

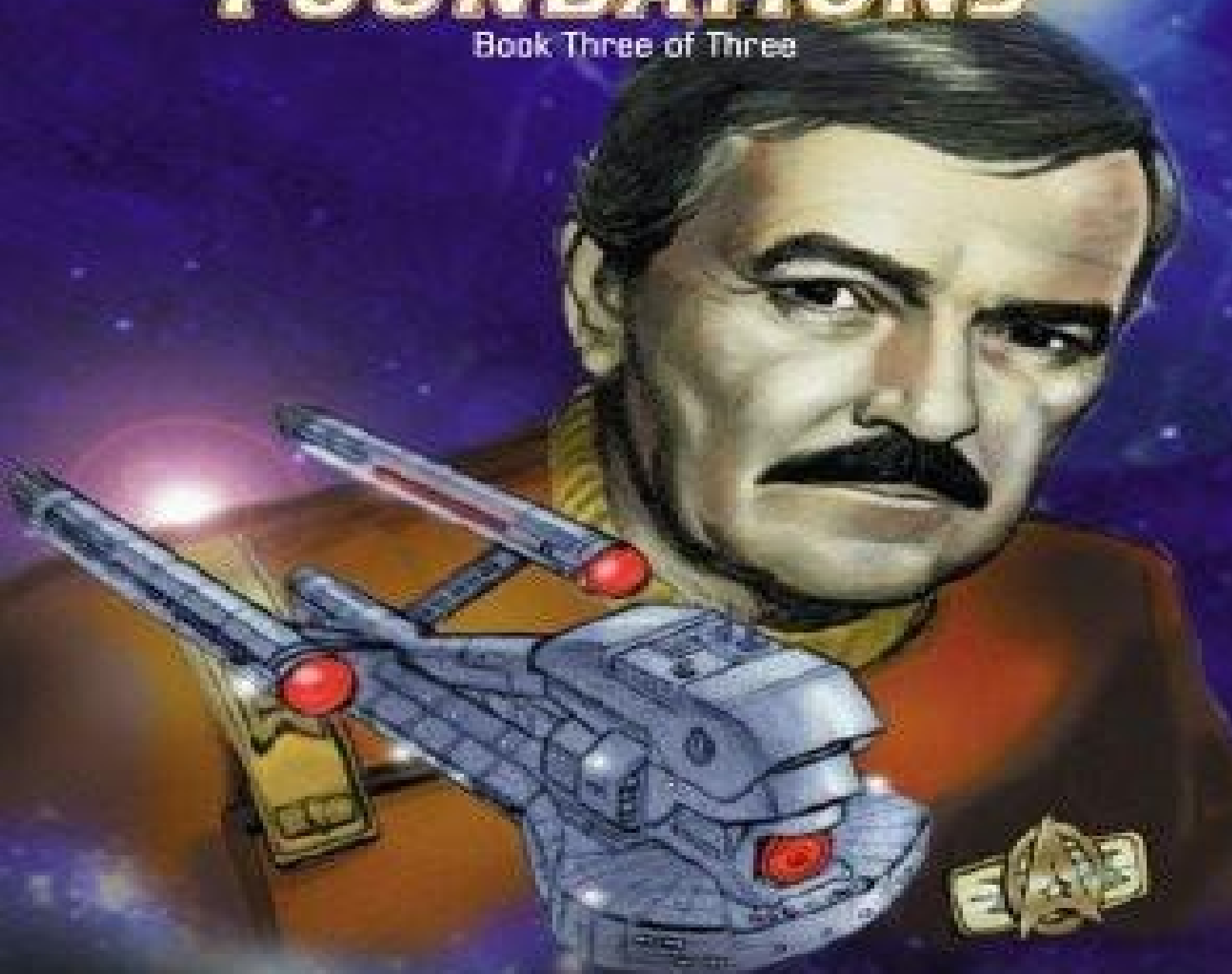
STAR TREK™

S.C.E.

#19

FOUNDATIONS

Book Three of Three



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S.C.E. concept by John J. Ordover and Keith R.A. DeCandido

Stardate 53676.2

“I’m hungry,” Bart Faulwell said as his stomach growled for the third time in ten minutes.

Involved as he was with his work at the main computer station of the Senuta ship’s compact command deck, Soloman nevertheless paused to regard his companion. “I have noted the indicative sound emanating from within your torso.”

Faulwell chuckled at the perfect deadpan delivery of the statement. In his experience, the Bynars as a species weren’t normally given to frivolous wordplay. They preferred instead to concentrate on ensuring that any communication was restricted only to what was essential to the accomplishment of a given task. This was especially true with verbal interaction, which was typically employed only when dealing with other species that did not possess the Bynars’ fantastic ability to communicate at speeds rivaling the most advanced computer processors. Like other members of his race, Soloman much preferred interacting with machines instead of living beings, as it freed him of the need to slow down the process of giving and receiving information.

However, he had been taking infrequent, tentative steps of late to engage various members of the da Vinci crew in verbal discussion when it related to the assignment at hand or, more recently, in more casual conversation. Faulwell wouldn’t categorize Soloman’s attempts as “banter” or “chit chat,” but it was a departure, and a most welcome one at that, from what had once characterized the Bynar’s normal behavior.

“Well, if you know what it means,” Faulwell said as he continued to study the array of computer display screens dominating the rear wall of the command deck, “then you also know that it’s not something I’m going to want to ignore for too much longer.”

Despite his teasing comment, he knew he had only himself to blame for being hungry. There had been plenty of time to grab something to eat prior to beaming over from the da Vinci, but Faulwell had elected to spend that time writing a quick note to Anthony. He’d spent thirty minutes painstakingly updating his partner on their current mission, composing his thoughts on paper by hand as he always did before transcribing the missive for transmission via subspace communication. The handwritten letter, like all of the others that he wrote to Anthony, would be saved until such time as Faulwell could deliver them in person. The intimate ritual was one of his few private pleasures, and he had become so engrossed in it that he had nearly lost track of time. When the reminder to report to the transport room came from his computer terminal, Faulwell had been forced to leave the note unfinished until he returned from the Senuta ship.

And after I get something to eat, he reminded himself. Sorry, Anthony.

Looking up from his console, Soloman said, “You will be pleased to know that I have nearly completed restructuring the interface to the operating system and providing a simpler means for the Senuta crew to interact with the computer. It will not give them the entire range of capabilities the original interface possessed, but it will be sufficient to make up for the loss of the ship’s computer

technicians.” His brow furrowing slightly, the Bynar added, “There is a great deal of security integrated into the various applications software, not unexpected for a vessel originally constructed for military use. In order to effect the interface, it was necessary to deactivate or bypass much of the protection schemes. I am preparing to run a final diagnostic to ensure the interface functions properly before instructing the Senuta on its operation.”

“Sounds great,” Faulwell replied as he glanced about the command deck. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t more than ready to get back to the da Vinci.” Once again he had to shake off the feeling that the room’s bulkheads were closing in around him.

I think it’s going to be a while before I complain about how cramped my quarters are again.

This room, like everything else on the ship, had been constructed to conform to the physiology of the comparatively smaller Senuta crewmembers. It had taken Faulwell more than a few minutes to adjust to the smaller-scaled equipment, which had been designed for a more diminutive body type. In contrast, Soloman had found the accommodations as comfortable as the furnishings of his own quarters on the da Vinci.

From behind them, a soft voice asked, “Have your repair efforts been successful?”

Faulwell turned to the two Senuta crewmembers. Each regarded him with what the linguist had come to recognize as their typical wide-eyed, expectant expression. Ircoral and Tkellan, as the two females Senuta had introduced themselves earlier, were part of the Senuta ship’s engineering staff and had been assigned to assist Faulwell and Soloman by providing information about the systems overseeing the vessel’s propulsion systems. Their expertise had allowed Soloman to craft the new interface to the ship’s computer, giving the crewmembers more direct control of the automated systems than they had previously enjoyed. Though Ircoral and Tkellan had been intensely curious in the beginning, peppering the da Vinci engineers with a myriad of questions, once Soloman had gotten down to the serious work of reprogramming the computer they had been content to remain quiet, working at other stations, until they were needed again.

“Yes, Ircoral,” Faulwell replied. “It looks as though we’re almost done here. Thanks to your help, Soloman is nearly finished repairing the damage the storm caused to your computer and its software.”

Soloman had been working steadily for the past two hours, his attention only rarely wavering from the bank of computer displays. Most of his attention had been focused on the subsystems overseeing the ship’s engines and propulsion, which had borne the brunt of the storm’s effects. It had been slow going at first, with the Bynar encountering more than a bit of difficulty in understanding the computer languages responsible for the software running the Senuta computers. That’s where Faulwell had been able to help.

As a linguist and cryptographic specialist, Bart Faulwell had not set out to become anything resembling a computer expert. Called upon to perform more demanding assignments as his experience grew, such as deciphering enemy communications codes and encryption schemes, it soon became apparent to him that understanding the nuances of discourse used by living beings was not enough. Therefore, Faulwell had expanded his knowledge into the world of computers and the languages used to transform instructions into the actions carried out by machines.

In this case the work he had already done to translate the Senuta's spoken and written language had allowed him to assist Soloman in understanding the alien ship's computer system. Once the language barrier had been broken, the Bynar was able to interface with the Senuta computer easily. The only remaining obstacle was the level of technology itself, which Soloman had likened to that used by the Federation during the early to mid-twenty-third century.

"This degree of self-sufficiency is comparable to that of modern starships in several respects," Soloman said as he continued to work. "The major difference of course is that the Senuta are more easily inclined to entrust themselves to their computers than many of the humanoid species I have encountered."

Noting a quality in his companion's voice that didn't seem to be a ring of approval, Faulwell glanced momentarily in the direction of the two Senuta engineers. Neither of the aliens appeared to have heard the Bynar's words, though. "Is there something wrong with that?" he asked. "I figured that if anyone would appreciate the Senuta's reliance on technology, it would be you."

The Bynar regarded him with an almost amused expression on his pale features. "My people have fashioned a society that embraces an interdependence on computers, yes, but the idea that we are slaves to automation is a misconception shared by many who do not understand us."

"Fair enough," Faulwell replied, now even more relieved that the Senuta had not overheard the conversation. After all, it would not do to offend these people so soon after establishing first contact. Though such initial meetings with new races usually caused Faulwell no small amount of concern, he still undertook the inherent responsibilities during such momentous occasions with all the seriousness they deserved.

Besides, Carol will kill us if we find a way to screw this up.

The lights on the bridge flickered around him and Faulwell became aware of a steady thrum resonating through the deck beneath his feet. The engines had come back online, he realized, thanks no doubt to the efforts of Kieran Duffy and his repair team from the *da Vinci*.

Turning in his seat, he saw the two Senuta engineers watching him again, anticipation dominating their features. Smiling, he nodded in their direction. "I think you're back in business."

Nodding excitedly, Tkellan replied, "Yes, it appears as though your companions have succeeded in helping our technicians. Your crew is very skilled."

Faulwell began to offer a response but was cut off by a voice from his combadge.

"Duffy to Faulwell."

"Go ahead, Commander."

"As you may have noticed, Bart, we've finished our repairs on the engines. She'll run well enough to get them home. All that's missing is the link to the propulsion management subprocesses in their main computer. How are you coming up there?"

The fatigue was evident in Duffy's voice. No doubt the repairs to the damaged engines had been

extensive, as they had begun their work hours before Faulwell and Soloman had started the investigations of the Senuta's computer.

"We're almost finished, sir," he replied. "Soloman is preparing a final test of his reprogramming before we hand things over to the Senuta."

"Outstanding. I don't know about you, but I'm ready to get back to the da Vinci and stretch out in my luxurious, oversized bed in my luxurious, oversized room."

Faulwell laughed at that, looking around once again at the bland, cramped confines of the Senuta ship's command deck. "I hear you, Commander. I'd estimate another ten minutes and we'll be done here. See you back on the da Vinci. Faulwell out."

Severing the connection, he returned his attention to the two Senuta engineers. "With the engine fixed, all that's left is the computer, and we'll be ready to return control of it back to you."

"I do not know how we will be able to repay your generosity," Ircoral replied.

Shrugging, Faulwell tried to smile humbly as he thought of how Carol would want him to handle this. "Perhaps if our two peoples spend time together after this, we can learn more about each other and you'll be able to better understand our motivations for helping you."

Ircoral considered that for several moments. "A most excellent idea. I will be sure to pass it on to Daltren when he returns from your ship."

Nodding in approval, Faulwell turned his attention back to Soloman. "Anything else I can do to help?"

"No," the Bynar replied simply. "I've finished my preparations and I'm ready to begin my diagnostics." He tapped a final series of commands into the workstation's oddly configured manual interface. In response to his instructions, graphics on the array of computer displays began to shift and scroll information, almost too fast for Faulwell to follow.

And then the alarm sounded.

It did not have the droning, piercing wail of a red alert klaxon, but it nevertheless echoed across the compact command deck. Harsh red illumination promptly replaced the more normal soft lighting, and flashers began blinking frantically near the two doors providing exits from the room. An audio message also began to play from the internal communications system. The message was spoken in the Senuta's native language, so it took Faulwell a second to understand the words.

"Intruder alert. Activating countermeasures."

"What's happening?" he called out over the alarms as his attention was drawn to the wall of computer displays. One by one, the monitors were blinking out, the various graphics and information being replaced with a single line of Senuta text.

This station is deactivated.

His fingers almost a blur on the consoles, Soloman did not look up as he answered. "My diagnostics"

have triggered some type of security protocol. The computer is closing out access to systems across the ship.”

Trying to keep his growing apprehension under control, Faulwell swallowed the lump that had risen in his throat. “I thought you said you disabled or bypassed the security protocols.”

“I apparently missed at least one.”

At any other time, Faulwell might have thought the straight delivery of the simple statement humorous, but this was rapidly becoming anything but one of those occasions. Rising from his chair, he turned to face the Senuta engineers. “Ircoral, what sort of countermeasures is the computer activating?”

Already studying their own display monitors, the Senuta did not immediately reply. After several seconds that seemed like an eternity to Faulwell, Tkellan turned to look at him.

“Our computer is proceeding as if combatting an unauthorized access by an enemy during wartime. There are a number of security procedures that were installed to prevent such an occurrence, as this was once a military vessel. Though onboard offensive weapons were removed years ago, the computer protocols were simply deactivated, as it had proven too expensive and time-consuming to completely remove those components from the computer system.”

Ircoral added, “The protocol that has been activated was only intended for use if the crew was incapacitated and the ship has been boarded by enemy invaders.”

His sense of dread continuing to worsen, Faulwell asked, “So what happens then?”

Ircoral turned to face Faulwell, her own expression one of near horror. “The computer’s instructions are to prevent access to its systems at all costs, to include destroying the ship if necessary.”

Pausing only long enough to look at Soloman, who was still working feverishly to salvage any kind of access to the Senuta computer system, Faulwell did the only thing that made sense to him at that moment.

He tapped his combadge.

“Faulwell to da Vinci. We’ve got a big problem here.”

“Da Vinci here. What’s the problem, Faulwell?”

Casting a worried look at Soloman, who was still engrossed in his attempts to override the computer, Faulwell replied, “We seem to have triggered some kind of booby trap, Captain. The computer is locking down access and has activated a self-destruct protocol.”

“What?” There was no mistaking the shock in Gold’s voice, something that happened only on rare occasions. Faulwell knew that the captain, like everyone else involved in the effort to assist the Senuta, had believed this to be a rather simple if time-consuming mission with few or no difficulties expected to be encountered. This latest revelation had shattered the peace of what should have been a routine set of tasks for the crew of the da Vinci.

It’s just not the S.C.E. if something doesn’t go wrong, he reminded himself.

“Can you override the computer?” Gold asked, his voice having returned to the measured delivery that made the captain the calm in the center of any storm.

Turning back to Soloman, Faulwell saw that the Bynar had abandoned his attempts to access the computer and was now looking at him with no small amount of worry.

“I have been locked out of the computer,” the Bynar said as he reached for his tricorder. “There is nothing more I can do.”

That was most definitely what Faulwell did not want to hear. “Are you saying the ship is going to blow itself up?”

“That is correct. I suggest we leave as soon as possible.”

“I heard that, Faulwell,” Gold said over the communicator. “I’ve already got Feliciano preparing to evacuate that ship. How much time do we have?”

Soloman was working again, holding his tricorder in one hand while the other tapped a few tentative commands to the computer console. “I estimate that we have less than five minutes.”

“Stand by for beam-out,” Gold ordered. “Sensors are detecting a massive power buildup in the engines. I want to be out of here before she blows.”

Faulwell nodded at that, though the captain could not see him. “Soloman, it’s time to leave,” he called out to his friend who was still hard at work, seemingly oblivious to everything around him.

“One moment, Bart,” the Bynar responded. “I am scanning and attempting to record as much information from the computer’s central data banks as time will permit. I will need an additional few minutes to complete the task.”

It was Faulwell's turn to be shocked again. "Soloman, I really don't think we have time for this."

"I am reasonably certain that the download will take slightly less time than we have remaining before the engines overload."

Reasonably certain? Was that supposed to make him feel better? Looking about the command deck, he tried to remember: How much did they have? How much time had passed? What if Soloman's estimate was wrong?

He noticed Ircoral and Tkellan regarding him, their faces masks of concern. "Are we leaving?" Tkellan asked, nervousness evident in her voice. Faulwell did not blame her. After all, it was not as if he wanted to be here, either.

Nodding to the Senuta engineer, he replied, "Yes, we're leaving in just a moment." Looking toward Soloman he added, "We are leaving, right?"

"I'm nearly finished," the Bynar responded, not looking up from his tricorder.

"Gold to Faulwell," the captain's voice called out again. "Our sensors are saying that the engines are approaching the overload point. Stand by for transport."

"Not yet," Soloman said.

"What's that?" Gold asked, his tone suddenly quite frosty. "What does he mean, 'Not yet'?"

Rolling his eyes, Faulwell offered a silent plea to any deity who might be paying attention to this particular dark comedy in the making: Please let me live long enough to regret what I'm about to say.

"Soloman is trying to retrieve as much information from the Senuta computer as he can, sir. He's almost finished, but he needs a bit more time."

He felt an abrupt rumbling beneath his feet, a rattling that shook the deck plates and the bulkheads. The ship shuddered around him, already gripped in the beginning of its death throes.

"You're out of time, Faulwell," Gold said over the communicator. "We're pulling you out of there right now."

Another tremor shook the ship, more violent this time, nearly throwing Faulwell off his feet. He could feel the explosion somewhere beneath him and his mind envisioned the force of the blast tearing through the interior of the ship's engineering section, ripping it apart as the engines succumbed to the effects of the overload. He reached for a nearby console to retain his balance, seeing as he did so that Soloman and the two Senuta engineers were doing the same thing to avoid being tossed to the deck.

The first tendrils of a transporter beam reached out for him just as another shock wave enveloped the ship. As he felt his body start to dissolve, an insane thought gripped him: If I survive this, it'll make a great finish to Anthony's letter.

As he rematerialized in the da Vinci's transporter room and saw the expression on Kieran Duffy's face, however, Faulwell wondered if he should have just stayed on the Senuta ship.

Duffy came around from behind the transporter console, where he'd been standing next to Transporter Chief Diego Feliciano. As the latter shut the transporter down, Duffy asked, "Are you all right? The bridge reported that there was some kind of computer problem over there."

"You could say that," Faulwell replied as he looked around him on the transporter platform, relieved to see that Soloman as well as Ircoral and Tkellan had made the transport safely. Turning to Duffy he asked, "Everyone else was evacuated, right?"

Duffy nodded. "And we went to warp as soon as we had you aboard." Noticing the expectant yet resigned looks on the faces of Ircoral and Tkellan, his expression turned somber. "The engines reached overload and exploded. Your ship has been destroyed. I'm truly sorry."

Ircoral and Tkellan regarded Duffy with horrified expressions. "That means that we are stranded here with no way to get home," Ircoral said. "What will we do now?"

"You're not stranded," Faulwell replied, stepping down from the transporter platform and turning to face the Senuta engineers. "We, and Starfleet, will see to it that you and the rest of your crew are returned to your homeworld."

Her brow furrowing, Tkellan said, "But without the navigational systems aboard our ship, we will not be able to plot a course to our planet."

In response to that, Soloman stepped forward. "I was able to record a great deal of information from your computer's memory banks, including what I believe to be your navigational databases. If that is the case, then it will allow our navigators to assist in locating your home and determining the most efficient route to get there."

Faulwell nodded in agreement. If Soloman had indeed managed to get that information from the Senuta's onboard computer, then the heart attack the Bynar had nearly given him by demanding he remain on the doomed vessel until the last possible second would be worth it.

Almost.

"That is very kind of you," Ircoral said. "I do not believe that we have ever encountered a race of people so willing to help others in need." Turning to Soloman, she amended, "Or, as I should have said, races of people."

Faulwell smiled reassuringly at her. Seeing Ircoral and Soloman together, he was reminded once again of how similar in physique and demeanor the Senuta were to the Bynars. "It's like I was telling you before, Ircoral. It's what we do. I guess that if there's a positive effect of what's happened, it's that you'll have more time to get to know us better." His smile faltering a bit, he added, "Besides, it's the least we can do. It was our trying to help that put you in this situation."

An exaggerated coughing sound interrupted him, and he turned to see Duffy looking at him, a mildly amused expression mixed with irritation on his face.

"Yeah, and about that," the engineer said with mock annoyance in his voice, "you couldn't blow up the ship before I spent all day fixing it?"

Before he could actually say anything, Faulwell's stomach replied for him, the noises it made echoing softly in the transporter room and causing Duffy's eyebrows to shoot skyward.

"Is that all you've got to say?" Duffy asked.

Shrugging, Faulwell replied, "At least until after dinner." He regretted the flippant words as soon as he left his mouth and as he saw the expectant, almost helpless expressions on the faces of Ircoral and Tkellan. They were looking to him, and by extension the rest of the da Vinci crew, for help. This was no time for jokes.

What the hell are we supposed to do now?

Carol Abramowitz could feel a prize-winning headache coming on.

"Are ye all right, lass?" Captain Montgomery Scott asked, looking out at her from the conference lounge viewscreen. Hearing the concern in his voice, Abramowitz realized for the first time that she was rubbing her temples, trying without success to relieve the pressure steadily building behind her eyeballs.

"Abramowitz?" Captain Gold leaned forward in his seat, his expression also one of concern. "Is something wrong?"

Shaking her head, she replied, "I'm fine, sir. Thank you." Forcing herself back to the situation at hand, she directed her attention to the padd she had brought with her to the meeting. The text on the unit's display comprised the sum total of the report she had fashioned, both for Gold and for Captain Scott back at Starfleet Headquarters on Earth. Somehow, she decided, the words themselves were woefully inadequate. No matter what flowery language she used to describe their current situation, it did not change the simple fact: Despite the best of intentions, the actions of the da Vinci's crew had trapped the Senuta here. Because of that, the Senuta were, at least for the time being, a people without a home.

However, after conversing with Daltren, the commander of the Senuta ship, Abramowitz had been unable to find any indication that the aliens harbored anything even resembling resentment or bitterness about the situation. During her meetings with the alien ship captain, he had shown nothing but gratitude for the da Vinci crew since first coming aboard. Even faced with the loss of his own vessel, his support for the Starfleet engineers had not wavered.

"Ensign Wong is continuing his attempts to extrapolate a reverse course to the Senuta homeworld," she said, reading more of the cold facts from her padd, "based on the route their ship was taking when we answered their distress signal. Additionally, Soloman is searching through the data he downloaded from their computer, looking for their navigational charts. He's not sure if he managed to retrieve those or not." Pausing, she winced involuntarily as another spasm stabbed at her brain.

Having only partially allowed himself to relax in his chair, Gold said, "You look like you could use a breather, Abramowitz, not that I'm surprised. You've been working as hard as anyone on this mission, and it shows. This is a sticky situation, but we'd be a lot worse off if not for you."

On the viewscreen, Scott added, "Aye, yer captain's right. I for one am grateful to have ye on the job."

Though she was seldom comfortable with compliments directed at her, Abramowitz could not help but smile at the praise these two veteran officers had conferred upon her. She knew from past experience that neither Gold nor Scott offered such accolades lightly, yet that did not stop her from believing she was unworthy of them.

“I have to admit to feeling a bit out of my depth, sirs,” she said. “I’ve spent years training in a wide variety of subjects that allow me to interact with hundreds of cultures the Federation has encountered. But that’s just it. All of my training and experience revolves around races and cultures we’ve already met. I’m nowhere close to being an expert when it comes to first contact situations.”

“Dr. Abramowitz,” Scott replied, “in my experience, there’s no such thing as a first contact expert. After all, it’s a mighty rare thing for one first contact to be like another. Life just doesn’t work that way, I’m afraid. The best thing that can be done is to have people like you on hand for such eventualities.”

Smiling at that, Abramowitz replied, “On any other day, I’d be tempted to argue that point. Truth be told, though, I’m really just too tired right now.” She shrugged. “Sometimes I wonder if I should have just taken that research posting on Memory Alpha.”

“And deprive us of your talents, to say nothing of your unflappable good nature?” Gold asked with amusement tugging at the corners of his mouth. “That would be criminal in the extreme, I think.”

Adopting a more serious expression, the da Vinci captain leaned forward in his chair once more, clasping his hands atop the conference table. “Look, Carol, I know you think you’re in over your head, but we all know that this isn’t a normal mission, even by first contact standards. The Senuta have been thrown for a loop to be sure, but they’re confident that we’ll do whatever it takes to get them home. The vast portion of that faith is due to you.”

“And that, more than anything else, is why we have cultural liaisons aboard our ships,” Scott added. “Even our S.C.E. ships.” On the screen, the Starfleet legend shook his head. “In fact, this whole thing reminds me of another time when a ship was lost far from home and came into contact with another species.”

“Uh oh,” Gold said, looking to Abramowitz with a mischievous glint in his eye. “I feel another story coming on.”

Abramowitz could not help laughing at the captain’s deadpan delivery. It was fascinating how Scott could be counted on to have a timely anecdote for whatever crisis the da Vinci crew happened upon in an encounter. Then again, that quality was only part of what made Captain Montgomery Scott the unique individual he was.

“Aye, but I think Dr. Abramowitz will appreciate this tale. For one thing, on this occasion it was one of our ships that was the lost little lamb, dependent on the goodwill of a previously unknown people to get them home....”

Stardate 7981.3

“What do ye call déjír vu the second time ye get it?”

As had happened three days earlier upon boarding the starship that had ferried him here, Montgomery Scott was struck by the familiarity of the transporter room in which he had just materialized. It, like its counterpart on the transport ship, was a near match for the Enterprise’s transporter room before his own ship’s extensive refit. Here the higher level of lighting served to intensify the already vibrant colors and give the room a pulse, a certain zest that he occasionally admitted to missing aboard the Enterprise. He knew that the heart of his beloved ship still beat proudly from beneath newer and stronger hull plating, faster engines, and more advanced onboard systems. However, while his engineer’s mind had long since embraced and even relished the improvements bestowed on his vessel, the romantic in him had refused to dismiss the sense that something had been lost in the Enterprise’s redesign.

One major difference, however, was that this ship’s transporter console was missing most of its components. The transport ship had performed the beam-in procedure all by its lonesome. This vessel was no longer on active duty, and many components had been removed, including the transporter.

“You’re not going to pine over the tune-up your ship got again, are you?” Commander Mahmud al-Khaled asked as he stood before the gutted transporter console with a wide grin on his face, moving forward to greet Scott as the latter stepped from the platform. “I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you again: If you’re looking for sympathy from me, you’re wasting your time. You starship types are spoiled compared to the rest of us real engineers, so quit complaining every time they give you new toys to play with.”

Ignoring Scott’s outstretched hand, al-Khaled instead embraced his friend. Drawing back, he cast the Enterprise chief engineer an amused look.

“I thought you said you only grew that mustache on a dare and you were going to shave it off. How long ago was that?”

Smiling, Scott replied, “A few lassies convinced me to keep it.”

Al-Khaled chuckled at that. “Well, mustache or no, welcome to the Chandley. I’m glad you could make the trip.”

“I had to come,” Scott said. “It was either this or Risa. Dr. McCoy has been champin’ at the bit for months to take shore leave.” His last conversation with the Enterprise’s chief medical officer prior to leaving the ship had been amusing, with McCoy shaking his head in disbelief that the engineer would choose to spend time with other engineers instead of immersing himself in the pleasures offered on the legendary resort planet.

Scott followed as al-Khaled led the way from the transporter room. "You know, you were right the other day about Alhena's knack for our line of work," al-Khaled said. "Her mother sent some images over subspace of her tearing into an old food processor. She almost got it put back together, too."

Scott smiled at that. Though he had never had the opportunity to meet al-Khaled's wife and daughter, he had heard all about them through his own irregular subspace correspondence with his friend. "When is she now, five?"

"Just turned," al-Khaled replied. "It's way too soon for this dad to wish for it, but if she wants to be an engineer when she grows up, I'm certainly not going to stand in her way. There are plenty of wonderful careers she could choose." Laughing mischievously he added, "I only hope I can convince her to join the Corps and avoid that cushy starship duty."

As they continued down the corridor, Scott could discern more signs that the Chandley was not a starship on active duty. Panels that had once provided access to circuitry overseeing many of the ship's key systems had been taken out, showing only dark maws where control mechanisms had once been. Defensive systems as well as most of the more powerful onboard sensor and computer components had been removed upon the vessel's decommissioning.

"They dinna leave much, did they?"

"Enough for the Kelvans," al-Khaled replied as they approached a turbolift. "When you see what they've been working on these last couple of years, I think you'll agree that the trip was worth it."

"I have to admit to bein' a wee bit intrigued at the offer," Scott replied. "I haven't been here in years, you know." How long had it been since his first visit to New Kelva? For that matter, what was the planet's original name? Tau Delta III, Delta Tau III, something else? The names of many worlds that Scott had visited during his service aboard the Enterprise had long since blended together, and the planet they were currently orbiting was not one he had ever regarded as a likely candidate for a return visit.

They stepped into the turbolift and al-Khaled ordered it to proceed to the engineering deck. "The Enterprise crew is held in high esteem by Rojan and the others," he said. "After all, if not for you, New Kelva would not have been founded, and the Kelvans would not be in a position to unveil the little surprise today."

Scott frowned, uncomfortable with such praise. After all, his first and only encounter with the Kelvans had been a trying one. The aliens had hijacked the Enterprise after their own vessel had been damaged during passage through the powerful energy barrier at the edge of the galaxy. Part of an advanced scouting party from their planet in the Andromeda galaxy, they had been sent to find a new home for their empire when Kelvan scientists discovered that radiation harmful to their life-forms was rising toward lethal levels. Projections called for the extinction of all life in their galaxy within ten thousand years.

Ships had been dispatched from the Kelvan Empire, traversing the void between their own area of space and the nearest neighboring galaxy, a journey that had taken generations to complete. In order to return with their report, the scouting party that had captured the Enterprise had intended to use the vessel to replace their own for the three-hundred-year voyage back to the Andromeda galaxy.

Scott suppressed an involuntary shudder at the memory of how the Kelvans had asserted their control over the Enterprise crew. Using the awesome power at their command, the aliens had transformed the bulk of the ship's crew into small, brittle duodecahedrons, each containing the essential chemical components of the person it represented. He recalled walking the starship's corridors, mindful of each step around the seemingly innocuous geometric shapes that had littered the decks. An errant footfall would have crushed one of the blocks, and brought instant death to the crewmember whose essence it contained.

Despite the obstacles before him, however, Captain Kirk had naturally been unwilling to stand by and allow his ship to be taken from him.

"It was Captain Kirk who was the real motivator," he said. "Of course, he practically had to knock their leader through a bulkhead before he convinced the man that the Federation would rather welcome them than battle them."

Laughing, al-Khaled nodded. "Rojan told me the whole story over dinner last night. An inauspicious first contact to be sure, but one that could ultimately provide many positive ramifications for the Federation. They have been most generous in sharing their scientific and engineering knowledge, which as you may remember was very advanced in many areas, especially with regard to engine design."

"Aye, that's a fact," Scott replied. "I dinna know how they did it, but they rigged up the Enterprise to fly at a speed I've seen bested only once."

The turbolift slowed to a halt and the doors opened again. Here, on the Chandley's engineering deck, the evidence of the ship's new status was even more apparent, though this time it was because of what was present rather than what might be missing. The corridor was littered with all manner of equipment, some of it undoubtedly Kelvan in origin and unfamiliar to Scott.

"You haven't seen anything yet, my friend," al-Khaled said as they proceeded down the passageway. "I've been here long enough to dig into what the Kelvans are going to show the Federation tomorrow. In a word, it's staggering."

Scott's brow furrowed. "What?"

"They may very well let the genie out of the bottle."

What did that mean? Scott knew from subspace correspondence with his friend that al-Khaled had been dispatched by Starfleet to report on the progress of the engine design project initiated by the Kelvans several years ago. What had he found here? Was Kelvan propulsion technology even more advanced than Scott had believed based on his previous encounter with the aliens?

He did not have time to ask any more questions before they arrived at the main engineering section. A glance around the room revealed a host of technicians, of whom almost none were dressed in any kind of Starfleet uniform. That made sense, of course, as most of the people currently aboard the ship were Kelvans. He had read in al-Khaled's last message that only thirty-six Kelvans lived on the planet below, most of those having been discovered nearly seven years ago marooned on a small planet several light-years from here. The castaways turned out to be from the same ship as the Kelvans

encountered by the Enterprise crew, and after their rescue they had been brought here to join the shipmates.

No doubt they're anxious to find more of their people, Scott thought before his eyes locked on the grouping of silver cylinders standing silently in the center of the engineering room.

"Will ye just look at that," he said as he regarded the odd object occupying the space where the matter/antimatter reaction chamber would normally have been situated. Appraising the construction, Scott realized it was not unfamiliar. After all, he had seen something very similar once before: the energy projector that Rojan and his group had installed aboard the Enterprise.

But this, Scott could plainly see, was something altogether different.

"Ah, yes," al-Khaled said as they crossed the floor to the unusual equipment, "the Kelvan version of an intermix chamber. I personally cannot wait to see this beauty in action."

Venturing forward to more closely inspect the device, Scott reached out to touch it and was a bit taken aback at the cool sensations on his fingertips. He could also feel the pulse of power from within its chambers. "Is this supposed to be the bottle yer genie is hidin' in, lad?"

A voice behind him said, "If you are asking whether or not this is the central component of our engine design, you are correct, Commander."

Scott was surprised to realize that he recognized the voice, although it had been many years since last hearing it. He turned to see a tall, black-haired man dressed in a utilitarian jumpsuit. His complexion was not pallid as Scott remembered it, his skin instead sporting a healthy tan no doubt cultivated beneath the warm rays of the New Kelvan sun.

"I believe you know Tomar," al-Khaled said to Scott. "From what I understand, you two are old drinking buddies."

Unable to stifle the laugh his friend's deadpan comment had provoked, Scott merely shook his head. It had been years since he had last thought about his unorthodox strategy to aid in overpowering the Kelvans who had taken over the Enterprise. He had managed to incapacitate Tomar, but it had taken several hours and nearly the entire contents of his liquor cabinet.

"Aye, I remember," he said as he extended his hand in greeting. "I certainly hope that you haven't held a grudge against me all these years."

Smiling slightly as he shook Scott's hand, Tomar nodded formally. "Neither I nor any of my people carry ill will toward you or your shipmates, Commander. I am grateful that you have chosen to join us for our tests, as your invitation was extended at my request."

"Mahmud here tells me that this project has been years in the making," Scott said. "If it's as successful as he says it should be, it'll be quite an achievement for all of ye."

Tomar turned to survey the drive structure. "We are proud of the accomplishments that have come about due to our cooperation with the Federation. As you already know, before we arrived in your galaxy our way was that of the conqueror. While in transit aboard our generational craft, we we

taught only how to overpower and rule other worlds. Now, with your help, we are ready to venture out possibly to unite with our fellow travelers or at least prepare for their ultimate arrival. This is far removed from what might have been.”

“That’s not to say you didn’t have your share of settling-in adjustments,” al-Khaled said. Scott recalled that al-Khaled and his ship, the Lovell, had been among the Starfleet detachment assigned to New Kelva to help establish the initial colony for Tomar and his companions.

Scott nodded. “As ye said, all of that is behind ye. But now I canna wait to learn more about the engines of yours.”

“There is no need to trouble yourself with such details now, Commander.”

Scott turned at the new voice and saw a young Andorian standing at al-Khaled’s side, wearing a Starfleet uniform with insignia designating her as a lieutenant and an engineer. What Scott noticed most of all, however, was the hint of a smug grin on her soft blue face.

“There will be plenty of time to discuss specifications once we’re on our way,” she continued. “Before we can do that, however, I need to review some calibration data with Tomar.”

Scott felt his jaw go nearly slack as Tomar excused himself and joined the Andorian, both of them stepping away to consult one of the computer monitors lining the bulkhead in this room. He had never been so smartly brushed aside by someone that... that young before.

“Well, that was a fine how-do-ye-do.”

Al-Khaled leaned toward his friend. “Scotty, meet Lieutenant Talev zh’Thren, one of Starfleet’s latest additions to the S.C.E. Though she’s assigned to the Tucker, she’s been on temporary duty here helping with the Chandley’s refit. She knows her way around the computer system overseeing the new engines better than the Kelvans who designed it.”

“Aye, but apparently she knows it,” Scott replied, not bothering to keep his first impression of the young officer from his friend.

Chuckling at that, al-Khaled said, “I’ll admit that she needs to refine her interpersonal skills, but don’t let that close your mind to her abilities.”

Scott frowned. “We’ll have to see what we’ll see, I guess.”

Dismissing the haughty young lieutenant for the time being, Scott instead looked about the engineering room. “You know, ye could have told me before that the Chandley had been selected for this project.”

Al-Khaled exhaled sharply before saying anything. “Well, it has been a long time, and I wasn’t sure that you would make the connection.”

“That this was J’lenn’s ship?” he asked, recalling the young Alpha Centauran whom he had known a little too briefly before her tragic death so many years ago, during his first mission with al-Khaled. “She’s always been hard to forget, I’m afraid.”

One of the few things Scott had learned about J'lenn prior to her death was that a previous assignment had been aboard this very ship, which had been tasked with patrolling the area of space separating the Federation and the Klingon Empire.

"I think of her sometimes, Scotty," al-Khaled said. "She's always been a reminder to me that our world is dangerous. It hurts me any time one of my shipmates dies, but each one makes me think of J'lenn and then it hurts worse."

"J'lenn was a fine engineer, Mahmud," Scott said, sensing his friend's pain. It was al-Khaled who had assigned J'lenn to the detail that resulted in her death. "And 'twas your leadership that made the mission a success. Just like this one will be."

Frowning, al-Khaled replied, "I don't know about that. There are several hundred people involved with this project, many of them volunteers, but Rojan is still very much the leader here. He figures that more members of his race are out there, on their way from their home planet, and neither he nor the other Kelvans are content to simply sit and wait for them to arrive. They know that the clock is ticking for their people back home, and that if billions of migrating Kelvans show up without warning there'll be no room for them. New Kelva can't sustain that many people, so Rojan and the others want to start looking for other suitable planets."

"So why not set up a contingency plan with the Federation?" Scott asked. "There are a legion of researchers and bureaucrats ready to place new settlements on planets of one sort or another."

"Because in spite of everything that's happened since they settled here, they're still Kelvans, Scott. They want to do this, and they want to do it on their terms."

Gesturing for Scott to follow him, al-Khaled began a slow walking circuit of the engineering room, pausing every so often to inspect a computer display or a control console. Scott regarded his friend quizzically as he worked, shaking his head in mild amusement.

"Speaking of doing things on one's own terms, Mahmud, tell me something. You enjoyed being out on assignment, so why did you settle for a long-term job at Headquarters?"

Before replying, al-Khaled stopped to tap a series of diagnostic commands into one nearby console, nodding in satisfaction at the results the monitor displayed.

"Call it payback," he said. "After we pushed like hell to get the Corps into official standing with Starfleet, things changed. Instead of three old tubs, we had S.C.E. teams assigned to ten active starships, to say nothing of special assignments like this one. For the concept to truly work, it made sense to break up the original three teams in order to spread experienced crewmembers across all the ships. Not everyone from the Lovell left me high and dry, though. Can you believe that O'Halloran and Anderson still want to take orders from me?"

Scott laughed. "Of course I can. What I canna believe, though, is that you're done givin' orders."

"I wouldn't exactly say that."

Now what does that mean? Once again Scott was left to consider his friend's cryptic words as a

Khaled completed his inspection tour of the engine room and returned to where Talev and Tomar were still reviewing data on one of the control consoles.

“Lieutenant,” he said, “let’s have a look at what you’ve come up with.”

As Talev looked up from her computer station, Scott noted the not-quite-suppressed expression of irritation on her face. It seemed to him that the Andorian did not appreciate being interrupted regardless of who might be doing the interrupting.

“We’ve identified a few minor fluctuations in the intermix chamber,” she said, and Scott could almost hear her jaw tightening as she spoke. “However, at the speeds we’re going to approach, these fluctuations are likely to cause no noticeable effect.”

Scott chuckled. “Lieutenant, it’s the little things that usually get ye into trouble. We had ‘minor fluctuations’ in the Enterprise’s warp engines the first time we took her out after her refit, and we ended up in a wormhole and almost got ourselves killed.”

Talev stood silently for a moment, and Scott got the distinct impression that he was being sized up by the younger officer. “Mr. Scott, the Enterprise’s intermix formulas are remedial mathematics when compared to the technology we’re working with here. We will manage just fine. I would like you to just sit back and enjoy your ride today, and to be prepared for a potential redefinition of warp speed when we understand it.”

Neither convinced by nor impressed with the Andorian’s assertions, Scott nevertheless held back from voicing his doubts when he saw the cautioning look on al-Khaled’s face. For his friend’s sake, he attempted a small smile as he regarded Talev zh’Thren.

“Well, in that case, Lieutenant, best of luck to ye. As they say, fortune favors the bold.”

Just as he thought he might get away before his desire to throttle the young officer got the best of him, Talev decided to say one more thing.

“This is hardly a matter of luck or fortune, sir. We are here because of attention to research and application of our skill. Confidence, Mr. Scott. That’s what they’re teaching in the Academy these days.”

Al-Khaled must have sensed his rising ire, because Scott quickly felt his friend’s hand on his shoulder before he asked, “Do they also teach patronizing behavior toward superior officers, Lieutenant?”

“No, sir,” Talev said, stiffening at the rebuke and shaking her head quickly. Pausing for a moment, she finally asked, “Permission to return to my departure preparations, sir?”

Nodding assent, al-Khaled waited until the Andorian was out of earshot before turning his attention back to an almost seething Scott.

“She certainly paid attention to her Academy cockiness course,” Scott said.

“Scotty, she’s young and full of herself,” al-Khaled replied. “For her, this is like being in the locker room before the big game. I’ll talk to her about it later, but right now I need her focused on her

prelaunch duties.”

Shaking his head, Scott sighed in exasperation as he cast a final look about the bustling engineering room. “Why do I get the sudden feeling that this is going to be a very long day?”

Montgomery Scott had always believed that the very atmosphere of a starship's bridge demanded action from its occupants. The constant barrage of sound, the flashing of indicators and switches, the flurry of personnel either at their posts or moving from station to station lent an almost palpable charge to the air.

Therefore, it did not seem right that he would be idly occupying a chair hugging the perimeter of the Chandley's upper bridge deck, crammed out of the way at the edge of the turbolift alcove.

"I feel like I'm sittin' on my hands here, Mahmud," he said as he swiveled to his left, moving his legs from the path of a passing Kelvan engineer. "You know this is killin' me."

Al-Khaled smiled as he proffered the padd that had been resting in his lap. "You want something to do? You can write my report to Starfleet." When Scott shook his head at the offer, al-Khaled shrugged, returning the padd to his lap. "You're supposed to be a guest here, Scotty. Enjoy yourself and let somebody else worry about the small stuff for once."

"Aye, just a wee shakedown, as ye said." But was it as simple as that? According to al-Khaled, Starfleet was most interested in the results of this test. If the Kelvans truly were on the cusp of some important advance in propulsion technology, such an accomplishment stood to benefit not only the Kelvans, who were now poised to take the next step in their quest for identity within their adopted family, but the Federation as well.

"I guess you could slide over there and eavesdrop," al-Khaled said, indicating the engineering station where Talev and Tomar were consulting the array of display monitors. "We're well enough away from New Kelva by now to engage the drive. I wonder if there's a problem."

"Now you're just goadin' me," Scott said, a smile creasing his features. "I'll stay put, if ye don't mind." He let his eyes wander over the other bridge stations, several of which were unmanned. Stations others, such as the weapons control alcove just to the left of the main viewer, had been removed entirely, the gaping holes in the consoles where keypads and monitors had once been were now covered with plastisteel plating. It was yet another stark reminder to Scott that this vessel's days as an active ship in service to Starfleet were behind her.

"They might find something for us to do yet," al-Khaled said. "With only a skeleton crew aboard, anything's possible. I was surprised when Tomar said that only eighteen people would be onboard for this test. That's not even a tenth of this ship's normal complement."

Scott understood his friend's concern. This was not his first run-in with extreme shipboard automation, after all. The mishaps of Richard Daystrom's failed M-5 computer test on the *Enterprise* were still fodder for much debate, especially in the Starfleet engineering community, and had provided lessons that Scott himself would never forget.

He watched as Talev and Tomar stepped down into the bridge's command well and began to speak i

quiet tones to the occupant of the captain's chair, Hanar. Scott recognized the dark-haired, slight built man as another of the Kelvans who had hijacked the Enterprise. For that matter, the woman seated at the helm position was also familiar to him. He could not remember her name, but he was sure that she had also been part of that small group who had caused so much trouble for him and his shipmates.

"I'd have thought the Kelvans would have given up their humanoid appearance by now," Scott noted quietly as he watched the aliens at work.

"Interesting, isn't it?" al-Khaled replied. "I've read Captain I mean Admiral Kirk's report about how the Kelvans had encased themselves in a type of 'shell' in order to appear human and better interact with our technology during their voyage to the Andromeda galaxy on the Enterprise. I guess the same mindset is what led them to retain their humanoid appearance even after all these years." He shrugged. "Too bad, really. So far as I know, no one has ever seen any Kelvans in their natural form."

Scott's attention was drawn to Talev as the young Andorian returned to the engineering station, spending several moments examining the information on the console's displays. "Shipboard energy readings are optimal. Everything is in line with our computer simulations. I would say we're ready."

Nodding at the report, Hanar toggled a switch on the arm of the command chair. "This is Hanar. We are preparing to engage the primary drive. All personnel mind your stations and report any anomalies to the bridge immediately."

Apparently realizing that she was being watched, Talev turned in her seat to face Scott and al-Khaled. "Everything is proceeding according to plan, gentlemen. There's nothing to be concerned about."

"But an engineer is always concerned, Lieutenant," Scott replied. "And even if everything does happen as planned, an engineer is still concerned because there's always next time."

To Scott's surprise, Talev seemed to ponder his words rather than arrogantly discard them out of hand as he had expected. If she was going to respond to him, however, her opportunity was lost as Hanar spoke once again, this time to the female Kelvan seated at the helm.

"Drea, lay in the course for Starbase 22." Turning to face the communications station he added, "Jah please alert them that we are ready to commence our test." Scott knew that sensors on the starbase would record the Chandley's passage, as well as provide a marker for the distance and speed portions of the test.

Waiting patiently for confirmation that his instructions had been carried out, Hanar calmly relayed his next order. "Engage the drive and accelerate to warp three." The order was as much a formality as anything else. The computer system designed and installed aboard the Chandley by the Kelvans would oversee the engines' operation, including monitoring of acceleration and performance once the desired speed was reached. The parameters of the test run had already been programmed by Talev, so Drea's duties in this regard would be limited to simply ordering the computer to carry out its predetermined instructions.

As the command was initiated, Scott sensed a quiver in the soles of his feet and the pit of his stomach. It was a feeling familiar to the engineer, yet tinged with a hint of uncertainty as, in his mind's eye, he

saw the warp field created by the Chandley's engines flare into existence. Scott imagined himself being pressed back in his chair as the ship entered subspace, a sensation he knew was wholly artificial thanks to the effectiveness of inertial dampers.

"Warp one," Drea reported, issuing updates as the ship continued to accelerate. Taking his eyes from the main viewer and its almost hypnotic field of streaking stars, Scott noted Tomar studying one of the monitors at the science station and wondered why the Kelvan had not issued any sort of status report since the ship had gone into warp.

Then the hairs on the back of his neck stood up at the precise instant a concerned frown crossed Tomar's features, and a full three seconds before Drea called out in alarm.

"Hanar! We're at warp four and continuing to accelerate!"

Without conscious thought Scott bolted from his chair, noting as he did so that al-Khaled had done the same thing. "What's the problem?" Scott asked.

"The computer doesn't appear to be following the test instructions," Drea replied, her brow furrowed as she hunched over the helm. "And it isn't responding to abort commands."

Talev rose from her chair and moved toward the science station. Scott turned to follow but felt al-Khaled's hand on his arm.

"This is their test, Scotty," al-Khaled said in a quiet voice. "Let them work."

His jaw torqued in growing annoyance, Scott heard Hanar call for Jahn to contact Starbase 22 as Talev and Tomar conferred at their console. He watched Tomar shake his head while Talev raised a hand as if to calm him.

Now what's that about?

As if in response, the young Andorian turned to Hanar. "We believe this is an anticipated effect of the new automated oversight system."

"How d'ye figure that?" The question exploded from Scott's mouth before he could do anything to suppress it, and he heard al-Khaled sigh in resignation. Despite that, he continued, "You expected the computer to deviate from its programming?"

"Of course not," Talev replied, and for a moment Scott detected a trace of the annoying demeanor the Andorian had displayed at their first meeting. "This is not a deviation." Turning back to Hanar, and effectively disregarding Scott in the process, she added, "The automation protocols are operating perfectly, and the computer is allowing the warp drive to operate at faster speeds because it knows the engines can accommodate the increased demands in a safe manner." She paused to look at the viewscreen and the streaking starfield displayed upon it. "Let it work, Hanar. I promise you that the computer will initiate safety protocols to avoid exceeding tolerance levels."

Much to Scott's dismay, Hanar appeared to consider the proposition. "Drea, what is our current speed?"

The Kelvan's voice quavered only slightly, but Scott noticed it nevertheless. "Warp seven-point-eight and continuing to accelerate."

"Ye dinna think that's approachin' tolerance levels?" Scott asked. "This ship isn't built for this kind of speed."

"Scotty," al-Khaled hissed, but Scott ignored him.

For the first time since the test had begun, Tomar turned from his station. "The ship is perfectly safe, Commander. We have not yet reached even the speed at which your vessel was traveling when we attempted to return to Andromeda."

Of course, this would make sense, Scott admitted. The Kelvans had obviously outfitted the Chandley with a similar form of reinforcement to the ship's structural integrity system that they had used on the Enterprise during their attempt to hijack her. The ship had reached speeds far in excess of its supposed limits, and according to Tomar had not even attained its maximum velocity before the hijacking had been thwarted.

"Commander," Talev said to him, "what you must understand is that this new drive generates a warp field unlike that of our Starfleet ships. In a sense, the field itself provides more protection for the vessel than would result from our current level of Federation technology. This turn of events is precisely what we need to study in our tests!"

This youngster is startin' to irritate me, Scott mused, tiring of the Andorian's condescending attitude but electing to say nothing about it for the time being. Once the situation was under control, however, he would have his say.

Swiveling in his seat, Hanar regarded al-Khaled. "Commander, you've not weighed in on this issue. What's your opinion?"

Frowning, al-Khaled studied Talev for a few seconds before responding. Finally, though, he nodded. "It seems that all systems appear to be functioning normally or as expected." Scott caught the hard glare his friend leveled on the young Andorian as he spoke. It eased his discomfort, if only slightly, that al-Khaled appeared to have the same concerns that he did. With that in mind, the engineer in him found he could not disagree with him when al-Khaled finished with, "Since we are on a test mission, I recommend we see where this takes us."

Nodding in approval, Hanar exchanged looks with the rest of the bridge staff before he said, "Very well, then. We shall continue."

Personnel turned to their respective tasks, and Scott only partially listened as Drea continued to report on the Chandley's acceleration. His attention was instead focused on the engineering station where Talev was standing, having resumed her study of the warp drive diagnostic displays. He could not tell whether she failed to notice his approach or simply chose not to acknowledge it.

Easy, he reminded himself. Let's keep things professional, eh?

"Lieutenant," he began as he stepped closer, "I don't wanna believe ye knew this would happen, b

I'm havin' a hard time of it."

Looking up at Scott, the Andorian smiled slightly in response. "We've known all along that this could be the next big step, that we could be opening the door to transwarp drive."

Transwarp. Of course. Supposedly the next big step in interstellar travel, engineers throughout the Federation had been carrying on about transwarp for years. Starfleet designers were at this very moment developing a prototype transwarp drive, and a whole new class of starship was being created to accommodate the new propulsion system. Scott himself was skeptical about the concept, but had the Kelvans developed the equivalent to transwarp, or even something superior? Was Talev merely consumed with ambition at the idea of being involved in such a staggering achievement? That would go a long way toward explaining her attitude, he decided.

"Ye knew that, did ye? Well, here's something that ye better learn quick," Scott said. "Engineers don't keep secrets. They don't hide tricks up their sleeves for their own amusement, and they don't keep a damn thing from their captains, even if the person playin' captain is a civilian overseerin' a test run. This may be a great feather in your cap, but don't be so quick to smile. Ye've got nothin' to be proud of just yet."

Talev's smile faded and her posture stiffened in response to the comment. "And why is that?"

"Because ye've not got us home yet."

Several seconds passed as Scott held the young engineer's gaze. Talev did not flinch from his scrutiny, but he could see that his words had struck some sort of chord in her. That was good, he decided. Hanar told him that she was a good officer, intelligent and full of passion. All that was really needed to fully tap her potential was experience, both practical and personal. Time would bring that, he knew, so long as she was receptive to the occasionally harsh lessons that experience would bring. Judging by what he had read in her eyes, he believed that would not be a problem.

A voice cut above the rest of the bridge noise, begging for his attention. It was Drea.

"Hanar, we have accelerated beyond our instruments' ability to measure."

Scott turned from Talev and moved toward the bridge railing as Hanar leaned forward in the center seat. "That's at least warp fifteen." Turning to Tomar he asked, "Engine status?"

Consulting the science displays, Tomar replied, "Engines are operating within tolerance levels, Hanar."

"What's our current position?" al-Khaled asked as he stepped down into the command well.

Drea tapped a series of controls on her console. "We are traversing Sector 68H now." Scott frowned at the reference. So far as he knew, this sector of space had been charted but never explored. Life was believed to exist here but nothing substantial had ever been detected with the probes sent into the region.

"I think we should rein her in, Hanar," Scott said. "I dinna like the idea of stampedin' into an unknown region of space."

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