe noticed Gagnon leaning back in her chair and grinning to the point that she was about to break into laughter. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Save speeches like that for the board of inquiry, when you need to impress the panel of judges. I don’t need to be impressed. Anyway, given the actions you did, and the outcome of those actions compared to what would’ve happened had you adhered to the letter of the regulations, they’ll give you a suitable punishment, like no fast-track to the admiralty, or a fleet command. They might put your ship into a fleet commanded by a captain of lesser experience or accomplishments.”

Thorpe remarked, “I’ve never seen myself as being more accomplished or renowned than the average captain.”

“You’re too modest, captain,” Gagnon remarked. “Starfleet is well aware of your accomplishments and your ability to get into the middle of situations, and resolve them. That’s one of the reasons that you got the Omerra assignment and why you might’ve gotten it again. And you did this without making too many enemies.”

“Well, there’s this certain Ksassan commander who might differ.”

“You know what I mean,” Gagnon replied, with a grin. “There are some elements in Starfleet Command that feel captains like you could become more arrogant and do more rash and dangerous things—and have them come

out in their favour. They want to bring people like that down, and that could include you. You might not be getting the prestige assignments for awhile, and the *Athena* could be assigned the less glamorous assignments.”

“I see.”

Then Gagnon, in a more hushed voice, added, “But...”

“There’s always a ‘but,’ isn’t there?”

“Yes, captain, there is, and the ‘but’ this time involves the Romulans.”

“The Romulans?”

For whatever reason, Gagnon lowered her voice as she spoke, although the privacy screen had been activated and so nobody outside of their booth could hear them. “As you know, captain, the Romulans were tricked into joining the Alliance during the Dominion War, and they were not happy about it in the end. They felt that the Dominion would’ve fallen in time. The war ended before the Odonans could get that Arosian Battlesphere of theirs working, and if they had, that would’ve finished off the Founders and ended the war; either that or we could’ve sealed the wormhole. Anyway, the official line is that we needed the Romulans to join us and defeat the Dominion, and the unofficial line is that we needed them weakened as well; otherwise, they would’ve had too much power and influence after the war.”

“All that’s generally known,” Thorpe remarked.

“True, but after the war, there was instability in the Romulan Empire. We know what happened to them after the Arosian War.”

“Fifty years of isolation.”

“And there was a faction that wanted to do that again, but that’s not the faction that won. Nevertheless, there is a continuing power struggle going on, one based on Remus and one on Romulus, and the one on Remus is winning.”

“What does it matter?”

“The Remans are more warlike, less refined, shall we say. The Romulans, those on Romulus, are more civilized, and this misguided Vulcan reunification project is making inroads there and in the colonies, but not on Remus. The next praetor is likely to be from there.”

“Why is the Vulcan effort misguided?”

“Too much infiltration by Romulan spies whose intent is unification, alright, but on their terms. They have also been attempting to acquire Federation secrets, and no doubt, the secret of the quantum slipstream drive is among them.”

“Surely the Vulcans and their intelligence agencies are aware of this.”

“They are,” Gagnon replied, “and that’s why this might be the next major area of conflict, the next major crisis to face the Federation.”

“It’s one thing after another, isn’t it?”

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“Yeah,” the woman replied with a sigh. “And to think that twenty years ago, we were naive to think we had entered some period of Pax Galactica, and even allowed families on board starships. Now, the more we expand, the more we learn and develop, the more dangers we run into. That’s why, captain, they may give you some token punishment, but they won’t take your ship away. You might not get any part of operations to contain a possible Romulan threat, but you could well end up being a part of it. You have this knack for getting involved. As I said, you’re getting this reputation, you and your ship. The *Athena* might be second tier—you might not think of it that way, but the *Nebula*-class has always been that way—but you’re becoming one of the better-known captains in the Fleet.”

“Perhaps I should be flattered.”

“You should be. A lesser captain would never get away with what you did.”

“But I did nothing.”

Gagnon just laughed, saying, “You may have changed the course of history.”

Now Thorpe laughed. This woman was way over the top, he thought. Of course, it was certainly possible that he had changed the course of history by his actions in the Omerra Open Cluster, or at least put history back onto its proper course. Without his contributions, he was sure that the Ksassans would still be controlling Philentrophia and the other worlds they had occupied, and probably expanded to still more worlds, including Trill. To Thorpe, that was setting history right, not changing its course. As he recovered from the laughter, he asked, in all seriousness, “How could I change the course of history?”

“You already have,” Gagnon replied. “You gave the Odonans the quantum slipstream drive and the probe weapons. Combined with their store of hypermatter we have no access to, they can become the undisputed power in the Alpha Quadrant. I wouldn’t be surprised if they got the secret of the Borg androids from the Ksassans as well.”

“You are aware of their mission statement, to rule no others and to be ruled by no others.”

“And surely, captain, you’ve heard of the truism, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. That’s the thing. The Odonans might be one way now, but they could be another way in the future. Remember, the Odonans arose from the Kroosian culture, and the Kroosian culture could arise again. Surely, someone will come along and such a thing could happen. Hell, it could happen to us, and some said it almost did with the Babylon Project. Something similar could appear among the Odonans, and that could make them dangerous, especially given the technology at their disposal.”

“But that’s hypothetical,” Thorpe retorted after a pause, during which

he finished his beer.

“Everything is hypothetical, but it’s also possible. It’s hard to say how history will proceed, but it is possible that at some point in the future, some historian will look back and find the turning point and the person who made that turn. That could be you.”

“I see.”

“That’s the power of a starship commander out on the frontier. It’s not something to take lightly.”

“Trust me, I don’t.”

Then Gagnon changed the subject, and said, “Now, about that board of inquiry. Of course, I’ll be there to represent you...”

\* \* \*

It was called “air swimming,” and as Vorwoorts knew, that was exactly what it was. People, in a zero-gravity environment, would don lightweight boards made of a kind of feather that was light and designed to propel the air-swimmer through the air using swimming motions. Vorwoorts, like many of her friends, had done it recreationally, and some, but not her, had done it competitively.

It was also done for entertainment, as air-swimmers would perform for glory and profit, and people would bet on who would win. They could watch the racers from a glass-enclosed—and gravity-provided—balcony as they competed over the three-dimensional course. It was at such a competition that Vorwoorts found herself in the company of some friends, whom she had barely seen since leaving for Starfleet Academy.

One of those friends was Frida Omsley, a girl Vorwoorts had known since grade school. She was a girl of the same age as Vorwoorts, and even somewhat similar in appearance, though with longer hair.

“So,” Omsley asked the *Athena* tactical officer, “how much longer do you figure on being in Starfleet?”

“I have no plans to leave,” Vorwoorts replied. “I’ve enjoyed my time on the ship, the people I’ve met and even the things that we have experienced.”

Another of the friends, Trudy Van Jaans, spoke up, “But if much of what happened is still classified and you can’t talk about it, even among friends, then I’m not sure that I would want to remain in the service. It sounds dangerous.”

“I know.”

The next team of four racers stood on the start podium. Omsley said, “Watch the man in the red. His name is Maartin, and he’s really cool, really nice.”

Van Jaans added, almost in a mocking tone, “And Frida has a real

crush on him.”

“Do not!”

“Do too!”

A horn sounded and a green light came on. A master clock was set at zero, and individual clocks for each participant were all displayed, alongside the leader board of those with the fastest times so far. Vorwoorts had no idea that if those leading times were fast for this course or not. The sounding of the horn signalled that the gravity in the enclosure had been neutralized, by generating a gravitational field on the ceiling that had the same pull on an object inside the enclosure that the planet’s gravity had, except in the opposite direction. In essence, gravity was cancelled out and objects in the enclosure responded as if there was no gravity. Once the horn sounded and the green light was given, the swimmers took their leap of faith and jumped over the edge of the start platform. They did not sink, but floated through the air. They started with their swimming strokes, sweeping the air and propelling themselves forward. Ahead were vertically- and horizontally-mounted poles that they had to swim around, with the course stretching from the top of the enclosure to the bottom. Because of their weight and the amount of air they needed to push aside, the racers did start off slow, but Vorwoorts admired their style and form, especially when they took corners. They also picked up speed, and in the early going, they were side by side but staying far enough away from each other that they did not get entangled in each other’s wings. They moved around the poles with surprising grace and athleticism, able to hook those ersatz wings and avoid bashing them into the poles, which would make them less effective.

The man in red, whom Mosley had named Maartin, started out trailing the other three men in the heat, but he executed the turns and especially the dips very well and soon worked himself to second. Omsley was cheering him on, as if she actually did know him. Vorwoorts had her doubts. However, the man in the blue outfit had too much of a lead and was too strong that in the final straightaway was too far ahead for Maartin to catch him. The man in blue, whose name none of the women had caught, won the heat.

“Oh,” Omsley remarked. “Maartin did not quite do it.”

Van Jaans added, “He gave it his best shot, but today, it was not enough.”

People were moving through the viewing area, because Vorwoorts knew that bets were placed on the individual heats as well as the overall winner. People were also going for food and drinks, so there was a swirl of people around. Some of them Vorwoorts recognized because they had gone to school with her. A few said “Hi,” and unless the gossip got to them, many did not even know that Vorwoorts was in Starfleet and had reached the rank of lieutenant commander. Some, she knew, had a low opinion of Starfleet and

those that choose to serve in it. They were seen as people “running from problems” or with an “infantile need for adventure.” They were among her former friends.

Then she spotted a familiar face, a man, a year older than she was, tall and thin, an unruly mop of brownish-blond hair on top of his bony face. No girl disputed he was attractive, and Vorwoorts had first noticed that when she started high school those many years ago. “Oh no,” Vorwoorts remarked, mostly to herself.

Omsley noticed that reaction too and looked in the direction that the other woman was looking in and she noticed the same thing that the other woman had noticed. “It’s Jerome.”

The man was Jerome Kloosterman, and he was walking towards Vorwoorts—and she was not that sure that he realized that. After all, after the letter he had sent her a couple of years ago, she was sure that he would try to avoid her.

“Oh no,” Van Jaans mumbled too.

Then eye contact was made. “Oh, Heni,” he said, as he spotted her and stopped. As far as Vorwoorts could tell, he was walking past her alone. Was there another woman in his life, she wondered.

“Hi,” she said softly and slowly. “I wasn’t expecting you here.”

“I had no idea you were back in town. After all, you’ve been gone for awhile, and there’s been no contact.”

“There was no need for any contact since that letter,” Vorwoorts retorted bitterly.

“You know why I did that,” Kloosterman replied, trying to sound earnest.

“Of course, it was in the letter. You didn’t like the separation.”

“Heni,” the man started, feeling the need to express himself and his feelings again. “Surely you understand. I’m here on Earth and you’re thousands of light years from here. You’re out there in deep space, and there’s the Dominion War and the business with the Ksassans and you’re in the middle of that. You know, I did have a cousin and his girlfriend was in Starfleet. She died on her ship during the defense of *Deep Space Nine* or something. I didn’t want that to happen to me.” Of course, as soon as Kloosterman said those words, he realized that they did not come out right.

Vorwoorts had heard that opinion in the past, saying, “I know that. I’ve heard that sentiment before. People don’t want those they care for to be out there, in space, doing what we do. It is dangerous out there, and if we didn’t do this, it could become dangerous here.”

“Except,” Kloosterman started, “if we weren’t out there, then there would be no danger here.”

“I would think that our society has been enriched with our contact



with other species.”

“But at a cost.”

Vorwoorts was actually surprised to hear this point of view from the man, since she thought she knew him well. Once she was in space, she had feared getting that “Dear John” letter, and the usual cause was that the person back home had found someone else. Perhaps that other person had warped his mind. After all, Kloosterman had attempted the Starfleet Academy entrance exam, but had failed. Now he had turned against the organization, perhaps because a cousin had been hurt, or he was being influenced. Vorwoorts did blurt out, “When you wrote that original letter, there was another woman, wasn’t there?”

“No,” the man admitted. “At the time, there was not. I didn’t like the separation, though.”

“Neither did I.”

Then Kloosterman said something that Vorwoorts did not expect. “Perhaps it was not the best way to have phrased it, but when I did it, I was hoping that you would take it as some kind of plea, to leave Starfleet and come back home. I was hoping that you would think that it was important to work on our relationship and come back home. However, you never responded to the message, so I got to thinking that you had accepted what I had written, and that you were almost expecting such a letter. You had moved on.”

“Oh,” Vorwoorts said, as she glanced at the man, and then at the two women she was with, and who had remained silent through this conversation. Then she felt the need to change the conversation, saying, “But in the time since?”

“There have been others,” Kloosterman replied, as he continued to look at the woman he once knew. “And with Juanita, I have become quite happy.”

“And she’s the one with anti-Starfleet views?”

“No, that’s becoming common among the population. Juanita helped, but she’s not the only one. People are increasingly of the view that Starfleet brings more harm than good to the people of Earth and that it has come time to evaluate its effectiveness.”

Vorwoorts wanted to continue to argue with her one-time boyfriend, but quickly realized that this was not the appropriate location for that. “That’s something I’m not going to discuss here.”

“Of course,” the man replied. Then he turned and walked away.

Van Jaans asked, “What was that all about?”

“He was my former boyfriend,” Vorwoorts answered.

“I know that.”

“We even seriously discussed marriage.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“But I got accepted by Starfleet Academy and Jerome did not, and though that did not cause an immediate rift, since he was still in school, in time we drifted apart. That’s the reality of this, as we get separated, and it could be years between visits. There’s not much I could do about that. Relationships cannot exist like that.”

“Perhaps.”

“But this business about Starfleet, being unpopular and all of that.”

Omsley answered. “Yeah, there’s been a lot of talk about Starfleet, and how it has become a drain on the government, and seems to be a government upon itself, and not answerable to the politicians that had been elected. People see it as a danger.”

“Space is not safe,” Vorwoorts remarked.

“Which might be a good argument to stay out of it. I mean, before warp drive, the other races of the galaxy ignored us.”

“There are records that state otherwise.”

“Perhaps, but also, back before warp drive, only a fringe element believed that aliens existed and visited Earth. Those that did were ridiculed and serious people did not believe them. There was no conclusive proof at the time that aliens existed. Thus, for the most part, the alien races ignored us.”

“It’s too late to go back now.”

“I know that. Some idealists might not, but the average person does know we can’t go back. However, if only Starfleet was more accountable and did not go from scandal to scandal...”

Once again, Bayanhong was at the San Diego Zoo, to see Dusty and to hear from Myers, who said, “He was being aggressive again, and he was baring his teeth at the handlers. We resorted to beaming in his food, not a recommended practice.”

“Why?”

“It’s perceived as unnatural by the animal, but we can’t risk injuries to our staff. On the other hand, he does not appear to be hungry. That’s a worry too. He’s not eating much. It’s as if comsosaurs do not want to eat when they’re rutting.”

“Yes, their attention is focused on that.”

“How much longer?”

“I don’t know.”

So Bayanhong went to visit the comsosaur, the last of his kind in the flesh. She did not come unprepared, as she was wearing one of the forcefield belts from the ship. She turned it on as she entered the entrance compartment to the enclosure where Dusty lived. The comsosaur was lounging in the late-day sun, the sunlight making his reddish-brown downy coat shine noticeably. It gave the perception of a good, healthy male. As Bayanhong

looked, the animal lifted his head and made a mournful, bellowing sound that while it was not loud, Bayanhong suspected it could carry in the still air. Dusty had this need to mate, and no way to satisfy that need.

However, Dusty also knew that he had a visitor in the enclosure, and Bayanhong knew she had an audience. At first, Dusty ignored the intruder into his space, because she was not one of his kind and she was not approaching. However, when she did get closer, he turned and hissed at her. She was taken aback by that, since he had never done that before. This rutting session was definitely worse than previous ones, as if the unrealized need was eating away at him.

"It's me," Bayanhong said, getting the attention of the creature. "You remember me? Just a couple of days ago, you did." Dusty simply growled at her. "What is wrong? Is the mating urge that strong?" Dusty turned away and made those mournful, moaning sounds, as if that would attract a female of the species. However, there were none, at least none that were real. As she watched, Dusty got onto his hind legs and looked around. He straightened up so that his back was more vertical, and he howled at...something. Then he started to run frantically around his enclosure, circling around Bayanhong. That unnerved her, though she could hear the comforting hum of the forcefield belt in her ears. Dusty stopped, sniffed the air and then he started to run circles again, and this time with a smaller radius.

Through a loudspeaker, Myers asked, "Julia, are you alright?" Before she could answer, Dusty stopped and howled at the source of the sound, his yell growling and in a way hideous and menacing. Myers added, "We have access to a phaser stun rifle."

"Don't you dare!" Bayanhong yelled back.

"But if he attacks you?"

"Clearly you haven't seen the Odonan forcefield belt in action."

Dusty then resumed running circles around Bayanhong, and the radius did get smaller. Up close, all of those claws and teeth did look frightening, and even though the creature looked small and slight, he was surprisingly strong and could do serious damage. And this was the same creature that at times would sleep in the same bed as she did.

Dusty, in his frantic running, got closer to Bayanhong, and then he stopped, as if he had suddenly noticed who it was. He looked at her and made some whimpering sounds. He approached a little closer, with those observing becoming rather concerned—Myers was about to order the stun rifle be brought out. They watched as the comsfoosaur lowered his head and peered at Bayanhong.

"It's me," she said in a soft voice. "I'm not bringing you any harm. It's me, Julia, and you know me. Relax." The creature made more whimpering sounds, and then laid down on the ground. When she started to stroke his

head and neck, he accepted it and even writhed a bit on the ground. After a couple of moments of that, Dusty got up and sprinted off to a corner of the enclosure. Bayanhong got up and returned to the security of the other side of the partition.

Myers came down to the entrance and said, “What you did was incredibly foolish. He could have sliced you apart.”

“Again, you don’t understand the forcefield belt. It can resist a full phaser blast. I was in no danger, though I did feel nervous, because of my concern for Dusty. He is acting in a way I have not seen before. The mating urge must be very strong.”

“Forcefield belt or not, you took a chance. Dusty has become unpredictable... and yet, he eventually calmed down.”

“He finally recognized me. I’m something of a mother figure to him. I raised him from virtually a hatchling to adulthood. I think I still have his respect that way.”

“But for how much longer?”

“I think we would have to try the holodeck solution,” Bayanhong said, but she was not sure if she could pull it off.

Indesakar used the Starfleet transporter system to beam back home to Tondi. He did stay in San Francisco long enough so that he knew it would be morning in his hometown. There was nothing quite like arriving at home in the middle of the night and startling his parents. Now, he arrived in time for breakfast, but did not feel like having any. His body was not saying “breakfast” and “morning.”

Both his mother and father were at the table when Indesakar came through the door. After the usual greetings, Indesakar’s mother asked, “How did it go in your meeting with the admiral?”

“Not good,” the younger man answered.

“What happened?”

“I’m not going to get an assignment that will put me in the command track. According to those that made the decision, there were some errors in the things I did on the *Athena*.”

“Like that woman?”

“Yeah, that,” Indesakar sighed. “It wasn’t so much the relationship but the fact that she was part of the Babylon Project and used me, and I was blind to that.”

“Relationships can do that,” the mother replied. “It’s hard to hold that against you.”

“But in command, you can’t let relationships blind you. You can’t be deceived. Bad things can happen, like almost happened to us because of that. It was a mistake on my part, but one that a person not in the position of

authority could make. I was kind of like in the borderline. I mean, I didn't give in to Sunni's demand to know what was happening in senior officer meetings. I recognized that was wrong. Maybe at that point I should have done more, but I kept that sort of thing to myself, hoping it was not serious."

"Another lapse of judgement," the father remarked.

"Yeah," sighed the son. "I didn't know her intention, and I liked the attention. The feelings were real."

"And you're sure about that?" asked the mother.

"She's still trying to contact me." And in his mind, Indesakar added that he wanted to contact her, while realizing that could be a career-limiting move if people like Geurts found out about it.

The parents ignored the comment, because both in the past understood how romantic relationships could make people act in an irrational or even illogical way. It was almost as if the instinct driven by the hormones could overcome the sensibility of the brain. As a command officer, Indesakar would not have that luxury.

The father asked, "So what is next? What assignment are you getting?"

"I'm staying with the *Athena*."

"That's not a bad ship."

"I know, and Captain Thorpe has given me some assignments that give me practical experience in command situations. I don't think that will change. I was just hoping I could move on with my career."

"There's lots of time yet. You're not that old. Most commanders are much older than you are now."

Perhaps, Indesakar thought, but Thorpe was only eight years older than he was and he had been a captain for six years already and a first officer before that. Of course, Indesakar had served under commanders who were older, but his most familiar experience was with Thorpe, and so he thought he was at a most appropriate age to be a captain. He knew he was not going to achieve anything like that. Perhaps he was not cut out to be a captain. Not everybody was, as the vast majority of officers in Starfleet never got to that position.

"Perhaps you're right," Indesakar eventually said. "Things happen for a reason."

"If you want something," the mother continued, "you have to be patient and know what it takes to reach the goal, especially if that goal is hard. Very few people get to where they want to be without a few failures along the way."

"And the greatest problem some people face is not realizing that something they're doing is failing them until it is too late."

Brigson returned to the hotel room where she was staying, giving in and spending another night there before deciding whether or not to go home and spend time with her family. She had spent the night with former colleagues from the *Socrates*, and they were reminiscing about old times—and those old colleagues realized that Brigson had done a lot more on her time on the *Athena* than they had on the *Socrates*. In fact, other than some simple “milk run” missions, they had not done much of anything. As one said, “Colonny support is the last thing any of us want to do.” Another asked, “Any more openings on the *Athena*?”

“Actually, there are,” she had said, because on their last mission, people had died. She said those words and thought about Debangalo Toh and the others who had not made it back. How odd was that, she thought, as one moment life is going normally, or as normally as life could go for a Starfleet officer, and the next, he is dead and as the head of the department, she has to compose the letter of condolences to the family and the loved ones of the dead officer. That was the worst thing about being the head of the department.

Now she entered the hotel room and turned on the lights. She had her commbadge with her, as she went nowhere without it. However, her personal communications device had been left behind. She checked it now, expecting another message from her parents asking when she was coming home. Instead, there was a message from Bayanhong. Brigson did not expect that.

“What could she want?” Brigson asked herself. If it was related to Starfleet or the ship, she was sure the message would come through official channels. Nevertheless, she sent back a response indicating she was aware of the message and was waiting for a response. Only a couple of moments later, just when the science officer came out of the washroom, Brigson got the response. “Commander,” she started, seeing the first officer in the small screen of the communications device. “This is unexpected.” She noticed that Bayanhong was dressed in civilian clothes, and could see her wearing a shirt and a denim jacket, and her hair was loose. That made her look distinctively different. “I take it this is not a social call... or Starfleet business.”

“No,” Bayanhong replied. “This is more science. You know Dusty.”

“The comsfosaur?”

“Yes,” Bayanhong said, sounding just a bit impatient. She was aware that the *Athena* science officer knew about the Cretaceian creature, though she had never seen him. “I’ve been visiting him, as is inevitable whenever I’m on Earth. Right now, he is in heat, and based on what the people at the San Diego Zoo tell me, it gets worse each time because he can’t, well, satisfy that urge, that mating urge. It’s wearing at him.”

“I’m not an expert on Cretaceian animals, so I don’t know what I can

do.”

“We’ve decided that we’re going to try to fake it.”

“Fake it?”

“We want to put Dusty on a holodeck and create a female comsfoosaur and let him mate with that to burn off the urges.”

“And that’s going to work?”

“I don’t know,” the first officer replied, “but doing nothing is not working as well.”

“What do you need me for?” Brigson asked, as surely it was not to get access to a holodeck, as she was the first officer—unless Captain Thorpe had refused to allow this demonstration and she was seeing if Brigson could get access to a holodeck somewhere else. “Has Captain Thorpe approved this?”

“I haven’t asked him yet. I need help with the programming, because it will be advanced and detailed, and that’s a bit beyond my ability.”

“I see,” the science officer replied, after thinking it over for a couple of moments. There was a certain challenge to what Bayanhong was proposing, but also a problem in case it did not work. There was another angle too. She started, “Personally, commander, I don’t think what you’re proposing is a good idea. It’s okay to fool ourselves with holographic simulations, but it is considered unethical to do that with animals that cannot make the distinction. It’s never a good idea to deceive animals in that manner.”

“You do realize that there are no other comsfoosaurs, and that to solve the mating urge, there are no alternatives.”

“I know, but I’m not convinced that it would work. The comsfoosaur mating urge might require senses that the holodeck can’t do or can’t do accurately. If Dusty is the last of his kind, then a mating urge might be redundant. Have you considered neutering him?”

“That has been discussed, but like in people, the mating instinct is partly mental.”

“And you know that?”

“I suspect that, yes, given his increasingly erratic behaviour each time the mating urge appears.”

Brigson thought about that for a moment, and then said, “That’s not generally true, but I’ll concede the point here because you know Dusty and his kind better than anyone else, but I don’t think it’s a good idea, and could just damage him in the long term, like the next time he goes in heat. I find the whole idea to be unethical, so I really can’t help you.”

After a brief pause, Bayanhong answered, “Okay, I understand.” Even as she said that, Brigson had the feeling that she really did not. It was just that what she had proposed, Brigson found wrong on too many levels.

\* \* \*

Thorpe was back home, at a “home” that really did not feel like his, but there he was, living the domestic life with Matsubara and Hiroshi, with the toddler showing exemplary behaviour by not crying a lot. Maybe it was because he was in new surroundings and so could evoke a sense of curiosity and try to learn more about his surroundings and that strange person who also lived here and whom he was supposed to know.

Hiroshi was in bed when Thorpe returned from Reykjavik, while Matsubara was reviewing papers. “You should congratulate me,” Matsubara said when Thorpe returned.

“About what?” he asked.

“Starfleet gave me clearance, and now I can review all papers coming out of your time in the Omerra Open Cluster.”

“I wonder why.”

“Perhaps because technically I’m still with the *Athena*, just on maternity leave. The first thing I did was to look over what’s been done with the quantum slipstream drive. I get the feeling Rodall has been all over this.”

“He knows it as well as anyone else.”

“So the Odonans know all about it too.”

“That’s inevitable,” Thorpe sighed. “But then my deal with the Odonans gave them the technology in exchange for the hypermatter needed to make the probe weapons work. You can’t hide technology from them.”

Matsubara changed the subject and asked, “How was your dinner date in Iceland?”

“Oh, Lily Gagnon was her usual self, full of conspiracies and dangers that we had not considered before. To her, the next big problem for the Federation will be the Romulans.”

“I’ve heard that too,” Matsubara replied. “There’s long been the rumour that the Romulans did not like being tricked into the Dominion War.”

“Although their contribution did lead to the victory in the war, and surely they had to know that to the Dominion, once the Federation and the Klingons fell, the non-aggression pact would not be worth the paper it was printed on.”

“True.”

“But a lot of that anger is apparently Romulan internal politics, but to Lily, the big problem is the Vulcan’ reunification mission, which she believes has been seriously infiltrated by the Romulans’ Tal Shiar.”

“To what end?”

“Cynically, to go ahead with the reunification, but on Romulan terms and not Vulcan terms, to reunify the people but as Romulans and not the logic of the Vulcan.”

“Not good,” Matsubara remarked.



“Combined with rising anger against Starfleet here on Earth, and that could spell trouble.”

“Yeah, and I know about that Starfleet business. Back home in Kyoto, a lot of the people blame Starfleet for what’s been happening, like Borg incursions, the Dominion War and this business with the Ksassans. It’s been suggested that we do not go out in public in uniform, but in civilian clothes. Now, if there’s trouble with the Romulans, that’s more material for people to criticize Starfleet with. Let’s hope that we can solve this problem without bringing any of it down on Earth—and given that Romulus is not all that far from Earth, as starships go, that may be optimistic.”

Even as Matsubara was speaking, the civilian comm unit sounded, and that was a sound that surprised Matsubara. She said, “Somebody’s contacting us, and I have no idea who that could be.”

“I heard that civilian units are prone to so-called ‘cold contacts,’ where somebody is randomly calling people they do not know to sell them something.”

“Maybe you should answer it.”

Since the apartment belonged to Thorpe, he decided it should be him that answered. However, the incoming screen did not identify the person who was contacting him, but the location was a hotel in San Diego. He accepted the call, and saw a familiar face presented in an unfamiliar way. “Commander,” Thorpe said, momentarily startled. The first officer was not in uniform, but he could see her wearing a shirt and a denim jacket over that. Her hair was loose and mostly down her front, a way he had not seen her before.

“Captain,” Bayanhong started, “I apologize for contacting you at your home.” As she spoke, she saw Matsubara move into the range of the comm unit’s video pickup. Having her with the captain was not totally unexpected, she thought. “Right now I’m in San Diego, and I’ve spent time with Dusty.”

“How is he?” Matsubara asked.

“He’s in his rutting pattern, and again, it’s going unsatisfied. It seems to get worse each season, and because of it, he’s becoming more aggressive and unmanageable.”

“Oh. What can you do?”

Bayanhong then outlined the plan she had formulated with Myers about creating a holodeck simulation that would allow Dusty to at least mate and somehow satisfy the hormonal urges. “That’s why I’m contacting you, captain, to see about the availability of the holodecks on the *Athena*. I know the ship is essentially in drydock and getting upgrades and the rest.”

“I’d have to check,” Thorpe replied, “but it may be that the holodecks are not available.”

Matsubara spoke up, “But there is an alternative. During my leave,

I’ve been reviewing and doing fact-checking on science papers, and I’ve made contact with various researchers and professors. There’s a research holodeck facility in Kyoto I believe I can get access to.”

“Really? What about the logistics of beaming Dusty from San Diego to Kyoto without him really knowing? We’d have to use the Starfleet network.”

“Perhaps something can be arranged, or could he be transported more conventionally?” Thorpe asked.

“There might be paperwork delays there, but I’ll see what the zoo would allow.”

Matsubara stepped in, asking, “But would this work? Would mating with a holographic mate reduce this mating urge? I’m sure it’s been tried with other animals, but I’ve heard of no research papers on the topic, so I can’t tell if the holographic experience works with animals.”

“Is this research holodeck at the same quantity as a Starfleet system?”

“Better, actually,” Matsubara replied, “much higher resolution and many times the processing power.”

“Interesting.”

“Holodecks on starships are only good enough for what they are designed for, which is mostly training simulations, and not for detailed and complex research.”

Bayanhong thought about it for a moment, and then said, “Now, I’m thinking if we take Dusty somewhere for this, we can simulate a more Cretaceous environment, because I still have my data, and that would be easier to replicate than his enclosure here, and might make it more convincing for him. On the other hand, he might not want to leave. Having him mate in the enclosure will give him the sense that the mate was provided for him and then returned. It’s hard to figure out which would work better.”

“You know the comsosaurs better than anyone else,” Matsubara remarked. “You’ll have to figure it out, and I’ll see about reserving time on that holodeck.”

Once the call ended, Matsubara faced Thorpe, and asked, “Can we really do that?”

“What?” asked Thorpe.

“Trick Dusty in mating with a holographic comsosaur, to satisfy that urge to mate? Would it work? Would he be fooled by it?”

“It’s hard to say.”

“I mean, I have heard that it is unethical to use animals in that fashion because they don’t know what they’re dealing with, and yet I know that at Kyoto they perform many such experiments because it’s more humane that way. Very complicated scenarios can be created to test the cognitive abilities of animals, especially alien animals of which there is question of

sentence.”

“Dusty could be in that category,” the captain acknowledged.

“But this could work, or it could backfire.”

“And it’s possible that doing nothing could backfire too.”

“I’ll see about getting time on that holodeck...”

Indesakar knew that he should not be doing this, but he was. He took the Starfleet transporter to New Zealand, where the Federation had one of its incarceration facilities, commonly referred to as a “re-education centre” where people could learn proper and acceptable behaviour. People whose actions were contrary to the aims and principles of the Federation could end up there, especially if their actions did not involve violence. At the facility, the people would, through various means, be shown why their actions and beliefs were wrong and the damage that those wrong beliefs could lead to. If persuasion failed, there were other treatment options available. On the surface, Indesakar wondered why such facilities existed in the Federation, but he understood that with the size of the Federation and the power of the technology available to even the average citizen, people with wrong ideas that acted on them could do a lot of damage. Just having bad ideas was not a crime, but acting on them was, though the person might not necessarily understand that the ideas were wrong or dangerous. That was what happened to Sunni Lopodhur. She had ideas that were contrary to the best interests of the Federation, and as a result, people were hurt and resources needlessly squandered in the consequence. Perhaps she might not have understood the error of her ways, and even felt that her views were right, or that she was taken advantage of.

Indesakar took a flitter from the Starfleet office in Dunedin, which took him into the beautiful mountainous areas of New Zealand’s South Island. Located in a valley, with spectacular views all around, was the Waukewaki Reintegration Facility, which from the outside looked more like a resort than what it really was, a prison.

The flitter dropped Indesakar off at the main entrance, so he had to walk down the relatively long walkway to the main entrance. The building was made of a white stone material in an old architectural style with columns and climbing vines on some of the walls and columns, which did help to hide the small windows and the unbreakable transparent aluminum within them. From the outside, it did not look like it was too bad of a place.

Indesakar entered and immediately went to the front desk. The sign said all visitors had to register at this desk. The person behind the counter watched as the man approached, and he did the usual scan to make sure Indesakar did not have on him the long list of prohibited items. One of those were the Odonan forcefield belts, so Indesakar had to leave that behind at his

house. He was not permitted to leave it in the care of anyone not associated with Starfleet.

The man asked, “How can I help you?”

“I’m here to see Sunni Lopodhur,” the *Athena* pilot answered.

“How are you related to her?”

Indesakar wanted to say “lover,” but he answered instead, “A friend.”

The man behind the counter asked for Indesakar’s name and his identification, and confirmed that he was not on the list of non-allowed visitors for Lopodhur. Since he was not on the list, the facility official said, “You’re not on the prohibited list. I will see if she wants to meet with you.”

“Okay.”

That took a few minutes, and in the meantime, Indesakar stood by the big front windows, bathing in the sunlight and the mountain views. Then the official called out, “Your friend is willing to see you. You’ll be escorted to the common area for that purpose.”

“Okay.”

One of the staff members—they refused to be called “guards”—arrived and led Indesakar into the main section of the facility. In particular, they went to a common room, where the facility’s residents, as they were referred to, could meet and have meals and socialize. It was also the meeting place for those who were visiting the residents. Entering the tastefully-decorated room, Indesakar looked around for any sign of Lopodhur, but she was not in the room. Perhaps they had to go for her too.

“You can wait here,” the staff member remarked to the man. “That area in the corner is where visitors can meet with the residents.”

“Okay,” Indesakar replied. He walked over to where his escort had pointed, a small section off the main room, and it consisted of some small couches and easy chairs clustered in small groups around tables. Nobody was in this section, though a few of the residents were in the main part of the room. Indesakar saw what looked like a civilian-level replicator. He doubted that he had authorization to use it, but thought that a coffee would be good right about now. It would not be the Orion coffee from the replicator on the *Athena*, but any coffee right now would settle his nerves. He wondered again why he was here, and what was he going to say to Lopodhur that had not already been said? Yet, there was still something drawing him to her, and he was not exactly sure what that was.

Then he heard a voice behind him, saying, “Hi, Sanjay.”

Indesakar turned and looked at the source of the words. He recognized the voice, of course, and when he saw her, he found her to be as lovely as he remembered her to be. There was no disputing her attractiveness, and it seemed to be enhanced by the fact she lost a little weight. She had her medium-length straight black hair, set off nicely against her dark face. He

could not say the same about her outfit, which consisted of basic gray pants and a simple tunic in a lighter shade of gray. There was only form and functionality about it, no style at all.

He found himself replying. "Hi, Sunni." He sat down in one of the easy chairs, and Lopodhur did likewise, sitting in one adjacent to his. He noticed that none of the guards, er, staff members were around. He doubted that this conversation was going unmonitored. Lopodhur continued, "You know, I'm surprised that you have come to see me after what happened out there."

"It's hard to blame you," Indesakar replied, even as he found himself staring at the woman. "You were as much a victim of this as I was. They found someone with unorthodox beliefs and they exploited that. There's no crime in having unorthodox beliefs."

"I know," the woman replied, smiling in her pleasant way. "That's why I ended up in a place like this rather than a prison somewhere. I even got some guy sent to an Odonan prison on trumped-up charges so that I could take his place on the ship. I wonder what happened to him."

"After the Babylon Project was exposed, he was released. The Odonan woman whose identity was misused in the plot also spoke up. He became disillusioned with Starfleet and left."

"It's still too bad."

"The whole thing was, but that's in the past." There was a few moments of awkward silence, and then Lopodhur spoke up again, "I heard that your ship was involved in a lot of excitement over this Ksassan incursion."

"Excitement is not a word that I would use. People died during that, people I knew."

"But a lot more live because of what you did. That's got to count for something."

"Perhaps," Indesakar sighed. "But how did you find out?"

"Word gets around. I'm not the only former Starfleet officer here. About half of the people here were in Starfleet at some point. Oh, the stories that we could tell. Some of these people got visits from friends who have connections in Starfleet, and they were able to get information that was not generally known because of the blackout. That's when we suspected that it was bad and getting worse. Suddenly, there were dozens of planets you could no longer book passage to, and they were not the occupied worlds. That's what the Federation does. When the news is bad, they keep it to themselves." Lopodhur then looked more intently at Indesakar and smiled, as she added, "But I knew it would turn out right in the end. Starfleet gets it done. The government is sometimes incompetent, but Starfleet gets it done."

"Starfleet is there to serve the government."

"Oh, don't be a fool, Sanjay. Starfleet is the government. What Star-

fleet wants, Starfleet gets, all the time. That’s just the way it is, and most people accept that. Perhaps not everybody, but most people do. Our presence in space is very important, and that is the realm of Starfleet.”

“You make it sound like that’s a bad thing.”

“Perhaps it is, or perhaps it isn’t. It’s hard to say, but does not really matter to me since I’m not a part of Starfleet anymore and I doubt I ever will be again.”

Indesakar did not want to continue this line of conversation anymore, as this was a theme that he had heard more than once already. Instead, he asked, “So what has been happening to you here?”

“Well, the doctors and the psychologists and the rest try to work through our problems, to show us how our thoughts and beliefs are wrong. Unfortunately, the people who run this place are of the belief that there’s only one right way to do anything, just one correct set of beliefs, and those beliefs have produced the great and powerful Federation and has insured that mankind will exist for a long time to come. Other beliefs apparently will produce a less desirable outcome. They even showed us holographic simulations of what could happen if the people in power actually acted on what we believe in.”

Just the way that Lopodhur was talking told Indesakar that she was not taking this seriously. He asked, “But you don’t believe that, do you?”

“You can’t predict the future, Sanjay, not even close. I mean, the Federation talks about how great it is, and how it is the pinnacle of human organization, and yet the government of the Federation still believes that we can’t handle bad news. Thus, a section of the Federation could not be accessed by ship, and the government tells us not to worry, that it’s under control and that there’s no need to keep us informed. This tells me that the Federation is like any other political entity. It exists for the benefit of those in charge, those who rule. Right now, Starfleet rules and so what Starfleet wants, Starfleet gets. Because Starfleet is a secretive organization optimized to keep as much information to itself as possible, this attitude has spread to the government as well. So, you see, what they do here is useless. It doesn’t change reality and it doesn’t correct the problem that a person might have. It’s hard to explain, really.”

Of course, Indesakar sat there and listened to the woman rant, and could understand where she was coming from with her opinions, as he had heard them before. However, he added, “You realize that if you can’t conform with your beliefs, they’ll do a drug treatment next?”

“They can’t make a person change his beliefs. All they can do is point out to that person, using the best available information, that following their beliefs will lead to an outcome that they would not want. Then, if the person accepts what he is told, he won’t act on those beliefs. In my case, being a

Starfleet officer might not be the best career choice, but they're not going to care if I spend my time ranting in the infonets. However, the drug treatments are reserved for those who have been convicted of criminal charges and could reoffend. That's not me. I agreed to this as part of my dishonorable discharge from Starfleet. I know my rights, Sanjay."

"I've always been aware of that," the man replied. "I've always heard about these reintegration centres and their negative reputation."

"Well, it's not that bad. It's not a holiday and we can't check out when we would like, but it's not exactly prison."

Lopodhur did talk a little bit about the place and some of the people that she met there. Then she asked, "How is it on the *Athena*? There were some good people on that ship. It was a good ship."

"Well, other than the ones we lost during this affair with the Ksas-sans, we're okay."

"So are you staying on the *Athena*?" For a moment, Indesakar just looked at the woman. Lopodhur then said, "Did I say something wrong? I know that you have command aspirations."

"Well, that's the problem. You see, after returning to Earth, I had a meeting with one of the admirals in charge of these things, about a transfer to a command track position on another ship, but I was denied. Basically, they don't regard me as command material."

"Why?"

"They questioned my judgement."

"About what, anything in particular?"

"You," Indesakar replied.

"Me?" retorted Lopodhur.

"Yeah, according to them, I should have been more aware, and more clinical in my approach. I should have been more aware that you were trouble, and not be blinded by emotions and the like."

"And of course, there's one more thing," Lopodhur started. "It's not just a lack of judgement, but also a willingness to accept responsibility for making mistakes and taking the blame when things go wrong."

"Really?"

"Of course. Those in command accept the responsibility of the actions of those under your command, and you're included in that group. You can't blame anyone else for things that happened to you. That's the weakness that the admirals are talking about. I did not deceive you. You know what I was. You talked about it often enough."

"But... your aim was to use me as a method to learn what the senior officers were upto."

"And I failed miserably. I learned nothing."

"Even so."

“That’s all over with, Sanjay,” Lopodhur remarked. “That’s the past and it’s not coming back...”

A couple of hours later, Indesakar returned to the Starfleet office in Tondi by transporter. When he arrived, his personal communicator chimed to indicate that somebody had been trying to contact him. As he walked into the bright sunshine of a southern Indian October, he checked who had attempted to contact him. The device said, “The message was from Leonard Thorpe, San Francisco, United States. Play message?”

“Yes,” the man replied.

A second later, the familiar voice of Captain Thorpe came out of the speaker. “Sanjay,” he started, using a more familiar tone of voice, “there’s a mission for you. I believe your Starfleet pilot qualifications are adequate to fly a civilian issue RTR-2 transport craft. We need a pilot to fly between San Diego and Kyoto, to bring Dusty to a research institute in Kyoto for an experiment. We don’t have clearance to use civilian transporters to move Dusty, and we want to leave Starfleet out of this. Let me know if you’re willing.”

That was a most peculiar request, Indesakar knew, and he suspected that the “experiment” that they were referring to might not be strictly legal or ethical. Even so, if the captain was involved, it was probably something that he agreed with. Since the comsosaur was involved, so likely was Bayanhong, and since this experiment was in Kyoto, Matsubara was also likely part of it too. How ironic, he thought, that there was this gathering of the *Athena* senior officers. It was like they were calling together the family. He knew that Bayanhong had become first officer by default and had no command aspirations, and Matsubara as the science officer was not in the command track as well. They were thinking of him as part of that family, even though he had ideas of moving on. It would be hard to do so, but to take part in this, he needed more information. For one thing, he knew that to operate in the vicinity of Earth, civilian craft of that type required two pilots, even if Starfleet officers were piloting. Who was the other pilot? Indesakar decided to answer the message...

When Vorwoorts woke up the next morning, she was still thinking about her encounter with Jerome, and what he had said about Starfleet. Vorwoorts had heard it from others and some searches on the infonet seemed to confirm that the popularity of Starfleet was at an all-time low. There was more than one editorialist who declared that Starfleet was out of control and that the civilian government was unwilling or unable to rein them in. The people simply did not like the fact that Earth, and humans to some degree, were being increasingly targeted by various entities, and they blamed Starfleet for behaviour that encouraged such activity. However, those



same editorialists seemed unable to come up with a realistic solution and could offer nothing but hindsight.

Vorwoorts knew that her parents were concerned about her and wished she would leave Starfleet, something she really did not want to do, at least not yet.

When she got up, Vorwoorts saw that there was a message waiting for her on her personal communications device. She played it and saw that it was from a “Leonard Thorpe,” and it was the same message that Indesakar had received. The captain wanted her to pilot a civilian shuttle between San Diego and Kyoto. She decided why not.

At the breakfast table, with pancakes being served, Vorwoorts’ mother said, “You got a message on your comm device last night. I heard you had encountered Jerome the other night.”

“Yes,” Vorwoorts replied, and she knew where this was going. “And no, the message was not from him. The encounter at the air swimming event just reinforced what I already know, that there’s no reconciliation in our future.”

“Then who was the message from?”

“Captain Thorpe.”

“So why is he transmitting on a civilian system?”

“Because this is not really a Starfleet operation, but a civilian one assisting in a research project.” At least Vorwoorts was assuming that as she was a little short on details. “He needs me to fly some cargo from San Diego to Kyoto.”

“So Starfleet has something sneaky going on.”

“No, not really,” the daughter replied. “I’m pretty sure that this is a civilian extension of an old Starfleet operation from years ago.”

The mother took a few more bites of the pancake, and then continued, “You know, I really am not that enthusiastic about you continuing in Starfleet. It has become too dangerous.”

“I’ve been okay so far, and we’ve had this talk before.”

“And we’ll have it again. At one time, Starfleet was a noble organization, with the aim of representing the best of mankind in space, in the presence of aliens, but I don’t feel that is its purpose anymore.”

“Then what is its purpose?”

“It’s just another bureaucracy now, filled with the empire-building kind.”

“That’s ridiculous, mom,” Vorwoorts replied. “Where do you get such ideas?”

“It’s obvious. Starfleet is too large and too complex to manage or control. It’s almost self-sustaining now, and it takes up more and more of our resources. I fear that you’re caught up in it. I can understand the desire of a

young person to enter Starfleet and explore and see some of the galaxy without paying your way, but a couple of tours of duty should be enough. It’s time to settle down in civilian life, to start a career when you’re still young enough and not become a state dependent like so many others that stayed in until Starfleet told them they were no longer wanted and they had nothing to fall back on.”

“I’ve heard that story before and I don’t really believe it. That’s not what is going to happen to me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I believe so,” Vorwoorts answered. She sat at the table, and was beginning to wonder why she would have wanted to come home. Maybe it was the stress of the mission the ship had just come back from, and maybe the people on Earth were feeling it too as it was the matter of crisis after crisis.

The mother eventually continued, “Are you going to do what your captain is asking from you?”

“Yeah,” the younger woman replied.

“Because you’re ordered to?”

“No, because I want to.”

A couple of hours later, Vorwoorts was on board the RTR-2 transport shuttle. It had been a strange experience because she beamed to the Starfleet office in Kyoto, where she was met by an older man who identified himself as Hiroshi Matsubara. She was driven to the University of Kyoto and its simulation research centre, which she understood to be one of the most advanced holosimulation facilities on the planet, far more advanced than a holodeck on the *Athena*. She was met there by a woman in her early sixties named Taeko Rushijo, who, she Vorwoorts soon learned, was the first cousin, once removed, of Damiko Matsubara.

It was Rushijo who was giving the authorization for the two officers to use the shuttle associated with the research institute, once she was satisfied of the credentials of the two.

While they were waiting, Vorwoorts asked Indesakar, “I assume you’re the pilot and I’m the co-pilot?”

“Only because regulations here on Earth require two pilots on aircraft like this.”

“I know. Ever fly something like this?”

“Starfleet uses ships like this too, and it was a trainer in the Academy.”

“I never trained on one,” Vorwoorts admitted, “but I assume that the flight systems are similar.”

“Or they can be configured that way.”

Rushijo returned to where the two were waiting, and said, “Every-

thing is cleared to go. The program that has been transmitted is working and is ready to go. They're waiting for you in San Diego, and the flight plan has been filed."

"Very well," Indesakar replied, as he felt he was the commanding officer on this mission.

The two beamed over to the aerodrome near Kyoto where the RTR-2 was based and serviced, and found it ready for flight. They checked in and took their places behind the flight controls. Flying civilian craft in Earth atmosphere was a bit different than flying a spaceship, Indesakar knew, because in space, everything was so open and there was no need to file flight plans and follow prescribed routes and carefully monitor other air traffic and follow the orders of air traffic controllers. He had to also be aware of weather issues, here in Kyoto and also in San Diego. He could see the display that showed the relative times. It was eight in the evening at their destination, and the next day from their departure point. Such issues usually did not apply when traveling in space.

"Ready?" Vorwoorts asked.

"Ready," replied the pilot, as he set the radio and heard the instructions from flight control.

"Hardly different from the Starfleet version."

"Well, no weapons and shields, and the on-board transporter is for emergency use only, but otherwise, not too different. Oh, wait, we have clearance to proceed."

Indesakar activated the antigravity field and the gravity drive. By setting the antigravity field higher than local gravity, he was getting the planet to "push" them away, as the shuttle was basically borrowing energy from the planet. The gravity drive worked the same way, using gravitational potential energy to propel the ship. Essentially, the two masses were repelling each other, but since the planet was orders of magnitude larger than the shuttle, it was like the shuttle was moving. When they returned to land, they would be returning the energy. Of course, some of that energy would come from the engines and power generators on the ship since the transfer was not perfect, as required by the laws of thermodynamics.

Soon, the shuttle was quickly rising through the atmosphere to assume a sub-orbital flight altitude, their surroundings darkening to indigo and then to near black. If they looked away from the glare of the planet, they could even see the stars.

"How long?" Vorwoorts asked.

"Ninety minutes," Indesakar replied. "Not quite warp speed."

"Yeah, on the *Athena*, we can do a good fraction of a light year in ninety minutes."

A few minutes later, Vorwoorts asked, "Sanjay, have you noticed an

increase in hostility towards Starfleet among the people on Earth during your time here?”

Indesakar pondered that question for a moment, before he answered, “I have not personally encountered such hostility, but I have heard of it.”

“Well, the affair with the Ksassans did not help,” Vorwoorts added. “I mean, I’ve been hearing a lot about the secrecy that was going on, that the average person here on Earth had little idea of what was going on or how dangerous it was.”

“It really wasn’t that dangerous. The Ksassans were in no position to attack the Federation core.”

“True, but what did happen was the spreading of rumours, because people lacked real information. You know what made it worse? People with relatives in Starfleet, people like our families, were trying to get information, but we’re being blocked at every turn. That would make matters worse, don’t you think?”

“But why would that make Starfleet look bad in the eyes of the people?” Indesakar asked, and as he did, he was thinking about what Lopodhur had told him. It was possible that his copilot might have heard something similar in her hometown.

Vorwoorts answered, “Based on what I heard, from those with no connections to Starfleet, was that Starfleet brought these problems down on us. Without the overbearing nature of Starfleet, they say, some of these things might not have happened. The danger and the cost might have been avoided.”

“That’s unlikely,” Indesakar replied.

“What makes you say that?”

“Just having a presence in space could bring those dangers to us, regardless of the nature of Starfleet. I mean, there has always been a risk in having a presence in the interstellar community, but we decided that the rewards were worth the risk.”

“That’s just it, there are people who no longer believe that the rewards are worth the risk. We have, in the history of exploration, encountered worlds that had retreated from a presence in space.”

“And in most cases, that has not worked out well.”

“There are the Muirians.”

“Who have the ability to defend themselves.”

“And we’d need that too, because once we’re part of this community, it’s not easy to leave it.”

“I know,” sighed Vorwoorts. “It’s just that I hate being around such people, who think that way. Increasingly, I’ve felt more comfortable being around other Starfleet officers.”

“Yeah, I felt that way too...”

## Coming Home

In San Diego, night had fallen. Comsfosours like Dusty were creatures of the day, and they would sleep during the night. In their natural habitat, they would sleep in groups because they were small animals compared to some of the other creatures found on Cretaceaia. Several of them would remain awake, the individuals taking turns, to keep watch in case danger approached. However, Dusty was alone and had no one to watch over him when he was asleep. Then again, no large, dangerous creatures ever came into his enclosure. He got used to being alone in the enclosure, and the creatures he saw—zoo workers—did not threaten him. Thus, he would go to sleep, secure that he was safe from any dangers.

Dusty tended to sleep in a sheltered corner of the enclosure, where it was dark and covered with straw and leaves and the like. He would curl up in the enclosure, almost like a cat, except that his tail would remain straight and seemingly exposed while the rest of him was mostly buried under the straw and leaves.

They waited until the comsfosaur had been asleep for about an hour, because, as Miers had said, “He’s eventually a pretty solid sleeper.” After that hour, Matsubara and Bayanhong went into the compound, dressed in dark clothing and wearing forcefield belts for protection and night-vision glasses so that they could move around in the darkness. They entered the compound and moved as silently as possible to where Dusty was sleeping. They had previously discussed what they had to do, so they were silent now. The forcefield belts gave them some sense of security towards their personal safety, but Bayanhong was of the opinion that they had only one chance at this.

The two silently approached where Dusty was sleeping, and through the infrared glasses, they could see that the creature was motionless, confident that there was never an intrusion into his little world. So far, it was going to plan, Bayanhong thought. They needed just a few more seconds.

Matsubara had the neural inhibitor in her hands. It was programmed to the Cretaceian xenotype and based on the data that Bayanhong and her associates had gathered during their time on Cretaceaia, and though the data and its collection might have been unethical, they were still using it. After the slow walk, they arrived where Dusty was sleeping, and saw that he was in that cat-like curled-up position, except for how his tail was sticking more or less straight out. Matsubara knew that was because in this kind of bipedal animal, the vertebrae in the tail were linked together in such a way to make the tail stiff, as it acted as a counterbalance for the rest of the body over the rear legs. She found it hard to believe that was a normal sleeping posture for this type of animal. Perhaps because he lived in a secure, non-threatening environment, Dusty could sleep that way.

Matsubara turned on the neural inhibitor and handed it to Bayanhong, who crouched down slowly, making not a noise at all, and even holding

her breath, as she put the inhibitor on the creature’s forehead, where a built-in friction field would keep it in place. Dusty did not stir as the device turned on. It generated brain waves that would keep the comsosaur unconscious for as long as the device was active.

Bayanhong stood up and looked at the still form of Dusty. She got out her tricorder and did a quick scan. “It’s working,” the first officer said. “It’s successfully manipulating his brain waves to keep him unconscious.”

“How long would it be safe to use?” Matsubara asked.

“I’m not sure, but if this works, we should be in Kyoto before he normally would wake up. This just prevents him from waking up on the journey.”

Matsubara used her tricorder to take scans of the surroundings so that they could be exactly duplicated at the holodeck in Kyoto. At the same time, Bayanhong signalled for the others to enter. Captain Thorpe and Miers came into the enclosure, guiding an antigravity stretcher. They brought it over to where Dusty was lying in the grass and straw and together, with an assist from Bayanhong, got the creature onto the stretcher. They covered him with a blanket, and programmed the stretcher biosign monitor for the established norms for Dusty. Miers said, “He’s resting normally. That’s a good sign.”

“Are they here?” Bayanhong asked.

“Yes,” Thorpe replied. “Sanjay and Heni are waiting on the helipad.”

“We should get moving,” Miers added. “Is the holodeck at the other end ready?”

“Yeah,” Matsubara replied. “I’ve uploaded the most recent information, to duplicate how Dusty was here.”

Once Dusty was secure on the stretcher, Thorpe and Miers guided it through the complex, which at this time of day was rather empty and dark, and to the rear entrance. They came outside and found the civilian-model RTR2 was waiting for them, Indesakar standing beside the open rear cargo door. The stretcher was loaded onto the vessel and secured, while the rest boarded and took their seats.

Bayanhong asked, “How long will it take for us to get to the facility in Kyoto?”

“Ninety minutes to two hours,” Indesakar replied, as he and Vorwoorts worked through the prelaunch flight checks. “We have our course plotted and approved by air traffic control, so we’re good to go.”

“Let’s go then,” the first officer replied. “I’m going to sit in the rear and keep an eye on Dusty.”

“Okay,” Thorpe replied. She left the flight deck, and Miers joined her in the rear. That left the remaining four on the flight deck, though Thorpe and Matsubara were really just passengers. After the checks were complete,

Indesakar started up the RTR2 and lifted it off the ground with its anti-gravity field generators. He locked the craft into its filed flight plan and got them underway.

He checked various conditions and status and the traffic that he had to deal with and got an estimate of the arrival time. "About a hundred and five minutes," he reported.

"That'll do," Thorpe replied.

Matsubara spoke up, "So it looks like the crew is back together."

"Can't keep us apart," Vorwoorts added. "No doubt Rodall is on the ship, the hardest-working among us. I guess the chief engineer comes with the ship."

"And stays with it," Matsubara asked. "What about Sal?"

Thorpe added, "He was thinking about heading back to Philentrophia, but you would've thought he had spent enough time with his parents."

"What about Marlina's family?"

"She had no family. They were all lost at that disaster at Penthara."

"Oh yeah."

Oddly, nobody had much to say about what they had experienced since arriving at Earth, except for some comments about Hiroshi and how he is growing up and has travelled more than most toddlers. Then Vorwoorts asked, "This thing with Dusty, is it going to work?"

Matsubara answered, "We really don't know. That's why it's an experiment. There have been many experiments where animals are put into holographic simulations, and what is weird is that in some cases, more than you would think, the animal realizes what it is in is not real. They are more likely to tell a simulation is not real than a person is."

"That's weird," Vorwoorts remarked. "I wonder why that is."

"The main reason is that most simulations involving people are recreations of what are plausibly real environments, and depending on how well the programming was done, it might be difficult to tell the difference between reality and a holographic simulation. After all, the technology is designed to fool human senses, because we perceive the world around us through our senses in our own unique, species-specific way, and if we can perfectly trick the senses, then it is hard to tell the difference. However, with animals, it might work differently, and they could interpret sensory data differently, and not in a way that the holodeck is simulating."

"So this might not fool Dusty?"

"It might not, but there's no way to tell without trying."

"And if it doesn't work, then how will Dusty react?"

"That, we have no idea."

That did bother Thorpe a bit, since they would have an unpredictable comsosaur on their hands, but if being in heat was having this kind of det-

rimental effect on Dusty, they had to do something. It was not like they could reason with him and explain that he was the last of his kind and there was no chance that he could mate. The other alternative was to neuter him, and if this failed, Bayanhong would have to consider that alternative.

Further along into the flight, which so far was completely uneventful, Vorwoorts asked the captain, “Have you heard of how much longer it will be before the *Athena* is back in service?”

“No,” Thorpe answered, “and I have not even been kept informed about what they’re doing with the ship.”

“Why?”

“It appears that Admiral Holloway has other things in mind for me, things I’m being investigated on before the ship returns to active service.”

Indesakar spoke up, saying, “Let me guess, not attempting to rescue the Ksassans on their doomed ship after they killed Debanggalo and the others at the Overseers’ Planet.”

“That and giving the slipstream drive technology to the Odonans.”

“Unavoidable, really.”

“As I will explain when they hold the board of inquiry, whenever they do.”

“So it could be awhile?” asked Vorwoorts.

“I’m assuming that, and it’s possible that the *Athena* might launch again with a different person in the captain’s seat.”

“That just wouldn’t be right,” Indesakar remarked. “Any other captain out there, even ones the admirals might hold in high esteem, would’ve done the same thing.”

“I know that, but those that make the final decision have either never been in the field or are long removed from it, and they got their positions by promoting the ideals of the Federation rather than the practical realities. That’s the thing I have to argue, but there’s no such thing as a sure thing at a board of inquiry.”

Vorwoorts added, “It just wouldn’t be the same without you as the captain. The *Athena* has become your ship.” Thorpe had no immediate response to that comment, so his tactical officer continued, “But who would take over command? Julia has said that she does not want it.”

“It’s possible the replacement commander would come from another ship, but all of this is hypothetical, because I won’t give up command that easily.”

Indesakar added, “Speaking hypothetically again, if the ship is put back into active service, what kind of assignment would we get? I’m assuming we’re not going back to the Omerra Open Cluster.”

“It’s possible but not likely, and if we go back, we’ll be under the command of the overall Starfleet operations there. The most likely assign-



ment is that sector we were operating in before Omerra. There is also the possibility of the next threat to the Federation, and it involves the Romulans.”

“Really?” asked Vorwoorts.

“We know that the Romulans have never really gotten over being tricked into joining the Dominion War, and now I’ve heard the suggestion that the Romulans have infiltrated the reunification movement with the Vulcans, to corrupt it for their own purposes.”

“That doesn’t sound too good, but you would’ve thought that the Vulcans who are part of that movement would have taken that into account.”

“Perhaps, but it’s possible that there are double agents involved, Romulans who do want reunification, but on Romulan terms. Naturally, there is a subset of Vulcan society that would favour that, and perhaps a merger of the two cultures, neither Romulan nor Vulcan but something in between. A merged society would logically be something like that.”

“None of this sounds good,” Indesakar remarked, as he continued to monitor the aircraft, although for all intents and purposes, it was flying itself. “It would have an effect on the Federation.”

“Perhaps even split it,” Thorpe continued, “and it seems likely that the Romulan effort is designed with that aim in mind and we’re the main target. They feel that Earth, and mankind in general, would not have the same amount of power or influence if we went it alone.”

“I don’t think that’s true. I think we would do just fine.”

“Perhaps, but it is not something that I want to test...”

About ninety minutes after leaving San Diego, the civilian-issue RTR-2 re-entered the atmosphere over Kyoto and began its descent, aligning again with the assigned flight plan that would take it to the landing site at the University of Kyoto. As the vessel began its approach, Matsubara, who had been rather silent through most of the flight and was really just listening, headed to the rear section, where she saw Dusty still on the antigrav stretcher, the neural inhibitor still on his forehead. “How is she?” she asked.

“Still the same,” Bayanhong replied, as she had been monitoring the comsfosaur with her tricorder. “He’s basically in a deep sleep, and nothing appears out of the ordinary.”

“Well, we’re almost there. We’re on final approach now. It won’t be long.”

“Yeah, won’t be long to see if this actually works.” Even as she said those words, Bayanhong could feel the nervousness rise up in her again. Miers was likely feeling the same way, because there was a lot riding on this. As he had said, if this works the first time, they might have to keep doing it each time he goes into heat, and each time, Dusty could wonder what hap-

pened to the female and why there were no young around. Unfortunately, Dusty was male. Had he been a female, they could have considered cloning to create a young comsosaur, but Dusty was male and so that option did not exist. Bayanhong knew it was impractical to keep him company with an ongoing series of holographic companions. The only long-term solution was to neuter him and hope that worked. “I’m hoping this will work.”

Miers added, “It all depends on the quality of the holographic simulation.”

Matsubara responded, “The equipment here is about as good as it gets.”

A couple of minutes later, the RTR-2 craft broke through the clouds covering Kyoto and Indesakar brought it down to a perfect landing. It was raining, though it was not a heavy rain. Standing on the tarmac was a single person in a fluorescent orange jacket, a person who was revealed to be a middle-aged, or older, woman, her graying black hair tossed in the wind. She was guiding the craft to the hanger, and once it was inside, she shut the main door. In Kyoto, it was the early-morning hours, two or less hours to dawn, so hardly anyone was around. Matsubara knew that was one of the reasons she was able to get access to the holographic simulation chamber, because at this hour, nobody else would be using it.

Once the craft was in its parking spot and powered down, Indesakar opened the hatch. The woman in the orange florescent jacket was standing there waiting. “Damiko,” she started, “the holographic simulator is ready. I’ve downloaded and incorporated the latest information that you transmitted.”

“Good,” Matsubara replied. She also made the introductions, naming her fellow *Athena* officers and then saying, “This is Taeko Rushijo, and she runs the holographic simulator here at the university—and she’s a relative too.”

“Small world,” the older woman replied. “So these are your Starfleet associates?” Matsubara just nodded. “I had conducted some Starfleet missions in the past.”

“You were in Starfleet?”

“Not as a Starfleet officer, but as a civilian mission specialist, back in the day when that was more routine.”

“It just seems like a long time ago,” Thorpe added.

“And some of those missions were extended ones, and on those, I did get a feel for what extended missions in space could be like. I also got an appreciation for how long-term crews start to feel like family.”

“That’s true,” Matsubara replied.

By this time, Bayanhong and Miers got Dusty ready to move, so they guided his stretcher to the exit. Rushijo looked at the creature, as it was still, the neural inhibitor still attached to him. He really did not look like anything

she could imagine. “What a strange animal,” she started. “It’s not like anything I have seen before. We don’t get too many alien species coming through here. It’s like a combination of a bird with the downy feathers, and limbs and the mouth that suggests a reptile.”

“The closest Earth analog would be a dinosaur.”

“Haven’t seen too many of those.”

“Few have.”

Rushijo then got back to business, and said, “Let’s get this started. How long will this take?”

“Hard to say,” Bayanhong replied.

The group, with Miers and Bayanhong guiding the stretcher, followed Rushijo into the network of underground tunnels and corridors that linked the various buildings and facilities on the campus, and on that journey, they saw nobody else. It was as if students never had a reason to be up that late in the night—or this early in the morning.

The holographic simulation chamber was located in the basement of the physical science building, and as they made their way there, Rushijo explained what it was, and hearing the processing speed, the resolution level, the multifocal targeting and the advanced computing power and simulation change rate, Thorpe got the feeling that this chamber had ten times or more the processing and imaging power than the holodecks on the *Athena*. He was pretty sure that on planets or in stations, Starfleet had access to technology on this level, but it was not needed on starships.

After making some adjustments, Rushijo faced the others and said, “The program is running, according to the information that I had been provided. I’m of the opinion that what you want to do requires Dusty to be by himself, so there is an observation lounge where we can monitor what is happening.”

“That would be good,” Bayanhong replied.

Rushijo opened the door and the two with the stretcher, with Matsubara following, entered the chamber with the program running. The two Starfleet officers had experience with holodecks before, but there was something about the detail, the level of realism about this place. Even the little sounds, the little motions, the feel of the ground beneath their feet, were so much more realistic than a holodeck on the *Athena*.

Matsubara said, “It’s almost like being back at the San Diego Zoo.”

“I noticed that too,” Bayanhong replied. “It’s uncanny. If I didn’t know we were in Kyoto, I’d almost swear that was some kind of gateway we walked through and we’re really back at San Diego.”

“Except for the add-on,” Matsubara said, gesturing to the part of the simulation that had no counterpart at the actual zoo.

Bayanhong added, “I hope he notices it, and does not get freaked out

by it—or goes looking for it when he’s back in the real zoo.”

Miers added, “There’s no real solution to this problem, beyond neutering.”

“I’m kind of hoping to put that off.”

“In case a female comsosaur should ever be found?”

“Perhaps.”

They arrived at the corresponding location in the simulation that they had found Dusty in the real enclosure, and following Matsubara’s directions, laid him down as close to originally positioned as possible. They covered him in the straw and the vegetation, as closely to how they found him as was humanly possible. “Damiko,” the first officer started, “get Taeko to turn down the light and simulate the time that it is in San Diego. There’s no need to give him jet lag.”

Matsubara contacted the researcher on her personal communications device and passed on the instructions. Those in the chamber donned their infrared goggles and switched them on. As the light dimmed and they saw everything increasingly toned in red, Matsubara crouched down and gently removed the neural inhibitor. Dusty, now on his own terms and sleeping normally, did not stir or waken. Now the three in the chamber were silent, and without a word spoken, slowly backed out. They closed the door to leave the comsosaur in his own little world.

The waiting game began. The three joined the others in the observation lounge, where they could watch Dusty on several display screens, the data generated by the system that produced the simulations and which also tracked actual individuals, or comsosaurs. While they waited, they had some coffee and some snacks and talked, mostly about Dusty, though it was Bayanhong doing the majority of the talking and Rushijo doing the listening. After all, her fellow officers had heard the stories before, and the researcher did seem interested in the experiences that Bayanhong and her team at the time had at Cretacea. Rushijo had no idea that Dusty and his kind were so intelligent and represented where dinosaur evolution on Earth could have headed had they another forty million or so years. Of course, Thorpe and the others knew more about that than they were allowed to say.

Then a buzzer went off, startling those in the lounge, except for Rushijo, who explained, “The system is indicating that Dusty is starting to wake up. I guess it’s time to see if this experiment will work.”

Those in the lounge looked towards the viewscreens, and saw that in the rising light of dawn, a false dawn, of course, Dusty was stirring. He dug himself out of the bed of straw and vegetation that he had been lying in and worked himself up to stand on his two legs. He looked up at the sky and gave a bizarre and unpleasant-sounding howl. Miers remarked, “He has been doing that nearly every morning lately.”

“I hope that’s not a mating call,” Vorwoorts said, as Dusty repeated it.

“Actually,” Bayanhong answered, “I’m hoping that it is a mating call. I remember it from my time on Cretacea. Let’s hope my data on the female equivalent is accurate.”

As dawn strengthened, and the surroundings in the enclosure brightened, Dusty looked around then heard the same sound he had made, but it was more distant and at a slightly higher pitch. He noticed it

Indesakar remarked, “Wouldn’t he be hungry first thing in the morning?”

“Not usually,” Bayanhong replied, as she continued to watch Dusty and listen to his sounds.

Miers added, “And especially now he has no early appetite.”

Dusty started to run around his enclosure, listening to the wailing sounds, while trying to locate them in the enclosure that he knew very well. The imaging sensors tracked him in the chamber as he moved around. Bayanhong watched, hoping that there were no other senses involved other than sight and sound, and perhaps touch. If odours played a part, then this was not going to work.

Rushijo then said, “I think he’s spotted the entrance.”

They watched as Dusty uncovered something that did not exist in the real world. He likely did know his enclosure very well, and so would have realized that this gap between the trees had not existed before. He could see in the sand that was along the perimeter that there were footprints that were not his own.

Seeing that, Bayanhong remarked, “Nice touch with the footprints.”

Rushijo answered, “It was a way for Dusty to realize that those sounds had found him.”

“Before returning him to the real enclosure, we’re going to have to make it look like repairs were made.”

Dusty did take the bait. There was an opening in the fence that had not been there before. Layers of trees and shrubs surrounded the fence and the transparent aluminum panels that were above them. However, in the simulation, there was a path through the trees and shrubs. It was narrow enough for a comsosaur to get through. Halfway through the path, Dusty came to a stop, because he could see some downy feathers sticking to the twigs. That feather was grayish colour, a valid colour for females of the species and not a colour on Dusty’s body. He noticed the feather, and stopped to examine it.

“As long as he doesn’t stop to smell it,” Matsubara said softly.

Sitting beside her was Vorwoorts, and she asked, “How hard would it be to make a holodeck simulation that includes odours?”

“Not that hard,” Bayanhong replied, “but we don’t know what the

odours are or in what concentration. We basically know nothing about Cretaceousian pheromones and the like and so could not simulate that. It’s possible that Dusty, who was sexually immature when we left Cretaceaia, might not recognize the pheromones because he was not exposed to them.”

“We can hope.”

While they talked in the observation lounge, Dusty resumed his journey through the vegetation until he got to the opening in the fence. The gap looked like it had been made from the other side, as if those on the other side had answered the mating calls that Dusty had made. Now, the coms-fosaur moved through the gap, and in the process, a feather or two was snagged on the ripped edges of the fence, with other small, downy feathers already there.

The imaging sensor tracking Dusty though the simulation picked him up emerging through the opening in the fence, and then there was another path through the shrubs and the trees. The screeching, mating sounds were getting a little louder, and that seemed to draw Dusty forward until he got to the clearing. He entered an enclosure similar to his own, including the observation level and the entrance to the zoo complex. There were trees and shrubs and hiding places for comsfosours, and in this enclosure, there were two of them.

“You gave him a choice?” Thorpe asked.

“I was thinking that competition would make Dusty think it was more imperative that he mate and disregard any suggestion that it is a simulation and not real.”

Indesakar added, “I hope that Dusty can recognize females.”

“Well, it’s true that it’s hard for us to tell the males from the females, but fortunately, the comsfosours do not have that problem. It’s instinctive, even for Dusty, who probably has no memory of seeing a female—at least I hope.”

Dusty spotted the two comsfosours, with one positioned by the tree, and one resting on a broad lower branch. Comsfosours were a species comfortable in trees but did not regularly climb them. However, their ability to climb trees did help them evolve opposable inside fingers on their hands, something that had their evolution continued could have sparked advances in intellect as the creatures put those opposable fingers to use. It was why, Bayanhong assumed, humans had opposable thumbs but rarely climbed trees—and why they did not have opposable big toes. Placing a comsfosour in a tree was not unexpected. Bayanhong also put two into the simulation to increase the choices for Dusty, and she also added another, distant male making those howling sounds, as if there was another male out there approaching these females.

“Well, this is it,” Rushijo remarked.

As those in the lounge watched, Dusty approached the two females, and he made screeching, almost angry sounds at the one in the tree. She replied in kind, and they were quite loud, and their sounds were angry, at least to human ears.

“Do those sounds carry any meaning?” Rushijo asked.

“It’s possible, but the language is inefficient, as one sequence of sounds conveys a single message, like using a twenty-syllable word for a simple idea. We don’t have any ideas of the meanings, though, but some might be identification.”

“So the females could be saying something completely inappropriate?”

“It’s possible, and it’s also possible that Dusty does not know the language as he was never taught it and I don’t think it’s instinctive.”

Then the howling stopped and Dusty turned his attention to the other comsfosaur, the one on the ground. The two started to eye each other. Bayanhong got a sudden inspiration in what the programming was doing based on her input. The comsfosaur in the tree was the mother and the one at the base was the daughter and the mother was passing judgement on Dusty. She hoped that her comsfosaur passed muster. She watched as the two creatures approached each other, and circled. It looked like the two might fight each other.

Thorpe saw that too, and said, “I hope holodeck safety protocols are on.”

“They are,” Rushijo replied.

They watched as the two comsfosaurs faced each other and exchanged a quick series of sounds. Then Dusty turned and started to walk away.

“Oh no,” Bayanhong said, mostly to herself. “It’s not working. He’s rejecting her.”

Matsubara added, “We don’t know why. We could be missing something.”

Dusty started to walk back the way that he had come, but he had gone only about five metres before he stopped. The female comsfosaur stood up, revealing a creature that looked for all intents and purposes the same as Dusty, except for more gray in her fur. She started to make other sounds, and to Rushijo, they sounded different. Bayanhong could not figure out how the program was doing that, unless the routines here were somewhat more advanced than on the ship. Bayanhong was about to question the local researcher about that, thinking that perhaps the computer here might be approaching independent-thought levels, but then she noticed that whatever the program was doing, it was working. Dusty was turning back to the female, and there was a further exchange of sounds, and again, the sounds were different to Bayanhong’s ear. It was like these creatures had separate languages for courting and mating.

As Bayanhong and the others watched, the exchange of sounds continued, and the two comsosaurs danced around each other and made contact that seemed like they were attacking each other. However, their sounds did not sound angry or menacing, they could almost be described as... happy.

Matsubara remarked, “I think it’s working.”

“Could be,” Bayanhong remarked. “I think it could be happening, but we’ll have to wait and see. It could take time, though. They’re not really going to get right into it.”

Miers could have doubted that, as Dusty was being driven by a need to reproduce, and the female comsosaur was programmed to respond in kind. He did say, “Do we really need to see this? We should give them their privacy.”

Bayanhong was not interested in seeing what was going to happen next, but she did have one question on her mind. To Rushijo, she asked, “The female comsosaur went beyond the programming I put into it, and it started making sounds that I was unfamiliar with, and yet Dusty seemed to understand and even responded in kind. How was that possible?”

Rushijo explained, “I doubt that you were the only person to study Cretaceous animals. Because the animals on that planet so resembled the dinosaurs and other creatures of the Late Cretaceous period on Earth, they have been extensively studied and there are a great deal of reports and studies on those animals. The controlling program here has the objective to get Dusty to mate, and if the programmed approach is failing, the system will draw on those reports for an alternative.”

“And those reports include this particular species?”

“If they exist, then yes it’s possible.”

When Rushijo said that, Bayanhong was thinking of the reports that she might have worked on earlier and which she did not directly use as a source for the program. There could also be reports from those who had studied this particular species before and which had inspired her to pick up that research. “That’s amazing,” she finally said.

“And perhaps it is edging into sentience,” Thorpe started, “a place nobody wants computers to go.”

“Oh no,” Rushijo replied quickly. “The computer is not sentient. We make sure of that. It does not go beyond the base programming, though it may go beyond a simulation program if the subprogram is incomplete. It’s pretty complicated, but it’s not sentient.”

Then Indesakar spoke up, “Hey guys, I think they’re starting to do it...”

As the group at the Kyoto University holographic simulation lab soon



## Coming Home

found out, comsosaurs tended to take a nap after mating, a rather long nap. That allowed Matsubara and Bayanhong to enter the chamber and put the neural inhibitor back onto Dusty's forehead. In that state, he was taken back to his real world, the real enclosure at the San Diego Zoo.

The next day, Bayanhong returned to the zoo and met with Miers so that she could see how Dusty was doing. She was fearing the worst, but the man explained, "The plan appears to have worked. So far, Dusty is acting more normal, but seems somewhat more sleepy than normal. The mating drive might've taken something out of him."

"That's possible," Bayanhong replied, as she and the man stood by the window, observing the topic of their conversation sunning himself. "Has he searched for that portal he saw in his enclosure yesterday?"

"No, no signs of him doing that at all. That's kind of curious, I think."

"Or perhaps not. It's possible that Dusty recognized that the female comsosaur was fake, and though his brain might have known that, his body does not. Therefore, he went ahead and did it because it would quiet down those urges that are generic or hormone-driven, but since he knew it was fake, he's not searching for that portal."

"So you think that he won't go looking for his offspring?"

"I doubt it, at least now."

"Well," Miers sighed, "if we get the old Dusty back, the trade-off will have been worth it. Those that deal with him thank you for doing this, and for the help from your fellow crewmembers. They went beyond the call of duty there."

"I know," the first officer replied, "but after what we went through in our last mission, this was not much."

"You guys, you seem so much like family, your interactions, helping each other."

"Yeah, sometimes it feels like that, and coming back to Earth almost confirms that. A crew like this is almost family, and something like dealing with Dusty is almost like coming home again."