

The Fracture-U.S.S. Seleya

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The Fracture-U.S.S. Seleya

by [mistral](#)

Summary

Shattering the multiverse.

Notes

Pt. 1 of 3

Captain Niklesh Sanjay sat in the lounge of McKinley Station, sipping red tea and gazing out of the window at his new command. A Challenger-class starship, the Seleya was currently in the primary dock to complete personnel and supply loading. Captain Sanjay could see worker bees attending to last-minute tasks, flitting about the Seleya's vertically-mounted nacelles and wide saucer section. A padd rested on the table in front of him, ignored in favor of the magnificent view. The quiet murmur of many beings filled the lounge with a background noise that reminded Sanjay of the warp drive aboard the Cochrane, his previous command. She'd been an Oberth-class, a tiny ship indeed. The Seleya was massive by comparison, 390 meters stem to stern with a crew of over 400. She wasn't as big as a Galaxy-class but Sanjay thought she was beautiful, a graceful schooner to sail amongst the stars. He sighed contentedly and tore his eyes away to peruse the padd in front of him. Tapping the interface, he began to read the dossiers of his new command crew.

Commander Carol M'Benga was a 29 year-old firebrand Sanjay had tapped for his First Officer as a counter-point to his own placid nature. Young for such a high rank, she had distinguished herself several times over the years both in battle and during missions of exploration. She had won a citation for bravery at Wolf 359 after rescuing 47 crewmen from the Chekov during the thick of the battle. Her service file stated she had been in command of the transport Tarawa, carrying torpedo reloads for the fleet, when the Chekov had been badly mangled by the Borg cube. Ignoring the fact that her ship was, in essence, a flying bomb, she had swooped in under the cube's fire and held position long enough to transport the remaining survivors off. Starfleet had been impressed enough to assign her as Second Officer on the Lexington for a one-year tour. During that time she had handled the clean-up of a botched First Contact at Kellen Four, doing so well that the Kell were even now being considered for Federation membership. Although some of her previous commanders had noted a proclivity towards acting on her first impulse, she had proven herself right more often than wrong. Sanjay wasn't sure if she was wildly lucky or one of those rare breeds who jumped from the beginning of the problem straight to the solution with no steps in between. Either way, he knew he tended towards conservatism and he figured she would open his eyes to new ideas.

As his Second Officer, Sanjay had requested a young Ferengi he had heard about during the war with the Dominion, one Lieutenant Nog. Nog had been serving as the Tactical Officer aboard the warship Defiant during the war and had fulfilled the same role aboard Deep Space Nine afterwards. Sanjay had been friends for some time with Captain Shelby of the Sutherland and when they had discussed his new command recently she had suggested Nog, who had requested a transfer to an exploration vessel. Shelby had told Sanjay some interesting stories during the war about the Ferengi's exploits. He was looking forward to meeting him and finding out if the tales were true.

Sanjay knew any deep space exploration vessel could live or die by its Science Officer's abilities to explain the unknown and he'd agonized over the decision of who to get for this role. There had been a number of candidates available, some old veterans and others newly-minted ensigns just out of the Academy. Unfortunately, the war years had left a stunning dearth in between. Between the hurry-up curriculum that pared away any "extra" education and the appalling casualties inflicted by the Dominion and the Breen young but seasoned science officers were mighty thin on the ground. He'd finally opted to go with a wet-behind-the-ears ensign from Arizona named Louis Perling. His academic record had been exemplary and several of his professors had compared him to legends like Hawking and Dyson. Also, during the fourth year survival exercise, Perling had been dropped 50 miles deep into the Rockies with nothing but the clothes on his back. This was a pretty standard procedure for seniors. They were expected to survive using their wits alone and return to the base camp within 3 days. Grades were given out based on their condition and appearance, as well as on elapsed time. Anyone unable to return within the 72 hour period was transported out via the subcutaneous transponder implanted in their arm. Perling had walked into camp on the evening of the second day carrying a haunch of venison over his shoulder. His hair had been combed at the time. Sanjay suspected there was more to Ensign Louis Perling than his academic record revealed.

Sanjay took a drink from his now-cold tea and set it hastily back on the table. He skimmed over the officers who had opted to remain with the Seleya after McGowan, her previous captain, had taken the promotion to Commodore and transferred to Fleet Command in San Francisco. Dr. Jesus Ramirez was familiar to Sanjay, they having run into each other a few times at receptions and diplomatic affairs. The soft-spoken Rigellian-Human commander often startled others when he spoke to them for the first time. Although the Vulcanoid genes of his Rigellian father dominated, giving him a non-human appearance, his voice was pure Latin American. Sanjay had enjoyed their conversations together, finding the doctor both erudite and funny.

Sanjay wasn't quite sure what to make of his new Security Officer. A graduate of Notre Dame before attending the Academy, Staff Sergeant Damian Mitchell had excelled at athletics, particularly football. Sanjay wasn't sure but he didn't think it was the same game he, himself, had played as a boy in New Delhi. Not if Mitchell's photo was anything to go by. The man was a mountain, over 2 meters tall and built large. He'd gone directly into the Fleet Special Forces training course upon graduation and then to active service with the Ninth Fleet on detached duty. Much of his service file previous to transferring aboard the Seleya at the end of the war was classified. Captain McGowan had given him very high ratings, though, so it seemed he knew his job.

Chief Engineer Lt. Commander Jerix was a twenty-year Starfleet veteran who seemed to go wherever he was needed. The Denobulan had postings in his record for Utopia Planetia, the Daystrom Institute, and the Academy of Engineering on Vulcan. He'd taught for two years at the S.C.E. facilities in Aberdeen and had done five years with the S.C.E. out in the field as well. The Seleya was the first regular posting to a ship in his long career, but with a recommendation in his service file from Montgomery Scott there was no question of his abilities. He'd been aboard the Seleya for the last 3 months overseeing her re-fit.

Sanjay checked the time and realized he needed to get on board for the swearing in ceremony. He put his tea in the reclaimator and straightened his dress jacket, then headed for the loading tube.

Carol watched him leaving the lounge. "Handsome," she thought. A distinguished looking man in his middle years, Captain Sanjay sported a full head of still-black hair and a Vandyke beard peppered with grey. He seemed confident and athletically trim. Carol wondered if he knew Kendo. He was built perfectly for the discipline and she would need a new sparring partner. Shaking her head, she headed off towards the ship. "Wouldn't do to be late my first day on the job," she murmured to her self.

SWEARING IN CEREMONY, U.S.S. Seleya 1400 HOURS

The shuttle bay of the Seleya was immense. Due to the linear design of the Challenger-class ships the warp core, which would ordinarily run vertically through the engineering hull and limit the length of the shuttle bay in most ships, instead ran horizontally. This allowed the designers to utilize the entire top half of the engineering hull as a shuttle bay and cargo area. The Seleya carried 8 shuttles instead of the typical 4, although they were currently holding station outside the ship, piloted by McKinley Station personnel. Instead, the entire complement of the Seleya was assembled in the bay at parade rest. A podium had been erected to face the crew and Admiral Janeway stood behind it, Sanjay to her immediate right. On the Admiral's left were M'Benga, Nog, Ramirez, Perling and Mitchell. Only Jerix was missing, and Sanjay figured he was exercising a Chief Engineer's unwritten prerogative to ignore ceremonial occasions in order to fine-tune the engines.

Admiral Janeway cleared her throat. "Pursuant to orders from Starfleet Command BuShips, Admiral Kathryn Janeway, Commanding, I hereby establish Captain Niklesh Sanjay as Officer, Commanding, of the U.S.S. Seleya. Computer, transfer all command protocols to Captain Sanjay, authorization Janeway, Omega, Alpha, Alpha, One."

"Confirmed." The computer spoke so all could hear. "Command transfer recognized. Protocols transferred."

Before anyone could applaud or otherwise react, Vulcan harp music began to play. Janeway smiled at the look of confusion on Sanjay's face. The massed crew parted right down the center, forming an aisle, down which marched Jerix in full dress uniform carrying a crate-sized box. He stopped in front of Sanjay, placing the box on the floor in front of his feet. Inside, Sanjay could see a piece of blackened metal about a meter long and wide. A piece of transparent aluminum covered the top of the box.

Jerix spoke. "Know this, Captain Niklesh Sanjay. Today you have taken command of more than a ship, you have taken command of a rich tradition. Within this box lies the only remaining piece of the first starship named Seleya, the ship which was chosen by the Vulcan High Command to make First Contact with Earth. After the foundation of the Federation the Seleya was the first Vulcan ship in Starfleet, where it served with distinction for many years. It was finally destroyed at the Battle of Donatu Five. This is all that remains. It is here to remind us of where we came from and to act as a reminder of the grand tradition of the name... Seleya. With your permission, sir, I will install it in a place of honor in the crew's lounge for all to see and reflect on." The music came to a close. Jerix waited expectantly.

Sanjay gave his first order as captain of the Seleya.

"Yes, Chief. Please do that." A cheer went up from the ranks.

M'Benga bellowed out, "Dismissed!" and the crew went to their stations. As they filtered out Jerix once more picked up the box and headed for the exit. Janeway turned to Sanjay.

"So, Captain. A momentous day for you, I imagine. I hope your voyages are fruitful. As the first ship with a charter of exploration since the war you are, in a way, in the vanguard of Starfleet's rededication to its primary mission. More hopes rest with you than you might imagine. Too many of our brethren have been tainted, sickened by all of the killing, all of the deaths. You are our breath of fresh air, captain."

Sanjay looked abashed. "I had thought the weight of a major command was enough of a burden on my shoulders. Between you and my Chief Engineer, I am near to staggering under the burden."

Janeway's eyes held a glitter that reflected her smile. "Captain, it is not a burden. Take it from me, what you are feeling is a blessing. As one ship's captain to another, let me say that it just takes a little time to realize it. Go with God, Captain."

"Thank you, Admiral Janeway," Sanjay said as Janeway called for transport from McKinley Station.

“Call me Kathryn,” she replied, and then she was gone.

OFFICER’S BRIEFING, U.S.S. SELEYA, 1500 HOURS

Captain Sanjay sat at the head of the table, waiting for his officers to settle into their seats. There were nods of acknowledgement between them as they organized themselves. Sanjay used the time to study each more closely.

Carol M’Benga was a true Nubian princess in appearance, with a classic beauty that hadn’t been created but merely was. Her movements were precise but elegant as a trained dancer. She seemed to flow into her chair on Sanjay’s left. Nog, on the other hand, had the herky-jerky body language common to most of the Ferengi Sanjay had met over the years. He seemed cheerful as he chattered at Jerix but his eyes held that look Sanjay thought of privately as “the million-year stare”. Sometime in the past, probably during the war, Nog had seen and done things that affected his soul. Jerix sat down like he was bellying up to a bar. His face was split in a wide smile as he listened to Nog. Louis Perling acted hesitant and Sanjay noted that he took a chair at the far end of the table from his captain. Jesus, on the other hand, slipped easily into the open chair on Sanjay’s right. Sgt. Mitchell sat with an economy of movement, keeping his back ramrod straight the entire time. Sanjay opened his mouth and the room grew silent.

“Greetings, everyone,” he began, “We are scheduled for departure at 1600 hours so I will try to make this brief. First, I want you all to know that I am looking forward to working with you. Each of you brings an excellent record with you and I’m sure that together we will meet or exceed Starfleet’s expectations of us. That having been said, let me explain our current orders.” Sanjay paused for a moment and stroked his beard. “Since the war ended Starfleet has been busy helping rebuild those worlds that were hardest hit by the Dominion, providing aid and ferrying supplies and personnel around to places that needed it the most. Due to the massive losses the Fleet sustained during the conflict the remainder of the available ships have been kept busy defending the frontier, putting down the occasional pirate and dealing with opportunists who looked on this as a chance to sneak one past Starfleet. The recent unpleasantness in the Briar Patch comes to mind. However,” he smiled, “I’m happy to say that with the latest wave of ships coming out of Copernicus and Utopia Plenitia, combined with the recent class of graduates from the Academy,” here he nodded at Louis, who gave him a nervous smile back, “Starfleet is ready to re-dedicate itself to its primary task. Seleya will be the first ship since the war with orders to go exploring. We are not tasked for any other duties, we are not to remain within Federation boundaries, we won’t be chasing Syndicate raiders. Our job is to go out and learn more about our galaxy. “

The reaction around the table was a chorus of enthused murmurs that warmed Sanjay’s heart. Focusing on Jerix he asked,

“Chief, are the engines checked out and ready?”

The Denobulan grinned harder, if that was possible. “Spic and span, Captain. We can leave anytime you would like.”

Sanjay nodded at him. “Commander M’Benga, everyone present and accounted for?”

“Yes, sir, all personnel had arrived as of 1400 hours. Bridge systems check out and the shuttles and runabouts have been returned to the bay.”

“Good,” Sanjay said. “Mr. Nog, I’d like you to check over our supplies down in the cargo bays. It has been my experience that something always gets left out or forgotten.”

Nog stood. “I’ll get right on it, Captain.” He headed for the door.

Sanjay also stood up. “Ok, places everyone. Let’s prepare for departure. Mr. Nog?”

Nog stopped in the open doorway. “Yes, Captain?”

“Please report to the bridge when you’ve finished your inspection. I’d like you to take us out of spacedock.” Nog gave an enthusiastic “Yes, sir!” before stepping out into the corridor. The remainder of the crew headed for their stations throughout the ship.

McKinley Station, U.S.S. Seleya, 1600 HOURS

When Nog walked onto the bridge the rest of the command crew were already at their stations. After receiving a whispered update from the Andorian ensign at the helm Nog displaced him. “Awaiting orders, Captain.”

“Was everything ship-shape and Bristol fashion down in the cargo bays, Mr. Nog?” Sanjay inquired.

“Actually, sir, someone failed to load an entire crate of self-sealing stem bolts. I arranged for Supply and Logistics to transport it over.”

Sanjay said, “Very good, Mr. Nog. Commander M’Benga, if you would, please?”

Carol stepped up to a position just behind Nog’s seat. “Mr. Nog, clear docking clamps and umbilicals. Light a fire in the engines and prepare to move us out.”

Nog looked puzzled for a moment. “Light a fire...oh, aye-aye, Commander. Umbilicals cleared. Impulse engine on line.”

Carol rested a hand on the backrest of Nog’s chair. “Take us out Mr. Nog. And Mr. Nog?” He craned his head around to look at her. “Try not to scratch the paint.”

Nog grinned hugely, showing a mouthful of pointy teeth. “Aye-aye, Commander. No scratches. Got it. Activating thrusters now.” Slowly, with a grace belying her size, the Seleya eased out of spacedock. As she cleared the dock Earth drifted momentarily across the viewscreen and then they faced the deep black of space. “Going to one-quarter impulse...now!” Nog said.

“Accelerate to full impulse after we pass Jupiter Station, Mr. Nog.” Sanjay ordered, standing up. “I’ll be in my ready room. Commander, you

have the bridge. Take us to warp once we clear the gravitational limit. Make course for Starbase 31. That's to be our jump-off point for the great unknown." He headed for the door as Carol sat down in his place.

"Aye, sir," she confirmed.

SOMEWHERE OUT PAST MARS, U.S.S. SELEYA, 1730 HOURS

After meeting with Sgt. Mitchell to go over the current state of the Security Dept. (good, verging on excellent, if Sanjay was any judge of things,) Sanjay had unpacked a few mementos and placed them in his ready room. The only decorations he had inherited from Captain McGowan were a pair of paintings. The first depicted the original Seleya in a laser print burned into a sheet of brushed aluminum. The second was a gloriously done oil and canvas of the ship's namesake mountain on Vulcan. On the credenza beneath them there now rested a hand-carved, wooden figurine of his first command, the Cochrane. The statuette had been a thank-you gift from Captain Akinola of the Bluefin after Sanjay had arranged for a case of Andorian rum to end up in the Border Cutter's hold. On the wall opposite his desk Sanjay had hung a mandela, a gift from his parents when he had graduated Starfleet Academy. On the desk, itself, sat a smiling jade Buddha incense holder. Currently, a lightly smoldering jasmine stick protruded from it. Although a cosmopolitan starship captain in most things, Sanjay still preserved a few of the cultural habits of his youth in India.

Sanjay was watching Jupiter slide past his ready room window when he felt the ship accelerate to full impulse. The Seleya gave a mighty lurch, as though it had run smack into a brick wall. The Buddha, the Cochrane statuette, and Sanjay were all thrown violently to the floor. Sanjay's vision grew hazy and blurred with indescribable colors, his head began throbbing and then, darkness.

SIX MONTHS LATER, SAN FRANCISCO, STARFLEET COMMAND, ADMIRAL JANEWAY'S OFFICE

Admiral Janeway took the proffered padd from Cmdr. Reginald Barkley, who was standing in front of her desk. "These are the Science Division's final conclusions regarding the Seleya Incident?" she inquired. Reg nodded, seating himself across from her.

"Yes, Admiral. It seems that all of the unusual activity in the vicinity of Jupiter Station over the last few years was the cause of the problem. Time-traveling Borg, failed transwarp experiments and a few other factors combined to weaken the structure of space/time near Jupiter. This weakening caused what can only be described as a 'fracture' in space, similar in some ways to a cosmic string. When the Seleya accelerated to full impulse it slammed straight into the fracture. Although we only recovered a few small pieces of hull plating, our best theoretical physicists assured me that there was no way the Seleya could have survived. Either the stresses would have shredded the ship on a molecular level according to one theory or it would have been compacted into an object the size of a pea or smaller. At least, that's what the other dominant theory holds. We really don't know very much on a practical level about cosmic strings or space/time fractures. Either way, the Seleya is in all likelihood destroyed with all hands." Reg had a pained look on his face. "I'm sorry, Admiral. The only good news I have is that as long as our ships stay at one-half impulse or below until they reach the orbit of Pluto they won't suffer the same fate. We're working on a way to seal the fracture but right now, as I said, all we have are theories."

Janeway looked sadly at the padd in her hand. "Will you be attending the memorial ceremony at the Hall of Ships on Saturday?" she asked.

"Of course, Admiral. I had been friends with Chief Engineer Jerix for several years now. It's the least I can do." Janeway nodded slowly.

"I'll see you Saturday, then," she said as Reg made his way to the door. He waved hesitantly and left.

PART 2-Watch That First Step

Captain Niklesh Sanjay had a headache. That was the first thing he noticed. Then the blood dripping down his face became apparent. Pushing himself up off of the floor, pain shot through his right arm. He collapsed back to the floor. "C'mon, Sanjay, you're the Captain. You have to get up!" he thought. After a second try he was able to assume a sitting position. Grasping the edge of his desk with his left hand, he slowly pulled himself to his feet. The room seemed fuzzy at first as his head swam. He waited a moment for his balance to return and then staggered to the bridge doors. When they opened he clung to the frame with his good hand and surveyed the carnage in front of him.

Nog was the first one he noticed. He was lying on his back, unconscious, both arms burned from fingertips to elbow. Helm control was a charred mess, still smoking in places. Next to Nog lay M'Benga. She, too, was unconscious but the blast from the helm console hadn't touched her, protected, apparently, by Nog and his chair. To Sanjay's left the environmental control station was blazing merrily and the ensign that had manned the post was laying face-down in a pool of his own blood. From Sanjay's vantage point most of the secondary posts were either shorted out or on fire due to overloads. The main viewscreen was showing an almost artistic blend of colored bands and grey fuzz but no clear image to speak of. Another ensign, part of Jelix's engineering team, was slumped over the tactical console behind the command chairs. A tinny voice was coming out of the arm speaker in Sanjay's chair.

"Engineering to Bridge. Engineering to Bridge. Is anyone alive up there? Hellooooo! Can you here me?" Jelix's normally cheerful voice sounded stressed and worried. As Sanjay stumbled through the wreckage of his bridge over to the chair Jelix continued to speak.

"Please, someone be alive up there! I don't want to have to take command ! I'm just not the commanding type! And who will watch after my engines? Hellooooo! Engineering to Bridge."

"Bridge here," Sanjay rasped, wiping the blood from his eyes, "Damage report, Chief."

"Systems are out all over the ship. I can't even begin to tell you the extent of the damage. The only positive thing I can report is that the warp core is stable. We have at least two dead down here and a handful of walking wounded. I have my people trying to get an assessment but with all of these systems shorted out...." He trailed off.

"Bridge to Engineering, understood. Get back to me when you have something. Bridge out." Sanjay snapped over to another frequency.

“Bridge to Sickbay.” After a moment Dr. Ramirez responded.

“Sickbay here. No, no, take him first, he’s got a sucking chest wound. And get some gel on her burns before she scratches her own eyes out! Madre di mios! Captain, I don’t know what happened but I’ve got over forty wounded in here and at least six dead!”

“I don’t know what happened, yet, either but right now I’m the only conscious person on the Bridge. I have at least two medical emergencies that I can identify including a crewman with head trauma and another with severe burns. Get a medical team up here now, Jesus!” Sanjay’s voice had begun to recover its former timbre and the tone of command was unmistakable. Dr. Ramirez didn’t even bother to reply. A second later a trauma team materialized on the Bridge. One medtech immediately beamed back to Sickbay with Nog in his arms. Another pronounced the ensign at the environmental station dead. “I never even had a chance to meet him,” Sanjay thought, and then brought his attention back to what a third medtech was telling him as he checked M’Benga.

“Sir, I don’t believe the Commander is actually hurt. A significant portion of the crew seems to have been knocked out by…whatever that was. The farther we get from the heavily shielded areas like Sickbay and Engineering, the worse the effect seems to have been.”

“Can you give her something to revive her? I could really use her help right now.” Sanjay sat down in his chair as a wave of nausea rolled over him.

“Yes, Captain. Then I’d better take a look at you. I think that arm you’re cradling might be broken.” As he said this he pulled a hypospray from his medkit and applied it to M’Benga’s neck.

Sanjay waved him off. “Help the ensign behind me first. I need that viewscreen working and sensors running so we don’t have a repeat of whatever just happened.” When the medtech opened his mouth to protest Sanjay met him with a steely gaze. The medtech closed his mouth and went to help the ensign at Tactical. At that moment the turbolift opened and a damage control team began to filter onto the Bridge, followed by Sgt. Mitchell. Mitchell had a purple bruise above his right eye but seemed alright otherwise. Taking in the scene on the bridge, he nodded to the Captain and strode over to the navigation console adjacent to the blasted helm panel. He immediately began cross-connecting circuits to dual-purpose the navigational controls. Meanwhile, the ensign at Tactical had been revived and was attempting to stabilize the viewscreen. Commander M’Benga got to her feet, albeit a bit unsteadily. Glancing at the viewscreen, she turned towards Sanjay and asked,

“Captain, what the hell just happened?”

“Frankly, Commander, I had hoped you could tell me that,” he replied. Jerix chose that moment to interrupt.

“Engineering to Bridge. Captain, are you still with me?”

“Bridge here, Chief. What have you got for me?” M’Benga made her way to her seat as Jerix answered,

“Well, the impulse drive is out and won’t be restored for at least two hours. I should have sensors online shortly. There seems to be a couple of minor hull breaches in the shuttle bay. We are sealing those now. We have no communication with Deck 18 at this time and the turbolifts are all signaling ‘Obstruction Detected’. I have a man running diagnostics on the circuits but I don’t think that’s the problem. We can’t communicate with anyone down there, either. I sent Ensign Raffees through the Jeffries tubes down to 18 but its going to take him a while to climb down that far. I’ll let you know when something new develops there. Also, according to exterior cameras, we have a, well,….um, a dent in the front of the saucer section.”

Sanjay and M’Benga looked at each other incredulously. “Understood. Bridge out.”

Carol looked up at the still-malfunctioning viewscreen. “A dent. So we did hit something! But what? And why didn’t the navigational deflectors avoid it?” She seemed to be talking to herself. “I mean, its not like we crashed into Io or something. We’d have seen that coming.”

Sanjay cut into her monologue. “Commander, why don’t you try to help the ensign fix the main viewscreen?”

“Uh,yessir, I’m sorry. “Looking abashed, she walked around to Tactical and began working alongside the young Bolian engineer, still muttering to herself. The medtech came over to Sanjay.

“Sir, please let me treat you. You have a nasty scalp wound and that arm looks bad.”

The medtech looked stubborn and Sanjay finally relented. The young man began running a dermal regenerator over his forehead. After he finished he immobilized the broken arm and gave the captain a mild painkiller. The waves of nausea finally ceased, for which Sanjay was grateful. “You really should have a doctor fix that but this rig will hold you for now. I have to get back to Sickbay, sir, things were pretty chaotic down there.” Sanjay waved a dismissal with his good hand and the young man headed for the turbolift. As he was leaving Sgt. Mitchell spoke up.

“Captain, I have helm functional. As soon as sensors come back on line we can steer.” His voice was flat and matter-of-fact.

“You are a man of many talents, Sergeant. Can you also fly this ship?” Receiving a reply in the affirmative Sanjay continued, “Then if you don’t mind, I’d like you to take the helm until we get this mess sorted out.” Sgt. Mitchell nodded, taking his seat at Navigation. Sanjay was about to ask M’Benga about the viewscreen status when it suddenly came to life. The imaging system showed Jupiter directly in front of them.

“Oh, excellent work! I was about to ask how it was going,” Sanjay said.

“Um, Captain?” M’Benga responded, “Where is Jupiter Station?” The bridge went silent as everyone from the captain to the damage control team members stared at the viewscreen. “Do you think we ran it over?” M’Benga asked no one in particular.

“Begin scanning for debris,” Sanjay snapped, all business. “I want to know where the station went and I want to know what we hit if that

wasn't it. Something put a dent in my ship!"

With an "Aye, sir!" M'Benga went to work. After a few moment she looked up from Tactical. "Captain, not only can I not find the station, I can't find any debris either. It's like it was never there! I am picking up some very strange readings near by, however. There seem to be some odd fluctuations on the level of sub space but I really don't know how to interpret what I'm detecting." Sanjay could tell it hurt her to admit this. "Captain, I suggest we get Ensign Perling to look at these readings. This seems more in keeping with his specialties."

"That's a fine idea, Commander, but Ensign Perling was in Astrometrics, down on Deck 18. How far from us is this phenomenon?"

"About five kilometers, sir."

"Sgt. Mitchell, put at least a hundred kilometers between us and whatever Commander M'Benga detected. Commander, keep monitoring and alert me to any changes. Bridge to Engineering."

"Engineering here, Captain. I assume you would like an update?"

"That is correct, Chief. What's going on with my ship?"

"Well, sir, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that the turbolifts are no longer claiming there's an obstruction in the shafts on Deck 18." Sanjay started to smile. "The bad news is that's because all of the shaft sensors on Deck 18 have melted in the fire."

Sanjay grew worried. Fire in space was a very bad thing indeed. "How bad of a fire, Chief?"

"Oh, it is bad Captain. Fortunately the emergency bulkheads on Deck 17 snapped into place and contained it. Internal sensors are back online and it would appear that all of the survivors are gathered in Astrometrics. Although we can't communicate with them, the fire is so intense I have to assume they are sealed in. That being the case, I really think our best bet is to have a shuttle cut a hole into Deck 18 at the end opposite of Astrometrics using its phasers. Then the fire will vent harmlessly into space."

"Alright, Chief, I'll go with your recommendation. I'm sending Sgt. Mitchell out in the Terra Nova. Bridge out." Sanjay looked at the expectant Mitchell. "I can't believe I'm saying this. Sergeant, would you be so kind as to blow a hole in my ship?"

"My pleasure, sir," he replied, exiting the Bridge as a replacement took his place at Navigation.

Sanjay rubbed his temples with his good hand. "What a day I am having," he said.

PART 3-Where Are We?

It had been nearly fifteen hours since the accident had occurred. Sanjay hadn't slept in almost twenty-seven hours but large amounts of Turkish coffee were keeping him going and mostly alert. He knew he'd have to rest soon but he wanted to get an assessment of the ship's overall status first so he'd called a meeting of his senior staff. Everyone was in the briefing room except Nog, who was still recovering from the burns he'd received. Although nearly everyone had managed to snatch a short nap, as Sanjay looked around the table he saw exhaustion and haggard looks on nearly every face. The lone exception was Jerix, who's Denobulan physiology operated on a different circadian rhythm. He insisted on looking chipper and fresh. Some primitive part of Sanjay's hindbrain wanted to reach out and strangle him. He called the briefing to order instead.

"All right, lets get started. Dr. Ramirez, I guess we need to get the worst of it over with. Casualties?"

Jesus took a sip of his tea and cleared his throat. "The final count was probably better than we deserved. We lost twelve people in various outlying parts of the ship, mostly due to plasma burns from ruptured conduits and severe blunt-force trauma. Deck 18..." At this Jesus paused and his eyes took on a haunted look, "Deck 18 would have been a lot worse if Ensign Perling hadn't kept his head when the fire broke out and herded so many into Astrometrics. Even so, based on simple head counts and DNA samples from the affected areas of Deck 18 we lost an additional twenty-two people. Most of them were science specialists due to the high number of labs located on 18. I still have sixteen in Sickbay, including Lt. Nog, who will need a few days to a few weeks to recover from burns they sustained. I had to put Crewman DeSoto into stasis until we reach a Starbase or planet-based medical facility. He has burns over 90% of his body as well as a fractured spine. The burns are deep tissue injuries which merely compounds the difficulties in treating him."

Sgt. Mitchell spoke up, "Doctor, what do you mean by 'deep tissue injuries'?"

Jesus held his gaze calmly as he answered, "He's burnt so bad his bones are charred in places." Mitchell took the information phlegmatically but Ensign Perling and Commander M'Benga both looked nauseated. "Captain, I think you should know that there may be issues with Lt. Nog. I checked his records and he was hurt quite badly during the war. He apparently had some trauma issues afterwards. He hasn't woken up yet- I've been keeping him in an induced coma-but I will have to revive him before he's fully healed. I don't know what his reaction will be to this injury."

Sanjay nodded his head. "Thank you, Jesus. I'll keep that in mind. Jerix, what's the ship's status?"

Jerix smiled and replied, "With the exception of Deck 18 all of the repairs have been completed. We even managed to get the missing hull plating replaced. Deck 18," and here he frowned, "Is another matter entirely. In spacedock we could repair it all in a week. On our own we would need at least three weeks and we wouldn't be able to get it the way it was. As the good doctor pointed out, many of our science labs were destroyed in the fire. A lot of very specialized equipment was lost, equipment we are not capable of replacing. We have, however, managed to patch the hole Sgt. Mitchell punched into the deck. We are currently replacing plasma conduits but that will take time as I said."

"Thank you, Jerix. Tell your team and, Jesus, this goes for your people as well, tell them all I said, 'Well done!'. They have really come

through in this crisis.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Ramirez and Jerix chorused.

“Ensign Perling, I wanted to let you know that I’m putting you up for a commendation. The reports I received from other crewmembers on Deck 18 say you risked your life to lead them to safety. I do have a question, though. How did you know Astrometrics would be the safest place on the deck?”

The young ensign looked down with embarrassment for a moment at the Captain’s compliment before answering, “Well, um, sir, some of the equipment in Astrometrics is pretty sensitive so the room was built with virtually no power feeds or plasma lines running through the walls. I just figured it was safe because there was less fuel to feed the fire.”

“Very good thinking, Ensign. Ok, people, now for the big puzzler. As you all are probably aware Jupiter Station isn’t there anymore. We didn’t “run it over” as has been suggested-it literally is not there. I’ve had Commander M’Benga and Ensign Perling working on the problem. Commander?”

Carol wore a very troubled look on her face. Taking a deep breath she said,

“Jupiter Station isn’t there because it wasn’t built. The communications array over Titan is missing as well. For that matter, Christopher City isn’t even there. There are structures on the Moon and some fairly large objects in Earth orbit but we are too far out to distinguish details. Subspace frequencies are mostly silent, although we did pick up a fragment of a transmission from deep space that sounded Klingonese. It seemed to be coming from the vicinity of Alpha Centauri but it didn’t last long enough to get anything useful from it. We have detected a large number of low-frequency E-M emissions coming from Earth and the surrounding area though.”

“Aw, crap!” Sgt. Mitchell exclaimed. Everybody looked at him curiously.

“Did you have something to add, Sergeant?” Sanjay asked.

“Sir, it sounds as though we’ve traveled back in time. I’m something of a student of Earth military history and the kind of emissions Commander M’Benga is referring to are radio waves. Earth utilized radio exclusively until the 2060s when subspace communication was discovered. We must be back in the 20th or early 21st century!” For once, the Sergeant looked worked up about something.

Even as he said this Louis was shaking his head. “Ensign Perling?” queried Sanjay.

“S-sorry, Sgt. Mitchell. I thought of that already. I did a star “shoot” and all of the planets and stars align correctly with our own time. We are definitely not in the past.” Louis seemed intimidated by the big man, avoiding eye contact, but he lifted his chin defiantly as he stated his conclusion. Not for the first time since meeting him Sanjay had the thought that there was more to Louis Perling than he let show.

“If I may,” Commander M’Benga interjected, “Whatever is going on, we’ll eventually find out if we stay here. About 2 hours after the accident, or whatever, occurred a fleet of five ships broke Earth orbit on a direct course for Jupiter. They would have to be fairly large for us to even detect at this range. I suspect they are some kind of welcoming committee. In the meantime, I have some people trying to intercept some of the radio signals in order to get an idea of what’s going on back on Earth. We should be getting results soon. The hardest part is getting our instruments to “step down” to the proper frequencies.”

“Commander,” Sanjay said, “When can we expect this fleet to arrive?”

“Oh,” she said with a twinkle in her eye, “In about three weeks.”

“Three weeks?!” This from Jerix. “What are they doing, walking here?” Whether from exhaustion or the sheer incongruity of the situation, everybody chuckled aloud.

“Well, I did say ‘eventually’, Chief!” Carol had a smile on her face that matched the one Jerix usually sported.

“Why is it taking them so long to get here?” Dr. Ramirez asked M’Benga.

She became serious to the point of solemnity, “The ships seem to have an ion drive similar to ones designed at JPL in the 1970s. They aren’t even fusion-powered. We can detect clear evidence of fission reactions. The DY sleeper ships had more sophisticated engines. Whoever these people are, it is highly unlikely they can help us get home. Wherever home is, that is.” Faces around the table turned thoughtful at this last statement.

“That being said, Ensign, what can you tell us about the cause of the accident. Did it involve the phenomenon Commander M’Benga detected near Jupiter?” Sanjay waited expectantly.

Louis took a deep breath and said, “I believe it was responsible but I cannot say conclusively without further study.” Now he sounded almost eager as he warmed to his topic. “Although it bears a similarity to a cosmic string it also displays some of the aspects of the subspace ribbon known as The Nexus. There is a fluctuation in subspace being projected as a sort of nimbus, which is how we can detect it with sensors. It isn’t solid, though, so the navigational deflectors never saw it in our path. As to how it dented our hull or how it brought us here I just can’t say at the moment. This is unlike anything in the databanks, a truly unique anomaly. I’m not even sure where “here” is. I’ll have to run some tests and experiments to get more answers.”

“Ensign, you say it has aspects of The Nexus. I’ve read the reports filed by the Enterprise. Is it possible this is all a hallucination?” Sanjay looked worried at the thought.

“No, sir,” Louis said, “That occurred to me too so I took the liberty of running through Sokal’s Thought Experiments on Reality. Its kind of like a process of elimination reality check. It was developed on Vulcan about two hundred years before First Contact and its considered a very important tool by most theoretical physicists for separating “real” from “hypothetical”. This is real, sir.”

"I'll have to take your word on that, Ensign. Run your experiments and try to figure out what happened. Commander, get those signal intercepts as fast as you can. I need information before I can decide how we should proceed. If those ships are using a primitive form of ion propulsion I doubt they are warp-capable. That being said, I may be bumping into Prime Directive issues. It might be a good idea if we kept Jupiter between us and Earth. Use a probe to relay the radio signals to us. I doubt they can detect anything that small. Chief, I'd like a complete list of the non-replaceable equipment from Deck 18 as soon as you can put it together. Sgt. Mitchell, stay apprised of any new information regarding that fleet. We don't know if they are hostile or not but if things turn sour I want to have as clear an understanding of their capabilities as possible. Jesus, keep me updated on your patients' progress, particularly Nog. That's all, people, dismissed." Sanjay stood.

As the others filed out Carol came up to him. "Captain, why don't you get some sleep. The worst has passed and I can handle things. I was going to do my signal analysis from the bridge anyway. You should rest."

Sanjay opened his mouth to protest automatically and then closed it again. He realized she was right. "Ok, Commander. But make sure the rest of the senior officers get some rest as well. Yourself included. As Head of Security, Mitchell is authorized to stand Bridge watch. Let him so you can sleep some, too. After you get a team on those signals," he added.

"Aye, sir," she said as Sanjay headed for his cabin.

When Sanjay awoke he was momentarily disoriented. Then the events of the last twenty-four hours caught up with him. After a quick sonic shower and a continental breakfast he headed for the Bridge. Commander M'Benga was there to greet him. She looked fresher than when last he'd seen her. He assumed she'd managed to get some sleep as well.

"Hello, Captain. You look better."

"Thank you, Commander. As do you. Status?"

"We are holding position "behind" Jupiter from the oncoming fleet. Dr. Ramirez is currently off duty and sleeping by my order. Sgt. Mitchell is also resting." She gave a little smirk. "I had to practically wrestle Ensign Perling out of Astrometrics but he finally went and got some sleep too. He just returned to Astrometrics a few minutes ago."

"Excellent. Any progress on those radio signals?"

She glanced covertly at the other crewmembers on the Bridge. "Perhaps we should talk in your Ready Room, sir." Sanjay nodded.

"Ensign Kolb," he said, addressing the young, Bolian man at Tactical, "We'll be in my Ready Room. You have the Bridge. Call me if our situation changes." The ensign looked startled but came around to the command chair as they exited.

Sanjay offered M'Benga a seat in front of his desk and crossed to the replicator. "Would you care for anything to drink?" he asked.

"Whatever you're having would be fine, sir." She replied.

"Computer, two coffees, Turkish, black, sweet." He carried the drinks back to the desk and took his seat on the other side. "All right, Commander, what have you got."

M'Benga had snatched up a padd from her seat when they left the Bridge and she consulted it now. "Well, sir, the first thing we noticed once we were able to rig up a proper receiver was that very few of the transmissions, percentage-wise, were in English. Most of what we've detected the translator has identified as a dialect of Mandarin with a number of Arabic loan words mixed in." Sanjay looked intrigued as he sipped on his coffee. "We gathered enough information overall to build a pretty clear picture of Earth as it is here." Understanding dawned on Sanjay's face at her phrasing.

"This is a parallel universe, isn't it?" he asked.

She looked grim. "Yes, sir, it is. And it is not the best of all possible worlds, which is why I wanted to tell you about it in private first. After what I'm about to tell you, you may want to pat yourself on the back for placing the ship in hiding. The only good thing about this place is that their technology is so far behind us they pose virtually no threat in terms of ship-to-ship combat.

From what we've gleaned this world followed our own until just after the Eugenics Wars. Then things took a few twists.

On our own Earth World War Three killed roughly a quarter of humanity. On this world the figure was closer to half. Most of the difference was absorbed by the Western nations. For some reason we haven't determined, the anti-missile defenses of Nato and the United States weren't nearly as effective as they were on our Earth. When the shooting stopped many of the cities that survived our war were smoking ruins here. The infrastructure was damaged to a greater degree and the people who would have participated in the re-building, well, a lot of them were dead. That was the first straw." She paused to take a drink of her coffee and nearly choked. "Damn, that's strong!" Sanjay just chuckled and gestured for her to continue.

"We had Col. Green and his insane racial "cleansing" policies. Sad to say, they had him too. Somehow, he survived the destruction of Detroit, here, and went on to commit his favorite brands of atrocities. The problem was worse in the here and now, though. This Earth also had Saladin, a like-minded individual who detested the Western "devils". He came out of the ruins of the Middle East with an army of gun-toting crazies and an alliance with what was left of the ECON forces. Like our own Earth, the lines of nations had begun to blur in the years leading up to the showdown between the last two power blocs. There were thousands of people of European, Australian and American origin living in the East. Some had married locals. When Saladin was done with his little Crusade or "jihad" as he called it there wasn't a white face or a child of mixed marriage left alive between the Korean coast and Turkey. This caused a further "brain-drain"."

"Good lord!" Sanjay exclaimed. "How many did he kill?"

Carol shook her head. "Don't know, sir. We picked up a lot of television images as well as audio signals. I saw a photo of gallows in Tian Eh Mien Square dated 2041. There must have been a couple of hundred, each with four or five nooses and all of them were occupied. After Saladin finished his internal housecleaning he overran most of Europe. I don't know all of the politics of the last three hundred years but I've

caught references to a 'North American Protectorate' so I think some form of the ECON won the war in the end. The worst part from our point of view is stuff I caught on current news. I saw footage from a public park. Took me a minute to figure out why it looked familiar. It was where Starfleet Command San Francisco sits in our world. It was the execution of a convicted thief. They beheaded him. With a sword." Carol gave a small shudder. "Sir, whoever is on those ships, I don't think we want to meet them."

Sanjay frowned. "You are probably right. Leave me your report so I can look it over in detail, please. You'd better go relieve Ensign Kolb before he has a nervous breakdown in the Captain's chair." Carol nodded, setting the padd on his desk, and silently left the room. Sanjay picked it up and skimmed through parts of it. "No, not people I want to invite in for coffee," he thought to himself.

Challenger-class starship
Seleya is NCC-57247

PART 4-You Say Tomatoes

Staff Sergeant Damian Mitchell liked being posted to a starship. He liked pulling the Gamma shift on the bridge. It was quiet and peaceful. No Jem H'adar Firsts trying to eviscerate him. No Voortas sending waves of cannon fodder at him. No blowing up other peoples' toys. No comrades-in-arms dying at his feet. Just a quiet, relaxing shift on the bridge. So when Commander (Science Division) Marcel Fenier burst on to the Bridge and began bellowing into Mitchell's face and disturbing that peace Mitchell became annoyed. Most of the people who had annoyed Mitchell in the past had soon thereafter become dead, but Fenier didn't seem to be aware of that. Otherwise he might have handled himself differently.

"Mr. Mitchell, I cannot tolerate this a moment longer!" Fenier screamed. "You have to order that snot-nosed little punk out of there right this minute. What was the Captain thinking? I'm twenty years his senior and that little turd is telling me what to do?" The crewmen present were all staring at Fenier with open mouths but he didn't seem to notice. They knew Mitchell was not someone you raised your voice to but Fenier seemed to have missed that point altogether. As Mitchell stood up from the command chair to face him Fenier continued his rant. "The Captain may have thought it amusing to put a mere ensign in as the Science Officer but I am not taking another order from him! I need that Astrometrics lab and I need you to order that, that, ...kid out of there right this minute!" It was at this point that reality caught up with Fenier. He had started his diatribe at eye-level with Mitchell but he finished it craning his neck upwards to look into Mitchell's face. What he saw there seemed to disturb him and the color drained out of his face. "I, I, I mean, perhaps..." He trailed off like a balloon with its air let out.

Sgt. Mitchell bent over until his nose nearly touched Fenier's. "Commander," he said in a low, soft, contemptuous voice, "Ensign Perling is in the chain of command and you are not. You are a science specialist and your rank is more a matter of courtesy outside of your lab. Ensign Perling was hand-picked to fulfill the role of Science Officer by Captain Sanjay. I can only assume he did so with full confidence in the young man's ability. You are not required, however, to follow any future orders he may give you."

Fenier was now scared and confused. "I-I'm not?" he asked.

"No, sir, you are not. The next time he gives you an order you DON'T LIKE," here Mitchell's voice suddenly thundered, causing Fenier to visibly shrink back, "Please don't follow it. Then, considering we are in an unknown situation and lost to boot, as Head of Security I can drag you down to the cargo bay, throw you in, and DEPRESSURIZE THE BAY! I'm sure it will mean another commendation in my file when we get back." Mitchell grinned wolfishly and Fenier flinched. Mitchell threw his massive arm over Fenier's shoulders and began guiding him back towards the turbolift. In a reasonable, quiet tone he said, "That being said, if you'd like I will call Mr. Perling and request an hour's access for you in Astrometrics." When Fenier started to open his mouth Mitchell continued, "One hour. Mr. Perling is working on a project crucial to our hopes of returning home. It would be a violation of the Captain's orders, in spirit at least, to take him away from such an important task. Have a good night, Mr. Fenier, Commander, sir." This last part was said as Mitchell gently pushed the stunned scientist into the turbolift. Mitchell remained facing it until the doors closed. Fenier never said another word. Mitchell lightly dusted his hands off. The Bridge crew all found interesting things to do at their stations.

"Bridge to Astrometrics."

After a slight delay the reply came, "Uh, Astrometrics, Perling here."

"Mr. Perling, I would be very grateful if you could allow Commander Fenier one hour's use of your lab. And Mr. Perling?"

"Yes, Sergeant?"

"If Mr. Fenier is there for a single minute past the one hour mark you have my authorization to call Security and have him bodily removed. Do we understand each other?"

"Uh, yes Sergeant."

"Bridge out." Mitchell reseated himself and went back to contemplating the quiet.

Louis Perling was in Ten Forward eating something from the replicator. He didn't remember what he had ordered, couldn't taste what he was eating and really didn't care. The padd with his experiment's results completely held his attention. He'd been working feverishly for a week and a half, often slipping into a near-fugue state, trying to determine how Seleya had arrived in this parallel universe and what they would have to do to get home. He had only left the lab due to the demands of his body. He wasn't even aware that the other occupants of the lounge were carefully giving him a wide berth. It may have been the distant look in his eyes or it could have been the incoherent muttering but in all likelihood it was the odor of a body left unwashed three days. He didn't notice, though, and so he didn't care. The fork was halfway to his mouth when the answer came to him. "The Captain's not gonna like this at all," he muttered, dropping his fork and rushing from the room.

Curious looks followed him as he dashed through the doors.

In the turbolift Louis paged the Captain. "Perling to Captain Sanjay."

"Go ahead, Ensign," came the reply.

"Captain, I may have some answers for you."

"Excellent, Ensign. The briefing room in fifteen minutes if you please."

"Aye, Captain. Perling out." It was then that Louis noticed the peculiar odor in the 'lift. It took him a moment to realize the source but when he did he flushed with embarrassment. "I wonder if I can squeeze in a shower in time?" he thought. He made the briefing with a few seconds to spare, his hair slicked back damply.

As Louis entered the briefing room Sanjay gestured with his hand towards the surrounding staff and said, "The room is yours, Ensign. What do you have for us?" The entire senior staff was already collected around the table, including Nog, who had been released from Sickbay the day before. Most of them nodded at Louis, with Jerix and Nog adding welcoming smiles. Louis strode over to the large display unit in the wall and uploaded the relevant information from his padd. He turned to the assembly and began.

"The phenomenon that brought us here is a sort of fracture in space/time. It is not a temporal rift, which operates in an area I will refer to as the Chroniton Underflow in terms of its location in the scheme of things. This is more of a tunneling through space/time, sort of like the coring of an apple. You core the apple's center out and the shaft you make touches on the entire depth of the apple. This universe is located at one depth and ours is located at another. That's the best I can do without complex mathematics. Sorry. Anyway, I was totally stumped until I remembered a report of an officer from the Enterprise who had traveled to a series of parallel universes. A Mr. Worf, I think his name was." At this, Nog busted up involuntarily.

"I believe his name is Mr. Worf," Sanjay corrected drily.

"Uh, yes, Worf. Anyway, he was returned to his proper universe when the barriers between them started to break down by utilizing his Universal Planck's Constant. It's the frequency on which a given plane of reality vibrates. Each one is unique, like a Human's fingerprint or Trill spots. Now, we know our own frequency so if we re-enter the fracture at just the right angle we can intersect it and return home." At this there were murmurs of approval. Louis held up his hand.

"You're about to tell us that there is a catch, aren't you," Sanjay asked.

"Yes, sir. I will need to map out the proper angle ahead of time which means we have to re-enter the fracture randomly one or two more times at least just to get the "topography", so to speak."

"Well," said Sanjay, "I'm sure we can take steps to minimize the effects of the transit to avoid all of the damage and loss of life we suffered before."

Louis was nodding his head. "Sure, Captain. We can pack everyone into Sickbay and Engineering and fly the ship from the Auxiliary Bridge. We can turn off non-essential systems to avoid overloads too. Unfortunately, my cored apple analogy isn't entirely accurate. The fracture is shaped more like a squished, bent rotini," here he put a graphic up on the wall screen to show what he meant, "And if we don't hit it just right those ships that are coming are going to find either a very large debris field or a bouncing, baby black hole where we used to be." The room was very silent now as Louis paused for a moment.

Sanjay looked thoughtful. "Can you program the computer to fly us at the correct angle to safely traverse the fracture?"

"I can," was Louis's reply, "But Captain, I still have no idea what put the dent in the ship. If we hit something in there and it throws us off course even a little I cannot predict what will happen. There just isn't enough information."

Sanjay brooded for a moment over his answer and then made his decision. "Ensign, begin your calculations and program the autopilot as you see fit. We will depart tomorrow at 0600 hours. Dismissed." They rose as a group and exited the room quietly, each deep in their own thoughts.

Louis caught at the Captain's sleeve to keep him from leaving. "Was there something else, Ensign?" he asked.

"Yes, Captain. You may want to sit for this." Sanjay's eyebrows threatened his hairline but he resumed his seat as requested. Louis took the seat next to him. "Captain, when Mr., ah, Worf was returned to his own universe he had an advantage we don't have. You see, the barriers between universes had weakened and a number of Enterprises were all occupying space in the same universe. Worf's Planck's Constant was broadcast to the other ships and the proper one identified itself. Unfortunately, according to Multiverse theory, the universes are branching off all of the time. There are an immense if not infinite number in existence. With Worf, they only had to carry the Constant out to so many decimal places until they hit a unique number that only one version of the Enterprise shared. We don't have that working for us. We have all of the universes in front of us. If we find one that seems right out to a certain number of decimal places," he paused, and then continued in an anguished voice, "It still might not be our universe! We could get back and discover everything was the same-except you are dead, or Rigellian ringworms were wiped out by disease or Command-level uniforms are green or something. You see what I'm saying?"

Sanjay opened his mouth and then closed it again. He mulled over what Louis had said. "Are you telling me we could end up somewhere that looked like home, felt like home, and even tasted like home but still wasn't really home?" Louis nodded his head vigorously. "Well, then I guess if the differences weren't readily apparent, like someone painting the Golden Gate Bridge blue or something like that, I would have to declare that we were home. If we can't tell the difference then there is no difference, correct?"

"Well, yes, to a point," Louis replied, "But what if it all looks fine and then someone loses a marriage or a child or something equally radical and we don't find out right away? I just don't know how much accuracy is called for. A universe where the only difference is a blade of grass

would be fine but I don't have a mathematical cut-off point for what is viable and what isn't. I can use the Enterprise incident as a guesstimate for how far to carry out the decimal places but that's really all I have to go on." He looked worried as he said this.

"Louis, you do your best and I'll decide when to claim we are home. That's what captains get paid for." Louis looked somewhat mollified, if not relieved. "Now, these random jumps we have to make to calibrate your 'map'. Any idea what we might find on the other end?"

"Actually, I have a theory. There is a concept expressed mathematically in the equations that resembles distance. It is tied to our vibration frequency. I can't tell you what we will find but I doubt we will encounter an Earth where dinosaurs or horses are the dominant species. That kind of 'distance' would defy the laws of entropy. We would have to apply an effort to find a place like that. That having been said, no, I can't predict much else."

Sanjay smiled, "Ok, so whatever we find, it will probably be people like us. Different cultures, perhaps, but human."

"Yes, sir, that's what the equations say."

"I can live with that. Make your preparations, Ensign."

"Yes, sir."

PART 5-A Bleak Night

Nog sat on the bed in his quarters holding his arms up to the light. The flesh was pink like a Hu-mon's, not the naturally sallow color that Ferengis ran towards. The tightness was still there, although Dr. Ramirez had assured him it would fade with a little more time. He was suddenly gripped by memories of a flash and the burning pain. The room vanished for a moment and the arms he looked at were black and charred. The smell of burnt meat filled his nostrils and then it was gone. He was back in his room and his arms were pink like a Hu-mon's. The tightness would go away. Nog wasn't so sure about the memories.

Jerix looked at the holos of his wives. Kaelin, the quiet, unassuming presence that held his line marriage together. Mitra, the fiery she-devil. She broke crockery sometimes faster than he could replace it. Always introducing the family to something new. Barda, who raised babies like flowers in a garden. Jerix smiled at each in turn. He hoped he'd see them again. They needed him, to play referee if nothing else. He smiled again at the thought of something else. They needed him for...well, he just hoped he'd see them again.

Sgt. Damian Mitchell sat at his desk in the Security office. His feet were propped up and he was slowly and meticulously sharpening his trench knife on a whetstone. He did this to get prepared every time he knew combat was approaching. He thought about quiet nights on the Bridge. He thought about harmless, beautiful stars slowly passing in front of the ship. He tested the edge of the blade on his thumb and continued to stroke it along the whetstone.

Jesus Ramirez had finished directing the removal of non-essential equipment to the cargo bays. He looked at the trays of emergency kits waiting to be grabbed or handed out. There were scalpels and hyposprays sterilized and loaded. Everything was ready. He went into his office and pulled from his desk an old-fashioned photo, a glass and a bottle of Juarez tequila. He poured a shot and looked at the photo. He sighed heavily...."Maria...."

Carol M'Benga wandered around her cabin, her fingers tracing and touching objects and mementos. She paused in front of a glass-filled frame. It held a row of medals, some of Starfleet's highest awards. Centered in the place of honor was a crude decoration, obviously hand made. The lettering had faded with time but was still legible. "Thank you for saving my friend. James T. Kirk Enterprise NCC-1701" Carol wondered if her great-grandfather had ever faced a moment like this. She wondered where they would end up. She hoped she would see his grave on Vulcan again. She finally stopped wondering and went to bed.

Niklesh Sanjay sat in his Ready Room. In his hands he twisted and turned a small figurine. It was an image of his first command. He'd brought the ship home intact. He looked up at the laser etching of the first Seleya. His eyes drifted down to his incense burner. He reached out a finger and rubbed Buddha's belly. "For luck," he whispered, "Let me bring this ship home, too."

At 0600 the command crew was on the Auxiliary Bridge. Nog was at Helm, with Mitchell manning Tactical. M'Benga was in her seat next to Sanjay. Louis sat in the Navigator's seat, making last-minute adjustments to his programming. The crew had been evacuated to the areas of the ship with the heaviest shielding. Sanjay looked around at his people.

"Are we ready?" he asked. Heads nodded in affirmation. "Louis?"

"Yes, sir. I've got us set to cruise right through the middle of the fracture. I used the thrusters to bring us within 10 kilometers of the phenomenon. Whenever you're ready."

Sanjay tapped his communicator, "Chief, how are we doing down there?"

Jerix's always cheerful voice replied, "I have people stacked, piled and dumped wherever there is room in here. Engines are hot, you can go to full impulse anytime you want. Power demands have been minimized throughout the ship. I have everyone tied down or laying down on pads. With luck we'll come out of this without a scratch, but emergency teams are standing by just in case."

Sanjay smiled. "Thank you, Chief. Well done. We'll be heading into the fracture on my mark. Dr. Ramirez, are you ready?"

"Si, Captain. My office is packed but we have Sickbay cleared and ready. I hope we are not needed."

“As do I, Jesus.” Sanjay took one, last look around. “Ok, Ensign, let’s go.”

Louis nodded and pressed a key at his station. The impulse engines surged to life.

“Activating Astrometrics monitoring sequence.” He pressed another key. “Engaging autopilot. Flight plan is active.” Seleya leaped forward.

The Aux Bridge rippled as though made of water and the ship was shaken by a noticeable jar. A ringing “THUMP” echoed in the air. Although bounced around, the command crew remained in their seats. The viewscreen had turned to hash and it flickered for a few moments and then cleared, showing Jupiter once again. Sanjay slapped his com badge. “Chief, status?”

There was a few moments of silence and then Jerix’s voice came online. “We have atmosphere venting in the shuttle bay. I have a team on the way. Conduits have ruptured on the Bridge. Overall, we seem to be in pretty good shape. And Captain?”

“Yes, Chief?”

“Exterior cameras show another dent on the saucer section. I don’t know what we keep hitting but the navigational deflectors apparently refuse to recognize it. If you want, I can send an EVA repair team to smooth out the wrinkles…”

Sanjay sighed. “No, Chief, we’ll worry about it when we get home. Sickbay, status?”

Jesus sounded relieved when he answered. “I have reports of a few sprains but nothing serious.”

“Thank God for that. Sanjay out.” He looked at Carol. “Commander, find out our circumstances as soon as you can.”

M’Benga waved at the viewscreen. “Not good, if that’s anything to go by.” Jupiter Station crossed in front of them. The melted sections blurred the station’s lines. Scorch marks from energy weapons were visible on the intact portions of the superstructure. There weren’t any ships docked but a drifting debris field suggested that there had been a ship or ships present when the station was attacked.

“Can we identify the weapons signature or the origin of that debris field?” Sanjay had turned in his seat to question Mitchell. Mitchell bent his head over his board.

“One moment, sir.” He activated a sensor suite.

Nog spoke up. “Captain, I think I can identify the debris in orbit.” His voice held both awe and sadness. Sanjay turned back to the screen. A piece of starship was visible near the station, about a fourth of the saucer section from a Galaxy-class. Clearly defined were the letters ENTE-. The Bridge was silent for a moment. Then Carol spoke up.

“Sergeant, scan Earth-wards for activity of any kind as soon as you’ve identified that weapons fire. Mr. Nog, check Starfleet channels for any sign of communications. Ensign Perling, return to Astrometrics and begin analyzing your data.”

As Louis headed for the turbolift Sanjay added, “Report as soon as you have anything, Ensign.”

“Aye, sir,” he said, exiting the Bridge.

Nog was the first to speak up. “Sir, I’m not getting anything on Starfleet channels in the Sol system. I’m expanding the search area.” Mitchell was the next to speak.

“Captain, the residual signatures indicate Cardassian disruptors. I am scanning Earth now.” There was a pause. “Captain, I have three vessels departing Earth orbit at one-half impulse. Whatever they are, they’re big. About the size of a Galaxy-class. They will arrive at our position in one and a half hours at current velocity.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. Mr. Nog, anything further to report?”

“Yes, Captain. I’m getting an automated distress call from Vulcan.” There was a note of disbelief in his voice.

Sanjay looked at him as he swiveled in his chair to face the Captain. “Who on Vulcan is in distress, Mr. Nog?”

“It’s a planetary distress call. The whole planet needs help.” Nog looked as if he couldn’t believe his own words. Sanjay was obviously startled. He turned to M’Benga.

“What do you make of that?”

Carol opened her mouth but Mitchell interrupted before she could respond. “Captain,” the note of alarm in his voice was obvious, “I’ve identified those ships from their energy signature. They’re Galor-class!”

Sanjay had a determined look on his face. “Mr. Nog, get us the hell out of here. Set course for Vulcan, warp 8. Now!” The stars dopplered and turned to multi-colored streaks.

Control had been transferred back to the main Bridge and the Seleya’s crew had returned to their regular posts. Sanjay had ordered Nog to continue scanning for Starfleet broadcasts as they fled towards Vulcan. Sgt. Mitchell spent the time examining the solar systems they passed on their way. He found no trace of life at Alpha Centauri. Rigel emitted a saturated radioactive signature. Andor was glaciated, completely covered in the ice which, in their universe, had merely threatened it. Although he couldn’t prove it, Mitchell thought it was a side effect of a “nuclear winter” situation. About halfway to Vulcan Ensign Perling contacted the Bridge.

“Captain Sanjay. I have finished my analysis of the data we collected from the fracture. You may want to come to Astrometrics. It yielded interesting results.”

There was a curious note in Perling's voice as he said this. Sanjay exchanged puzzled looks with M'Benga and said, "Commander, you have the con." He headed off to see what Louis had found.

Down in Astrometrics Louis had a display queued to play on the massive screen. When Sanjay arrived, Louis smiled and said, "Captain, I figured out what dented the ship."

"Ok, go ahead Ensign." Sanjay looked up at the screen with interest.

Louis started the display. "This is the visual footage taken as we passed through the fracture." As the sequence played out Louis continued his voiceover. "The fracture pierces the natural structure of space/time from what might be called a 'perpendicular' angle, along the 'z' axis, if you will. Anything traveling through it is outside of linear time." As he spoke, whirling colors traversed the display. The view had come from recording devices located on the saucer section of the ship. "That being said, I'd like to apologize for not realizing what it was we impacted." A large shape filled the screen and as it grew bigger it resolved into a Challenger-class starship. It slammed into Seleya and caromed off out of sight. As it disappeared Sanjay caught a glimpse of its service number. NCC-57247.

"That's us!" he exclaimed.

Louis nodded. "Yes, it was. What's even more interesting are the other images we captured." He ran another sequence, which showed Seleya sliding past the onboard cameras on the port side. Then another view, this time to starboard. "It looks like we're going to pass through the fracture at least two more times."

"And that's all of the images of us you got?" Sanjay asked. "So we'll get home after two more trips through."

"Well, Captain, that's one viewpoint. The other is that after two more passages we try it a third time and get turned into cosmic jelly." Louis looked more intrigued by the possibility than worried.

"Thank you, Ensign. Your words bring me everything except relief," Sanjay said, sardonically. Perling looked properly abashed.

"Sorry, Captain. There's just no way to know for sure."

"You'll be able to calculate our future traverses so we avoid a collision?" Sanjay asked.

"Oh, yes, Captain. Now that I realize what's happening I can take it into account. I should have realized that every passage we made was occurring simultaneously."

"Ensign, you told me when this started that it was a new situation. Don't blame yourself. Now, how many more times will we need to pass through for you to finish your mapping?"

"Based on what I already have, I think one more should allow me to narrow down our angle of attack to something useful."

"All right. Make your calculations for the next 'dive' into the fracture. We may have to do this on the fly if the Cardassians are hanging around the Sol system. I'm hoping what we find at Vulcan will give us a clearer picture of what's going on. Anything to make your job easier."

"Thank you, Captain." Sanjay headed for the Bridge.

Seleya entered the Epsilon Eridani system. "Sgt. Mitchell, passive scan only. Nog, put us at one-quarter impulse, reduced emissions." Sanjay stared at the viewscreen. Everything appeared normal.

"Captain, I've managed to narrow down the location of the distress signal," Nog said. "It's coming from Vulcan Space Central." Space Central had orbited Vulcan for a thousand Earth years. Sanjay wondered why the signal wasn't coming from the planet itself. Seleya crept closer.

"Captain, I have visual on Vulcan." Mitchell put it on the main viewscreen. They were looking at the day side. Everything seemed normal. "The atmosphere is intact. No excessive radiation. No signs of bombardment." He paused for a moment. "I can't find any signals beyond the distress call."

Sanjay frowned. "When we are close enough have Dr. Ramirez transport an atmospheric sample aboard for testing," he told M'Benga. "I'll be in my Ready Room." Carol started giving orders as he left the Bridge.

Three hours later, as he was finishing up yet another "I am sorry to inform you..." letter Carol stuck her head in.

"Yes, Commander?" he inquired.

"Dr. Ramirez tried to transport that atmospheric sample you wanted. The transporter's biosensors went beserk. Somebody used biogenic weapons on Vulcan. Same results when we tried for a sample of the air on Space Central." Her face was drawn up in a haggard frown.

Sanjay waved her in to the room. "You know, there were rumors during the First Cardassian war that they were working on stuff like that. After seeing Galor-class vessels at Sol I can't help but wonder if the war went very badly for the Federation in this universe. It was a closer thing than most people realized back 'home'." Carol took a seat across from him.

"Captain, if Vulcan is dead there's a strong possibility Earth is too." Carol didn't look too happy about this.

"Hey, remember this isn't our Earth, our universe. Try not to let it get to you. I guess we should head back to..." His words were interrupted by the red alert going off.

"Captain to the Bridge!" Nog's voice sounded excited and tense. Sanjay and M'Benga were already heading for the door. When they arrived on the Bridge the viewscreen showed three Galor-class vessels hanging in space in front of Seleya.

“Shields!” Carol commanded. “Are they powering weapons?”

“No, sir!” Mitchell said from Tactical.

Nog turned and looked at Sanjay. “We’re being hailed, Captain.”

“Onscreen.”

The image of a Cardassian Gul filled the view. “I am Gul Macet,” he said, “And I can’t help but wonder where you came from. Were you lost in time? On a deep space mission? Wandering the Gamma Quadrant for the last four years? I didn’t know there were any Starfleet ships left.” Macet had an amused, slightly condescending air about him.

Sanjay stroked his beard. He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts and then said, “We aren’t a part of your Starfleet. We’re from a parallel universe. We intend to depart as soon as we can. Whatever happened between the Cardassian Union and the Federation here has nothing to do with us.”

Gul Macet laughed. “Oh, my, what a splendid bit of prevarication!” He sobered. “It won’t save you, I’m afraid. It was nice meeting you, Captain. Good-bye.” The screen went back to a view of the three battle cruisers.

“They’re powering weapons, Captain!” Mitchell exclaimed.

“Mr. Nog, get us back to Earth, maximum warp!” Sanjay was tugging on his beard now. The Seleya sped away as the three Cardassian ships began firing. The impacts made the ship shudder, but the shields held.

“Captain,” Mitchell said, “Their fire isn’t as effective or as powerful as we might expect.” He sounded puzzled.

Carol spoke up. “No Dominion enhancements. They’re probably years behind the Cardassians in our universe when it comes to weapons technology.”

“I have warp factor 9.1, Captain,” Nog declared. “The Cardassians are pursuing. Estimate their speed at warp 9.” There was an edge of confidence in his voice as he said, “I think they’re redlined.”

“Thank you, Mr. Nog.” He tapped his com badge. “Ensign Perling, how are your calculations coming?”

“I’m programming the navigational computer in Auxiliary Control now, Captain,” came the reply.

“We’re going to have to hit the fracture at a dead run, Ensign. There’s three Cardassian Warships on our tail. Will that affect your calculations?”

“No, sir. As long as we hit the fracture at full impulse on the right angle we should be fine.”

“Thank you, Ensign, Bridge out.”

The Seleya raced through the long dark, hotly pursued by Macet and his ships.

PART 6-A Hot Time In the Old Town

It was a stern chase, both long and nerve-wracking. Several times Nog had reported the Cardassians matching speed with Seleya only to drop back again after a brief interval. The last time they tried to make up lost ground one ship fell out of warp completely, its drive burnt out. Now, an hour out of the Sol system, there were still two Galors in pursuit. Sanjay had only left the Bridge once to sleep and shower and as they reached the end of their long run the Alpha shift had staggered their duty hours so they were all present. Sanjay had overseen the transfer of operations to the Auxiliary Bridge while M’Benga dealt with the crew evacuation to the shielded parts of the ship. They were as ready as they could be for the next passage through the fracture.

“Ensign Perling, how’s the flight programming coming?” Sanjay said into his com badge.

“I’ll be finished in a few minutes, Captain,” came the reply.

“Sgt. Mitchell, I want torpedoes loaded and all weapons ‘hot’ as soon as we drop out of warp. There may still be Cardassian ships near Earth and even though they are weaker than our own Cardassians enough of them together...” his voice trailed off.

Mitchell nodded from his post at Tactical. “Understood, sir.”

“Mr. Nog, I would like you to raise shields right before we drop out of warp.”

“Aye, Captain.” The young Ferengi was all business. Sanjay had worried about him after his injury but he seemed the very image of professionalism, displaying no trace of trauma. Sanjay was glad for that. He needed every one of his officers right now at their peak. The tension mounted as Sol grew nearer. Everyone knew it was likely Macet had called ahead for help. They were probably heading into some kind of a trap, but they had no choice. They had to return to the fracture if they wanted any chance of getting home.

Five minutes out of Sol Sanjay said, “Mr. Nog, I want you to cut warp just outside of Saturn’s gravitational well. That will give us the least amount of travel time at impulse power and it may mess with the sensors of any Cardassian ships laying in wait for us.”

Carol turned to him, "Captain, if we stay at warp that deep into the solar system we run the risk of knocking planets out of alignment!"

Sanjay looked bleak. "I know, Commander, but you saw Vulcan and Rigel. Do you really think Earth got off any lighter?" Carol turned back to the viewscreen, a pensive look on her face.

At two minutes out Sanjay began unconsciously stroking his beard. Carol noticed but didn't say anything. At one minute out she began drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. Sanjay noticed but didn't say anything. "Entering Sol system!" Nog announced. A few moments later he added, "Dropping out warp. Shields are up!"

"Status of our pursuers?" M'Benga asked him. Ensign Perling, at Navigation, answered in his place.

"Five minutes back if they drop out where we did. If they come in closer..." He didn't sound too happy with the idea.

"Time to fracture?" M'Benga said.

"ETA twenty minutes," Nog replied.

"Sgt. Mitchell, any sign of other ships?" Sanjay inquired.

"No, sir," came the reply, "I'm not-Whoa! Hold on! Three power signatures moving out from behind Io! They're Galor-class. I expect them to achieve firing range in twelve minutes. They're only moving at one-half impulse. Captain?" Sanjay turned to look at him. "They will be between us and the fracture." Sanjay looked grim at this.

"Ensign, how long before the computer takes over the Helm?"

Perling consulted his station a moment and answered, "Fourteen minutes from...Now! Mark!"

Sanjay shook his head. "I don't suppose you programmed in any evasive maneuvers, did you?"

Ensign Perling looked chagrined. "Ah, no, sir. I was more concerned with hitting the correct angle, I'm afraid."

Sanjay exchanged a look with M'Benga. "Well, I guess we bull our way through, then. Red Alert!"

As the klaxon sounded Carol leaned over and said in his ear, "We do have one advantage, sir."

"What's that?"

"The Cardassians will be targeting our Bridge-but we're not there!" She gave him a tight little smile that he returned.

"Thank God for small favors!" he replied to her.

Nog chose that moment to announce, "Gul Macet's ships are dropping out of warp! Captain! They are already in firing range!"

"Evasive! Sgt. Mitchell, fire a full spread of torpedoes! Stand-by phasers!" The "Whump!" of torpedoes launching was as much felt as heard.

"Incoming!" Sgt. Mitchell called out. "Captain, they're using some kind of plasma torpedo. It looks more like Romulan munitions. Here it comes!"

M'Benga yelled out, "Brace for impact!" a second before the ship shuddered deeply.

"Damage report!" Sanjay was tugging furiously at his beard. M'benga answered him.

"Whatever that was, it tore right through our shields. Upper nacelle is heavily damaged. Captain, our torpedoes scored a direct hit on one of those ships. He's out of the fight."

"On screen!" Sanjays voice was suddenly cool and calm. The image of a Cardassian cruiser adrift and on fire filled the viewscreen. "Target the other ship and fire phasers, Sgt. Mitchell."

The whine of the phasers filled their ears. "Captain, our variable-frequency phasers are carving right through their shields. I don't think they've encountered anything like what we've got before." Sanjay thought Sgt. Mitchell sounded almost...jubilant.

Sanjay said, "Take him out, Sergeant." Disruptor fire lanced out from the enemy ship even as Sgt. Mitchell sliced away a portion of its main hull.

"Captain," Nog said, "Our forward shields are down to sixty percent. And the other ships have accelerated to three-quarters impulse. They'll be here any minute now!"

"Thank you, Mr. Nog. Ensign, how much longer until the autopilot engages?"

"About seven minutes, sir." He looked worried. "If they take out our impulse engines..."

"Let me worry about that. Sgt. Mitchell, status?"

"Sir, they are somehow still firing but I don't see how." His voice held a puzzled tone.

“On screen, please.” The view shifted from the burning derelict to a second Galor-class in far worse shape. Sgt. Mitchell had carved off both warp nacelles and parts of the superstructure so that only the primary hull remained. That part of the ship showed gaping slashes up and down its length. A cloud of debris surrounded it but even as they stared at it in disbelief it somehow managed to fire again.

“Forward shields at thirty percent.” Now Nog sounded a bit worried.

“Sergeant, fire a tor-“ Sanjay was cut off as the dying ship detonated, temporarily whitening out the viewscreen. “Ok, I guess not,“ Sanjay finished. Then Seleya shook like a rat in a terrier’s mouth. “What the Hell?”

“It’s the other ships, Captain!” Nog changed the viewscreen to show the three ships peeling off of their attack run. Before Sanjay could say anything, Sgt. Mitchell began firing with everything he had available. Torpedos streaked after two of the ships while phaser fire began to dismember a third. M’Benga had been examining the read-outs on her screen.

“Dear God,” she breathed, “I don’t believe this! Captain, I’m getting damage readings from all over the ship! We’ve completely lost the lower nacelle, the shuttle bay is exposed to space and the main Bridge...If we’d been on it we’d all be dead right now. Deck one is literally gone!” On screen, torpedoes struck the two ships they’d been trailing, causing serious damage. Sgt. Mitchell continued to play phaser fire over the third ship’s hull.

“Captain, they must have hit us with those Romulan-style plasma torpedoes to cause all of that damage. I’ll try to keep them from doing it again.” Mitchell sounded grimly determined.

“Captain!” Nog sounded more than a bit wound-up. “The autopilot just engaged!”

Ensign Perling added his two cents worth. “Two of the cruisers are coming about. They’re firing disruptors!”

“Forward shields down to ten percent!” Nog had a desperate note in his voice. Even as he spoke one of the two ships detonated in front of them. The other had a phaser trace right down its belly, nearly bisecting it. It thrusted away, trailing plasma, debris and what looked like bodies. The third cruiser had swung around and an ominous green glow began building in its central torpedo bay.

M’Benga jumped up out of her seat, her right hand up and pointing at the screen. “Sergeant, nail that bastard now or we are all dead!” Phaser beams speared from the emitters and detonated the plasma torpedo as it was leaving its tube. The viewscreen overloaded for a moment and went black. The shockwave threw M’Benga back into her seat. When the screen came back on there was nothing to be seen except a fast-approaching Jupiter and a quickly expanding ball of gas. “Thank you, Sergeant,” M’Benga said quietly.

“Its what I’m here for, Ma’am.”

Sanjay hit his com badge. “Chief, damage report!”

Jerix came on, “Captain, its pretty bad. I had to take the core offline to avoid an overload-we apparently no longer have plasma nacelles to cool it with.” He sounded less sarcastic than amused. “We’re running straight off of the deuterium tanks at the moment. The shuttle bay has been sealed off. Until we hit a spacedock the entire bay is a write-off. Same thing goes for Deck One. Emergency forcefields are keeping Deck Two pressurized but just barely. We have massive failures in many of the secondary systems. Impulse engines and life support are about the only thing besides weapons still working. Could we try to avoid anymore fights for a while?”

“No promises, Chief.” Sanjay paused for a moment and sighed, then tapped the com again. “Sickbay, what’s the word?”

“One dead. Broken neck. Two people with crushed ribs.” Sanjay could hear controlled chaos in the background. “I’m going to be setting broken bones and taping sprains for the rest of the day. If there’s nothing else, Captain, I really need to get my rib cases into surgery.”

“Bridge out,” Sanjay said. He gave M’Benga a worried look. “Without a spacedock we’re stuck in the Sol system. I hope we don’t have to run again. We won’t get far.” She nodded in agreement.

“We’re entering the fracture, Captain.” Ensign Perling sounded excited. The viewscreen filled with static like the last time but there were no bumps noticeable. When the screen cleared Jupiter once again filled it. Floating in orbit was Jupiter Station. It looked intact and functioning. A Horace Greeley-class freighter was docked to it and several runabouts were in the area. “Are we home?” Ensign Perling asked in wonder. Suddenly, another Challenger-class starship hove into view. Sanjay heard M’Benga gasp next to him.

“Captain, that’s-“

“The Buran,” Sanjay cut her off, “I recognize her. Well, people, don’t get your hopes up. We aren’t home yet.”

“How do you know, sir?” Nog asked curiously.

“It was a little before your time, Mr. Nog,” replied Sanjay, “But the Buran was destroyed at Wolf 359.” The Bridge was silent.

PART 7-Old Friends Made New

Commander M’Benga interrupted the quiet. “Captain, we’re being hailed. Its Federation Standard but the coding is archaic. Looks like pre-War stuff.”

“Put it on screen.”

The image of Jupiter changed to show a bridge almost identical to the Seleya’s main Bridge. There was an Andorian at Helm and a young Vulcan at Navigation. A scowling Klingon with full head ridges manned Tactical. A dignified-looking Klingon/Human woman sat in the First

Officer's seat. The Captain was a middle-aged Human of Mediterranean descent. All of them wore the previous iteration of uniforms, with red or gold tops and black pants.

"Attention damaged starship," the other Captain said, "We're not sure who you are, actually. Your saucer section is too mangled to read your name and your IFF transponder does not seem to be compatible with our systems. What the Hell happened to you people, anyway?"

Sanjay smiled. "And a very good day to you, too, Frank." The other Captain's mouth dropped open in shock while the rest of his Bridge crew expressed various degrees of surprise.

"Nick! Is that really you?" The other Captain, Frank, looked like his eyes were going to roll back in his head.

"It's me, Frank. More or less. Just not the me you knew. "At this comment Frank's eyes narrowed.

"You're from the Empire!" he exclaimed. "Red Alert! All hands to battlestations! Mr. Kurn, prepare to fire!"

"FRANK!" Sanjay practically screamed, "I'm not from the Empire! I'm from a different Federation! Don't shoot, we've got wounded over here! FRANK!"

Some of what Sanjay was yelling seemed to penetrate. "Mr. Kurn, hold your fire a moment. Let's hear him out." The big Klingon scowled but no phaser fire leaped out at them. "Ok, Nick, if you aren't from the Empire what did you mean by that? And you'd better not be up to any trickery. I'd as soon shoot as talk when it comes to Empire scum!"

"Frank, I am and am not the Nick Sanjay you know."

"Knew." Sanjay seemed momentarily startled by this.

"Ok, there's probably an interesting story there. We'll save it for later. My crew and I accidentally rammed into a sort of fracture in space/time while passing Jupiter. I lost a lot of good people and took some damage. When we managed to pull ourselves together we discovered we were in a parallel universe. We figured out how to traverse the fracture in order to map it and try to find our way home. This is actually the third separate reality we've encountered. The last one, well, things didn't go so good. As you can tell by the damage."

Frank looked skeptical but he asked, "Who did that to you?"

"Cardassians," came the reply.

Frank seemed startled by the answer. "All right, Nick, maybe you're telling the truth. We know about the fracture, as you call it. We thought it was a gate to the Empire's reality. That's why the Buran is on station keeping duty out here. Yours is the first ship to come through since the Empire tried to hit us two weeks ago." His First Officer leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Good idea, K'Ehleyr. Nick, why don't you and, say, one or two of your people beam over here and we'll talk."

Sanjay grinned. "Gee, Nick, I'd love to but the Cardassians sort of trashed my ship. Our transporters are down and you probably have a bird's eye view of my shuttle bay deckplates."

Frank grinned back. "You have a point there. I'll have Mr. Kurn come and collect you. See you soon, Nick. Buran out." A few moments later the tallest Klingon Sanjay had ever seen materialized on the Auxiliary Bridge.

"Come," he said, waving at Sanjay. Sanjay got up and walked over to him.

"Mr. Nog, Ensign, you're with me. Commander you have the con. I'll check in after one hour." When the two junior officers joined him by the big Klingon, Kurn tapped his com badge.

"Buran, four to transport." They disappeared from the Bridge.

When they re-appeared in the Buran's transporter room Frank was waiting for them.

"Francisco el'Sabra, I'd like you to meet my Second Officer, Lieutenant Nog and my Science Officer, Ensign Perling." Frank nodded greetings at both of them.

"Why don't we go to the briefing room," Frank said. As they headed out into the hall Frank kept glancing at Sanjay. After they had walked for a few moments Sanjay stopped and faced him.

"Frank, why do you keep doing that?"

"Well, it just seems a bit odd, seeing you here. I went to your funeral a few days ago." He continued walking.

"Sorry I asked," muttered Sanjay, following along.

When they got to the briefing room there were armed security guards posted in the corners. Sanjay chose to ignore them. Nog waved cheerfully at them and Louis just looked nervous. Frank's First Officer, the attractive Klingon/Human lady, was already seated at the table. Frank gestured to some seats opposite her and said,

"This is K'Ehlyra, my Number One. You've already met Kurn." Sanjay and his officers took their seats. Frank continued, "From what we've said to each other so far, and assuming I believe your story, in your reality we know each other."

Sanjay looked uncomfortable. "Actually, Frank, we were best friends. You died during the First Borg Incursion. I attended your funeral. Understand, things are far more different than that. In my 'world', your First was a Tellarite named Ceval."

The Buran officers exchanged curious looks. K'Ehlyra spoke up. "Who are the Borg?"

For a moment Sanjay and his people just gaped at the Buran's officers. Nog found his voice first. "You've never met the Borg?"

"Apparently not. What are they, some kind of pirates or something?" K'Ehlyra looked completely sincere with her question. Sanjay shook his head.

"No, they're a bit worse than pirates. One ship devastated a forty-ship fleet about five or six years ago in our home dimension. We almost lost the war against the Dominion because our Fleet was so short of ships in the early days. If the Romulans hadn't helped out the whole Alpha Quadrant would have fallen. As it was, I lost a lot of friends that day." Sanjay gave Frank a pensive look.

The Buran officers just looked more confused. "The Dominion," asked Frank, "Is that what you call the Empire in your reality? And what do the Romulans have to do with anything? They haven't crossed the Neutral Zone in seventy-nine years."

Sanjay grimaced. "I can see that we need a common ground before we can continue these discussions. My history and yours are very different. Before we start trading notes, though, I'd like Ensign Perling to explain what we've learned about the fracture so you can verify our story. I don't know what this Empire is but it is obviously your enemy. I'd like to clear up any lingering doubts as to our origin." He nodded at Louis and the young man began to explain about Planck's Constant and vibrational frequencies. K'Ehlyra looked interested, Frank at least paid attention but Kurn looked out and out bored. As Louis concluded K'Ehlyra asked,

"I can perform a simple scan to verify the truth of what you are telling us?"

Louis nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, yes. And if you have anything from this "Empire" that we can scan you'll see that the frequency is different from our own." The Buran's officers exchanged smug looks.

"I think we can come up with a few bits of Empire wreckage to scan," K'Ehlyra declared. "When they popped out of the fracture a few weeks ago they made a horrible mistake. Starfleet had assembled an exploration fleet to go through the wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant. We had about twenty different ships around Jupiter Station when the Empire stuck its head out of the fracture. We chopped it off." Kurn bared his teeth in something resembling a smile.

Frank spoke up. "K'Ehlyra, why don't you and Ensign Perling go conduct the necessary scans while the rest of us continue our discussions." K'Ehlyra acknowledged him and, with a wave towards Louis to follow, headed for the door. "You know, Sanjay, that little bit of adventurism on the part of the Empire is how you died in the here and now. The Fleet we set up to go through the wormhole was mainly composed of science vessels with an escort of Galaxy-class ships for protection. When the Empire's attack manifested, we lost some of the smaller ships. The *Cochrane* was one of them."

"Who or what is this Empire you keep referring to?" Sanjay asked.

Frank gave him a bleak look while Kurn merely growled. "The Terran Empire was first discovered by James T. Kirk almost a hundred years ago. There was an accident and Kirk slipped into an alternate universe where humanity was a galaxy-wide oppressor. He and his people managed to escape but not before the Empire became aware that we existed. Since then there have been a number of attacks in our universe by Empire forces. They are determined to invade and exploit our 'side' of things. About two weeks ago they launched a strike through that fracture out there," Frank gestured towards the briefing room window, "And we got lucky. None of them survived to return home. Sanjay, they've been a real pain in our butts for a long time now. If you have the information to track them back to their plane of reality Starfleet Command would be extremely interested in what you have to say."

"Frank," Sanjay said, "Maybe we can work out some kind of deal. I could use a few repairs," Kurn snorted at the understatement, "And I would be more than willing to trade help for help." Frank smiled at him.

"Assuming K'Ehlyra says your story checks out I'm sure we can work something out. Now, don't you have to check in with your First Officer or something like that?"

Sanjay was momentarily startled, then his expression turned rueful. "You know me better than I know myself."

Frank grinned. "We have-sorry- had been friends for years. What did you expect? Besides, its what I would have done and I taught you everything I know. Well, not you but--"

Sanjay smiled back. "You know what, Frank?" he said, "We were friends before. The beauty of this situation is we have a chance to be friends again. Not too many people get a second chance." He took a moment to assure M'Benga everything was going smoothly.

"You know, Nick, you're right. We do have an opportunity here. Maybe we can start with a little filling in on the differences between our universes. For instance, you mentioned the Dominion. Who are they?" Frank waited expectantly.

"If you keep poking around in the Gamma Quadrant you'll find out soon enough!" Nog declared.

"They rule a major portion of the Gamma Quadrant," Sanjay added, "Not long after we first jumped through the Bajoran wormhole--"

"The Bajoran wormhole?" Frank interrupted, "Don't you mean the Simean wormhole?"

"There's a stable wormhole near Simea?" Nog asked. For a moment they all sat there in confused silence.

Kurn finally broke it. "It would seem we have a lot to learn from each other." The talks continued, pausing only to include the returning K'Ehlyra and Perling. It was very late when Frank finally said,

"I think we should table this until I can make a full report to Starfleet Command. In the meantime, why don't you prepare an after action report

Nick. I suspect that Admiral Hanson will want to help you out with the Seleya in return for the information you can provide us. That will give you a head start at least.” After agreeing to meet again in the morning at Jupiter Station the two captains shook hands.

“Its good to see you again, Frank,” Sanjay said.

“You, too, Nick. We’ll talk some more in the morning.” The Seleya officers beamed back to their ship for the night.

PART 8-Return To The Grave

It had been a long, strange five months for the crew of the Seleya. With the agreement and aid of Admiral Hanson the ship had limped into McKinley Station, where it had undergone a refit that bordered on a complete re-building. There had been extensive de-briefings of all of the crew by Starfleet Intelligence in an attempt to get pre-emptive information about possible future threats. Much of the technology developed to fight the Borg and the Dominion was more advanced than anything Starfleet ‘here’ had and Jerix and his engineers were kept very busy meeting with designers. Others of the crew took shore leave and sought out people they ‘knew’, leading to some interesting interactions along the way. Louis spent almost the entire five months of the refit in huddled discussions with the top astrophysicists of the Federation. As time passed more than a few friendships were formed. To Sanjay’s way of thinking, the strangest was the bond between Sgt. Damian Mitchell and Kurn, Son of Moag.

Interlude-One month into re-fit

Damian was packing a rucksack when the door chime to his quarters sounded. “Come,” he said. The door opened to reveal Kurn, the Buran’s Tactical Officer, standing in the hall with a similar bag slung over his left shoulder. His bat’leth stuck up over his right shoulder and a gleaming mek’leth hung from his hip.

“Are you ready to depart, Damian?” Kurn looked impatient but as a Klingon that was a typical appearance for him. Damian shoved a rather wicked-looking blade into his bag and shut it. He grabbed a bow and a quiver of arrows that rested against his closet wall and took one last look around to make sure he hadn’t forgotten anything.

“Let’s go,” he replied. They headed for the shuttle bay. When they arrived Captain Sanjay was waiting outside the entrance to see them off. He tipped his head in Kurn’s direction and turned towards Damian.

“Sgt. Mitchell, I’ve authorized the shuttle Pug for your use while on leave. Try to bring it back in one piece, please.”

Damian gave a brief grin, “Certainly, Captain. And thank you for letting us use it.”

“You are more than welcome, Sergeant. Gentlemen, good hunting! Qapla’!”

“Qapla’!” they responded and went to prepare their shuttle for flight.

Aboard the Pug, Kurn stowed their gear while Damian prepped the shuttle. After receiving clearance for departure they left the Seleya and entered McKinley Station’s flight control pattern. While they were waiting for authorization to descend Kurn spoke up.

“Damian, I was quite surprised when you asked me to go hunting with you on Earth. I was under the impression that there was no hunting allowed.”

Damian replied, “Ordinarily, you’d be right. This is a special situation, though. I heard about it on FleetNet and jumped all over it because I knew it would interest you. I remembered the story you told me when we were drinking bloodwine of you and your brother hunting the sun-fevered s’ehlat on Vulcan. This is, in some ways, a similar hunt.”

Kurn was very interested. “So what is it we hunt?”

“Well,” Damian answered, “We’re going to an area called the Yukon. It’s located very close to one of Earth’s polar regions. It seems that they’re having a problem with a mad bear.”

“A bear,” Kurn remarked, “Isn’t that a type of domestic animal?”

“No,” laughed Damian, “You’re thinking of a dog but at least you got the right genus. A bear is a lot larger than a dog. Most are about two to four meters tall on their hind legs and they can reach speeds of forty kilometers an hour for brief stretches. They have large claws and a mouthful of sharp teeth. Their reflexes are very quick and they are one of the smartest land animals on the planet. A Betazoid I knew told me he touched a bear’s mind once. He said it had a definite series of thoughts, not just the instincts of a dumb animal.”

“If they have intelligence then why are we hunting it?” Kurn’s curiosity was peaked now.

“Oh, I don’t know if they actually qualify as intelligent on the Sokal scale but they are crafty. Usually they leave humans alone and we try to respect their habitats. However, one thing they have in common with humans is that in extreme old age they sometimes suffer from senility. The difference is that a senile human tends to drool on himself while a senile bear, particularly a male like the one we’ll be hunting, tends to turn irrationally violent. This guy has attacked several groups of campers over the last few weeks, killing at least two people. Usual policy is for the government to send in a Forestry Service team armed with phasers to put the beast down but I had Admiral Hanson pull some strings and give us the job.” Damian seemed quite satisfied with himself.

Kurn roared his approval. “You have the instincts of a true warrior, my friend! We will hunt and then we will feast on our quarry’s flesh!” He paused for a moment and then asked, “They are edible, are they not?” When Damian nodded Kurn flashed a fierce grin.

“Excellent! How big did you say this bear was?”

Now it was Damian's turn to grin. "Well, Kurn, as I said the typical bear can reach up to four meters. This one isn't so typical, it's from a subspecies known as 'Kodiak' that are renowned for their size and strength. The reports say he's about five meters tall and probably weighs in at half of a ton." He tapped in a command on the control panel. "If you look on the screen, here, I've brought up a picture of a Kodiak bear."

Kurn seemed suitably impressed by the image. "A beast worthy of the hunt, indeed! Will Traffic Control never clear us for landing?" The question was purely rhetorical and soon enough they were allowed to land at a field in Juneau. There they took on cold weather gear and spoke with the local rangers to narrow down the bear's location. The rangers seemed to think they were a little crazy to go out hunting a mad bear with primitive weapons in the middle of the Alaskan Nature Preserve but they gave them the information they had requested. After a quick lunch they re-boarded the Pug and took off for the Yukon.

Damian set the shuttle down in a snow-brushed meadow less than a kilometer from where the last attack had occurred. After calling up a local map he and Kurn plotted the locations of the attacks and narrowed down the search area to a two square kilometer section of forest. They donned thermal jackets and hats. Damian drew on a pair of leather gloves with the fingers cut off of the right one. Lashing his Bowie knife around his waist, he slung his quiver and bow on his shoulder. He looked up at Kurn, who had his mek'leth once again hanging by his side. His d'k tahg was sheathed on his forearm and he held his bat'leth ready. They nodded in silent agreement and headed out into the wild.

They cast about for spoor for over an hour without success. Then Kurn caught Damian's attention and waved him over to the tree he stood next to. Without speaking, he pointed at a series of claw-marks about three meters off of the ground. He then looked at Damian questioningly. Damian confirmed they were from a bear with a bob of his head. Kurn immediately dropped into a combat stance and Damian followed suit, stringing his bow but not yet drawing it. They both saw the next clawed tree at the same time about ten meters north and began cautiously moving forward. While Damian examined the ground at the base of the second tree Kurn lifted his head and sniffed at the light breeze that blew from the east. He tapped Damian on the shoulder and pointed north by northeast. They began to move forward once more. After walking a few hundred meters deeper into the woods they came across the corpse of a hightail deer. It looked half-eaten. Kurn bent over and touched the body. He looked back over his shoulder at Damian.

"Still warm," he hissed. Then his eyes grew wide and he jumped up, stumbling over the dead deer. As a loud roar sounded behind him Damian leaped without hesitation over the deer and landed in a roll, coming back to his feet facing the other way. His arrow was already flying before he came to a stop. Kurn was belted to the side as the bear screamed in pain from the arrow in its chest and Damian knew he didn't have time to shoot again. He dropped his bow and drew his Bowie knife in one smooth motion. Then the bear was upon him. It clawed across his chest as he slashed at its gut. The impact threw him to the ground, his ribs burning with pain. The bear reared up, raging, and Damian realized it was even bigger than the five meters credited to it. The arrow still sprouted from its chest and Damian's knife had left a half-meter slash in its belly but it hadn't even been slowed down. As it lunged at him Damian considered where he would like to be buried. "The old cemetery at Arlington" flitted idly through his mind and then, with a Klingon war cry on his lips, Kurn flung himself onto the bear's back. Distracted, the beast took a hesitant step backwards as Kurn lodged his bat'leth into its shoulder. It shook itself like a wet dog trying to get rid of him but he hung on and even managed to draw his mek'leth. Damian took this opportunity to roll out from under the bear and pick his Bowie knife back up. Now Kurn was trying to cut the bear's neck with the mek'leth. The maddened creature lunged backwards, smashing Kurn between itself and a large tree. Damian danced forward quickly and opened the beast from groin to mid-chest. It screamed and fell to all fours, bits of its innards spilling out. Damian jumped back several steps. The wounded Kodiak focused on him and tried to charge. Kurn, looking a bit worse for wear, cut its hind legs out from under it with his mek'leth. When it stumbled Damian slashed at its already bleeding neck and it toppled to its side. Lungs heaving, unable to get back up, it nevertheless tried to claw and snap at Kurn when he staggered over to deliver the death blow with his d'k tahg. The ceremonial dagger sticking out of its skull, the bear gave a last shudder and then the light in its mad eyes faded. Kurn lifted his head and screamed, warning those in Sto-Vol-Kor that a warrior was coming to join them. Both of them collapsed where they were, panting hard.

They sat that evening by a campfire next to the shuttle eating bear steaks and drinking bloodwine that Kurn had brought along. Damian's ribs no longer hurt thanks the field dressing and painkillers Kurn had applied. Kurn himself had been bruised all over but nothing seemed to be broken. The meat was good, if a little tough. It had been a pretty old bear. Kurn had been a bit surprised that Damian had known how to dress and skin the beast. As they ate he asked him where he'd learned to prepare fresh game. Damian looked thoughtful for a moment and then answered.

"During that Dominion War we've told you guys about I was the leader of a Fleet Marine LRRP team. That's Long Range Reconnaissance and Patrol. Basically, me and three other guys would sneak to a strategic planet deep behind enemy lines and get dropped off. We'd spend a few weeks raising all kinds of Hell, blowing things up and taking out critical enemy personnel and positions. The lousy rations they sent with us convinced us to hunt our own food whenever possible. I like to eat so I got pretty good at it."

Kurn took another bite of meat and chewed thoughtfully. Then he said, "You were a Sergeant in the Fleet Marines. Now you are Head of Security and, basically, Tactical Officer on a starship. How did that happen?" He sipped his bloodwine and waited for an answer.

Damian replied, "The war was long and vicious. I did a lot of things I'm not proud of. I also learned a lot of things I never expected to along the way. I did a lot of reading out in the bush, waiting for nightfall so we could strike. I managed to take and pass the Bridge Officer's test based on some of what I learned. When the war ended, I was sick of the combat, sick of the constant killing. Starfleet was short of qualified people all over the fleet. I put in for a line transfer and a Captain I'd worked with on several missions, Captain McGowan, told Command he'd take me on. He needed someone to replace his Head of Security, who'd been killed in the last days of the war. They wanted to make me an officer but I told them I'd only do it if I could keep my noncom status, just in case I decided to return to the ground pounders. They were so short of experienced help they agreed. Later, when my boss got promoted I inherited Captain Sanjay. He never questioned my status. He just let me keep doing my job."

Kurn took this in. "I understand. I suppose if you do a good job it really doesn't matter. I envy you, though, Damian. We have no Borg, no Dominion, no Cardassians to fight. The Romulans stay hidden behind the Neutral Zone." He sighed theatrically. "It is very hard for a warrior to prove his worth in this universe!"

Damian gave him a grin and said, "Oh, I don't know about that. From what I saw today, I'd say you manage just fine." He lifted his glass. "Qapla'!" Kurn echoed him and they drained their drinks.

“More bloodwine!” he roared out into the night, “Warriors feast tonight!”

End Interlude

PART 8 (cont.)

Sanjay was in his quarters, struggling with the collar button on his dress uniform. It hadn't been so difficult to fasten when they'd arrived here five months ago. Numerous cocktail parties and dinners hosted by Federation brass had taken their toll. He sighed to himself.

“I'm going to have to put in some serious gym time,” he thought. Tonight was the final reception, a going away party. Tomorrow the Seleya was scheduled to depart for home. Every system had been checked and re-checked and she looked as good as she had when they'd first left on this unusual voyage. Assuming they got home ok, they would be returning with terabytes of valuable data on races and cultures this Federation had met that their own had yet to encounter. It almost made all of the losses they had suffered worthwhile. Still, while they were eager to get home, tomorrow's parting would leave many with mixed feelings at best. Friendships had been formed in the time they had spent here, some of the crew having even met “themselves” and developed bonds on surprisingly deep levels. Sanjay was almost glad his counterpart had not been alive in the here and now. He wasn't sure how he felt about the idea of meeting “himself”. He looked in the mirror and tried unsuccessfully to suck in his gut. With a sigh, he headed for the door.

Kurn had stopped at Damian's quarters on the way to the reception aboard McKinley Station. He was dressed in full Klingon regalia instead of his usual duty uniform. He was snickering quietly as he watched Damian fumbling with his many medals and citations.

“Oh, you think this is funny?” Damian asked him. “At least you get to wear something comfortable!”

“I am allowed to wear my race's dress uniform under Starfleet cultural protocols. Why don't you just leave those on your formal whites? It would be a lot easier.” Kurn seemed genuinely curious. It was one of the things that had contributed to their friendship. He was honest about what he thought. No whitewash to sooth feelings, no hiding behind false smiles, he just said what was on his mind. Damian was going to miss him.

“I tried that once. I have so many of these damn hershey bars that it made my jacket sag out of shape,” he said, pointing a thumb at his numerous citations.

“I have heard that phrase before,” Kurn commented, “I have always wondered what it meant.”

“Hershey bars? I don't really know. Its very old slang for military decorations. Must date back four hundred years or more. C'mon, let's get to the reception.”

They were almost out the door when Damian looked down at himself and said, “Oops, wait a second. I forgot one.” He went back to his dresser as Kurn rolled his eyes. After placing the ribbon with the missing medal around his neck he said, “Ok, let's roll.”

Kurn looked at the latest addition to Damian's fruit salad. “The Pike Medal of Valor? I would like to hear that tale!” He actually seemed a bit impressed and Kurn didn't impress easily.

“Oh, it was just a case of not dying while others did. Nothing special.” Kurn lifted an eyebrow but remained silent. “C'mon, buddy, let's go find some bloodwine.” They headed off to the transporter room together.

The reception was in the duplicate of the lounge where Sanjay had first seen Seleya. Like then, the ship hung suspended in front of the observation windows, bathed in the soft glow of spotlights. Unlike then, the lounge was crowded with dignitaries from all over this Federation. Nevertheless, there was a definite “party” feel to the occasion. Carol M'Benga, her chocolate skin off-setting her dress whites in a stunning fashion, was surrounded by a gaggle of Fleet Captains and a couple of the younger Admirals. Drink in hand, she was regaling them with a tale from the Dominion War. Judging by the looks many of them had on their faces, she could have been reciting planetary survey statistics and they still would have been enthralled. Jerix, also with a drink in his hand, was entertaining a group of Andorian women, attaches from their embassy in San Francisco. Mitchell and Kurn had commandeered a table in the center of the room, which they shared with Kurn's par'mach, K'Ehlyra, and Kurn's brother, Worf, the Klingon ambassador to the Federation. In the center of their table was an open cask of bloodwine and the speech was loud and rowdy. A few onlookers from the Vulcan delegation eyed them primly from a distance. Jesus Ramirez was at a table in the corner, speaking quietly with the beautiful Latino woman who had accompanied him to the affair. Nog was no where to be seen. Sanjay took all of this in from the doorway before he entered. He finally spotted Admiral Hanson at one of the bars and strode over to join him.

“Good evening, Admiral. Looks like a good party, wouldn't you say?”

“Nick! Here, have a drink!” the Admiral had evidently had one or two already himself. He pressed a glass of scotch on Sanjay. “Yes, it looks like a real good party. Kind of sad, though. Your people have made a lot of friends in the short time they've been here. Hate to see you all go. ‘Course, parting doesn't have to be forever,” he said wolfishly, a sly look on his face.

“What do you mean, Admiral?” Sanjay asked.

“Oops, almost let the cat out of the bag.” Hanson looked down at the drink in his hand suspiciously. “I think I'd better switch to synthehol. Nick, we'll talk again after my little speech.” He walked away, leaving Sanjay to wonder what ‘cat’ he'd been talking about. Sanjay knew he'd have to wait to find out. You just didn't go prying into the affairs of Starfleet Admirals, no matter what universe you were in. They had a habit of taking such behavior badly.

The door to the lounge opened, revealing Ensign Perling. He looked awkward and uncomfortable in his dress whites. Sanjay had only seen him a few times since Seleya had entered spacedock for her re-fit so he wandered over to him now.

“Ensign, were you coming or going?” he asked with an amused smile on his face.

Flushing, Louis stepped into the lounge. "Sorry, Captain. I just feel a little out of place here with all of these Admirals and diplomats."

Sanjay nodded at him and said, "I know what you mean. My first formal reception, I just wanted to find a closet to hide in. You'll get used to it with time. C'mon, Ensign, I'll buy you a drink." He guided the younger man towards the bar. When they got there he waved at the man behind the bar.

"Th-thank you, Captain," Louis stammered, taking the proffered glass in hand.

"So, Ensign, is everything ready for our flight tomorrow?" Sanjay sipped his drink. A burst of raucous laughter came from Mitchell's table.

"Oh, yes, Captain! I actually had the information we needed a few days after we arrived here. I just had to wait for the ship to be repaired so I could program in the proper course headings. I finished that earlier today." He took a sip of his own drink, a blue concoction, and coughed discreetly.

"So what have you been doing with yourself since then? I know you been working with some of the physicists in Geneva but I haven't really been following your work too closely." As Louis opened his mouth to answer a ship's bell rang out three times. The room began to quiet down as people found themselves seats. "Nevermind," Sanjay said, "Let's be seated. Its time for the Admiral's speech." They took a couple of chairs at their assigned table in the front by the podium. The other senior officers and Mitchell soon joined them. Nog was still nowhere to be found and Sanjay made a mental note to speak to him later. Three more bells rang out and the room became quiet. Just as Admiral Hanson took his place behind the podium, Nog slipped into his seat.

"Sorry, Captain," he murmured. Sanjay tipped his head at him and then focused on the Admiral.

"Good evening, gentlebeings. About five months ago a strange ship passed through a fracture in space and appeared in our universe. For once, it wasn't a prelude to an Empire raid. Instead, friends from a Federation much like our own arrived. Tomorrow they leave us to return home but their visit here has been beneficial to all involved from both universes. They have warned us of possible future dangers and improved some of our technology to better face those dangers. They have told us of races we have yet to encounter and of miraculous sights in the heavens we have yet to see.

We, in turn, have aided them with their repairs and given them supplies and equipment lost in their travels. We have shared information their Federation had yet to acquire about races and such that we found in our own explorations. Both parties have benefited, so much so that early on in their visit I set to task some of our brightest minds, for it seemed to me that these mutual benefits might continue. Tonight is a parting of ways with the crew of the good ship Seleya but it is not the end, we hope, of our mutual contact. With the help of one of their brightest minds, Ensign Louis Perling," the young man blushed in embarrassment as a roomful of eyes turned his way, "Our scientists have developed a theory that may well allow us to establish permanent communication with our brothers from the other universe! Tonight we may say our 'Good-byes!' but on another day in the not too distant future we hope to say 'Hello!' once again!"

There was a brief pause at the end of the Admiral's speech and then the room erupted in applause, much of it directed at Louis and the rest of Seleya's officers. Sanjay narrowed his eyes and peered at Admiral Hanson. The Admiral beamed a broad smile back at him and gave him a 'thumbs up'. The twinkle in his eye told Sanjay what he was thinking: "Gotcha!" Sanjay grinned back. The cat was indeed out of the bag.

The next morning, just prior to departure, Kurn requested permission to beam over to Seleya for a few moments. Sanjay agreed and a couple of minutes later Kurn strode on to the Bridge. Nodding at the other crewmembers present, he approached Damian at the Tactical station.

"Damian," he growled, "We have shared good times together. I wish to give you a token of remembrance." With this he drew his d'k tagh and presented it, hilt first, to Mitchell. Damian, knowing the importance of a d'k tagh in many Klingon rituals and aware of what was being offered him, bowed stiffly and formally as he accepted it. Kurn saluted, fist to chest, and then wheeled about and left the Bridge without another word. Damian watched him exit with a thoughtful look on his face. Sanjay cleared his throat.

"Commander M'Benga, has the crew been evacuated to the shielded parts of the ship?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Nog, transfer control to the Auxiliary Bridge!"

"Aye, Captain."

"Ladies and gentlemen, let us move to the alternate command. Mr. Nog, join us when you have finished."

"Aye, Captain."

When the command crew was reassembled Sanjay gave the order to cast off.

"Mr. Nog, please clear us for departure."

"Yes, Captain. McKinley Control, this is the Seleya. Requesting permission to exit spacedock, " Nog said crisply.

An answering voice echoed throughout the Bridge. "Permission granted, Seleya. All umbilicals are clear. Exit on zero beam, full thrusters are authorized. Good luck, Seleya."

Nog grinned, "Thank you, McKinley. Seleya is on departure."

After leaving spacedock they made their way towards Jupiter, escorted by an honor guard composed of the Buran, the Saratoga and the Yamamoto. The trip out was uneventful and, after a final round of farewells with the Buran's officers, Sanjay gave the order to jump through the fracture.

PART 9-HOMECOMING

Lt. Karl Vinson had pulled the night shift in this week's rotation. He currently had his feet propped up on his station, reading an actual paper copy of *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress*. Jupiter Station Flight Control was usually quiet these days so he was the only one on duty. Since the Seleya Incident the bulk of traffic in the Sol system was being routed through Titan Flight Control. Ships tended to give the Jupiter region a pass altogether so Vinson was quite startled when the station's proximity alarm went off. He dropped his feet back to the deck and began examining his scanners. Commander Burel, the station second-in-command, came over the speaker, cutting through the alarm's racket.

"Flight Control, what the hell is going on up there?" Burel was notoriously short-tempered, even for a Tellarite.

Vinson took a moment more to verify his scanner readings. "Sir, you are not going to believe this! It's the Seleya!"

One Week Later-Starfleet Command San Francisco, Briefing Room One

"...and then we exited the fracture the final time off of Jupiter Station and reported in." Sanjay sat back down in his seat, weary after the long recitation. The three admirals who were debriefing him, Janeway, Paris, and Sonal, exchanged looks.

"Thank you, Captain," Janeway said. "It sounds like you had quite the adventure. Not the mission of exploration we had intended for you and your crew but that's what makes a career in Starfleet so interesting. You never know what you will find out there." She smiled at him as she said this.

Admiral Sonal spoke, his voice emotionless like any Vulcan but somehow conveying the depth of his interest. "Captain, as I understand your report, this Empire that has been raiding the other Federation you encountered was the root cause of the fracture, as its being called?"

"Oh, yes sir," Sanjay replied. "Ensign Perling worked closely with some of the brightest astrophysicists in the other Federation for weeks and they verified that the Empire opened it. Although they couldn't prove it, our counterparts believe that the Empire didn't fully comprehend what they had done. Probes were sent in to track Empire movement within the fracture and the only ship telemetries detected showed the Empire had attacked the other Federation. There was no evidence they had penetrated any other universes."

"Thank God for that," Paris declared, "At least they won't be showing up on our doorstep anytime soon!"

Sonal shook his head thoughtfully. "It would be illogical to assume they will not come to our universe. We have no way of knowing what progress they are making in their understanding of the phenomenon." Paris looked chagrined at this.

Janeway nodded her agreement. "We will have to bring this to the Federation Council. The possibilities are quite literally endless and could have deep political ramifications. According to Reg Barclay's report, we can seal the fracture in our universe but it wouldn't actually close the fracture. It would be akin to placing a patch over it. Anyone could force their way through the other side. The only way to shut it down would be at the source. The problems there would be twofold. If this Terran Empire is as powerful as our counterparts would lead us to believe we might need their help. Everyone here knows Starfleet still hasn't recovered completely from the Dominion War. We might not be strong enough to do it ourselves. We would have to open some kind of negotiations with the other Federation. The flip side of this coin is even more problematic. If we sent an expedition in to seal the fracture how do they get back?"

All three of the admirals wore concerned looks now. "Well, Captain Sanjay, thank you. You've given us a lot to think about." Admiral Paris gave him a wan smile. "Oh, and that commendation for Ensign Perling has been approved, you'll be happy to know. From what you told us that boy earned it and then some. Your crew is pretty much finished with their de-briefings at this point so we are authorizing two weeks shore leave for all of them. Tell them all to go get re-acquainted with their friends and family. Dismissed."

Sanjay said, "Thank you, sirs," and left the admirals to their deliberations.

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