

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

CABIN FEVER

By Stephan Dickinson

PART 1

Chaym n'Maldonado, the head of *Avenger* Recreation, entered the captain's ready room and stood rigidly at attention. She didn't say anything to the captain, as it was his protocol for junior officers not to speak until spoken to. The captain said nothing to her, however, and simply stared at his viewer. It displayed a magnificent view of his homeworld, Earth. It was an eerie, brooding silence that was intensified by the smell of the pheromones humans emit when angered, as well as the captain's own accelerated breathing.

Captain Carlos Maldonado was pissed off. REALLY pissed off.

Chaym hated when the Captain was pissed. When he was pissed, he had a habit of venting heavily to his wife, the Chief of Recreation. However, none of these sessions would ever take place in his ready room.

After a great length of time, Chaym cleared her throat and ventured a question. "Carlos, sweetie...?"

"Yes, Commander?" he responded.

He used her rank, not her name. This meant that things were REALLY bad!!

Chaym cleared her throat again. "Sir, if this is about Mitzi's request to remodel Shuttle Bay 2 as a hockey arena, I can assure you that proper padding will be worn at all times..."

Captain Maldonado silenced her with a sharp look.

"I just received our new orders from Star Fleet Command," Carlos said in an ominous tone. "It seems that word of my promotion has finally reached Admiral Tolwyn."

"Tolwyn? Wasn't that the same Admiral who was standing in front of you last Shore Leave when you tried to wash down Klingon Goulash with Saurian Brandy? You said he was at the center of the blast radius..."

"Yes, him." Carlos covered his face.

"I heard it took months for the scars to heal. Say, didn't he threaten to reduce you to Ensign if he ever set eyes on you again?"

"Yes, he did." Carlos sank into his chair.

"I wonder if they ever found the rest of his uniform. Didn't he say that if you ever got your own command, he'd see you shipping Tribiddian-12 to the farthest corner of Federation space at warp 3?"

"Yes, he did."

"Did you used to date his daughter?"

"Yes, I di..." Carlos's head snapped up. "HEY! I never told you that!"

Chaym's eyes opened in horror. "I was joking!" she cried.

"Oh." Carlos's eyes shifted uncomfortably. "So was I."

"Good one, sweetheart." Chaym padded forward. "You almost had me fooled. But I know that you and Cindy Tolwyn would never have worked out. So is that the reason you called me into your office, to confess about some old girlfriend?"

"If only..." Carlos groaned. He turned the desktop monitor so that Chaym could read it. His wife leaned over and scanned the text. As she progressed, her feline eyebrows narrowed in con-

fusion. Her tail slowed and her jaw slackened. She re-read it twice before asking, "Can he really do this?"

Carlos sighed. "How much do you know about Tribiddian-12?"

Lt. Commander Amy Wilson watched as the shuttlecraft lifted off from Shuttle Bay 2. It nimbly skirted over the goal posts and passed through the force field on its return trip to SpaceDock.

"I've got a bad feeling about this..." she said to herself.

Captain Maldonado turned from the departing shuttle, and grimaced at the coffin-shaped cargo that it had left behind. Shaped like a photon torpedo casing, the dull gray container was bare except for the stenciled letters TRIBIDDIAN-12: DO NOT OPEN. Carlos sighed, checked his chronometer, and turned to address the command staff.

"As of zero-seven-hundred hours today, *U.S.S. Avenger* is commencing Operation Long Haul. During the course of this operation, no personnel may enter or leave the ship for any reason. *Avenger* has been assigned to transport 500 kilograms of Tribiddian-12," He nodded toward the tube. "...non-stop from Earth, sector zero-zero-one, to Outpost ELR-19, at sector seventeen by ninety by..." He stopped and licked his lips. "...six hundred forty one."

There were murmurs from the crew. It was about 720 light-years away, at the edge of Federation space, about 4 weeks journey at moderate warp.

"Sir?" came a voice from the crowd.

"Yes, Commander Underwood."

"Does this mean we'll miss the premiere of the new 'Star Wars' episode in San Francisco? It's only 4 days away."

"Yes, Commander Underwood. I'm afraid you'll have to sell off your tickets to Mann's Chinese Theatre."

"That's all right, sir," said Chris. "We'll just catch it in 4 weeks at our destination."

Carlos gulped, then continued. "Due to the extremely volatile nature of Tribiddian-12, it will be necessary to institute several unusual safety precautions during our journey. T-12 becomes unstable when subjected to high energy subspace fields. This means that we will only be able to travel at a maximum speed of warp 3."

As one, the crew gasped.

"That'll take MONTHS," cried Zach.

"Seven months, 2 weeks, and 4 days," answered Carlos.

Muttered whispers came from the crew, many of whom had long hours of vacation time that now needed to get rescheduled.

"Wow," mumbled Chris unhappily. "By that time we'll be able to order the vid on pay-per-view..."

"Lastly," Carlos raised his voice and the crew fell silent, "T-12 will also become unstable if exposed to any forms of Faster Than Light emissions, which will make the compound decompose. The *Avenger* has been equipped with a special shielding system to eliminate all FTL particles coming from around the ship. This shield must be active at all times while the T-12 cargo is aboard. Unfortunate-

ly, this means we will be unable to receive any forms of subspace communications from the outside.

Silence.

"No live holovids?" someone asked.

"Correct," answered the captain.

"No real-time commpics?"

"Correct."

"No interweb access?"

"That's right."

"No I-mail?"

"Uh-huh."

"No direct-from-Hollywood all-new Tri-D vid events?" begged Underwood, his lip trembling.

"Nope."

Fear swept the shuttlebay as the command staff stared desperately toward their captain. Their eyes were full of terror as they searched for some faint spark of hope.

"What will we do with all that time?" asked a tiny voice.

"NEVER FEAR!!!" Chaym leapt onto the podium and grabbed the comm unit. "There's lots to do! I've got books and music and games and a huge collection of old 20th century 2-D's!!! WE'LL ENTERTAIN OURSELVES!!!!"

"Captain's Log, Supplemental:

Stardate 9907.21. At 0700 hours this morning, my command staff shattered the commonly-believed theory that in space, no one can hear you scream."

PART 2 – "Subterfuge"

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9908.04:

"It's been two weeks since the *U.S.S. Avenger* left Earth at Warp 3, with our destination over 7 months away. Due to the delicate nature of our cargo, no transmissions may enter or leave the ship during that time. Also, none of the crew can leave, because of some as-yet-undisclosed security situation. Thus, the crew of the *Avenger* has been effectively cut off from all external contact. At first I was worried about the effect this would have on ship's morale, but my wife Chaym, the head of the Recreation Department, seems to have the matter well under control. Under her guidance, the crew has pulled together in this time of crisis, and it would seem that there was never anything to worry about."

"HOW CAN YOU PRIMITIVE SCREWHEADS LIVE LIKE THIS???"

Lt. Commander Christopher Underwood stared at the terminal before him with a hint of insanity in his eyes. This screen, located in the officer's lounge, had been configured to look identical to the one at Underwood's workstation. That one was identical to the one in Underwood's quarters, which was identical to the one in sick bay that Chris was standing next to for about 90 seconds. Every time he stopped near a terminal, *any* terminal, Chris dropped whatever he was doing and accessed the ship's computer, looking up the same information. Every time he did this, the result was the same.

NO NEW MESSAGES

Ensign Mitzi Mrowr watched Chris' growing anxiety with a great deal of interest. Mitzi was a Seltzan, whose appearance was similar to that of a Human mixed with a cat. She was one of the more reclusive crewmembers aboard the *Avenger*, preferring to keep the company of the other felinoids onboard: Chaym Re'ming-ton and Sasha Graevyn. However, today, boredom had overtaken her, and she had come down to the officers' lounge to see what was going on. Here, she had discovered Chris lamenting before his screen.

"Arre you all right, Lieutenant Commanderr?" she asked, her feline tongue forcing her 'r's to roll.

"No..." Chris sighed heavily, dropping his head into his hands and sighing. "Ever since we started on this odyssey, I've been totally cut off from Star Fleet Headquarters. I was working on some re-designs to the *Miranda*-class starship hull, and the ASDB was supposed to be getting back to me last week about my recommendations. Since we've been cut off, I've got no way of knowing what they think of my ideas."

"That sounds unforttunate." Mitzi tried to sound sympathetic, even though she couldn't seem to recall what the ASDB was.

"It's worse that you think," Chris continued. "There were rumors that Captain Harris was going to be stepping down from his post as the head of ASDB. If these modifications went well, I might have been able to replace him, or maybe get a high-level position in Star Fleet Engineering. Then I might have been able to re-activate the GEC, maybe get Admiral Scott to come out of retirement and head it up."

"Oh, my." Now Mitzi was entirely lost.

"And to make matters even more dismal, I've been entirely cut off from all of my electronic forums and publications. I'm missing this month's issue of *Popular Engineering*, *Duotronics for Dummies*, *PlayBeing*, *Calisthenics Today*, *Sprockets Intergalactic*, *How to Pick up Intelligent Beings in 7 Easy Steps...*" Chris began to trail off.

"Uh-huh." Mitzi was completely lost. She started scanning the room, looking for some reason to excuse herself from this painful reminder of why she spent a great deal of her personal time in her quarters. Luckily, she quickly spotted Sasha Graevyn entering the room, and waved her over.

"Hey, Mitzi, haven't seen you out prowling in a while," said Sasha as she approached. While both women appeared as humanoid/cat combinations, that was where the similarities ended. Where Seltzans looked like common housecats, Sasha's native race of Kyonans more closely resembled cougars or mountain lions. Her storm-gray fur was crossed by tiger-like stripes of black. At the end of her tail was a lion-like plume, which stopped just above the floor.

"Sasha! Hey! Good to see you!" Mitzi bounded out of her chair and into her friend's embrace. Purring loudly, she pulled away and fixed the Kyonan with a desperate look. "Lieutenant Underwood was just telling me all about his work with the ASDC..."

"ASDB," Chris corrected.

"Yes, that thing! He's rreally upset at the fact that he can't communicate with Starr Fleet or get any of his magazines. Rreally, RREALLY upset."

"Yeah," Sasha sighed. "If we don't find some way of communicating with the outside world, I might as well delete this month's

Isolinear Gaming Monthly the instant I get it."

"Not to mention that the next issue of *Warp Field Dynamics* was going to have a great article on bipolar subspace strata," Underwood interjected.

"Surre, fine, whatever..." Mitzi instantly tuned out Underwood's technobabble. "Anyway, my point is that we should help out a friend, and ourselves, to be able to stay in touch with the rest of the known universe. I think we should do something."

Sasha looked at her friend suspiciously. "What do you mean *ourselves*?"

"Huh?" blinked Mitzi.

"Don't play dumb with me, Ensign! I was in Star Fleet Intelligence for two years. You're talking about going through an awfully large amount of trouble just to get some magazines for some buddies. What's in it for you?"

Mitzi looked embarrassed for a moment, then leaned forward and whispered in Sasha's ear. "I need my soaps."

"Soap?" Sasha looked confused. "The quartermaster's got a ton."

"Not soap! SOAPS! Soap operas! Hologram programs! Entertainment!" Suddenly Mitzi's voice took on a deep growl, and her ears flattened against her head. "I have to know if Pearl's going to discover that Joel has been cheating on her, or if Tom's gonna reveal that Crow's father was really a spy for the Klingons!! *It's been two weeks and I can't take it any longer!!!*"

"Okay! Okay! Just calm down and we'll figure out what to do," Sasha said, now understanding what Mitzi did when she was holed up in her quarters.

"There's nothing to do," Underwood lamented. He half-heartedly checked his messages again, and then sighed back toward the two females. "We're traveling at warp speed, so the only signals we can receive have to be moving faster than light. And because we're carrying that stupid Tribbiddian-12 stuff, we can't receive faster than light transmissions. So that pretty much rules out the *Avenger*. And since no one can leave the ship for some as-yet-undisclosed reason, no one can go out and 'check the mail', so to speak." Chris sighed, checked again for new messages, and then returned his gaze to his companions. "We're totally cut off."

"Awfully suspicious if you ask me," said Rostarr.

Sasha yelped, and Mitzi almost jumped out of her skin at the almost instant appearance of the ship's tactical officer. Merinid Rostarr was a dark and quiet man, and had the ability to be extremely stealthy when he chose. He particularly enjoyed surprising the non-Human crewmembers, whose wide range of sensory abilities offered a challenge to his skills.

"Come to join our lament, Rostarr?" asked Underwood, who seemed too lost in his own misery to be shocked by the sudden appearance of his subordinate officer.

"No, I'm on duty. The chief master-at-arms has me checking the ship to make sure that the masking field to block FTL transmissions was fully functional. He said it was critically important that no... accidental transmissions breached the field. He didn't seem as concerned with a mechanical problem as much as he was concerned that someone might want to deliberately sabotage a section of the field. I can't imagine why anyone would want to..." He let the sentence hang in the air for a moment, allowing each of the other officers to wonder exactly how long he had been standing within earshot.

"There goes that idea," Underwood mumbled under his breath and checked his messages again. He then jolted, as if just waking up. "Hey, aren't you in Operations?"

"Yes, sir."

"And who's your commanding officer?"

"You are, sir."

"Then why the hell is Rham asking you to run around and check the ship for leaks if you're not in his department??"

"He said I was the right man for the job. Once again, very suspicious."

"What did you mean by suspicious?" asked Sasha.

"Well, it seems kind of strange to me, the *Avenger* being assigned this mission. I mean, we're a Federation starship, staffed by a highly trained and specialized crew. Why in the heavens would Star Fleet Command waste all of this on a bloody cargo run?"

"Well..." Mitzi grinned wildly. "I heard from a very reliable source that the captain had offended a high-ranking Star Fleet Admiral! Now I'm not one to spread rumors, but my friend thinks that years ago, the captain has had intimate relations with the Admiral's daughter! And when the Admiral found out Carlos had been promoted, he was so furious, he gave us this slack assignment!"

"Really?" Sasha cocked her eyebrow. "I heard that the Captain threw up on him at a party."

"I heard that too, but I like my story better." Mitzi smiled.

"Ladies, please. Be realistic. Do you know how much money Star Fleet is wasting on this mission? The combined salary of a starship crew for 6 months is way over 5 million credits. Not to mention the operating costs of the ship itself. I think that rules out a personal vendetta."

"You don't think this is a legitimate mission?" Sasha asked. Mitzi's ears raised in attention, and even Lieutenant Underwood's eyes had stopped straying to his screen.

"Of course not. If you wanted to get something from point A to point B at Warp three, you use an unmanned cargo freighter. This dampening field is completely automated, and it would just make more sense to use a freighter, or at least a smaller vessel than the *Avenger*, to baby-sit Tribbiddian-12. We've got over 300 crewmen on this ship. Don't you think that's a little extreme, even for a personal vendetta?"

"What're you saying?" Underwood asked.

Rostarr smiled to himself. "Do you know what Tribbiddian-12 is used for?"

"No."

"Neither do I. I never even heard of it before this mission. Almost nobody has. That means it's either so meaningless that it's not worth mentioning or ultra top-secret. And since they've assigned a whole starship to guard it, my money's on the second one."

"Do you think it's dangerous?" Mitzi asked.

"Somebody must think so. This dampening field may be necessary for the ship, but there's no reason to lock everyone on board unless somebody is trying to keep a secret."

"A secret..." Mitzi's voice trailed off. Her eyes had a distant look to them.

"Anyway, I've got to finish my sweep. Gotta make sure no unauthorized transmissions are being sent from the ship. Be seeing you." Rostarr gave a small salute with his left hand and headed out of the officers' mess.

"Wow!" Mitzi spun to face her comrades. "What do you think is going on, Sasha?"

"I'll tell you what's going on, Mitzi. Nothing! Absolutely nothing! I know that look."

"What look?"

"That look you've got in your eyes right now. The same look you had when you wanted to help Chaym take over the ship. That look that tells me you're going to be nothing but trouble until you know every dirty little detail of what's going on with this mission."

"Oh, don't tell me you don't want to know what's going on too. Chris?" The two women turned to the Chief of Ops, who had turned his attention back to the terminal. However, instead of the email screen, Underwood was now accessing the ship's science files.

"All the material data sheets on Tribiddian-12 have been sealed with Level 1 security access. You know what that means..."

"rRham." Sasha mused. "He would've sealed those files to keep nosy people like us out of things that aren't any of our business. This is a really bad idea, Mitzi."

"C'mon, Sasha, I'm just a little curious."

"Uh-huh. And do you know what people from Earth say about curiosity?"

"No. What about it?"

"It kills cats," Sasha said grimly.

PART 3

"Assistant Chief of Operations' Log, *U.S.S. Avenger*, Stardate 9908.14, Lieutenant Lauren Milan reporting:

As assistant chief of ops, it is my duty to maintain a log of the various happenings on board this vessel that would affect the ability of its crew to operate. This is my job, and I like to think that I do it well. My log is also supposed to be a record of anything on this ship that affects the performance of my division. As such, in the last thirty days I have given a lot of thought to what has now become my official, professional opinion:

The *Avenger* is the most boring starship in the universe. It's not anyone's fault, really. It has been exactly thirty days since we left Earth for ELR-19, a science station on the edge of Federation space. Our mission is to deliver a shipment of Tribiddian-12 to the station. The crew has been told that the T-12 is so sensitive to external radiation that the entire ship must be enveloped in a special energy field at all times. This field is designed to keep out anything that might harm our precious cargo. Things like faster-than-light radiation, electromagnetic emissions, sensor data, oh, and of course; communications. This means that my life is currently very boring. More than that, it means that for everyone who works for me, life is very boring. As a matter of fact, right now everybody on this ship's life is very boring. The recreation department has been working double-shifts just to keep people from going stir crazy.

It's not working.

Which brings me to my current task. For the first time in a month, something is actually happening on the *Avenger*! Fifteen minutes ago, a shuttlecraft entered our

warp field, slid right up next to our bridge, and used a direct-laser beam to request permission to dock with us. The captain's pretty sure it's Admiral Tolwyn, the man who selected our ship for this assignment. Captain Maldonado is sure that the Admiral will come aboard, assess our performance, and leave, taking his precious Tribiddian-12 with him. This will let us get back to doing the sort of things that you're supposed to do with a starship, like exploring space!

But first, I have to find out why my immediate superior, Ops Chief Christopher Underwood, hasn't reported to the shuttlebay in full dress uniform like the rest of the command staff. More than anybody else, the boredom has really hit Chris. He's actually started inventing stories about how the T-12 might be some ultra-secret Star Fleet military weapon or something. He's always been one of those evil genius types, and lately he's been growing more and more reclusive. He's probably so bored that he holed up in his quarters, turned off his comm, and is busy reading technical manuals or something. I just wish that exciting would happen, that's all..."

Lauren Milan stepped up to the entrance to Chris Underwood's quarters and pressed the comm switch.

"Who is it?" It sounded like Chris was still half-asleep.

"It's Lauren, your assistant chief of operations. I wanted to make sure you knew about the shuttlecraft."

"I'm sorry," came the groggy voice. "I'm afraid I can't come to the door right now."

"Excuse me?" Lauren was stunned. "Commander, are you hung over or something?"

"I'm afraid that in my weakened condition, I might take a nasty spill down the stairs and subject myself to further school absences."

Lauren gave the comm unit a dirty look.

"You can reach my parents at their places of business."

Lauren silenced the comm button with a swift punch. To her extreme surprise, this opened the door.

Lauren had once watched an ancient Earth movie called "Frankenstein" in which an insane Human genius had given life to a corpse. The inside of Underwood's quarters reminded her suddenly of that movie. Disassembled electronics and robotic equipment were scattered all across the floor. There was almost nowhere to walk. At the far end of the room, huddled in front of a computer terminal, was Lt. Commander Underwood. His back was to the door, and over his shoulder Lauren could see the all-too-familiar display:

NO NEW MESSAGES.

"So," began Underwood. "I see that you've bypassed my automated door response system."

"You mean that recorded message?" replied Lauren. "I saw 'Ferris Bueller's Day Off'."

"Oh." Chris seemed disappointed. "You'd be surprised how many yeomen that works on."

"I'm sure." Lauren smirked. "Hey, did you get my message about the shuttlecraft...?"

DING!

Lauren almost jumped at the sudden chime. Looking to her left, she saw something that could only be described as a 20th Century microwave oven with a dozen multicolored glass tubes protruding from the top. The ancient digital display spelled out "DONE" in primitive glowing letters.

"Could you get that for me?" Underwood asked as he turned back to his terminal. His e-mail was gone, replaced by a series of complex mathematical formulae.

Lauren approached the microwave with a sense of apprehension. Opening it, she discovered a fizzling glass of freshly poured Mountain Dew. "Ew!" Lauren gagged. "You microwave your soda? That's nasty!"

"Ahhh...once that machine was a normal microwave, my dear. But no longer! Now it is my latest creation!"

Lauren reached in and took the glass. It was cold. "If it's not a microwave, what is that thing?" she asked as she moved toward Chris, carefully stepping over cast-off pieces of machinery.

"The most useless thing I've ever made. It's a time machine."

"You built a time machine...out of a microwave?"

"I couldn't find a car." Chris shrugged as he took the glass from her hand.

"Ha-ha." Lauren's laughter was laced with sarcasm. "I think you've been watching too many of Chaym's old Earth movies."

"Hey, I always told rRham that I'd make a time machine if I ever got bored enough. Well, this happy little expedition of ours has been more than enough opportunity for me to get bored."

"So why is it so useless?"

"It doesn't work on living tissue. For that I would need a Quadratic Enhancer, which we don't have here on the ship. Also, it only goes sends things backwards in time."

"What's wrong with going back in time?" Lauren asked.

"Because I want to go FORWARD! I hate being stuck here on this ship with nothing to do." Almost automatically, Chris checked his email again. 'No new messages' was the only response.

"I see..." offered Lauren. "Well a shuttlecraft just arrived. The Captain thinks that it might be carrying the mail."

"One shuttlecraft couldn't hold my mail."

Lauren scowled. "Are you coming to the reception or not?"

"No. I've got to finish this thing I'm working on, then I need to go down to the arboretum and set up Chaym's cultural festival. She wants to re-work the ship's comm circuits for her Mohnan sing-along." Chris sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Would you mind going in my place?"

"Sure. It's better than bridge duty." Lauren turned and began picking her way across the floor toward the door.

"Before you go, can you do me a favor, Lauren?"

"Sure, what do you need?"

"Pour me a glass of Dew, would you?"

Lauren paused and looked at Chris. "I just gave you a glass."

"Trust me on this."

Totally confused, Lauren stepped back toward the microwave, and replicated a glass of Mountain Dew. Picking it up, she started to walk back toward Chris.

"No," he said. "Put it in the microwave. Then set the timer for two minutes."

She walked over and inserted the drink, then pressed the numeric keypad. At once there was a loud popping noise and the door

sprang open. Looking inside, Lauren discovered that the glass had vanished.

"I don't get it. Where did it go?" she asked.

Underwood smiled and sipped his drink loudly.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Amy Wilson said.

"Why does everybody always say that?" First Officer Se'ele replied across the shuttlebay to the young flight officer. "Why doesn't anyone ever have a good feeling about anything that ever happens on this ship?"

Amy smirked back at the Vulcan. "When was the last time anything good did happen on this ship?"

A loud cough from Captain Carlos Maldonado silenced both of them. With the exception of Lt. Commander Underwood, the *Avenge*'s entire senior staff was assembled. They were all wearing their dress uniforms, and stood ready for what Carlos hoped was the light at the end of the tunnel.

Carlos's hopes were rapidly fading.

The ship now docking in Shuttlebay 1 was not a Star Fleet vessel. Technically, it wasn't even a shuttle at all. It was a small civilian transport of Orion design, with an excessively luxurious and stylized hull, not at all the vessel in which a Star Fleet Admiral would be traveling.

"Who do you think is in there?" Amy asked Lauren.

"I don't know," Lauren replied. "They had all the necessary security clearances, but I've only seen ships like that in use by rich alien businessmen or diplomats."

Carlos cleared his throat again and the crew silenced themselves. The vessel had come to a complete stop, and the outer hatch opened. A short ramp descended, and from the darkness within a figure emerged. As Carlos had feared, it was not Admiral Tolwyn, but an extremely disheveled Vulcan female. She was wearing a standard issue science-lab coat, stained with liquids of various colors. A nametag with the word 'Selerus' was embroidered on the left breast. Her hair was streaked with the same multicolored stains as the coat, and looked as though it had not been washed in days. In her hand, the Vulcan held an oddly-shaped tricorder. She studied it intently as she descended the ramp, not once looking up at the crew. At the base of the ramp she paused, raised the tricorder to eye level, and then began to turn in a slow circle.

Carlos glanced at Se'ele, then cleared his throat loudly. The Vulcan woman continued to circle. The Captain then noticed more Vulcans within the shuttle. They all seemed to be watching for the first woman with a great deal of excitement, especially for Vulcans.

Carlos cleared his throat yet again. This time the woman looked up and seemed to see the command staff for the first time. She immediately marched over to the Captain, stopping less than two feet away.

"You are the Captain of this vessel?" she asked, a little too loudly.

"Yes," replied Carlos. "My name is Captain Carlos Maldonado of the *Fede*—"

"Your ship is suitable for our purposes," the woman interrupted. "You will provide my team with lodging and workspace." As though this was some sort of signal, the Vulcans in the shuttle began to disembark. Most of them were carrying large crates and boxes labeled with scientific equipment.

"I beg your pardon." Carlos blinked in shock. "Excuse me, but exactly who in the hell are you?"

One of the woman's eyebrows skyrocketed. "You ARE the captain, correct?"

"Yes, I am. However, you have not identified yourself—"

"As captain of a Star Fleet vessel," the woman interrupted again, "you are required to be capable of reading and comprehending Federation standard linguacode, correct?"

"Of course." Carlos was starting to get very annoyed.

"Each member of my team has a nametag." The woman sounded much like a mother explaining something complex to a child. She tapped the tag on her own coat. "This tag says 'Selerus' because that is my name. If you want to know who any of us are, you can simply read the tags." Selerus nodded as though that explained everything.

Carlos was about to give the order for security to throw the woman off the ship when a sudden commotion sounded from the direction of the shuttlecraft. Lifting his gaze from Selerus, the captain watched as a young human in a Star Fleet uniform pushed his way past the Vulcans and came running down the ramp. The boy looked about nineteen, though he had to be older, judging from his rank insignia, and he screeched to a halt just before colliding with both the Captain and Selerus.

"Captain Maldonado, I presume? Permission to come aboard, sir." The breathless young man saluted hastily. "Ensign First Class Marcus Abrams reporting with new orders from Admiral Tolwyn, sir."

"Finally someone reasonable!" thought Carlos to himself. "Thank you, Ensign. Perhaps you can explain what's going on here."

"Of course, sir. I guess I should begin by introducing Chief Scientist Selerus..."

"I already explained about the nametags," Selerus interrupted.

Marcus continued without pausing. "...of the Vulcan Science Academy. She and her team contacted Star Fleet Headquarters about a week ago to request passage aboard the *Avenger* for the duration of our journey to ELR-19."

"Requested Passage?!?" Chaym gasped. "What are they, insane? Do you mean that they *want* to be trapped on this ship for six months?"

"Yes ma'am." Abrams paused for a moment and blinked at Chaym, as though there was something about her he recognized. He shook himself and continued. "Selerus needed a spacefaring vessel with an active FTL shielding system for her experiments. Admiral Tolwyn at Fleet Command said your ship would be perfect. He seemed to rather enjoy the idea, as a matter of fact."

"I'm sure he did," Carlos grumbled to himself. Selerus had gone back to reading her fancy tricorder readings. She turned and began speaking quickly in Vulcan to several of her colleagues. Ensign Abrams took the opportunity to step toward Carlos and lower his voice.

"I know she's strange sir, even for a Vulcan. Most of the Science Academy was happy to see her go. She's got almost no social skills whatsoever, but she's extremely brilliant, and a genius in her field."

"What field is that?" Se'ele asked.

Abrams took a deep breath. "Theoretical sub-quantum and para-quantum waveform research relating to, but by no means restricted to, chroniton hyperstring deformations. She has speciali-

zation in hyper-magnetic and proto-magnetic spectrum theory." Abrams paused to catch his breath.

"Of course," said Se'ele.

"What about you?" Carlos asked. "Why are you here?"

"I'm the official Star Fleet attaché' to Selerus. The Federation has given her several very large research grants, and I'm supposed to report back with any information that may be of use to Star Fleet. She's on the verge of a breakthrough that's supposed to revolutionize the way our transporters work."

"Well, I'll be damned if she's going to be performing any experiments like that on *my* ship," Carlos fumed. The Vulcan had been aboard for less than 5 minutes, and already the shuttlebay was a disorganized mess. "Our orders are to deliver a very sensitive cargo, not baby-sit scientists."

"I wouldn't be certain of that, Captain." Abrams produced a small box with a red security seal and bold black letters on it. Carlos took the box and pressed his thumb against the encoding bar. The box opened to reveal a PADD, which Carlos began reading immediately.

"What is it, honey?" Chaym asked.

"It's our new orders, and it's labeled 'Captain's eyes only'. Let me read it and I'll tell you, Chaym."

"Chaym?" Abrams blinked in astonishment. "Chaym Gale' Re'ming'ton?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"Oh my God!" Abrams eyes almost jumped out of his skull. "You... you're Sinnamon! You're the lead guitarist for the Galactic Hussies!"

"You've heard of my band?"

"Heard of you? You guys are *awesome!* I've been a fan since I was a kid. I've got all your albums and... Hey, would I be able to get your autograph?"

"Sure. No problem." Chaym found herself blushing. "It's always great to meet a fan. Did you know that Mitzi's on board too?"

"Mitzi Mrowr?? The lead singer? She's here? That's incredible." Abrams looked like he was about to faint. "Do you...? Would it be possible... for you to introduce us?"

"Sure. I'm supposed to meet her at 1800 hours in the crew's mess. Would you like to join us?"

"Would I ever! That'd be *awesome!*"

"Hey!" Carlos looked up from his reading. "Before anybody goes anywhere, I've got some questions that need to be answered, Ensign."

"Sir!" Abrams' enthusiasm vanished immediately. He stood straight up and saluted.

"First and foremost, you didn't happen to pick up our mail while you were out there, did you?"

"Sir?" Abrams seemed at a loss.

"We've been out of communication for over a month. Tolwyn didn't happen to mention that it would be thoughtful if you brought the mail, did he?"

"Er... No, sir, he didn't mention it."

As one, every member of the *Avenger's* senior staff simultaneously smacked their foreheads.

"Fine. Forget it. Never mind." Carlos waved his hand to restore order to his staff. "Did he also forget to tell you that this ship is carrying some ultra-secret cargo, and that no one is al-

lowed to depart this vessel for any reason until we get to our destination?"

"Actually, he did tell me that, sir."

"Good. Well, according to these new orders, this 'Selerus' and her company are to be shown every courtesy. And you, as their aide, are to act as a go-between between us."

"Understood, sir."

"Good. Because what I *don't* understand is this tiny note at the bottom that reads and I quote: 'PS: Oh, and Captain, whatever you do, don't refuse the gift. It would deeply insult the ambassador.' What ambassador would that be?"

As if on cue, the Vulcans who were still unloading the shuttle parted like the waters of the Red Sea. As one, the *Avenger's* crew gasped as an incredibly beautiful, green-skinned woman descended the ramp. She moved slowly, and with a grace that reminded one of a great jungle cat. Her olive skin and deep green hair only enhanced the natural beauty of her amethyst eyes. She was garbed in a gossamer-thin gown that flowed around her as though it was free of gravity. Woven into her hair were braids of gold and silver, and encircling her neck was a thick metal collar.

"An Orion slave woman?" Se'ele whispered to Abrams.

"Not exactly," Abrams whispered back.

Her gaze swept in the whole of the command staff, before settling on Carlos. "You." Her voice was a song. "It must be you. A man of such stature and confidence. Only a man like you could command this fine starship." Her lips parted in a smile, and she lowered herself in a deep curtsey. "I am Geisha. It is truly an honor to service you in any way you wish."

"Excuse me?!?" blurted Chaym.

The green woman ignored the Mohnan. "My government wishes to congratulate you on your ascension to Captaincy, and wishes you to accept this gift." She extended her hands toward Carlos, wrists together, palms up. Her hands were empty. "Please accept it is a token of good will between the United Federation of Planets and the Orion Confederacy."

Carlos was having trouble following her words. They sounded like music, and it took him a moment to comprehend them. "Wait just a second. *You're* the ambassador?"

Geisha smiled and blushed as she nodded. It seemed to make her face a darker green.

"So you're here to present me with some sort of gift?"

Ensign Abrams cleared his throat. "She *is* the gift, sir."

"Like hell she is!" Chaym stepped between the stunned Captain and the ambassador. "Thank you very much, but my *husband* simply cannot accept. Star Fleet personnel cannot accept gifts from foreign officials, and besides, slavery is illegal in the Federation."

Geisha chuckled. The sound was like windchimes. "I am not a slave. I'm a free woman, who simply wishes to please. It pleases my government to present me to the Federation. It pleases Admiral Tolwyn to send me here, and now it pleases me to serve the Captain." Looking beyond Chaym toward Carlos, she smiled and added. "And it would appear that he will be most pleased." Returning her gaze to Chaym, she offered a questioning expression. "Surely such a fine and strong Captain will have stamina enough for the both of us?"

"Stamina?!?" Chaym screamed. Her ears suddenly flattened against her head and she began to growl.

"Okay! Okay! Chaym, just calm down." Carlos took his wife by the shoulders and pulled her out of arm's reach of the green woman. "Sweetheart, she's a foreigner, with ways and customs different from our own."

"We're not talking about folk-dancing, Carlos," Chaym growled.

"Nevertheless, Tolwyn said not to insult her." Carlos turned back to Geisha. "Welcome aboard, Ambassador. My first officer and I would love to give you a tour of the ship."

"I'm coming, too." Chaym glowered.

Mr. and Mrs. Maldonado stared at each other for a moment. Something invisible seemed to pass between them before Carlos added, "My wife will also accompany us."

"Of course," the green woman replied.

"Assistant Chief of Operations log, supplemental:

At that point, things got rather boring. The Captain, Se'ele, Chaym, and the Orion ambassador all departed to tour the ship. Not, however, before the Captain gave the task of finding quarters for all the new arrivals to the Operations Division (a.k.a, me).

This was not the excitement I was hoping for.

Okay, I said that the *Avenger* was the most boring starship in the universe, and I meant it. I joined Star Fleet to seek out new life, new civilizations, and all the other cool stuff you see on the commercials. I did not join up so I could have the luxury of assigning accommodations for visiting diplomats and scientists. As I left the shuttlebay, I made up my mind that nothing exciting or dangerous could ever possibly happen on this ship.

Looking back on this entry just ten hours later, I realize that I could not have been more wrong."

PART 4

"And here on Deck Seven," Se'ele continued. "you'll find sick-bay, security, and several of our science laboratories."

Carlos, Chaym, and the Orion Ambassador Geisha followed behind Se'ele as she traveled the *Avenger's* more prominent decks. Carlos made a mental note of how well Se'ele was performing on her first V.I.P. tour. She had skillfully steered clear of Deck 5, where the walls and floor were still caked with marshmallow fluff and dry cereal from the Recreation Department's last 'Toy Day'. Se'ele also took a slight detour away from the science bay where Chaym and rRham filmed their popular cooking show. The bay still had the stench of roast Targ, and the air scrubbers all needed to be replaced.

Geisha seemed genuinely fascinated by the *Avenger*. Carlos had never been aboard an Orion vessel, but he was under the impression that their technology levels were similar to those of the Federation. However, Geisha's behavior made him think otherwise. She seemed to find the entire vessel antiquated, and treated the entire tour like a trip through a history museum. The newly upgraded food replicators made her giggle and the twenty second journey on a turbo-lift had her shaking her head and wondering how Federation personnel survived.

Chaym noticed an entirely different set of peculiarities about Geisha. She noticed how the green woman kept casting Carlos

sidelong glances, and asked the Captain all of the questions she should have been referring to their guide. Chaym noticed how Geisha was constantly touching Carlos' shoulder, how her gold and silver braids sounded like windchimes when she turned her head, and her posture seemed too erect to be natural. The Ambassador seemed to hold her 5-foot stature above everyone around her. Chaym found herself unconsciously picking lint from her uniform.

Just around the corner from security, two sets of armed guards were leaving for Deck Ten. They wore their phasers openly.

"Ohhh... Expecting trouble, Captain?" Geisha asked.

Se'ele glanced at the captain before responding. "Those crewmen are relieving the officers who are currently on watch duty over the *Avenger's* special cargo. You'll understand that we're really not at liberty to discuss it with non-Star Fleet personnel."

Geisha laughed musically. "You mean the Tribiddian? Don't be ridiculous."

All three officers stopped and stared at the green woman. "You know about the Tribiddian?" asked Carlos.

"Surely you jest, Captain! Of course I do. Where do you think the Federation got it?" She continued to chuckle until she saw that everyone's surprised looks remained. "Do you mean that Admiral Tolwyn didn't tell you?"

"He appears to have a habit for withholding details," said Se'ele.

Geisha smiled. "Tribiddian is one of the primary exports of my homeworld in the Confederacy. It's a fantastically powerful source of energy. Tribiddian-12 is just like standard Tribiddian, except that for unknown reasons, sometimes it will spontaneously explode without cause."

"WHAT?!?" choked Chaym.

"Huh?" blinked Carlos.

"I beg your pardon?" gasped Se'ele.

"Oh, yes," Geisha continued. "No one has been able to discover exactly why it happens. It will be stable one moment and the next..." The Ambassador made a grandiose gesture with her hands. "Boom."

"Boom? How dangerous is the blast?" asked Carlos.

"Oh, very dangerous, my dear Captain. A couple of kilograms could easily cripple your starship."

"And no one knows why it happens?" asked Se'ele.

"Not for certain. Some of our scientists have their theories, of course. Most think it's because of some kind of radiation. That's why your ship has the FTL-shielding system in place. This way your vessel should be protected against any outside influences."

"But what if it gets triggered by something internal?" thought Chaym aloud.

"Like an eccentric Vulcan scientist?" Carlos and Se'ele exchanged worried glances.

"Oh, I'm so sorry Captain!" Geisha smiled. "If I had known that it would distress you so, I would not have mentioned it. I'm certain everything will be fine in your strong, capable hands." She put her hands into his.

"Please," said the Captain. "Call me Carlos."

Se'ele heard a low rumble echo through the hallway. It took the Vulcan a moment to realize that the rumbling was coming from deep within Chaym's throat. Carlos glanced over and noticed his wife's large furry ears had flattened against her head.

"Listen, Geisha," Carlos said quietly. "My wife and I have a previous engagement. Why don't you and Se'ele finish the tour, and I'll check in on you after dinner."

"Whatever brings you pleasure, Capt...er....Carlos." Geisha lowered her eyes and performed a graceful sweeping courtesy. She then turned to Chaym and executed a slight bow. "It was a honor to meet the wife of such a fine Captain."

"The pleasure was all yours." Chaym returned the bow. She felt awkward and unnatural doing it, and this only increased her sense of inadequacy.

Geisha and Se'ele departed in the direction of the turbo-lift. Chaym waited until they were out of earshot before turning to Carlos.

"'Whatever brings you pleasure, Carlos'. 'Surely you jest, Captain.' What kind of person talks like that?"

"She's an Ambassador. Everything they know about Earth comes from watching old movies."

"Don't even start, Carlos." Chaym started walking toward the turbo-lift on the far side of the ship.

"What?" asked Carlos.

"You're defending her. Well, stop it. She's a tramp. And don't start entertaining any fantasies about her either."

"What do you mean fantasies?" Carlos asked innocently.

"I saw how you were looking at her. Your jaw was hanging wide open. And the way she was drooling all over you and kept saying 'Captain' all the time, you'd think she thought you were James T. Kirk or something."

"You know I love you, honey."

"I love you, too. And I trust you. I just don't trust her. Who knows what kind of disease you could get from just touching her...?"

Just then, Carlos and Chaym came around a corner and discovered Chief of Operations Chris Underwood. He was lying on his stomach halfway out of a Jefferies tube, sealing closed a circuitry panel.

"Hey, Chris, need some help?"

Chris responded without looking. "Nope, I've almost got it." Standing up, he turned to face them. "Did you get the... CAPTAIN?!? What are you doing here???" Chris blinked back and forth between the two of them with a shocked look on his face.

"I'm the Captain and this is my ship. Last time checked I was allowed to go wherever I damn well pleased. What're you doing here?"

Chris straightened up and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. He seemed physically exhausted. "Huh? Oh, there was a problem...with, um..a sensor glitch. I had to come down here and fix it manually."

The Captain grimaced. "Uh-huh. And that's why you missed the reception?"

"Reception?" Underwood blinked in confusion. He was paler than usual, and Chaym could smell a strange aroma around him.

"The shuttlecraft?" Chaym offered.

"OH YEAH!!!" Chris exclaimed.

"Are you feeling alright?" Chaym asked. "You look horrible, and paler than usual."

"Oh, I'm just not feeling that well. I think I had some bad Mountain Dew or something."

Just then Sasha Graevyn came striding around the corner. "Hey, Chris, there you are! That sensor glitch is all cleared up now."

C'mon, let's go." Striding over to the Chief of Ops. Sasha swung one of his arms over her shoulders and turned and began walking back the way she came.

"Where are you going?" asked Carlos as they departed.

"Sickbay," Sasha called over her shoulder. "The Commander here hasn't been feeling well, so I told him to report to sickbay. But nooooo... He insisted on coming up here himself and fixing the sensors. Anyway, you big oaf, let's get you to Deck Seven." The two of them then vanished around the corner.

Chaym stood blinking after them. "That was strange."

"Considering that we're on Deck Seven, and that sickbay is behind us. Yeah, I'd say so. If I didn't have more important things to worry about, I'd be feeling kind of paranoid right now."

"I'm used to it. I'm going to the mess to meet Mitzi for dinner. I want to introduce her to that Abrams. What about you?"

"I'm heading for the bridge. I'll see you tonight, sweetheart."

The *Avenger's* captain gave his wife a quick kiss before they parted ways.

As the doors closed behind them, Sasha and Underwood collapsed against the turbo-lift walls.

Sasha turned toward Chris. "That was stupid! You almost got yourself caught!"

"Hey! How was I supposed to know that was the real Chaym?"

"You're right." Sasha put her head in her hands and sighed.

"We were lucky this time. We can't afford to get careless. How's your arm, anyway?"

"It's still numb from where that little witch shot me." Underwood grimaced as he touched his left bicep. As he pulled his hand away, there was blood on it. "Did you have any luck?"

"None. They've got communications locked down tight. There was no way to get past security. You?"

"A little. I think I disabled the sensors. Getting to the actual Tribiddian itself is going to be harder than we thought. And we don't have much time."

"You're right." Sasha glanced at the turbo-lift's chronometer.

"We'd better get moving. The Romulans are going to be here soon."

PART 5

"Stardate 9908.14, Tactical Officer's Log, Merinid Rostarr reporting:

It's not paranoia if they're really after you.

Did you ever get that feeling of uneasiness? The one that sets all your senses on alert, pushes your stomach down, and makes your hair stand on edge? Well, I've had that feeling for almost a month now. A feeling like a storm was about to break. I've kept my feelings to myself, but I know that something bad is about to happen. Aboard the starship *Avenger*, things are usually pretty dull. Without communications, the ship has been rather routine and ordinary for the last month.

For the entire month, we've been carrying a cargo of Tribiddian-12, an unstable element with enough destruc-

tive power to destroy the ship. I haven't slept well since it got here.

But three hours ago all that changed. A shuttlecraft docked with our ship. It contained a Vulcan science team, their Federation attaché, and an Orion Ambassador. Ever since they arrived, that creepy uneasy feeling went away. It's vanished entirely.

So now I'm really paranoid.

It's 18:20 hours. Most of the crew is having dinner now, and I heard that Chaym was eating with one of the new arrivals, an ensign named Marcus Abrams. I've decided that I'm going to join them for dinner. I want to meet this guy and learn more about him.

I want to know why my instincts tell me everything's finally okay, and my brain says now is when things are really going to get ugly."

Merinid Rostarr entered the crew's mess of the starship *Avenger* and swept the room with his gaze. From the nearly fifty crewmen in the mess, the two he was looking for stood out like a sore thumb.

They were the only ones whose meals were still alive.

When Star Fleet was founded, it was quickly discovered that different classes of aliens had different needs. The classification of 'felinoids' for example, lumps together any aliens with human/feline characteristics, characteristics such as total body fur, lengthy tails, pawed feet, and the desire to hunt their own food, as well as consume it live.

Mitzi Mrowr and Chaym Gale' n'Maldonado were two such creatures. Normally they hunted their food in the shuttlebay (much to Chief Flight Officer Amy Wilson's chagrin). Today, however, they were both in the officers' mess, their trays of hamster puffs and Vegan mice forgotten on the table. Both crewmembers were listening in awe to the words of the Human ensign sitting across the table. Rostarr smiled inwardly as he approached the table to listen to what this new face had to say.

"My favorite stories are the ones from your childhood," Marcus Abrams told the two felinoids. "Like Chaym's 15-day trek across the Shoo-oree Desert on her homeworld with no food or water."

Mitzi turned to Chaym. "You told me it was 12 days."

"12 Federation days," Chaym corrected. "Mohnan days are shorter than Federation standard, but it doesn't matter. It was deep in the southern hemisphere during the height of summer, so the sun never set once during my entire ordeal. I was being persecuted for my Gale've' heritage by some local hotheads. They drove me out of town and I had to cross 180 miles of wasteland on foot."

"I've heard this story a million times, Chaym," Mitzi interrupted.

"So have I." Abrams leaned forward, his face full of wonder. "But only in Mitzi's tell-all book. I can't believe that the *real* Galactic Hussies are sitting across the table from me."

"Mitzi wrote a tell-all book?" Chaym turned to her girlfriend. "You never told me that!"

"Hey!" Mitzi shrugged in confusion. "This is news to me." She turned to Abrams. "Are you sure about this?"

"Positive," the ensign replied. "I would have brought it for you to autograph, but Selerus had me calibrating a quadratic enhancer

so I didn't have time to get it before dinner. The bio is very comprehensive. It was a must-own for any true Galactic Hussies fan. Next to Chaym's biography, that is."

"Chaym has a biography?" Mitzi's ears drooped.

"She's got a couple. They're all named after your songs. 'Sell Me Some Love Tonight', 'Lungfish of Love', 'Green-Skinned Freak Woman Stay Away from My Man'..."

"That's not one of our songs." Mitzi blinked.

"It should be," Chaym growled.

"Oh, no." Mitzi's eyes widened as all thoughts of biographies and songs left her head. "Here she goes again."

"I'm not going to get started..." Chaym gripped the table so that her nails dug into its surface.

"Get started on what?" asked Rostarr as he quickly sat down.

"Started on that puke-colored floozy who's been hitting on my husband! That little green tramp is going to be in for a world of hurt if she doesn't lay off my man."

"Hey, that would make a good song." Mitzi smiled.

"Yeah." Chaym grinned. "And the way I'm feeling right now, I bet I could dish out a mean guitar riff to go with it."

"On page 45 of your book it said you do your best work when you're angry." Abrams smiled at Chaym.

"You know, I don't remember ever authorizing a biography. Who wrote it?"

"Who wrote your biography?" Abrams looked confused at the question, then his eyes suddenly widened. "It was...um... I can't remember."

"You know what page number the quotes are on, but you can't remember the author?" Mitzi's ears twitched.

Rostarr leaned forward, his metal eye gleaming. "I find that rather unlikely."

"Well, it's just that..."

Abrams was cut off by a hand that suddenly clasped his shoulder. Looking up, the group found that Lt. Chris Underwood had joined them. Chaym noted that he looked even worse than he had when she had seen him earlier. The color had almost entirely drained from his face, and he seemed to be breathing heavily.

"You," said Chris.

"Me?" replied Abrams.

"I know you," smiled Chris.

"You do?"

"Uh-huh. Today's your lucky day."

"It is?"

"You've got a quadratic enhancer."

"I have?" blinked Abrams.

Underwood smiled maliciously and leaned closer to the Ensign. "It just might save your life." With that, he half-helped, half-hoisted Ensign Abrams to his feet and began escorting him across the mess toward the door.

"Okay, that was normal," said Rostarr.

"Chris has been acting funny all morning," Chaym mentioned.

"Earlier today he skipped the shuttlecraft's reception, then Carlos and I saw him on Deck Seven messing with some sensors earlier."

"The only sensors in that portion of Deck Seven are the ones routed through security. The ones used to monitor the T-12. Why would he be up there?"

"And what the heck does a quadratic enhancer do?"

"Star Fleet Intelligence," mused Mitzi.

"Huh?" asked Rostarr.

"The Ensign. He knows way too much about us. Intimate details of Chaym's early life? A biography with no author? I bet that kid works for Intelligence, and he's been briefed on our back-grounds."

"You're being paranoid again, Mitzi," Chaym said as she rolled her eyes. "He's just a fan, albeit a well-informed one. He's harmless."

"Yeah, right," grunted Rostarr as he stood up. "I agree with Mitzi. Something's going on, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it if—"

Rostarr was cut off as a small device on his belt began chirping. Picking it up, he examined it for a moment before reaching for his communicator.

"What's wrong?" asked Chaym.

"Someone's hacking into the ordnance computer."

"What's that mean?" blinked Mitzi.

"Somebody's trying to hijack a photon torpedo." Rostarr tapped his communicator. "Transporter room, one to beam directly to the torpedo bay."

"Aren't you going to call security?" asked Chaym.

Rostarr smiled. "No, I'd like to handle this personally. Transporter room, energize!"

Merinid Rostarr vanished in a column of light.

"Wow," said Mitzi as she absently ate one of her now-cold hamster puffs. "And I was starting to think this place was boring."

.....

The torpedo room of the *Avenger* was not an easy place to get to. Affectionately dubbed the 'best make-out spot on the ship', it was located in an isolated pod above and aft of the bridge. Its only physical connection to the main vessel was via two very long, very narrow Jefferies Tubes within struts leading up from port and starboard parts of the ship. All of the pod's systems were fully automated and it required only minimal human presence for occasional checkups and maintenance. There was almost no reason for anyone to be in the pod, unless they wanted to manually launch a sensor buoy.

Or a torpedo.

The transporter glow faded from around Merinid. The lights were off. This suited him just fine, as his cybernetic eye could see everything. He quickly checked the entrances to the Jefferies Tubes to insure that they were both secured. That way he knew that whoever was trying to override the system was still in the pod. He then silently moved to the forward launch tubes. Both were empty, but could be auto loaded and ready to fire in less than ten seconds in the event of a Red Alert. He then moved to the ordnance console. The computer screen showed a current payload of 24 photon torpedoes, one of which had all the safeties deactivated.

A loud crash suddenly echoed through the darkness. It was followed immediately by a great deal of swearing and cursing in a voice Rostarr was very familiar with. Scowling, the tactical officer stepped to the wall and turned on the lights.

"Sasha, what are you doing?"

Sasha Graevyn was sitting on a torpedo casing, nursing her left foot. On the floor beneath her lay a six-kilo crowbar, the source of the crashing noise.

Sasha smiled sheepishly at Rostarr. "I was...um..."

"Trying to steal a torpedo?"

"No, no. I wasn't stealing it. I was...borrowing it."

"Uh-huh. And you were doing this alone and in the dark."

"I was under orders." Sasha seemed to be turning slightly pink. Rostarr noted that she looked nauseous and was sweating profusely, much as Underwood had been.

"Is that so? And who exactly did these orders come from?"

"Err.. That's classified."

Rostarr laughed out loud. "Oh, THAT's original!" He walked over to the comm-system. "I guess I'll be calling security now."

"Wait... It was Lt. Commander Underwood. He told me to get a torpedo for him."

"I'm the *Avenger's* tactical officer; you're the ship's geologist. Why would he ask you to do that?"

"Um...he...er..."

"Hey, I've got an idea. Let's contact Chris and ask him." Rostarr pushed the button on the comm-panel.

"Computer, where is Lt. Commander Christopher Underwood?"

"Error. Sensor malfunction," the computer chirped. "Unable to comply."

"Must be a glitch." Sasha shrugged. Her ears twitched nervously. "Guess you'll just have to take my word on it."

"Not bloody likely." Merinid frowned. "Computer, where is Ensign Abrams?"

"Ensign Abrams is in Lt. Commander Underwood's quarters."

"Ah-hah. Computer, patch me through to Lt. Commander Underwood's quarters."

The screen on the comm unit lit up, showing the ultra-cluttered quarters of Lt. Commander Christopher Underwood. Various pieces of scientific equipment were scattered all across his quarters. Ensign Abrams could barely be seen on the far side of the room. He was holding something that looked like a microwave-oven, and talking to someone off screen.

"...but Selerus has only been collecting data for a couple of hours. Plus the power drain would cause the ship to..."

The image of Abrams was suddenly replaced with the very pale and sweaty face of Lt. Commander Underwood.

"WHAT?" He yelled before recognizing Merinid. "Oh! Lt. Commander Rostarr? Hey listen, now isn't really a good time. Why don't you call back later?" He raised his hand to close the channel.

"I caught Sasha stealing a torpedo, sir."

Underwood's hand froze. Merinid now had his complete attention.

"She said she was operating under your orders, sir." He turned back to watch Sasha, who was now fidgeting nervously. "Should I call security and have them come pick her up?"

"No. Let her go. WITH the torpedo."

"EXCUSE ME?!?" Now it was Rostarr who froze.

"You heard me, Commander. Let her go. She's operating under my authority."

"With all due respect, sir, why the hell are you giving the ship's geologist a weapon of mass distraction?"

"That's none of your concern, Commander. I want you to return to your duties and don't let anyone know you saw Sasha with a torpedo."

"Sir, this is highly irregular, not to mention very, very illegal." Rostarr's mind scrambled as he attempted to deduce what Underwood was up to. Then he remembered something Chaym said in the

mess. "Sir, does this have something to do with the sensors around the T-12?"

Underwood's head drooped. He sighed deeply, and seemed about to say something when a thought occurred to him. He raised his head and looked into the monitor with an almost mirthful glint.

"Lt. Commander Rostarr, you have your orders. I suggest you follow them. If you've got a problem with that I recommend, you call security. Have a nice day. Underwood out." Chris pressed a button and the screen went blank.

Merinid stared in shocked silence at the monitor for a couple of seconds before muttering to himself, "What in the heavens is he thinking?"

"I'll be damned if I know," Sasha answered as she grabbed the torpedo with an anti-gravity lift and hauled it across the room to the transporter. "If you asked me, I'd say he was trying to get himself thrown in the brig." Standing on the pad with the torpedo, she smiled at the stunned tactical officer before energizing.

"I guess you'll just have to trust him," she said as she faded from view.

Left alone in the torpedo pod, Merinid Rostarr weighted his options. The process lasted an entire two seconds.

"Trust Chris Underwood. Yeah, right." Rostarr pressed the com switch. "Computer, get me security."

Five minutes later, the turbo-lift doors on Deck 4 opened, and a very healthy and energetic looking Chris Underwood stepped out. He walked 10 paces from the turbo-lift, stopped, pulled up a display on his PADD, and checked his mail. Sighing deeply as the words NO NEW MESSAGES were displayed, he continued to his quarters. Once there, he opened the door, looked inside, and screamed.

"I'VE BEEN ROBBED!!"

It took him a couple of minutes to assess the damages. Whoever had broken into his quarters had been fiendishly thorough. His favorite toolkit was missing, his hydro-spanner, the trans-dimensional freon converter, his microwave-oven sized time machine that only sent things backwards, a Mark-IV torpedo guidance system, four pattern enhancers, and two bottles of Mountain Dew.

So furious at the theft of his precious liquid, as well as his toolkit (he considered everything else junk), it took Chris three attempts at using the comm unit to realize that it wasn't working. On closer examination, Underwood saw that the unit had been disassembled and several key components removed.

"Fiends!" Chris swore and marched out his door to search for the nearest security officer.

He found six of them armed with drawn phasers waiting in the hall. Behind them stood the green scaly form of the *Avenger's* chief master-at-arms.

"Lt. Commander Underwood," grinned the Tzen. "You are under arrest."

PART 6

"Green haired freak woman stay away from my man"

"Green haired freak woman I know what you plan."

"I know what you're think'n, and what 'cha gonna do."

*"But do it to some other guy 'lest I beat you black and blue"
-Deciphered from a golden disk found within a subspace
probe, discovered in the late 35th century.*

At the same time that Lt. Commander Underwood was returning to his quarters, a breach of security occurred on Deck 5. Here, the darkened interior of Captain Maldonado's quarters was suddenly illuminated as the door to the hallway opened. A figure entered, stealthily moving from the entrance to the nearest corner of the room. There, the figure reached up to the nearby security camera and placed a gum-like electromagnetic scrambler on the camera's lens. Satisfied that its actions were no longer being monitored, the figure stepped confidently into the center of the room and removed its hood.

"A Federation Captain's quarters," the Orion ambassador spoke aloud to the empty room. "Spacious. Much bigger than the Romulans'."

Geisha surveyed the room with her gaze. It didn't take her long to find what she was looking for.

"First business," she said aloud and crossed to the Captain's desk. Reaching into her cloak, she removed a silver disk and placed it on the console of the computer terminal. The disk began to make small beeping noises, and the terminal's screen flashed images from the computer's databanks. Geisha threw a switch to turn off the screen.

"Now pleasure," she said with a smile.

Geisha began to examine the room, moving gracefully from the real wooden bookshelves, past an elaborate set of Mohnan stringed instruments, to a desk covered with tiny model starships. The green-skinned woman smiled as she studied the room, and with each step, she removed another article of clothing. First her cloak, then her gloves and boots. Finally she completed her circuit of the main room and returned to its center. Here, she slipped out of her dress entirely, and was now clad in only a thin silk slip. "I wonder what Captain Maldonado keeps in his bedroom," she asked out loud as she moved to the smaller chamber.

"Me," answered Chaym.

Geisha gasped and jumped backwards. Mrs. Maldonado stepped out of the bedroom, fur standing on end and fangs barred.

"H..how? You're supposed to be in the mess hall with the rest of the crew."

"Let's just say I had an overwhelming sense of female intuition."

"I know what this looks like..." Geisha stammered. Chaym took a great deal of pleasure watching the overly self-confident tramp squirm. Geisha on the other hand was very alarmed. Chaym's fur was matted down with sweat, her breathing was deep and irregular, and her eyes looked glazed, almost rabid. "... I assure you this is not what you think," Geisha stammered.

"Oh, really? I caught you red-handed breaking into the Captain's quarters. What exactly am I thinking?"

"Well, since I'm a foreign dignitary, you're probably thinking that this is some sort of interplanetary espionage attempt."

"Good guess."

"Well." Geisha seemed to regain some of her composure. She stood up straight and seemed to look down her nose at Chaym. "I would like you to know that it was nothing of the sort."

"Yeah, right. Then why are you here?"

"If you must know, I was planning on sleeping with the Captain."

Chaym gasped and stared at Geisha, totally stunned.

"But now that you are here, I suppose it will be the three of us. I have no problem with that, but frankly, you're not my type..."

With a bestial howl, Chaym leapt at the Orion woman's throat.

.....

"Okay, I think it's time for a recap."

Lt. Commander Underwood sat behind a force field in the brig and bounced a baseball against the wall. "I've got no idea what's going on. Would somebody please start from the beginning and give me the condensed version?"

Outside the prison cell, Captain Maldonado, Security Chief Gor, Chief Master-At-Arms rRham, and ship's Tactical Officer Merinid Rostarr were all watching him with great suspicion.

"It's a trap," said rRham. "He's trying to get us to reveal how much we know."

"rRham, you think everything's a trap," said Carlos.

"Everything is," replied the giant reptile.

"All right," said the Captain. "We'll handle this systematically. I'll ask the questions, Underwood, you'll answer, and then we'll get to the bottom of this. Now, true or false: You've been very disgruntled for the last month because our cargo of Tribiddian-12 has required us to maintain total communication silence, and we've been totally cut off from the outside world."

"True." Chris continued to bounce the baseball against the wall and catch it.

"This morning, a shuttlecraft docked with the *Avenger*, and I ordered all the senior officers to the reception. A reception you did *not* attend."

"True."

"Why not?"

"I had to go to the arboretum and set up for Chaym's Mohnan sing-along. I've been there all afternoon."

"But my wife and I saw you on Deck 7 just around mid-afternoon. You said you were fixing a sensor glitch. Then Sasha showed up and the two of you left together."

"False!" said Underwood. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"So you deny you were there?" smiled rRham. "It's your word against the Captain's. This will be a very short court-martial."

"It wasn't me," maintained the Operations Chief.

"What about half an hour ago, in the mess hall?" asked Rostarr. "I saw you take Ensign Abrams and leave. Then, a few minutes later, I caught Sasha stealing a photon torpedo. She said she was operating under your authority. I contacted you in your quarters and you personally told me to let her go."

"Again, false," said Chris, who was handling his accusations quite calmly. "I was in the arboretum."

"So you don't remember talking to me," said Rostarr.

"Nope. I was down on Deck 5 setting up until about 20 minutes ago, when I returned to my quarters and found them ransacked, and a great deal of my personal property stolen. I was about to call for security when rRham barged in and arrested me."

"That is because you are lying!" growled rRham.

"You're just still pissed off because I gamma-welded you to a bulkhead 2 years ago. I'm telling you I'm innocent!"

"Innocent, huh?" asked Carlos. "Well then, perhaps you can offer us a reasonable explanation."

"About a hundred or so come to mind!" Underwood stood up and began pacing his cell.

"Such as..."

"Alien doppelgangers. An alternate me from a mirror universe. A freak transporter accident could've separated the good and evil sides of me. Time Travel. *Avenger* is actually in a holodeck and this is all some 'test-of-character'. Extraterrestrial parasites implanted in my body to make me vulnerable to suggestion. It could be a self-aware android I created in my own image gone amuck. Maybe a scientific experiment created a pocket dimension and it's getting smaller and smaller. Or an exotic space disease that unleashes my repressed passions and is affecting my mind!"

"Something's affecting his mind, all right," muttered Rostarr.

"Those are the most ridiculous suggestions I've ever heard in my entire life," said Chief Gor.

"Actually, he *could* be from a mirror universe," said rRham.

"Shut up, rRham!" said Gor.

"You might as well get comfortable, Chris, because until I get some answers, you're staying right where you are." The Captain turned to Gor. "Have you been able to figure out where Sasha went with that photon torpedo?"

"No, sir," replied the Security Chief. "Internal sensors can't seem to locate Sasha, even though they otherwise appear to be working normally. And we can't do a shipwide sweep for antimatter because it might trigger the T-12. We can do manual scans with low powered tricorders, but that'll take time."

"It would help if we knew why my ship's geologist was running around with a torpedo."

"Maybe she's also from a mirror universe?" offered rRham.

The three Humans looked at the great reptile in a stunned silence. Finally Carlos spoke. "Now I remember why we never made you Security Chief again, rRham."

Just then the door to Security opened and Chaym burst in, half-dragging the Orion ambassador by her hair.

"Carlos!" screamed Chaym. "Thank the Spirit of Wande'le's you're alive!"

"Chaym!" Carlos yelled in disbelief. "Let go of her now!"

n'Maldonado released Geisha's hair. The ambassador immediately pulled herself upright and began composing herself. Carlos noted that both women looked as if they'd been participating in a wrestling match. Chaym's fur was matted with sweat and Geisha's slip was torn loose at one shoulder. The slip was so tight and so short that Carlos wondered why she bothered wearing it at all. He also noted that while the ambassador was dressed for bed, she wore a full complement of jewelry and makeup. From seemingly nowhere she produced a comb and began repairing her damaged hair.

"Carlos, I—" Chaym began.

"Shut up, Chaym," Carlos cut her off.

"But she—"

"That's an order!" The Captain silenced his wife with a stern look. He then turned to Geisha. "I'm sorry, Ambassador. I don't know what's going on, but we'll clear this up right away."

"Thank you, Captain. It's nice to know that cooler heads can indeed prevail." Geisha smiled gratefully at Carlos, then she turned

back to Chaym. "I see now why you keep this pet of yours, Captain. She really is quite spirited."

Chaym repressed a deep-throated growl. "Lock her up, Carlos! Lock her up now before I kill her!"

"That's enough, Chaym!" Carlos yelled.

"But you don't understand! She's going to..."

"It's really quite sad," Geisha said with a hint of a smile. "I thought that in the Federation, wives take an oath upon marriage to honor and obey their husbands."

Chaym roared and leaped through the air. She would have torn out Geisha's throat with her teeth if rRham hadn't caught her in mid-air with one of his massive hands. The giant reptile twisted Chaym's wrists behind her back and in two seconds had her completely restrained.

"I'm sorry, Chaym," said rRham. "But I cannot allow you to cause an interstellar incident." Chaym struggled for a few seconds more before finally collapsing in futility.

"I'm very sorry, Ambassador. I really don't know why my wife is acting like this. She's usually quite normal."

Geisha gave Carlos a pitying look and spoke in a tone of genuine sincerity. "It's not her fault, Captain. She's just doing what every lesser female does when she gets a man of such greatness as yourself: She's clutching herself to you with all her might, lest she lose you to a more worthy mate, someone like... myself." The ambassador batted her amethyst colored eyes toward the Captain.

"Actually, Geisha, I think we should talk about that." Carlos looked embarrassed, and took a deep breath. "You see, Chaym is my wife and I love her, and I really don't want you to get the idea that I'm interested in you because..."

"Oh, Captain." Geisha blushed a deeper shade of green. "You Humans are so cute when you're being monogamous. But we don't need to discuss such things in front of your crew. Let's go back to your quarters and talk about it." Geisha cast a sidelong glance at Chaym. "She can stay here."

"I really don't think that's a good idea," said Carlos. He rubbed the bridge of his nose with fatigue and thought to himself, *This really isn't the type of thing they train you for at Command School.* He looked back up at Geisha with her green skin and her welcoming smile and her very *very* short slip and said to her, "Aren't you cold?"

At that statement Geisha shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. The effect was one that made her look alone and helpless and showed off her cleavage all at once. Carlos resisted the urge to stand next to her. "All the more reason to return to your quarters." Even Rostarr looked embarrassed by her persistence, and Chief Gor was suddenly pretending to be very interested in a nearby console.

"Why is that, exactly?" asked Carlos.

"Because that's where my clothes are." She winked at him.

Suddenly Carlos felt as though he had been splashed with cold water. "Why are your clothes in my quarters?"

"Because that's where I left them." She smiled like a vixen, but Carlos was beyond distraction.

"What were you doing in my quarters?"

"Why, waiting for you, of course. You are the most powerful man on the ship, so naturally you're the only one worthy of my attentions."

"No." Carlos noted how skillfully she was dodging the question. "I meant how did you get into my quarters?"

"You must've left your door unlocked."

"Chief." Carlos turned to Gor. "Check the security systems in my quarters." Gor pressed a series of buttons.

"The sensors in your quarters are being jammed, sir, and the lock on your door has been forced. Also, I'm getting some strange activity from your terminal. It looks like someone's accessing your personal files."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!" screamed Chaym. "I found her in our living room snooping around!"

"Espionage is a very serious offense in the Federation, Ambassador," said Chief Gor. He glanced at rRham and the big reptile released Chaym and began approaching Geisha.

"But I wasn't spying!" Geisha cried in terrified tone. Chaym was sure she was faking it. As rRham approached, Geisha slipped closer to Carlos. "Captain, you must believe me, I wasn't spying! I was there for you!"

"For me?" Carlos looked unconvinced. "And exactly what were you going to do 'for me'."

"Why, sleep with you of course!"

The forwardness of her statement stopped even rRham. Carlos's mouth opened and closed wordlessly several times before he said, "Geisha, I don't *want* to sleep with you."

If the Captain had physically struck her, the effect would not have been more intense. Geisha's frightened façade shattered instantly, replaced first by shock, then horror and outrage. "H-h-how could you say such a thing?"

"Because it's true," Carlos responded. "Chaym is my wife. I love her. She..."

"You don't want me?" Geisha asked. Her eyes held the fury of a thunderstorm. "You're choosing...*her*...over *me*!?"

"Of course." Carlos was taken aback by the level of emotion that emanated from Geisha in almost physical waves. "I love her. Hell, you and I just met this morning and I've known Chaym for years. That's why I married her. She..."

Carlos never finished his sentence because Geisha screamed and threw herself at him. For an instant there was nothing but a flurry of fists and nails, then rRham grabbed the Orion woman and pulled her away from the Captain. Carlos's face was bleeding, and his jacket had been torn open. Chaym rushed to her husband's side to make sure he wasn't seriously injured. He wasn't, and Chaym was quick to notice that rRham had efficiently restrained the Ambassador in the same manner that he had used on her only moments before.

"I'll see you pay dearly for that insult, Maldonado!" Geisha screamed. It was uncertain which Maldonado she was talking about. "I am Geisha, a daughter of Jurai! The women of my family have been at the arm of every great Orion captain for two hundred years. I will not be spurned for some dog-faced half-breed. Mark my words, Captain, no man has ever insulted me like this and lived to tell about it."

"I can believe that," Carlos said, wiping blood from his face. "Look, Ambassador, I didn't mean to insult you, but I'm a married man, and that's all there is to it. Now, in the interest of diplomacy, I'm willing to pretend this little scene didn't happen and..."

"You thoughtless destitute! First you spurn me for that flea-bitten toy you call a wife, then you wish to ignore me like some lovesmitten chambermaid. My actions will not be swept under the carpet like so much refuse! I'll see you dead within the hour, Maldonado!"

So much for diplomacy, Carlos thought to himself. "Fine, have it your way. Chief, have the Ambassador confined to quarters."

"Sir," began Gor, "that's probably not a good idea. We know she can override the locks, and I'm still not sure how much of the computer system was compromised."

"Good point. rRham, assign the Ambassador a luxury suite right here. She can enjoy the next six months thinking about what to tell her government when we send her home in a prison barge."

rRham placed Geisha in the cell across from Underwood's and activated the force fields. From within, she watched silently as n'Maldonado wiped the last of the blood from her husband's face. Then the couple left together, presumably to get the Captain a new uniform. Rostarr and Gor then left to begin their sweep of the ship for the missing torpedo. This left rRham alone with the prisoners. Underwood had returned to bouncing his baseball against the wall, and Geisha curled up in a ball in the corner of her cell. There, she watched carefully until she was certain no one was listening. Then she touched a hidden communicator in her earring and whispered quickly.

"Raven to Thunderhead, Raven to Thunderhead."

"Thunderhead here," a voice only she could hear replied.

"We're not waiting. Tell the Romulan Commander to commence the operation immediately."

"Understood, sir."

Geisha smiled and thought to herself, *Dead within the hour, Maldonado, dead within the hour.*

PART 7

"The reason you shouldn't time travel is because if you do something you don't want to do, you could go back in time and tell yourself not to do it, then you don't do it and wonder what it is you didn't do, but now you know you didn't do it, but since you didn't do it you don't know what happens when you did do it so you've got no reason to tell yourself not to do it so you don't not do it so it still gets done."

-excerpt from "The Reason You Shouldn't Time Travel."

By Cadet Sasha Graevyn
Temporal Physics 101 Term Paper
Star Fleet Academy, (2284 AD)
Grade A+

"Doctor Graevyn, I presume?"

Sasha Graevyn took off her headphones and turned toward the voice. As ship's geologist, Sasha often spent long hours alone in the geology lab, studying rock samples and cataloging experiments. Since she worked off-shift from most of *Avenger's* physical sciences department, she had taken the luxury of modifying the ship's audio circuits so she could listen to some of her native Kyon-an melodies at loud volumes. This way she could blast her music without disturbing other crewmembers. However, since the arrival of the Vulcan science team this morning, Sasha now had to share her workspace with four Vulcans and an awfully large amount of equipment.

"Can I help you?" Sasha replied to the Vulcan. Sasha recognized her as Selerus, the chief scientist on the Vulcans' team.

"I seriously doubt that," replied Selerus in a loud voice. "It would be unlikely that your skills would be useful in my research, and while I am in need of a personal assistant, I don't think you fit the bill. However, the Vulcan Science Academy does have several custodial positions available, if you are interested."

Sasha wasn't quite certain, but she was overcome with the sensation that the woman had just insulted her. However, before she could react, Selerus continued. "I would appreciate it, Dr. Graevyn, if you would return the bipolar tachyon receptor that you borrowed earlier."

"The what?" blinked Sasha.

Selerus sighed heavily. "The bipolar tachyon receptor. It records various temporal phenomena. You had asked if you could borrow mine, since yours was broken. I thought this was very suspicious, since you did not seem like the type of person who knew how to interpret the non-linear reactions of bipolar tachyons, but I wasn't currently using it, and you told me you would return it immediately."

"I did?!?" Sasha asked in total astonishment.

"Yes, you did. That was exactly four hours and forty two minutes ago, and you have yet to return my property."

"Look, lady." Sasha stood up from her desk. "I really don't remember borrowing your wacha-ma-callit. I've been here studying my Formica samples since your shuttlecraft landed. I really don't know what you're talking about."

"A likely story." Selerus folded her arms and scowled. "You Federation types are always borrowing things and not returning them. A *katra* here, a bird-of-prey there. I suppose it's my own fault. I knew you weren't trustworthy when I saw your face on the security bulletin."

"What??"

Rather than answer, Selerus reached over and pressed a button on the comm unit on Sasha's desk. The screen immediately displayed a security fugitive alert with Sasha's own picture on it. The caption listed her as having stolen a Mark IV torpedo. In flashing text, the bulletin said that she was armed and dangerous, and that anyone who saw her should contact security at once. Sasha stared with her mouth agape at the screen for several seconds. "This must be some mistake," she finally said aloud.

"Not very likely," replied Selerus. "You are obviously a dangerous criminal, bent on mass destruction. The logical course of action would be turning yourself in to the authorities and throwing yourself on the mercy of the court. But only after you've returned my bipolar tachyon receptor."

"But I didn't DO anything!!" Sasha stepped forward and pressed the comm button. "Graevyn to security." The screen flashed and Commander rRham's face appeared.

"Aaahhh... Sasha," said the big lizard. "Right on schedule. I suppose you're planning on making your demands now?"

"Schedule? Demands? What in Drizzit's name are you smoking?"

"Well, you did steal a torpedo. Standard terrorist patterns indicate you're going to threaten to blow up the ship if your demands are not met. What is it that you want? Money? A fully fueled escape shuttle? The release of political prisoners?"

"But I didn't steal a torpedo!!"

"I should warn you that a Mark IV torpedo is considered a class A weapon, and thus we are authorized to use deadly force in

its retrieval. Now if you immediately surrender yourself to our custody the military tribunal may show leniency."

"Has everyone gone crazy?!? I DIDN'T STEAL ANYTHING!!!" Sasha screamed.

"You haven't returned my receptor yet. Technically that's stealing," interjected Selerus.

"Theft of a personal item is a misnomer," said rRham. "It carries a maximum 5000 credit fine and two years—"

"Shut up!" Sasha pulled at her mane. "This is useless. You're not even listening to me! Where's the chief of security? I want to talk to him."

"I'm afraid it's Star Fleet policy never to negotiate with terrorists. Now if you won't surrender, you leave me little choice but to—"

"rRham, listen to me! I *didn't* take a torpedo!" But Sasha knew rRham, and she knew where rRham had come from, and how he thought. A simple protestation of innocence wouldn't be enough, not for a Tzen. Of course, it wasn't.

"Then you must surrender and clarify your involvement in this. You will be dealt with fairly, but you know what such a charge means, and you know I cannot—"

The rest of rRham's speech was cut off as Sasha slammed her hand down upon the comm unit. She stared at the now blank screen and growled.

"That wool-headed numbskull! Why the hell would I steal a torpedo? It's not like I even know what to do with one anyway. Or with your bipolar thingamabob." Sasha stormed past Selerus and out into the hallway. She turned left and marched furiously toward the turbo-lift. "Everyone is acting crazy! Accusing me of being in places I've never been, of doing things I didn't do... This is like some bad science fiction story. Any second now I'll come face to face with my evil twin, only she'll have a big scar and be bent on world domination. That, or a little midget called mini..."

Sasha never finished her sentence. She had half-turned around a corner when she was knocked clean off her feet by someone who had been running down the corridor, and not looking where they were going.

"It works better if you face forward, Zod-for-brains! Try watching where you're going..."

Sasha's voice trailed off. She stared slack-jawed at an identical copy of herself, who was staring slack-jawed right back. The two were indistinguishable from each other, except that one of them held Selerus's bipolar tachyon receptor in her hand.

Captain Carlos Maldonado returned to the security complex with a new shirt and a pungent odor. The brig's two guests and their single guard all noticed immediately.

"Pardon me, sir," said the large green guard, "but something smells like... shoe polish."

"Don't start with me, rRham." Carlos shot the big lizard an evil eye. "My wife seems to think that little-miss jealousy here might be carrying a disease or five. She wouldn't let me leave the quarters without smothering me with some sort of Mohnan antibiotic. How are our guests?"

Carlos' gaze went to the two occupied cells in the brig. The first contained the ship's chief of operations, Lt. Commander Chris Underwood. An eyewitness had connected him to the missing tor-

pedo, but despite all questioning, he maintained his innocence. Now he was concentrating heavily on bouncing a baseball against one side of his cell.

"Hey, Chris. I don't suppose you've decided to make my life easy and admit you know anything about what's going on, would you?"

"Sorry, Captain," the ops chief replied. "But it's like I said, I was in the arboretum for the last 6 hours. Now if you'll excuse me, sir, I think I'm making progress."

"Progress?" Carlos watched Underwood throw his ball and catch it again.

"He is attempting to escape." rRham left the security station and stood next to the captain. "He seems to think that he can use that antique piece of sports equipment to get out of his cell. I must admit that I cannot fathom his logic."

"It's actually basic particle physics, rRham. The electron shell of each atom in my baseball has a random phase shift. If the random phase of the wall atoms is exactly opposite of that of the baseball's random phase, the two objects will not physically resist each other."

Carlos couldn't help but smile. "So you're going to keep throwing that ball until it magically decides to pass through the wall."

"It's not magic, it's science!"

Carlos suppressed a chuckle. rRham watched suspiciously. "Captain, do you think I should remove that device?"

"I don't think we're in any danger of his escape." Carlos turned to the other prisoner.

"I wouldn't underestimate him, sir," rRham said as he followed the CO.

Carlos turned his attention to the brig's other occupant. Geisha, the Orion ambassador accused of interstellar espionage, sat quietly in her cell combing her hair. She was incredibly beautiful, and her smooth green skin was accented by a strategically cut silk slip. The gold and silver beads in her hair jingled as she brushed, humming a few bars of a nameless tune. She seemed perfectly calm, almost queen-like in her attitude. She did not acknowledge the Captain or rRham as they approached. rRham's ears twitched as he heard the melody she hummed, but he said nothing. Carlos couldn't quite place it.

"That's a very pretty tune you're humming," Carlos said. Geisha didn't respond. Carlos grimaced at this. Being the *Avenger's* XO for five years was mostly about running a ship and following orders. Now, as Captain, Carlos had to start dealing with the political and diplomatic part of the job. And the more he dealt with it, the less he liked it.

"Listen, Geisha. We've got nearly six more months before the *Avenger* gets to ELR-19. That's a really long time to spend alone in the brig. Now we can make a deal..."

"A deal?" Geisha's hand froze in mid-motion and she turned her amethyst-colored eyes toward the Captain. They blazed with fury. "Is this the part where I fall to my knees, grovel before you, and submit to whatever demands you desire? That time has passed, Carlos Maldonado, Captain of the Federation starship *Avenger*. Have you forgotten my last words to you so soon? Dead within the hour, Maldonado. Dead within the hour. Well, your hour is almost up, my poor Captain. Have you prepared yourself for the next life?"

"I'd be more worried about your own life if I were you, Geisha. We've confiscated your equipment, and have overwhelming evidence against you. When this ship puts in, you'll be shipped back to the Orion confederation in chains. I've heard that they don't take too well to spies that can't cut it. I'd hate to think of what would happen to a girl like you in a forced labor camp."

Geisha's face dissolved into a wicked grin. "I see that my comrades vastly overrated you, Captain. You have no clue what's really going on, do you?"

rRham quickly interjected, "Perhaps you are referring to the fact that you're actually working for the Romulans. That this entire interstellar espionage business is in fact a diversion. And that your true purpose here is for the Tribiddian-12."

Geisha's eyes shot open and she gasped. Carlos was just as shocked, but he hid it better. The Orion woman recovered quickly. "And how exactly did you come to this conclusion?"

"Go ahead, rRham. Tell her," Carlos prompted. He was anxious to hear the story himself.

"It was quite obvious," said rRham. "Why would you want to spy on a Federation starship that was cut off from its fleet? There is no way for you to report your findings to your government until we dock at ELR-19, and any information you get would be useless by then. The only thing of value to bring you here is the Tribiddian. And since T-12 is manufactured by the Orion confederacy, it seems unlikely that they would go through the trouble of stealing it. Therefore you are working for the Romulans."

"How do you know that?" asked Geisha. "I could be working for the Klingons."

"I know my music. The song you were humming before was a Romulan funeral dirge. Not too many outsiders have ever attended a Romulan funeral. But I've heard rumors that the fatality rate for those who wish to join the Tal Shiar is very high."

Geisha's face was a mask of stone. After a moment, she smiled and leaned back against the cell wall. "I was wrong, Captain. My comrades did not overestimate you, they underestimated your crew. But then I suppose history always credits the leader for the deeds of his men. However, your deduction changes nothing. Your time is up."

Just then, the ship was rocked violently from an impact. Chris was knocked from his bunk and rRham and Carlos struggled to keep their footing.

"Red Alert. Hostile ship decloaking to the aft. The ship is under attack. All hands to battle stations. Red Alert," Se'ele's voice sounded out from the comm system. It was quickly replaced by assistant chief engineer Mike Rupprecht. "Attention all hands, power loss on all decks. The enemy is using some form of energy dampening field. All hands..." The rest of the message dissolved in a crackle of static.

"I've got to get to the bridge." Carlos bolted for the door... and smacked nose-first into it when it didn't open. "What the...?"

"My comrades have arrived." Geisha was now crouching on her bunk, still grooming her hair. The lights across the brig started to flicker.

"What's going on?" Carlos shouted.

"EPS systems failure," said Underwood. "The ship's power grid is losing stability. It would explain why the door and the lights. I can't understand why the batteries haven't kicked in."

"Sabotage," hissed rRham.

"Ohhh... You're a smart one." Geisha smiled. She made a small clapping motion with her hands.

"Disrupting the ship's power grid will not allow you to escape," said rRham. "The brig has a fully independent power cell that can imprison you for 24 hours. The force fields will remain in place. You aren't going anywhere."

"Think so?" she smiled.

A second blast rocked the ship and everything went dark. Carlos's stomach lurched as the gravity gave way and he felt himself floating in freefall. Emergency lighting filled the room with a pale red glow.

"Ow!" rRham yelped and swatted something from his snout. A tiny golden hairpin was lodged directly between his nostrils.

"You shot me!" rRham blinked in disbelief. "You shot me with a hairclip!"

"You ARE smart, aren't you?" Geisha pulled a second clip from her hair and snapped it onto the front of her comb. Bringing it level with her eyes, she pulled back on a hidden trigger and the hairpin shot out and struck rRham directly in the neck. The Tzen warrior roared, drew his phaser, aimed for the green woman and fired.

Nothing happened.

rRham checked the settings and aimed again. Still the phaser would not fire. By now two more golden hairclips protruded from his chest. Bellowing in outrage, the security officer spun in the non-gravity. Coiling his snake-like tail, he used it to push off from the wall and sailed through the air toward the Orion woman, intending to subdue her hand-to-hand.

He never made it.

With the grace of a zero-G ballerina, Geisha casually stepped aside as the giant reptile sailed by her and collided with the wall. The lizard made no move to get up. Geisha chuckled to herself and turned her attention to the two other Star Fleet officers. Carlos floated near the door, one hand on the inactive comm unit. Underwood was drifting helplessly from his cell toward the security desk.

"What did you do to him?" asked Carlos.

"Tranquilizer darts," Geisha said, reloading her weapon. "Non-lethal, so they'll get past your scanners. Normally one will suffice, but with an opponent of his size, I wasn't taking any chances."

"I don't get it." Underwood kicked in midair, finally managing to grab hold of rRham's desk. "Why frame me? If you were just trying to escape and steal the Tribiddian, what purpose does stealing a torpedo and locking me up serve?"

"I didn't frame you. I have no idea who did or why. All I care about is the Tribiddian-12, which should be getting loaded onto my shuttlecraft even as we speak. As soon as the shuttle departs, it will dock with our starship, my comrades will beam me off, circle around, and blow the *Avenger* to atoms. No witnesses, and the *Avenger* is assumed destroyed by a T-12 explosion."

"I DON'T THINK SO!" Underwood reached under the desk, pulled out a fully charged phaser rifle, and leveled it at Geisha. "For once rRham's paranoia paid off! Drop it now!"

Geisha's laughter was like a spring rain. Even now her beauty struck Carlos.

"Foolish boy, didn't you see what happened to your large friend? High-energy weapons are useless within the dampening field."

Underwood set the rifle to maximum and fired. Phased energy burst forth, only to dissipate less than an inch from the emitter.

"Gold star for effort, left-tenant commander." Geisha's amethyst eyes sparkled as she raised the comb and shot Chris. He grabbed his shoulder and struggled for a moment before floating unconscious in zero-G.

"I don't understand." Carlos felt like he was trapped in a nightmare. "This is impossible. The Romulans don't have energy dampening weapons of this magnitude."

"Of course not. At least not yet. They won't be invented for at least 500 more years. Now for you, Captain, I have a special treat." Geisha drew two beads from her hair, one gold, one silver. She loaded the gold one. "These tranquilizers are normally non-lethal." She pulled the trigger and shot once, hitting Carlos in the chest. "But when mixed with a dose of quadrazine like I have here, it's a slow, painful way to die. This is the fate of all men who defy me." She raised the weapon and locked gazes with Carlos.

"I was expecting more from you, Maldonado. 500 years from now the *Avenger* and her crew are still spoken of with reverence. But I guess this time history will take a different turn. Goodbye, Captain." Geisha fired her weapon, hitting Carlos in the jugular vein. Instantly his body went cold, his vision dimmed, and the last thing he heard was Geisha's laughter fading away in a Romulan transporter beam.

PART 8

"Dear Diary,

You are never going to believe this..."

Chaym n'Maldonado's
Personal Journal Entry
Stardate 9908.16

Ensign Charles Donovan had seen his share of strange things since joining Star Fleet. During his first five-year tour, he had boldly gone where no human had gone before. He had met aliens, been shot at by aliens, had dinner with aliens, and almost been eaten by aliens. He had narrowly avoided death on numerous occasions, and generally seen enough strange new worlds to sate any normal human being's quest for adventure. Of course, Star Fleet was not the place for normal human beings content with their lives of complacency. It was a place for people who liked seeing strange things, so Charles had just re-enlisted for a second 5-year tour. This was his first mission of his new tour.

And it was very, very boring.

Walking the corridors of Deck 5, Ensign Donovan sighed and dreamed of adventure. The *Avenger's* first voyage of his new tour had started out horribly. The ship was carrying an ultra-secret cargo at incredibly slow speeds to the farthest corner of the Federation. The cargo required absolute communications silence, so the crew was completely cut off from their friends and families. This would be tolerable for a military vessel, but the *Avenger's* primary focus was exploration. And with nothing to explore, most of the crew was going stir crazy. Charles had often heard Assistant Ops Chief Lauren Milan complain that if you stare at the same corridor walls long enough, you would start seeing things. Frankly, Donovan wouldn't mind seeing something strange or exciting. It was what he signed up for, after all.

So when one of his crewmates came galloping up the corridor on four legs, Charles did not consider it strange. There were lots of non-humans in the *Avenger's* crew, and a couple of them walked on all fours. As the crewman zipped past him at close to 50 kilometers per hour, Charles was not really surprised; perhaps they were in a hurry. And when that same crewman collided headfirst with someone coming out of the Geology lab, it seemed rather ordinary, being as they were both not looking where they were going.

What was strange about the entire ordeal was the identity of the two crewmen. The one coming out of the Geology lab was Sasha Graevyn. This was not at all abnormal because Sasha Graevyn was the ship's geologist.

What was strange was that the crewman who ran into her was also Sasha Graevyn.

"It works better if you face forward, Zod-for-brains! Try watching where you're going..." The Sasha from the Geology Department muttered and rubbed her head. She then looked up at her assailant and went slack-jawed. The Sasha that had been running was sprawled against the wall, one hand nursing a swelling ankle and the other holding an odd piece of science equipment.

"Woah, talk about Deja vu," the Sasha against the wall said to her dumbfounded mirror image. "Are you okay? Well, I mean I know you're not okay because that's the same bump on your head that I've got on my head, and I remember how much it hurt when I got it. Oh, wait. If you're here then that means..."

"Waa.... Who the heck are you?" The Sasha from the Geology lab stood up slowly, never taking her eyes off her counterpart.

"What are you, blind? I'm you! Sasha Graevyn, *Avenger's* ship's geologist. I don't remember hitting my head that hard."

"Huh? Wait a minute.... What did you say? How can you be me."

"Geez, am I really this dense? I'm YOU, but from the future."

"WHAT?!?" the first Sasha screamed. Her head was really starting to hurt now. "From the future? When? How far? This had better not be one of those goofy parallel universe stories."

"Only about twenty minutes from now." The Sasha against the wall slowly stood up. "Look, we don't have time for this. I have to get to the shuttlebay and you have to get to the brig."

"The brig? What the hell do you think...?" Suddenly everything began falling together. "Wait a second. YOU'RE THE ONE WHO STOLE THE TORPEDO!!!"

"Quiet! Are you trying to get me arrested?!" The Sasha against the wall immediately started looking around. The only other person within earshot was Ensign Donovan, who remained transfixed by the entire exchange.

"Oh, no, you don't! Everybody's giving me trouble for whatever you've been up to! I bet that's Selerus' bi-polar thingamabob!" Sasha pointed at the equipment in her duplicate's hand. "You're no me-from-the-future! You're one of those alien doppelganger things, or a mirror universe double, or something. You're not going anywhere until I get some answers from you!" The first Sasha dropped into a Kyonan fighting stance.

"Look, you're making a mistake!" the second Sasha pleaded. "I know what you're about to do and I remember that it really, really hurt. You've got to listen to me. I need you to..."

"Heeeyah!" The first Sasha threw a flying kick. The second Sasha expertly dodged the attack, spun around, and swept the first Sasha cleanly off her feet. The second Sasha then kicked the first one squarely in the stomach, knocking the wind from her victim.

"Owwwww... That hurt," the first Sasha moaned.

"I know. I remember." The second Sasha lifted her shirt up, showing a stomach with four long scratches on it. The wounds looked to be several hours old. The first Sasha looked down at her own midriff, and saw the same marks, only newly made. "Now do you believe me?"

The standing officer extended a hand to her fallen counterpart and pulled her to her feet. "Okay, so now what?" asked the wounded Kyonan.

"Now you freeze," Security Chief Gor said. He and a half dozen security guards filled the end of the corridor. They were armed with phasers, and had them leveled toward the two women.

"Sasha Graevyn, put your hands on your head." Both women put their hands up.

"Don't panic, we're going to escape," the future Sasha whispered.

"Oh, really." The present Sasha eyed the guards warily. "This should be neat. Exactly how do we get out of this?"

"I can't remember."

"What? Why the frell not?"

"Hey, I've been through a lot in the last couple of hours. Besides, I was distracted."

"What? Weren't you paying attention? What the heck were you doing?"

The future Sasha grimaced. "Well, it just so happens that I was busy yelling at the future me because SHE couldn't remember."

"Oh." The present Sasha realized that she herself wasn't paying attention. Turning to look toward the security officers, she saw them closing in slowly. "I'm sorry," muttered the present Sasha.

The future Sasha's ears suddenly perked up. "Oh, yeah, now I remember. This is when the ship gets attacked!"

There was a tremendous noise, like the sound of the ship's hull scraping against another object. The lights went haywire, and then failed completely. The emergency lights flashed for a second and the artificial gravity gave way. The future Sasha leapt forward toward her assailants and wrestled the phaser rifle from one of the security officers. With a quick twist, she reversed the rifle and stunned the guard at point blank range.

"Run!" she yelled toward her present day clone. The current Sasha nodded and immediately bolted in the opposite direction. The future Sasha waited until she was out of sight, then turned her attention to the guards.

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Unfortunately, Sasha was in no condition to run far. Her stomach was still hurting from where she'd kicked herself, and the artificial gravity kept fading in and out. All around her was chaos. Only the emergency lights remained active. The red alert sirens were glowing, but the audio signal was all static. Crewmembers were running to battle stations, and she ran along with them in an attempt to blend in with everyone else. Three intersections from the battle, she paused to catch her breath.

"Good thing I remembered where to go," the future Sasha said as she ran up from the side corridor. She looked over her shoulder for pursuit.

"What did you do to them?" the current Sasha asked.

"Something that'll probably get me court-martialed." She turned away from the corridor to face her double. "Listen, we have almost no time left. You've got to get Chaym and get to the brig. Once you're there, grab Underwood. Take him and Chaym to Cargo Bay 4. Underwood will know what to do. Oh, and before I forget..." Sasha's future self handed her the bipolar tachyon receptor. "You'll need this."

"What for?"

Her future-self shrugged. "I don't know. You didn't tell me. Well, not you – you. I mean the future-you didn't tell me when I was you...oh forget it. I've gotta run."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to stop the Romulans from blowing up the ship." Her future self turned and ran toward the turbo-lift.

The Kyonan raised her hand and was about to call after her future self when the words "Hey, Sasha" came from behind her. Turning, the present Sasha saw Chief of Recreation Chaym n'Maldonado pausing from where she had been rushing to her battle station. Chaym immediately ran over to Sasha.

"Hey, who was that? She looked just like..."

Sasha grabbed Chaym's arm and half dragged her toward the brig. "Don't ask, PLEASE just don't ask."

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"Why in Drizzit's name does Security have to be so damn... secure?" Sasha muttered.

Outside of Security Central, Chaym and Sasha both stood, growling. The automated door to the brig was designed to withstand a great deal of physical punishment, as well as being reinforced against energy weapons. In the event of an enemy boarding party, or a mutiny, this was the area to where the security officers would fall back. It was also designed to resist attempted liberations of prisoners. In the event of a breach of security, or total loss of power, the door operated on a "time safe" principle. Once closed, the door would not open for twenty-four hours, or unless the Captain or Chief of Security entered the code to open it.

This entire hallway was without power. Currently the door was closed. A convenient panel next to the door currently read 23:52:58 and was slowly counting down.

"Time travel, huh? That's pretty crazy," Chaym muttered. Sasha had relayed the story of the last ten minutes of her life as they had run to security.

"Will you please try to focus a little?" Sasha said. "How can you be so calm at a time like this? The ship's under attack!"

"I'm not worried. Carlos is in command." Chaym smiled with absolute confidence. "He's probably on the bridge right now blasting whoever it is to kingdom come. I just wish I could see him."

"That's very nice, Chaym, but will you please concentrate? We have to figure out how to get past this door."

"That should be easy enough." Chaym approached the wall panel. "I'll just use Carlos' code."

"You know the Captain's access code?" Sasha gasped.

"Well, we ARE married." Chaym smirked and typed a number. The panel buzzed but the door did not open. "It's just a matter of figuring out what his code would be. It won't be long 'til I guess the right one." She typed another set of numbers. Again the door buzzed. Unaffected, Chaym continued to chat as she typed. "Why

the hell would you want to travel through time? Isn't there a law against that somewhere?"

Sasha grimaced. "Only about nine hundred of them. I took a class in temporal mechanics back at Star Fleet Academy. It ended up being more philosophy than science. They basically drilled it into your head that you should never, ever, ever, EVER go back in time, no matter what. Stuff about paradox and parallel worlds and stuff. I was actually pretty good at it until they started getting into stuff like which universe is canon and which ones aren't. Also, there's how they justify having older technology that looked more advanced than the stuff we have now. The entire ordeal was just one big enterprise. After a while, you just have to turn your brain off and accept what they tell you. It just got too confusing, so I just gave up."

"Ah-HA!" Chaym exclaimed as the panel beeped and the sound of pneumatic depressurization came from behind the door. The portal slowly sank into the walls. "That's so sweet! Carlos used our anniversary as the code to get into security. Of course, that might have had something to do with the fact that our wedding night was spent in the stockade of Starbase 48. Did I ever tell you that story, Sasha? Sasha...?"

Chaym turned to her friend and her mood immediately fell. Sasha's face had drained of all color. She was staring in absolute horror at something beyond the door. Chaym shifted her view to look into security and gasped.

Just inside the door to security lay the body of Captain Carlos Maldonado, Jr.

Chaym's scream snapped Sasha from her trance. Immediately Chaym pounced forward and began shaking her husband. Sasha, too, leapt forward to join her.

"He's not breathing." Chaym's fur stood on end as she checked for a pulse. "His heart's not beating and he's not breathing. In the name of all the Mohnan highlords, he's not breathing. Sasha...I...I think he's..." The rest was a low noise and suddenly her face was a mass of silent tears.

"That green witch shot him." A voice came from farther inside the security office. Sasha looked up to see Underwood propped up against a desk, cradling one of his arms.

If Chaym heard what Underwood said she had no response. Sasha ran over to Chris and helped him to his feet. His legs were almost completely useless. "What happened?"

"That Orion chick shot us all with darts of some kind. She said they were poisonous." Chris indicated several gold and silver metal slivers on the ground near Carlos' body. "Good thing I'm not Human or I might be dead, too."

Chaym looked at the slivers and turned her gaze back to her husband. "Geisha..." was all she said.

"Where is she now?" Sasha asked.

"I think she beamed away after shooting us. I can't remember that part very clearly, but she said something about the Tribiddian..."

"EMERGENCY!" Se'ele's voice came very loudly across the com system. "STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY IS FAILING. ALL DECKS PREPARE FOR IMMEDIATE DECOMPRESSION!! SEAL ALL HALLWAYS AND AIRLOCKS IMMEDIATELY!!"

Sasha turned to look at the security door. It had opened completely, and without power, there was no way to close it. "We have to get out of here!"

"Apparently you built a time machine." Sasha smirked. "One that works, according to the chronometer on the wall over there. We seem to have gone back in time about 4 hours."

"We used the time machine I built? Well, that would explain why I feel like 3-day old targ droppings. I was never able to work out the tachyon shielding principles." Chris searched his memory in vain, trying to remember the last thing that had happened to him. "Why did we go back in time?"

"The ship was being attacked by Romulans," Sasha volunteered. "Don't you remember? You were in the brig, and you got shot with a poison dart. That's where we found you. You and Carlos..." Sasha bit her tongue and looked at Chaym.

"Carlos was shot." Chris was starting to recall. "He wasn't moving."

"He wasn't breathing either," Chaym said. Chris thought she seemed unnaturally calm about her husband's apparent death. When she spoke next, Chris understood why. "We can change that now that we've traveled back, can't we?"

"Uh..." Chris gulped. "Not exactly."

"WHAT??" both women yelled simultaneously. "What do you mean?"

Underwood blinked through the haze of his headache. "Um... Short answer or long answer?"

Chaym's ears flattened. "Short answer."

"Paradox." Chris nodded his head as though that explained everything. Chaym waited for an exposition that never came.

"What? That's it? Paradox?"

"Hey, it's that or the long answer." Chris settled himself against a cargo container to try and get comfortable.

"Well, I guess it's the long answer, then." Sasha and Chaym approached the Chief of Ops.

"Okay, here's the extremely simple version: There are two kinds of time travel. In the first kind, you don't actually travel through time. Instead you actually create a parallel universe where your actions can actually alter events. This is more of a multi-dimensional shift, and is generally pretty messy from a space/time continuum point of view. The second type is the *real* time travel. In this one, it's kind of like reading a book or watching a holo-vid. The end is always the same, no matter how many times you rewind it and watch it again. The only thing that's different is the point of view of the observer. A time traveler can't go back in time and alter events because those events were taken into account the first time."

Both women sat for a moment, trying to comprehend Underwood's words.

Underwood sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Here's an example of the first kind of time travel. Say a Star Fleet vessel answers a Klingon distress call and discovers a bunch of Romulans attacking a Klingon outpost. In the fight, some weird accident gets the ship shot through time, creating an alternate future where the Klingons and the Federation are at war. Now imagine if they meet some future Star Fleet people, and they repair the battle damage, upgrade the old ship's technology, give them some of their people and send the ship back to the original timeline in an attempt to prevent that future from occurring. Do you see the problem?"

Chaym and Sasha looked at each other. "Ummm... No."

Chris rolled his eyes. "If people from an alternate future were running around in the true timeline, all sorts of crazy things could happen. They could meet themselves, get themselves killed, start

cross-breeding with aliens and have their own kids become their greatest adversaries."

"You totally lost me," said Sasha.

"Forget about it. What's important is that the time travel machine we just used moves stuff back along the TRUE timeline. This means that we can't change the past."

Chaym growled furiously. "What the hell is the point of building a time travel device if you can't change time!"

"Because I built the device so I could send stuff like Mountain Dew back in time to myself! I don't want to be sending stuff to some parallel universe me! I'm the one who's thirsty!"

Sasha rolled her eyes. The entire thing seemed very stupid and hard to figure out. "Okay, so what CAN we do?"

"We have to figure out a way to save the ship and Carlos without changing any of the events that we saw."

"Events like Carlos dying," Sasha said very coldly.

"Events like Carlos getting shot..." Chaym corrected in a quiet voice. She seemed to be concentrating hard on what Chris had said. Chris leaned back and rubbed his head.

"We need a plan," Sasha said and began pacing back and forth across the cargo bay. She started talking out loud, "Okay what do we know? In about four hours, the Romulans attack the ship, and Carlos gets shot with poison dart in Security."

"Why would the Romulans attack our ship?" Chris asked.

"The Tribiddian-12," Chaym answered. "Our ship was disabled with an energy sapping weapon. They must've done that to lower our shields so they could transport the T-12 without any risk of damaging it."

"You can't use transporters on T-12. The Romulans would need to use a shuttlecraft, and that means a boarding party."

"Unless..." Chaym's ears shot up. "Unless they already HAD a shuttle on the *Avenger*."

Sasha stopped pacing. "You mean..."

"Geisha, that little green-skinned spy, must've been sent to find out exactly where the T-12 was so they could beam a boarding party over, grab the T-12, get to her shuttlecraft, and get off the ship before we knew what hit us."

"Good plan," Sasha mused. "How do we stop it?"

"We don't," said Chris with a smile. "We let them grab the cargo and get off the ship."

Both women looked at Chris like he was crazy.

"Why the hell would we let them get away?"

"Because before they grab it, we'll switch the T-12 with a bomb!"

"It'd have to be a pretty powerful bomb," Chaym said.

"How about a torpedo?" Sasha grinned. "I think I'm starting to see how this whole time travel thing fits together."

"Huh?" Chris seemed oblivious.

"Never mind," Chaym said, getting to her feet. "We also need to get a signal off to Star Fleet Command. There's no way we're going to be able to fight off an angry warbird alone. Okay, here's the plan: Chris, you go to work disabling the sensors around the T-12 so we can switch it with a torpedo. Sasha, you go up to Communications and try to send a signal to Star Fleet about what's going on." Chaym got up and ran towards the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Chris as he got up.

"Sickbay. We're all feeling woozy, so I'm gonna get something to treat this tachyon poisoning. We need to be at our best if we're

going to get out of this alive." With that she stepped out into the hallway and the door closed behind her.

"Why do I not believe her?" asked Chris as he stumbled to the door.

"Because you know her as well as I do." Sasha helped Chris through the door and into the hallway. "I'm off to Deck 3. Where are you going, anyway?"

"Deck 7. There's a juncture next to Security Central that controls the alarms around the T-12. Meet me there when you're done, and we'll figure out how to snag a torpedo."

Nearly an hour later, Chris was sealing shut the security bypass juncture on Deck 7. It had been hard work, and his headache hadn't helped. As he finished his last weld, he heard Chaym's voice behind him.

"Hey, Chris, need some help?"

Chris responded without looking. "Nope, I've almost got it." The Ops Chief climbed out of the tube and snapped the casing back on. Standing up, he turned to face Chaym. "Did you get the... CAPTAIN!?! What are you doing here???"

Chris blinked back and forth between Captain Carlos Maldonado and Chaym. Both looked alive and healthy, and Chaym seemed free of concern she had shown an hour ago. The two of them seemed taken back by the shocked look on his face.

"I'm the Captain and this is my ship. Last time checked I was allowed to go wherever I damn well pleased. What're you doing here?"

It suddenly dawned on Chris that these were the REAL Chaym and Carlos. Chris straightened up and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. He needed an excuse fast. "Huh? Oh, there was a problem...with, um...a sensor glitch. I had to come down here and fix it manually."

The Captain grimaced. "Uh-huh. And that's why you missed the reception?"

"Reception?" Underwood blinked in confusion. He had no idea what Carlos was talking about.

"The shuttlecraft?" Chaym offered.

"OH, YEAH!!!" Chris exclaimed. Geisha and the Vulcans must have just arrived.

"Are you feeling alright?" Chaym asked. "You look horrible, and paler than usual."

"Oh, I'm just not feeling that well. I think I had some bad Mountain Dew or something." Chris tried desperately to figure out how to get himself out of the situation.

Just then, Sasha Graevyn came striding around the corner. "Hey, Chris, there you are! That sensor glitch is all cleared up now. C'mon, let's go." Striding over to the Chief of Ops, Sasha swung one of his arms over her shoulders and turned and began walking back the way she came.

"Where are you going?" asked Carlos as they departed.

"Sickbay," Sasha called over her shoulder. "The Commander here hasn't been feeling well, so I told him to report to sickbay. But nooooo... He insisted on coming up here himself and fixing the sensors. Anyway, you big oaf, let's get you to Deck Seven." The two of them then vanished around the corner.

Chaym stood blinking after them. "That was strange."

"Considering that we're on Deck Seven, and that sickbay is behind us, yeah, I'd say so. If I didn't have more important things to worry about, I'd be feeling kind of paranoid right now."

"I'm used to it. I'm going to the mess to meet Mitzi for dinner. I want to introduce her to that Abrams. What about you?"

"I'm heading for the bridge. I'll see you tonight, sweetheart." The *Avenger's* captain gave his wife a quick kiss before they parted ways.

As the doors closed behind them, Sasha and Underwood collapsed against the turbo-lift walls.

Sasha turned toward Chris. "That was stupid! You almost got yourself caught!"

"Hey! How was I supposed to know that was the real Chaym?"

"You're right." Sasha put her head in her hands and sighed. "We were lucky this time. We can't afford to get careless. How's your arm, anyway?"

"It's still numb from where that little witch shot me." Underwood grimaced as he touched his left bicep. As he pulled his hand away, there was blood on it. "Did you have any luck?"

"None. They've got communications locked down tight. There was no way to get past security. You?"

"A little. I think I disabled the sensors. Getting to the actual Tribiddian itself is going to be harder than we thought. And we don't have much time."

"You're right." Sasha glanced at the turbo-lift's chronometer. "We'd better get moving. The Romulans are going to be here soon."

PART 10

"Hey, Chris, mind if I ask a question?"

"What's that?"

"Why is it that all Vulcans look alike?"

Lt. Commanders Chris Underwood and Sasha Graevyn entered Science Lab #2 of the starship *Avenger* and found themselves looking completely out of place. It was 1730 hours, about thirty minutes before dinner, and the entire room was filled with Vulcan scientists. These Vulcans were members of a team which had arrived on the *Avenger* less than two hours before, and in that brief time, they had completely devastated any semblance of order or cleanliness.

Science Lab #2 was usually used for atmospheric and stellar research, but now it was simply a mess. Large containers of fragile-looking equipment lay around the room in a completely haphazard fashion. The dozen Vulcans who were scrambling around the room unloading crates appeared totally consumed by their work, and paid no mind whatsoever to the two Star Fleet crewmen as they entered.

"I'm not really sure, Sasha," Chris answered as he looked at the equipment. "I think it has something to do with the fact that they don't want to be confused with Romulans."

"I don't follow you," said Sasha.

"Well, I don't know if you knew this, but thousands of years ago, the Vulcans and the Romulans lived together on the same

planet." Chris spoke as he advanced through the room. "Technically, they're the same species, so the only way to differentiate between them is by their culture. The Romulans are emotional, intelligent, and have an excellent sense of style and design. Their clothing and hairstyles are all really hip, and if you ever get the chance, you've just GOT to try their shoes!"

"Shoes?" Sasha wasn't certain she was hearing correctly. "Are you serious?"

"Totally! The two pair of imported Romulan boots I own are almost as expensive as that bottle of Romulan Ale rRham confiscated from me last month." Chris paused at a large container to examine its contents. "On the other hand, the Vulcans have no sense of style and design. From their starships to their uniforms, it's all boring and flat and functional. There's no individuality or expression in any of it. I mean, just look at these robes!" Chris gestured to the nearest scientist. "White lab coats that completely hide the figure and don't even offset the complexion. With Vulcans, we really are scraping the bottom of fashion's evolutionary ladder."

"I never knew you were such a fashion connoisseur, Chris."

"You have no idea." Chris smiled back. "Now, to business. Which one of these overcooked eggheads do you think is in charge?"

"Ummm... That one." Sasha pointed to a rather disheveled-looking scientist. "She's called Selerus. We met a couple of hours ago, in the future. Or is it that we *will* meet in the future?" Sasha pulled on her tail and fumed. "Damn it, Chris, I hate all this time travel stupidity. What are we doing here? We haven't got much time and we should be saving the ship."

"We ARE saving the ship, but we have to do it very carefully!" Chris sighed. "If we don't set up the proper chain of events, then our future selves will never be able to travel back in time and become us, so that we won't be here to save the ship. Kapishe?"

"No," Sasha replied dryly. "Just tell me why we're in this science bay."

"We need to build a time machine. To do this, we need the equipment in this crate." Chris gestured to the box in front of him.

"What's in there?" Sasha puzzled at the long rods stacked neatly inside the box.

"Quadratic enhancers. Without them, the time machine will fry us to a crisp." Chris then pointed to Selerus, specifically to a little box hanging from her hip. "And we also need that device. It's a..."

Sasha interrupted him. "Bipolar tachyon receptor. It interprets the non-linear reactions of bipolar tachyons, records temporal coordinates, and makes a kind of map of the space/time continuum. Without it, we'd never be able to find our way through the timeline and back to the ship."

Chris stared at Sasha. "How'd you know that?"

"Lucky guess." Sasha grimaced. "That and a couple of hours ago Selerus came to the geology lab looking for it. Or she will come. Or..." The Kyonan yanked her tail. "I hate time travel."

Chris frowned at the device. "We're going to need a distraction. I'll fake a fire alarm, and get everyone out of the lab while you use a low-g cargo mover to get the enhancers. The tough part will be stealing the receptor. Maybe we can mug her when she goes to the head..."

"I've got a better idea," Sasha said. She began walking toward Selerus, not waiting for Chris' reaction.

Sasha and Chris approached Selerus. The Vulcan scientist was speaking quickly and loudly with two of her co-workers. The three of them stood together, and made a rather mismatched set. Selerus' hair and coat were completely disheveled, with various multi-colored stains from foreign liquids, and her hair was askew and formed a rather odd shape above her head. Her two comrades were stereotypical Vulcans, with clean lab coats, straight haircuts, and expressionless faces. Sasha tried to listen to what was being said, but Selerus was speaking Vulcan so quickly that she couldn't follow the exchange. Apparently Selerus was rather angry with one of the two junior scientists. Both of the scientists were taking the verbal abuse with the usual Vulcan calm.

"Pardon me, Chief Selerus?" Sasha butted into the conversation. All three Vulcans stopped and stared at her. "I couldn't help but notice your bipolar tachyon receptor. Would you mind if I borrowed it for a moment? Mine seems to be malfunctioning."

Without saying a word, Selerus took the device from her belt, handed it to Sasha, and went immediately back to lecturing her colleagues.

Sasha showed the receptor to Chris. "See? It's amazing what happens when you ask for something nicely."

"Yeah, no kidding. Let me try..."

Underwood approached the three scientists. He arrived just as their own conversation was ending, and the instant he opened his mouth to speak, the two junior crewmen bowed from the waist and left quickly. Selerus turned to Chris.

"Can I help you?" she asked in a thick Vulcan accent.

"Yes, thank you." Chris paused. An odd smell, like burned computer components, clung to the woman. "I was wondering if I could use a couple of your quadratic enhancers. Mine are having trouble..."

"Have you had a level 6 cranial scan in the last three days?" Selerus asked.

"Er... No," Chris responded.

"Are your inner ears and lymph nodes currently susceptible to Metagen effects?"

"Umm... I don't think so."

"Have you traveled through time in the last 45 days?" Selerus asked the question as if she was asking if he had ever traveled to Alpha Centauri.

"Actually...yes."

"Then your answer is No. You're probably covered with unregulated isotopes, and would no doubt galvanize the enhancers the instant you touched them. Ensign Abrams just finished calibrating them, and he's the only one qualified to do more than move them from deck to deck." With that she turned and began walking toward the far side of the bay.

Chris watched her go with a stunned expression. "Damn, that was rude!" he muttered to Sasha as she joined him. "She treated me like I had the plague! She didn't even want to hear why I wanted them! I had a great story planned about a Gravity Well and Dark Force powers..."

"I'm sure it was a great story, Chris." Sasha patted his arm.

"Well now I really AM going to set the lab on fire!" Chris started examining the contents of the nearby crates. "Ohhh... Double helix T-virus containers! These will explode nicely!"

"Chris!" Sasha grabbed his elbow. "I know you're not serious about blowing up the lab. We're just gonna have to think of something else."

"Fine." Chris pocketed one of the green gel-filled cylinders. "How would you suggest that we get the enhancers?"

"You can start," Selerus responded, "by making yourselves useful." She seemed to have appeared from nowhere, leading a low-g cargo mover. "If the captain is going to assign me crewmembers who know nothing about proper equipment handling, you can at least push some boxes around. I need those containers moved to Deck Nine, and these empty ones sent back to the shuttlebay."

"What about that one?" Chris pointed to the box containing the quadratic enhancers.

"Those go to Science Lab 3."

"Yes, sir!" Chris took the cargo mover's controls, strolled across the lab, and attached it to the box containing the quadratic enhancers.

"It's so hard to find good help these days," Selerus commented.

"Tell me about it." Sasha rolled her eyes. "Well, thanks for the help!" Sasha started following Chris, who was towing the enhancers toward the door.

"What is your name, crewman?" Selerus asked.

"Sasha Graevyn!" Sasha called as she exited the lab. The doors closed behind her.

"Sasha Graevyn...Why did her voice sound so familiar...?" Selerus mused for a couple of seconds more, then turned and went back to work.

PART 11

"I don't believe in the no-win scenario." -Cadet James T Kirk, defending his decision to tamper with the Star Fleet Academy computer simulator

Chaym Gale' n'Maldonado entered the *Avenger* sickbay, took a quick survey of her surroundings, and marched over to the Chief Medical Officer.

"Doctor, I need your help."

Dr. Ann Marie Reilly, CMO for the starship *Avenger*, was used to this kind of thing. Usually, whoever came storming into sickbay was bleeding, or badly burned, or carrying someone unconscious. Always, there was some dramatic accident, like a plasma coil overload, a Life Support malfunction, or a zero-g loader that had collapsed. The sort of things that usually happened on a starship. And whenever Chaym, the Chief of Recreation, came to sickbay, one of two things had happened. Usually someone had gotten injured in a sporting accident on the Rec Deck. On more rare occasions, someone had tried her cooking.

"Hello there, Chaym." Ann Marie put down the book she was reading. "Are you all right? You look pale."

"I'm fine. I need you to look at these." Chaym opened her paw and revealed what appeared to be four small metal beads. Three of them were gold, and one was silver.

"What are they?" the Doctor asked.

"Darts of some kind. They've got some kind of toxin on them that's poisonous to humans, so be careful how you handle them. I need you to tell me about them."

Ann Marie put on a steri-glove and lifted one of the darts for a closer inspection. A casual observer would have dismissed it as jewelry, but Dr. Reilly quickly realized that Chaym was correct. A

tiny barb extended from the end of the bead, and it appeared to have some kind of substance on it.

"I'll have the computer run a full analysis of this. It'll take a couple of minutes." She took the beads and placed them in a tray, which she then placed in a scanner near her desk. The scanner lit up as the machine began to work. "Where did these things come from?" Ann Marie asked as she returned to her chair.

"That's a long story." Chaym turned and sat down on a nearby couch. She looked horrible, Ann Marie thought. Her fur was matted with sweat and she was rasping as she breathed. The Doctor walked to a nearby replicator and requested a large glass of water, which she then handed to Chaym.

"Drink up, Doctor's orders."

"Thanks." She took the glass and drained it almost instantly. Lying back on the couch, she sighed. "This is nice. What is it?"

"What, the water?"

"No, this music."

Ann Marie smiled. Sometimes she forgot that other sickbays didn't play music through their comm systems. Running classical music at low volumes seemed to have a soothing effect on the patients. It was a habit that Ann Marie held over from her time before Star Fleet, when she practiced medicine on Earth. "It's Tchaikovsky."

"It sounds very mellow for something Klingon."

The CMO chuckled. "Tchaikovsky isn't Klingon. He's a very famous Human composer. This is probably his most well-known piece. It's from 'Romeo and Juliet'."

"That's the one where the lovers die at the end, right?"

"It's a little bit more than that." Ann Marie couldn't help but smile at how one of the greatest stories of Human literature could be summed up by its final event. "Juliet drinks a potion to commit suicide, and then Romeo kills himself because he thinks his love has died and he can't live without her."

"His love has died and he can't go on. How ironic." Chaym made a choking sound and turned away from the doctor. Ann Marie started to say something, but stopped herself. Years of working in hospitals had shown her grief in all its forms, so she knew it when she saw it here. Most people would offer sympathy, or a shoulder for support, but that only made things worse. It was much better to let people deal with grief in solitude, and give them consolation when they asked for it, than to barge into matters of the heart without invitation.

Luckily, a chime from the scanner offered a distraction. Ann Marie checked the display and began her analysis. Chaym composed herself and rose from the couch to approach the desk.

"This is weird," Ann Marie began. "The gold darts contain a very powerful sedative, fast-acting, plant-based. Nasty stuff, but non-lethal. Anybody who was hit with a couple of cc's of this stuff would be out cold in seconds, and remain that way for a while."

"What about the silver dart?"

"Standard quadrizine. We use that here in the lab. Nothing special except..." The doctor trailed off.

"Except what?"

"Well, if these two elements were in a person's system at the same time, things could get ugly. As a matter of fact..." Ann Marie pressed a couple of buttons and the display on the monitor switched to an animation of several multi-colored particles coming together. As they collided, they changed to a uniform black and little biohazard icons started popping up.

"Hmmm..." the doctor mused.

"What?" Chaym asked.

"Well if someone was hit by both darts within a five minute span, they would die almost instantly."

Chaym turned her back to the doctor and paced slowly toward the couch. After a moment, she sat back down. Ann Marie could see that it was taking her a great deal of willpower not to start crying. The Doctor watched for a moment before addressing her.

"Chaym, would you mind telling me what's going on? I'm going to assume that because we're not at alert and because security isn't calling me that nobody's died."

"Not yet..." Chaym almost whispered. She then looked up Ann Marie. "What about a counter-agent? There has to be a counter agent, right?! I mean, now that you know what kind of poison is involved, you can create one!"

"I don't think so." Ann Marie turned back to the scanner. "This is really complex stuff, Chaym. I might be able to cook something up, but it'll take most of today and tomorrow."

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!" Chaym roared and leapt at the desk. She almost ripped the screen from it's mooring as she swiveled it to face her. "There has to be something faster. Something we can use to stop it! Something that we have here in the lab, or that will only take a couple of hours." Her eyes scanned the list of possible counteragents, and the incubation times required for each. After a moment the hard truth began to settle in. She slumped against the desk and began crying.

"Chaym, what is it? What's all this about?"

"What's this about...? I'm in hell, that's what this is about." Chaym stumbled back toward the couch and collapsed into it. "Have you every heard that old question 'If you could know when and how you were going to die, would you want to?' Well trust me, you never want to." Chaym reached over and grabbed her tail and pulled on it in frustration. "This is horrible!"

"Chaym, what's going on?" the doctor asked.

Chaym snarled. "It's like I'm an actor in a play. Imagine if Romeo knew how the story was gonna end, and he still had to go through the entire play, knowing that Juliet was going to drink the potion, and he couldn't stop her. Imagine how that would feel. Well, that's how I feel."

"Well, just don't make his mistake."

"What was that?"

"Giving up too soon. Juliet wasn't dead; she was faking it."

"What?"

"She was faking it. She was in suspended animation from a drug she took. Unfortunately, Romeo assumes she's really dead and goes and kills himself."

"Suspended animation..." Chaym's eyes had a lost quality.

"Yeah, if Romeo hadn't been such a quitter, if he had just had the guts to hang in there, he would have seen that everything was going to be okay." Ann Marie smiled as Chaym's mood brightened.

"Doctor," Chaym stood and approached the monitor, "I need to know more about quadrizine."

An hour later, Chaym entered the quarters that she shared with her husband, the captain of the *Avenger*. Under her arm was a 2-liter container of a tan paste that smelled like shoe polish.

Upon entering her quarters, she quickly entered the bedroom and began searching through the captain's belongings.

"I frelling HATE time travel" she swore.

Earlier that day, Chris Underwood had tried to explain something to her about time travel. About how she, Sasha, and Chris would not be able to change the events that had already transpired, even though they had moved back in time. It was something very technical involving paradox, and he hadn't made much sense. All that Chaym remembered was that they couldn't make anybody do anything they hadn't done in the past...or the future... Whatever!

"Ah-ha!" she exclaimed as she pulled out a fresh uniform and opened the shirt. The substance Ann Marie had cooked up would work, but only if she could get a great deal of it on Carlos's skin. She figured that the best way to do this was to get Carlos to change his uniform, or at least his shirt, and have him put on one that had already be treated with the paste. This was a normal thing for the captain to do. Only now Chaym had to find a way to convince him to change his uniform. And she had to do it before he went to security. Or at least before Geisha went to security.

"What the hell was that little green wench doing in security anyway?" Chaym muttered to herself. Glancing at the chronometer, Chaym winced at the time. It was 18:35. The majority of the ship's crew would be in the mess right now, and Carlos would be on the bridge. A single comm message would bring him to his quarters, and then she would need to convince him to change his shirt...

From the other chamber, the door hissed. Chaym jumped in surprise. *Carlos must be back from the bridge early!* She thought as she swept the shirt and paste up and shoved them into the closet as quietly as possible. This would complicate things. If Carlos found her with the uniform and paste, he would ask her a lot of questions. Questions that Chaym couldn't answer without telling him he was going to die. But if she told him, he might not go to security. Then he would never get shot and then....

Chaym swore silently and pulled at her tail. Every instinct told her to go into the next room and tell Carlos what was going on. He was smart. He could figure out a way to save the ship, and without breaking any stupid laws of temporal physics.

'That's what I'll do.' She thought. *'I'll just tell Carlos everything!'* She went to the door to the other chamber, ready to spill the beans.

But the person in the other room wasn't Carlos.

It was Geisha.

Geisha's back was to the doorway in which Chaym stood. She seemed unaware that Chaym was in the bedroom. The green woman had apparently made a circle of the living room, removing various pieces of her clothing as she went. Now she slipped silently out of her dress, and was wearing only a trashy little negligée. The Orion slowly turned toward Chaym.

"I wonder what Captain Maldonado keeps in his bedroom." She asked out loud as she moved toward the smaller chamber.

"Me," answered Chaym.

Geisha gasped and jumped backwards. Chaym strode forward, fur standing on end and fangs bared.

"H..how? You're supposed to be in the mess hall with the rest of the crew..."

Chaym smiled wickedly. "Let's just say I had an overwhelming sense of female intuition."

"I know what this looks like..." Geisha stammered. Chaym took a great deal of pleasure watching the overly self-confident tramp squirm. Geisha, on the other hand, was very alarmed. Chaym's fur was matted down with sweat, her breathing was deep and irregular, and her eyes looked glazed, almost rabid. "I.. I assure you this is not what you think," Geisha stammered.

"Oh, really? I caught you red-handed breaking into the captain's quarters. What exactly am I thinking?"

"Well, since I'm a foreign dignitary, you're probably thinking that this is some sort of interplanetary espionage attempt."

"Good guess." Chaym resisted the urge to scream out what she knew of Geisha's true motivations. She still didn't know if Chris's theories about the Romulans were true.

"Well." Geisha seemed to regain some of her composure. She stood up straight and seemed to look down her nose at Chaym. "I would like you to know that it was nothing of the sort."

"Yeah, right. Then why are you here?"

"If you must know, I was planning on sleeping with the captain.."

Chaym gasped and stared at Geisha, totally stunned. All thoughts of time travel poisons left her mind. A flood of jealousy and disgust rose up from deep within her.

Geisha continued, "But now that you are here, I suppose it will be the three of us. I have no problem with that, but frankly, you're not my type..."

With a bestial howl, Chaym leapt at the Orion woman's throat.

PART 12

"I love the idea behind jigsaw puzzles. You take a perfectly beautiful picture of something, slice it into a million irregular pieces, deliberately scramble them up so they are completely disjointed, then reassemble them slowly, by hand, without any computers or instruments to assist you. When finished, you take it apart and repeat the process.

"On Earth, this is a form of recreation.

"On every other known world, it's a clear portent to mental illness."

-Lt. Commander Chris Underwood.

Chris Underwood's headache was getting worse.

A casual observer might deduce that this was because Chris was having what Humans would normally consider a "bad day". Among Terrans, headaches are often caused by stress, over-exertion, or thinking too much about things that are rather complicated. Despite the events that had transpired in the last twenty-four hours (or at least the ones from his own perception), Chris was actually not having that bad a day. Things had started out pleasantly, if dull, when he had gone to the arboretum and prepared the room for what the chief of recreation had dubbed a "cultural gathering". Eight hours later, he went off shift, checked his mail, returned to his quarters, discovered they were ransacked, called security, gotten arrested, checked his mail, been tried for attempting to steal a torpedo, checked his mail, been shot and left for dead, recovered, traveled back in time, checked his mail again (he might have missed some in his time-overlap), and was now in

the process of stealing the torpedo that he would later be arrested for stealing. It all made perfect sense. To him, anyway.

Chris' headache had nothing to do with his stress level. He had a headache because he was out of Mountain Dew.

Chris checked the chronometer on the wall. It was currently 18:25, and in about two hours, which was about two hours ago to Chris, he was shot with a tranquilizer dart. The dart would have sent a normal Human to unconsciousness for the better part of a day. It merely stunned Chris, whose biology was not only alien, but reinforced with enough caffeine to keep an army on its feet for a week.

Now the tranquilizer and the caffeine were battling it out in Underwood's head, and the unshielded trip through time wasn't helping, either. The whole combination resulted in Chris being a little bit dizzy, a little bit nauseous, and a great deal hung-over.

"An hour of sleep, that's all I need," the Ops Chief mumbled as he entered the *Avenger's* mess. There the majority of the crew were already eating. Chris had come here seeking the answer to his headaches, both real and metaphorical. And his answer sat next to two furry humanoids on the far side of the hall. Chris approached them quickly.

"On page 45 of your book it said you do your best work when you're angry." Abrams smiled at Chaym.

"You know, I don't remember ever authorizing a biography. Who wrote it?"

"Who wrote your biography?" Abrams looked confused at the question, then his eyes suddenly widened. "It was...um... I can't remember."

"You know what page number the quotes are on, but you can't remember the author?" Mitzzi's ears twitched.

Rostarr leaned forward, his metal eye gleaming. "I find that rather unlikely."

"Well, it's just that..."

Abrams was cut off by a hand that suddenly clasped his shoulder. Looking up, the group found that Lt. Commander Chris Underwood had joined them. Chaym noted that he looked even worse than he had when she had seen him earlier. The color had almost entirely drained from his face, and he seemed to be breathing heavily.

"You," said Chris.

"Me?" replied Abrams.

"I know you," smiled Chris.

"You do?"

"Uh-huh. Today's your lucky day."

"It is?"

"You've got a quadratic enhancer."

"I have?" blinked Abrams.

Underwood smiled maliciously and leaned closer to the Ensign. "It just might save your life." With that, he half-helped, half-hoisted Ensign Abrams to his feet and began escorting him across the mess, out the door, toward the turbo-lift.

"Where are we going?" Abrams asked.

"My quarters first, then to Cargo Bay 4. That's where we're going to build it."

"Build what?"

Chris gave the boy a hard look. "Kid, what do you know about time travel?"

Abrams' eyes went wide. "T..Time travel? Er... Well... Nothing really. Why do you ask?"

"Of course you don't know anything. You know why?" Despite his headache, Chris launched into what his friends often referred to as his "overly-dramatic lecture mode". "You don't know anything because you're just a lowly Human serviceman. A two-bit ensign who's still wet behind the ears. I, on the other hand, have had a great deal of experience with time travel."

"You have?" Abrams asked, his eyes wide.

"Of course I have. I'm an expert on this stuff. That's why we're going to my quarters. To get the necessary equipment..."

"The necessary equipment... to do what, exactly?" The turbo-lift doors parted.

Chris dragged Abrams by the arm out of the lift and around two waiting crewmen. "Not so loud. We've got to be careful."

"Careful about what?"

Arriving at the door to his quarters, Chris turned and glared banefully into Marcus' eyes.

"Do you know how time travelers get caught?"

"...er...no."

"They're not careful. They get sloppy and accidentally reveal some critical evidence. It can be anything. A word, a glance, a gesture. Some tell-tale sign that they know too much about something they shouldn't. That's how time travelers get caught. That's how they almost caught me."

"You?? You're a time traveler?"

"That's right." Chris entered a combination into the wall unit and the door opened. Inside was a disaster area resembling a technological scrap heap. Circuits and chips were scattered everywhere, mixed in with empty Mountain Dew bottles, action figures, and clothing left behind from previous romantic engagements. Chris entered and easily navigated through the debris. Marcus followed more slowly.

"So...if you're a time traveler, then when did you come from?"

Chris chuckled. "Everyone always answers that question by saying 'the present'. But in truth, only a couple of hours in the future from now."

"A couple of hours... That's not really time travel."

"Oh, and you're the big expert, are you? I suppose you've come from across the centuries, eh fry-cook boy?" Chris shot Abrams a dark glance. When the boy didn't respond, Chris smirked and added, "Didn't think so."

"So... why did you need me?"

"Because you calibrated the quadratic enhancers." Chris began making passes around the room, collecting items. "I need you to help me assemble the temporal displacement device, and then operate it, thus sending me and my two friends back in time to do what we're doing now. Got it?"

"You want me to send you back in time?"

"No, I've already come back in time. I need you to send the primary Chris from this timeline back in time."

"Oh, okay." The ensign seemed to have no trouble with the circular logic. "So where is the primary Chris now?"

"Down in the arboretum." Chris handed Abrams something that looked like a microwave oven. "You just saw Chaym in the mess hall, and Sasha's probably at her station in Geology. The

three of us will be traveling together, so we need to get all this junk to Bay 4, along with Selerus' temporal data."

"Whoa! Wait a sec. You're gonna send three people back in time four hours using...this?" He nodded his head at the oven.

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, it's just that Selerus has only been collecting data for a couple of hours. Plus the power drain would cause the ship to..."

The comm unit on Chris' wall suddenly chirped to life. Underwood rolled his eyes and growled at the monitor. "WHAT?" he yelled before recognizing Merinid. "Oh! Lt. Commander Rostarr? Hey listen, now isn't really a good time. Why don't you call back later?" He raised his hand to close the channel.

"I caught Sasha stealing a torpedo, sir."

Underwood's hand froze. Merinid now had his complete attention.

"She said she was operating under your orders, sir." Rostarr turned back to watch Sasha, who was now fidgeting nervously behind him in what appeared to be the torpedo room. "Should I call Security and have them come pick her up?"

"No. Let her go. WITH the torpedo."

"EXCUSE ME?!?" Now it was Rostarr who froze.

"You heard me, Commander. Let her go. She's operating under my authority."

"With all due respect, sir, why the hell are you giving the ship's geologist a weapon of mass destruction?"

"That's none of your concern, Commander. I want you to return to your duties and don't let anyone know you saw Sasha with a torpedo."

"Sir, this is highly irregular, not to mention very, very illegal."

Rostarr's mind scrambled as he attempted to deduce what Underwood was up to. Then he remembered something Chaym said in the mess. "Sir, does this have something to do with the sensors around the T-12?"

Underwood's head drooped. He sighed deeply, and seemed about to say something when a thought occurred to him. He raised his head and looked into the monitor with an almost mirthful glint.

"Lt. Commander Rostarr, you have your orders. I suggest you follow them. If you've got a problem with what I recommend, you call security. Have a nice day. Underwood out." Chris pressed a button and the screen went blank. Chris stood up, inhaled deeply, and smiled.

"Um...was that a good idea?" asked Abrams. "He'll probably call security and have them arrest you."

"Oh, he will." Chris popped the comm unit open and removed several key components. Then he reached down and grabbed two bottles of Mountain Dew. "Let's get to Bay 4 before they get here."

"Okay, sir, but it'll take time to put all this stuff together. Won't they start sending search parties to look for you?"

"Nope." Chris smiled as he rounded the corner and headed toward the far side of the ship. "They typically don't send search parties out for people who're already in custody." Staggering slightly under the weight of the pattern enhancers, the two crewmen rounded the corner at the end of the hall.

Seconds later, the turbo-lift doors on Deck 4 opened, and a very healthy and energetic-looking Chris Underwood stepped out. He walked ten paces from the turbo-lift, stopped, pulled up a display on his PADD, and checked his mail. Sighing deeply as the

words NO NEW MESSAGES were displayed, he continued to his quarters. Once there, he opened the door, looked inside, and screamed.

"I'VE BEEN ROBBED!!"

It took him a couple of minutes to assess the damages. Whoever had broken into his quarters had been fiendishly thorough. His favorite toolkit was missing, his hydro-spanner, the trans-dimensional freon converter, his microwave-oven-sized time machine that only sent things backwards, a Mark-IV torpedo guidance system, four pattern enhancers, and two bottles of Mountain Dew.

He was so furious at the theft of his precious liquid, as well as his toolkit (he considered everything else junk), it took Chris three attempts at using the comm unit to realize that it wasn't working. On closer examination, Underwood saw that the unit had been disassembled and several key components removed.

"Fiends!" Chris swore and marched out his door to search for the nearest security officer.

He found six of them, armed with drawn phasers, waiting in the hall. Behind them stood the green scaly form of the *Avenger's* chief master-at-arms.

"Lt. Commander Underwood," grinned the Tzen. "You are under arrest."

PART 13

Plan n; 1) An idea that remains perfect until acted upon.

-Any Military Commander

Ensign First Class Bill Mackenzie stood outside Bay 3 on the starship *Avenger* and tried not to hate his luck.

Every day for a full month his only duty as a ship's security officer was to report in at Security Central, sign out his phaser, and then stand guard for eight hours at this door. For the first couple of days it was kind of exciting. Within Bay 3 the ship's precious cargo of Tribiddian-12 was under 24-hour armed guard. No one knew what the hell Tribiddian-12 was, but that didn't stop the entire crew from trying to get a peek at it. During his first week on duty, Bill had been greeted by every senior officer on the ship as they personally inspected his performance by trying to get into the room. And Ensign First Class Mackenzie had turned them all away, one after another. Only the captain and chief of security were allowed in, so after the first week, people stopped trying.

The second week was *very* boring. No one came by to get through the door. Ensign First Class Mackenzie spent nearly 40 hours that week trying to think of why he let his friend Ensign Bolton talk him into signing on to a starship instead of staying at home and manning the brig at Mosley IV. Mackenzie even dared to go so far as mentioning to the security chief that this assignment was "too dull".

That was a mistake.

The third week of duty was hell. Security Chief Gor had mentioned to Chief Master-at-Arms rRham 'ho tzt 'tzen that security around the T-12 was lax. From that point forward, rRham made it his personal business to make certain Ensign Mackenzie was never, ever bored again. He would call for status reports every 10 minutes, come up to Mackenzie and critique his posture, simulate sa-

botage and burglary attempts, even barge in on Bill while he was in the head, accusing him of abandoning his post.

"Hey, Bill!"

"Wayne!"

The approach of Wayne Bolton, Bill's oldest friend, snapped the security officer out of his mental self-loathing. "What the heck are you doing here, Wayne? I figured Gor probably had you guys running firing drills or something."

"Well, we won't be getting any drills today. One of the ship's scientists finally went over the edge. She stole a torpedo right out from under the tactical officer's nose. Now they've got us scanning the ship for her."

"No way! Who?"

"Sasha Graevyn, the geologist."

"Isn't she one of the cat-girls?"

"Yeah, the hot one."

"Which hot one?"

"The gray one, with the stripes"

"Mmmm..." Bill smiled. "I wish I could be there when they catch her."

"I'd be careful what you wish for if I was you. You just might get the chance. I'm getting sporadic readings from this deck."

"Well, she's not in here." Bill touched the button on the monitor next to the door. Instantly, an image of the room within appeared. It was empty except for a raised pedestal in the center of the room with a long box on it. The image was disquietingly similar to a sarcophagus.

"Been like that all day?" asked Wayne.

"It's been like that all month," groaned Bill.

Just then two men came around the corner. Bill straightened out as he saw that one of them was an officer, but relaxed when he recognized Operations Chief Chris Underwood. Underwood was well-liked by most of the ship's crew, and was known as the "get stuff" guy. Accompanying Underwood was a young ensign carrying what looked like an antique microwave oven. It struck Bill as odd that he didn't recognize the boy. On a ship as small as the *Avenger*, it didn't take long before you knew everyone's faces.

"Lt. Commander Underwood?" said Wayne. "I thought you were in the brig! Something about you being connected to the missing torpedo."

"The rumors of my incarceration were greatly exaggerated," Underwood said with a smile.

"When did you get out?"

"A couple hours ago...er...wait. Scratch that." Chris seemed confused for a moment, then turned toward his companion. "Gentlemen, I'd like to introduce my lovely assistant, Ensign Marcus Abrams."

"Hi," Abrams grunted under the weight of the microwave oven.

"Mr. Abrams here wants to show you a magic trick." Chris grinned widely.

"He does?" Bill and Wayne asked together.

"I do?" blinked Abrams.

"Of course you do. Watch closely, gentlemen, and note that at no time do my hands leave my wrists." Chris turned and opened the microwave. It was empty. He then closed the door, looked at his chronometer, and snapped his fingers.

Nothing happened.

Bill and Wayne glanced at each other.

"I don't get it." Chris looked at his chronometer again. "What time is it?"

"It's 21:58, sir," answered Wayne.

"Duh!" Chris smacked his own forehead. "My chronometer is off by like four hours." He then snapped his fingers again.

The microwave went 'ding'.

With great flourish, Chris positioned himself between the microwave and the two security officers. Opening the door, he reached inside and grabbed the contents. He then spun to face the two guards.

In his hands were two phasers...

...with which he immediately shot the guards.

"What are you doing?" yelled Abrams.

"Avoiding a paradox," Chris answered. He then put both phasers down, grabbed the weapons from the fallen guards, set them to stun, and placed them within the microwave. He then pressed a couple of buttons and the microwave 'pinged' again.

"Why'd you shoot them?" Abrams asked.

"Hey, kid, I just saved their lives. In twenty minutes the Romulans will try to steal the Tribiddian-12. These two guys would have been in their way, and Romulan disrupters don't have a 'stun' setting."

"Oh. Well... What happens now?"

"Now the plan comes together." Chris stepped up to the door to the cargo bay and knocked.

"No one's in there," Abrams noted, looking at the screen.

The door opened, revealing Sasha Graevyn and a room very different from the one portrayed on the monitor. Within, a zero-g cargo loader held what appeared to be a half-disassembled photon torpedo.

"What happened to the monitor image?" Abrams asked.

"Oh, I set it to a continuous loop back at 1750 hours. Now help me move the bodies..."

"Bodies!" Sasha quickly did a visual scan of the hallway. Her gaze fell upon the unconscious guards. "Ahhh!" she squealed. "Did you do anything *else* that I'll get court-martialed for?"

"Nope, just this." Chris had grabbed Wayne by the boots and dragged him into Bay 3. Sasha grabbed Bill and the dropped phasers and Abrams brought up to rear. The door swished shut behind him, leaving no evidence of what had just happened.

"So, Marcus, Chris brought you up to speed on the plan, right?" Sasha asked.

Marcus just stared at Sasha and mumbled, "You...you know my name?"

"Of course! We met like four hours ago...er...we *will* meet. Oh, I *hate* time travel!!" Sasha dropped Bill's feet, flattened her ears, and started pulling her hair from the plume at the end of her tail. Abrams noted that the tail seemed to not have much plume left at this point.

"Well, don't fret," inserted Underwood. "The time loop is almost complete. We've got about 15 minutes to swap the torpedo with the T-12 and duck out of here before the shooting starts. After that, it's anyone's guess as to what happens next. Personally, I'll be glad when this is all over and I can get back to checking my mail." Chris walked over and examined the torpedo. Sasha had already opened the casing and disassembled most of the targeting and propulsion systems, exposing the warhead. It was very small, about the size of an apple, but within it was enough anti-matter to

turn an unshielded starship in a stellar dust cloud in a matter of nanoseconds.

"Not bad for a geologist," Chris mused.

Just then Chaym entered. She surveyed the entire room in a heartbeat. When her eyes fell on the torpedo and the unopened T-12 container, she shrieked.

"You're not done yet? What the hell have you been doing for the last four hours?"

"Nice to see you too, Chaym. Glad to hear you're feeling better," Underwood replied as he reached into the torpedo and began disconnecting the warhead. "As a matter of fact, we've been setting events into motion so we CAN go back in time. The question is: Where have *you* been? I thought you were going to sickbay."

"I *did* go to sickbay," Chaym said as she approached so she could watch what he was doing. "Unfortunately I had a little run-in with Geisha on the way back."

"Geisha?" Sasha's ears shot up. "The woman who shot Carlos? Chaym, you know we're not supposed to try and alter the past!"

"Relax, I didn't do anything. We just had a little chat, girl to girl." Chaym licked her claws and purred.

"I seem to remember you dragging her into the brig by her hair," Chris smiled.

"Chaym," Sasha began. "You know that woman is going to shoot Carlos. There's nothing we can do to stop it. Are you okay with that?"

"I guess I've just learned to accept that certain things are inevitable," Chaym replied calmly.

Chris and Sasha exchanged glances. An awkward silence reigned for a couple of moments before Ensign Abrams cleared his throat. "Um, excuse me, but should I be helping?"

"Nah," Chris replied as he removed the final connections to the warhead. "Marcus, you need to go back to Deck 4 and plug that microwave into the time machine the way I explained earlier. Sasha, you need to head up to geology and meet your past-self so she can travel back and..."

"Spare me!" Sasha yanked on what was left of the tip of her tail. "If I hear one more word about causality loops, I'm gonna kill somebody! C'mon, kid, let's go..." Sasha steered Abrams out the door, leaving Chaym and Chris alone together.

"So," Chris started, "do you think it's gonna work?"

"What? The plan to swap the torpedo and the T-12?"

"No, your plan to save Carlos."

Chaym didn't answer.

"Come on, Chaym." Chris slowly lifted the warhead out of the torpedo housing. "You're a smart girl. I know you wouldn't be here right now if you hadn't found a way to keep your husband safe."

"You're right," Chaym said as she watched Chris slowly cross the room toward the torpedo. "I went to sickbay and showed those darts Geisha used to Ann Marie. She and I came up with a sort of counter-poison."

"Don't you mean counter-agent?"

"No, a counter-poison. It'll react with the poison from the darts, and cause Carlos's body to enter a catatonic state. But if we get him to sickbay within a couple of hours, Ann Marie should be able to stabilize him and he should recover. There's no certainties, but at least he'll have a chance."

"Provided that the Romulans haven't blown the ship to bits." Chris put the warhead down and turned to the container of T-12.

He looked at it and frowned. "You know, this box has caused me nothing but misery for over a month. None of this would have happened if it hadn't arrived. And you know what the worst part is? We don't even know if it's even real!"

"Huh? Chris, you lost me."

"How do we know that box isn't empty?" Chris growled. "For all we know it could be packed full of chocolate covered pretzels! No one ever had the guts to even check and see. We just took Star Fleet Command's word that it had T-12 in it. And you know what? Something Rostarr said has been running around in my head for a while. Why waste an entire Heavy Frigate with hundreds of crewmen to do something an unmanned freighter could do? The whole thing has been fishy since the start." Chris walked over and pressed a button on the container's hull. The lid opened slowly. Chris impatiently grabbed the lid and yanked it open.

"Careful, Chris! You could set it off!"

"Set what off?" Chris asked as he peered into the container. Inside were four individual cargo totes, each sealed with the logo of Star Fleet Command. Chris reached down and started to open one, but Chaym grabbed his wrist.

"Look, Chris, I know you consider yourself the mad scientist type..."

"I prefer 'evil genius'."

"...and you did make a working time machine, which is really impressive. It's just that you have this track record, and when you're right, you're right. But when you're wrong, you're really wrong."

Chris chewed his lip for a moment, then released the half-torn seal. "You're right, Chaym. Besides, we don't have time for this right now. There'll be plenty of time later." He then hoisted the totes out of the container, placing them near the disassembled torpedo. He then placed the torpedo's warhead into the case. Next went in the canisters of propellant so it would be heavier. Finally he threw a switch on the detonator.

"Uhh, how are we supposed to set this thing off, anyway?" Chaym asked as she loaded the real T-12 totes into the now empty torpedo casing.

"Well, I've been trying to figure that out myself," said Chris. "I couldn't decide if the fuse should be radio controlled, proximity, or time delay. So I used all three."

"Come again?"

"Well, I set a proximity fuse, so that if someone opens the case looking for the T-12, it goes off. Then I set a radio-controlled fuse, so we can blow it up via a signal from the *Avenger*. But in case that doesn't work, I've set it to detonate after 15 minutes, just to be safe."

"SAFE!?" Chaym's hair was standing up. "What if they open the case while they're still on the *Avenger*, or if we can't send the signal, or if the time runs out before..."

"Hey!" Chris cut her off. "No plan is perfect. Besides, it's already armed, so we can't open it anyway." Chris closed the lid of the torpedo and checked the room. Now the only evidence that they had been there at all were the bodies of Bill and Wayne. Chris activated the anti-gravity lift and the torpedo rose gently off the floor. Chris and Chaym then added the bodies of the two security officers to the load.

"Well, this makes for an interesting sight," Chaym commented. "How're we supposed to get past the guards?"

"Relax, Chaym. These ARE the guards." Chris smiled.

Suddenly a faint chirping sound could be heard. It was coming from Bill's communicator.

"Crap!" Chris said. "If security gets here before the Romulans then the whole plan is scrapped. We'll have to bluff it."

"How?"

"Think of something!" Chris grabbed the communicator and tossed it to Chaym. She turned it on.

"Mackenzie? Why aren't you at your post?"

"Uh, everything's under control. Situation normal."

"What happened?"

"Uh, had a slight weapons malfunction but uh...everything's perfectly all right now. We're fine. We're all fine here, now. Thank you. How are you?" Chaym winced immediately.

"We're sending a squad up."

"Uh.. Negative, negative, we have a reactor leak here uh, now. Give us a few minutes to lock it down, uh large leak, very dangerous."

"Who is this? What's your authorization code?"

Chaym switched the communicator off. "Boring conversation, anyway. Chris, we're gonna have company!"

Chris grabbed the cargo loader and moved towards the door. The unconscious guards almost slid off a couple of times, but with Chaym's help Chris managed to get them out the door and halfway down the hallway.

But then Tactical Officer Merinid Rostarr came around the corner.

To give the cyborg credit, he was deeply focused on his hand-held radiation scanner, and after a month of boredom, he was not expecting anything unusual. He walked right toward the two time travelers without looking at them.

"Hey, Chris," he said as he passed.

"Hey," Chris responded automatically.

Both groups continued past one another. Merinid made it five more steps before he stopped dead, the mental alarms screaming. He looked up and saw the T-12 bay, unguarded. He whirled around and saw the two unconscious guards draped over a torpedo, *his* torpedo, being led away by Christopher Underwood. The same Christopher Underwood whom Merinid had seen locked in a cell in the brig not five minutes earlier. The tactical officer's mind raced to try and find an explanation as to how Chris could be in two places at once. A dozen scenarios flashed thru Rostarr's head until he found the only one that made any sense.

"Alien Doppelgangers!"

"Freeze!" Rostarr yelled.

"Run!" Chaym cried. With a shove, she knocked Bill and Wayne off the torpedo and raced toward the end of the hall. Chris leaped over the two bodies and zipped after her. At the corner, he looked back and saw that Rostarr had actually stopped to check the two officers for life signs. He then steered the torpedo around the corner, only to grind to a halt behind a motionless Chaym.

A team of five Vulcan scientists ahead occupied the hallway ahead of them. Vulcan scientists in sharply cut lab coats, slick haircuts, and stylish boots. Boots that looked exactly like the boots in Chris' quarters. Boots that had cost him three months' salary to smuggle out of Romulan space.

'Romulans disguised as Vulcan scientists.' Chris thought. *'They're after the T-12, and they don't know I've got it. They won't risk blowing their cover, and they don't know I've made them. All I have to do is play it cool and they'll walk right by.'*

"Freeze right there!"

Rostarr spun around the corner behind Chris, his phaser drawn.

What happened next was a mass of confusion. All of the Romulans reached into their long white lab coats and started to draw weapons. Chaym immediately leapt for one and Chris shoved the cargo loader into two others before throwing himself at a third. The last Romulan brought his weapon to bear on Merinid, who barely dodged the disruptor's lethal blast. Rostarr then ducked back around the corner before the Romulan could fire a second shot.

"Computer, activate program Rostarr-FPS Nine on my mark." Merinid reached up and made an adjustment to his cybernetic eye. "...Mark!"

Immediately the entire hallway went pitch black. Using his eye's thermal sensor, Rostarr peered back around the corner. Chaym had incapacitated one of the assailants, and was currently using her heightened sense of smell to find another target. Chris was being strangled by one of the others, and the one who had shot at Rostarr was pulling some sort of goggles out of his pocket.

"Vulcan scientists my ass..." Rostarr swore and shot the Romulan dead in the chest. A second shot stunned Underwood's attacker, but at this point the two that had been knocked down by the torpedo had recovered. They had pulled low light goggles from their coats and were using the torpedo for cover as they zeroed in on the glow of Rostarr's phaser.

Then, exactly seven seconds after the lights went out, the hallway went from pitch black to 500% illumination. The two Romulans screamed, and Rostarr shot one right in the face. Chaym leapt across the hallway, grabbed Chris, and ran back toward Rostarr's position. He gave them covering fire until they rounded the corner and collapsed behind him.

"What the heck is up with the lights?" Chris gasped, choking for breath.

"Just a little program I wrote for situations like this."

Chris blinked at Merinid. "I don't know what's scarier, the fact that you made this program, or that you foresaw its need."

"Always be prepared. So, can I assume that since the Romulans are trying to kill you that you're not Alien Doppelgangers?"

"No, we're time travelers."

"Ah, that explains everything, then."

"What now?" Chaym asked.

Rostarr peered back around the corner. The Romulans had removed their coats, revealing light combat armor and disruptor rifles. Rostarr noted that the enemy he shot in the chest was back on his feet.

"Unless you two have weapons, then we're outgunned 4 to 1. They're wearing phaser absorption armor, so anything other than a headshot is no good. They're probably a crack team, and they're using the torpedo for cover."

"I think we can take 'em," said Security Chief Gor.

Merinid spun around. From the hallway behind him came Gor and probably every security officer on the ship.

"That was fast."

Chaym and Chris glanced at each other and said nothing.

"The odds are now 20 to 4 in our favor," said Gor. "Let's get 'em."

The whine of transporters came from around the bend. Peering once more, Arnand saw Romulan Marines joining the espionage team.

"About 15 new guys. That makes us even. But they're all wearing gravity boots! What're they for?"

Suddenly Chris Underwood's chronometer started beeping.

"Time's up!" Chris covered his ears.

And 500 meters off the *Avenger's* port bow, the Romulan warbird opened fire.

PART 14

"Aim for the head. Don't miss."

*-Cadet rRham'Ho'Tzet'Tzen
Complete body of "How to resolve
combat quickly"*

Term paper for Starfleet Academy Security Cadets

"I hate my life!" Sasha thought to herself.

Stepping out of Cargo Bay 4, Sasha Graevyn put the handle of the bipolar tachyon receptor in her mouth, pulled her boots off, dropped to all fours, and started running. As a Kyonan, she had a passing resemblance to the great hunting cats of Earth: the tiger or the lion. Although her race had evolved to a more humanoid appearance, they could still move like the beasts of prey from which they descended.

"Stolen torpedos, time travel, Romulan warbirds, fanboys of Chaym's frelling garage band? Can today possibly get any crazier? No. It's not possible. If I suddenly woke up in a vat of embryonic fluid, and this was all a cybernetic dreamland, wouldn't even bat an eyelash. Why? Because today Just Can't Get Any Stranger!"

Zippering past crewmates, Sasha dashed for the *Avenger's* central staircase. There, she skipped the steps completely, chosing instead to vault up between the hand-rails as the stairs switched back on themselves between decks. Using both her hands and the claws on her feet, she quickly reached Deck 7, where she broke away from her climbing and sprinted toward the rim of the *Avenger's* hull.

"Okay, focus. Come on, focus! Ignore the bump on my head that's been pounding for four hours. Ignore the pain in my stomach from getting drop kicked. Concentrate on the mission. Chris's plan will work. All I have to do is get this frelling receptor to my frelling past-self, and then get to the shuttlebay in time to make sure the Romulans fall for our frelling trap and take the frelling bomb back to their frelling ship. Then the bomb blows up and they all explode and then I can stop and take the 10 seconds to ask somebody to explain to me what the heck just happened!"

As she rounded the corner just before her destination, she almost bowled over Ensign Charles Donovan. Luckily for the unsuspecting human, Sasha's reflexes allowed her to easily dodge around him toward the open door of the Geology lab...

...and crash directly into herself.

"It works better if you face forward, Zod-for-brains! Try watching where you're going..." The Sasha from the Geology Department muttered and rubbed her head. She then looked up at her assailant and went slack-jawed. The Sasha that had been run-

ning was sprawled against the wall, one hand nursing a swelling ankle and the other having just managed to catch the receptor.

"Woah, talk about Déjà vu," the Sasha against the wall said to her dumbfounded mirror image. "Are you okay? Well, I mean I know you're not okay because that's the same bump on your head that I've got on my head, and I remember how much it hurt when I got it. Oh, wait. If you're here then that means..."

"Waa.... Who the heck are you?" The Sasha from the Geology lab stood up slowly, never taking her eyes off her counterpart.

"What are you, blind? I'm you! Sasha Graevyn, *Avenger's* ship's geologist. I don't remember hitting my head that hard."

"Huh? Wait a minute.... What did you say? How can you be me?"

"Geez, am I really this dense? I'm YOU, but from the future."

"WHAT?!?" the first Sasha screamed. Her head was really starting to hurt now. "From the future? When? How far? This had better not be one of those goofy parallel universe stories."

"Only about twenty minutes from now." The Sasha against the wall slowly stood up. "Look we don't have time for this. I have to get to the shuttlebay and you have to get to the brig."

"The brig? What the hell do you think....?" Suddenly the younger Sasha's eyes widened as she connected events. "Wait a second. YOU'RE THE ONE WHO STOLE THE TORPEDO!!!"

"Quiet! Are you trying to get me arrested?!" The future Sasha scanned the hallway to see if anyone had heard her. The only other person within earshot was Ensign Donovan, who remained transfixed by the entire exchange. She tried to think of a way to calm herself down, but her younger-self barged onward.

"Oh, no you don't! Everybody's giving me trouble for whatever you've been up to! I bet that's Selerus' bi-polar thingamabob!" The younger Sasha pointed at the equipment in her duplicate's hand. "You're no me-from-the-future! You're one of those alien doppelganger things, or a mirror universe double, or something. You're not going anywhere until I get some answers from you!" The first Sasha dropped into a Kyonan fighting stance.

"Look, you're making a mistake!" the second Sasha pleaded. "I know what you're about to do and I remember that it really, really hurt. You've got to listen to me. I need you to..."

"Heeeyah!" The first Sasha threw a flying kick. The second Sasha expertly dodged the attack, spun around, and swept the first Sasha cleanly off her feet. The second Sasha then kicked the first one squarely in the stomach with her bootless feet, knocking the wind from her victim.

"Owwwww... That hurt," the first Sasha moaned.

"I know. I remember." The second Sasha lifted her shirt up, showing a stomach with four long scratches on it. The wounds looked to be several hours old. The first Sasha looked down at her own midriff, and saw the same marks, only newly made. "Now do you believe me?"

The standing officer extended a hand to her fallen counterpart and pulled her to her feet. "Okay, so now what?" asked the wounded Kyonan.

"Now you freeze," Security Chief Gor said. He and a half dozen security guards filled the end of the corridor. They were armed with phasers, and had them leveled toward the two women.

"Sasha Graven, put your hands on your head."

Both women put their hands up.

"Don't panic, we're going to escape," the future Sasha tried to reassure her past-self.

"Oh, really." The younger Sasha eyed the guards warily. "This should be neat. Exactly how do we get out of this?"

"I can't remember."

"What? Why the frell not?"

"Hey, I've been through a lot in the last couple of hours. Besides, I was distracted."

"What? Weren't you paying attention? What the heck were you doing?"

The current Sasha grimaced. "Well, it just so happens that I was busy yelling at the future me because SHE couldn't remember."

The past Sasha said, "Oh." They both turned to look toward the security officers. She saw them closing in slowly. "I'm sorry," muttered the past Sasha.

The current Sasha's ears suddenly perked up. "Oh, yeah, now I remember. This is when the ship gets attacked!"

There was a tremendous noise, like the sound of the ship's hull scraping against another object. The lights went haywire, and then failed completely. The emergency lights flashed for a second and the artificial gravity gave way.

The Dampening Field. It'll disable the phasers! The older Sasha leapt forward toward her assailants and wrestled the phaser rifle from one of the security officers. With a quick twist, she reversed the rifle, pressed the emitter against his chest, and stunned the guard at point blank range.

"Run!" she yelled toward her younger clone. That Sasha nodded and immediately bolted in the opposite direction. The future Sasha waited until she was out of sight, then turned her attention to the guards.

"Sorry, Sasha." Gor pointed his phaser at Sasha's head and pulled the trigger. The emitter glowed for a brief second, but nothing happened. Sasha looked down at the rifle in her hand. The controls seemed fine one second, but then blanked out the next. She tapped it a couple times to set a self destruct sequence, and then tossed it at the chief of security.

"Good luck!" she cried as the rifle started its accelerating pitched whine. Immediately Gor fumbled with the controls, trying to cancel the sequence. But before he could input the code, the controls went dark.

"Damnit," he swore as the pitch reached its highest level. Lord Gor squinted his eyes and prayed.

And in that instant, instead of exploding into a giant ball of death, the weapon merely made a small crackle noise and released a puff of smoke.

Early in its days of space exploration, each race discovers how generally unhealthy it is to have a starship crew engage in a shoot-out. Every square meter of a spacefaring vessel's interior is occupied with something that's usually designed to keep the crew alive somehow. Atmospheric processors, food and water recyclers, power and gravity generators, and countless other systems are constantly at risk when violence erupts. The United Federation of Planets is no exception, and Star Fleet training for intership energy weapon combat is guided by a single golden rule:

Don't do it.

In the event that you have to violate this rule, the advice from the academy is as follows: If the fighting is on your own ship, keep it short, and contained. Energy weapon discharges tend to reduce the ability of your vessel to get you home in one piece. In the pioneering days of space travel, standard operating procedure was for the entire crew to don spacesuits and the captain would then decompress the hull. In the event of an enemy boarding party, compromised sections of the ship are usually sealed off by force fields, then flooded with incapacitating gas. These plans, however, require that the ship's crew maintain control of the environmental systems.

The first thing the Romulan timeship *Trogdor* did when it de-cloaked off the port bow of the *Avenger* was to fire a phase-variable torpedo at the Federation vessel. The torpedo used technology from 500 years in the future to skip in and out of phase with our dimension. It passed out of reality just long enough to move through the *Avenger's* shields, then re-emerged and rammed the Federation ship's hull.

Once it made contact with the *Avenger*, it activated its high energy dampening field. Immediately, the EPS system that provided power to the ship's lights, gravity, and computers began to malfunction. On Deck 4, Chris Underwood, Chaym Re'ming'ton, and a dozen security officers were about to begin a firefight with a Romulan boarding party when the torpedo hit. There's nothing in the universe quite as disorienting as losing all vision and sense of weight at the same time. The dual impact of panic and vertigo is almost completely overwhelming. Luckily, any good starship crew is trained to operate in exactly these conditions.

"Stand fast!" Lieutenant Asterix of security shouted over the dismayed cries of his men. "Everyone grab handholds and prepare for Z.G.C.!" At once the team searched out and found the zero-g handholds that automatically deployed from the floor and ceiling in times of weightlessness. After a couple of seconds, emergency lights began to glow along the walls, giving an eerie red illumination to the scene.

"Sir, my weapon is malfunctioning!" reported Rostarr.

"Mine too," commented Lt. Asterix. Commander Underwood looked at the readout on the phaser he had taken from Ensign First Class Mackenzie. The battery showed a nearly full charge, but the display was fading in and out irregularly.

Lt. Asterix pulled out his communicator. "Chief, come in! We need reinforcements on Deck 4!" The communicator responded with only static.

"No lights. No backup. No phasers. Can this get any worse?" swore Chaym.

A loud blast cut through the voices of the Star Fleet forces an instant before the durasteel plating on the corner of the hallway exploded and two of the security ensigns screamed and went flying back.

"Projectile weapons!?! Rostarr gasped.

Chris pulled the body of one of the wounded men out of the air. "This guy's hurt pretty bad. We need to get him to medical fast!"

"We can't let the Romulans get the Tribiddian-12!" said Asterix.

Chaym reached forward and grabbed a sonic grenade from the front of the Lieutenant's combat vest. Twisting the cap, she threw it expertly against the nearby wall so it ricocheted around the cor-

ner. Seconds later its shockwave blasted the corridor with a gale-force wind.

"That's not going to slow them down for long! We've got no weapons and no options! Fall back to the turbo-lift shaft on the starboard side and use the Jefferies tube to evacuate the wounded. That's an ORDER, Lieutenant!" Without even waiting, Chaym spun and began "climbing" the handholds toward the other side of the ship.

Gripping the wounded man closely against his chest, Chris positioned his legs and "jumped" up the corridor in the direction Chaym had gone. He had to correct his trajectory every three meters or so, but soon he caught up to Rostarr, who had been propelled back by the grenade blast. The tactical officer was lifting the unconscious body of Ensign First Class Mackenzie and was preparing to imitate Chris' leaps.

"I don't know what your plan is, Chris, but I sure hope it works," he said as Underwood drifted past.

"So do I, Merinid. So do I."

PART 15

"Task Force Commander Tek'lar, give me a status update."

The heavily-armored Romulan centurion turned toward the voice. The speaker was his superior, the green-skinned Orion female who had been given control of the operation. The woman was short, but incredibly attractive. Her olive skin and eyes contrasted sharply with the black combat armor she wore. On one hip a slender pistol rested loosely in its holster. The other hip held a long thin fighting knife.

"Everything is under control. You should return to the ship, sir." The last part was added with a sneer. Tek'lar was a commander who believed every word of the Stellar Naval Command's propaganda. Especially the part about Romulan genetic superiority.

"Under control?" The Orion woman, whose code name was "Geisha", surveyed the corridor. Blast marks marred the halls and the unmoving bodies of several members of the boarding party were floating in the weightlessness. "This mission called for light resistance and a fast extraction, Force Commander. What happened?"

One of the other Romulans, a junior commander, spoke up. "Resistance has been surprisingly heavy, sir. The plan was to take the Federation completely by surprise. When we transported onto the *Avenger*, there were nearly two dozen enemy combatants awaiting us. If it wasn't for our ship's energy dampening attack, the Humans would have overrun us."

"Thank you, Centurion, that will be enough." Tek'lar cut the junior officer off. He then returned his attention to Geisha. "Obviously the secrecy of our mission was leaked to the Federation beforehand."

The Orion's eyes flashed. "Explain your statement, Force Commander."

Tek'lar returned Geisha's stare. "Perhaps the hour you spent in the Terrans' brig being interrogated by their captain was more useful to them than you originally reported."

"You think I jeopardized the mission?" Geisha glanced at the junior commander before returning her gaze to Tek'lar. "Perhaps you think that the Tal Shiar made a mistake in placing me in charge of this mission?"

"I think it was a mistake to bring you at all. You've contributed nothing to our cause, except to provide us with the location of the Tribiddian-12. Your botched attempt to interface with the *Avenger's* computer network drew attention to our upcoming attack. And your failed attempt to seduce the Human captain was..."

Tek'lar never finished his sentence. With a single, lightning swift motion, the junior commander drew a knife and planted it squarely in Tek'lar's spine. The blade entered at the base of the neck, severing all motor control, as well as the commander's windpipe. Tek'lar could do nothing but stand in the zero-g environment, rooted in place by his magnetic boots. He simply blinked helplessly, his mouth forming words he had no breath to speak. It took him almost 20 seconds to die of brain asphyxia. Geisha watched his face the entire time, a smile on her lips.

"Good work, Junior Commander..."

"So'Can, sir." The officer saluted crisply. "To conclude the situation report you requested, we have overcome the Federation resistance and seized the Tribiddian-12 containment unit. The Terran forces have retreated, but we are expecting a counterattack soon."

"Then we had best not delay. Have your men opened the containment unit to inspect its contents?"

"No, sir. You specifically ordered no one was to open the vessel."

"Good. Captain Maldonado's own files show that the T-12 is still within. Let's get our prize and depart this wretched space husk. I will then request that our captain allow me to personally blow the *Avenger* to atoms."

Geisha looked once more into Tek'lar's lifeless eyes. With a macabre smile, she extended one finger and gave him a gentle push. His corpse bent at the knees and tiny droplets of green blood sprayed from his mouth. It was only then that she noticed the black, coffin-shaped piece of metal discarded against the wall. It had obviously been overlooked during the firefight.

"Junior Commander So'Can, what is that?"

"I'm not certain, sir. Several of the Federation personnel were transporting it when we arrived. I am unfamiliar with Star Fleet Linguacode. Can you read the markings?"

"It's a photon torpedo. A primitive matter-antimatter weapon. The Federation used them until they perfected quantum torpedos in the late 24th century." Geisha recalled how the other occupant of the brig had been incarcerated for misappropriating such a weapon.

"Leave it. It is of no concern to us."

"Man, I hope they fell for it..."

Commander Underwood reached into a Jefferies tube and slowly lifted the body of Ensign First Class Mackenzie into the hallway. There was still no gravity, and the dim chemically-based emergency lights cast everything into sharp contrasts. Mackenzie had been wounded during the Romulan attack. The Romulans had used explosive-shelled rounds from projectile weapons for maximum damage. Mackenzie had been on the front line when one of the shells had hit the hallway. Shrapnel in his leg was causing him to bleed badly, and he had fallen unconscious while being moved from Deck 4 to Deck 7.

"So do I, Chris." Chaym swung out of the tube behind him. She took hold of one of Mackenzie's shoulder straps, while Chris took the other. Together the two of them propelled themselves up the hallway toward sickbay. They were followed by Lt. Asterix, Rostarr, and the rest of the security detail.

"So what do we do now?"

"You mean after we deliver aid to the wounded?" Chaym looked at the ash white pallor of Mackenzie's face. "The T-12 is too unstable to be moved with transporters. The enemy will need to get to the shuttlebay. We'll have to wait until they're off the ship before we blow them to hell. Somebody's gonna have to go to Flight Ops. And someone else is gonna need to get to the bridge."

"Looks like we're gonna have to split up."

"Yeah. Chris, you take the bridge, since you're the only one who knows what frequency to use to remote detonate the explosives. I'll lead a security team to the shuttlebay."

"But we want them to escape."

"And we can't let the enemy know that. If it's too easy, they'll suspect something's up. First rule of Mohnan guerilla tactics: keep the enemy on-the-run and off-balance."

Chaym, Chris, and Mackenzie had finally reached sickbay. Underwood was reaching for the manual control when the deck lights suddenly flickered back on and gravity suddenly began working again. In a pile, all three of them suddenly crashed into the floor and forward into the room as the automatic door opened.

"'Bout time Padovan earned his paycheck," Underwood muttered.

"What on Earth happened?" the CMO, Ann Marie, asked. She unstrapped herself from her chair and was across the room with a medical tricorder before anyone else had even started to rise.

"Mackenzie got the worst of it. Three others are also seriously wounded." Underwood helped Ann Marie get Mackenzie to an aid station. Most of the rest were able to walk themselves in.

Rostarr checked his phaser. "Weapons are back on-line, sir."

"Good," Chaym purred. "Now it's time for some payback."

The deafening crash of a concussion grenade preceded the Romulans' arrival onto Deck 6, where the lower entrance to Shuttlebay 2 was located.

"Phah! These primitive Federation soldiers barely offer any resistance whatsoever," newly-promoted Force Commander So'Can noted.

"Do not be so quick to underestimate the Federation," Geisha said as they moved over the wreckage of the hatch and into the hanger area. "This sector of the galaxy is littered with the bones of many a spacefaring culture who thought they had the Humans beaten. The Borg, the Founders, V-ger, even your own Romulan Star Empire. All have traveled to the Earth itself, and all have lost."

"That time is behind us now." So'Can glanced at the Tribiddian-12 containment unit. "Now we have the power to make history... No... to re-write history in any image of our liking."

"Patience, So'Can," Geisha cautioned as they entered the shuttlebay proper and made for her ship. "We are not home yet."

As if on cue, weapons fire filled the shuttlebay. From a catwalk on the upper level, several Star Fleet security officers began firing phasers at the Romulans. In response, half of the boarding party took cover and began returning fire. The other half, including Gei-

sha and So'Can, rapidly brought the T-12 the remaining distance to Geisha's starship. Its cargo ramp was lowered and awaiting their arrival.

Inside the ship, So'Can took the helm. Immediately he began powering up the engines, and flipped the switch to close the cargo ramp.

"Sir!" cried one of the centurions over the comm system. "We've still got troops out here. Open the door!"

So'Can switched the communicator off.

"You are leaving them behind?" Geisha commented with a slight smile.

"More Federation troops will be arriving momentarily. Those men will ensure that no Star Fleet craft launch after we depart."

"I see. And the fact that some of those men might have been loyal to Tek'lar, and could have posed a threat to you in the future, had nothing to do with decision?"

"Nothing at all."

Just then a light on the panel near So'Can's left hand began blinking. It was accompanied by a loud klaxon. The Force Commander swore violently.

"The phaser array's been hit! It's completely destroyed!"

"What?" screamed Geisha. "Those are our only weapons! Without them we cannot destroy the airlock doors! We cannot escape the *Avenger*!"

"I know that!" So'Can yelled, smashing his hand against the control console.

What followed next was an awkward silence, broken only by the external sounds of weapons fire.

"It seems that your decision was premature, So'Can."

"One of my own men crippled the ship! They risk the failure of the mission and the disgrace of the Empire for their own pathetic lives. Cowards!"

"Romulans are survivors, and resourceful ones at that." Geisha unhooked her safety harness and began moving toward the rear of the ship.

"What are you doing?" So'Can cried.

"The only way off the *Avenger* now is for someone to go to the hangar controls and open the outer doors manually. Since you cannot read their language, I must do it."

"If you open that door, my own men will try to kill me!"

"Then I hope your survival skills are as impressive as theirs." Geisha opened the hatch and exited without a backward glance.

The Orion sprinted away from the shuttlecraft toward the nearest wall, and then followed that around the edge of the hangar. In the corner of the rectangular room was a ladderway leading up to a small office with a transparent Plexiglas window. This was where the Chief Flight Officer oversaw shuttle operations. And it was here that the airlock control circuits were held. Geisha entered the room and moved toward the control panel.

"Hold it, wench!"

Geisha stopped and turned toward the voice.

Standing in the doorway was Commander Chaym Gale' n'Mal-donado. In her hand was a phaser, and on her lips a smile of pure delight.

PART 16

"You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this," Chaym

growled.

"Indeed..." Geisha's eyes scanned the tiny office in which she stood. On her right was a large plexiglas window overlooking the *Avenger's* shuttlebay. In the hangar, Geisha's own shuttlecraft was poised to escape. The only things stopping it were the reinforced doors in the *Avenger's* hull. Those doors were closed, and the controls to open them were almost within Geisha's grasp. On her left was the interior of the office, with only a small desk, some chairs, and no escape.

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Commander. It seems you are armed and I am not." Geisha slowly raised her hands to be parallel with her head. As she did, her eyes scanned past Chaym onto the catwalk beyond. It was devoid of any other Star Fleet personnel. "I surrender. I request prisoner-of-war status as stated in the Khitomer Accord, Article 4, Section..."

Chaym fired.

The blast was a narrow beam at relatively low power. It grazed Geisha's left arm, just above the elbow, drawing blood. Geisha screamed and backed away. "What are you doing? I said I surrender!"

"Oh, I heard you." Chaym's voice was low and reverberated from deep within her chest. Her tail lashed back and forth like a cat who had just begun toying with a mouse.

"You're Star Fleet! You can't do this!" Geisha screamed.

"To Charon with the regs! You tried to sleep with my husband, THEN you tried to kill him. On my homeworld of Mohna, we know how to deal with females like you."

"So you're just going to shoot me in cold blood?"

"No." Chaym switched off the phaser, dropped it to the floor, and kicked it backward onto the catwalk behind her. For a split second Geisha looked confused, until Chaym bent at the knees, unsheathed her claws, roared, and leapt.

Which was just the opening Geisha had been waiting for.

With an almost impossible speed, Geisha ducked, and slid forward under Chaym's attack. As the Mohnan sailed over her, Geisha kicked up with pinpoint accuracy. Her boot impaled Chaym's throat, stunning her and sending her crashing into the wall. Standing quickly before her opponent could recover, Geisha turned to the control panel and threw the switch to open the hangar door.

"Geisha to shuttlecraft, respond," Geisha said into her communicator.

"Task Force Commander Huknos here."

Geisha remembered Huknos from the firefight earlier. He had been next in line for command after So'Can. This meant his men had taken revenge for So'Can's attempt to abandon them on the *Avenger* while he and Geisha escaped.

"I have opened the shuttlebay doors, Huknos. Transport me aboard so we can get out of here."

"I'm sorry, Geisha, I'm afraid I can't do that."

"WHAT?"

Geisha whipped her head up to see the shuttle, HER shuttle, rise slowly off the deck of the hangarbay and turn toward the blackness of space.

"So'Can told us before he died about how you ordered him to kill Teklar."

"That's a lie!"

"Probably, but since you've fulfilled your purpose to us, I'm afraid we no longer have any need of you. The Romulan Star Empire thanks you for providing us with the Tribiddian-12. Good bye." The

communicator chirped softly as the connection was broken.

Geisha screamed then. She screamed long and loud with fury at her betrayal. She screamed until her lungs were empty, then she turned back toward Chaym, only to find the Mohnan's jaws merely inches away from her own neck.

She never had the chance to scream again.

Exactly fourteen and a half minutes after the attack on the *Avenger* began, Christopher Underwood burst onto the bridge. On the viewscreen was the image of their assailant, the Romulan time-ship *Trogdor*. Although tiny when compared to other ships of their navy, it was easily three times the size of the *Avenger*. Its broad, curved, winglike hull was swept forward, giving it the appearance of a great bird of prey preparing to strike. Beneath its hull, a tractor beam slowly drew Geisha's shuttlecraft toward the docking port.

"Weapons status?" asked First Officer Se'ele from the captain's chair.

"Still nothing," said a woman from the firing station. "Power fluctuations continue to prevent us from firing phasers or launching torpedoes."

"I see." Se'ele's Vulcan face pinched with a look of heavy concentration. "With no warp power and minimal shields, it would appear that we are at their mercy."

"The shuttlecraft has finished docking with the enemy ship, Commander. They appear to be powering up their disruptors."

Se'ele lifted a single eyebrow. "Then it would appear we are about to die."

"Not if I can help it!" Chris leapt across the bridge to communications. Rudely shoving the crewman stationed there aside, he began punching a sequence into the computer.

Se'ele calmly turned the captain's chair to face him. "Lieutenant Commander Underwood, your presence on the bridge is highly unexpected."

"Enemy ship is about to fire!" cried the weapons officer.

"Remain calm, Ensign. A direct hit should be relatively painless." Turning back to Chris, she asked, "Did you ever clear up that matter about the location of the missing torpedo?"

"You could say that." Chris turned to the main viewscreen and pressed his thumb against the transmit button.

The lower half of the Romulan ship vanished in a flash of brilliant light. The remaining sections were instantly shredded by the force of the explosion, and within seconds there was almost nothing left of the enemy ship at all.

"Fascinating..." commented Se'ele.

Chris moved to sit down on the communications officer's chair, but missed and landed flat on the floor. His head throbbed, his stomach ached and he was incredibly thirsty. Closing his eyes, he leaned back and moaned.

"Please...NOW can I check my mail?"

EPILOGUE

Ensign Marcus Abrams' head bobbed up and down to a heavy rock beat as he worked alone in Cargo Bay 4. Half-disassembled pieces of Underwood's time displacement machine were scattered

everywhere. Abrams had been working for several hours on its dismantlement. He had even set the cargo bay speakers to play some of his favorite Galactic Hussies songs from his personal collection while he worked. Unfortunately for him, he was playing it too loud to hear someone else enter the room. It was only when the music stopped that Abrams turned to face the newcomer.

"Captain!" Abrams immediately stood at attention and saluted.

"At ease, Ensign." Carlos Maldonado entered the room slowly. In the three days since the attack, rumors of his health had raced across the ship like wildfire. It was only when he regained consciousness and had been released from sickbay that crewmen finally started believing that he wasn't actually dead.

"To what do I owe the honor, sir?" Abrams stopped saluting but remained at attention.

"Oh, just making my rounds, inspecting the damage control and repairs. Star Fleet has redirected us to Starbase 61 and authorized us to travel at an astounding Warp 5. We should be there in a couple of days."

Carlos moved toward the remains of the device. "So it actually worked, did it? Underwood was always bragging that he would build a time machine if he had enough time. We all thought it was a bad pun. But I guess he did it."

"Yes, sir." Abrams turned toward the cargo transporter that formed the bottom of the machine. "It's actually fairly close to a normal transporter, but with some specialized chronoton filters. It would never have worked if the *Avenger* hadn't spent the last month inside the special dampening net designed to protect your cargo."

"Lucky us," Carlos mused.

"Yes, sir," Abrams responded. "Also, we needed Selerus's specialized data recordings, which she started taking samples of the minute she arrived."

"Also very lucky." Carlos turned to Abrams. "Underwood said your assistance was invaluable in constructing the machine. That's pretty high praise from someone who rarely relies on others."

Abrams blushed with modesty. "I just put stuff where he told me to, sir."

"Uh-huh." Carlos gestured to Marcus's personal music player. "Was that my wife's band I heard you listening to when I came it?"

"Oh, yes, sir! I'm a big fan." Marcus relaxed his stance and smiled. "I was still hoping to get Mitzi to autograph my copy of 'Lungfish of Love'."

"What's your favorite song?"

"Ohhh, that's a tough one. I like their early stuff like 'Sell Me Some Love Tonight' or 'Hurt'n Like a Horta'. Some of my buddies like the later songs like 'Back from the Dead' or 'Green-Skinned Freak Woman Stay Away From my Man...'"

Marcus cut himself off in mid-sentence and looked at the Captain. Carlos's face was flat, but in his eyes there burned a deep, seething emotion. The two men locked gazes for several seconds.

"Haven't heard those, have you sir?"

"No," Carlos replied coldly.

Marcus chewed his lower lip. "You know, every band has bootleg songs that only the hardcore fan..."

"I know ALL my wife's songs."

Marcus was silent, withering under the captain's gaze. Finally he spoke.

"I'm busted, right?"

Carlos nodded slowly.

Abrams sighed, then straightened his uniform and stood at attention. "First Lieutenant Marcus Abrams, Star Fleet Temporal Reconnaissance Division, operating under Special Article Omnicron, requesting..."

Carlos slammed his hand down on the transporter console and swore colorfully. Clenching his teeth, he fumed at Abrams

"Do you know how long I've been in command of this vessel?"

Marcus blinked at the unexpected question but said nothing.

"Six weeks. Six weeks ago yesterday. And you know what happens in Star Fleet when you finally make captain? Fleet Command throws you a party. Not just any party, either, it's a big one, with all your friends there. It goes late into the night, too. And then, when it's winding down, you know what happens?"

Marcus shook his head.

"Just as it starts to get late, they send two men to collect you. These men escort you away from the party, away from your friends and your family, off to a little side room. And you know what happens there, Lieutenant? They give you a shot to sober you up. And they tell you about Star Fleet Special Article Omnicron. They do this so that when you come out of the room, looking like you just threw up, nobody is suspicious."

Marcus merely stood there, motionless.

Carlos glowered at him. "Special Article Omnicron. It states that 'Sometime in the future, time travel is available. Occasionally, Federation operatives from the future will be forced to travel back to the present and manipulate events. They operate without our knowledge, in order to minimize contamination to the timestream. However, if they are forced to reveal themselves, they are to contact the nearest Star Fleet Captain, say the magic words 'Special Article Omnicron', and I'm supposed to do whatever they say."

Marcus squirmed uncomfortably.

Carlos continued. "I can't ask them WHY they need me to help them, because that might jeopardize the future. I can't refuse to help them, because THAT might jeopardize the future. I can't even ask them to PROVE they're from the future, because THAT might jeopardize the future. All I can do is shut my trap and do what they tell me to."

"Sir, I didn't write the regs..."

"SHUT UP," Carlos yelled.

Marcus fell silent again. He looked down at his boots.

"Five men died fighting to defend this ship. Another dozen are still in sickbay. Did you know that Romulan ship was out there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you know they were planning on attacking my ship?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why the hell didn't you do anything about it?"

"I did, sir!" Abrams finally looked up. "Underwood's design for the time machine was flawed, and would have killed him if I hadn't modified it, using my own knowledge of temporal mechanics. Frankly sir, if I had not acted, you would be dead, this ship would be destroyed, the Romulans would have gotten the T-12, and would probably have gotten away with a weapon of unimaginable power.

"If you had warned us, we could have prepared for the attack. Lives would not have been risked and five men would not have died meaningless deaths."

"There is no such thing as a meaningless death, Captain," Abrams countered. "Listen, the timestream is like a mosaic: everything that happens in it is a part of the greater picture. The deaths

of these men will affect those friends and family that knew them. Those people will make decisions and take actions, some of which will change their lives and the lives of those around them. That's how history works, Captain. And that's why I'm not allowed to change it."

"That's a load of crap."

Abrams ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "Captain, every year Star Fleet discovers more and more pre-warp civilizations. Millions and millions of life-forms whose lives are filled with hardships that our technology could solve. The Federation adopted the Prime Directive because it understands that non-intervention prevents more problems than the alternative would solve. But try explaining that to a race of people dying of cancer, or the Antigan Plague. Events occur for a purpose. If Chancellor Gorkon had not been assassinated, then the Khitomer Accords would never have happened. If Hitler had never come to power, then Stalin would have overrun Europe."

"You don't know that."

"Don't I?"

Carlos was about to reply, but cut himself off. As much as he hated to admit it, the boy had a point.

"You can at least tell me why they attacked my ship."

"You already know that sir; it was the Tribiddian."

"But why?"

Abrams paused for a moment. "Tribiddian-12 is a critical ingredient in making a time-bomb."

Carlos's eyebrows shot up. "A what?"

"A temporal resonance weapon. A device that, when activated in the future, would deploy in the past. It's hard to explain without being technical, but we can track and monitor their timeships, but this weapon would allow them to strike wherever and whenever they wanted. With it, they would be able to re-write history."

"Oh. So it's better that we have it than they have it."

Marcus said nothing.

Carlos scowled. "So what was the plan if the Romulans got away with it?"

"We had a timeship nearby. I was able to tell them when the attack had started. They would have intercepted and destroyed the enemy."

"After the *Avenger* was destroyed? That's comforting."

"Hey, I didn't like that plan, either."

"Weren't you supposed to go back to the future with your ship?"

Abrams responded. "I'm from Iowa, I only work in the future."

"Hmmm," Carlos mused. "So what now?"

"Well, if it's not too difficult, I'd like you to keep the matter of my true rank and position confidential. It saves me a great deal of work."

"I'll bet. What about the future?"

"The future? When it gets here, it gets here. Until then, we carry on."

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