

BELONGING

By Rahadyan Sastrowardoyo

*When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state....*

—William Shakespeare

Prologue:

Stardate 9407.01:

Commander Hartriono Benjamin Sastrowardoyo held himself as tightly as possible, every now and then relaxing just enough to not completely break. By choice, he sat alone in the front row of the center pews of Starbase 29's smaller chapel. It was the first of many memorial services he would have to attend. This first one was for Rahadyan's shipmates on Avenger, so they could vent their grief and anger. There was no body for Hartriono to bring home to Earth, but he would be there in a few days to supervise the service where his parents and extended family would be, where they would say their last goodbyes.

The starbase's top brass were here as well, all resplendent in dress uniforms: Commodore Barry Johnson, the base commander; his Edoan executive officer, Fleet Captain Tarex; and the sector JAG officer, Fleet Captain Winifred Lawrence. They sat behind him in the second row along with the Avenger's top line officers: Vice Admiral Alex Rosenzweig; First Officer Commander Carlos Maldonado, Jr., and Second Officer Commander Bob Fillmore. Also present was another Starfleet flag officer, an Admiral Barstow, and his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Halloway; some other ship commanders: Ajax's Captain Talmadge, Thagard's Captain German, Pandora's Captain Divakuruni, Lexington's Captain Smith, Accord's Captain Anbinder, Challenger's Fleet Captain Vosseller, Diponegoro's Captain Moyet, a few others. All friends, friendly acquaintances and/or respected colleagues of Rahadyan and Hartriono.

*"Where are you going?
Where are you going?
Will you take me with you?
For my hand is cold
and needs warmth.
Where are you going?
Far beyond where the horizon lies,
where the horizon lies..."*

Carolyn Pratiwi Adiwoso finished the song with tears in her eyes, then stepped down from the dais and took her place in the row behind Hartriono. "By My Side" was one of Rahadyan's favorites, a song from an ancient Terran stage musical. "My last gift to him," she'd said to Hartriono before the service; "the last thing I can ever give him in this life." And she burst into sobs and Hartriono took his cousin in his arms and cried too.

After Lt. Commander Adiwoso took her seat, several Avenger officers went up to the podium to say a few words of parting and

remembrance for their comrade and friend. Rahadyan had been friends with most of the senior staff, including his CO. Alex Rosenzweig spoke of Rahadyan's compassion and wicked sense of humor and empathy that occasionally emerged from the cloak of reserved politeness, of how each had benefited from the others' counsel during the more than two years Rahadyan had been on Avenger, then concluded with simply "He was my friend who also just happened to be one of the best officers I'd ever known."

The last Avenger officer to speak was Commander Andreas Kitabatu al-'Qalb. He had heard the news of Rahadyan's death in Main Rec and after the initial shock, Andreas had wept openly in public, as if the very soul had been torn out of him. That had been several days ago, and while his expression was dark and brooding, he hadn't shown much of any emotion in public since.

Andreas stepped up to the podium, solemnly elegant in full-dress uniform. He grasped each side of the podium and gazed out into the audience with a sad smile. "Rahadyan and I first met at the Academy nearly 20 years ago. That seems like a long time ago." He stopped suddenly, and looked as if he was about to cry, but he visibly steadied himself. "He was first my rival and my roommate, then he became my friend. In Vulcan there is a term: t'hyla. In Deltan, it is ma'ha'al. In Betazed: bij'ni'di. In English, there is no true equivalent; the meaning of those terms combines friend, lover, sibling." Andreas paused again, took a breath, and went on. "To me, Rahadyan was all of those things. He was the best part of my heart. I will always love him.

"Rahadyan was a very private person, much of the time. While he wasn't comfortable with showing it, I know that he cared about you, about all of you, a great deal. I don't know that he made as much of a difference in your lives as he did in mine, but I know that you all really mattered to him. He hoped—and I hope—that he had some place in your hearts."

Andreas closed his eyes and bowed his head for a long moment, as if in silent prayer. Hartriono, and a great many others, wondered if they should imitate the gesture. Then Andreas raised his head, his eyes filled with tears. In a voice that was just barely picked up by the podium microphone, he said "Thank you" and strode quickly from the podium and went not for his assigned seat but out the chapel doors.

The chapel was quiet, then Hartriono went to the podium and said quietly, firmly, "This concludes the memorial service. On behalf of my family, on behalf of all of the people who were true friends of my brother, and myself -- I thank you for coming. There will be a small reception in conference room A, on level 17."

Several officers went to the front of the chapel to give their respects to Hartriono. One of the top brass who had sat in the back rather than at the front with the line and flag officers of the

sector was a white-haired admiral of medium height. He had a kind, sympathetic look in his dark eyes and approached the two with sure but slow steps.

"Raden Hartriono, Raden Adjeng Pratiwi," he said formally, addressing each of them by their Indonesian titles. "May I express my condolences on the passing of Raden Rahadyan?"

"That's very ... kind of you, Raden Mas," responded Hartriono. Admiral Supriyanto was an old friend of both of their families and had been one of their sponsors for entrance into the Academy. Hartriono and Carolyn's grandfather and the admiral's father had been kyai—teachers of Islam—at the University of Jakarta, years ago. Supriyanto was well respected among the top brass at Starfleet Command, not the least reason being that he—as the fleet commander of Confrontation Group Aleph—was a hero of the Battle of Donatu V, nearly fifty years ago.

"Rahadyan was the full embodiment of both satria and priyayi," continued Supriyanto. "He was also kind enough to correspond with me on occasion. I shall miss his letters—and our talks." He took a breath. "As I understand it, the selamatan will be in 10 days?"

"That's correct, Raden Mas," said Carolyn. "Not all of the different branches of the family will be in the same place, of course, but there will be selamatan in New York, on Earth; in Yogyakarta Baru; in the Grand Mosque on Ziboji; other places where there are members and friends of the Sastrowardoyos." Selamatan—special prayers for the dead—normally took place on the day of a person's death or the day after—but these were extraordinary circumstances.

The admiral nodded. "I plan on leading one aboard Diponegoro."

"Will you be joining us at the reception, Raden Mas?" asked Carolyn.

"Briefly, my child," he said to her.

The admiral took his leave of the two of them—he bowed in the Indonesian priyayi fashion, touching both sets of fingertips to theirs and then bringing it up as if in prayer to his chest—then left the chapel.

Hartriono and Carolyn were the last to leave the chapel. Outside of the chapel doors was about a dozen officers whom Hartriono had expressly forbidden to enter the chapel during the service. Commodore Johnson had not been happy about it, but he understood Hartriono's wishes and had instructed the security guards to proscribe the group from entering.

One of the group, a young Bajoran woman, approached Hartriono. "Hartriono, I need to tell you that I never meant to hurt Rahadyan in any—"

He cut her off angrily. "Lieutenant, after what you did to him, as far as I or any other member of my family is concerned, you're not even fit to speak his name."

The young lieutenant junior grade looked at him with sorrow. "He was my friend, too! You have no idea what the circumstances were..."

"I know only too well, Lieutenant," responded Hartriono with not a little venom, perhaps thinking of a former Assistant Chief Science Officer. "My brother wasn't good enough for you and your cronies except to spit on! Well, listen to this—" Hartriono gathered up the 'qi to hurl a very powerful Indonesian curse at her—"—May every man you love treat you like a five-credit whore and

may all of your children die before you do." The woman turned pale and tears filled her eyes. "Oh, spare me! That's the least you deserve..."

Another member of the group, a dark-haired Azanian male wearing captain's insignia, stepped forward. "Hartriono, aren't you being a little harsh on her?"

Hartriono turned on him. "No, and unless you'd like me to forget the regulations against assaulting a fellow officer, you'd be wise to keep your distance. The Sastrowardoyos aren't quite done with you yet." The two officers glared at one another.

The other man spoke softly. "So, is this a declaration of a vendetta between our families, Commander? That's a bit much, don't you think?"

Hartriono smiled grimly. "You should have thought about that a while ago, Captain. And your brother should have thought about ... consequences on Demakos II."

The captain started to say something then thought better of it. "I understand you're ... indisposed, so I'll forget this conversation took place. You do have my condolences, Hartriono. Rahadyan was a good officer—and a good man."

"You needn't forget this conversation took place, Mister," said Hartriono, "because I don't forget anything. None of us do." And he strode angrily towards the turbolift. Carolyn, who had adopted a grim, resolute expression, followed a step behind him.

The two of them took a short turbolift ride to the reception area in silence, then Carolyn said quietly, "I think we've just made a very powerful enemy."

Hartriono turned to her. "What else should I have said?"

"I'm not disagreeing with what you said to either of them," she replied. "In fact, I agree totally."

Hartriono had a surprised look on his face. "You're supposed to be the peacemaker in the family."

"There's a big difference between peace and subservience," Carolyn said. "You know that as well as I do."

There were two security guards in front of the reception area, as well; Hartriono, as was true of most of his family, had a highly developed sense of protocol. He wanted nothing to take away from proper honors for Rahadyan, and knew that, if the tables were reversed, Rahadyan would have done the same for him.

Somehow, both Carolyn and Hartriono got through the next few hours, speaking with all who stopped by to pay their respects. Carolyn had hated funerals ever since the series of them she'd attended when she was five years old, after the attempted coup d'état on their home colony, Yogyakarta Baru. Carolyn's parents had died not long after that massacre and she had taught herself the technique of sequestering the memory of their funeral from the rest of her thoughts. She learned to go through funerals on autopilot, saying what people expected her to say, keeping a brave face on when most of the time, all she wanted to do was be alone with her thoughts – or put herself in an EVA suit and scream into the soundless night.

Some of the people at the reception were close friends, but most were just people she knew via her cousins, or via reading Starfleet reports; thus, she kept to quiet responses, "Thank you for coming" said seemingly a thousand times, brief kisses and hugs and bows of greeting and mutual commiseration. It was what was expected of her. And Carolyn reached back to the drama school training from before the Academy and gave a convincing

performance. She thought of her cousin Sabartomo's last words, which he'd bid some medic on the cadet ship tell the family as he lay dying: "Tell them 'You taught me to be brave. And I was.'" What were Rahadyan's last thoughts, his last words? None of them would ever know.

Hours later, all that were left in the reception area were Hartriono and Carolyn and Alex Rosenzweig. The three sat at one of the tables; Alex had the last dregs of a cup of Tarkaalian tea in front of him, Carolyn was on her third snifter of Centaurian North Continent cognac, while Hartriono had carefully nursed a few Saurian brandies throughout the day so he was relaxed but not far from a reasonable semblance of sobriety.

Hartriono had the Sastrowardoyo family talent for near-eidetic memory as well—though, like his brother Rahadyan, that talent had been seriously traumatized by the events of the Starfleet Intelligence mission known as Operation Blackjack. Among his many talents, moreover, was a fairly high but quirky psi quotient. This meant that a large part of any telepathic ability he possessed was more under the control of Hartriono's subconscious. There had been many occasions in which the link between Hartriono and either of his brothers was quite powerful, and a separation of light-years meant nothing: thoughts could fly as easily across those spaces as a whisper into an ear standing next to them.

Over the past few months, the psi link between Rahadyan and Hartriono had been reduced to nothing more than a low-level hum, like a carrier wave. Then, nearly two weeks ago, nothing whatsoever. When Rahadyan and Hartriono's brother Sabartomo had died in '76, both of them had felt an abrupt mental snap!—as if a large light bulb, albeit one on the periphery of one's visual focus, had gone out. But with Rahadyan's death, the link hadn't ended the same way.

Hartriono doubled as Executive Officer and Chief of Operations of the heavy cruiser U.S.S. Challenger. He had been on Challenger's bridge, casually talking with Fleet Captain Vosseller—then suddenly Hartriono was overcome with an overwhelming wave of sadness. He sank to the deck as if a piledriver had hit him and began to cry soundlessly but as if the very soul had been torn out of him. When he could speak again, the words that came out of his mouth were "Gods, I'm all alone." He then rose as if nothing had happened, strode over to the Communications station and bid Lt. Commander Francen contact Avenger posthaste.

The channel cleared and the image of Vice Admiral Rosenzweig himself appeared on the Challenger's main viewer: "Hartriono, I didn't want to tell you until it was confirmed, but..."

Rahadyan had been attending a conference on Starbase Osiris, near the Sudirman Alpha system. He was returning to the Avenger by shuttlecraft when apparently he had accidentally been caught by previously uncharted quantum singularities in the Oort cloud of Sudirman Alpha.

"Long-range scans indicate molecule-sized debris—duranium alloys—and muon decay from the shuttlecraft's warp drive. There's no way anyone—" Rosenzweig appeared to hesitate for a bit, then went on. "There's no way Rahadyan could have survived."

The U.S.S. Accord's shuttle Hammar skjold was set to rendezvous with its mothership in the New Colonies territories in

several days and had to leave at 0100 hours local. That was in half an hour. Lieutenant Katharine Janek, their pilot, had already gone aboard the shuttle for preflight checks. Captain Mark Anbinder had come with her to pay his respects, though he didn't have to—when he and Rahadyan were stationed on Avenger at the same time, they had been cordial but not friendly. Yet he knew that Accord was safe for a week in the hands of her XO, Commander Michael Shappe, and so took the trouble to accompany Carolyn to Starbase 29. But it was nearly time to go back to the universe, which wasn't stopping for the grief of a few people.

"Contact me on Accord if you need to," Adiwoso said to Hartriono. "Take care of yourself, cuz." The two kissed briefly, and then Carolyn followed Rosenzweig out the door.

"Wait a few minutes," was all Andreas said. After about ten, "That should be enough. Let's go."

"And where are we going?" asked Hartriono.

"Just follow me."

The two of them walked out into the corridor. Andreas said to the two Marines on duty, "We're the last ones out. Thank you so much for staying so late. You can go."

"Yes, sir," one of the guards said.

"Have a good night, Commanders," the other said, then hesitated for a moment.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" asked Hartriono.

"I ... just wanted to give my condolences to you and your family, sir," the security officer said. "I didn't know your brother very well, but some of us admired him very much."

Andreas smiled and nodded his thanks. Hartriono didn't have the energy to fake one and merely said, "Well, thank you ... I do appreciate it."

"Yes, sir ... Well," he continued awkwardly, "good night, again, sirs."

"Good night, gentlemen."

Andreas led Hartriono to one of the observation bays along the outer rim of the starbase. From a small pouch that had been attached to his belt, Andreas took out a small hinged box. He opened it and took out a palm-sized jewel of a type that Hartriono didn't recognize. The color of it kept shifting from one second to the next.

"I'm afraid I'm not well-trained in geology, Andreas. What is that?"

"It's called a holempathic memory crystal. They're made by the Shi'ar. I was given this by Rahadyan a few months ago. Touch it."

"What for?"

"Just do it," said Andreas. "Touch the crystal and—"

The universe seemed to dissolve around Hartriono.

Day One:

The day that I *officially* replaced—in this case, "replaced" was as appropriate a word as "succeeded"—Alex Levin as the Avenger's Chief Helm Officer was also the day I began seeing our ship and my shipmates in a new light. *Our* ship. *My* shipmates. I'd never thought of it, or them, that way before; it meant I finally felt at home somewhere.

Many senior officers, although cordial, seemed to think of me as only a fill-in, a temp. Lieutenant Levin had been recalled to Earth on a family emergency of some sort, and I was the only qualified

and available senior officer in the sector to replace him. My pay vouchers noted a series of code numbers that translated to "adjunct acting Chief Helm Officer." "Adjunct" because my primary billet was still that of a systems analyst and test pilot at Starfleet Tactical's test range for experimental vessels near Starbase 29; "acting" because I had signed on with the understanding that it was only a six-month stint.

My administrative duties, as opposed to the operational ones, involved the supervision of six other helm officers, one lieutenant, one lieutenant junior grade—Joseph Toland, who was away on emergency home leave—and four ensigns. That supervision included constant training and evaluation, for which I have a knack. The "virgins"—the ensigns were all under 30, and only Lieutenant Didier Betancourt had served on more than one vessel—were all "eager ensign" types: they did everything by the book, could do calculations in their heads to several decimal places, showed initiative when appropriate, and studied diligently for promotion exams. In short, they were *all* undistinguishedly smart, not necessarily brilliant, each with the potential to be a good officer. The only real differences were in name and appearance.

In turn, being fully aware of my "adjunct, acting" status, I did my best to be the model of a senior officer and department chief: tough but fair, impersonal, quick to praise in public but firm in chastising in private. At Commander Fillmore and Dr. Romano's engagement party, I'd distinctly overheard "Mr. Sastrowardoyo? Yeah, he's the old man..." I hope it meant I was "the Old Man" of the Helm department in the same way that the Admiral is "the Old Man" of the bridge—spoken of with respect and not a little awe. It could also have meant stodgy and unapproachable.

One evening, while filling out some paperwork in my cabin, I realized there was only a month left to my temporary assigned duty as Acting Chief Helm Officer, and that I didn't know anyone in my department. I knew their resumes in their personnel jackets, their Officer Evaluation Reports, their names, ranks, serial numbers and every single test score since primary school—but I didn't really know each of them as *people*. Once Starfleet Command replaced with me with a permanent Chief Helm Officer for the *Avenger*, I'd have the same place in these kids' memories that their sixth-grade teacher did. That bothered me.

The next morning, I strolled into the Officer's Mess at 0715. Our commanding officer, Rear Admiral Rosenzweig, First Officer Lt. Commander Johnson, Lt. Commander Brown (our Second Officer) and Commander Bell, Chief of Operations (my immediate supervisor), were all seated at one of the tables, which had an empty place. Rosenzweig saw me and waved me over. "Get yourself some chow and join us." I was a little suspicious. They all had datapadds next to their trays, for one thing. Also, the three top line officers were rarely in the same room except for official briefings or a crisis. It didn't seem to be the latter—none of their kinesics showed one to be anticipated: no neck muscles knotted, no frowns, no clenched fists around styli. Their half-hidden expressions were those of people planning a surprise birthday party with the recipient in their midst. Also, Brown's duty shift is beta, not set to begin for six hours; she held down the science station or the conn, as the need arose, from 1400 to 2000.

I asked the replicator for *nasi goreng istimewa*—fried rice with a scrambled egg—a large mug of Yogyakarta Baruan coffee,

light and sweet, and a glass of tomato juice, and joined them at the table, sitting between Johnson and Bell. The remains of their breakfasts were littered in front of them. "So what's up?" I asked. Most tried to hide grins, but weren't doing too good a job. Rosenzweig made little effort to hide his expression. He reached across the table to shake my hand. "Congratulations," he said. "You're now officially our Chief Helm Officer. Alex Levin's decided to make his leave of absence a permanent transfer off *Avenger*."

"Why, um, well, that is." I felt a little dizzy.

Until then, my experience of Lt. Commander Johnson had been that he was a polite, reserved though forthright officer, as serious in demeanor as I was if not more so, young for his rank and position—certainly not one to slap one on the back. I was thus startled when he did so to me. "So you're not just 'adjunct Senior Helm Officer' or 'acting Chief Helm Officer,' you're—"

"You're not a hobo anymore," the four of them chorused. Well, two of them—the admiral and Commander Bell—anyway; Johnson and Brown chimed in half a step behind. "Hobo" was a Merchant Marine term, used for those who hung around port stations looking to work their passage to the next stop.

"That is," added Brown in a mock-serious tone, "if you *really* want the job."

"Well, of course, certainly, Commander," I said quickly. "But how did you know?"

"Off duty, or at least, off the bridge," Brown said. "It's Kathy, or Kate, as you prefer. And we knew from several things." She took the datapadd from beside her tray and hit several touchpads on its lower surface. "The library computer logs indicate you've been using your security clearances to access technical articles on the latest advances in starship helm and navigation systems. You've asked George Padovan—the chief of the Engineering division—"for his log entries regarding individual quirks in the *Avenger's* warp and impulse engines and related systems. Also, the Recreation department has noted that you spend at least 16 hours a week running the helm/nav simulator on the Rec Deck. The simulator logs show that you started with the usual variants on Standard Evasive, worked your way up to Level 6 within a month—and solved most of those fairly quickly." Brown looked up from the datapadd and smiled. "And when you didn't have the solutions, you repeated the problems until you did."

"Certainly not the attitude of someone who's only working temp," interjected Bell. "The only way you could be more a part of the *Avenger* would be if we saw more of you at shipboard social gatherings."

"Maybe you will—now," I said, trying to suppress a grin. I utterly failed to do so. "Well, thank you—all of you. It's gonna take a while for me to get used to this. I guess I can postpone getting back to test-piloting at Star Fleet Tactical for a while."

"Ah, but the beauty of it is," said Commander Bell, "that you're not giving that *quite* up." I blinked at her. "You can call me Brenda," she added, "and by the way, your first unofficial assignment is to take me on in a fencing match." Bell was a short woman who had a professorial air about her. The average person would think of her as (at best) a fencing coach or a fencing tournament judge, but certainly not as a fencer, even one past prime.

"You're on," I said. "Whenever. I hear Lt. Commander Re'ming'ton's installed a new holodeck program that simulates a fencing arena in 17th-century France." Bell had been her Academy class's champion in foil, épée *and* saber. This might be interesting.

"Your assignment here is somewhat open to discretion," she continued, "as long as you give us some notice."

"Which means if Klingons are decloaking off the port bow," interjected Johnson, "you *can't* say, `Well, gotta go! See ya!'"

We all laughed. "Well...I accept, and thanks again. I'm rather overwhelmed."

"Oh, don't be," said Brown. "However, just 'cause it's `for real' now doesn't mean you can jettison warp engines at a D-7 cruiser anytime soon." Fortunately, the coffee mug was only halfway to my lips; otherwise coffee would have passed through my nose. Instead, I only chuckled amiably; I'd been wondering how long it would take for *that* story to circulate. "That said," she added, "I'm going to get at least four more hours of sleep." Brown got up, walked around the table, and patted me on the shoulder en route to the door. "Congrats again."

"Thanks." The messroom doors sighed closed behind her. "I believe this calls for a celebration."

"Hm," said the admiral with a hint of warning. "No alcohol before a duty shift."

"No, of course not," I said. "However, I'm bringing over to the Avenger an ancient Indonesian custom..." Rosenzweig and Johnson exchanged apprehensive glances. Perhaps they were thinking of blood-drinking or brain-eating rituals, but my ancestors hadn't come from *that* part of Indonesia. "Well, at least an ancient Sastrowardoyo custom. Newest officer buys the first round next time we make shore leave."

Rosenzweig let go with a sigh of relief. "No problem with that. In my case, a cup of tea will do. Mint, if possible."

"Saurian brandy for me," said Bell. "What's your drink of choice?" she asked me.

"Alcoholic? Jack Daniels and soda."

Johnson winced. "To each his own, I guess. I personally find chamomile tea more relaxing. That's very generous of you, Rahadyan." He actually pronounced my name properly, accent on the middle syllable, which surprised me. Most people emphasize the last one. At my raised eyebrow, he asked, "That was right, wasn't it? I asked the computer for help."

"That's perfect," I assured him.

"Actually, it's rather interesting," said Bell, "that the Indonesian language places a great emphasis on the second syllables of words. If it weren't for the displacement of several thousand light-years I would suspect that there was a direct link with the formal Ij-fa'al tribal language on Capella IV..."

"Ah, yes. Professor Rinehart's Academy seminar on the structure of the humanoid dextrocerebral bridge and its relevance in software design for the earliest true universal translators. Quite a ... fascinating class," I added in a deadpan tone. "I received an A-minus on my final paper by the skin of my teeth."

"I received an A," Bell stated with a trace of a supercilious smile. "My paper was on the effect of Rigellian kassaba fever on infant language acquisition and its similarity to..."

"Thank you, Brenda," Rosenzweig interrupted. "Maybe we could hear about it at dinner." Johnson rolled his eyes.

"Let me finish up," I suggested hurriedly, "and maybe we can go up to the bridge a little early."

It was a short ride up to the main bridge. The Caitian navigator, Lieutenant J.G. M'Reen, had already displaced her delta-shift counterpart, and was punching up situation displays at her

console. The delta Officer of the Deck, Lt. Commander Ragan, was in the center seat, and talking to Lt. Commander Klufas, who leaned on the chair arm. Kris Ragan was a young, pretty blonde officer nominally assigned to the Sciences division as a scientist in charge of floriculture. However, she had demonstrated some proficiency in command, having previously served as Chief Science Officer on the strike cruiser U.S.S. Sovereign, under Captain Marinelli. Michael "Klufie" Klufas was the Avenger's warm-hearted and friendly—if occasionally overbearing—chief of the Communications division, working the bridge comms board during alpha shift. I suppose he could be considered handsome; he was tall, with a dark, thick head of hair, and had a constant air of enthusiastic calculation about him.

As the four of us stepped out onto the bridge, Klufas straightened up and announced "Admiral on the bridge!"

Ragan stood up from the command chair and flashed a winning smile at Admiral Rosenzweig. "Good morning, Alex, guys."

"Morning, Lt. Commander Ragan. I relieve you as OOD."

"I stand relieved," Ragan replied, and handed him a datapadd. "All ship's systems are nominal to profile. We entered Sector 11843 during delta shift, and are proceeding on a standard mapping run at an average velocity of warp factor 6.354."

"Thank you, Lt. Commander," said Rosenzweig. He had a twinkle in his eye that belied the formality of his tone. "Dismissed." Rosenzweig thumbed the ID scanner on the face of the datapadd and placed it in a niche on the right arm of the command chair.

She tilted her face up at Klufas. "Talk to you later, Michael?"

Klufas moved as if to kiss her. This could take a while. I walked down into the lower bridge well towards the Helm station. Bell found something fascinating about the ship's dedication plaque mounted to the right of the turbolift entrance. Except for Rosenzweig and Johnson, the rest of us scrutinized carefully either the course tactical projection displayed on the main viewer or our own consoles.

Rosenzweig made a small cough. Johnson merely stood, hands folded behind his back, looking down at the deck. Klufas blinked, decided now was not the time nor place to violate bridge protocol, and instead took her hand. "Well, yeah, I'll see you later."

"Ensign Farkas," I said to the delta-shift helm officer, "you can leave a little early. I'll take over now."

"Thank you, sir," she said. Tina Farkas zeroed some of the Helm's status telltales and logged off, then stood up. "Have a good shift, Commander."

I smiled slightly. "Thank you." She headed for the turbolift, which Ragan was holding for her. As the doors sighed closed, Ragan gave a friendly wave to Klufas. He broke out of his trance, then sat down at the Communications station and began looking busy.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," I said, as I sat down, to M'Reen. To the Helm console, I muttered "Reconfigure to setting lambda-four," just loud enough for the audio sensors to pick up, and the images of touchpads and displays slightly rearranged themselves. Ensign Farkas was rather dogmatic, as novice officers tended to be; she preferred the default settings.

"Good morning," she replied. "Still haven't learrned Caitian, I see. It is a language of infinitely morrrre levels of subtlety than Federrration Standarrrrd."

I made a face. "Unless Dr. T'Raav would like to give me a larynx transplant, I don't think I'll ever." One of my hobbies was

learning new languages—I was fluent in several major Federation languages, and a few of the minor ones. There were several I would *never* be fluent in, among them the languages of felinoid races like the Caitians and the Sadrao; my larynx couldn't make noises, much less recognizable speech, in the ultrasonic range.

"Well, we can't all be perrrrfect," she replied. I smiled and began scrolling through the status menus and situation readouts.

Just then, Klufas's station began emitting a steady stream of digital chatter. Reflexively, I half-turned towards Communications in response while keeping my eyes on my console displays. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him pick up the transdator and place it in his left ear. He hit several touchpads. "Incoming Priority Two-A transmission, code groups 061-18-920912-85," he announced. "Input of command ciphers required." He turned in his seat and gave Rosenzweig a questioning glance.

"Thank you, Mr. Klufas," said the admiral primly. "I'll take it in the ready room. Mr. Johnson, you have the conn." Johnson nodded and assumed the center seat, while Rosenzweig headed for the 'lift.

A few moments later, the question we all seemed to have on our minds was answered. The bridge intercom whistled and Rosenzweig's voice came out. "Bridge, I'm afraid we have a minor setback. We have to backtrack several parsecs and rendezvous with the survey vessel U.S.S. McCaffrey in 20 hours. Coordinates now feeding to the navigation computers. Helm officer, go to warp factor 8."

"Confirrrmed rrecept of coorrndinates, sirrr," said M'Reen.

The data appeared on my console displays simultaneously. "Acknowledge warp 8," I said. "Implementing now."

"Very good. I'll be out shortly," said Rosenzweig, and closed the channel.

Bell had assumed station at one of the two Mission Ops consoles on the starboard side of the bridge, and was busy compiling, in conjunction with the Sciences division, a manifest for some planned landing parties. "061 code group means a personnel transfer."

"Yes, which is odd," said Johnson. "We haven't put in a request. We don't need anyone. And why the urgency?" The turbolift doors opened, and the rest of the alpha-shift bridge crew trooped in and assumed their posts.

"Special assignment perhaps?" I suggested, and I glanced 'round the bridge, making mental notes as to who was here during the shift. In addition to M'Reen, Klufas and the officers present at my "installation" at breakfast, Lt. Commander DiMaio, the Chief Science Officer, sat at the Sciences station, Ensign Neltex was at the Engineering console, and two other ensigns I recognized—Riccardelli and Rupprecht—monitored, respectively, Environmental and Propulsion Systems. Lieutenant Wells stood at the Tactical station to rear port, while Yeoman Abbandando busied herself downloading readouts from the Master Situation console (at rear starboard) to her datapadd. Auxiliary Systems and Mission Ops 2 were currently unoccupied.

"Could be," replied Johnson tersely. The 'lift doors opened again and Rosenzweig re-entered the bridge. Johnson got up and walked over to the Sciences station near DiMaio. The two exchanged a quick, worried glance. The admiral resumed the center seat.

"I take it we have a guest, Rosie?" said Klufas. The Chief of Communications was the *only* person who called the admiral this,

but Rosenzweig didn't seem to mind. It wasn't until he'd done this a few times during alpha shift that I realized that someday Klufas might wind up calling me "Sassy." If I let him.

"Not a guest, a new... officer," he replied with a studied amount of control in his voice. "In fact, Mr. Sastrowardoyo"—Rosenzweig leaned forward slightly in the command chair—"he'll be one of *your* neophytes. His specialty is the Helm, although he'll also be flying shuttlecraft."

"Oh?"

"Yes. McCaffrey is conveying an Ensign Hayden C. Pope from Starbase 12. He's a nephew of Admiral Helena Pope, and we're to make him into a better officer." He turned to his right. "Brenda, access file HC 08874—Starfleet piggybacked that onto their message."

Bell punched in the numbers, then looked aghast at her screens. "Admiral, you're not serious."

I had a sudden sinking feeling. "What's wrong with him?"

"File synopsis indicates he's a discipline problem," she said. "Pope's been on four ships in the past year—since his graduation from the Academy."

"If he's such a problem," asked Klufas, "that four ships couldn't straighten him out, why are *we* number five?"

"I owe his aunt a favor," said Rosenzweig miserably, "and she's decided to call it in." He raised his voice slightly, and an authoritative tone replaced his usual avuncular one. "Note to all of you"—he seemed to direct his voice towards the four ensigns, but I knew it was meant for the seniors as well—"I don't want this discussed *at all* off the bridge; consider the information as confidential as if we had problems with conveying a shipload of ambassadors to a conference. If I get wind that it has been discussed—and believe me, I have my ways of finding out—the person or persons responsible will be subject to *immediate* disciplinary action. And I don't mean a slap on the wrist."

M'Reen raised an eyebrow at me in response. I shrugged. I made the decision not to worry about the matter until my off-shifts. "Commander Bell, would you please upload a copy of that file to my personal terminal?"

She hit two touchpads on her console. "Done."

"Thanks." We had nearly a standard day until Pope arrived. In my head I began restructuring the training schedule.

After the shift, I went back to my quarters and called up file HC 08874 to my terminal's screen, noted by the header that the file's size was several times as large as it should have been—and also noted that there was some encrypted information in the file.

I paged Rosenzweig on the intercom, and he answered immediately. "Somehow I knew you would call," he said. "The Pope file, right?"

"Yes. There are nearly 20 megaquads of encrypted text on this kid. Do you have the key?"

"Not sure. Let me try my command ciphers. Just a moment." On my intercom screen I saw Rosenzweig turn to his right and input several numbers. "Try it now."

"Yes." The jumble of alphanumeric and mathematical symbols that had filled the terminal screen resolved itself into the Roman characters of Federation Standard. I scrolled down the file. "Apparently, all of the encrypted stuff is comments from all of the CO's, XO's and division officers he served under. *Unexpurgated* comments. I've never seen a file quite like this."

"Vitriolic?"

"To say the least," I said dryly.

On the screen, Rosenzweig winced. "Sorry about that, but there's a reason for why it's encrypted. Would you like to discuss it?"

"I would."

"Stop by my quarters at—would an hour be enough time?"

I knew he knew I read fast, but it was good of him to not take it for granted. "More than enough."

"At 1530 then. I'll have Bill, Brenda and Amy Wilson join us."

Lieutenant Amy Wilson—as was the case with Kris Ragan, she was yet another one of the ship's relatively young officers saddled with lots of responsibility and authority—was the chief of the Flight department in Operations, responsible for the hangar deck and the pilots. If Pope was also to be flying shuttlecraft – and especially if he was going to be a problem -- Wilson should be warned about it.

"Fine."

"See you then." His image was replaced by the 'com screen default setting: a Doppler-corrected forward view of the ship's course.

A little before 1530, I met Bell at the door to the admiral's cabin. She held her omnipresent datapadd under her left arm, and wore a rather harried expression.

"I'm sure you've dealt with much worse, Commander," I said, pressing the door chime. I tried to smile in a reassuring manner; I'm not sure if I was trying to convince myself.

"It *could* be worse," she agreed. "However—"

The door hissed open. "Come in," said Rosenzweig. Lt. Commander Johnson was already present, datapadd and stylus tucked under one arm. The First Officer's usually serious expression seemed even moreso; I wondered, briefly, about all of the other responsibilities that he and the admiral had. I also wondered how the hell someone a good ten years or so younger than I could qualify for a Number One slot when I, with all of my experience and academic credentials, still somehow fell short. On the other hand, rumor had it that Johnson was a prodigy among prodigies, as far as Fleet was concerned.

I had never been in the admiral's quarters before. One entire wall was taken up by a set of shelves with model starships, some on tiny stands, some in small force-cubes, and others in actual glass bottles. The designs dated back to the founding of the Federation over two hundred years ago and beyond, and included Klingon and Romulan vessels as well. Highlighted by a small spotlight in the center of the display were replicas of the Starfleet vessels on which Rosenzweig had served previously: Auriga, Revere—Rosenzweig's first command—and Constitution.

On another wall were very old, and very familiar, paintings: spacescapes by Bonestell, McCall, Hartmann and others, all 20th century Terran artists. Amazingly realistic, especially in view of the fact that many of these had been painted prior to the first landings of astronauts on Luna. I looked closely at what appeared to be an original Sternbach—not a photoprint reproduction as I might have expected, but a real painting, done in acrylics with some airbrushing effects. Both the brushstrokes and airbrush dispersal patterns were consistent with the techniques of the time.

"I'd need an electron microscope to determine whether or not this is a forgery. If it *is* one, it's very good," I said. Rosenzweig just smiled mysteriously.

Otherwise, Rosenzweig's rooms were fairly typical of most line officers I'd known. I noticed his desk was almost bare in contrast to my own: aside from the curled-up form of Wonder—his bronze Pernese fire-lizard, who merely regarded the three of us with sleepy eyes—all that was on the desktop was his terminal, some styli, a rack of datachips and a flat holo of him, his parents and sister. In the holo, Rosenzweig was dressed in an old-style Academy dress uniform.

On his small dining table was a large tea service decorated with some sort of Byzantine design. "Would either of you care for some?" Two cups had already been poured, apparently refresher cups for Rosenzweig and Johnson.

We both said yes, and he poured us each a cup. The tea was bright neon orange, and each of our cups had tiny leaves settling to the bottom. Vulcan *saya*, an acquired taste. Wonder raised his head with a look of sudden interest. "Yes, you may have some too," said Rosenzweig to the fire-lizard, and poured some into a saucer.

Just then, the door sighed open, and Lieutenant Wilson came in, slightly out of breath, and looking (I noticed) slightly more well scrubbed than usual. "Sorry I'm late, Admiral, Commanders, I was running my people through a spare-parts scavenger hunt during alpha shift, and it leaked over into beta, and... and I thought I should get a better face on before I arrived."

"It's all right, Amy," the admiral allowed. "Tea?"

"Yeah, sure, thanks." Rosenzweig poured the young officer a cup, and she took a large gulp. Wilson addressed me directly: "So, are you with us or what, Commander?"

Since my return from Operation Blackjack, I'd become very decorum-conscious, though with Amy Wilson, I let it go more often than I did with most junior officers—though not enough to let it get to be a problem. "Yes, Lieutenant, I accepted the offer."

"Cool," she said, with a slight grin. Wilson was only two years out of the Academy, and showed a great deal of promise as an officer. My first introduction to the young lieutenant, months before, had been by Lt. Commander Klufas, who had referred to her as "the Avenger's kid sister." The appellation fit Wilson; she was ten centimeters below Terran average height, and had almost disarmingly cute features surrounded by light brown, curly hair.

"`Cool?" echoed Rosenzweig. "I believe, Lieutenant, that my cabin temperature is set at a *Homo sapiens* standard of comfort. It is precisely 25 degrees Celsius." Wilson shot the admiral a look of mock-annoyance, as she always did when he did his Vulcan imitation. *Mock* annoyance because, by now, the lieutenant was probably as used to it as many of us were used to her using 20th- and 21st-century Terran North American slang.

"Anyway," said Johnson and I simultaneously. I coughed and deferred to the Exec. "We should get back to the business at hand," he reminded us.

"We should," agreed Bell. She turned to me, and said, "Alex tells me that we have a crash file on our hands. In all my years in the Fleet, I've only seen six or seven of those."

I looked back at her, then at Johnson and Rosenzweig. "I've never liked the idea of crash files since I learned of their existence at Command School. They just don't sit well with the civil libertarian side of my personality."

"Truth to tell," said Johnson. "I feel similarly—but they're a necessary evil."

"I've never run into a crash file," interjected Wilson. "What is it?"

"It's a special sort of personnel file," said Rosenzweig. "It's usually set up for those people who aren't quite the optimal Star Fleet officer—but that we can't afford to lose. It includes, but isn't limited to, people with special talents or combinations of talents, that Orions, renegade Andorians—or, much worse, Klingons or Rihannsu might wish to co-opt for their own purposes."

"So Starfleet compromises its standards by *retaining* these bozos?" asked Wilson. I clenched my back teeth to suppress a grin. Count on Amy to cut through the *felgercarb*. Out of the corner of my eye, though, I noted Johnson's slight frown.

"Amy, I mean Lieut—oh hell!" I said. "Can I call you Amy?"

She grinned and nodded. "Of course, sir. One, you're a superior officer. Two, you're one of us now. Three, even if you weren't one of us, you'd still be one of us. Got it?"

I returned the grin. "Got it. Thanks. Anyway, as I was about to say, it's not a black-and-white universe."

"And it never has been," said Johnson. His voice had a note in it that I couldn't quite read; not sadness but perhaps resignation.

The young lieutenant looked at both of us quizzically. "Well, sure, I know it isn't, but we're Star Fleet! We're supposed to live up to a certain standard."

"We do live up to that standard," I said. "Just in different ways."

"And we have very high standards here on *Avenger*, Amy," interjected Rosenzweig. "Else you"—he looked 'round at all of us—"else all of us wouldn't be on this ship."

"So this guy could be a misfit in some ways," thought Wilson aloud, "but if he's 'Fleet, then in most ways, he's gotta be okay, is that what you're saying?"

"He's gotta be. I hope," I added quickly.

"Unless..." said Bell, "he might actually be more trouble than he's worth to 'Fleet."

"You're right," I admitted, and turned slightly in her direction. "I expect you have a decrypted copy of the Pope file on your 'pad?"

She nodded. "I've skimmed through it. I'm neither surprised nor shocked at the contents. I'm mostly perturbed that the situation's gotten this bad."

Rosenzweig sighed and brushed his hand through his hair. "Only his aunt's position has protected him thus far. I'd love to just excuse his problem as one of youth, but..."

"If he thinks he's the Second Coming of Garth of Izar, or James Kirk," I said abruptly, "he should think again."

"Well," said Rosenzweig, with the beginning of a sly grin on his face, "we can't *all* be Garth..."

Johnson interrupted. "I have a copy of the file also, but I haven't read much beyond the *précis* at the beginning. Seems to me that much of what his alleged 'problem' is could be interpreted as a bad case of 'eager ensign' disease."

"True, but not that many eager ensigns," said the admiral, "can rebuild a duotronic core so that not even a ship's top Science and Engineering people could recognize precisely what he's done."

Bell put in for Wilson's benefit, "That's what he did on the *Sirius*. He gave the ship's computer cutting-edge capabilities—but with no parts added. Just reconfiguration of the hardware, and no changes to either firmware or software. *Sirius*' computer is now rated at 15 times the processing speed of Star Fleet's best shipboard computer systems."

"That's impossible," said Wilson. "My senior thesis at the Academy was on the current theoretical limits of Federation

computer technology as applied especially to helm/nav simulation problems. Unless we use tesseract storage or high-warp data processing configurations, say using a subspace field as strong as a kilocochrane or more—stuff that's still decades away—you *can't* move exaquads that fast."

"So then it's not impossible," opined Johnson. "Just impossible for *us*." The exec turned to Rosenzweig with a thoughtful look. "I'd been wondering why they pulled the *Sirius* off patrol in our sector last year. Well, that's significant that he has unusual skill with computers, but why is that a problem?"

"Apparently our Mr. Pope is extremely polite—most of the time," I said. "However, he has a tendency to interfere in matters outside of his areas of responsibility. The *Sirius* incident is only one example of that; somehow he managed to make the alterations without having to use command access to the system—a feat that should be virtually impossible. There are an infinite number of command-cipher combinations, and certainly more than enough safeguards, including voiceprint and retinal scans."

"And the time in which he made the changes to the *Sirius*' computers were phenomenal," added Bell. "Then there are the incidents on *Chandrasekhar*, *Soyuz* and finally *Ajax*."

"Didn't the internal sensors in the *Sirius*' computer core show anything?" asked Johnson.

"No," said Rosenzweig. "The internal sensor logs show nothing, except..."

"Except what?"

"I mean, they literally show nothing," said Rosenzweig. "There's a twelve-minute gap of no data on the logs that can't be explained."

"Alex, where's *Sirius* now?" asked Bell.

"Star Station Gamma Persei," said the admiral. "After eleven months of testing and analysis, what Pope did still defies rational explanation."

"I guess that leaves irrational explanations," I said awkwardly, then wished I hadn't.

"Well, *McCaffrey* is the ship that's conveying him, right?" asked Wilson. "As a passenger, he'd have no computer access except to non-secure read-only files. He can't do any harm, so the *Annie Mac* will be fine."

"We hope," said Rosenzweig grimly. Johnson nodded.

A thought occurred to me. "Does Pope know of the contents of this file?"

"I'm not sure," said Bell.

"Neither am I," said Rosenzweig. "According to the file, Pope's one of the two or three youngest non-Vulcans in the Fleet to ever get a C.E.C. rating of A7." A C.E.C. was an officer's Computer Expert Classification; an A7 wasn't normally attained until after a couple of decades around research-grade duotronic computers, like the ones found on Starfleet vessels. And one only got that high if one could virtually hear those polyprocessors *think*.

"A file like this should be illegal if he *doesn't* have access to it," I said. "How can he know if the information disseminated about him is accurate? How would *anyone* know?"

"Perhaps they should be illegal," agreed Rosenzweig. "The regs state that an officer should be able to examine his or her personnel jacket at any time, with at least the division officer present. However, there's a loophole for *that*: should some matter in a personnel jacket present a danger to the security to the Federation, or be at least prejudicial to the ship's current mission,

then the file, or selected portions thereof, would be reclassified as Restricted."

I digested this for a moment. "Who makes the determination that the ship's mission or Federation security is compromised?"

"It would have to be a line officer," said the admiral evenly, "someone from the Second Officer on up to the CO."

"So four COs have made a bad evaluation of this guy." I sighed, and let the statement hang in the air for a moment.

"Which is odd," said the admiral, "because what he's done is more inexplicable than actually annoying. I would almost call it professional jealousy except that I know Janna Talmadge on the Ajax far too well to believe that she's capable of jealousy."

"So, what should we do?" asked Wilson.

"I guess the general plan is for one of us to keep an eye on him at all times. We can't let the general crew know about this problem. Oh, I've also let Steve Romano—the Chief of Security—"know about the problem. He's sprayed the interior of Pope's cabin assignment with nanocameras."

"Courtesy of Commander Vlekkenbaaij's good offices, no doubt," said Bell. "So much for civil liberties." David Janus Vlekkenbaaij was the acting Intelligence Officer on Rosenzweig's flag staff—Commander Buonocore, Rosenzweig's regular Intel officer, was on home leave back on Earth—as Avenger's liaison to Star Fleet Intelligence, he had access to state-of-the-art surveillance equipment.

"Pope can't complain about his civil liberties," volunteered Wilson, "if he doesn't know they're being violated."

"Yes, indeed," said Rosenzweig. "The other problem with the nanocameras is that their usable lifespan is only a week, and then we'll have to re-apply them to the walls." He cleared his throat. "Well, that's all for now. We'll keep each other in touch about the Pope situation, shall we?"

We all nodded. "Then dismissed," the admiral said with the trace of a rueful expression. He moved to sit at his desk. "I've got, as usual, tons of paperwork to catch up on."

Johnson, Bell and Wilson headed towards the cabin door, and I lagged behind them a little, lost in thought. "Excuse me, Admiral?" I said. "May I speak with you for a few minutes?"

"Of course, Rahadyan," said Rosenzweig. He put down the stylus he had picked up.

To the others, I said "Dinner later, maybe?"

"Yes, that would be nice," said Johnson. "The usual time, the usual place." The alpha-shift senior officers met on most days at 1800 in Main Recreation to watch an hour of Prolificomm Intergalax summaries while eating dinner; I had actually attended a couple of these, though I hadn't said much to anyone except to make polite, impersonal conversation. Bell nodded—and Wilson grinned, again. Then the door sighed behind them.

"Sit down and have another cup of tea," said Rosenzweig. "Or is this one of those occasions when I should break out the Saurian brandy?"

"No, the tea is fine," I said, pouring myself a cup. I sat down. "I'm not sure how to say this..."

"Permission to speak candidly," said Rosenzweig. Then with a roguish expression, he added "Well, within reasonable parameters. Just speak up. Is there a problem?"

I approached the subject cautiously. "People are pretty informal around here." He looked up from his tea, his scapegrace grin having changed to a more wistful smile, and nodded. I

continued. "I mean, I've been in commands where relative juniors are on a first-name basis with their C.O., but..." I hesitated, then plunged right in. "For some time, I've been meaning to ask you why you allow the degree of informality that you do on the bridge."

"You're not the only one," Rosenzweig said wryly. "A lot of officers think it inappropriate." He took a sip of his tea. "Certainly, I've served with these people a long time—nearly a decade in the case of Brenda, and Bob Fillmore, and some of the others. I've come to think of a good number of Avenger officers as my friends, and a select core of those friends as my family—in many ways they are as much or moreso than my sister or parents. I didn't always think so, but I have for a long time. We've been through a lot; I know that I can rely on them when the chips are down, and they know they can rely on me."

"I envy you that," I said softly. "I haven't had that feeling in a long time."

He looked at me. "I know of some of the problems you've experienced in other commands." In fact, Rosenzweig had served as a representative of the Judge Advocate General's Office at one of my hearings. "On Arcturus, it was the fault of the Captain and the Exec. In the case of Tai Shan, I think it was a combination of people at fault—to a large extent, perhaps also the dynamics of the situation. A lot of why people request transfer has to do with how one fits in, and where."

"Are you saying that I do, or don't, fit in here?"

"Actually, I don't have a definitive answer to that. I think your style of doing things is better suited to Avenger. I wouldn't have requested your permanent transfer if that weren't true."

There was an awkward silence. "Thank you," I said finally.

"You're most welcome. Is there anything else?"

"No, not now," I said. I did an imitation of one of Rosenzweig's wry smiles. "It's only my first day as a real officer of this ship."

Rosenzweig chuckled. "Yeah, I noticed that, too. Think of it as your first Avenger challenge."

"Permission to go back to my quarters and figure out some future strategies, sir?" I said, only half-seriously.

He waved me out. "Go ahead. I'll see you at dinner."

Dinner was pleasant, but uneventful. The five of us couldn't talk about the matter, not out in the open of Main Rec. It seemed to be tacitly agreed that we should wait until Pope actually came aboard to really worry about the problem. Even so, I fell asleep close to ship's midnight while re-reading his crash file. While I didn't dream about Pope and the problems he might cause us, I did have a dream that disturbed me, one that I'd had before.

Day Two:

I was in a secondary-school classroom again, only this time it was a classroom the size of an auditorium. All of us were dressed in hooded monks' robes of different pastel colors, blues and pinks and oranges and greens. To my right and left, the row of students stretched as far as the eye could see. I was in the first row, dead center under the teacher's eyes. I looked behind me, and the rows of pastel monks went back and up to a heaven.

The teacher spoke in my direction without moving his/her lips. It occurred to me that I couldn't tell what sex the teacher was because of the robe and the hood that obscured most of his/her features. Just a pair of lips, and eyes like black holes. The skin

around the lips kept changing color, from various shades of Andorian blue to the various Vulcan pigments ranging from light yellow-green to dark brown then the various shades of Terran brown to Eseriat gray to Cygnian chalk-white and back again through the series.

I couldn't understand the question, although I knew somehow that it was a question. The words didn't form in my mind in the slow, plodding cassette-switching way they do during that period when I'm just learning a new language. The words just weren't there. I opened my mouth to speak, to ask him/her/it to please repeat the question. No words came out of my mouth, just breath.

A low whistling began, just below the level of my hearing—then suddenly the volume exploded up the scale to fill the endless hall. I turned to my left and my right, and realized that my classmates had no faces, but somehow all were laughing at me. The whistling was the laughing. I turned and looked to the other rows above me. All of them were laughing at me. Tears came into my eyes, no, no stop—

—and I woke up. The intercom on the night table was whistling at me in that familiar three-note round. The chronometer in the upper right corner of the screen displayed "Stardate 9209.14" and the time in bright-red characters: 0330.28, then .29, .30.... I hit the Answer touchpad. The blonde, bearded face of Lieutenant J.G. Ian Weston Smith, the delta-shift communications officer, appeared with a slightly apologetic look on screen.

"Good morning, Commander. McCaffrey is due in about half an hour. We're to receive Ensign Pope and two of McCaffrey's officers in Transporter Room One."

"Umm, yes, right," I said, fumbling. "Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll be there. Sastrowardoyo out."

"Yes, sir. Bridge out." The 'com screen switched back to the forward view of the ship's course.

I threw my legs over the side of the bed, and tried to stand. Yes, I could manage that. I stumbled into the bathroom. "Water, 35 degrees above body temperature, four minutes, then sonics, two minutes," I told the shower. The small transporter in the stall beamed the nightclothes off of me, and then blasts of hot water came at me from three sides. After the sonics had dried the water from my body, the Erati materialization apparatus formed a fresh class A dress uniform around me. I went into the bedroom, ran a comb through my hair, took an absent-minded swipe at my mustache, and thought about adding medals and ribbons to my jacket. I decided against it: No, the kid'll see I'm trying too hard.

I downed a cup of coffee from the replicator, looked into Hanuman's basket and saw he was still asleep, then headed out the door. Rosenzweig was just coming out of his quarters, also dressed in class A's. He'd apparently decided against the ribbons and medals, too. "Good morning," he started to say reflexively, then said, "What's wrong?"

"Mm, nothing. Why?"

"Is this too early for you? You look white as a sheet."

"No, no, just a bad dream."

"Oh," he said, then let the matter drop. The two of us walked to the nearest turbolift. "I think Brenda's ahead of us," he remarked, apropos of nothing in particular. The lift doors opened, we entered, and we went down two levels to Deck 7. As we entered Transporter Room One, I saw that he was right: Bell had

apparently been there for some minutes, and was pacing around the transporter console.

Rosenzweig greeted the young transporter specialist with a brief nod and "Ensign Vestri." She had a dimpled smile for the two of us, said "Good morning, sirs."

"Brenda, you're making me dizzy," said Rosenzweig. She stopped.

"Sorry, didn't realize I was doing that."

The intercom whistled, and Kris Ragan's voice came out. "Bridge to Transporter Room One. We're coming alongside McCaffrey."

"We're ready here, Commander," said Rosenzweig.

"They're hailing us and requesting permission to transport," continued Ragan. Vestri looked questioningly at Rosenzweig, who nodded and said "Tell them to go ahead, Kris. Ms. Vestri, energize."

Four pillars of light formed on the transporter stage. Three resolved into Starfleet officers, the fourth into a large cargo container with an anti-grav pallet beneath. One of the officers was an Andorian wearing captain's insignia on her uniform. She stepped forward, and said in a soft voice, "Permission to come aboard, Admiral?"

Rosenzweig smiled and stepped forward to bow in the Andorian fashion. "Granted, granted. It's good to see you, Shrevas. *Kree'so en tho el-le*."

"I am glad to see you as well, Alexander," said the captain, smiling thinly.

"May I present my officers?" said Rosenzweig. "Commander Brenda Bell, Chief of Operations; Commander Rahadyan Sastrowardoyo, Chief Helm Officer; Ensign Lorraine Vestri, transporter specialist. This is Captain Shrevas ch'Zanasethri; we attended Command School together." The admiral's smile grew slightly wider, and it occurred to me that he expected us to be prime examples.

Bell stepped forward, and tried to emulate the admiral's bow. "*Kree'sa en tha ili, Mahat Shrevas*." Rosenzweig's eyes narrowed slightly, and I knew he had caught the slight error as well.

Captain Shrevas bowed back. "*Kree'sa en tha ili, Commander*. You honor me."

Not to be outdone, I stepped forward, bowed and said "*Kree'so en tho el-le, Maha'ut Shrevas*."

She returned the bow and the greeting. "You honor me even more, Commander." Shrevas turned to Bell. "Your Andorian standard is perfect, Ms. Bell. Mr. Sastrowardoyo, however, apparently knows the dialect of my home region." She addressed Vestri—who seemed uncertain if she should greet the captain in Andorian, which she might not know, or in Federation Standard—and favored her with a smile. "Nice, safe trip, Ensign. You don't have to speak in the language of the Great Mothers as long as you can keep my molecules intact. Thank you." Vestri laughed.

Shrevas turned her attention back to the transporter pads. "This is my First Officer, Commander Adam Malik Narkhirunkanok." A Terran Asian man appearing to be in his late 30's stepped down from the stage and shook hands with all of us. "And this is Ensign Hayden Pope."

A tall, young ensign in class A's stepped down and gave Rosenzweig a formal salute, with perfect form: longest way up, shortest way down. Salutes were rare things in the Fleet these days, especially since dress uniforms hadn't included hats in nearly thirty years. Rosenzweig and I both knew a lot of minutiae about

the Terran naval traditions that were the basis for Starfleet's own traditions: centuries ago, salutes were only given if one's head was covered.

I made a conscious effort to smile with my eyes as well as my mouth. Giving the ensign the drill-instructor treatment from the get-go wasn't the way to handle him; I had only been an ensign fifteen years ago. And for some reason, those days didn't seem that far away.

Rosenzweig returned the salute. On his face was that "negotiator" smile I recognized from datachips of old log entries—friendly but guarded. He and Pope also shook hands.

Hayden Pope had the kind of pretty-boy media star looks I despised. Blonde, neither too young nor too old, the perfect height, the perfect weight. I suddenly became conscious of being three kilos over what I should have been.

Rosenzweig introduced Commander Bell. Pope smiled broadly. Perfect teeth, too. He saluted her, said "Pleasure to make your acquaintance, ma'am." Manners that would stereotype him as being from the southern part of North America, though his records said he'd been raised in Ares City, capital of the Martian Colonies, by parents originally from Florida. A slight Russian accent overlaid the southern N.A. twang.

As Pope shook Bell's hand, he appeared to hold onto it just a fraction of a second longer than he should have. I was aware that the commander had been involved in a monogamous relationship with Lt. Commander Frank Warren, one of the senior security officers, for many years, and that scuttlebutt had it—Bell's demeanor precluded any possibility of conversing on personal matters—they would soon be married. I had never seen the Ops chief blush or otherwise seriously, visibly, react to anyone but her boyfriend, and she didn't then at Pope's touch; however, I daresay if she could have, she would. *Pheromonal rush?* I noted idly.

Then the ensign got to me, saluted, then shook my hand. "Honored to meet you, Commander. I expect I'll have to live up to *your* high standards."

I smiled grimly. "My standards are high but fair, Ensign. High but fair." Firm handshake on his part, equally firm on mine. I had the sudden feeling of being one of two alpha males circling the other. So much for 23rd-century civilization or what passes for it.

The ensign's smile dimmed slightly, then he said "I've read some of your papers—and Aunt Helena lent me the copy of your doctoral thesis you'd sent her. Very fine, exacting work ... I'll do my damndest while I'm here."

"`Damndest' is the minimum required effort as far as the Commander is concerned," said Rosenzweig. I shot a surprised look at the admiral. "Only kidding, Ensign. Just do your best."

"How *is* Admiral Pope?" I asked.

"Fine, sir. She sends her regards to you and to Rear Admiral Rosenzweig." He hesitated a moment. "Aunt Helena also asked after a Lt. Commander Vlekkenbaaij?"

I narrowed my eyes at him, but said in a calm voice, "Actually, David Janus just got promoted to full Commander."

"He's fine, Mr. Pope," put in Rosenzweig. "And one of the best Intel officers in the Fleet."

"Aunt Helena didn't seem—" began Pope, then changed his mind in mid-sentence. "I understand you have Pernese fire-lizards here on Avenger. I wonder if there's any way I could see them?"

"Of course," said Rosenzweig. "There are about 30 or so aboard."

"Do you have a special habitat for them?"

"No, many of the officers—including myself and Commander Sastrowardoyo—have Impressed at least one, so they live on the quarterdecks."

"I see." The ensign looked pensive for the briefest of moments.

Rosenzweig decided to get back to business. "Ensign, Commander Sastrowardoyo will show you to your quarters," he said. "In your message queue will be the Orders of the Day. I believe I'm scheduled to see you at 1930." The admiral turned slightly towards me, a slight smile on his face. "Dismissed. Commander, I will see you at breakfast. Captain Shrevas and Commander Narkhiruncanok will be joining us."

"Yes, sir. This way, Ensign," I said; out of the corner of my eye, Bell's expression as she gazed after Hayden Pope wasn't at all lost on me. The ensign took a small remote off his belt and activated it. The anti-grav pallet rose and followed us as we walked out the door and into the corridor.

Pope was very quiet as he walked beside me.

"Mr. Pope, have you had breakfast yet?" I asked him.

"No, sir. McCaffrey is on a slightly different schedule than Avenger. It's still 2300 over there." Although warp drive alleviated many of the problems of Einsteinian time-dilatation, it didn't eliminate them: two ships could leave port at the exact same time at the same velocity, go off in different directions, return to the same port standard weeks or months later, and one ship's chronometer would deviate from the other by hours or sometimes days. Much of that differential had to do with the time dilatation encountered by running around at high sublight speeds on impulse engines.

"Sorry about that. I'm sure you've gotten used to warp lag by now." It was an oblique reference to how many ships Pope had been on in the past year, but Pope either didn't notice or was ignoring the remark. "Are you hungry?"

"A little," he admitted.

"We'll get you some chow after you're settled in." I looked at the datapadd Bell had given me. "Here we are. Computer: program key entry, quarters 06-18445. Assign to Pope, Hayden Christopher Ivan, Ensign."

"Awaiting input of occupant's voiceprint for lock sequence," said the computer in its pleasant contralto. Pope stepped forward and said his name. The computer seemed to think about it for a split second, then said "Anomalous reading. File not saved. Please re-input occupant's voiceprint for lock sequence." I frowned slightly and Pope repeated his name, a little louder this time.

This time the split second seemed like two. Again: "Anomalous reading. File not saved. Please re-input occupant's voiceprint for lock sequence."

"Something's wrong with the door program," I muttered; I noted on my datapadd to have Maintenance check the software. "Computer: program lock sequence for palmprint. Ensign, if you would."

"Yes, sir," Pope nodded and obediently placed his left hand on the sensor. This time the computer said "Confirmed. Saved as Pope, Hayden Christopher Ivan, Ensign." The door slid open.

As we and Pope's anti-grav pallet walked in, the lights came on. "You're the odd man, as it were, Pope, so you won't have to share quarters with anyone. At least not for a while. Enjoy the privacy and the space while you can."

"Thank you, Commander." The quarters were standard for junior officers: two small bedrooms with a shared bathroom, walk-in closet for two, small work area: two desks, each with a terminal. Pope picked up a datapadd next to one of the terminals, muttered his name and the tiny screen lit up, first with the Federation sigil then with the Orders of the Day in white letters on a dark-blue background.

"Shall I leave you to unpack, or would you like to get breakfast?"

"Breakfast sounds fine, sir," he said cheerfully. The bright tone in his voice was enough to chill one's blood. "The sooner I adjust to this new schedule the better."

"Yes, well, that's a ... commendable attitude. After you, Mr. Pope." We walked a few meters to one of the large messrooms, Pope taking his datapadd with him. There were about a dozen people present, junior officers from beta and gamma shifts whom I knew by sight but not to speak to. A few smiled and nodded in my direction by way of greeting and I smiled back or bid them "Good morning."

"I assume all of your personnel records have been transferred over," I said to Pope, making idle conversation as we walked over to the replicator stations. Of course, I knew damn well that the records had preceded him by several hours.

"Yes, sir."

"After breakfast, you'll meet with Second Officer Brown for orientation, then you'll meet with Lieutenant Hennings for a tour of the recreation facilities, after which you'll have some free time. After lunch, you are scheduled to see Dr. T'Raav in sickbay for a complete physical. I also have you scheduled for a helm-qualification test in the simulator this afternoon at 1730."

"Yes, sir." Again the quietness. Pope gave me a strange look at that point, sort of a mix of that all-knowing calm that clerics have—real clerics, not the ones who used to clutter up holo-channel bandwidth—with a look of sadness. Kind of a combination of Jesus Christ, Gandhi and my mom.

From the replicator, Pope ordered oatmeal, a glass of orange juice and a cup of black coffee. I took my coffee light and sweet, and also ordered an English muffin with orange marmalade. Then we went over to a small table and sat down.

I cleared my throat. "Mr. Pope, there's something I must discuss with you."

"Of course, sir."

"Your record isn't particularly ... optimal."

"Oh." Pope looked a little confused at first, then a slight, congenial smile formed on his lips. "You mean, the fact that I've been on four starships since the Academy, not counting Avenger. Well, things happened."

"Yes, I know," I said dryly. "Very interesting things happened."

"I didn't do anything wrong," he said quickly.

"Unauthorized intrusion into secure areas is certainly a problem," I said evenly. "So are unauthorized changes to a ship's mainframe, auxiliary computer systems, warp and impulse engines, subspace communications, transporters..."

"But none of those changes were harmful ones..."

"Merely unexplainable ones. Or at least ones that *you* won't explain."

"I thought the changes explained themselves."

"`Explained themselves'?" I had an inkling as to how annoyed I might get, based on the megaquads of transcripts and gigaquads

of holoivid excerpts in his crash file, otherwise I would have choked on the coffee had I been drinking it. "The changes explain themselves" was the phrase that appeared several times in his file, usually followed by an angry senior officer asking Pope to elucidate—at which Pope would say "I prefer not to, sir." Bartleby the Scrivener lived, and his name was Hayden Pope.

"Yes, sir," he said politely. Pope took a spoonful of oatmeal, put it in his mouth, chewed for a minute then swallowed. "May I ask you a personal question, Commander?"

I was looking down at my coffee. I looked up and saw the reappearance of Pope's Gandhi look. "Go ahead."

"Do you ... have any brothers or sisters?"

"Two, I mean one, I mean..." I stopped and took a breath. "I have, I had, two brothers. One is Ops Chief on Challenger, and the other died in an accident 16 years ago. Why do you ask?"

Pope looked genuinely pained. "I'm sorry. It's just that ... Oh, never mind."

"I assume you just like to know about the officers with whom you're serving?" I asked dryly. He nodded. "Ensign," I said. "May I propose ... a deal?"

"A deal, sir?"

"Yes, a deal. You can ask me all the personal questions you want from now on—although I have no idea why you would ask *me* personal questions—if you answer the one question that the officers of *five* starships and Star Fleet Command would like to have answered."

"There's only one question?"

"No, but there's one big question."

"I think I can figure out what that question is," he said evenly.

"Yes, I'm sure you can. Do we have a deal?"

"Well, maybe. If the answer to *the* question contains several parts, do I have to answer them all at once?"

I thought about this for a brief moment. "No, if you give all of the part of the answer, whatever it is, before the week is out."

Pope's Gandhi look was replaced by a knitted frown of consternation. "A week? Hmm." Then the Gandhi look reappeared. "Yes. Before the end of the week."

I was a little surprised, though for some reason, not very.

Pope noted my look. "The big question must be `How does this fresh-faced ensign do what he does?' "

"Please don't say—`Because I can', Ensign."

His smile became sort of roguish. In fact, it resembled the admiral's scapegrace grin. "That's just too obvious, Mr. Sastrowardoyo."

"Then there are the other obvious questions," I said, almost as if he had not spoken. "You can't be charged with insubordination because you oh-so-politely refuse to answer questions about actions which have *not* endangered the ship. You also managed to not be goaded into insubordination, although some of the interviewing officers on the other ships pushed the envelopes of their authority—in fact, Commander Halvorsen, the Exec of the Chandrasekhar, came close to being charged with abusing privilege of rank."

"Yes."

"Are you interested at all in coming clean? Do you know why Star Fleet doesn't want to lose you, yet the Fleet detailer has to move you from ship to ship? How many ships do you expect to be on? Do you want to stay an ensign for the rest of your life?"

His grin grew even broader. "I'm not destined to be an ensign for the rest of my life." It was a simple statement, made with not a trace of arrogance.

"I see," I said calmly. I waited for him to proceed.

"And I am interested in ... 'coming clean' as you put it. I know why Star Fleet doesn't want to lose me; they're afraid of the Klingons or the Romulans or the Orions or someone co-opting me. In fact, I overheard Captain Swofford-Montgomery on the Soyuz express concern that I might be a double, or even a triple agent, of some kind. Is that in my crash file, too?"

Again, I was not surprised by Pope's knowledge about his own crash file. For a split second, I wondered if he was bluffing about knowing, but from the look in his eyes, I guessed not. "Yes."

"And you're wondering now—and Fleet *will* be wondering—why I will have chosen to come clean here, on the Avenger."

"Or perhaps you could wait for a bigger ship, a more ... prestigious one," I suggested. "The Enterprise, say, or Captain Sulu's Excelsior."

Pope's expression changed to one of mild surprise—with a dash of amusement. "Enterprise or Excelsior? No. Aren't they scheduled to decommission the Enterprise and a few other Constitution-class vessels next year? Kirk and his gang can have the Enterprise. And Fleet Operations took nearly ten years to get all of the bugs out of Excelsior and the other ships of her class." He paused. "The Avenger is quite a prestigious ship in its own right. I daresay it will be for years to come ... and quite celebrated even after its demise at To--. At some point."

"So..." I prompted.

"Why the mystery? I know I can be an asset to Star Fleet and the Federation, and I'm using my abilities the best that I can. Is that so hard to believe?"

I ignored his question. "Another question is why make those alterations, those improvements, on *several* ships, rather than one? What do you have in store for Avenger?"

"Good question." Pope took a sip of his coffee, and winced slightly. "I thought the replicators would have defaulted to Bajoran *imhal* spice coffee by now. Let's just say I wanted to share the wealth," he said.

A part of my brain wanted to ask how one's supposed to get Bajoran *imhal* coffee when we don't even know the precise coordinates of Bajor, but I filed the query away for future use. "Sorry, just Jamaican blue mountain coffee, held in stasis all the way from Earth."

"Yes, I know. No natural endorphinesque additives."

"Will you answer questions from other Avenger officers?" I asked.

He looked at me oddly. "Did you have the feeling I would only answer questions from you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, you happen to be correct."

"Oh. Why me?"

That odd look again. "We're a lot alike, Commander. I trust my gut instincts enough to have known that when I beamed aboard. You seem like a kindred spirit."

"Out of 360 officers, I am sure there are quite a few on this ship with whom you could get along, Ensign," I said, faintly irked. "In fact, I daresay I'm rather hard to get to know in comparison with most."

Pope shrugged. "Maybe." During our conversation, he had finished his oatmeal.

I glanced at my wrist chrono. "You have about 90 minutes before you're scheduled to meet with Kate—with Lt. Commander Brown. Perhaps you'd like to grab a nap?"

"There's an idea," he said, then took a huge gulp of what remained of his coffee. All that Jamaican blue would make it impossible for him to actually sleep, I noted idly.

I rose from the table. "I'm sure you can find the way, can't you?" I wanted to grab some shuteye myself before alpha shift began.

Pope had that beatific smile again. "I can always find the way—anywhere, Commander. Thank you for shepherding me. And for our little talk."

"I'm sure we'll have many more opportunities to *talk*, Mr. Pope," I said dryly. "Please remember about the end of the week."

"Oh, I shall," he said simply. "See you later."

"Later, then."

I went back to my quarters but couldn't sleep. Hanuman, my bronze fire-lizard, began keening at my discomfiture. I sat up in bed and glared at him, but found that I couldn't stay mad. *Come here*, I thought, and he flew across the room into my arms. I scratched between his ears as I would a cat. I hadn't had pets since before I was 11, but Hanuman—named after the mischievous Monkey God in Hindu mythology—was much more than a pet; for about a month now, he had been my only real friend aboard Avenger.

"No, Hanuman, I don't know what Pope's big secret is," I said softly to the fire-lizard. "I suspect there's always been much more to him than we see. But I don't know what that could be."

I put Hanuman down for a moment while I rummaged about in my wardrobe for my favorite bathrobe. It was one of the oldest articles of clothing I owned, dating back more than 20 years to when I'd attended Georgetown University several years before the Academy. I found it and slipped it on, digging my hands into its deep pockets. I wore the pumpkin-colored robe made of Argelian silk whenever I needed to think or write, or was pulling an all-nighter studying. One of its pockets had been specially reinforced so Hanuman could curl up in it. "Yes? No? Maybe so?" I said to Hanuman, holding the pocket open. He shook his head and leaped onto my shoulder instead.

I walked over to the desk, activated the terminal and pulled up Pope's crash file. I hadn't remembered seeing any medical reports attached to the file. I have a near-eidetic memory, but lately, I've had less confidence in it so I've been double-checking myself. It was true. No medical files. In fact, there was no evidence that Pope had ever undergone a physical while at the Academy or on any of the ships on which he'd served. Not even the standard Academy pre-entrance physical was noted.

That was impossible. I made a note to ask Admiral Rosenzweig if there could be some sort of mistake on the part of the Starfleet Bureau of Personnel's Records Section, but somehow I knew that there had been no mistake. Crash files were supposed to be complete with respect to the subject's anomalies; a subject's medical status was certainly significant, and would have been included.

I showered, got dressed and was in the officer's mess by 0630. I thought I would be the first one there, but I was wrong. Already present were the Admiral, Captain Shrevas and Commander Narkhirunkanok. Lt. Commanders Johnson and Klufas

had apparently just joined them. " `Morning," I said affably. Though I felt more apprehensive than affable.

"So, Sassy," said Klufas, "what do you know about this Pope guy?"

I winced, I'm sure, quite visibly. "Mr. Klufas, if you want to call me anything aside from `Commander' or `Mr. Sastrowardoyo' or the like, please call me Rahadyan. Not ... Sassy."

"Oh, well if it bothers you then I'll stop," he said with his indefatigable cheerfulness. "I just meant to make you feel at home."

"I'm beginning to ... feel at home," I said with a slight smile. "Thank you, Mr. Klufas."

"And you can call me Klufie," he added.

"No, that's okay," I said hurriedly. "Can't I just call you by your name?"

"But that *is* my name," he said. "Everybody calls me that."

"No, it's your nickname," I said. I hated nicknames. Diminutives like Alex or Mike or Bill were one thing. When I was growing up, I always had a wide variety of nicknames, some of which were benign, most of which weren't. "Can I just call you Michael—or Mike?" I tried not to sound whiny, though it sounded so to my ears. I knew whininess wasn't becoming, especially from a senior officer.

Klufas looked disappointed. "Well, okay. Anyway, what do we know about this guy?"

"Not a whole lot," I said. "Let me get some coffee and I'll tell you." After I came back to the table, I told the six of them about my earlier conversation with the ensign. Klufas was especially amused at the description of Pope as a combination of Christ, Gandhi and my mother.

"That's weird," said Klufas, chuckling. "Just plain weird."

"Unique to say the least," ventured Johnson diplomatically.

"No, weird does the trick," said Rosenzweig. His usual friendly, avuncular expression had devolved to a pensive one.

"So just keep watching him," suggested Klufas. "And maybe get him drunk, so he'll start talking."

I shot him a look. "I don't think getting Pope drunk would do very much. Anyway, they tried that on the other ships."

Johnson was absently tapping a stylus against the side of his datapadd. "We'll *all* keep watching him."

"No question," agreed Rosenzweig.

"And I'll transmit that packet message to BuPers regarding the stuff missing from his files," said Klufas.

Captain Shrevas had a close Andorian approximation of Human amusement on her face. "You run a singular command staff, Alexander."

"One of the finest in Star Fleet," said Rosenzweig nonchalantly.

"A matter of opinion," she replied silkily. "Too many seem to be more *precocious* than experienced."

"True, for the most part," said the admiral firmly, "but if they weren't the cream of the crop, they wouldn't be here." He took a sip of his tea, Antarean mint from the smell of it. "And I have some whose experience informs and supplements their precocity. All in all, the balance I want and need."

Just then, the messroom doors sighed open, and the rest of the alpha-shift bridge officers started to come in.

Shrevas and Narkhirunkanok rose. "Perhaps we'd best be getting along, Alexander," said Shrevas. "Our baby-sitting chores are done, and yours are only beginning." I noticed the slight

tendency towards Terran idiom in her speech, and made a note to myself to look up her command record.

"Yes, Admiral, Commanders," said Narkhirunkanok warmly. "Thank you for the hospitality."

"Bill and I will walk you to the transporter room," said Rosenzweig. "Rahadyan, if we're late getting to the bridge, take the center seat until we get there."

"Yes, sir," I said. We shook hands all around, brief introductions then goodbyes were made to the rest of the alpha-shift officers who had just entered, then the four of them left.

"Seems like a flinty sort," said Klufas. "Alex mentioned that Shrevas and he had been rivals at Command School. That explains a lot."

"And if they were there at the same time, but the admiral outranks her by three grades, it's no wonder she has the attitude she does," I opined.

Later on the bridge, alpha shift itself was relatively uneventful; we resumed the benchmarking run through sectors 11844 and 11845. No dark-matter clouds, interdimensional gateways, gravitational anomalies or space-going amoebas to deal with. No class M planets, either.

At one point in the middle of the shift, however, around 1100, Commander Vlekkenbaaij came up to the bridge. The stellar cartographic routines were largely automatic so I'd been keeping one eye on my console readouts, and another on a reader screen displaying the text of Pramoedya Ananta Toer's *Anak Semua Bangsa*, an old 20th-century Terran novel. I heard the turbolift door sigh open, but didn't turn. " `Morning, D.J.," I heard the admiral say behind me.

"Good morning, Alex, everyone," replied Vlekkenbaaij. I turned and smiled politely in his direction, nodded. "Commander."

The Intelligence Officer—a native of Azania, an Earth colony founded by light-skinned refugees from South Africa shortly after the Third World War—stepped down into the lower bridge well. As usual, he was immaculately groomed from head to foot; somehow, Vlekkenbaaij managed to make the elegance of class A's somehow even more elegant. He extended his right hand. "Congratulations and welcome, Rahadyan. I've only just heard about your choosing Avenger as your permanent assignment."

"Thanks," I said, shaking his hand and relaxing the smile slightly so that my face wouldn't freeze that way.

"I could have called you on the intercom or left you a message on your terminal but I wanted to come up here in person, and say that," he said in a cordial tone, then he lowered his voice: "I know we've had some problems in the past, but I'd like to throw a small party in your honor at the end of the week—if that's okay."

I was a little taken aback. "Um, sure, that's real—that's quite generous of you, Commander."

"I know you hate calling people by nicknames," he said in a very serious tone, "but if you won't call me D.J., at least please call me David Janus?"

I considered this for a split-second, though I believe he heard the transtators humming in my head loud and clear. "Well, yes, of course ... David Janus."

"Great," Vlekkenbaaij said with that scapegrace grin that seemed to mesmerize most of the women we both knew. "Oh, about our ... current little problem"—meaning of course Hayden Pope—"could you stop by my office around 2000? I'd like to talk

about it in person instead of reading each other's memos every day. Also, I'm putting together a wine-tasting club here on Avenger. We could talk about that, too."

I tried to smile in a comradely fashion. "Sounds good."

"See you then." He clasped me on the shoulder and started to turn to the lift. He turned back to me and said in a softer voice, "You know, even after this ... problem is dealt with, I'd like for us to try to be friends. I mean that."

Our eyes met. "I think that's possible," I said with a small smile, but this time, it was genuine. "I'd like that, too."

He nodded, then said to Alex Rosenzweig, "I'll have the details posted to everyone's terminal. This party's gonna *rock* the Avenger."

I had turned back to the Helm, but heard the grin in the admiral's voice as he replied, "I've no doubt of that." The turbolift doors sighed open then closed.

M'Reen cast a sidelong glance at me. "Did you and Mrrr. Vlekkenbaaij know each other before you came to Avengerrr?"

I assumed a nonchalant expression and turned to her. "Yes. We met at the Academy's Command School several years ago. We've seen each other on a couple of occasions since then, too." I couldn't tell M'Reen about Operation Blackjack; only a handful of Avenger officers knew, and only a few more than those handful were authorized to know. She wasn't one of them. And I would never tell her what had happened at the Academy and at Starbase 41.

The Caitian pitched her voice low, so that only I could hear. "Rrahadyan, if there's a ... concern of any kind, you *do* know I am here to help." Her ears slightly flattened against her head.

I couldn't meet her eyes. Helm and navigation officers working the same watch on the bridge tend to form a bond that's almost psychic, so I'm sure that some of my discomfort around David Janus Vlekkenbaaij—though I tried to hide it and had thought I managed to do so—was more than a little apparent to her. "I appreciate it, M'Reen."

She made a good approximation of a Human smile—without showing teeth, which would have been a challenge to battle for all of the known feline species—then nodded and turned back to her console.

That afternoon, I paced around my quarters. Something was going to happen with Pope; I didn't know what it would be, but it was going to happen, and soon. Hanuman picked up on my inner turmoil and started keening again, this time a few octaves above middle C. I winced and shot him a look that reduced the keening to a tenor humming.

"That's not helping, Hanuman," I said to the fire-lizard. He gave me a sad look, then curled up in his basket and went to sleep.

The annunciator chimed. "Enter," I said and the door slid open. "Hello, M'Reen."

"Good afternnoon, Rrahadyan. Am I disturbrring you?"

"Not at all. May I get you something?"

"No, thank you." I waved us over to the seats near the small dining table.

"Rrahadyan," she said as we sat down, "I'll get to the hearrrt of the matterrr: that new helmsman disturbrrs me grrreatly. If you wouldn't mind, when you arrange the brrridge shift-scheduling, and if you happen to place him on alpha ... please arrange for me to be in auxiliarry contrrrrol, or on anotherrr shift."

I raised an eyebrow at this. "What do you mean, he `disturbs' you?"

She looked embarrassed and looked down at the claws on her left hand. "I've nevrerr had occasion to tell you this beforrrre, but among Caitians there is a rrrreligious orderrr known as the V'rrroowwww. My mother was a high prriestess of the orderrr, so I have some of her abilities." M'Reen looked back up at me, her expression changing from embarrassment to fear. "Therrre is a hole wherrre he is. I can't rrrread him at all. His soul-prrrresence—what you Terrrans call a psychic aurrra—I don't perrrceive it."

"I see." I digested the information for a moment. "Couldn't it simply be an interspecies problem? Differences in the telepathic paricortex or something?"

"No," she said simply. "Caitians of the V'rrroowwww can detect the soul-prrrresence of memberrrs of all 200 or so species thus farr encounterrrred by the Federrration. Cerrrtainly everry Terrran or Terrran-derrived humanoid among those. Only in isolated cases can we actually rrrread thought-patterrrns, but we know absolutely when a being is nearrr us, within 20 meterrrs. I do not have that knowledge with Misterrr Pope."

"Are you the only ... follower of the V'rrrow on board?"

"Yes."

"M'Reen," I said slowly, "have you gone to the Admiral with this ... appraisal of Pope yet?"

"No, I have not, Rrahadyan," she replied. "I do not want the Admirrral thinking I'm rrrready for perrrmanent rrrreassignment to the Tantalus rehab colony."

I laughed. "Somehow I doubt he would think that. File a personal log entry on the matter, or you can append a note to my department head's log, or both. It's not enough to indict Pope or take him off bridge duty, but..."

"It is at least noteworrthy," finished M'Reen.

"Yes."

"Then I shall do both nowww," said M'Reen. "May I borrow yourrr desk?"

"Certainly." She went over to my desk, gathered her thoughts for a moment, then recorded an entry for both her personal log and as an appendix to my log as Chief Helm Officer. I stood well away from her, my thoughts focused on my conversation with Pope earlier. Once M'Reen was done, she looked up at me expectantly.

"Thanks, M'Reen," I said quietly.

Caitians manage to simulate Human expressions fairly well. The expression on her face now was one of sympathy. "Most welcome. I had thought my actions might *rrrelieve* yourrr concernrrs, Rrahadyan."

"They *will* help," I said.

"Rrreferrring to yourrr otherrr prrrblem," she began. The pupils of her eyes were dilated with excitement, as if she were preparing for battle.

"If you mean Commander Vlekkenbaaij, that's not a problem. Not anymore."

"Oh," she said, sounding almost disappointed. "I thought it might be an honorrr dispute of some kind."

"At the time..." I started to say, then caught myself. "I can't tell you about it now, M'Reen. Maybe someday, but not now, okay?"

"Okay." M'Reen had been around Terrrans long enough to adopt the idioms that we take for granted among ourselves but

sound a bit startling from the mouths or other vocal apparati of other species. "The offerrr of aid still stands."

I glanced over at the chrono. "I appreciate it, M'Reen," I said. For some reason, I felt embarrassed and not a little touched. I added "I have an appointment in a few minutes, but ... would you like to play a game or two of chess or *kal-toh* or *latrunculo* later on?"

"That would be pleasant," she said, then added with what looked like a wicked leer, "Lieutenant Parrris taught me a strrrrip verrrsion of chess. Have you everrr played?"

I gave her a look of mock reproof, then smiled slightly; the smile even made it to my eyes. "Yes. I have. Many times."

"Then would it be a violation of decorrnum to challenge a superiorrrr officerrr to a game?"

"Not at all, M'Reen," I said nonchalantly. "Though you *do* know ... I play to win."

"As do I, Rrrahadyan," she said. "As do I."

I laughed. "I'll see you later. 2300?"

"A fine time. In my quarterrrrs. Brrring Saurrrrian brrrandy, it might help you win." And with that, M'Reen exited.

16.48. I still had a few minutes until I was scheduled to see Dr. T'Raav. I threw on my dress jacket, and walked out.

Stepping out into the corridor, I was nearly run down by a speedwalking officer. "Gangway!" I flattened myself against the wall. "Sorry, sir!" shouted the officer as he passed me. It was Lieutenant Dov Berman, one of Tom Colgan's officers in shipboard security.

I sighed, walked over to the turbolift and went to sickbay.

T'Raav was a temp like me—rather, as I *had* been. She was serving as acting Chief Medical Officer while Dr. Wendy Fillmore was away on her honeymoon with her husband Bob, one of the advisors on Rosenzweig's flag staff who had been *Avenger's* Chief Science Officer, years ago. Once the Fillmores had returned, T'Raav would begin an assignment at Starfleet Medical, as an instructor in surgery.

I walked into the sickbay complex, and stopped at the reception desk. The Caitian nurse, S'Net, smiled and said "Dr. T'Rraav is rrrunning a bit late. Please have a seat, and something from the rrrreplicatorrr."

"Thanks." I took a small cup of mango juice from the replicator, and sat on the long couch opposite S'Net. There were a couple of datapadds on the low table in front of me. I briefly wondered if I should access journals or the news from the ship's library.

Then the door to the C.M.O.'s office opened, and three people came out. Two were Terran doctors: Diane Gifford, head of Emergency Medicine, and Laurena Cytrynbaum, Stephanie Richardson's deputy in the Mental Health department. The third was T'Raav. "Well, thanks for your time, T'Raav," said Gifford.

"Yes, thanks," echoed Cytrynbaum. "We'll see you at the party." At my questioning glance, she said "Invitations'll be posted on the 'net later."

T'Raav inclined her head slightly. The expression on her face was almost a smile. "I am honored to serve." She noticed me. "I see my 1700 appointment is here. Good evening, doctors."

I gave my best imitation of a shy smile at Gifford and Cytrynbaum, then entered the office at T'Raav's beckoning. "I trust your stint as C.M.O. has been uneventful?" I said, falling semi-consciously into the formal Vulcan turn of phrase.

"Indeed it has," said T'Raav as she sat at her desk. "In fact, were I a Human"—I thought I detected a twinkle in her eye—"I would almost call it enjoyable. Diane wanted to schedule a triage drill later this week, Laurena wanted to discuss some new trainee candidates for her department—and they both want to throw a going-away party for me once the Fillmores return."

"Of course, no mere *Avenger* party could compare to some of those we had on the *Tereshkova*." T'Raav's eyes smiled, though the rest of her face remained calm. "Speaking of parties," I continued. "Vlekkenbaaij is throwing one later this week—in my honor, no less."

"You should not be surprised," she said. "Do remember that David Janus has always been quite ... giving with his resources."

I smiled. "That's an interesting way of putting it." I had first met T'Raav nearly 30 years before, when she had been *Avenger's* Chief Medical Officer under Captain Sturdevant, and *Avenger* was one of the ships involved in relief efforts after the abortive coup d'état on Yogyakarta Baru. Then later, the two of us wound up serving together on the science scout *Tereshkova*, where she'd been C.M.O. and I had been a specialist in First Contact protocols. On *Tereshkova*, she'd become a friend and a confidante. She was also another survivor of Operation Blackjack, and further, I owed her for helping preserve my sanity after that mission. She also knew everything about my personal history, especially where David Janus was involved.

"Enough small talk, however ... pleasant it may be," I said, smiling wryly. "What can you tell me about Hayden Pope's physical?"

"Textbook responses, or nearly so, on all tests," said T'Raav. "Well within Terran norms. Let me show you." She slipped a datachip into her desk terminal and turned its display so we could both see it. Nothing happened; the screen was totally blank.

"Odd," she commented. "The terminal is otherwise operational. Let me see if it's the datachip." She selected another, a pharmacopeia from the rack behind the desk and slipped it into the media-reading slot on the terminal. "Must be the 'chip itself; *this* one works." She took a new datachip from a drawer, slipped it into the terminal. "Computer, download medical record of Pope, Hayden Christopher Ivan, Ensign," she said to it.

The computer's contralto voice said promptly, "File not found."

T'Raav raised an eyebrow at me. "Expand search beyond medical files queue." We waited a moment, then again: "File not found."

The two of us looked at each other. "Computer," I said, "search for personnel file on Hayden Pope."

A split-second passed, then the desk terminal's screen came to life—not with text or statistics or medical data—but with what looked like flames, then the interior of a star, then the accretion disk of a singularity, then a rain forest. The screen went back to its default setting, an overview of all of the medical monitor readouts in sickbay.

"Rahadyan," said T'Raav, "*what* did you see?" There was a strange note to her voice, one that overlaid the obvious tone of astonishment.

"Flames, then a bright light—though for some reason I felt it was the mantle of a star—then a singularity, don't know which one, then a rain forest."

"That is *not* what I saw," she said. "I saw images from Vulcan history: one of the many wars before the birth of Surak and the

Reformation, the Sundering, the construction of the Vulcan Academy of Sciences, then faces of famous persons in Vulcan history. Then the default setting."

We stared at each other for a long moment. T'Raav hit the intercom switch on her desk. "Sickbay to Rear Admiral Rosenzweig." The admiral's face appeared on the desk terminal screen.

"Admiral," she said tersely, "I'm with Commander Sastrowardoyo in sickbay. There's something very strange going on. I just gave Ensign Pope a physical an hour or so ago and there are no records of it. We have also tried to call up records on him from the ship's computer. There are none. The computer displays different images—to different people at the same time."

On the screen, Rosenzweig frowned. "Where is he now?" he said.

The chrono display read 1714. "I told him to rest after his physical, but he's scheduled for a helm/nav simulator session at 1730. Rahadyan is supposed to meet him there."

"Rahadyan, page his quarters," said Rosenzweig. "Switching to conference mode." His expression was perplexed.

I hit the intercom touchpad. "Sastrowardoyo to Pope." No answer. "Sastrowardoyo to Pope." Still none. "Admiral..."

On the screen, Rosenzweig reacted quickly, using allcall from his intercom. "Ensign Pope, please report to Admiral's quarters, on the double" came over the MC-1 speakers. I could hear the echo in the corridor beyond.

The intercom whistled in Rosenzweig's quarters. "Rosenzweig here," he said. The response was garbled from T'Raav's and my perspective, although the voice sounded like Chief Engineer Padovan's. The expression on the admiral's face turned from perplexity to worry—with not a little anger mixed in. "What? George, that's impossible! Are they off-line now? Begin a level-1 diagnostic immediately! I'm on my way."

"Admiral, what is going on?" asked T'Raav.

"One moment, T'Raav," said Rosenzweig urgently. "All hands, go to yellow alert. This is no drill." A klaxon began sounding throughout the ship. He hit another touchpad, and a screen to his right lit up, displaying engineering systems readouts. "According to our Chief Engineer's readings, our warpfield shifted just now—several times. His system logs read that we were traveling at warp 18 then..."

"But none of us felt anything," I said. "None of those subharmonics from acceleration..."

"Never mind the subharmonics," said Rosenzweig impatiently. "The entire ship would be shaken apart by the stress. We went from warp 6 to 18 almost instantaneously, then back down to warp 4 then up to 19—all in the space of thirty seconds. George took the warp engines off-line and is doing a full diagnostic..."

"Excuse me, both of you," said T'Raav. "I have to prepare sickbay." She left the office hurriedly.

On yellow alert, the gamma shift goes to stations to back up the shift on-duty, which in this case was beta shift. Alpha and delta shifts didn't need to be anywhere until red alert—which could be minutes, or hours, from now. "I'll go to auxiliary control, just in case we have to..." I broke off at the expression on the admiral's face, one of consternation. "What do you want me to do?"

"Find Pope. If he's not in his quarters, not at the helm/nav simulator, find him. He must have something to do with this."

"Aye, sir. You'll be in Main Engineering?"

"Yes. If you're the only person he'll talk to..."

"Find out what the hell he's doing, if not *how* the hell he's doing it," I said grimly. "Yes, sir."

"Rosenzweig out." I half-ran out of T'Raav's office and headed into the corridor. Passing by an intercom station, I tried again, and hit the allcall button. "Sastrowardoyo to Pope. Respond, damn it!" The echoes of my own voice reverberated off the corridor walls.

I glanced at my wrist chrono. 1719. I entered a turbolift and went to Pope's quarters first. I rang the chime, then when I heard no answer, overrode the door lock with a department head's password. Apparently either Maintenance had fixed the door software or what had gone wrong this morning wasn't a problem anymore.

The door to Pope's quarters slid open. The rooms were pretty much as when I'd shown them to Pope, hours before. But he wasn't in them.

I hit the intercom touchpad on what would be Pope's desk. "Hangar Deck." The screen lit up with Lieutenant Wilson's face, which had a frown on it. Behind her image was the hangar deck, the crews of which were prepping shuttlecraft and all of the other auxiliary vehicles for emergency launch.

"Yes, Commander," said Amy Wilson hurriedly. "What's going on? Warp drive's off-line..."

"I know, I know. Weren't you en route to the helm/nav simulator?"

"You *know* I was, then we went to yellow alert," she said impatiently.

"So you haven't seen Pope?"

"No, this was supposed to be the first time I'd met him."

"We've paged him and he hasn't answered. The Admiral thinks he's responsible for what's going on."

Just then, Rosenzweig's voice came over the ship's speakers. "Ensign Pope, please report to Main Engineering. Ensign Hayden Pope, please report to Main Engineering."

"Amy..." I started to say.

"I heard," she said grimly. "Good luck in finding him." She took a breath. "Good luck to us all. Wilson out."

I hit the intercom touchpad again. "Main Engineering. This is Commander Sastrowardoyo. I need to speak to the Admiral."

No visual. Only the audio circuit became active, making me wonder if systems were beginning to fail all over the ship because of Pope's machinations. "Go ahead."

"Sir, do you wish me to join you in Engineering?"

"Actually, yes," came Rosenzweig's voice. "You may as well see what he's done."

I ran up to Main Engineering. Rosenzweig was there, as was Chief Engineer Padovan, his two Assistant Chiefs, Lt. Commanders Lynch and Zulkowski, and several junior officers, specialists and technicians. All except Rosenzweig and Lieutenant Peter Alderson, the ship's Alien Technologies Officer, wore anti-radiation suits. Some were at the master situation monitor; some across the huge room at the vertical matter/antimatter intermix column.

At my inquiring eyebrow, the admiral shook his head. "We won't need to suit up. We don't have to worry about radiation."

"Why?"

"There isn't any," came the answer from George Padovan. "None that we can detect anyway."

One of the specialists spoke up. "We're ready for that static warp propulsion systems test, Mr. Padovan."

"One moment, please, Ensign T'Lieste," he shot back. "There's some kind of new shielding around the intermix column," he said to me. "It's opaque to everything but visible light, perhaps even gravitons, chronitons and neutrinos."

"That's beyond the current limits of our technology," said Alderson. "In fact, it's beyond the limits of *any* known technological culture."

"Is that how we got to warp 19 without overstressing the hull or being made into jelly?" I asked. "The inertial dampeners and the structural integrity field couldn't possibly overcome velocity changes like what your readings showed."

"Apparently they can now," said Padovan. He turned back to the technician. "Begin the static test."

The *basso profundo* hum of the warp engines began. All of us were silent. The corruscations within the intermix column began to twist in patterns I'd never seen before.

"That's very strange," commented Lt. Commander Lynch, pointing at an indicator. "If this trend continues, our warpfield output will potentially be 100 kilocochranes..."

A thought occurred to me, and I'm not sure why it hadn't before. "If we were traveling at up to warp factor 19 for even a short burst of time at our previous heading..."

"Then where are we?" said Rosenzweig grimly. He strode to another console and hit several touchpads in rapid succession, accessing the navigation computers. "Why wasn't the bridge aware of the situation?" he muttered, almost to himself.

Almost on cue, the intercom whistled. "Bridge to Admiral Rosenzweig." It was the voice of Lt. Commander Brown.

"Rosenzweig here. Go ahead, Kate."

"Sir, those short bursts of hyper warp velocities ... That's not possible."

"It shouldn't be," allowed Rosenzweig.

"We've lost our navigational fix," she continued, "and we're attempting to identify our position using panoramic sensor scans to reprogram the S.I.N.S." The S.I.N.S. was the Stellar Inertial Navigation System.

"All you *can* do, for now. I know it'll take a few minutes. Let me know as soon as possible. Rosenzweig out." He double-tapped the intercom touchpad. "Security."

"Romano here," came a voice from the 'com.

"Commander, we're missing someone—or seem to be. Organize some teams to find Ensign Hayden Pope. He's our new helm specialist." It must have dawned on the admiral, as it did on me, that Lt. Commander Romano wouldn't be able to access Pope's personnel records from the ship's computer; he'd wind up having the same weird experience that T'Raav and I had. "Wait a minute. I have a feeling you won't be able to get his records, not even a holo of him."

A pause, then Romano came back. His normally calm voice sounded quite disconcerted. "What the—? You're right, sir. Has Pope infiltrated the computer cores?"

One of the Engineering technicians spoke up. "A level-three diagnostic on the computers showed no intrusion or damage."

"And we can't go to a level-one or even a level-two diagnostic," volunteered Padovan, "unless we stop the test we're doing on the warp engines."

"Describe what he looks like, Admiral," said Romano.

"Terran humanoid male, about 1.8 meters, blonde, Caucasian, clean shaven, age: early 20's—fairly non-descript otherwise."

"Do our best," said Romano with a sigh. "I can only spare four teams if we're on yellow alert, sir."

"Understood, Mr. Romano. I'd like a progress report every ten minutes."

"Will do. Romano out."

"With your permission, I'm going to the bridge to take over the Helm from Lieutenant Betancourt, or pull starcharts, or *something*," I told the admiral. "I can't just stand here."

Rosenzweig looked thoughtful for a moment then said, "No, Didier can handle the Helm. I need you to see what Commander Vlekkenbaaij has picked up from the nanocameras we put in Pope's quarters. If there's anything unusual we may need your intelligence expertise to help decipher it."

"Yes, sir," I turned and strode towards the corridor. In a few minutes, I was at the Intelligence office on one of the lower decks. It was down here for several reasons, including its distance from the main bridge and its proximity to both the lower sensor platform and the primary computer core. In case of an emergency—such as if a stray phaser shot struck the bridge and blew it to hell and gone—David Janus Vlekkenbaaij and his Intelligence staff could still support a backup command crew in the more heavily-shielded auxiliary control room.

As I approached the Intelligence office doors, they slid open before I had a chance to touch the door chime. In the outer office, at a desk facing the doors, was Ensign Jeanne-Marie Chartier, Vlekkenbaaij's yeoman. While I had seen her several times in the months since I came on board *Avenger*, I had only met her the week before, at the Fillmores' wedding. During the reception, I had been playing my usual role of watching people dance from the sidelines; she had not taken my polite refusal to dance with her as definitive.

"Commander Sastrowardoyo," she said, with a winning smile. "What brings you to Intel? Making an early appointment to be on my dance card, perhaps?"

I smiled slightly in spite of myself, and shifted my weight from one foot to another. "No, Ensign, I'm—"

"Here to see David Janus," Chartier said brightly. "Yes, well, we would *all* love to see more of him." Something in the way she said that made me blush. Something in the way she said *many* things usually did. Jeanne-Marie Chartier made me feel very uncomfortable and awkward, as if I was in sixth grade going to my first dance. "Go right in." The fingers of her left hand did an arpeggio on a console beneath the level of the desk and a door to my right slid open.

"Thank you," I said then walked in.

David Janus Vlekkenbaaij and two female Human officers, both lieutenants, sat at a huge desk console in front of a bank of holo screens. "Rahadyan," he said, nodding at me, "I take it you're here because of the yellow alert."

"Yes, they're performing tests on the engines that'll take a while and the bridge is trying to figure out where the hell we are and Security's trying to find Pope, so ... I'm just champing at the bit here."

"I understand," he said with a serious tone in his voice. "Oh, this is Larisa el-Ibrahim and this is Alexandra Massey. They've just joined my staff." I smiled politely at both of them. They both murmured hellos.

I'm not sure if David Janus caught the glint of amusement that I'm sure my eyes revealed. "Did the nanocameras reveal anything?" I asked.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," said Vlekkenbaaij. "The last time he was in his quarters was before he was scheduled to get his physical from T'Raav. That was six hours ago. I had also programmed a few of the nanos to attach themselves to his clothing so he could be continually monitored. After he left sickbay, the nanos stopped transmitting."

"What about personnel reports? Has anyone sighted him?" I asked.

"Ensign Neltex was in a turbolift with him over an hour ago."

"So he's been missing for an hour," I muttered.

"Let's see if any of the Security teams have found him," he said. He tapped the intercom. "Security."

A soft tenor voice came from the 'com speaker. "Security. Lieutenant O'Rourke."

"This is Commander Vlekkenbaaij. Have any of the teams found Ensign Pope?"

"No, sir," came the quick reply. "Not so far."

"May I ask who the teams are led by?"

"Team Aleph is led by Lt. Commander Romano, Team Beth by Lt. Commander Colgan, Gimel by Lieutenant Teiresias and Daleth by Lieutenant Jayawardene."

"All good people," commented Vlekkenbaaij. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Please keep me informed. Vlekkenbaaij out." As he closed the channel, the intercom whistled. He hit the touchpad. "Intelligence. Vlekkenbaaij here," he said automatically.

"D.J.? It's Alex. Rahadyan was supposed to see you."

"He's right here."

I stepped over to the intercom microphone. "Yes, Admiral."

"Switch to external scanners and focus on the hull plating." At that, Lieutenant el-Ibrahim changed the view on one of the screens.

"Something's forming on the outer hull," I said.

"Yes," said the admiral. "The bridge picked it up when they were trying to calculate where in the name of the gods we are ... Whatever it is, it's a material unknown to our science with a very high atomic weight. Curiously, sensors indicate it doesn't affect our mass at all. And it's alive."

We were all silent for a moment, until Massey broke it with "Gee, at least it's not peach-colored." I would have laughed except it came out as a snort. Larisa el-Ibrahim just raised an eyebrow and grinned wryly at me. Even Vlekkenbaaij's mouth twitched at the corners. Rosenzweig sighed heavily over the intercom channel.

"How long before it envelops the entire hull?" asked Vlekkenbaaij.

"We estimate 17 minutes from now," said Rosenzweig tersely. "Whatever it is, it's also forming holes in itself for sensors, viewports, antennae, airlocks, the hangar bay doors ... Could be totally harmless—except we don't know where it came from." He took a breath. "I've ordered an EVA team—led by Lieutenant Aguinaldo—to go out there and take some close readings."

I almost offered to go out and help, but Aguinaldo and the Sciences specialists knew their stuff; we'd only be in the way. However, Vlekkenbaaij looked as if he might have had the same idea.

"Pope again and his improvements," I said. "We can't find him, so we don't know how the hell he's doing it..."

"Well, we may have only a few minutes to find out," came the admiral's voice. "Rosenzweig out."

"Alex told me earlier that apparently Pope'll only talk to *you* with any degree of openness," said Vlekkenbaaij. "I wonder if you're the key, and why?"

"He said I was a kindred spirit," I replied, slightly embarrassed.

"You're usually not much of a telepath," said Vlekkenbaaij. He said it as a fact, not as an insult, but I imagined a snide subtext to his observation. On testing for psi abilities, I'd evinced a high Rhine quotient initially, but had not scored consistently on subsequent tests. David Janus would have known that from his vetting me for Operation Blackjack, years ago.

"No," I said. "I don't think it's that. In fact..." I told Vlekkenbaaij what I'd almost forgotten, that M'Reen had found Pope to be telepathically void.

"A negative form of telepathy?" said Vlekkenbaaij, frowning. "That's rare, but not unknown. Wait!" He sat up straighter in his chair. "T'Raav gave him a physical..."

"And Vulcan healers have a very high psi quotient," I finished. "If he's telepathically void, why didn't she comment on it?"

"He's playing with us," decided Vlekkenbaaij. "Leaving hints and clues and breadcrumbs for us to follow."

"And he's using those same psi powers to conceal himself from sensors," I suggested. "But if he can do all of the things he's been doing, why does he *need* to hide?"

"The question," said Jeanne-Marie Chartier from behind me, "is why he needs Starfleet." I turned. She was standing in the door with a perturbed expression on her face. I had heard from others that Chartier's Québécois accent only came out under stress, and it was present now.

"I have no idea," I said.

"Could it be," she continued, "that he doesn't need Starfleet so much as he needs an excuse to do what he's been doing?"

"Then what we need to find out is a motivation," I said.

"As well as find out precisely who or what Pope is," added Chartier.

"What Pope is?" Vlekkenbaaij asked.

"I just did a library search on psi powers as manifested in Humans, particularly those of Terran origin..."

"And?" I said.

"Making the assumption that he's the cause or the catalyst of everything that's been going on for the past few hours, he almost *can't* be Terran."

"His aunt, Admiral Helena Pope, is quite definitely Human of Terran-derived stock. She was head of Star Fleet Intelligence, Strategic Hazards Division, during..." My auto-editing function kicked in.

"During that Intel operation that you and David Janus aren't supposed to talk about," finished Chartier quietly. "The op that still gives its survivors nightmares. The hypnotherapy that you all had afterwards ... took more easily with some than others." She regarded me with a look that was almost sad. "Or it wore off, eventually."

"Yeoman," said Vlekkenbaaij in a warning tone.

"Yes, David Janus, I know," she said, turning to him with an enigmatic look. "It's classified. But you should learn not to talk about *classified* stuff in your sleep." Jeanne-Marie Chartier turned back to me. "What is *not* generally known is that Helena Pope isn't *our* Pope's aunt. Not biologically anyway; he's adopted."

I didn't know what to say at *that* bit of information. I glanced over at el-Ibrahim and Massey, who had assumed carefully neutral expressions.

"If he's an alien intelligence of some kind," said Vlekkenbaaij, more in order to fill the awkward silence than anything else, "I can't imagine he—or she or it—is on the level of the Organians or the Metrons."

"More subtly," volunteered Chartier, "Pope may be pretending he's less than he is."

"Question is, Ensign," I said, and almost winced. My voice sounded a touch condescending. "Why would he bring himself down to Human levels if he were capable of so much more?"

"We won't know that," said Vlekkenbaaij, "until we find him."

"Or *allows* us to find him," added Chartier.

"By your leave, Commander?" I said to Vlekkenbaaij, pointing at the intercom.

"Be my guest," he said.

I thumbed the intercom touchpad. "Bridge, this is Commander Sastrowardoyo. Where *are* we, precisely?"

Kate Brown's voice filtered down several levels. "We're a couple of hundred light years off our course, close to the galactic rim." She rattled off a string of coordinates.

"So the nearest Fleet contact is Starbase 61?" asked Vlekkenbaaij.

"Correct, D.J.," said Kate. "The admiral's already been informed, and we've just launched a log buoy as well as tried to send out a subspace transmission to the starbase. As soon as we know what precisely is going on with the engines and the hull plating..."

"We'll know what to do," finished Vlekkenbaaij. "Well, let us know. We're not doing too much down here. Intelligence out."

Suddenly, my bronze fire-lizard appeared from *between* in the Intelligence monitoring room, with that slight ozone smell. "Damn," I exclaimed in surprise. "I thought you knew enough to stay in quarters during an alert, Hanuman."

Hanuman hooted once, flew in a circle around me, flew towards the corridor, stopped at the door and hovered. He looked back at me.

"What's wrong?" I asked Hanuman. He flew towards the viewscreen that displayed the growth of ... whatever ... on the hull, then flew back to the door.

"I think you should follow him," said Chartier and Vlekkenbaaij almost in unison. Vlekkenbaaij glared at the yeoman. "I'll go with you," he said to me, walking over to the weapons locker. "Don't know what's going on, but it's better than staying around *monitoring* things ... though I *do* like to watch, I prefer to be in the middle of things whenever possible." He took out a combat phaser and a holster, handed both to me, and took a set out for himself.

I started to put it on, then said, "Wait a minute. What good is *this* gonna do against Pope, or whatever Pope is?"

Vlekkenbaaij shrugged. "I like to be prepared for anything." He strapped on the phaser, then added, "Once upon a time, *you* did, too. Do me a favor, though? If we have to this time, shoot to *kill*."

I swallowed a retort, and merely said, "Hand me a tricorder and a communicator." He did so, and I started to walk out the door. Yeoman Chartier had a suddenly fierce expression on her face. "I'm going with the two of you," she said decisively. "Larisa and Alexandra can mind the store." She walked towards the locker.

"David Janus," I began, "she's a *yeoman*."

"I'm an *Intelligence* yeoman," Jeanne-Marie Chartier retorted, "which means to have this job, I have to be one hell of a shot. David Janus, tell him."

"She's almost as good as me," he admitted.

"I'm *as* good as you are," she retorted. "Rahadyan, had the two of you planned on going after Pope *without* body armor?"

"The phasers are provocative enough," I said. "And if it *is* Pope who's having my fire-lizard fetch me ... perhaps even duranium composite armor won't do the trick against what he's got."

"Do what you want," Chartier said with asperity. "You may have special dispensation with Pope, but I suspect David Janus and I would not." She opened another locker and stepped backwards into it. A sensor hummed briefly, then the locker's Erati apparatus formed class I combat armor around her short, deceptively slight, form. Chartier began the systems prep routines on her armor.

"It seems to me," I said to Vlekkenbaaij, and smiling in spite of myself, "that I might not know *which* of you is the senior officer." He glared at me, thinking as I did, of Operation Blackjack again.

"Okay, we're even now," he said. "Sure you won't reconsider the armor?"

"I won't," I said. "I think I'll be okay. You should wear it, though."

He nodded, then went to the armor locker and went through the same procedure than Yeoman Chartier had.

"Can the two of you hear me?" I said, after Vlekkenbaaij had concluded his systems checks. Their armored forms both nodded. "Good. Oh—wait one minute. Fools rush in, and all that, but we should let the Admiral know..."

"I'll do that, sir," said Lieutenant Massey. "We can track Commander Vlekkenbaaij and Ensign Chartier via their armor, but you'll need something on you..."

"Subcutaneous transponder," said el-Ibrahim, going into a cabinet and pulling out a hypo. She loaded it with one of the microscopic tracking devices then injected it near the brachial nerve in my left forearm.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," I said. "Now all I have to do is make sure my arm stays attached." At her look, I said quickly, "That *was* a joke, Lieutenant."

Hanuman hooted again, this time with a decidedly impatient tone.

"Yeah, yeah, coming," I said and walked out in his wake.

The other two followed, walking behind but on either side of me, Chartier on my right, Vlekkenbaaij on my left.

"If this is Pope," said Chartier, "you seem to be almost ... casual about this."

"Far from it," I said. "It's just that ... I guess I feel relieved that the mystery, all these mysteries, may be coming to an end."

Hanuman was flying four meters in front of me. I trotted slightly faster in order to catch up, then noticed that the two Intelligence officers weren't behind me. I looked back at them. Vlekkenbaaij and Chartier were frozen in mid-step.

This looks like a bad hologid, I thought to myself glumly, then turned back and continued to follow Hanuman. There were other officers in the corridor as we went through it. All, apparently, were frozen in place. I touched the cheek of one. Slightly cold to the touch. Another mystery on top of all the others. This situation had an air of familiarity to it, as if I'd read about it but forgot it—or had been made to forget it.

Following the conclusion of Operation Blackjack over three years ago, I—along with the nearly 190 other officers who survived it—had been given hypnotherapy to suppress our memories of the horrors and the classified information that was revealed during the op. The sense of familiarity with memories just out of my grasp was similar to the feelings I had immediately following the treatments.

Hanuman flew towards a turbolift entrance, but his mass wasn't enough to trigger the door sensor. He turned around and looked at me with what passes in fire-lizards for an expectant look. I approached the door and it opened. "Okay, what level, Hanuman?" I asked him. The doors closed.

He hooted once then poked with his snout at the manual 'lift controls. We rose upward rapidly, towards the main bridge. I wondered how we could be moving when everyone else wasn't.

The 'lift doors opened on the bridge, and I stepped out. Hanuman settled onto my right shoulder. Kate Brown was in the center seat, frozen in mid-conversation with Yeoman Rachel Ashley. I looked around. Other officers were statues at their respective stations: Lieutenant Xiomara Michaelsen at Sciences; Lieutenant Didier Betancourt at the Helm; Lieutenant J.G. Pamela Desjardins at Navigation; Commander Mark Anbinder at the comms board; Lieutenant Victoria Paris at Tactical; Lieutenant Antonia Sawalha at Aux Systems; Ensign Maria Brescia at Engineering; other officers I didn't immediately recognize. The chronometers above each of the upper bridge stations were frozen at 1803.36.

The main viewer had the image of a singularity—or rather a singularity's accretion disk—on it. I went over to the sciences station and looked over Michaelsen's shoulder at her readouts. They identified the black hole as FGC 42576 and gave data on date of discovery, probable origin date, what little spectroscopic information could be had.

I turned and looked at the settings on the astrogator, in the middle of the console between where Betancourt and Desjardins sat. We were locked on course for the center of the singularity, but we weren't moving. I would have guessed that no one on the ship was moving—except for Hanuman and me. And Pope, wherever he was, whatever he was.

"I assume you want explanations," said a voice behind me in a tired, almost bored, tone. It was Pope's voice, of course.

I turned. It was Pope, although looking not quite so much the pretty-boy media star as he had that morning in the transporter room. The Gandhi-Christ-mom look was there raised by a couple of orders of magnitude. "That would be a good idea," I said. "I don't understand why, what or how..."

"You must forgive," said Pope, "my penchant for parlor tricks. I suppose I could have been more subtle with my clues and drawn this out longer, for decades even."

"Should I call you anything but Hayden Pope?" I asked. My heartbeat was rapid, and I called upon every stitch of training to slow it down to a normal rate.

"For the time being, that name will do as well as any," he replied with a chuckle.

"What are you?"

"`What,'" he said, almost mockingly. "I ... am many things. A trickster, a traveller, an outcast, a lost child—although, were I to call myself a child of my race, that would be ironic, considering how much older I am than you." He paused. "Considering how soon your species will become part of us."

"What's the purpose of all this?"

"Purpose? A test, an invitation, a helping hand, a quest..."

I felt annoyed, although I wondered if I should have been angry. "You seemed to have singled me out, among all of *Avenger's* officers and crew. Among all of the Fleet, perhaps."

"Yes," Pope said. "You have the most ... potential for growth."

"I find that hard to believe. You spoke of your race—are you..."

"An Organian? No. Nor am I a Metron or a Megan or one of the Aegis—nor any of the other so-called super-races Terrans have ever knowingly encountered since they first went to space. My kind has observed you for—well, time is relative, isn't it? Let us say: a while."

"As powerful as you are," I said, "I still don't see why you need Star Fleet or starships or someone like me..."

"Of the myriad of starfaring races in this galaxy," Pope said, "the Terran Federation—please don't complete your thought; while that's not the *official* name, you cannot deny that Terra and its colonies, historically, have had the most influence in your Federation's affairs—has the greatest of all destinies. The Million-Year Empire, I liked to call it."

"We are *not* an Empire!" I started angrily, "The Federation is a coalition of individual governments run along federalist and democratic lines..."

"Spare me the political science lecture, Rahadyan. As the Federation expands, it cannot remain the coalition you think it is for long. Not without splintering again into many little ... principalities. Mutually hostile ones, at that."

"Explain the modifications to *Avenger* and the other ships," I said.

Pope spread his arms wide. "Consider them gifts. Consider them ... my contribution to helping the Million-Year Empire towards its correct path."

"There's more than one path," I said, not a question.

"Yes, there is more than one path for your Federation, as there is more than one path for you as a race, and you as an individual. Time is mutable enough to allow for choice. I am going to give *you* the ... honor of making that choice. A choice with much larger consequences than you can imagine."

"Me," I said, smiling cynically in spite of myself. "You said that I had 'the most potential for growth'. What does *that* mean?"

Pope smiled the Gandhi-like smile. "I'm allowed some secrets, although I've revealed too many already."

"So what are the choices? Accept your gifts of advanced technology so the Federation can expand even faster—"

"Refuse them," said Pope, "and you will stay in your cradles a while longer, but doing *that* will only stave off the inevitable in most futures."

"How dare you play God with our destinies?" I asked this without, for the most part, anger.

"I am not playing God, or even *a* god," said Pope. "I—and other members of my race—have no pretensions to deity."

I thought for a moment. "Are you acting on your own—or with other members of 'your' race?"

"Very good question, Rahadyan. I am, in fact, acting on my own."

"What I refuse to make a choice?" I asked. "What if I don't want the burden of history?"

"Then the Million-Year Empire will occur as I remember it—in some alternate continuum. In the one where you refused to make a choice, the Empire's enemies were able to conquer it and subjugate or execute all sentients within its borders by the 30th century of your Terran Common Era calendar." The being that called itself Hayden Pope was good at melodrama. "Trillions of lives lost or enslaved a mere 700 years from now. I'd suggest you make that decision."

"Then the choice I make," I said, "is to reject the technological advances you've given us over the past year. Let our scientists and engineers discover or invent those advances on our own, *without* outside help. Let the Federation evolve, as it will, without the influence of your species. We may stay a while in the cradle, but at least we'll leave it on our own."

Pope nodded. "Precisely the choice I knew you would make. Ever and always the soul of moral certainty, aren't you?"

"May I ask another question?"

The Gandhi smile grew wider. "You have always had that right."

"Since you came aboard the ship, you seemed especially interested in me, and in fact—if I'm not mistaken—seemed to know the answers to questions about my personal life before I'd answered them. Except for one."

"The question about your siblings."

"Yes. Shall I assume you know everything about my past, present and future—or at least you thought you did?"

"Correct. I thought I had. Your brother who had died in this reality—"

"Tomo."

"Sabartomo Daniel Sastrowardoyo. There are many close, alternate universes where he did *not* die. You are aware of this?"

I blocked off the thought that half-formed in my head. "Pope, you must know I'm aware of it—I found it out the hard way, not too long ago." Operation Blackjack again, rearing its ugly head.

"What would you give to be in a continuum where he was alive and whole—and at your side?"

"Once upon a time, *everything*," I answered quietly, honestly. "But I live in *this* universe, Pope, not an alternate one."

"Could I offer you—"

I cut him off angrily. "If you have that power, I won't, I *can't*, take advantage of it. It's damnable of you to dangle that in front of me."

The smile was gone and replaced by the Christ-look of sadness. "I had only meant to—"

"I have missed him every *day* of my life for more than 16 years," I said tersely, trying to rein in the outrage I felt. I didn't feel quite as violated as I had during that interrogation on Mirfak IX years ago, but... "I stopped believing in a just and loving Deity after I begged, I pleaded for Him or Her to give my brother back to me—and He didn't. I spent too many sleepless nights wondering what my life would be like if Tomo *hadn't* died!" I was nearly screaming at him. "I missed him so much that at times I wanted to join him..." I felt the tears on my face. "But eventually I came to terms with it. I hated that I could do so, but I did. And now you want to open the wounds all over again..."

"I only wanted to give you peace, relief from your grief..."

"No," I said with difficulty. "Thank you, but no. Peace won't come from *another* version of my brother, no matter how similar a universe you'll put me into, or draw him from. Peace will come at

the end of life, but as far as I'm concerned I'm not ending this life anytime soon."

"No," Pope said soothingly. "No, you won't. You have much too much to do, to contribute." He bowed his head, as if in prayer or meditation, then looked up again at me. "Very well, then. The changes I made to the starships Sirius, Chandrasekhar, Soyuz and Ajax will be taken away." He paused. "There are those in Star Fleet who will *revile* you for taking away all of those advantages."

"I'd be locked up, and the key thrown away," I agreed.

"That would not do," he said. "Some subtle alterations in history, perhaps? Or more simply, keep the mystery: the changes were made, then they were taken away. And you will have a secret that you'll have to keep to your grave."

"Wouldn't be enough," I countered. "Too many here on Avenger know I have some kind of connection to you, to a super-entity that masquerades as a Human."

"Then perhaps I'll just do a more—shall we say, theatrical—presentation for the benefit of those who do know..." And Pope vanished in a flash of light. Too holocomic-booky, I thought.

Everyone around me on the main bridge started moving again, and the steady tones of yellow alert and the beeps and clicks of status checks and instruments filled the bridge. The chronometers moved forward again, no longer frozen at 1803.36. Next to me, Mark Anbinder looked startled at suddenly seeing me near the Communications station. "Rahadyan, where'd you come from?"

"Engineering, then Intelligence," I said. "The Admiral sent me up to—" I couldn't think of a plausible story fast enough. Fortunately, I didn't have to. The turbolift doors sighed open and Rosenzweig, Vlekkenbaaij and Chartier came running out, the latter two still in the combat armor in which they'd been frozen a minute—or an hour—before.

"Where's Pope?" asked Rosenzweig.

"I don't—" I began.

Gasp from Kate Brown and several others. "Admiral, on the screen—"

Where only the black hole's accretion disk had been was now the image of Pope's face—looking as Gandhiesque as ever—superimposed on the accretion disk. When he spoke, however, his voice was deeper, more stentorian, as if he had incorporated the vocal characteristics of all of the male leads of the Royal Shakespeare Company for the past 500 years. "I have found that your kind is not yet ready for the gifts I could have given you. All of those changes made over the past year will be restored to what they had been." Pope's face had a sad smile. "Perhaps in a time to come, my friends."

"Wait!" said Rosenzweig, "We need some explanations. What's your connection to Rahadyan?"

The dark eyes of Pope's image seemed to look in my direction. "None, really. Beyond his being a kindred spirit, an enlightened soul."

"If I'm so damn enlightened," I muttered, "why the hell don't I know what's going on?"

Vlekkenbaaij and Chartier had the helmets of their armor off, and David Janus regarded me with a suspicious look. I raised an eyebrow back at him.

"Will you be back to ... judge us again?" the admiral asked Pope.

"Yes. I, or one of my species. Not in most of your lifetimes, however. Farewell." And the image of Pope vanished.

The intercom whistled stridently. "Engineering to Admiral Rosenzweig." The admiral walked down to the command chair and hit a touchpad. "Go ahead."

"Padovan here, sir. That shielding around the intermix column is gone, as if it had never been there. No traces of it whatsoever."

"I see," said Rosenzweig, looking over at me. He shared Vlekkenbaaij's suspicious expression. "Begin a level-two diagnostic of all ship's systems, Mr. Padovan. I'd like to get underway as soon as possible. Star Fleet'll want some answers—even if we don't have all of them."

"Not a level-one, sir?"

"My gut instincts tell me it's not warranted, Mr. Padovan. How about yours?"

After a pause, the Engineering chief responded. "No, sir. Level-two diagnostic should be complete in three hours."

"Very well. Rosenzweig out." He closed the channel.

"Sir," said Lieutenant Michaelsen. "Sensors show that ... growth on the hull is no longer there. Shall I recall the EVA team?"

"Yes, do so, Lieutenant," said Rosenzweig with a bemused expression on his face. "Commander," he said to me, "what exactly happened?"

I took a breath. "Well, it's like this, Admiral ... Hanuman and I came up to the bridge, and ... and Pope decided to take back everything he'd given us in the past year."

"Just like that?"

"Essentially," I said.

"Commander," Rosenzweig began warningly. But just then, the Incoming Message indicators flashed on the Communications console. Anbinder hit a couple of touchpads and read his instruments.

"Priority One livelink message from Starfleet Command, Admiral. For your eyes and Commander Sastrowardoyo's."

"In my ready room, Mr. Anbinder. Oh, and do have Mr. Romano call off those search parties for Pope." Rosenzweig gestured towards the lift doors. "Shall we, Commander?" There was a glint of restrained anger in his eyes, though his expression was otherwise a neutral one.

I squared my shoulders and walked to the turbolift, which sighed open. The two of us entered, the doors closed, the lift made an 85 degree turn to starboard and the doors opened on the short corridor behind the bridge. Without a word, we walked into the admiral's ready room.

Rosenzweig walked to behind his desk and hit one of the touchpads in front of him as he sat down. "Go ahead, Mark."

The screen on one wall of the ready room lit up, and on it was a familiar face. I stood slightly more at attention and the admiral even sat up straighter. "Helena," said Rosenzweig, "this is a surprise."

"Good evening, Admiral," I said. I had not seen Admiral Helena Pope in a while, and I'd hoped I'd never see her again. Though the ready room was a comfortable 25 degrees Celsius, I felt a bead of sweat form on my forehead.

"Gentlemen, I'll get right to the point. Here at Star Fleet Intelligence, we've been receiving some ... interesting images of what has transpired on Avenger during the past several hours." She paused. "Similar transmissions have been sent to both the Commander-in-Chief, Star Fleet, and the Federation Council President. Pending further investigation, this matter is regarded as classified Top Secret—in fact higher than *that*." Helena Pope took

a breath, a deep one. "Alex, Rahadyan—Smillie and Ra-ghoratrei spoke of stamping this incident with a Doublet Regal classification."

The admiral and I looked at each other, then back at the screen. "Sir, that classification—" began Rosenzweig.

"Is very rarely used," finished Admiral Pope. "I don't even remember the last time it was used, or for what. It's even higher than how we classified Operation Blackjack, or the Nova Weapons research files, or when we stole the cloaking device from the Romulans."

"Request permission to participate in any further investigation," said Rosenzweig tersely.

"I'm afraid that might not be my permission to grant, Alex," said Admiral Pope. "Rest assured, though, if I have any say, you and Avenger have first crack at it."

"Thank you," said Rosenzweig.

"You're most welcome," said Admiral Pope. "I'm not sure what that entity was that was masquerading as my adoptive nephew, and we may never know what your"—at these words, she looked straight at me—"precise connection to it was, Rahadyan. Do *you* know?"

"Only what he—what it, said, Admiral," I responded honestly. "It perceived me as an enlightened soul, a kindred spirit. So it said."

On the screen, she nodded. "The matter is closed for now. Alex, your orders have changed. You're to be debriefed at Starbase 61. Proceed there as soon as you're able, at warp 8. The Corregidor will be taking over your survey mission."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Padovan's doing a level-two diagnostic. We'll be underway for Starbase 61 by 2130. Warp 8'll get us there in four days."

"Very well, then. Star Fleet Intelligence out." The screen resumed its default setting of the ship's forward view, still the singularity.

Rosenzweig sighed. "Well, that's that."

"For now," I said.

"For now," he agreed. "Looks like your tenure on Avenger has had a very interesting beginning."

"Almost too interesting," I said. We went back out to the main bridge, where Vlekkenbaaij asked "Well?"

"The matter regarding Mr. Pope has been classified top secret, pending further investigation, Commander," said the admiral formally. He turned to the communications officer. "Mark, please have all of the division chiefs report to the main briefing room at 2200. Commanders Sastrowardoyo and Vlekkenbaaij will also be joining us."

"Yes, sir." Anbinder turned back to his console and began paging officers.

Personal Log of Alex Rosenzweig, Stardate 9209.15:

What I had envisioned as a fairly routine benchmarking run has turned out to be an enigma within a puzzle, and so on ... We may never know what the entity calling itself Hayden Pope's purpose was in giving us those technological advances—and then taking them away. I've little doubt that we'll develop or discover those advances on our own, albeit decades or centuries in the future.

The technologist in me would love to know the principles behind each of those advances. The philosopher and

sociologist in me wonders if the Federation would have been ready for those advances—and doubts it.

Did we fail some kind of test without knowing we were being tested? Why did Pope focus on my new Chief Helmsman? Rahadyan himself doesn't know. He seems mildly shaken by the incident, but according to Drs. T'Raav and Cytrynbaum is fit for duty otherwise. I'm glad. I think of him as soon becoming an integral part of the Avenger gestalt. He has a lot to contribute to us, and we to him.

The senior officers' briefing didn't uncover any more information than what we'd had from watching tapes of the ship's internal monitors. Afterwards, I talked with Dr. Cytrynbaum and then T'Raav, the former in her capacity as ship's psychiatrist, the latter not only as acting Chief Medical Officer but also as my friend.

Dr. Cytrynbaum seemed vaguely frustrated that I wasn't worse off than I was, that I had no physical symptoms whatsoever. I felt tired, and I was troubled by my experiences and curious about what the entity's real purposes were—but undeniably fit to return to duty immediately.

I let T'Raav meld with me—there was no way I could have avoided her doing that, though if I had steadfastly refused, she wouldn't be able to push the point legally—and all she said was "Perhaps a couple of days of light duty and recreation. Other than that, you are fine."

T'Raav's stay aboard Avenger was prolonged a couple of weeks by our encounter with the Hayden Pope entity. We would be late meeting with the Prince Khufu, which was conveying the Fillmores from Disneymoon, and so schedules would have to be rearranged. T'Raav would be a few days late for the beginning of the semester at the Star Fleet Medical Academy; someone else would have to fill in for her.

I was glad to have T'Raav around for a while. She's one of the rare friends in the Fleet with whom I can simply sit and say nothing and just be, and that's okay by her. T'Raav seemed to be glad, too.

Two Days Later:

Vlekkenbaaij's parties tend to end late, and they often end with couples or more separating to have their own, more private, fun in quarters. I was invited to a few of these, but declined. More than enough time on this tour of duty to recreate some of the more interesting parties on Tereshkova or Tai Shan. My relationship with Trish Capdeville, light-years away on Earth, wouldn't have stopped me so much as that I just wasn't in the mood. Someday, sometime fairly soon, but not yet. Becoming part of the Avenger family, or any of the sub-families within it, takes time, especially when one has been part of other families, and the painful memories of those families still crowd out the fond ones.

I stood alone on the observation deck. 0430. In a couple of hours, I would have to report for bridge duty. I'd be in suboptimal shape, but Star Fleet training allows you to push off sleep for a few hours, even days, until you can get it. I anticipated spending beta shift, and probably part of gamma, in bed, asleep.

I looked out at the stars streaking past. Early in ship's morning is my favorite time to come up here, just to watch. With 360 other beings on board, you'd think that at least one-fourth of

those would pick around this time, too. But not everyone is as enamored of looking at the stars as I am, and of those that are, there are several places on Avenger from which to watch.

I thought of the being that had called itself Hayden Pope. I thought about the secret I kept, that I would have to mentally suppress in order to keep it a secret from all but the most powerful telepaths or mind-probes. If I could keep it from T'Raav, much as it pained me to do so, I was doing pretty well. Also, even as powerful a healer as she is, and as close a friend, T'Raav knows enough to keep out of certain parts of my mind unless asked. And I won't ask.

There were still mysteries about Pope, the answers to which I wouldn't know for a long time, if ever. For some reason, I wasn't too motivated to find those answers just yet. The universe will unfold, as it should, someone once told me, and that seems to be largely true, though at times, a maddeningly fatalistic way to perceive things.

I thought about the friendships I had started to form in the past week, friendships that had started simply because of my decision to stay, to be part of the Avenger in a more real sense than I had been. I had closed myself off from the possibility of new friendships for months, perhaps years, but time had partially healed old wounds. This was a larger part of my life now, and hopefully would be for a long time.

The friendships would evolve on their own, although they would still need care and nurturing. Half the battle was wanting those friendships, and wanting to belong.

"Star Fleet's not just a job, it's an adventure," someone had told me at Vlekkenbaaij's party, and I smiled at the appropriation of a centuries-old media campaign. Part of the adventure on these ships was the relationships, for good or for ill, that were formed with others. It was still too early to tell how good those relationships would be, but for once, I was uncharacteristically optimistic. Whatever the future held, for now I belonged on Avenger.

Epilogue:

The images faded from the holempathic matrix crystal. Hartriono turned and glared at Andreas. "That's a hell of a trick."

"I assure you, 'Triono, it was no trick," Andreas said quietly.

"What this suggests—at least to me," said Hartriono, "—is that Rahadyan turned down the chance to have power and abilities far beyond the dreams of avarice from some superbeing or race of superbeings. That's the most bloody ridiculous thing I've ever heard of." He took a breath. "You're not trying to tell me ... he's not really dead."

"I'm trying to tell you that we don't know for certain."

"I'm going to take this to Rosenzweig," Hartriono began.

"No," said Andreas abruptly. "You can't. You won't be able to."

"Yeah? Try and stop me." With that, Hartriono reached for the crystal—and his hand passed right through it. He took another swipe at it, and again, his hand passed through the crystal as if it were air.

"I tried the same thing," Andreas said. "While I don't know if the crystal is alive, or alive as we understand it, it is an intelligence of a sort."

"What does it want?"

"I'm uncertain. It hasn't indicated what it wants—though it has shown what it doesn't want." Andreas punched an alphanumeric code into his datapadd. "I've recorded personal log entries about my analyses of the crystal. No one, aside from myself, has been able to read them. I show people the entries, they see bad poetry, random doggerel—The boy stood on the burning deck,' that sort of thing—anything but information about the crystal. Let's see if you can read these."

Hartriono took the 'padd from him, glanced at its display. "Of course I can read this, plain as day..." He scrolled down for a few minutes, then looked up. "Only you and I can read this?"

Andreas nodded. "I've even approached members of the—of your family with it: Ilse, Carolyn, Sunaryati, Iwan, Pam ... I stopped after contacting Marlaina on the Stellar Wind. They all thought I was crazy with grief."

Hartriono sighed. "This is all too weird for me."

"Me, too. But remember Clarke's Third Law."

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.' And then Eddington: 'The universe is not only stranger than we imagine. It's stranger than we can imagine.'"

"Something like that," said Andreas with a small smile.

"What do you propose we do?"

"If Rahadyan isn't dead, only ... away, then I'd like to know where he is."

"As if I wouldn't," said Hartriono dryly.

"Granted. I've made a set of assumptions and I'd like to run them past you."

"Go ahead."

"First, assume that Rahadyan isn't dead. Second, assume that he has a very good reason for making virtually every one he knows and every one he cares for believe that he is dead."

Hartriono nodded. "Implying that if people know he's alive—even me and my parents—it would present a danger to Rahadyan himself or to us."

"That would seem to be the case. A rather far-fetched notion occurred to me that what's going on is bigger than either you or I could imagine. But perhaps it's not so far-fetched if it involves ... technology like this." Andreas indicated the crystal.

Hartriono nodded. "Ask the crystal to be our guide to Rahadyan."

"It's not that simple. I've tried to make contact with it telepathically. All it's done is shown me different scenarios. The one you've just seen is the one it has displayed most often."

"What's the possibility that the crystal is actually a hostile intelligence, that all of this is just brainwashing of an incredible degree?"

"It's very possible. And it becomes a recursive loop of my saying 'I know my own mind and I can do a self-diagnostic and I know my mind is sound'—but that obviously doesn't help very much if I'm so severely damaged or controlled. But, for whatever it's worth, I have something that can't be explained rationally."

"What's that?"

"Faith," said Andreas simply. "In my life, I've been able to trust that while whatever Deity there is may not seem to be just, or loving, or anything other than incredibly capricious and mean-spirited, He or She or It is moving all of us to an incredible destiny. I have a feeling that even Alex Rosenzweig—so apparently set in

his atheistic ways—would believe that. It's just that we're incapable of seeing the really, really big picture."

"We've had this discussion before," Hartriono said with a wry smile. "If you recall, I always argue for free will being the evidence that we are the captains, as it were, of our fate, etc. So?"

"I have faith that the crystal is not hostile, and that ultimately, we will meet again with Rahadyan. But perhaps not now and not for a while."

Hartriono sat down heavily on the floor of the observation bay. "And meanwhile, both you and I maintain the illusion or the truth or the ... Damn. We pretend he is dead to all of my family, to all of Rahadyan's and my friends—yet know he is alive somewhere and be somehow comforted by that?"

"Yes," said Andreas softly, gently. "We can take comfort in that."

"That's so insane."

"Isn't it, though? You can't tell Trish, or your mother and father."

"What's the purpose of our having this knowledge?"

"Perhaps, to be the only persons in the Universe that know."

"And you go back to Avenger, and I go back to Challenger, and we go on from there," said Hartriono, not without a trace of sarcasm.

"Actually, I'm tendering my resignation to the Admiral as soon as possible. It's composed and on my personal terminal, ready to be transmitted to his." Andreas took a breath. "I'm going on a journey for a few months over several sectors, but I'll be in touch. Nominally, though, I'm transferring to Starbase 29's research facilities."

"How will I get in touch with you?" asked Hartriono.

"Watch the crystal," said Andreas. It rose into the air and turned sideways, sort of, and appeared to split into two. One fell into Hartriono's hand. "I suppose one of those is yours, and one mine."

Hartriono just looked into the face of the crystal and smiled.

"Hartriono," Andreas began. The other looked up. "Beam back to Challenger now. But you should know—I sense that things are about to change in a big way for you and I, for all of us. And soon."

"You're right. If I get command of Agtekerk..."

"Yes. Yes," repeated Andreas. "Somehow it's linked to that woman, Lieutenant Holloway."

"Okay," said Hartriono slowly.

"Do be careful."

Hartriono had a scapegrace grin on his face. "I always am, Andreas. I always am." He held out his hand to the other. "Good luck?"

Andreas matched the grin. "'Luck', as Rahadyan says, 'ain't got nothin' to do with it.' You take care, 'Triono," and pulled him into a hug.

They broke from the hug and Hartriono just smiled, a little one this time. Without saying another word, he left the observation bay and headed back to Challenger. Andreas stayed behind and looked out the bay's ports.

"I did as you asked," he said softly to what would appear, to anyone else, as the empty air. "Now what?" Silence, then "Oh, I see. I understand perfectly now." He closed his eyes for a long, sad moment, then opened them again. "I understand all too well."

With that, he pulled out his communicator. "Kitabatu al-'Qalb to Avenger."

"Avenger. Goldberg here," came the voice from the communicator's speaker.

"Gordon, please have me beamed aboard. And let Alex—let the Admiral know I'd like to speak to him as soon as possible."

There was a slight pause, then "Will do. Stand by for transport."

Transporter effect enveloped Andreas, and he was gone.

Coda:

Elsewhere. Elsewhen.

The One took the form of Homo sapiens because it was comfortable, because it was the first he recalled ever taking. Though he originally belonged to a race that was old when Terrans had first discovered fire, he chose to remember no earlier incarnations than the several people he had been on Earth. He had a special fondness for those people he had been, one in particular.

Here, in this Now, both the environment and one's own appearance was a product of the Minds that inhabited it. The particular metaphor The One chose for Here was for he and the Other to have Human form and clothed in hooded dark-gray robes like that of some Terran clerics. This Time, they elected to forego the metaphoric wings, a capricious choice of aesthetics.

The Other, who had recently called himself Hayden Pope, spoke first, in what sounded like a soft tenor. "He has passed the latest of your tests."

The One nodded, and as a theatrical gesture, removed the hood. His appearance would have been familiar to Rahadyan and Hartriono; it was that of a face that haunted too many of their sleeping moments and a lot of their waking ones. He smiled. It was a beautiful, warm smile, at once both compassionate and scapegrace. His dark eyes shone with pride. Then he spoke:

"I have a great deal of faith that my brothers can pass almost any test."

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