

Star Trek: The Excalibur Epics

“Deux Ex Machina”

By  
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Frontiers of any type,  
Physical or mental,  
Are but a challenge to our breed.  
Nothing can stop the questing of men,  
Not even Man.  
If we will it,  
Not only the wonders of space but,  
The very stars are ours!

Deux ex machina (Latin) -- God from the machine; refers to an implausible ending where everything is solved and justice is served.

"...the only ship in the quadrant... ha!"

"Commander?" the yeoman asked.

The executive officer of *USS Excalibur* NCC 2004 looked up from the PADD and the report the yeoman had given him to review and sign. "Sorry, Yeoman. Just thinking out loud." He scribbled 'Daniel C. Blasberg, Jr.' at the bottom of the dilithium reserves report and handed it back to the yeoman. "Carry on."

"It is illogical to voice emotional musings that are counterproductive to mission accomplishment,"

T'Tala noted.

"Are you speaking as science officer or my executive, Lieutenant?" Blasberg asked her, staring at the view screen without real interest.

"On this shift, you have assigned me as one and the same," T'Tala answered. She rose from her science station and crossed down to the center seat. "I will take the opportunity to note at this point you appear to be less than optimal in your attention to detail this evening, Commander."

Blasberg met her eye to eye. "What is there to pay attention to, on this mission? Straight line course at warp six from Starbase Forty-one to the outer boondocks of space just to deliver one component to get some colony's atmosphere purifier functioning."

"Trilithon."

"Gesundheit."

T'Tala arched an eyebrow. "The colony is designated 'Trilithon' not 'Outer Boondocks.' Our mission is to explore space, defend the Federation and render assistance. Logically, repairing Trilithon's atmosphere purifier qualifies as rendering assistance."

Blasberg returned his gaze to the view screen. "It isn't one yawn after another, it's the same yawn over and over again."

"I interpret that as your disapproval of the peaceful nature of our current mission."

"Your interpretation is accurate as always, Lieutenant."

T'Tala clasped her hands behind her back. "If we are accomplishing our mission regardless of nature, logic dictates that would suffice to be acceptable."

"I can't accept that we were the only ship available to make a mail run," Blasberg sighed. "We've saved the galaxy more times than I care to count and now all we are good for is to deliver spare parts."

"You deny the logic of the situation, Commander. If you are less than sanguine about the mission, why assign yourself to the late shift where the operational tempo is equanimous?"

"Because if I'm on shift with the Commodore I have even less to do than I do now." Blasberg informed her. "Maybe we can do some phaser practice to liven things up."

"Unauthorized firing of phasers is against Starfleet regulations," T'Tala noted.

"I'm the executive officer," Blasberg countered. "I can authorize anything I wish."

"There is no threat to ship's security to warrant the firing of phasers, Commander. Such a course of action requires the presence of the commanding officer. Commodore George is in his rest cycle at this time and I predict with one hundred per cent certainty he would be perturbed to be disturbed."

"Lieutenant, you're a poet and don't know it."

"I was not attempting to speak aesthetically, Commander. I was acting as your executive to point out the..."

"Don't worry, Lieutenant. I'm just thinking out loud again. I won't fire phasers unless we are threatened by more than boredom."

"Vulcans do not worry, nor do we become bored."

"Now there's an interesting thought... what could possibly worry or bore a Vulcan?"

"Such speculation is groundless since the likelihood of deriving such a scenario is improbable."

"So this mission, and this conversation in particular, is not boring you, Lieutenant?"

"Humans," T' Tala intoned. "How can one become bored when there is the perpetual mystery of the Human thought process to meditate upon?"

"Ouch!" Blasberg winced. "I resemble that remark. So if a superior alien invasion force attacked Vulcan right now you wouldn't..."

"Commander," the security officer on duty called out, "if I may interrupt..."

Blasberg swiveled the center seat to face him. "Please do, Flavius. Please tell me we are being attacked by a Klingon warfleet."

Lieutenant Silva frowned. "No, sir. But, we are getting a proximity alert. Another vessel has appeared in our sector."

"On screen," Blasberg requested as T' Tala returned to her station to run sensor scans.

The view screen wavered then refocused. Nothing but stars.

"Magnify," Blasberg said.

Another refocus and still more stars.

"Tactical view, Mister Silva," Blasberg continued. "Show us where it is."

Red gridlines and crosshairs masked the screen and centered in on an expanse of nothing.

"You say there's a vessel out there?"

"Affirmative," Silva replied. "I am attempting to detect an ident code... if any."

"T' Tala, anything on sensors?"

"Yes, Commander. Preliminary readings indicate a destroyer class vessel. I am reading no power output or energy signature, however."

"How far away is it?"

"Twenty minutes at warp six," Silva informed him.

Blasberg rubbed his hair and stabbed the view screen with interest. "I don't suppose a twenty minute course deviation will hurt."

"The commanding officer will be informed of all course deviations during missions in progress," T' Tala quoted.

Blasberg glanced at her to see if she was serious. Since Vulcans are always serious T' Tala was as Vulcan as they come. "Very well, Lieutenant. Contact the Commodore. In the meantime, Mister Thokov plot an intercept course to the contact."

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"Status."

Blasberg vacated the center seat as Commodore George exited from the turbolift. "Well, we yawned some, then yawned some more then things got really exciting and we yawned in surprise."

George lowered himself into the center seat. "You didn't interrupt my dreams and call me to the bridge to give me a yawn report, Number One. T' Tala mentioned something about a course deviation?"

"Proximity alert, Commodore," Blasberg answered. "Silva says it's a vessel and T' Tala says it's a destroyer. That's about all we know."

George took in the grids and crosshairs on the view screen. "No distress calls or other hails?"

"None, Commodore," the communications officer on duty answered.

"Has it moved since we detected it?"

"Not an inch, Commodore," Blasberg supplied. "I think it's a derelict."

"I don't think a twenty minute course deviation will hurt."

"Great minds think alike," Blasberg quipped. "I said the exact same thing before. Thokov already has a course plotted."

"Lay in the course, warp six," George ordered. "Open hailing frequencies."

"Aye, sir."

"Aye, sir."

"I could have done all that myself," Blasberg grumbled.

"Yes, but then I'd miss out on the fun," George countered.

"You never let me have any fun, Commodore."

"You got to yawn, didn't you, Number One?"

"On this mission, I'll get to do that a lot."

George smiled and leaned back in the center seat. "At least you aren't taking potshots with the phasers."

"Don't think I didn't think about it."

"I think I know how you think, Number One."

"That's my schtick, Commodore."

"Well, let's see what this contact does to liven things up," George said. "Maybe they'll need a tow."

Fifteen minutes later it became all too clear that was not the case. "Will you look at that!" Blasberg whispered.

The vessel was now within visual range. It was a Starfleet Saladin class destroyer hanging in space at a gruesome angle. The one nacelle was completely blasted away. The rest of the hull showed massive ruptures, phaser burns and torpedo hits. All lights were extinguished and a mist of escaped atmosphere shrouded the vessel in an ethereal nimbus.

"Identify," George said into the stunned silence the vessel's image had evoked.

"We're close enough now to receive a weak ident code," Silva said, studying his panel. "It's the USS Powell NCC 84653."

"Any response to our hails?"

"None, Commodore"

"Life signs?"

"Registering no life form readings."

"Any other vessels in the vicinity."

"We are the only two ships in this sector," Silva reported.

"Yellow alert," George directed. "Number One, summon the primary bridge crew to duty then assemble a recon party and beam over to the Powell."

"Oh, this'll be fun. I beam from a ship where nothing is going on to a ship where nothing is going on," Blasberg grouched.

"Put us out of your misery, Number One," George chided. "Just find out what happened to the Powell so we can get back on course."

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Transporter energies blazed to life on the Powell's tomdark bridge. When the flare dimmed, Blasberg and his recon party were smothered in dead lightlessness. "Suit lights," Blasberg said and activated his own environment suit's spotlights. The scene that flashed in the renewed illumination was ghastly. Corpses littered the bridge, the bodies flung into far corners in inhuman geometry.

"Intriguing," T' Tala said and activated her tricorder. "No life signs."

"Silva, take your security team and check out the rest of the ship," Blasberg said.

"The turbolift is nonfunctional," Silva said near the unresponsive doors.

"Use the Jeffries Tubes, then" Blasberg directed. "T' Tala try and get some sort of power going so we can check the ship's logs."

Silva and his security team slid into the Jeffries Tube access hatch in the deck as Blasberg made his way to the center seat. He sat down and prodded some of the control switches. "Now, this is more excitement than I can handle," he mumbled as the center seat's lights and gizmos continued to fail to operate.

"Logic dictates all systems are non-functional when ship's power is nonoperational," T' Tala told him with her head and shoulder buried deep inside the bottom access panel of the science station.

"What are you doing, Lieutenant?"

Her tricorder whirred and bleeped in response for a moment. "Since I am unable to access the ship's computer, I am extracting memory modules we can take back to *Excalibur* to activate and review there."

"Any way I can help?"

"There is insufficient maneuvering space for two individuals, Commander."

"Then I'll maneuver around the bridge and see if these corpses are really dead."

"If you can ascertain their identity it is certain the families of the deceased will appreciate the requisite notification."

With nothing better to do, Blasberg rose from the center seat and moved to the body sprawled by the view screen. At least his environment suit would prevent him from catching the odor of decay when he rolled the...

"Emotional expletives do not constitute an informative detail account, Commander."

Blasberg worked to control his shock. "This corpse was Romulan, Lieutenant."

"Indeed? Fascinating." T'Pol continued her work uninterrupted.

"Vulcans either have a knack for understatement or stating the obvious, Lieutenant. What was a Romulan doing on board a Starfleet destroyer?" Blasberg moved to the next body and withheld another 'emotional expletive.' "Or a Klingon for that matter? Here on a Starfleet bridge I've found a Romulan and a Klingon."

"In spite of evidence to the contrary there must be a logical explanation."

"I've found the Captain," Blasberg called out as he continued to inspect bodies. "He's human at least. Can't say that I know who he is... or was, though."

"Silva to Blasberg."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"We've completed a search of the ship. All dead. And Commander, we've found a few Klingon and Romulan bodies too."

"Same here, Lieutenant. None of those were in the brig?"

"No, sir. They are in the same areas of the ship that the Human, Vulcan, Andorian and Tellarite bodies are."

"Well, count noses and get ready for the paperwork, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir. Silva, Out."

T'Pol's tricorder ceased its warble. "Commander, since you mentioned 'paperwork,' wouldn't it be prudent at this point to give a sitrep to the Commodore?"

"You mean the OVERDUE sitrep and thank you very much for that tactful reminder," Blasberg said as he mentally kicked himself for the oversight. Something else to give the Commodore one-up in their next verbal feud. He promptly activated the environment suit's comm-link. "Blasberg to Excalibur."

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"*Excalibur*, George here. Go ahead Number One." George leaned back in his seat, suppressing a smile as he envisioned Blasberg's blush for tardiness. He took a mental oath right there and then to remember to forget the uncharacteristic lapse in his first officer. Uneventful missions had always been a stress factor for Blasberg.

"We're on a floating coffin, Commodore," Blasberg reported. "The crew is as dead as the ship. T'Pol is extracting memory modules for study back on board *Excalibur*. There is a Klingon and Romulan here on the bridge. Silva reports some Klingons and Romulans on the rest of the ship too."

George tethered an internal red alert. "Any signs of a struggle?"

"There's no green, burgundy or red blood pools anywhere," Blasberg said, "and no one here on the bridge has a phaser or disrupter in their hands. We may have been doing less than nothing before this but this crew is doing even less."

"Record the images of the deceased, then," George requested, "and then get beam on back. We can figure out what to do after we figure out what happened."

There was a moment of silence on the comm-link. "Well, it's not a photo-opportunity I want to put in my scrapbook but if you think pictures of corpses will spice up the logs then I'll try to make them pretty."

"Just make the resolutions clear, Number One, so we won't have to guess too much at the identities."

"Roger that, sir. Blasberg, Photographer of the Dead, out."

George stroked his chin in reflection. There was nothing odd about a dead crew on a dead ship. But the

mystery of how they had died was odd enough to disturb his command instinct for jeopardy. "Opinion, Mister Molina?" When in threat, ask the security chief.

"The Powell has been in a fight even if the crew hasn't," Lieutenant Commander Molina, *Excalibur's* security chief replied. "That sort of structural damage can only occur during an all-out battle with adversaries who are not trying to be gentle."

"But how long ago?" George wondered aloud. "Or for that matter, how far from here? We are the only ships in this sector. Where and when did that battle take place?"

"I can't begin to guess with available information, Commodore," Molina said. "The battle, wherever and whenever it was, is over. Is there some threat out there still? Maybe so. I hope not. But, I wish we could have been there to make a difference."

"We make a difference regardless of circumstances, Toby," George told him. "Had we been there we might have shared the same fate as the Powell. I just wish we knew how prevalent and pervasive the threat was or may still be."

"I'd like to know how the Powell got here in the first place," Lieutenant Commander Makofsky, the chief science officer spoke up. "Sensors do not pick up any ion trails, tachyon emissions or warp plasma dumps anywhere near the Powell. How she moved from there to here and at speeds faster than a slime devil's pace is beyond me. Unless the Powell got here way before the half-life of her warp trail faded to non-existence I'd almost say the ship was moved out here by faeries instead of warp drive. That also means there is no way to track back along their course since there is no trace of a trail to track."

"And the lack of distress calls or ship's record buoys is just as mysterious," Lieutenant Commander Holmyard, the chief communications officer added. "They either didn't try to communicate the threat or had a complete failure in their comm system before they were able to call for help. There is nothing on subspace channels that report any distress calls in this or adjoining sectors."

George always appreciated the free association of his bridge crew. Their dynamic had ensured their survival on occasions too numerous to count. "Bonnie, contact Starfleet Command. We should report we have discovered the Powell in this condition. At least the brain trusts at headquarters can earn their pay to solve this riddle."

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"Identity unknown," the computer intoned for the twenty-seventh time as the twenty-seventh image appeared on the briefing room's view screen.

"And that's the last of them," Blasberg said. "All thirteen Klingons and fourteen Romulans. Normally, I would consider either of them in a deceased condition to be a good thing. But this bothers me."

"Keep in mind we are negotiating peace treaties with both the Klingons and Romulans after the Praxis Incident, Number One," George reminded him. "They deserve as much consideration as the Starfleet crew under the circumstances."

"I'll consider that the next time I meet a live Klingon or Romulan, Commodore," Blasberg countered.

"I'm still bothered by this lot though. What were they doing on a Starfleet vessel?"

"It wasn't a military purpose," Lieutenant Commander Chilton, the chief xenologist offered. "Their apparel is not military uniforms. From our cultural records those Klingons and Romulans are all dressed as civilians."

"At least we know who the captain is," Makofsky said, "or was. I guess the obligatory condolence message from Starfleet to Captain Sonnier's family is on its way."

"There are civilians among the Federation people too," Lieutenant Commander Alexander-Riley, the chief medical officer supplied. "And, I've determined the cause of death to be asphyxiation and/or hypothermia due to the failure of the life support systems on board the Powell. At least we know how they died if not why."

"The Powell died in a silly manner," Commander Riley, the chief engineer said. "The warp drive suffered a complete failure probably due to the depletion of antimatter reserves and destabilization of the dilithium crystals. It was just a matter of time before the ship ran out of power and therefore out of life. If they only had impulse drive to limp along with, their time ran out along with their power."

"Which leaves us with a bunch of whys but no wherefores," George summarized. "Why was the Powell in a battle? Why didn't they call for help? Why were there Federation, Klingon and Romulan civilians on board?"

"They could have been attacked while on a diplomatic mission," Molina suggested. "Remember the Gorkon assassination? But then again, maybe not. If it was a diplomatic thing, there would be Klingon and Romulan as well as Starfleet escorts involved. I don't want to imagine what could face an armada like that and leave the Powell and her crew in this condition."

The comm-hail whistled in interruption. *"Bridge to Commodore George."*

George toggled the comm. "George, here."

*"Incoming priority message from Starfleet Command, sir."*

"Patch it to the briefing room, please."

*"Aye, sir."*

George snared eye contact with Holmyard who used the keypad in front of her to link up the briefing room and the bridge. "On screen, Commodore."

*"Excalibur this is Admiral Hunter, Starfleet Command."*

"Commodore George, here, Admiral."

Admiral Hunter's image on the view screen took in the venue in the briefing room. *"I see you and your senior officers are hashing over the details, Commodore."*

George repressed a shrug. "Standard operating procedure, Admiral. We should be finished soon and will resume course to Trilithon."

*"We have already dispatched a replacement vessel for the Trilithon delivery, Commodore."*

"I knew we weren't the only ship in the quadrant," Blasberg mumbled.

Admiral Hunter continued without noting Blasberg's editorial. *"We need Excalibur to divert to coordinates being sent to your helm even as we speak. Maximum warp. There is no time to spare."*

"Trouble, Admiral?" George asked.

*"Let's just say the sooner you get there the better. Excalibur's crew is perfect for this diversion. You have a knack for surviving this sort of crisis in one piece. Starfleet out."*

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**“ Discreet High Technology Systems (DHTS)  
'For when Diplomacy Fails'**

**Due to the nature of our services no further contact need be initiated by you.  
DHTS will be in contact with you shortly. ”**

“Was that a greeting or an advertisement?” Blasberg queried, looking at the glitzy text message on the view screen. “Are you sure you said, ‘open hailing frequencies,’ Commodore? It looks like we tuned in to the Subspace Shopping Network.”

“I wonder what they mean exactly when they say, ‘when diplomacy fails...’” Molina mused. “Somehow I don't like the sound of it.”

The view on the screen returned to the nondescript asteroid field in the dying star system. “Starfleet sent us here for a reason,” George said. “I guess we wait for this ‘DHTS’ to contact us as they wish.”

“We rushed all the way out here to hurry up and wait,” Blasberg complained. “I'd rather be on the mail run to Trilithon than wait for nothing to continue to happen.”

“Jim, anything at all on sensors?” George asked the chief science officer.

“Not a single deviation above normal readings for a dead asteroid field,” Makofsky answered. “If this ‘DHTS’ is out there they are doing a great job of playing hide and seek.”

“Hail them again, Bonnie,” George requested.

“There's nothing to hail, Commodore,” Holmyard responded. “Nothing but subspace static in the immediate vicinity. As far as I can tell we are the only receiver-transmitter for subspace communications in this entire sector.”

“SOMEONE responded to our hail,” Blasberg insisted. “They HAVE to be there.”

“Jim, check the records for this ‘Discrete High Technology Systems,’” George said. “Find out who their corporate executive is.”

“And see if they have a Complaints Department,” Blasberg added. “I sure want to complain at the expediency of the service here.”

“One moment,” Makofsky answered and poked and prodded the library computer controls to harvest the information.

"At the risk of adding to the mystery," Molina said, "I wonder what Starfleet and the *Powell* have to do with DHTS?"

"I don't recognize it as one of the more common technology contractors," George noted. "They don't sound like they're in the same league with the Daystrom Institute or Utopia Planitia."

"I don't believe it!" Makofsky exclaimed.

"Something, Jim?" Blasberg asked.

"Nothing, Commander," Makofsky returned. "Absolutely nothing. The Federation database tells me that DHTS has no relevant entries to consult. It's like they avoid even mentioning that they don't exist."

"Well WE exist and something else that exists just sent us a commercial jingle," Blasberg fumed.

All attention on the bridge was arrested by an alert from Molina's station. "Commodore, something just activated the console in transporter room two," the security chief reported. "A security team is responding."

"Which means this transporter activation is considered a threat to ship's security," George concluded.

"Mister Makofsky you have the conn. Number One, Mister Molina, let's go see if our DHTS questions are being answered in Transporter Room Two."

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A phalanx of Starfleet security guards cordoned off the transporter platform. Behind the transporter console stood George, Blasberg, Molina and Riley.

"A little elbow room, please, gentlemen," Riley requested and flexed his arms to clear the space. "I can work better if I'm not distracted by getting nudged and bumped from you kibitzers."

Molina studied the transporter console over Riley's broad shoulders. The coordinates were shifting in a random fashion but the annular confinement beam and pattern buffers were priming to receive something. The life form readings indicated the something was humanoid if not human however. The transporter was set to receive something humanoid from nowhere in particular.

"Can you deactivate the transporter, Tim?" George asked

Riley tapped a few more controls. "I have no operator interface access, Commodore. Something external to *Excalibur* is running this show. There appears to be a tight-beam subspace signal jamming the local command relays. Out there, somewhere, someone is operating this console by remote control."

"DHTS?" Blasberg asked.

"Who?"

"DHTS," Blasberg repeated. "Apparently we have a failure of diplomacy and DHTS is paying us a house call."

"I'll figure out what you're babbling about later, Dan," Riley said. "Commodore, I wonder what would happen if we raise shields? That should prevent anything from beaming in... or out."

"I considered that, Tim," George said. "But Starfleet sent us here to meet with this DHTS, apparently. We were told we would be contacted. Maybe this is their way of contacting us, albeit obtuse and anomalous."

"The transporter is energizing," Molina noted. "Our guest is arriving whoever it is."

The lights on the transporter console blinked through the materialization sequence. On the transporter console the hum and whine of transporter energies chimed in their accustomed sub-harmonics. The dazzle of the incoming pattern coalesced above one of the receptor pads. A humanoid biped began to solidify in the transporter chamber. The security guards pointed their phasers in welcome.

"DHTS is at your service," the man said as soon as he completely materialized.

"Shoot him now, Toby!" Blasberg urged. "Put him out of our misery before he puts us out of his!"

"He's not armed, Commander," Molina countered. "And he's alone. How much of a threat can he be?"

"How much of a threat is the Starfleet Renegade who is number one on Starfleet's most wanted list?"

Blasberg returned.

"...Starfleet Renegade...?"

"Black Barker."

"Gentlemen," George urged, then stepped around the transporter console. "Welcome aboard, B' Qa' ... or is it just Mister Barker now?"

"The services of DHTS have been requested by Starfleet Command," 'Barker' said as he stepped down from the transporter console. "Our next destination is encoded in this memory module. We are ready to depart now."

"Not so fast," Blasberg said. "I want to know what Black Barker is doing back aboard a Starfleet vessel, particularly this one."

"Commodore George, DHTS recognizes that you will assist us in our service to Starfleet Command," Barker went on. Then looked at Blasberg, "There is no profit in keeping a dead past alive."

"Commodore, you know this man?" Molina asked.

"I've only encountered him once before," George acknowledged, "but Number One and Commander Riley knew him back at Starfleet Academy."

"Is he a threat?" Molina pressed.

George sighed. "He is as threatening as every other renegade, but he's not dangerous."

"Ha!" Blasberg scoffed.

"Later, Number One," George said. "Mister Barker, you say you know our next destination?"

"DHTS knows your next destination, Commodore," Barker corrected. "We are here to implement the coordinates in your navigational system and observe the events at the destination."

"And what is our destination?"

"DHTS can best be of service to Starfleet if we find out our destination when we get there," Barker replied.

"Don't trust this turncoat, Commodore," Blasberg insisted. "Throw him in the brig. Better yet, throw him out an airlock and do the galaxy a favor."

George stood a moment, considering. "Your objections and recommendations are noted, Number One. For now, I must act on Starfleet's apparent reliance on DHTS and this man who says he represents them. Mister Molina, dismiss all but one of the security detail and assign him to escort Mister Barker during his stay aboard *Excalibur*."

"DHTS will make favorable mention in the after action review of your concern for our safety, Commodore," Barker said. "If we may proceed to the bridge, we must transfer this encoded destination immediately. It may be too late to accomplish anything profitable at this point, but then again, it may not."

All but one of the security detail trooped out of the transporter room. One guard remained ubiquitous and vigilant. George gestured towards the door as they proceeded out into the corridor heading for the nearest turbolift.

"Blink the wrong way, Barker," Blasberg growled, "and even this security guard won't keep you safe from me."

"DHTS habitually replaces lost sales operatives," Barker returned. "Sometimes profit ventures involve situations with unsatisfactory risk margins. We are certain there is risk in this venture as well..." then Barker looked Blasberg directly in the eye, "but who is at risk remains to be seen, Commander Blasberg."

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Makofsky placed the handful of computer memory modules on the briefing room table one stacked on top of another. "These are all useless as are the hundred or so others T'Tala extracted from the Powell's computer, except..." as he held up on last CMM, "for this one and it contains only one uncorrupted file."

"DHTS would be interested in knowing if those were blank to begin with," Barker commented, "or if they contained information subsequently removed."

"Hold on a second," Molina interjected. "Before we tell DHTS anything I would like to clear up two questions: Who is DHTS? And what do you, or they, have to do with the *USS Powell*."

"Valid questions, Toby," George agreed. "Mister Barker, would you be inclined to answer those questions?"

"Maybe Black Barker here should first answer where he's been for the past four years since we left him on Qo'noS," Blasberg said, "and how he convinced this DHTS to employ him in spite of the fact he is a traitor."

"Number One, Mister Barker is not on trial here," George said, "so the answer to how and why he works for DHTS now is academic."

"Inquiring minds still want to know," Blasberg reiterated.

"DHTS thinks the answer to Commander Blasberg's question may not be germane to impending events," Barker said, "but we sense that if it were known that the Klingons seek DHTS services as well as the Federation and the Romulans, it would go a long way in explaining why certain sales operatives were encountered by this vessel's crew on other than Starfleet ships in the past. And, we regret any unprofitable

consequences resulting from DHTS actions in moments of crisis.”

“One of your ‘unprofitable consequences’ was a member of this crew,” Blasberg shot, “right, Tim?”

“Over time, Daniel, I have come to accept Susie was a casualty of the circumstances,” Riley said softly. “The living cannot revive the dead and here and now we are dedicated to protecting the living.”

Blasberg opened his mouth for further comment but no words came out for the span of a breath, “I’ll note my protests in my logs, then, and let the facts speak for themselves.” He nailed Barker with a glare, “But, there had better not be any more ‘unprofitable consequences’ on this trip. Got that, Mister DHTS?”

“DHTS seeks to maximize the profit our services provide to our customers,” Barker said without a shrug. “We would also wish it to be known that the *USS Powell* was dispatched by Starfleet Command to a DHTS research facility in case emergency contingencies arose necessitating the resources of said ship.”

“I take it we are headed for this research facility now?” Molina asked.

“DHTS has questions regarding the status of our research facility,” Barker replied. “The fact that the crew of the *USS Powell* are unable to answer these questions mandates an onsite observation by a DHTS sales operative.”

“So, why bother hitchhiking, or is it hijacking, *Excalibur*?” Blasberg asked. “Surely, DHTS has its own ships to play taxi.”

“Since *USS Powell* is no longer able to fulfill its function as emergency contingency resource in support of DHTS’s contractual obligations to the Federation,” Barker replied, “a replacement for that resource deficit is required.”

“So you trade up from a Saladin class destroyer to an Excelsior class starship,” Blasberg noted. “More bang for your buck?”

“DHTS and Starfleet consider it efficient to temporarily draft *Excalibur* as that resource replacement,” Barker said, “as well as the mode of travel for the DHTS sales operative to conduct the onsite observation at the DHTS research facility.”

“What you’ve said without actually having said is that your corporation has lost contact with your research facility,” Riley said, “and the fact that the *USS Powell* is a battle fatality may mean your research facility is also in the same condition. I wonder why, then, Starfleet or the Federation even cares about your research facility.”

“DHTS has already stated that the research facility is inventoried in support of contractual obligations to the Federation,” Barker said. “These contractual obligations are crucial to the integrity of Federation stability. Should DHTS renege on this contractual obligation, the stability of the Federation would then be jeopardized, if not malignantly compromised, as an unprofitable consequence.”

“Gentlemen, I think it is clear that both Starfleet and DHTS want to find out how and why the *Powell* was lost,” George spoke. “Jim, does that one uncorrupted file on that CMM shed any light on that score?”

“Yes and no, Commodore,” Makofsky answered. He inserted the CMM into a playback slot on the briefing room table. “One picture is worth a thousand words. Take a look at this and judge for yourselves.”

On the briefing room view screen, the *Powell*’s bridge view screen appeared. The view was obscured by the smoky effluvia of a burning starship bridge. There was no sound. But there on the *Powell*’s view screen displayed on the briefing room’s view screen could be seen a very alien, and very ugly looking ship, firing a steady barrage of bolts of blazing energy. The scene continued for thirty seconds then was rudely aborted probably due to fatal systems malfunctions on the battered *Powell*.

George inhaled after a stunned moment. “That is the only viable file out of all those CMMs?”

“Yes, Commodore,” Makofsky affirmed. “It answers what and how but not who, where or why.”

“Where has to be where we’re going,” Riley said.

“Or somewhere along the way from here to there,” Molina added.

“Mister Barker, how soon will we arrive at your coordinates?” George asked.

“DHTS is certain that when we arrive we will be there,” Barker answered. “We can see that it is a positive development that *Excalibur* is employed as the emergency contingency resource for DHTS contractual obligations.”

Further debate and discussion was interrupted as *Excalibur* abruptly rocked and heaved.

“Whoa!” Blasberg exclaimed. “Are we there yet, Mister DHTS?”

“*Bridge to Commodore George,*” Holmyard’s voice barked from the intercom.

George was out of his seat, out the door and on the way to the bridge without bothering to respond to the call.

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"Bridge to Commodore George," Holmyard repeated her call, keeping a wary eye on the view screen.

"George, here, Commander," the Commodore said as he stepped off the turbolift. "Status?"

Holmyard was out of the center seat in a shot. "We collided with some sort of displacement wave, Commodore. We had a few seconds warning on proximity sensors before it hit." She resumed her seat at communications.

George sat in the center seat. "T' Tala, analysis?"

The assistant science officer stood, "Analysis incomplete, Commodore. I am replaying the scant sensor reading we managed to record before the wave hit us."

"Mister Silva, are we under attack?" George asked the assistant chief of security. Blasberg, Makofsky, Riley, Molina and Barker exited the turbolift at that moment.

"There are no hostile contacts in our immediate proximity," Silva reported. "But we raised shields immediately after the displacement wave hit."

"Where there's one wave there's bound to be another," Blasberg said.

"That is correct," T' Tala said as Makofsky worked over her shoulder. They were making a tandem effort to define the displacement wave properties. "The next wave will impact in forty-three seconds."

"Number One, we need a damage assessment from that last wave," George said.

"Already on it, Commodore."

"Can we survive another one?" Molina asked as he and Silva prepped their defenses to optimize their effectiveness. "Shields are down to seventy percent."

"We still have main power and no breaches in hull integrity," Blasberg informed them. "All the last one did to us was a minor shake and quake."

George spared a look at the view screen. The stars streaked by in their normal course with nothing inimical in the panorama. "Helm, evasive maneuvers."

"Not possible, Commodore," Sisneros, the helmsman negated. "We can't go anywhere fast enough to evade it."

"All decks brace for impact," George said into the center seat's comm. "Jim, if we can sense it's out there can we figure out what it is and where it is coming from?"

"T' Tala and I are working on that, Commodore," Makofsky replied. Then *Excalibur* pitched, yawed and rolled as the enigmatic wave-front swelled into, over then past them.

"Shields at sixty-three percent," Molina said. "We reinforced the starboard shields just before whatever it was hit us."

"I don't believe it," Makofsky said.

"That usually means you've nailed the identity," Blasberg said as he crossed to the science station.

"Please share your disbelief with us."

Makofsky turned to face the rest of the bridge and the Commodore in particular. "We've just passed through a temporal displacement wave-front of un-scalable magnitude. There's another one on the way in a little over a minute. When it passed over, we skipped ahead a second or two along the timeline. But, the one before that, we skipped backward a second or two."

"Is this what damaged the Powell?" Blasberg asked.

"I don't think so," Makofsky answered. "There is no energy discharge with the temporal displacement wave. As a matter of fact, we are running a parallel course to the wave-front. If we were to turn into it, the effects would be significantly reduced."

"Maybe we should just turn around and get out of its range," Blasberg suggested.

George looked at Barker. "Do we turn around, turn into it or keep on course as we are? Mister Barker?"

Barker was standing unperturbed by the turbolift. "DHTS records indicate this was Powell's assigned patrol sector. One of the Powell's responsibilities was to warn off incoming ships from entering restricted space. We also know that warning buoys were deployed and are wondering why we have not encountered any."

"Something attacked the Powell and drove it away from its routine patrol," George concluded, "and probably destroyed the warning buoys as well. We've seen a log recording of an attacking ship which could be still around as a threat."

Another wave passed over *Excalibur* and the bridge crew anchored themselves to endure the turbulence.

"Shields at sixty percent," Molina dutifully reported.

"We've isolated the source of the waves," Makofsky announced. "It's close in the stellar neighborhood."

"Transfer the coordinates to the helm, Jim," George requested.

Unobserved, like he had always stood there, Barker was at the conn, looking at the panel. "DHTS recognizes those coordinates as those of Hawking Station. Without the Powell to render emergency contingency resources, the station is vulnerable to unprofitable consequences."

"And if the Powell was rendered derelict," George picked up on the hint, "Hawking Station is less equipped to be in a similar status. Mister Sisneros, lay in the course to Hawking Station. Ahead warp five."

"That course will turn us into the wave-front, Commodore," Sisneros advised.

"All the better," George nodded. "Better to hit it head-on than broadside."

"I have just one question for the record," Blasberg said. "Tell us, Mister DHTS, if you knew where Hawking Station was all along, why didn't you just get us there directly rather than take this scenic route?"

Barker turned his corporate regard on Blasberg. "DHTS has the contractual obligation to insure the integrity of restricted space is maintained and the location of Hawking Station kept close-hold and need-to-know."

"And now we have the need-to-know, is that it?"

Barker didn't shrug but gave every indication he was doing so. "DHTS postulates that entry into restricted space is the most profitable course of action to render emergency contingency resources to Hawking Station at this time."

"Lucky for you we are the only ship in the quadrant here to do just that," Blasberg gibed.

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"It still reminds me of a petrified doughnut, Debbie" Blasberg insisted. "Are you sure THIS is the genesis of the temporal displacement waves and not actually Hawking Station?"

Chilton double-checked her tricorder readings, a welcome break from the view of the time-blasted ruins around this anomaly, not to mention the macabre picture of the butchered researchers in the nearby shelter. "The fluctuations in the temporal dimension are emanating from this obelisk, Dan. And it isn't petrified since I am not reading any vegetable or animal proteins. But I also can't say it is made of stone, crystal or metal either. All I can tell you is that it is solid, it is old and it is here warping time."

Blasberg walked around the object. Chilton could see him through the aperture as he passed by the other side. It DID look like a Doughnut albeit twelve feet high. "There's got to be more to it than this. Subterranean machinery, remote access satellites, anything but this stone age sculpture. I mean, what is so crucial about it that caused the deaths of those researchers over there, the personnel of Hawking Station and the crew of the Powell?"

"A QUESTION!"

"For the love of Abboris!" Chilton yelled, almost dropping her tricorder. The Doughnut had spoken. "Dan, what did you just do?"

"Apparently, I asked a question," Blasberg said. He had leaped clear of the area when the voice had boomed from the Doughnut.

"It must have a proximity threshold," Chilton guessed. "Get near it and ask it another question."

"Thanks for volunteering ME to get near IT," Blasberg complained. "I don't see you rushing in where this fool fears to tread."

"Okay. Together then," Chilton soothed as Blasberg eased his way to her side. As one, they stepped closer to the Doughnut. "Go ahead. Ask it another question now."

Blasberg straightened. "Okay. Here goes nothing," and went silent for a second... then a moment. "All that comes to mind is I can't figure out if Starfleet knows about this place why I've never heard of it."

The Doughnut remained silent.

"Maybe we have to get closer," Blasberg hedged.

"Maybe you have to phrase your question as a question," Chilton suggested.

"I thought I did already," Blasberg insisted. "If Starfleet knows about this place, why have I never heard of it?"

"A QUESTION!" The Doughnut came to life, its rim glowing with milky translucence. "SINCE BEFORE YOUR SUN BURNED HOT IN SPACE AND BEFORE YOUR RACE WAS BORN I HAVE AWAITED A QUESTION."

"Was that an answer or a sales pitch?"

"I ANSWER AS SIMPLY AS YOUR LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING MAKES POSSIBLE."

"Who do you think you are?"

"I AM THE GUARDIAN OF FOREVER."

"Well I think you're either a very advanced calculator or an extremely retrograde abacus."

The Doughnut went silent again.

"A question, remember Dan?" Chilton prompted.

Blasberg frowned and crossed his arms. "Okay, now that we know who you are, how about telling us what you are."

Silence.

"Right. What are you?"

"I AM MY OWN BEGINNING -- MY OWN ENDING.."

"Now we're really making progress," Blasberg murmured. "What is your job here?"

"BEHOLD! A GATEWAY TO YOUR OWN PAST IF YOU WISH."

In the Doughnut's aperture, scenarios flashed into view for an eye-blink only to be superimposed with a succession of vistas, all of them apparently from Earth's past.

"Dan, this is fantastic," Chilton exclaimed. "According to my tricorder the temporal continuum is in quantum flux in synchronization with each scene we see."

"So this machine sees the past," Blasberg surmised.

"More than that," Chilton went on, her tricorder steadily aimed at the Doughnut's aperture. "According to these readings, if we step through the picture we actually arrive there... I mean then... I mean..."

"You're saying this is a time travel device," Blasberg said, "one which beats the slingshot-around-the-sun hands down."

"No wonder we've never heard of this place," Chilton breathed. "If Starfleet restricted the Mutara Sector because of the Genesis Device, and General Order Seven is in place because of Talos IV, imagine the threat the wrong people could be if they got their hands on the Guardian of Forever here."

"And those temporal displacement waves it sends out are like flames to a moth," Blasberg realized. "If an enemy to the Federation ever tracked them back here... goodbye Federation history. Goodbye Federation." He turned back to the Doughnut. "Doughnut... er, uh, Guardian, do you have to show everyone who comes here their history?"

"I WAS MADE TO OFFER THE PAST IN THIS MANNER. I CANNOT CHANGE."

"I just had a scary thought," Blasberg said. "Maybe the same aliens who attacked the *Powell* have been here already and..." His communicator was drawn and flipped in the next moment. "Blasberg to *Excalibur*," and winced as the device emitted an ear-piercing squeal of subspace feedback.

"THE TRAVELERS HAVE RETURNED," The Guardian intoned.

"What travelers?" Chilton asked.

The Guardian's aperture misted over with nebulous quantum clouds. A squad of ten or so brutish-looking aliens leaped through the fog and arrayed themselves before the Guardian. All ten of their weapons were pointed directly at the two Starfleet officers.

"Dan, quick! Say, 'Beam me up,'" Chilton urged.

"No good, Debbie," Blasberg sighed. "The communicator is malfunctioning."

"What do we do now? Pray?"

"Yeah. Pray that either those aliens are as friendly as they are ugly or that those weapons have a 'stun' setting."

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"The lights are out and no one's home."

"The absence of an operating system in the station's computer effect a total system shutdown, Commander," T' Tala said.

"I think I just said that, Lieutenant," Holmyard returned and aimed her suit light in yet another darkened niche of Hawking Station. "It's spooky that the same thing that happened to the *Powell*'s computer happened here. Too identical to be coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

"The sole dissimilarity is the absence of remains of the deceased," T' Tala continued coolly. "Logically they are either captive or were among those we found on the *Powell*." She seated herself at one of the

library computer access consoles and proceeded to pry open a panel of switches.

"If they are captive, then who captured them?" Holmyard asked. She sat next to T' Tala, suppressing a frisson of apprehension at being one of the three living beings on the station. "I wonder how Silva is doing in the lower levels?"

T' Tala pried out a computer memory module and handed it to Holmyard. "Lieutenant Silva is a supremely competent security officer. His next communications check-in is in four point seven minutes."

Holmyard inserted the computer memory modules into her tricorder. "Nothing on this one. What is this station doing here anyway?"

"It is in station keeping orbit above the epicenter of the temporal displacement waves," T' Tala replied, removing another CMM. "The purpose of the research would seem to be to monitor that temporal phenomena."

"But this is a Regula class station," Holmyard noted and discarded the second CMM as it too read 'empty, 'usually employed by civilian agencies- meaning it is not armed. But this 'temporal phenomena' would seem to need something a little more secure to be a base for research and observation."

"I am given to understand that defensive support was the *Powell*' responsibility," T' Tala said. Her arm was deep in the console, reaching for yet another CMM

"One destroyer," Holmyard dismissed. "If this place were under siege by a single Klingon warship that destroyer would be as effective as a match in a typhoon."

"There were Klingons as well as Romulans found on board the *Powell*," T' Tala reminded her and drew out her arm. But there was no CMM in her grip. "Perhaps they were employed by the very DHTS that Mister Barker represents."

"That would make sense," Holmyard nodded. "Mister Barker gives me the creeps. His communications are couched in corporate doublespeak. He never uses personal pronouns as if his individuality were completely subject to the DHTS conglomerate."

"The presence of DHTS here is logical," T' Tala said. "A scientific endeavor of this type would severely unbalance the power structures in this quadrant. To have an objective and extrinsic agency administering a joint effort by the three major government of the quadrant would ensure the balance of the paradigm evenly disperses any knowledge gained from this place."

"I guess the Federation found it first then," Holmyard said, "Because if the Klingons or Romulans were here before us we wouldn't be here to note the fact that we aren't here to observe it."

T' Tala looked directly at her. "Accurate if convoluted use of logic, Commander. One is left to wonder, however, if the Federation were the first to find this place, which Starfleet vessel had the honor. I know of nothing on record detailing the discovery."

"Ours not to reason why, Lieutenant."

"Indeed. However that quotation does begin with, 'someone blundered?' "

"Well, we'll never find out what the blunder is from here. There is no computer information anywhere on this station. It's like it was all siphoned off just like aboard the *Powell*."

"There was a solitary file found on one of the *Powell*' memory modules. It depicted an attack by a heretofore unknown alien vessel."

"I'd heard that, but I didn't have time to see it for myself."

"The only logical reason for a single computer file to remain in an otherwise vacant database is obvious if not ominous."

"A warning?"

"Just so. Possibly a threat as well."

"*Silva to Holmyard!*"

Holmyard brought out her communicator. "Holmyard here, Lieutenant. You sound a little..."

"*Get back to the ship! There are...*" His communication was interrupted by the sounds of energy discharges.

"Silva are you there?" Holmyard felt her instincts rouse to red alert status. "Flavius, are you all right?"

T' Tala was sweeping her tricorder in a three-sixty. "Lieutenant Silva may not be able to answer, Commander. There are thirty eight alien life forms surrounding his position. An additional ten alien life forms are maneuvering in this direction as well."

"Please tell me they are Klingons or Romulans," Holmyard said, drawing her phaser.

T' Tala drew her phaser as well. "They are neither. The readings indicate alien life signs unknown to those currently cataloged."

"Holmyard to *Excalibur*," she barked into her communicator. The squeal of subspace feedback was her only response. "We're being jammed!"

"We are under attack," T' Tala corrected as a barrage of energy bolts battered the door from the other side.

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"Red alert! All hands to battle stations!" George pronounced. The lights on the bridge swapped from bright to blood-red as the crew primed their stations for a battle.

Molina triple checked the offense and defense systems all showing green and hot. "Fire in the hole, Commodore. Shields are up. But I am showing no proximity alerts."

George knew Molina, acting as executive officer, was clarifying the situation. "Two hails in a row, one from Blasberg and one from Holmyard have been jammed by subspace interference. That fact plus the Powell's misfortune and that one computer file tells me to expect trouble."

Molina rose from his station and crossed down to the center seat. "We could beam a security squad to rescue our landing parties."

George shook his head. "Negative, Commander. We'd have to lower shields and something in my gut tells me *Excalibur* is the next target."

Molina glance back at his monitors, then up to the ones at the science station. "All screens show clear, Commodore."

"Which means either the hostiles have cloaked ships or are using the planet as a shield."

"We could send a shuttle to recon."

"And lose it before it can report back?"

Molina nodded. "Then our one option is to sit tight and expect trouble."

George smiled but with grim determination. "I don't like having only one option anymore than you do, Toby." He swiveled the center seat to face the science station. "Jim, any luck extracting tactical data from that one computer file from the Powell?"

"Vessel configuration is all we can manage," Makofsky answered. "Weapons type, propulsion signatures, life form readings were all either corrupted or erased."

"So we know what they look like," George concluded, "and that they attack in continuous barrage. But nothing else. How convenient."

"DHTS has noted the convenience of the solitary computer file as well, Commodore George," Barker spoke up. He had been so unobtrusive he had become a phantom standing by the turbolift. Quite a handy skill for a corporate representative. "The convenience indicates a deliberate choice to convey a specific message."

"What message would that be, Mister Barker?"

"Surrender."

"Commodore, three vessels matching the configuration from the computer file have cleared the planet's horizon," Makofsky reported.

Molina was back at his station in three steps. "Confirmed. Three alien vessels have crossed proximity threshold."

"Lock phasers and photorps on target," George ordered. "Helm prepare for evasive maneuvers."

Three alien vessels were now centered on the main view screen. A larger vessel whose every line and curve screamed 'menace' and two smaller (but easily as large as *Excalibur*) vessels who echoed the menace of the really big vessel.

"Open hailing frequencies," George requested and waited for the communications officer to confirm. "This is Commodore George commanding *USS Excalibur* representing the United Federation of Planets. We are on a peaceful mission. If you attack we will consider it an act of war and are prepared to defend ourselves."

"Voice response, Commodore."

"On speakers."

"*We are the Vendoth. You cannot defend against Us. Surrender. Resistance is shameful.*"

"And now we are down to no options," Molina observed. "Ready to fire at your command, Commodore."

"We can't claim to be on a peaceful mission and fire the first shot," George said tightly. "We have to

hope these Vendoth believe in our peaceful intentions and choose to be reasonable."

"DHTS expresses admiration for your dedication to Starfleet procedures, Commodore," Barker spoke up. "But the profits of peace are beyond the scope of the aliens' stated intentions. There is more profit indicated by agreeing to their terms of engagement."

"Their terms are our surrender," Molina noted.

"DHTS assesses that is the course of action to garner the most profit."

*Excalibur* rocked as the first of the Vendoth barrage struck with alarming force.

"Shields down to fifty percent!" Molina called out.

"One hit and we lost half of shield vitality?" George asked rhetorically.

"I don't believe it!" Makofsky exclaimed. "Sensors indicate the shields in the area struck by the Vendoth weapon have solidified."

"How does energy turn solid?" George asked

"It reads solid," Makofsky affirmed. "I can't begin to guess how."

Another barrage sent shudders through the ship.

"Shields down to twenty-five percent."

"And we haven't even fired a single shot!" George raged.

"If they hit us again we will be virtually shield-less," Molina warned.

George pounded the center seat. "Open hailing frequencies. Signal our surrender."

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The aliens that stood before them were under two meters tall but with twice the bulk of humans. Muscles rippled beneath the leathery green skin. The eyes were deep set under a thick brow line which curved around to the sides of their faces. Under the eyes, a flattened nose with slit nostrils in the front flared as the aliens breathed. A small ridge line began in the center of their forehead near the crest and extended to the base of their neck and along its spine. On both sides of their heads, several small spikes protruded menacingly. A huge square jaw framed their mouths where two sharp incisors were bared from the bottom jaw.

"That's a Vendoth?" George whispered.

"They call themselves that," Blasberg answered. "I just call them ugly."

"Did you get anything more out of them than that?" Molina asked.

"Oh yeah," Blasberg answered. "Lots of high brow conversation like, 'To resist is to shame,' and 'Submit to your masters,' and the ever popular, 'Surrender.'"

"Not a lot of room for open discourse is there?" Riley said mirthlessly.

"Speaking of surrender, what kind of tactic was that, Commodore?" Blasberg challenged. "They fire three shots and we give them the keys to the officer's mess?"

"To wait for a fourth shot would have been suicide, Number One," George replied. "At least we are still alive to resist them."

"And shame on you for saying so, Commodore," Blasberg returned.

"Silence, Liars!" the biggest Vendoth shouted. He stood before the Guardian of Forever, framed by its monolithic circle. "You claim to surrender yet continue to resist!"

"Our surrender is a matter of record," George countered.

"Truly, Commodore George?" the Vendoth scoffed. "Why is it then you have deviously protected your vessel's database denying us access to it?"

"I may be more inclined to cooperate," George said, "if I knew who I am cooperating with?"

The Vendoth smiled and the grin was not a reassuring sight. "Your cooperation is not required. Your submission to your masters is. But, so you will have the privilege to be the first in your galaxy to know the new masters, I am VenQa' Ja' Omoq. My vessel is the Ja' Xua' Hai. My clanmates VenQa' Ja' Ytaj and VenQa' Ja' Ubot command the vessels Ja' Xue' Chao and Ja' Xui' Niu. We are the first Vendoth vessels to arrive in your galaxy and when the rest of the fleet arrives the Vendoth will master all the species of this galaxy. We will enlighten your species to live by our superior code under our superior mastery."

"Like I've never heard that one before," Blasberg mumbled.

"I see, Ja' Omoq," George finally said. "So why..."

"You will address me as VenQa'!"

George paused, took a breath, then, "I see, VenQa'. If you are the new masters..."

"Vendoth ARE the new masters!"

"...if you insist. Why do the new masters need the database from *Excalibur* when you already have that of Hawking Station and the *USS Powell*?"

"Even a species of obviously limited intelligence like yours knows the elementary principles of little ship versus big ship," Ja' Omoq sneered. "While we did harvest some invaluable scientific information from the orbital station, your ship was obviously engineered to fight. Your database possesses all the tactical knowledge we would need to annihilate all military resistance in this galaxy. I would not even trouble to obtain your submission, however, were your database easily accessible. It would not demean myself as VenQa' to any further exchange with you than to demand your surrender."

"Is it just me or does this jerk just like listening to himself talk?" Blasberg whispered.

"Number One, please be a part of the solution," George whispered back. "VenQa' , I can appreciate your interest in gathering intelligence, but I' m afraid we can' t help you."

Ja' Omoq crossed his arms and raised to full height- all one point two meters. "Resistance is shameful? Why do you insist to resist, George?"

"The database on our ship is unique, VenQa' ," George replied. "It has protocols in place to keep a destructive algorithm in check. To access our database externally you have to remove the protocols. Remove the protocols and you unleash the destructive algorithm."

"Release the protocols," Ja' Omoq demanded.

"None of us here can help you," George repeated. "Our records officer is the only one who knows the protocols and she doesn' t seem to be here."

" " She? " Ja' Omoq. "Your females are elsewhere George. I will have your records officer located and those protocols will be released."

George shrugged. "That may work but then again it may not."

"No one resists the Vendoth!"

"You have a lot to learn about us, VenQa' ," George said. "I surrendered the ship to save the lives of my crew. But each individual life is their own to surrender or resist. And since we seem to be the first line of defense against you, I think you will meet our resistance more than our surrender."

"The punishment for the shame of resistance is death!" Ja' Omoq vowed. He turned to another Vendoth. "VenQa' ' Ytaj, return to the place we are keeping the females. Locate this ' records officer.' Place her and a few of the other females in a room where Qo' Doth Te' Ymel can interrogate them for the secrets of these ' protocols.' "

"It is done as you say, VenQa' Ja' Omoq," Ja' Ytaj snapped. He barked and growled into a device and vanished in a teleport beam.

"As for the rest of you," Ja' Omoq turned back to them, "I have other plans for now."

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Te' Ymel of the Ja' Xua' Hai, Qo' Doth of the Vendoth

Her male sire was VenQo' and her female dame Qi' Doth. Their pride in her choice of Qo' Doth gave Te' Ymel the firey drive to excel in her profession. If her sire and dame were here they would laud her success in this alien galaxy. VenQa' Ja' Ytaj tasked her to interrogate females of an inferior species so the Vendoth could succeed in harvesting their database -- a responsibility of trust among the Vendoth. Only the best were permitted to convey Vendoth superiority to inferior species. Te' Ymel had lived every moment of her career as Qo' Doth to achieve perfection. Now, trusted to BE Vendoth before an inferior species, Te' Ymel had received the recognition of the VenQa' for which she had sought and fought so long.

Even so, Te' Ymel felt guilt here at the pinnacle of her Qo' Doth career.

Sitting here in the command center of the inferior species' vessel, she wrestled with her guilt. Te' Ymel rotated the seat in the center of the room -- the ' bridge'- and took in the beauty of its function and design. This inferior species had a sense of design that neared the sublime. This ' bridge' was as beautiful as the vessel which contained it. As Qo' Doth, she had analyzed the database they had so far harvested. This inferior species had a beautiful ' bidge' , a beautiful vessel and a beautiful society compared to that of the Vendoth. Te' Ymel found herself regretting the necessary subjugation of these inferiors for their beautiful society would disappear to be replaced by the perfection of the Vendoth. She buried the shameful hope the Vendoth would fail in this one subjugation. Further speculation on the regret and guilt would place her under the care of the Qa' Doth for personality rehabilitation.

"Qo' Doth Te' Ymel."

The voice of VenQa' Ja' Ytaj startled her out of her reverie of guilt and regret. She rotated the seat in the center to face the entrance where the VenQa' was standing. She rose out of respect. "For the glory of the Vendoth, I am here to serve, VenQa'".

"I have brought the inferior species females for interrogation," Ja' Ytaj informed her.

Did the VenQa' sense the shame of her subversive musings? With her heritage, training and bearing at the forefront of her thoughts, Te' Ymel moved up to face the VenQa' and take the remote minutiae viewer he proffered. "I will do my utmost as Qo' Doth to subdue the inferiors, VenQa'".

Ja' Ytaj smiled showing all of his teeth. "Would that I had that pleasure for myself." He glanced inside the turbolift and gestured with his weapon. Three of the inferior females emerged without a word.

Te' Ymel drew her own weapon. "I take custody of the inferiors and will punish resistance with all due alacrity."

Ja' Ytaj flashed his predatory grin once more before the turbolift whisked him away from Te' Ymel and her work.

Te' Ymel arrested eye contact with each of her prisoners. Then with her weapon she herded them to the front of the 'bridge' to stand before the vision window. Demonstrating her nonchalance regarding any threat from the inferior females, Te' Ymel strode to the seat in the center with her back to the captives. Let them dare attack a Vendoth and earn the consequence.

She sat and watched as they tensed as one. Satisfactory. The seat was obviously a symbol of supreme authority on this vessel and her place in it made her intent to the inferiors as clear as the vacuum between the stars. Now to begin their education in the superior way of their masters. "I am Te' Ymel. Qo' Doth of Ja' Xua' Hai of the Vendoth. The Vendoth are the ideal society. We merge intelligence and a warrior spirit." She looked directly at the first one to her left and had to hide a shock of surprise at seeing the same intelligent warrior spirit in the inferior's eyes blazing back at her.

"We are the supreme driving force in the Kalium Galaxy. We thrive on study and knowledge." Looking at the next inferior she saw her studying Te' Ymel with equally passionate scrutiny.

"Our strict codes of conduct make our society function as one. Severe retribution is justified for any infraction of our codes." The look in the third inferior's eyes told her this one had a disciplined mind and keen intellect.

How could inferiors like these even hold a stare with a Vendoth for one second? Yet these females never dropped their gaze from hers. "Inferiors benefit from our example and we are here in your galaxy to educate you in the proper ways of social organization. Any disrespect or resistance shown to a Vendoth, either individually or as a group, earns justice." And the words tasted dry as a lie on her tongue.

I am Vendoth, Te' Ymel reprimanded herself fiercely. Apart from us there is no species more superior. She took a moment to scan the contents of the remote minutiae viewer. It contained VenQa' Ja' Omoq's instructions and information on the inferior females. The information had been competently compiled by the Qa' Doth of Ja' Xua' Hai. She compared their visual facsimiles with the three females standing before her. She regarded the one with the fiery eyes. "Our information indicates you are VenQi'. What are you called?"

"I am Lieutenant Commander Bonnie Holmyard, Chief Communications Officer," the inferior female responded, "service number AZ523-2871."

Te' Ymel nodded. The inferior female was being truthful since the information on the RMV matched her account. "Your experience as VenQi' will serve the Vendoth well.

"I serve Starfleet," Holmyard shot back.

"Resistance reaps justice," Te' Ymel reminded her. Inferiors sometimes took a span of time to accept the natural order. She dismissed Holmyard's defiance as the drawback of her inferior psyche and moved next to the one with the gentle eyes and curious mind. "You are Qa' Doth. You are called...?"

"Lieutenant Commander Debbie Chilton, Chief Xenologist, service number MA565-4120."

These inferiors displayed a surprising discipline in their uniform responses.

Next was the one with the ordered thoughts. "You are Qo' Doth as am I. You are called...?"

"Lieutenant Debbie Titus-George, Chief Records Officer, service number EV222-6859."

Te' Ymel suppressed a gasp. It was not possible. "Your name is similar to that of the VenQa' of this vessel."

Titus-George frowned in puzzlement. "Do you mean the Commodore? He is my husband."

It was Te' Ymel's turn to frown in puzzlement although the inferior females lacked the intelligence to recognize a Vendoth frown, she was certain, so there was no need to disguise it. "You are VenQa' George's

mate?" No Vendoth would ever willingly deliver his mate to his enemies. She took a moment to martial her thoughts. VenQi' . Qa' Doth. Qo' Doth. VenQa' Ja' Ytaj' s choice of inferiors for interrogation was prudent. One to refine communications between Vendoth and inferior. One to understand Vendoth superiority. And the last one possessed the knowledge Te' Ymel needed to succeed. She returned her scrutiny to the inferior Qo' Doth. "We are unable to harvest the database of this vessel. Our information indicates you have designed a paradigm that obstructs our efforts. You will now remove that paradigm."

Titus-George shook her head. Te' Ymel read it as resistant negation. "I can't do that."

"You designed the paradigm. Therefore you can remove it."

"It would be disastrous to remove that ' paradigm.' "

Exactng the justice for resistance would be counterproductive since this inferior female was the key to the paradigm. Te' Ymel made an attempt at reason. "Your fate as an inferior species is academic. The mastery of the Vendoth would not mean disaster for your species."

"Te' Ymel, you are missing the point", Holmyard spoke up.

"You will address me as Qo' Doth!"

Holmyard crossed her arms behind her back. "If you will address me as Lieutenant Commander... Te' Ymel."

The unthinkable resistance fueled the fire in her Vendoth heart. If her task to obtain the inferior' s database were not so crucial, all three of these females would be made an example to the rest of their species. No one resists the Vendoth and escapes justice. Te' Ymel looked at the inferior Qa' Doth and was amazed to see her still studying her. "What is it you find interesting..." try the inferior' s name, "...Chilton?"

"I' ve never seen your people before, Te' Ymel," Chilton answered. "My job is to observe first contacts and establish open lines of communication."

"You would communicate with those who are your masters?" Te' Ymel queried, her curiosity overriding her caution to remain Vendoth in demeanor.

"The way I see it, today' s' masters' are tomorrow' s friends," Chilton replied.

"Friends," Te' Ymel repeated. "How can the superior befriend the inferior?"

"By the desire to help the inferior become the equal of the superior so there is no difference between the two," Chilton explained, "and in my experience there have been several occasions where the inferior helped the superior. Mutual help goes a long way to cementing friendships."

"Would you help me obtain your database?"

Chilton' s lips tightened. "Would having our database help or hurt you is the question. I can help you best by keeping you safe from our database which would most certainly hurt you if you obtained it."

"The Vendoth have no need of the protection of inferiors."

"Since you' re so superior, then," Holmyard spoke up, "why don' t you just take our database like you did the Powell' and Hawking' s?"

Te' Ymel could sense when the tide of battle was turning in her disfavor. "Your database cannot hurt me for I am Vendoth." Then an inspiration came to her. "But, I will most certainly suffer hurt when I am punished for not obtaining your database as instructed."

The three inferior females looked at each other. Their tacit communication seemed to culminate in a consensus. Titus-George took one step forward. "I will disarm my protocols so you can have our database, Te' Ymel. We can' t allow another person be hurt by our inaction."

And that is why you are inferior, Te' Ymel pondered. "Proceed, Qo' Doth."

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"I have a nearly fool-proof plan of escape, Commodore," Blasberg whispered.

George glanced in the direction of the Vendoth guards. They were distracted by the enclave of Vendoth near the Guardian of Forever. Something was definitely afoot and it didn' t look like a game. "I' m open to suggestions at this point, Number One."

Blasberg gestured the others near. Riley, Molina, Makofsky and... Barker... all leaned closer. "First we distract the guards. Then one of us gets near the Guardian and asks to see Terra' a past. When the right time appears he' ll jump through. There in the past he leaves a message for Starfleet Command to be opened at the appropriate time. Starfleet receives the message a month or two ago and pre-positions the fleet to stop these Vendoth from being rude guests pre facto de facto."

"I liked all of it except the very first part, Number One," George said.

"Distracting the guards?" Blasberg asked. "Yes, that is the one flaw in my nearly fool-proof plan."

"That flaw may get one or all of us injured or worse," Riley pointed out. "The score may be in our favor in the long run but in the short run we lose."

George eased himself to a more comfortable position. "I have a plan of my own and it too is nearly fool-proof."

"And you were going to tell us about this plan when?" Blasberg asked.

"Just now," George replied. "As a matter of fact if I read my Vendoths correctly, the plan is working perfectly so far."

"You mean it's already in effect?" Molina asked. "I wonder which part of it makes it nearly fool-proof?"

"The part I have no control over," George explained. "The vaunted Vendoth superiority which also coincidentally is what I'm counting on to make the plan work."

"DHTS regards your plan with great interest," Barker said. "We can include the details in our situation report."

George closed his eyes in reflection. "I'll keep the details to myself. The less people who know the plan are the less people who know the plan -- the Vendoth in particular. Their reaction to my plan would be unkind to say the least."

"DHTS assesses that the Vendoth are unconcerned with any plans we may or may not have in effect," Barker noted. "The plans of the Vendoth are absolute insurance that any other plan will fail."

"Spoken like a true renegade," Blasberg scoffed, "and that is an oxymoron if I ever said one."

"Commander, don't judge Barker too harshly," Molina rose to Barker's defense. "I read the accounts of his performance at Starfleet Academy and completely understand why he is the way he is. Barker is not Starfleet material. He is alien to his own kind. But, he does appear to be perfect DHTS material."

Barker met Molina's gaze with something undefinable in his expression. "DHTS employees must conform to an arch-typical profile. This is no different from Starfleet officers."

The Vendoth enclave dispersed at that point and VenQa' Ja' Omoq pointed in their direction. The Vendoth guards responded by priming their weapons and moving for the Starfleet crew and Barker.

"Follow!" the lead guard commanded.

"We have to stall for time," George whispered to them. "My plan is working but hasn't worked yet."

"I hope we have time to stall for time," Blasberg said.

"Silence!" the lead guard snapped and his weapon punctuated the command with an exclamation point.

The Starfleet officers fell in step behind the lead guard while the rest of the Vendoth guards closed in behind them. They paraded the cluster over to face VenQa' Ja' Omoq before the Guardian of Forever.

"Show me the past!" Ja' Omoq demanded.

The Guardian remained silent.

"Do not resist!" Ja' Omoq pressed.

The Guardian's stony lack of response mocked Ja' Omoq's demands.

A Vendoth stepped forward and muttered something in his VenQa' s ear.

Ja' Omoq backhanded the subordinate and snarled. But, he grumbled something unintelligible and turned back to the Guardian. "Guardian, will you show me the past?"

"BEHOLD! A GATEWAY TO YOUR OWN PAST IF YOU WISH."

The milky maelstrom of time misted over the Guardian's aperture. When it cleared images warred with each other for dominance.

"Not Vendoth past you stupid device!" Ja' Omoq raged. "I want to see the past of these inferior aborts! Vendoth scenes remained within the temporal portal.

Ja' Omoq turned to the Starfleet officers. "Since this device ~~resists~~ resists to cooperate, you will now show me the past of your worlds!"

A guard prodded George but he remained silent and unmoving.

"You WILL now show me the past of your worlds!" Ja' Omoq snarled. "If you resist, the justice of your inferiority will be executed."

"Oh, my," Blasberg moaned. "He said the 'e' word." A blow from the butt of a Vendoth weapon made a cracking sound on Blasberg's skull. He collapsed in a heap.

"Stop!" George shouted. Then, regaining command of himself, "VenQa', why do you want to see our past?"

Ja' Omoq moved to confront George. "We await the arrival of the rest of our fleet. I will secure our victory before they arrive and my glory in our history will be endless. I will do this by wiping out your

history and therefore you inferior stain in this galaxy."

"Warrior to warrior, VenQa' ," George said, "we will not cooperate."

Ja' Omoq raised a paw to administer Vendoth justice for George' s resistance. He held back and his eyes narrowed in thought. "You will cooperate or one by one your inferior crew will be sent through this device to OUR past where the justice for your resistance will be doubly executed."

George looked at each of his crew. He read their support in their determined expressions... except Barker who was as inscrutable as ever. "Better to die in your past, VenQa' , than cause ours to be destroyed."

Ja' Omoq looked like he was about to explode in an apoplexy of anger. Instead he pointed at Barker. "Him. Now."

A guard gripped Barker from behind by both arms and shoved him towards the Guardian. "DHTS cannot be held responsible for the unprofitable consequences of this grave mistake," he said as evenly as if he were commenting on a change in the weather.

"IN!" Ja' Omoq bellowed and the Vendoth guard flung Barker through the Guardian into the Vendoth past.

"Looks like Barker ran out of stalling time," Blasberg quipped with the pain from his battered head evident through the levity.

"Now, SHOW me your past!" Ja' Omoq reiterated.

George shook his head. "Our choice remains unchanged, VenQa' ."

Ja' Omoq did strike George then, knocking the Commodore flat on his back.

"Pendejo!" Molina shot, and lunged for Ja' Omoq who straightarmed the security chief' s charge. Molina' s sternum cracked with the impact.

"Him!" Ja' Omoq selected and pointed at the downed Molina.

Before the guards could hoist Molina and toss him through the Guardian, Ja' Omoq' s communications box chirped. "VenQa' Ja' Omoq, this is Qo' Doth Te' Ymel."

Ja' Omoq activated the box. "Speak!"

"The database harvest is commencing."

Ja' Omoq grinned- all teeth showing. "Excellent." A wicked glimmer shone through his eyes. "Bring those inferior females to me when the harvest is concluded. I can make productive use of them here."

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Qo' Doth Te' Ymel was superb in her profession. She had meticulously organized the harvesting of this database so that life support and communications would be the last systems to lose functionality after their operating systems were emptied and sent to Ja' Xua' Hai for storage and study. Life support would fail, then she would contact Ja' Xua' Hai for evacuation right before communication failed. She would ensure the three inferior females accompany her long enough to teleport them to the planet as VenQa' Ja' Omoq instructed. Te' Ymel forced back thoughts wondering if the inferior females would live long after that.

"Weapons systems failure in five... four... three... two... one," Titus-George called out seated next to her Vendoth master. "Weapons database now transferred to Ja' Xua' Hai. Defense systems failure in five... four... three... two... one."

Te' Ymel could not quiet her curiosity any longer. "Tell me, Qo' Doth, how do you feel watching your vessel die by your own hand?"

"Better our unprotected database transfers to your ship than to leave it on mine," Titus-George replied. "Sensor systems failure in five... four... three... two... one... I protect my ship by removing the threat of the database in this paradigm?"

"How can a database threaten a ship?" Te' Ymel scoffed. Inferior indeed! Still, it was a shame to disable such a beautiful vessel in spite of its inferior designers. She shook her head in unconscious imitation of Chilton.

"You like *Excalibur*, don' t you, Te' Ymel," Chilton said.

Was the inferior a telepath? "*Excalibur*?" Te' Ymel hedged.

"Engineering systems failure in five... four... three... two... one..."

"This ship," Chilton said. "I can tell you like it... and us."

"The Vendoth harbor no liking for inferiors," Te' Ymel challenged, but a trickle of alarm crept up her spine.

"You say that," Chilton pressed, "but your eyes tell the truth, Te' Ymel."

"Medical systems failure in five... four... three... two... one..."

"My eyes cannot speak," Te' Ymel returned. "How can the inferior 'hear' the eyes of the Vendoth?"

"It's my job to observe first contacts," Chilton shrugged.

"Transporter systems failure in five... four... three... two... one..."

Te' Ymel felt an irrational wave of relief. Only two systems remained to fail as programmed -- life support and communications.

"Can't wait to get rid of us, Te' Ymel?" Holmyard probed.

"You cannot know the Vendoth," Te' Ymel said and silently urged the net to the last system to fail at a more rapid time-span.

"I'm a Starfleet communications officer," Holmyard returned. "I am proficient in thousands of communications media -- including what we call 'body language.' As a result, I don't need to know what each species thinks to know what they are thinking. I just read the physical hints prompted by the hidden thoughts. Your 'body language' screams the fact that we have gotten under your skin and you'd rather be anywhere else than with us."

Te' Ymel self-consciously felt every part of her body. How could this inferior VenQi' know her secrets so lucidly? "I have not been successful in educating you on the natural order of life. You continue to deny Vendoth superiority proving how inferior you are. I merely wish to release you to the those who know the precise methods of inferior education."

"Like this VenQa' Ja' Omoq?" Chilton asked. "Do you really believe he has our best interests in mind or is he the most expedient means to put us out of your misery. And if you're so superior, how can you admit defeat to inferiors like us?"

Fail... Fail... Fail! Te' Ymel desperately prodded the life support systems. "The disposition of inferiors do not concern me. I concentrate on databases."

"Databases are safer than inferiors," Titus-George said. "A database cannot harm your peace of mind like we have."

Te' Ymel stabbed a comm-link control. "Qo' Doth Te' Ymel to Ja' Xua' Hai. Status!"

"But you couldn't be more wrong," Titus-George continued. "I think you will find our company more secure than that of the database we just uploaded to your ship."

There was no answer from Ja' Xua' Hai. Was there no escape?

"Life support systems failure in five... four... three... two... one..." Titus-George reported.

"Qo' Doth Te' Ymel to Ja' Xua' Hai. Status!"

The comm-link remained silent.

"VenQi', assist!" Te' Ymel commanded. "We must contact Ja' Xua' Hai or we die here!"

Holmyard seated herself at the communications station. "Expanding subspace scan parameters to all frequency spectrums. There's some chatter on a sideband. Do you want to hear it?"

"YES!"

"Ja' Xui' Nho Ja' Xua' Hai. Cease fire! Why do you attack us?"

"Ja' Xui' Chao to Ja' Xua' Hai. Cease your attack or will open fire!"

"Ja' Xua' Hai to VenQa' Ja' Omoq. Emergency! Systems are out of control! We are destroying..."

And the comm-link went silent.

"Incoming transmission," Holmyard reported.

"Receive!" Te' Ymel demanded.

"I don't think..." Holmyard began.

"RECEIVE!" Te' Ymel bellowed and drew her weapon to amplify her command.

"Receiving," Holmyard continued, "but it's not a voice transmission. It's a datastream and it's infiltrating outside communications subsystems throughout the ship."

Chaos blossomed on the bridge. Panels activated and deactivated insanely. A cacophony erupted from the speakers. The vessel shuddered as if possessed. A monitor came to life briefly in front of Te' Ymel and she gasped. "That is Vendoth script! How..."

Titus-George let her hands dance over her console. "We seem to have a new database for all the good it will do us. It's completely alien to our interfaces. It's causing catastrophic malfunctions in all the systems it is trying to access."

"The database is not alien," Te' Ymel negated. "It is superior. It is Vendoth. Your inferior systems are overloading."

"I believe the Emfive Virus has returned home with a vengeance," Titus-George surmised.

"A' AUE' K BTHBI' YXI' G U' I' SP GVCHA' E' TEB!"

"What in the name of Abboris is that?" Chilton asked.

"It is Vendoth computer language," Te' Ymel' s voice quavered as he spoke. "Your inferior intellect cannot fathom it. It is saying this vessel' s warp core is overloading and a detonation is imminent."

"Well your superior intellect is gonna get blown to quantum dust along with our inferior intellect," Holmyard noted.

"Communications systems failure in five... four... three... two... one..." Titus read *Excalibur'* epitaph.

"We must escape!" Te' Ymel said.

"We can' t," Titus George informed her. "Transporters are offline. The shuttlebay is locked out. The escape pods are non-responsive. All thanks to your superior database and your superior plan to rape ours."

"Do something!"

"We can' t do anything...", Holmyard said evenly, "...alone. Together we can survive if we work as a team."

"What do you say, Te' Ymel?" Chilton added. "Are you willing to lower yourself from your high and mighty superior Vendothisms and work WITH us lowly inferiors to save your superior skin?"

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"Ja' Xua' Hai to VenQa' Ja' Omoq. Emergency! Systems are out of control. We are destroying..."

"That does not sound good," Molina whispered.

"On the contrary," George said. "It sounds good because my fool-proof plan must be coming to a cusp."

"Doctor Alexander-Riley has a hypo that will cure that," Blasberg said. "You know, there' s still time to try my nearly fool-proof plan."

"Toby has a cracked rib cage," George recounted, "I have a fractured jaw and you have a cranial sprain, Number One. That leaves just Riley and he may be awesome but he is not indestructible."

"We can' t just sit here!" Blasberg fumed.

"Yes, we can," George countered. "Wait for my plan to culminate."

"' Cusp,' now ' culminate,' " Blasberg repeated. "Did you eat a thesaurus for breakfast, Commodore?"

"I didn' t get to b Commodore using monosyllables, Number One."

Ja' Omoq disrupted further banter by storming over, weapon drawn, charged and aimed. "George! Order your vessel to cease its attack!"

George stood slowly, ignoring the pain in his jaw. "We' re in no position or condition to attack, VenQa' . By now, *Excalibur* has no operating system and all systems are offline."

"Then Who attacks my battle group!?"

"My guess is the database you stole from us is attacking your battle group," George informed him.

"A database!?" Ja' Omoa raged. "That is impossible! The delusion of an inferior mind!"

"You' re right," George said. "It' s not the database itself. It' s a virus embedded in every byte of that database that is assaulting your battle group."

"A virus!" Ja' Omoq sneered ferally. "You KNEW about this virus and didn' t warn us?"

"We knew about the virus," George admitted. "We' ve battled with it since *Excalibur* was launched. I' m sure we tried to warn you too but your superiority wasn' t listening to our inferiority."

"You will reap justice for this act of treasonous resistance!" Ja' Omoq vowed.

"We committed no such act," George protested. "You acted to steal our database. We complied. Could we help it if the virus that infects it activated on board your ship? Seems to me the assault on your battle group is self-inflicted."

Ja' Omoq' s weapon was in George' s ~~flouzzing~~ flouzzing with lethal potential. "You will pay the price for the total loss of the Vendoth battle group, George!"

"Why should I pay the price for the merchandise you bought, VenQa' ?" George pointed out. "Why should you exact justice on inferiors who did nothing more than give you exactly what you asked for... and deserved?"

Ja' Omoq seethed visibly. "You WILL be executed! Your crew consigned to the Vendoth past to live their lives as inferiors in Vendoth society."

"And after that... with no ships to take you away from here?" George asked. "Or will you use the Guardian to return to your own past and live out your days in shame for your failure here!"

"DIE!" Ja' Omoq screamed and squeezed the trigger on his weapon.

A ball of energy sizzled in the dry air of the Guardian' s planet. Ja' Omoq writhed in agonizing spasms and dropped to the ground insensate. More bolts of energy struck each of the Vendoth guards and soon the entire contingent lay unconscious at the Starfleet officers' feet.

"Anyone call the cavalry?" Holmyard asked as she, Chilton and Titus-George strolled up, each brandishing a Vendoth weapon.

"Bonnie!" Blasberg exclaimed. "Am I glad to see you!"

"And you' re not glad to see me?" Chilton asked.

Blasberg took Chilton in his arms and expressed his relief at their reunion in an intimately physical manner. "Does that answer your question."

"Report, Commander Holmyard!" George said. "How did you manage to escape and save our hides?"

"It' s a long story, Commodore," Holmyard said, a grin splitting her jaw. "Let' s just say we taught the Vendoth that Humans are a force to be reckoned with in spite of our inferiority."

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"Starfleet needs an explanation, Commodore."

George looked across the briefing room table, wishing for the billionth time it was on *Excalibur* and not *Potempkin*. But at least his crew was safe on board *Potempkin* since *Excalibur* was uninhabitable. The major players had gathered in the briefing room for a debrief by Admiral Hunter. "Commander Holmyard, would you please explain to Admiral Hunter how you managed to escape and rescue us?"

"Gladly, Commodore," Holmyard replied. "We crawled through the Jeffries Tubes to the shuttlebay. Then we launched in the warpshuttle *Meridian*."

"Did you have to use the Commodore' s personal yacht?" Blasberg complained.

"And did you have to blast open the hangar deck doors?" Riley added.

"Yes and yes," Holmyard nodded. "We had to use the best computer from all of the craft on the hangar deck. The Emfive virus in the Vendoth database was causing a warp core overload. Lieutenant Titus-George and Qo' Doth Te' Ymel worked together to establish Emfive Containment Protocols in the Vendoth database. Then we had to get out of the hangar deck. The hangar deck doors were shut and had to be opened manually by phaser."

"And then..." Hunter prompted.

"We piloted over to the Vendoth vessel Ja' Xua' Hai and boarded it," Holmyard continued. "The Emfive Virus had vented the atmosphere and spaced the vessel. The crew was dead. With Te' Ymel' s assistance we secured weapons and took *Meridian* to the surface of the Guardian' s planet. We landed out of sight of the Vendoth squad. Then we surprised them and disabled them using their own weapons."

"So this Vendoth defected and rendered assistance," Hunter summarized, looking at Te' Ymel. "Starfleet will keep that in mind as a favorable factor. What happened to the other two Vendoth ships?"

"When the Emfive Virus activated aboard Ja' Xua' Hai," Titus-George picked up the account, "it acted as if it were still on *Excalibur*. When the ship is in crisis and the Emfive Virus is not contained, it acts to destroy the ship by any means necessary. It got creative by attacking the other two Vendoth ships with Ja' Xua' Hai' s own weapons provoking an attack. When the ships counterattacked and threatened the survival of the Emfive Virus, it destroyed them to protect itself since one of its primary directives is survival. After that, it spaced the ship, killing all the crew."

"So, how did it get back aboard *Excalibur*?" Commodore Yurcsak, *Potempkin*' s commanding officer asked.

"As more demands on computer processors developed during the short battle, the Emfive Virus needed more memory space," Titus-George answered. "It extracted the Vendoth database and downloaded it across the comm-link to *Excalibur*. Of course the Vendoth database was infected with the Emfive Virus."

"This Emfive Virus was a very convenient tool, then," Hunter observed.

"For once, it worked in our favor by working as programmed," George agreed. "I knew it was the only remaining weapon in our arsenal after our surrender. The tricky part was convincing the Vendoth to do precisely what we wanted them to do. The best way to get an enemy to do that is to resist giving them what they ask for until you surrender and give them what they ask for. The Vendoth thought they had won until they lost. It' s also convenient you tasked *Excalibur* with this mission since she is the only Starfleet starship infected with the Emfive Virus." "Two conveniences equals one coincidence, I always say," Blasberg

said.

"If I were the suspicious type, I'd say the whole thing was a conspiracy from the start," George said. "As for the rest, we used the communications system on *Meridian* to contact Starfleet for rescue."

"Humans are devious, deceitful and indomitable," Te' Ymel said. "The Vendoth have never encountered their like in the Kalium Galaxy. We had no idea an inferior species could be so unpredictable and deceptive."

"Your superiority was your Achilles Heal," Molina explained. He saw Te' Ymel's puzzled expression. "Your attitude of superiority blinded you to any other way of thinking -- especially ours. It became the flaw we used to defeat you."

Te' Ymel nodded. "The rest of our invasion force have no idea what they will face when they arrive. If I may ask, what will you do with VenQa' Ja' Omoq and the rest of my people?"

"They're in sick bay on the *Tempest* in stasis," Hunter told her. "The *Tempest* will take them to Starfleet Command for interrogation. But, they will be treated well, I assure you."

Te' Ymel relaxed in her seat. "And me?"

George met her gaze. "You've shown a willingness to help us. Do you still want to?"

Te' Ymel looked at Holmyard, Chilton and Titus George. "I have learned there is benefit in mutual cooperation. Just as I have learned the inferior can befriend the superior. Yes, I will assist you because we are now 'friends.' "

George checked Admiral Hunter and got his nod of approval. "*Potempkin* is towing *Excalibur* to Memory Alpha. The *Valiant* has the Vendoth vessel in tow heading for the same destination. At Memory Alpha we will download the Vendoth database to the facility there and extract *Excalibur's* database back from the Ja' Xua' Hai. We will need an expert in Vendoth databases as we study it and I'm certain that Lieutenant Titus-George will appreciate your assistance."

"You are staying on this Memory Alpha?" Te' Ymel asked Titus George.

"I will have to," she answered. "I am Starfleet's expert on Emfive Virus control. I'll need to be there to keep it contained while Starfleet studies the infected Vendoth database."

"Starfleet will find that study invaluable as we plan our defense against the impending Vendoth invasion," Hunter noted. "Forewarned is forearmed. There is one final matter to clear up. Starfleet will owe an explanation to Discrete High Technology Systems for the loss of their operative."

"Barker is trapped in the Vendoth past," George explained. "I'm not certain if he can be rescued."

"We'll leave that decision up to DHTS," Hunter said. "They have the resources to mount a rescue if they desire. And Starfleet will offer assistance at their request."

"Good riddance, I say," Blasberg huffed. "Black Barker is history!"

"Be careful what you wish for, Number One," George cautioned. "After all, history repeats itself all the time."

## THE EXCALIBUR'S CREW

NAME: Walter Scott George  
RANK: Commodore  
BORN 23805.24  
BIRTHPLACE Dover, Ohio, USA, NA, Terra  
APPEARANCE  
EYES: Blue HAIR: Blond HEIGHT: 5' 6" WEIGHT: 150 lbs.

Integrity is George's most valued trait which prompts him to be fairminded. He stringently maintains high self standards and expects others to match or exceed same. He possesses a dry, wry sense of humor and looks for the comedy inherent in the idiosyncrasies of language. He rarely laughs even when he considers something to be humorous. His demeanor is neutral in all situations but emotions are intense and run deep. It is said of George that lack of a frown is as good as a smile from him. He has fostered introspection and honed it to an art form but his creativity is best displayed spur-of-the-moment and/or off-the-cuff. He is religious along Judeo-Christian dogma and is compassionate and empathetic (note: not 'empathic'), more than sympathetic, as a benefit of his faith. He is quick to trust even when betrayed previously. He prefers to simplify life by not complicating things. He is, however, easily made righteously indignant and must enforce moderation upon himself sometimes. George stresses clear communications and is easily frustrated with himself when others misunderstand. His temper fuse is moderate but not long. Self-control is practiced but not perfected. He is instinctively pessimistic, sometimes taking himself too seriously. Thus, he has a tendency to brood. He dislikes confrontation but recognizes the infrequent necessity of it. George is a conscientious Starfleet commander, ever mindful of his responsibilities to his crew, his ship and the Federation. His self-sacrifice is uncompromising even to the point of taking the brunt of the risks inherent in space exploration. Were it not for Blasberg's commitment to Starfleet policy to safeguard the ship's commander, The Commodore would assign himself to every away team to spare his crew the risks.

NAME Daniel Christopher Blasberg, Junior  
RANK: Captain  
BORN 26011.02  
BIRTHPLACE Galion, Ohio, USA, NA, Terra  
APPEARANCE  
EYES: Hazel HAIR: Brown HEIGHT: 5' 11" WEIGHT: 170 lbs.

Bullheaded is the best word to sum up Blasberg's eccentricities. He possesses a keen intelligence, and unquenchable ambition with a touch of arrogance. He is sly without being overtly dishonest. His ability to read body language borders on the psionic. He is an avid defender of the underdog though somewhat blind to deception. Once his loyalty and respect are won you cannot find a more faithful friend but woe to the one to whom no respect is deemed worthy. He is aggravatingly witty (don't give him an opening or suffer the consequences). He enjoys telling, being and causing a good joke. His unpredictable approach to life makes him a loose cannon. He has a long temper fuse but when it blows it BLOWS. He can and will push himself to all the limits but pays for it after the fact. Blasberg has the chronic fortune to passively attract adverse situations with a knack for surviving them smelling like a rose. His catch phrases are spoken from the heart, i.e. "With all due respect...", "Minor details..." and "No problem...".

Blasberg is somewhat unseasoned as a Starfleet officer where deep space duty is concerned. Excalibur is only his second deep space assignment. Commodore George mentors Blasberg's seasoning most carefully, firm in the belief that the bullheaded Blasberg is well worth the aggravation and effort.

NAME James Edward Makofsky  
RANK: Commander/Chief Science Officer  
BORN 25912.23  
BIRTHPLACE Wheeling, West Virginia, USA, NA, Terra  
APPEARANCE  
EYES: Blue HAIR: Blond HEIGHT: 6' 0" WEIGHT: 140 lbs.

Makofsky is the ship's clown, a real entertainer aheart. Impersonations are his forte. He is soft spoken and

intelligent. Explanations are only needed once for him to completely understand a matter be it technical, tactical or personal. His nature is one of extreme sensitivity thus, if he has a temper no one knows it. He has never been known, or at least seen to lose his cool. Often it appears he does not take life seriously and seems genuinely surprised when tragedy strikes. His outlook on life is obtuse. He definitely marches to the beat of a different drummer. No one knows much more about him unless he reveals his private thoughts and feelings in confidence. His sense of humor is his best defense and first attack.

Makofsky is an exemplary Starfleet officer. His performance as science officer on the bridge is a true asset to operations. All he really lacks is a little more ambition and motivation, being content instead to be merely the science officer. Passing the Kobayashi Maru recently has done somewhat to boost his confidence in that regard.

NAME Timothy Mark Riley

RANK: Commander - Chief Engineer

BORN 25007.06

BIRTHPLACE Saugerties, New York, USA, NA, Terra

APPEARANCE

EYES: Brown HAIR: Brown HEIGHT: 6' 0" WEIGHT: 180 lbs.

Riley is everyone's self-appointed big brother. He is practical, honest (therefore disliking dishonesty and hypocrisy) and open-minded. He laughs readily and can spin a pretty good yarn. Being of Irish descent is the biggest reason for this. He will not speak unless he has something concrete to say though he is not beyond spreading a little blarney here and there. He is willing to be friendly, enjoying many acquaintances but owning few close friends. Riley likes his personal life kept private and simple even to the point of denying that complications exist. He is a one woman man even though he recognizes his physical attractiveness to many women. He is religious along Judeo-Christian dogma which prompts him to be patient to the extreme. He is big hearted but able to be deeply wounded and must curb a natural tendency to seek retribution. He will only be double-crossed once though everyone gets one chance... only. He tends to put his temper on a slow simmer and is quietly but dangerously angered.

Riley is a dedicated Starfleet officer with unshakeable confidence his abilities when he is in familiar territory, physically and mentally. The unknown is, therefore, a real frontier for him and a challenge to his confidence, one which he is more than capable to explore in spite of his self-deprecation.

NAME Deborah M. Chilton

RANK: Lt. Commander - Chief Xenologist

BORN 26105.05

BIRTHPLACE Geneva, Switzerland, Europe, Terra

APPEARANCE

EYES: Blue HAIR: Brown HEIGHT: 5' 9" WEIGHT: 130 lbs.

From her Academy days on, one comment is common from Lieutenant Chilton's superiors: "She is a whiz at alien languages." This is, decidedly, an underestimate of her strongest talent. Though not psionic in any way, she is able to pinpoint the innate pathos in the xenolife she encounters. This is largely due to her ability to listen to the voiced thoughts of any being and hear what is not being said through what is being said. In effect, Chilton UNDERSTANDS almost any alien life form she encounters. To accomplish this, she must leave her inner self vulnerable to the sentiments in the other being. This is taxing to her mental stability and she has been known to identify so completely with the plight or pleasure of other beings she almost appears alien herself as a consequence. Even so, she maintains her sense of self-identity and has never 'gone native' so far that she cannot disentangle her self from mission completion. At times, she seems to withdraw from the world, but this is only to shore up her inner defenses after each passionate contact with alien life.

Chilton's outlook on life is a study in extremes. Life can be all-too-rosy one moment and a crisis the next. Her friends, as much as possible, anchor her to the moderation of these extremes. Among her friends (the few close ones she maintains) she is known affectionately as 'Mushy broad' but herself is uncomfortable when 'mushy' sentiments are directed towards her. She tends to be a worrier as well, but this is only out of a sincere concern for the well-being of others.

Chilton is stubborn and does not often like to go strictly by the book. Her reason for this is simple: "When

was the last time YOU met a textbook alien?" She has never expressed any desire to take on a command of her own. Rather, she maintains she is quite satisfied to remain in her chosen field.

Chilton is a promising Starfleet officer, impressionable to the right influences, eager to improve even her already acceptable character traits. Expectations are high in command circles that Chilton will be a definitive element in the contact of races yet to encounter the United Federation of Planets.

NAME Bonnie Holmyard

RANK: Lt. Commander - Communications Officer

BORN 33801.20

BIRTHPLACE San Francisco, California, USA, NA, Terra

APPEARANCE

EYES: Blue HAIR: Brown HEIGHT: 5' 7.5" WEIGHT: 150 lbs.

Holmyard is a paradox within a paradox. The paradox of her personality is obvious: confident, assured, self-possessed, intelligent, astute, gregarious, vivacious, dauntless, courageous; this is Holmyard. However, she is also dubious, skeptical, shrewd, ambivalent, impassive and at times unapproachable. She relies heavily upon her Vulcan training to conceal the ambiguities of her disposition, and most times succeeds. Acknowledging the faults of her own character, she does not allow herself to judge others but is brutally honest in her unprejudiced assessments.

The paradox she finds herself in is not so easily explained. As the stardates above attest, Holmyard is a 24th century Starfleet officer who finds herself trapped in the 23rd century courtesy of the entity known as the Q Continuum. Thus, she finds herself constantly challenged by the dictates of the Prime Directive, in that she must not allow details of the 24th century to become knowledgeable to her 23rd century crewmates. Add to the dilemma the fact that she is of Human/Betazoid heritage and the paradox become two-fold, in that the planet Betazed has not been discovered in the 23rd century. Therefore, she hides her inherent Betazoid empathic abilities.

Through it all, Holmyard's devotion to Starfleet is constant. She is an exemplary officer but does not blindly follow orders. She need not be called upon to take the initiative, but when she does, she makes split second decisions accurately and unequivocally

NAME Toby Octaviano Molina

RANK: Lt. Commander - Chief Security Officer

BORN 26508.16

BIRTHPLACE Kyle, Texas, USA, NA, Terra

APPEARANCE

EYES: Black HAIR: Black HEIGHT: 5' 6" WEIGHT: 170 lbs.

"It is a rare occasion to see Molina without a smile." This is the most common comment made on his evaluations by commanding officers throughout his career. Other comments made are "rock solid", "ever loyal", "highest caliber", "destined for starship command". To date, there has been nothing in Molina's performance of duty to contradict any of these accolades. He is even tempered yet good natured. He is always willing to lend a helping hand, even while off duty. Self-admittedly, he is not a talkative person, rather preferring to observe others at work and assess them by the fruit of their labors. If anything, he does not explain himself to the fullest. He has a honed and instinctive talent for subterfuge, which made him the top security cadet in his class.

Molina is one of the few whose life is divided between his career in Starfleet and his family homesteaded on Terra. For him it is not a question of which he loves more, for his family would be his first and only choice every time. It is because he loves his family so much that he is so dedicated to making his Starfleet career one of distinction and excellence. For Molina, Starfleet is the best occupation he could ever wish for, and keeping it provides support for his much beloved family, and the satisfaction of performing his duty to the utmost of his ability.

Molina is being groomed and mentored specifically for starship command. His career is being followed with keen interest from the highest levels of both Starfleet Command and the Federation Council. His assignments are hand picked by a committee whose purpose is to oversee the career of the creme de la creme of Starfleet Academy graduates. His assignments, therefore, are not dependent on the random selection of assignments branch computer. If he is picked to be on a certain ship, The Committee (as it is

called) has every good reason for placing him there, and every good reason to keep the reason for a particular placement extremely close hold.

**THE U.S.S. EXCALIBUR**

