

Survival Play

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Survival Play

by [kes7](#)

Summary

There are three tests every cadet dreads: The Kobayashi Maru, the "face your fears" psych test, and the survival test. The first one demoralizes you, the second one scares you, and the third one tries to kill you. Make it through all three, and interstellar exploration seems tame in comparison.

When Maren O'Connor takes her survival test, she's determined to last until the bitter, icy end. Still high on her Daystrom win, she's confident that with a bit of engineering magic, she can survive just about anything -- even the frozen hellscape of Earth's North Pole.

Little does she know, she's not just working against the elements -- she's working against a Starfleet Command-sanctioned conspiracy ...

... little does Starfleet Command know, they're not the only ones good at conspiring.

Viewport in the Storm

“No,” Maren O’Connor muttered, looking out the window of her tiny escape pod with dread and dismay. “No, no, no, no, no.” She closed her eyes and collapsed back into her seat with a heavy sigh, ignoring the now-released safety buckles digging into her scrawny back. *Of course*, she thought. *Of course they’d send me here for my survival test.*

There was not much Maren hated more than being cold, and outside the window, she could see nothing but ice. A blizzard was raging around the capsule, and what little she could make out of the landscape appeared to be a desolate icy wasteland piled high with snow. It was impossible to estimate how deep the snow cover was without exiting the craft, but that was the last thing she wanted to do.

“Computer, location?” she queried, wriggling around in her seat until the uncomfortable safety buckles shifted out from underneath her. This could be Delta Vega or Antarctica, and she wouldn’t know the difference until she stumbled across a penguin or a monster alien with telescoping fangs.

“Sol System. Earth. Location: Lincoln Sea. Coordinates 83 N, 58 W.”

Maren rolled her eyes. *Fantastic; I’m on top of the world*, she thought sarcastically. The North freaking Pole. It wasn’t penguins she’d be running into; it was polar bears and Santa Claus. She supposed that was better than hostile aliens. *Maybe I can hitch a ride on Santa’s sleigh*, she mused with a bitter smile. “Computer, how far to civilization?”

“The nearest populated settlement is Alert, Nunavut, approximately 18 kilometers to the southwest.”

Eighteen kilometers. Maren frowned and craned her neck to look out the viewport again. Under different circumstances, eighteen clicks was nothing. But that was a hell of a storm out there. “Computer, can you access weather radar and tell me when this storm is going to end?”

“Negative,” the computer replied. *“Access to secondary sensors denied for the duration of this exercise.”*

Of course. She was being tested on her wits, here. The computer could tell her where to go, but not whether it would be safe to travel there. That was for her to decide.

All she had to do was survive for 72 hours. She could stay in the climate-controlled capsule for up to 48 of them – that was how much basic life support she’d been allotted. For 24 hours – consecutive or not – it would be her against the elements, fighting for her life in a hostile and dangerous environment.

She wondered where they’d send JQ for his test the following week. He’d be perfect for this; he had grown up in Edmonton and didn’t mind the snow and cold. *They’ll probably drop him in the middle of the Vulcan desert*, she figured. Starfleet had a way of analyzing people’s weaknesses and forcing them to face them.

She eyed the storm outside warily again. *To freeze, or not to freeze?* she wondered. If she decided to brave the elements, she could maybe make it to Alert and be on her way home a day or two early, with extra points for the effort. But if she got lost in the blizzard, she’d have to activate her emergency beacon and fail the exercise – which meant she’d have to do it all over again before she could graduate.

Then again, if she waited the storm out, she’d run the risk of running out of life support before it ended, forcing her out into the brutal weather with even less time to reach the settlement before her time was up, and no safe haven to return to if she needed it.

Fuck it, she decided, annoyed with the Kobayashi Maru-ness of the choice. She shifted in the small capsule and pried off the maintenance control panel. Starfleet had programmed the computer not to help her; well, she’d just have to reprogram it. *It’s a survival exercise*, she reasoned, *and resourcefulness is the best way to survive.* Besides, it would be easy enough to reprogram it back to Starfleet’s settings after she’d gotten a weather forecast and planned out her strategy. They’d never have to know.

But what if I get caught? For an instant, she felt worried. She quickly pushed the fear aside. First of all, she was not going to get caught. She was too good for that. Even if she did, though, she figured that was better than wandering out onto the frozen surface of the sea in the middle of a blizzard and having to punch out in the middle of nowhere when she couldn’t take it anymore.

As far as she could see, there were only two options, and they all depended on the weather. If the storm was ending soon, she’d wait it out in the comfort of the escape pod and walk to Alert when it was over. If not, she’d have to stay here and ration her time inside the capsule to stretch 48 hours of resources over 72.

She frowned at that. She didn’t like the idea of hanging around outside the pod for hours at a time just for the sake of being able to turn it off. What if she couldn’t turn it on again? Worse yet, what if the weight of it cracked the sea ice? She knew that was unlikely, but she still wanted to be sealed safely inside if it happened.

“Computer, reduce interior temperature to 13 C,” she ordered, turning to open the emergency clothing compartment. She fished around until she found a cold weather jacket, a hat, gloves and a blanket. She set the gloves aside to leave her fingers free for programming, but she put on the hat, pulling it down tightly over her blonde hair and ears; then shimmied into the jacket, zipping it all the way up, and threw the blanket over her lap. 13 degrees was colder than she liked it, but it would use less power than the escape pod’s preset of 20 degrees Celsius, and maybe give her a few more hours of heat if she needed them. She’d also program the computer to shut off any non-essential components, and reroute that power to life support.

With a small smile, she said a quick prayer and began to hack into the computer’s subroutines to get past Starfleet’s defenses. The first thing she needed was a weather report. Then she’d know what to do. With any luck, either she’d be well on her way home within hours, or she’d have reprogrammed the escape pod to get her through the whole exercise without freezing to death.

Either way, she was determined to succeed.

Conflict of Interest

“She’s doing exactly what you predicted,” Commander Llewellyn Schmidt declared with an almost gleeful grin. Beside him, Icheb sat unsmiling, watching his girlfriend on the viewscreen. He hoped the security encryption algorithms he’d written were difficult enough to buy her some time in the heated capsule. The moment she broke through, the whole pod would shut down – not a normal occurrence, but one he’d been instructed to program.

“Computer, display weather information for 83 north, 58 west over the next 72 hours,” said Icheb, ignoring the commander’s praise. On a nearby viewscreen, a map of Maren’s current location appeared, overlaid with climate data.

“The current weather is -24.2 degrees Celsius with heavy snowfall,” the computer narrated. “The snow will taper off over the next six hours. An incoming cold front will reduce temperatures to -49.3 degrees by 0800. The cold will persist throughout the time period specified, with high temperatures in the -33 range and lows in the -45 range. Safety alert: Temperatures are outside normal human survival range. Prolonged exposure is inadvisable.”

Icheb shot Commander Schmidt a dark look. “I saw the instructions you sent to Weather Control. You’re setting her up to fail.”

Schmidt tossed him a smugly patient smile in return. “We set everyone up to fail. It’s to her credit that we needed you to do it.”

Now a full lieutenant, Icheb had taken his own Academy survival test just a year prior. He had passed it, but barely – his had been a test of endurance, not wits. Instead of a 72-hour test, his had been five days long. Five days in the Martian desert with no access to regeneration and no nutrition beyond the basic 48-hour supply in the escape pod and later, in his EV suit.

When Maren found out what they were having him do, she had stormed into Chancellor T’lott’s office, enraged.

“You’re going to kill him!” she’d shouted at the Bolian admiral.

“That’s exactly the point,” he’d replied. “It’s a test of survival. Don’t worry, he has the same option as everyone else to activate his beacon and try again next month.”

She’d wisely shut her mouth then, knowing that Icheb hadn’t told Command about the problems he was having with his implants and didn’t want her to tell anyone, either. By the time the test was over, three of his minor systems had shut down, including the one that controlled his spatial orientation. He was hopelessly lost, but he was alive. He had spent three days regenerating at Starfleet Medical. When he woke up, Maren had cried and called him “stubborn.”

Now, he was worried, because he knew she was just as stubborn as he was. She’d freeze to death long before before she would willingly admit her defeat.

He was sorry that he’d been the one tasked with defeating her.

“Don’t you think this is a conflict of interest?” he’d asked Commander Schmidt, upon being summoned from Utopia Planitia to Earth Spacedock to program Maren’s testing equipment.

It turned out Schmidt considered the conflict of interest a “bonus.”

“Someday, you might have to send her to her death,” he’d explained. “The way you handle this assignment will to some extent determine whether I believe you can be assigned together, and I’ll make my report accordingly.” He’d paused then, and warned Icheb, “If you make it easy for her, we’ll know.”

Icheb hadn’t made it easy. He’d made it very, very hard. His best hope to keep her alive was to stall her and keep her inside the capsule as long as possible. He knew her so well, he had anticipated her every move.

Maren’s first solution to any problem was to program her way out of it. He’d known she’d go straight for the maintenance computer, so he’d locked her out. Fourteen levels of encryption. The first thirteen were among the most difficult code he’d ever written. The last used a complicated Borg-based algorithm they’d developed together, although he hadn’t told his superiors that. He hoped its familiarity would serve as a warning.

Schmidt had praised him for his excellent work, as none of his programmers could break the codes within the 72-hour window. Icheb suspected Maren would be able to do it just fine. He just hoped she would recognize the final layer for what it was – a gift from him – and play along by pretending she couldn’t solve it. Otherwise, the last failsafe against her reprogramming the pod was for the whole system to shut down – life support included. She’d be on her own, out on the ice as the storm raged around her.

On screen, she was starting to shiver, a slight vibration that would have been imperceptible to Icheb without the help of his enhanced vision. 13 C wasn’t extremely cold, but Maren had always been susceptible to the slightest chill, which was undoubtedly exactly why her superiors had chosen this as her survival scenario. There was a word in Standard, “sadistic,” which Icheb thought described the architects behind the survival test perfectly. Schmidt was the worst of them, often displaying open pleasure at the suffering of the graduating cadets.

“She’s broken through the first layer of encryption, sir,” a nearby ensign announced with surprise. Icheb frowned. It had only taken her 74 minutes to break the first code. His pride at her efficiency and brilliance warred with his concern for her safety. *Slow down*, he willed her, wishing, not for the first time, that they could share a neural link.

Schmidt turned to him, eyebrows raised, looking somewhere between skeptical and impressed. “If I hadn’t had four of my best cryptologists personally test your code, I’d suspect you of making it easy for her,” he said. “She really is that good, isn’t she?”

Icheb nodded. “Yes, sir,” was his simple reply. He didn’t know why they were surprised. She’d won the Daystrom Prize at 20 for her brilliance in problem solving. She was the entire reason Starfleet’s slipstream project was going forward ahead of schedule, and she hadn’t even graduated yet.

Grimly, he eyed the weather screen again. Six hours until the storm passed by her. He hoped fourteen layers of encryption was enough.

Moving Too Fast

Maren exhaled with relief as she yanked her gloves on over her frigid fingers. 13 C wasn't freezing, but, as her mother was fond of pointing out, she "had no meat on her bones." Without any kind of natural insulation, she always felt colder than she should.

She returned her attention to the maintenance console with just a trace of a dejected pout. Whoever had been in charge of programming the security lockout on this capsule not only had way too much time on their hands, they were really, really good. The second layer of encryption was proving more difficult than the first. She wondered how many levels she had left to go.

"Who installs multilayered security on an escape pod maintenance computer?" she asked aloud. She'd been working at the second layer for nearly an hour now, and she'd finally given up and pulled her gloves on just to give her frigid, aching fingers a break. She also realized she was getting hungry.

With some trepidation, she opened up the food ration compartment. Upon seeing its contents, she sighed and made a face, disgusted. Liquid nutritional supplements. That was all. Not even an MRE. *Icheb would be happy*, she thought. He actually liked the gross white supplements, and drank them all the time on purpose, praising their efficiency.

Taking out one of the eight cans fitted into the compartment, she examined the label. "Nutritional supplement 13B," she read aloud. She had to grin at the coincidence – that was Icheb's favorite 'recipe.' She cracked it open. "Wish you were here, love," she said, lifting the can as if to toast him. Then she tipped it back, took a swig, and nearly choked. "*Ugh!*" she cried. "I don't know how you drink this stuff!"

At least Icheb ordered them chilled from the replicator. This stuff was room temperature and tasted like cotton balls. She could chill it by putting it outside, she guessed, but that would require opening the door. She wasn't that desperate yet. Grimacing, she took another sip. That was more than enough to convince her. She held her breath and forced herself to pound the rest of the drink as fast as she could, just to get it over with. Nutrition, not enjoyment, was the point, here.

Setting the empty can aside, she removed her gloves and returned her attention to the maintenance computer. Her slender fingers flew across the keypad as she battled with the code. *God, whoever did this is good*, she thought to herself, half impressed and half annoyed. And then it hit her: *They rigged it on purpose to keep me out.*

The realization only strengthened her resolve. So they'd expected her to toy with the systems. Well, she didn't want to disappoint. If they'd gone to the trouble of bringing in a top programmer – and this was top quality work – just to see if she could break through, well then, she was going to break through. After all, she had a reputation to defend.

"Level 9 encryption breached, sir." Icheb tried not to wince as the ensign announced Maren's latest achievement. It had been 4 hours, 27 minutes and 33 seconds since she had begun trying to break through his defenses, and she was making quicker work of them than he had ever expected. *She knows you as well as you know her*, he realized. Even if she didn't know she was breaking his code, the years they had spent programming together had given her an inside advantage.

Schmidt was in a meeting, and in his absence, a small crowd had gathered in the monitoring room to watch the spectacle. "Damn, she's tenacious," said one man, a Betazoid lieutenant commander who'd been part of the cryptology team that had failed to break the code.

"I would have given up on level four," admitted a female Andorian lieutenant. Level four had stumped Maren for 43 minutes, until she used a Borg tactic she and Icheb had seen Seven of Nine use only once, more than two years prior. Icheb hadn't realized she'd committed it to memory. The whole chamber had erupted in noise when she did it – it was a little like watching an athletic event, only there was just one competitor and the audience was made up almost entirely of star-struck programmers.

"I stand by my theory that she only looks human," said another lieutenant, this one a Deltan man. "She has to be Illyrian, or genetically enhanced, or something."

"Unlikely," a Vulcan lieutenant commander said. "All applicants to Starfleet Academy are required to submit to thorough DNA testing. If she were not human, it would have been revealed prior to her arrival at the Academy."

This time, it was someone Icheb knew who spoke up. "Assimilation always helps, eh, Lieutenant?"

Eric Atherton, a junior grade lieutenant, had entered the room unnoticed. The son of an admiral, he was stationed at Earth Spacedock, and had learned of Icheb's temporary assignment earlier that week. Having lost his mother to the Borg at a young age, he had hated Icheb since their first day at the Academy together, and that hatred extended equally to Maren, whom he viewed as a traitor to the Federation because of her relationship with Icheb. He had become gradually less abrasive toward the pair over the years, but the prospect of watching Starfleet force Icheb to torment Maren had obviously proved too enticing for him to pass up. He had stopped by numerous times throughout the week to check on Icheb's progress, with a sadistic grin that reminded Icheb of Commander Schmidt.

Icheb turned to level a glare at his former classmate, but didn't dignify the joke with a response. He simply resumed watching the monitor, where Maren was just a few keystrokes from breaching level ten.

"At this rate, she's going to lose power before the storm ends," the Betazoid said. Icheb silently worried that he was right. *Slow down*, he thought. *Please slow down.*

"Level ten breached," the human ensign announced, but his voice was mostly lost among the whoops and cheers of the crowd packed into the small room.

“Four more to go,” the Deltan said.

“I can’t believe this,” said the Andorian. “You guys worked three days and couldn’t crack level seven.”

“She’s the best I’ve ever seen,” the Betazoid said in awe. He glanced over at Icheb. “I think she’s even better than you.”

“It’s possible,” conceded Icheb. In fact, he had long suspected it himself. Thanks to his cortical implants, he was faster computationally, but she was more creative in her approach to solving problems, more free in her thinking. The Collective had structured his mind in a very particular way, and although it had given him many tools for problem solving, he tended to use those tools in a rational, predictable order. Maren’s thinking was, in his view, chaotic by comparison. That was one of the things he loved about her, even if he found it frustrating at times.

It bothered him that she had no idea she was being watched. It bothered him even more that there were so many people watching her. It wasn’t standard procedure to maintain a constant visual on cadets, but nothing about Maren’s test was standard. He suspected that Starfleet Academy was still unhappy about the glitch Maren had discovered and exploited during her Kobayashi Maru test. The resulting cascade failure had required a complete reprogramming of the simulator – which they’d made her do as punishment. Now, they were exacting their revenge. He hated to think of what they had in store for her on the psych test.

He’d faced the Borg for his own psych test – Command had overestimated his fear of the Collective. It was the first time his reserved personality had actually worked in his favor – if they had been able to read him better, they would know that the only thing he was truly scared of was losing Maren. The Borg simulation would have been much more frightening if they had included her in it, but they hadn’t. He had passed with flying colors.

“Level eleven!” the ensign cheered. Icheb stared at the viewscreen anxiously, then glanced at the weather display. The snow was starting to taper off, but the temperature was dropping. If she lost power, she might not get lost in the storm, but she’d certainly risk freezing to death.

“Please slow down,” he murmured under his breath.

The Betazoid looked over at him sympathetically. “She’ll be fine no matter what,” he reassured him. “Almost everyone fails their first test. It’s like a rite of passage.”

Icheb shot him a baleful look. “Maren has no intention of failing, sir,” he told the older officer.

“Tell me about it,” the Andorian replied.

Level Fourteen

“What do you mean, she’s reached level thirteen?” Schmidt’s voice boomed through the small observation room as Icheb grimly delivered his report.

“I mean that she has defeated twelve levels of encryption and has just two more remaining before full system shutdown,” Icheb replied, in a bitterly resigned tone.

Schmidt looked at the collection of cryptologists and engineers packed into the tiny space. “How is that possible?” he demanded.

Everyone but Icheb shrugged helplessly, looking awed. The Andorian spoke up first. “Sir, I don’t know how she’s doing it. She just keeps at it. I’ve never even seen half the tactics she’s using.”

Schmidt turned on Icheb. “Did you cheat? Did you somehow convey the codes to her prior to the test?”

Before Icheb could speak up, the Andorian did it for him. “No, sir,” the woman said emphatically. “I’ve been watching her for six hours. She’s angry about the encryption, and she’s not faking it. She’s just incredibly determined to succeed and has the talent to back it up.”

Schmidt cast the Andorian a skeptical glance; then eyed Icheb suspiciously for another moment before offering a slight shrug and settling into a chair near the main display. “She won’t win this by hacking,” he reminded them. “This is the survival exam, not a cryptology final. She’s going to have to leave that capsule one way or another, and face the elements head on.”

Icheb fought to keep his expression neutral. He felt the urge to yell at the older man, to tell him to alter the weather controls to give Maren a fighting chance, but he knew his words would fall on deaf ears, and that any outburst would be seen as proof that he couldn’t safely work with Maren in his chain of command. Instead, he stared ahead at the screen, watching her crack some of the best code he’d ever written. For the first time since he’d met her, he hoped for her to fail.

“There goes unlucky thirteen,” Maren muttered, as she finally conquered the thirteenth layer of encryption on the ship’s maintenance computer. “How many levels of this *are* there?” she asked aloud.

She took a deep breath, squeezed her eyes shut, and rubbed at them. They were strained and dry after so many hours working at decrypting the code, and it had long since gotten dark outside. “Computer, local time?” she asked.

“*It is currently 22:31 hours and 16 seconds,*” the computer replied.

No wonder she was tired. She’d been at this for over ten hours, now. She was pretty sure the snow outside had stopped, but in the pitch black of the arctic night, it was impossible to tell for sure. She was disappointed there was so much cloud cover. If she had to be stuck at the North Pole for the night, she would have liked to have watched the Aurora.

You should rest, she told herself, but the decryption wouldn’t let her. Knowing she hadn’t yet defeated the programming drove her crazy. She returned her attention to the module. *Just one more level*, she promised herself. Whether it was the last level or not, she would beat it, and then go to sleep.

When she looked at the screen, however, she stopped short and stared in surprise and confusion. *I know this code. I wrote this code.* She and Icheb had developed it together. To her knowledge, no one besides the two of them even knew of its existence.

It’s a trap, she realized. Not only had they set her up, they must have gotten Icheb to do it. *That explains the last-minute trip*, she thought. He’d said he was being sent to Andor for an engineering conference and wouldn’t be easily reachable for the better part of a week. Something told her he was much, much closer than she had thought – in fact, there was a very good chance he was in orbit directly above her.

She sat frozen in place, staring at the screen as her brain scrambled to catch up with the implications. He had obviously tried to make it hard for her, harder than anyone would have ever instructed him to do. That meant he didn’t *want* her to break the code. This level, however, was different. It was too easy. They had written it together. He had to have known she would recognize it immediately. What did it mean?

It’s a warning sign, she realized, with a rush of apprehension. *Now what?* It occurred to her for the first time that she might be being watched, or at least monitored. If they had gone to the trouble to set up this elaborate trap, it was incredibly likely they were tracking her progress. She couldn’t just stop now, it would seem too suspicious. And her pride all but demanded she complete the encryption just to prove how good she really was.

She wondered what would happen if she actually broke through. *Nothing good*, she guessed. *But how am I supposed to fake not knowing my own code?*

She could consciously limit herself to Starfleet algorithms, but that would be too obvious now that she’d used every Borg trick in the book to hack through the other thirteen levels. She would have to try at least a few Borg algorithms. There were plenty of Borg tactics that wouldn’t work on this code, but remembering what they were without access to her personal database? She had a great memory, but it wasn’t flawless like Icheb’s cortical array. It was possible for her to forget things.

To buy herself time, she started with some advanced Starfleet decryption protocols that she knew wouldn’t work, because she and Icheb had designed this code specifically to defeat them. As the computer churned through the computations, she wondered what the trap was for. She also wondered what else might be booby-trapped in this simulation. Suddenly, the choice of 13B for her nutritional supplements seemed more like a calling card than a coincidence. She didn’t know whether to be grateful for the warning or upset by the betrayal. *It’s not as if they*

would have given him a choice, she realized.

Her fingers instinctively went up to where her combadge would have been had it not been confiscated prior to the exercise. The empty space jarred her out of her thoughts. *Of course you can't call him*, she chastised herself. She glanced over at the screen, where the computer was reporting the failure of her first decryption attempt. *One more Starfleet algorithm, then I'll switch to Borg*, she thought. Best to keep switching back and forth for a while before "giving up" for the night, just to maintain the illusion that she was really trying.

She typed in the code, then pulled the blanket closer around her and settled back into her seat. It was just cold enough inside the pod that she could feel her metabolism slowing down. She knew her biometrics were being monitored; that was standard for the survival test, just in case someone sustained a life-threatening injury before they could manually activate their emergency beacon. That would actually work in her favor now that it was nearly midnight. If she drifted off to sleep mid-decryption, it would be utterly believable.

Suddenly realizing how tired she really was, she let her eyes flutter closed. It took only moments before she was fast asleep.

Thousands of kilometers above, Icheb breathed an almost imperceptible sigh of relief as he watched his girlfriend slip into unconsciousness. So far, his plan was working. She'd recognized his warning sign – he'd known it the moment she chose the first algorithm for her attack on the fourteenth layer. He looked over at the biometric readout screen. Her body temperature was slightly low, but not dangerously so. The light inside the capsule was dim, but he could just make out her sleeping face, illuminated by the glow of the maintenance computer screen.

"All right, show's over for tonight," Schmidt announced to the assorted spectators in the monitoring room. The others seemed simultaneously disappointed and relieved that she hadn't broken through all fourteen layers, and they murmured observations and predictions amongst themselves as they filed out of the chamber. Schmidt glanced over at Icheb and nodded. "That means you too," he said. "Go get some rest. I assume you'll want to be back here at the crack of dawn."

Icheb stared at the man for a moment before mustering a flat, "Yes, sir." He was having a difficult time concealing his disdain for the commander.

Apparently, Schmidt noticed. "Lieutenant," he said sharply, forcing Icheb to look him in the eyes. "I realize that this has been a difficult assignment for you, and that's fine. You don't have to like it, and you don't have to like me. But if I find out you've tampered with her test in any way, or given her an inside advantage, I will personally see to it that your career ends here. At the very least, I'll see that you are never, ever assigned together in any capacity."

Icheb stared at him levelly, careful not to allow his facial expression or body language to give anything away.

"I've been following both of your careers since that girl won the Daystrom Prize in '80," Schmidt continued. "Certain of the Admiralty are hell-bent on fast-tracking you both to command positions on the return trip to the Delta Quadrant. I don't think either of you are ready, but you've managed to handle everything we've thrown at you so far, Lieutenant ... everything except this – being pitted against her. So just think of this as an unofficial post-Academy psych exam. If you pass, I'll leave you alone, with my congratulations. If you fail, you'll have to pick between your career and your girlfriend." He locked his eyes on Icheb's, giving him a look that sent chills down the ex-drone's spine. "Choose wisely," he said. "You're dismissed."

Sunrise, Sunset

The next morning, Icheb used his combadge to contact John Quigley. He knew it was too early to call, but he needed to reach him before reporting to the monitoring room for duty.

"Icheb, what the hell? It's 5 in the morning. I thought you were on Andor," John answered, sounding groggy from sleep. His next words, however, sounded panicked. "Wait, did something happen to Maren?"

"No, no," Icheb quickly assured him. "I haven't heard anything. She has 55 hours remaining before her test is over."

"*Exactly 55?*" John teased him, although he sounded relieved.

"55 hours, 19 minutes and 33 seconds," Icheb replied, with a touch of sass. His Borg precision had become an ongoing joke between the two of them. "Anyway, I just returned from Andor," he lied. "I'm at Earth Spacedock. They can't get a shuttle for me to take back to Mars before this afternoon. Do you have enough transporter credits to beam up for breakfast?"

There was a pause, and then John's voice came back over the comm. "Yeah, I have enough credits," he said. "My first class isn't until 10 today. Does 0800 work for you?"

"Of course," said Icheb. "There's a Tellarite restaurant on level 9. Can you meet me there?"

"Tellarite food? Really?"

"It's good," Icheb lied again. He had actually chosen the location specifically because it was so terrible, making it improbable that they would run into anyone who knew them both. He just really needed to talk to someone he trusted, and he couldn't do it over the comm in case someone was listening in. If anyone he recognized did show up at the Tellarite restaurant, he'd know for sure he was being monitored.

"Fine," John sighed. "Tellarite it is. Level 9, you said?"

"Affirmative," said Icheb. "I'll see you at 0800."

"Aye-aye, *sir*," John replied, putting a joking emphasis on the last word. It still felt odd to all three of them that Icheb was an officer while John and Maren were still cadets. Fortunately, they were only four months away from graduation ... assuming they passed all their tests.

Icheb checked his hair in the mirror above the dresser in his temporary quarters before replicating a nutritional supplement – 13B, as usual – and heading for the monitoring room. Maren's escape pod was in a time zone three hours ahead of the station's. He wondered if she was awake yet. "Computer, check sunrise time for 83 North, 58 West," he said aloud to the nearly empty corridor. Since the station operated on San Francisco time to optimize communications, almost everyone was still asleep.

"*Sunrise will occur at 08:34 local time. Sunset will occur at 14:12,*" the computer said.

"Current weather for same location?"

"*The current weather is -48.1 degrees Celsius with fair skies. Winds out of the northwest at 10 kilometers per hour. Wind chill is -60 degrees Celsius. Safety alert: Temperatures are outside normal human survival range. Prolonged exposure is inadvisable.*"

"Thanks," Icheb muttered under his breath, not bothering to contain his sarcasm.

By the time he reached the door to the monitoring room, he had finished his nutritional supplement, and he tossed it into the recycler next to the door as he entered the cramped chamber. The only person there was a Denobulan ensign he didn't recognize, probably assigned to the overnight shift because of his lack of need for sleep. "Ensign, report?" he asked the man, who was staring at a handheld PADD and not paying any attention to the monitors at all.

The Denobulan looked up from the PADD in surprise. "Sir, I wasn't expecting you until Alpha shift," he said. "There's nothing to report, sir," he added. "The subject is asleep."

"The 'subject's' name is Cadet O'Connor," Icheb said sharply. "Have you been monitoring her biosigns?" he asked, walking over to the wall of screens to check on her himself.

If the Denobulan caught Icheb's irritated tone, he didn't let on. He simply nodded. "Off and on," he said. "She's cold, but otherwise fine. She snores a little," he added, with a far-too-wide smile that was characteristic of his species. "It's kind of cute."

Icheb suppressed the urge to inform the ensign that Maren was his girlfriend, and to tell him to refrain from making such comments. Instead, he gazed at the wall of screens. On the visual monitor, he could see that Maren was, indeed, sound asleep, curled into a ball in the escape pod's chair and wrapped tightly in a blanket. Her knit hat was pulled down low over her ears so that the front of the hat was almost covering her eyes. Sure enough, she was lightly snoring. He smiled at that – since he usually regenerated while she slept, he had rarely heard her snore. The Denobulan was right; it was endearing. Maren was such a perfectionist that this small flaw made her somehow more attractive in Icheb's eyes. He didn't understand why.

More than anything, he wished he could reach through the screen and touch her. Since he couldn't, he turned his attention to her biosigns. *Temperature: 35.9 degrees Celsius. Heart rate: 53 bpm. Blood pressure: 105/60. Elapsed time in sleep state: 5 hours, 23 minutes.*

Wake up, Maren, he thought. The sun would be coming up soon, and she was going to have to come up with a plan fast, since she would have fewer than six hours of daylight to work with before nightfall. He wondered if she could make it to Alert in that amount of time while wearing

an EV suit – the only way for her to survive the extreme conditions outside the capsule, he reasoned.

“You seem really concerned about her,” the Denobulan said. “It’s just the survival test. She can always punch out and try again next month.”

“She won’t,” Icheb said flatly. He took a seat next to the ensign in front of the monitors and looked over at him. “Cadet O’Connor is my girlfriend,” he explained, in a slightly more congenial tone.

“Oh,” the Denobulan replied, raising his eyebrows so high it appeared they might shove the ridges right off his forehead. Every facial expression his species made was incredibly exaggerated. Icheb realized that in comparison, he probably looked robotic.

“I only graduated last year,” Icheb said quickly, wanting to dispel the appearance of impropriety that came with his superior rank. “I ranked first in my class, so I started as a lieutenant j.g. and only got promoted last month. Maren and I have been together since I was a second-year cadet.”

The Denobulan nodded, looking thoughtful. Then he frowned. “Sir, if you two are lovers, why did Commander Schmidt assign you to this project? Isn’t that a conflict of interest?”

Icheb smirked at that. “I attempted to convince him as much, but he said he wanted to make sure I could send her to her death.”

The Denobulan shook his head. “That’s – that’s ... oh, what is the word in Standard?”

“I believe the word you are looking for is ‘sadistic,’” Icheb replied.

“Yes, that’s the one,” said the Denobulan. He smiled his too-wide smile again. “By the way, I’m Ensign Klaris.”

Icheb gave him a friendly nod. “Lieutenant Icheb,” he replied. “It’s nice to meet you, Ensign.”

On the visual monitor, the image got a little brighter. “Sunrise,” Icheb said. He leaned forward to get closer to the image of his sleeping lover. When he spoke again, his voice was barely a whisper. “Time to wake up.”

Maren squeezed her eyes shut hard against the light as sunshine began streaming in the window. Her body ached everywhere and she was cold, so cold. She moaned quietly and tried to shift position, only to realize there was nowhere for her to go – she was curled up into a ball in a cramped chair. *The survival test.* Her eyes flew open as she remembered where she was and why she was there. “How long was I out?” she muttered aloud, rubbing her eyes and trying to reorient herself to her surroundings. “Computer, time?”

“Local time is 08:37.”

“How much time do I have before the sun sets?” she asked anxiously. She hoped that information wasn’t off-limits like the weather report had been.

“The sun will set at 14:12. There are 5 hours and 39 minutes of daylight remaining.”

Great, Maren thought. *Less than six hours to get to Alert.* She wondered exactly how cold it was out there. “Computer, can you give me the current external temperature?”

“Negative. Access to secondary sensors denied for the duration of this exercise.”

Maren wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out rudely in the general direction of the computer’s audio output. “Thanks for nothing,” she said. *It was worth a shot,* she thought to herself. She glanced over longingly at the maintenance computer. Just one more level, and she would be in. *What if it’s not a trap?* she thought, but trusting Icheb’s attempt to warn her, she decided not to risk it. Besides, she didn’t have any time to lose. The snow out there was deep, and it was going to take forever to slog through it. 18 klicks. Under normal conditions, she could do that in less than three hours. But there was nothing normal about this place.

“All right, how cold is it?” she asked aloud. “Computer, unlock main hatch,” she said. She would only open the door for a second – just long enough to try and gauge the temperature for herself. They hadn’t even given her a tricorder to work with – just an old fashioned compass and a phaser locked on ‘stun.’ She briefly wondered if it was even possible to stun a polar bear. She hoped she wouldn’t have to find out.

Bracing herself, she turned the handle on the escape pod’s door and slowly opened it just far enough to stick her head outside.

“Holy *crap*,” she cried, as the arctic air hit her cheeks. She involuntarily sucked in her breath, and it *burned*. She couldn’t pull her head back inside and slam the door shut fast enough. “What. The. Fuck,” she gasped, desperately inhaling the warmer air inside the capsule to try and soothe her burning lungs.

They had to be fucking with her. No. They were *definitely* fucking with her. This was her payback for the *Kobayashi Maru*, and they’d seen to it that payback was an absolute bitch.

For a long moment, she eyed the emergency beacon strapped to her wrist and for the first time, seriously considered punching out. After all, they’d set her up to fail in every way possible. Not only had they blocked her from utilizing the capsule to its full capability, they must have programmed the weather specifically for her test. The cold was almost unearthly. Her only shot at surviving would be to wear an EV suit, and that would slow her down just as much as the snow.

Hot tears of anger sprung to her eyes as she considered the probability that she was actually going to fail this test. Rationally, she knew she’d be given another chance, and that the scenario would likely be more realistic next time. But failure wasn’t something she had ever been good at, and this time was no different – actually, it was worse, because it seemed so unfair. She eyed the beacon for another moment, then angrily

pulled her coat sleeve down to cover it up. Gritting her teeth, she bit back a swear word and started gathering supplies.

No way was she giving up. If she was going to fail, she would fail trying.

Breakfast at Tellarite's

The Tellarite café was, predictably, full of Tellarites. Normally, this would have bothered Icheb – their loud, boorish tendencies offended both his finely enhanced ears and his sensibilities, which ran toward the reserved and polite. But today, it was the perfect spot. There was no way anyone would overhear him talking to John. After meeting his friend at the entrance, Icheb asked for a table toward the back of the café, well out of view of the glass front doors.

“So what’s up?” John asked, when they were seated.

“Chat on your own time,” the Tellarite waitress interrupted with a grunt. “First tell me what you want to eat.”

“Why don’t you give us a minute to read the fucking menu?” John shot back.

The Tellarite rolled her eyes and threw up her hands in exasperation. “Terrans,” she said, shaking her head as she walked away.

“Bad move,” Icheb said. “Now she won’t return for an hour.”

“Nah,” John grinned. “I think she likes me.”

“Most females do,” Icheb conceded with a wry half-smile. His friend had a seemingly endless supply of women, in marked contrast to Icheb’s enduring and exclusive relationship with Maren.

“So, what’s up?” John asked again, glancing over the menu with a grimace. “Obviously you didn’t ask me here for the ambiance. It’s not like you to be this spontaneous, either. What’s going on?”

Icheb glanced at his friend in mild surprise, but then realized that John had always been fairly perceptive, and they knew each other well. He should have expected that John would realize there was more to this visit than enjoying offensive Tellarite food and culture. He leaned forward and dropped his voice until it was just barely loud enough to be heard in the noisy restaurant.

“I did something I shouldn’t have,” he said, and John’s eyes grew wide. Icheb rushed to explain before John got the wrong idea. “I didn’t really go to Andor,” he said. John’s eyes grew even wider. Icheb immediately realized that might not have been the best sentence to follow up with.

“Icheb, if you’re going to tell me you cheated on Maren – ” John began, sounding genuinely angry.

Icheb cut him off. “No! Of course I didn’t. Don’t be ridiculous. But I did lie to her about Andor. I had no choice. I’ve been here the whole time, assisting with the creation of her survival scenario. Starfleet ordered me to lock her out of the maintenance controls on her escape pod so she couldn’t reprogram anything to make it easier on herself.”

John raised his eyebrows. “That’s fucked up,” he said.

Icheb might not have said it exactly that way, but he had to agree. He nodded.

“So where is she?” John asked.

“Lincoln Sea. 83 north, 58 west.”

John’s mouth dropped open. “They sent her to the fucking *North Pole*?” he asked, incredulous. Then he chuckled. “Jesus, that’s brutal,” he said, shaking his head.

“That’s not the worst of it,” Icheb said, still keeping his voice down. “They reprogrammed weather control to make it nearly impossible for her to survive. First they sent a blizzard; then they reduced the temperature to extreme levels. The wind chill is -60 degrees Celsius. She’ll have to wear an EV suit just to survive it, and I’m fairly certain they tampered with that, too. They are determined to see her fail this test.”

John raised his eyebrows. “Wow. Guess she really pissed them off with that *Kobayashi Maru* thing, eh?” Then he turned and yelled across the café. “Hey, waitress!” The Tellarite woman turned around. “Two waters and a *plark* platter!” he shouted. He glanced at Icheb. “You eating?”

Icheb shook his head. “I had a nutritional supplement earlier. Water is fine.”

“You and your fucking milkshakes,” John muttered, while glancing over to make sure the waitress acknowledged his order – which she did, with an obscene gesture. John returned an even more obscene gesture, and the woman actually laughed – a loud cross between a cackle and a snort that irritated Icheb’s already aching ears.

“Anyway,” John said, returning his attention to Icheb, “I still don’t see how you did anything wrong. I mean, I’d feel bad, too, but they ordered you to do it. And it’s not like her life is really in danger. She can just punch out and try again. Besides, it’s not like you have to tell her it was you who locked her out.”

“That’s the problem,” Icheb said. “I already did.”

John narrowed his eyes in confusion, and reached up to ruffle a hand through his sandy blond hair, which was, as usual, badly in need of a trim. “Wait, you broke protocol?” he asked. “How the hell did you even reach her? I thought comms were cut off during the test.”

“They are,” Icheb said. “I didn’t speak to her directly. But I did everything I could to help her, and I left her a message of sorts in the code. A

warning.”

John’s eyes widened slightly. “No one caught it?”

Icheb shook his head. “They couldn’t decrypt it. Even if they had, it wouldn’t have looked like a message, because it wasn’t.”

“I don’t understand,” John said.

Icheb sighed. “I know. I’ll try to explain.” He paused briefly to collect his thoughts. “I knew the first thing she would do is reprogram the pod, which is why they ordered me to lock her out. But then they told me that if she could break the encryption, they wanted the pod to shut down completely. Power, environmental controls, life support, everything. So I programmed fourteen layers of encryption to lock her out of the controls. I made the first thirteen layers extremely difficult. I was hoping to buy her some time. The last layer was by far the most difficult, but I knew she would recognize it, because we wrote the code together. I hoped it would serve as a warning not to go any further.” He paused and smirked slightly. “I also stocked her food supply with 13B.”

John laughed at that. “You bastard,” he said. “You know how much she hates that stuff. But the coding? That’s some holonovel spy shit right there,” he added, clearly impressed. “Did it work?”

Icheb nodded. “She understood immediately. She pretended to try to break the code, but she intentionally used algorithms she knew would fail. Fortunately, it was late at night, so she went to sleep soon after.”

“And now?”

“When I left to meet you, she was on foot, walking toward Alert, Nunavut. She’s wearing an EV suit. I’m uncertain how long it’s rated for. She has less than three hours of daylight left.”

“How far a walk is it?”

“18 kilometers. But she’s walking on sea ice covered with nearly a meter of freshly-fallen snow.”

“Jesus, they aren’t fucking around. They really want her to fail this thing.”

Icheb nodded sullenly.

“What are you so worried about, then?” John asked. “She’s going to punch out, and as far as they’re concerned, you’ll have given them exactly what they wanted.”

Icheb shook his head. “She won’t activate the emergency beacon. She’d rather freeze to death than fail. You know that.” John grew quiet, knowing he was right.

“I’m not entirely convinced she *will* fail,” said Icheb, “but I’m worried that if she succeeds, they’ll discover that I helped her. Commander Schmidt is already suspicious because she was able to decrypt the first thirteen lockout codes so quickly. He told me last night that if he finds any evidence I tried to assist her, he’ll tell Command to keep us assigned separately for the rest of our careers. He called it my ‘post-Academy psych exam.’”

John’s eyes widened. “Can he *do* that?”

Icheb shrugged slightly. “He certainly seems to believe he can.”

“What if you got married?” John asked. Icheb wasn’t surprised by the question. He had already told John about his intention to propose to Maren.

“It wouldn’t necessarily matter,” he said. “There’s precedent for spouses being assigned separately for similar reasons.”

“Do you really think he’ll find out?” John asked.

Icheb sighed. “I don’t know.”

The Tellarite waitress chose that moment to unceremoniously deposit a large plate of *plark* in front of John, along with two glasses of water. “Here you go, *Terran*.” She spat his species like a curse word.

“Thanks, pigface,” John retorted cheerfully, offering the woman another rude gesture. She laughed again and walked away. Icheb could swear he saw her put a little extra sway into her broad hips as she did.

“You’re a proficient flirt in every language,” he told John, with just a little touch of awe. “I don’t understand how you do it.”

John shrugged and dug into the pile of meat on his plate. “Necessity,” he said, through a mouthful of food. “You know, some of us just haven’t figured out how to convince the perfect girl to worship us for life.”

Icheb picked up his glass and took a sip of water. *Quality over quantity*, he thought, feeling grateful for Maren. “So, what should I do?” he asked, as he set his glass back down.

John looked up in surprise and almost choked. “You’re asking *me* for career advice?”

“Yes,” Icheb said earnestly. “I can’t talk to just anyone about this, and I trust you not to share any of the information I’ve given you. You know that would hurt Maren just as much as it would damage me.”

John nodded thoughtfully, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve (since Tellarites didn't believe in napkins). "I think," he said slowly, "that you should keep your fucking mouth shut. You shouldn't even have told *me* about this. I mean, I won't say anything, but Christ, Icheb, Schmidt is not a guy you want to fuck around with. If he figures out what you did, he'll do everything he can to ruin you. That guy is legendary. He takes pride in his work. If he thinks he was outsmarted by a couple of twenty-somethings –"

"I'm 19," Icheb reminded him.

"Whatever. That's even worse," John said. "In any case, you just have to keep your mouth shut. It's the only thing you *can* do." He trailed off for a moment and, his blue eyes took on a distant look. "Or maybe it's not," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked Icheb. "Clarify."

"You can help him make sure she fails. It's not too late to fuck with her, is it? I mean, I know it sounds cold, but it's for the greater good. After all the two of you have been through, the last thing you need is some asshole at Command trying to keep you apart."

Icheb frowned and stared at his nearly-full water glass. What John was saying was rational, but he hated it. He couldn't bear the idea of working *with* the sadistic commander to torment Maren. All of his efforts thus far had felt like an effort to subvert Schmidt's dark impulses and mitigate the potential damage to Maren. Now, John was suggesting he assist the man.

"It's not too late," Icheb said, after a long silence. Abruptly, he stood up. "I've been gone too long," he said. "I want to get back there and see how she's doing. I'll pay for your breakfast on the way out. Thanks for coming up here."

"Wait, so what are you going to do?" John asked. "Are you going to help him?"

Icheb met his gaze. The truth was, he had no idea what he was going to do, and wouldn't be able to decide until he saw her progress. "I'm going to check on Maren," he said.

John set his lips into a grim line and nodded. "You do what you have to do, Icheb," he said. "But be careful. Schmidt's not a guy you want to cross."

Icheb thought of the twisted smile on the man's face whenever he thought Maren was suffering. "Trust me, I know," he told John. He walked over to the cashier, scanned his ID, and gave the waitress a fifty-credit tip on account of John's flirting, as a joke. She was sure to throw herself at John now, a spectacle he was sorry he could not stay to watch. *You have a sadistic side of your own, you know*, he realized, as he smiled at the thought of John trying to let the hideous, foul-mouthed, sour-smelling woman down easy.

Still, even if he did have a sadistic streak, there was no way he could imagine using it on Maren.

Fight or Flight

“This. Sucks. So. Much. Fuck. You. Star. Fleet.” Maren punctuated each plodding step with a word of complaint as she dragged her EV-suit clad legs through waist-deep snow. Every few meters, her boots broke through the snow cover and made contact with the ice, causing her to slip and stumble forward face-first into the snow.

Outside, it may have been lethally cold – minus 35 C, according to her helmet’s heads-up display – but inside her suit, Maren was sweating. She was a world-class athlete, but this was easily one of the toughest workouts she had ever had. She had been trudging across the sea ice for more than three hours now, and she had no idea how much distance she had covered. She had long since lost sight of her escape pod, but she couldn’t see any sign of Alert, either.

She slipped on the ice again and fell hard into the snow. This time, she didn’t get up. She needed a break. The heads-up display in her suit helmet displayed the time, her bio-readings, the suit’s system status, and both internal and external temperatures. Her heart rate was elevated, and so was her body temperature. She bent her head forward and closed her mouth around the hydration tube hooked up to her suit’s water supply, bit down to open the valve, and sucked hard to force the liquid upward, silently cursing gravity as she did so. In zero-G, drinking in an EV suit was so much easier – the water just floated into your mouth as soon as you bit the valve.

She kept an eye on the systems indicators as she tried to satiate her thirst. She was exerting herself far too much – she was using a lot more oxygen than usual, and the tank level was dropping fast. Once it was gone, the only way for her to breathe would be to remove her helmet long enough to let freezing cold air rush into her suit, get her helmet back on before she froze to death, use up the fresh air, and repeat the process until either she couldn’t take it anymore, or the suit’s systems gave out from trying to warm up all that frigid air.

The water situation was at least easier to fix. She was surrounded by ice, after all. As long as the battery in her suit lasted, she could refill her water pack with snow and the suit’s heaters would do the rest. *Just don’t collect any yellow snow*, she thought with a smirk.

She only had about half a charge left on her suit’s battery, but she was carrying a spare. Still, she was concerned about how much energy she was using. If she ran out of oxygen and had to start letting cold air in, the battery would run down much faster. She consciously tried to breathe more shallowly, but that made her dizzy, so she stopped.

She released the hydration tube and turned her head to bite down on the nutrition valve, instead. Bracing herself, she sucked in a big mouthful of 13B and forced herself to swallow; then repeated the process two more times before taking another big gulp out of the hydration tube to wash the taste away. “Ick. Icheb, seriously, *ick*,” she said aloud, grimacing.

She checked her compass and stared off to the southwest, where civilization lay an unknown number of kilometers ahead. All she could see was snow. Above her, the sky was clear, but she could see clouds forming behind her, back in the direction from which she’d come. *Great, another storm?* she wondered. She hoped not.

Not wanting to take any chances, she forced herself to stand up again and get moving.

It was at that moment that she saw the twin baby bears ... and their mother.

“What’s happening?” Icheb demanded, sounding tense. “Sir, her heart rate just rose considerably. She’s tachycardic.”

Since Maren had left the pod, they no longer had a visual connection to her. They knew her location thanks to the tracking device implanted in the emergency beacon, and her suit was transmitting her biosigns. She was 7.1 kilometers from Alert – she’d made it a little over halfway there – but she was showing signs of serious fatigue and her oxygen usage was cause for concern.

But this – this was different. Something was happening to her. “Can you get me a visual, Ensign?” Icheb asked, using his subvocal processor to prevent the panic he felt from creeping into his voice.

“Belay that order,” Schmidt told the ensign, a young Trill woman named Lira. “Relax, Lieutenant, she’s just scared,” he said to Icheb, with a smirk that said he was enjoying this. Icheb fought the urge to punch him in the face.

“Scared of *what*?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” the commander replied. “It could be anything. If she needs help, she has her beacon.”

“Sir, I want a visual,” Icheb pleaded.

“I’m not getting you one.”

“Request permission to go to the observatory.”

“Denied,” Schmidt snapped. “You’re not getting a visual, period. Not here, not there, not anywhere. Do you understand me, Lieutenant?” Across the room, Lira pretended not to stare.

Icheb glared at the commander. “Perfectly,” he replied. He looked back at Maren’s bio-monitor. Her heart rate was steady at 110 – more than twice its normal rhythm. Her breathing was fast and shallow. The oxygen gauge dipped a little lower.

Whatever was happening, she was terrified.

Just stay still, Maren willed herself. She had ducked down into the snow the moment she saw the bears, hoping that her white EV suit would blend in enough to keep her hidden from their view. Meanwhile, she fumbled awkwardly for her phaser, which was stowed in an external pocket on her thigh. Somehow, she needed to get it out without moving around too much or making any noise.

What are the odds of this? she wondered. Kilometers and kilometers of ice, and they'd managed to drop her where the bears were? She wondered if it was possible they'd done it on purpose. *Probably*, she decided.

Carefully, she extracted her phaser from her pocket and poked her head above the snow. She immediately yanked it back down when she saw the bears were getting closer. So far, they seemed not to see her, but they were definitely heading in her direction.

On the bright side, she realized, seeing bears might mean she was getting close to land. But there were too many downsides to count. She tried to count them anyway. Getting killed, getting eaten, getting mauled. Those were the top ones. Also, if she remembered correctly from her grade school studies, polar bears tended to hang out where the ice was thinner, so they could have easier access to seaborne food. So falling through the ice and sinking to the bottom of the Arctic Ocean was also a possibility. Given the amount of oxygen she had left in her suit, even if she hit her beacon, there would be no guarantee Starfleet would reach her in time if that happened.

Hit the beacon. Call for backup, her self-preservation instinct told her. But her tenacity in the face of a challenge had always overridden her sense of self-preservation. This time was no different.

Okay. I can stay here and hope they pass by. I can try to stun them. Or I can run.

Running, although one of her greatest strengths, was obviously not an option in waist-deep snow. Besides, she was now irrationally frightened of falling through the ice, although it still seemed plenty thick to her. Still, every moment she sat here was a moment of wasted daylight, and the day was rapidly coming to an end. She fingered her phaser through her gloves as she weighed her options.

She never got to make her choice. Something soft impacted her helmet, and she looked up to see a black snout sniffing the air around her and a paw raised to bat at her head. She stifled a startled scream. It was one of the cubs, but it was easily as big as she was, and probably weighed more. And growing up on a farm had taught Maren that wherever baby animals are, Mama is always close behind.

She stayed perfectly still, staring at the cub for a moment. The entire situation was so surreal that she felt paralyzed, frozen in place, unable to decide between fight or flight. The not-so-little baby bear took another swipe at Maren's helmet. It reminded her of a kitten playing with a toy, only this kitten was man-sized and had a 300kg bodyguard lurking nearby. Also, she was the toy.

If I stun it, Mom will come running, she realized. But this cub was big enough to kill her all on its own. Her breathing ragged, she tried to slowly back away from the baby bear, crab-walking backward into the surrounding snow. Only then did she realize she was surrounded. The makeshift hole she'd burrowed into for protection had become a trap, as the cub's twin had taken up position on the other side and was now eyeing her with curiosity.

Somewhere, Maren knew, their mother was watching.

Hail Mary

Maren's heart was pounding. Icheb stared at the readouts on the monitor with a growing sense of dread. 141 beats per minute. Her location hadn't changed at all since her heart rate had accelerated, and Icheb's instincts told him she was trapped. *But by what?*

It was possible she was injured. But if that was the case, why would she not activate her beacon? She was obviously still conscious, based on her biometry. *Maybe she can't reach it*, he thought. If she had become pinned by something, or both of her arms were too injured to move, it was possible she would be unable to activate the device.

Another terrifying possibility struck him, and he quickly brought up the climate tracking data for her location. "Computer, how thick is the sea ice at this location?" he asked aloud.

"2.3 meters," was the computer's reply. Icheb felt relieved. It was extremely unlikely that she would have fallen through ice that thick.

"She's definitely trapped by something," the Trill said, echoing Icheb's thoughts. "What kind of wildlife is there in that region?"

"Polar bears, harp seals, walruses, orca," Icheb answered. His stomach sank as he realized he hadn't even considered predators. He had been so focused on the severe cold, and the technology required to keep Maren alive in it, that he had overlooked the fact that there could be more immediate threats nearby.

Lira eyed the readouts with a worried expression. "How long do we give her until we pull her out of there?" she asked Commander Schmidt. "She's looking pretty distressed."

Schmidt sighed. "All right, get us a visual," he said. "Let's see what's going on."

Maren looked from bear cub to bear cub and tried not to breathe, flinch, or do anything else that might make her look interesting to play with and/or snack on.

Meanwhile, she had never been so grateful for the suit's toileting system.

The cubs circled her slowly, sniffing at her helmet and occasionally reaching out to swat at her. She knew the helmet could take the abuse, but she was concerned that their sharp claws might tear a hole in her suit. Sure enough, on the next swipe, one cub went for her shoulder, and the top layer of fabric on her suit snagged. Unfortunately, the nanofiber was strong enough that the cub's claw got stuck.

"*Shit*," Maren exclaimed, as the cub began frantically trying to free itself. Instinctively, she grabbed for its paw to try and pull it free, but that only succeeded in making the bear more scared and angry. With its other paw, it smacked at her helmet. This time there was nothing playful about it, and her faceplate cracked under the blow.

Frantically, she lifted her phaser and fired at the bear, stunning it. As it collapsed, she yanked its claw out of her suit sleeve and spun around to stun its sibling. But the other cub was no longer alone – his enormous mother was now charging straight toward Maren, teeth bared, clearly ready to tear her apart. This time, Maren couldn't stop the scream from rising from her throat. She quickly stunned the cub, then took aim at the mother bear and fired, holding the trigger down for a continuous stream, just in case a single shot wasn't enough to take her down. It turned out to be a good move. It took 6 full seconds to render the massive creature unconscious, and when she finally fell, she was less than a meter from Maren.

Through her cracked faceplate – a superficial crack, *thank God* – Maren looked around in shock at the three unconscious bears and burst into tears. She couldn't remember ever having been that scared before. She could still hear her heartbeat pounding in her ears, and she was trembling. Gasping for breath between sobs, she scrambled out of her hole in the snow and started to run – or at least push harder through the snow than she had been doing before. She barely had the presence of mind to check her compass to ensure she was moving in the right direction.

On her heads-up display, the oxygen warning began to flash. She only had an hour of air left. The warning snapped her out of her panic. She immediately stopped crying. "Computer, reduce airflow by 20 percent," she ordered the suit's computer. She'd done plenty of high-altitude endurance training. Lowering the oxygen level might make her feel lightheaded, but it would buy her some extra time.

She had to make sure she put as much distance between her and the bears as possible before they woke up – especially the mom, whom she didn't think would stay stunned for more than twenty minutes, tops. She also eyed the sun in the sky. It was getting disturbingly close to the horizon.

Hail Mary, full of grace ... Maren prayed the familiar words silently as she forced her way through the snow. She was afraid to say them out loud for fear of using any more oxygen than necessary. She was scrambling so fast that she was practically on all fours, bracing herself with her hands as she slipped and stumbled across the frozen landscape.

She glanced up at her helmet display to check the time. 12:51. Just a little over an hour of daylight left. She supposed that dovetailed nicely with the hour of air remaining in her tank.

It's now or never, she realized, trying desperately to pick up her pace. She wished there was some way she could know how far she was from the settlement at Alert. If the sun went down before she reached there, she was finished. With no air in her tank, and temperatures falling even further, she'd have no choice but to punch out.

"Computer, reduce airflow by 10 percent," she said. It was risky, and she knew it. This would be like running a marathon on Everest. But she

also knew her body was more capable than most of handling extreme conditions.

The speaker in her helmet stated its objection. *“Warning – reduction of airflow will result in oxygen levels outside normal human requirements. Confirmation required.”*

“Confirm override,” Maren said, already feeling the effects of her prior reduction of oxygen.

“Override confirmed. Airflow will be reduced by 10 percent.”

Maren just kept stumbling through the snow. *Hail Mary, full of grace ...*

“What is she doing?” Lira, the Trill ensign, looked at the screens in shock, her blue eyes wide as she stared at Maren’s readouts and the visual display, which was being streamed from the observation deck.

Icheb sat back in his chair and rubbed the ridge between his eyebrows. “She’s attempting to win,” he said, feeling defeated. He admired her determination. He loved her for it. But she was actually risking her life right now, just to beat a test. He tried not to think about the fact that he had done the exact same thing just twelve months before.

“I want a shuttle with a medic on board ready to retrieve her within seconds if she loses consciousness,” he told Lira.

“Aye, sir,” the Trill replied, rushing to a console to make the arrangements. To Icheb’s relief, Schmidt didn’t bely the order. The commander sat stone-faced, watching Maren clamber across the ice. He didn’t seem to be enjoying himself anymore – the sadistic look of pleasure on his face had evaporated around the time the visual display had revealed three stunned polar bears and a very frightened young woman scrambling away from them. The biometrics told the rest of the story – Maren’s heart rate was 153, her blood oxygen was dangerously low, and she kept reducing her own airflow to buy herself more time.

“4.3 kilometers to go,” said Lira. “I don’t know how she hasn’t passed out already.”

“She’s a long-distance runner,” Icheb said. “She qualified for the Federation Olympic trials. Her endurance is significantly above average for a human.” He didn’t mention that she had a bit of augment DNA passed down from an ancestor – Starfleet didn’t know that, and he intended to keep it that way.

“Her blood oxygen level is at 84 percent,” Lira pointed out. “Much lower than that, and she’s at risk of hypoxic brain injury.”

Commander Schmidt turned to Icheb with a bemused look. “Is she *always* this stubborn?”

“Yes, sir,” Icheb replied.

Schmidt shook his head. “I remember when you took your exam last year. Five days outside the dome. No regeneration, no food, no water. I thought you’d never last.”

“But I did, sir,” Icheb said icily.

Schmidt nodded and turned back to watch Maren. “Yes, yes, you did,” he said quietly. “I recall how upset she was over what we put you through.”

“Then you have some idea of how I feel right now,” Icheb told him.

“And yet, you haven’t asked me to pull her out.”

“She’d never forgive me if I did, sir.”

Commander Schmidt turned around and locked eyes with Icheb. For a long moment, he just stared at the younger man with a critical gaze, appearing to size him up. “You do realize that in a real emergency survival scenario, there’s not going to be any shuttle to have ready to rescue her when she pushes herself too far?” he asked. “That her recklessness could very well get her killed someday?”

Icheb nodded. “It scares me every day.”

Schmidt looked at him for another beat, then turned back to the viewscreen. “She’s just a little over three klicks out,” he observed, sounding simultaneously impressed and disappointed. “She just might make it.”

Icheb said nothing. He just stared at the viewscreen and hoped for the best.

Thin Air

“Warning. Oxygen saturation levels critical. Increase airflow or replace tank. Warning. Oxygen saturation levels critical ...”

“Computer, cancel audio warnings,” Maren snapped. She hated to waste precious air on speaking, but the droning voice of the suit computer was driving her nuts. *I got the point the first thirty-six times you said it*, she thought as she shoved her way through another snow drift.

It was getting dark. She had been chasing the sun, but it had outrun her. Now it was dipping low on the Western horizon, and according to her helmet display, the temperature was beginning to drop.

Inside the EV suit was a different story. Sweat beaded up on Maren’s forehead and trickled down into her eyes, making them burn a little. She was trying hard to control her breathing and not use too much air, but it was a losing battle. There just wasn’t enough air to breathe.

She was pushing herself harder than she ever had before, and despite the dizziness, fatigue, and nausea, there was something exhilarating about it. *Euphoria is a symptom of hypoxia*, she remembered from her training. She glanced up at her biomonitor readout. Blood oxygen level 81 percent. *Shit*, she thought. Below 80, and she would run the risk of brain damage or cardiac arrest. She wasn’t exhilarated. She was hypoxemic.

Still, she kept pushing forward. She had to be close. She’d been moving fast for an hour now, and she still had almost fifteen minutes of air left as long as she kept the flow reduced. *Assuming you don’t pass out by then*, she thought.

As the sun dipped beneath the horizon and passed out of view, Maren reached up to activate her suit’s headlamp. She hoped it hadn’t been damaged by the bear cub’s strike. As she did, she caught sight of a string of glittering lights flickering to life up ahead.

Alert? She hoped so. But then she reminded herself: *Hallucinations are also a sign of hypoxemia.*

Hallucination or not, her spirits were lifted at the sight. She forced herself to pick up even more speed. The snow was a lot shallower here, which she thought was a good sign. It also made it much easier to move. Her muscles screamed at her for mercy, and her extremities had long since gone numb, but she broke into a run anyway.

If those lights were Alert, then success was within her reach.

“Her blood oxygen level is seventy-nine percent and dropping, sir,” Lira said.

Icheb stared at the tracking monitor. They’d lost visual on her when the sun went down, but he could see she was moving fast, considering the icy conditions and the weight of her EV suit. “She’s running,” he said.

“She’s a little under two kilometers from Alert, and she’s got more than ten minutes left in the tank,” the Trill said. “She might actually make it.”

Icheb kept staring at the dot that represented Maren. “Before, or after she suffers permanent cerebral damage?” he asked. The question was rhetorical. There was no way to know how badly the diminished oxygen would affect Maren. Her stamina was above normal for the human body, and she had trained for low-oxygen situations, just like everyone else in Starfleet. But this level of deprivation hadn’t been part of their training. Schmidt was right; she was being reckless.

Beside him, the commander sat quietly monitoring Maren’s readouts. Every few seconds, his PADD would light up with a message, and he would reply by text. Icheb’s enhanced vision enabled him to read the messages without Schmidt noticing. Someone was checking on Maren – probably Commander B’Elanna Torres, whom Icheb thought was likely to kill Schmidt with her bare hands in an act of pure Klingon vengeance if anything permanently damaging happened to her protégé.

“Ensign Lira, give me a status report on the shuttle,” said Icheb.

“They’re following her at a distance of 2500 meters,” Lira said. “Ready to intercept if she goes down.”

“Can they see her?”

Lira’s fingers flew across the console in front of her. There was a pause, and then she put her fingers up to the comms earpiece she was wearing as she listened to whatever the co-pilot or medic was telling her. She turned to Icheb and Schmidt. “Confirmed, they have a visual on her,” she said. Then, suddenly, she frowned. “Sirs, they say she just collapsed.”

Icheb’s eyes flew up to the biomonitor. Maren’s heart rate was 161 BPM, her breathing fast and shallow. Her blood oxygen level was down to 76 percent. According to the sensors in her suit, she wasn’t moving at all, aside from the rapid rise and fall of her chest. *She’s unconscious*, he thought.

“Tell them to prepare for intercept,” he ordered the Trill, his voice calm and steady despite the panic he felt rising in his chest.

“Wait,” said Commander Schmidt, raising a hand. “Belay that order.” He pointed back to the tracking screen. “Look. She’s moving again.”

Maren blinked groggily, trying to clear her vision. All she could see was a gradient mixture of black and gray and white, illuminated at the top by a light she couldn’t identify. Her forehead was resting against something cold and hard. She struggled to pick up her head. It was then that

she noticed the words and numbers – glowing orange and floating all around her, dimly recognizable but too blurry to read.

Her head was pounding, and she felt dizzy, like she was about to pass out from lack of – *Oh, God*, she realized, as she remembered where she was and what she had been doing before she collapsed. *I'm not about to pass out. I already did.* She was lying on the ground, facedown in the snow. As she struggled to push herself upright, she tried to make sense of the blurry letters and numbers in front of her. One reading stood out from all the rest: *Blood oxygen: 72 percent.*

“Computer, restore default airflow,” she ordered. Her voice sounded raspy in the thin air.

“*Unable to comply,*” the suit computer replied. “*Insufficient oxygen reserve.*”

“Increase airflow by ten percent,” she said, her pitch rising as she used every bit of her strength to force herself back to her feet.

“*Unable to comply. Insufficient oxygen reserve.*”

Shit, she thought. *Better get moving, then.* She brushed the snow off her broken faceplate and tried to get her bearings.

Ahead of her, the lights of Alert looked like something out of a fairytale through her impaired vision – soft and blurry, like sprites dancing in the night. At first, she even thought she saw them moving, but then she realized it was only her perception – she had the spins. It felt a lot like the first night she had ever gotten really drunk, except that night, she had been in the safety of her own dorm room, with Rachel holding her hair back while she vomited. Not here in the middle of the frozen sea, just within reach of safety but feeling too weak to get there in time.

Haltingly, she took a step forward. She stumbled, but caught herself and managed to stay upright. Her head was swimming. *I need air*, she realized. She eyed the settlement ahead and tried to gauge the distance. She wished she had Icheb’s perfect vision and enhanced analytical abilities to help her. All she had was her gut. *I'm guessing 1.5 kliks*, she decided. She glanced up at the external temperature readout. -40.1 C. But that was without windchill, and she couldn’t get a sense of the wind through her EV suit. The snow didn’t seem to be blowing around too much, so that was good.

Last chance, she realized. *Without the extra weight from the helmet and the oxygen tank, I can be there in less than five minutes.* Of course, that was how fast she could run under normal conditions. But she wasn’t thinking clearly anymore. She needed air, and she needed to get to Alert, and the only thing she could think of to do was take off her helmet and run.

Somewhere in the deep recesses of her memory, she recalled that hypoxemia led to poor decision making. The thought was fleeting. Bracing herself for the pain, she released the seal on her helmet, took it off, and dropped it in the snow. She winced as the cold hit her face, almost instantly freezing the sweat that had been glistening on her skin. Then she shed her oxygen, water, and nutrition tanks, and ran for her life.

Alert

Schmidt suddenly stood up and squinted at the readouts. “Her blood oxygen level is rising,” he said in surprise.

Icheb saw it, too. He stared at the readings, stunned. “She removed her helmet,” he realized, with a combination of relief and fear – relief, because she was breathing oxygen again, and fear, because that helmet was the only thing standing between the face he loved and the harsh elements.

“That’s not all she removed, sir,” Lira said. “Her speed just increased considerably. At a minimum, I think she took off her external supplies.”

Icheb glanced at the tracking monitor. *16 kph*. Not even close to top speed for Maren. He hoped that meant she was at least still wearing the body of her EV suit, because suspected she was just stubborn enough to strip down to her base layers if she thought it was the only way to succeed.

Icheb pushed his chair back from his workstation, stood up, and walked over to Lira. “Get visual confirmation from the shuttle,” he told her. “I want to know exactly what she’s doing.”

Lira’s fingers danced across the console, then paused as she waited for a reply from the shuttle commander. She looked up at Icheb with concern in her eyes. “She’s making a run for it,” she said. “She dropped her gear and helmet in the snow and took off for Alert. Don’t worry, they’re following her.”

Icheb quickly calculated how long it would take her to reach the settlement at her present speed, and turned to Schmidt. “Sir, at her current velocity, she will reach Alert in 5 minutes, 13 seconds. Can she survive that long exposed to the elements?”

Schmidt stared at the tracking monitor for another moment. His look was one of stunned disbelief. “I don’t know,” he said. “But it appears we’re about to find out.”

Maren’s lungs were on fire. Every breath she took felt like she was being phasered from the inside out, and she cursed her own body for keeping itself warm – at least the searing pain of the cold against her face had almost immediately given way to numbness. She was pretty sure that was a bad sign, but she didn’t care. This was the northernmost permanent settlement on Earth. If their infirmary couldn’t treat frostbite, then they weren’t worth much, were they?

She still felt dizzy from the effects of oxygen deprivation, but she could feel her head clearing a bit. Her vision was recovering, too, but she kept her eyes closed as much as she could even as she ran, because she was afraid the moisture in her eyes would freeze the same way her sweat and the snot that had come pouring out of her nose upon her exposure to the cold air already had.

She was getting close – she was just beginning to make out the shapes of the buildings in the settlement. She wondered which one was the infirmary. She guessed it didn’t really matter – she could show up at any door in Alert and they’d immediately realize she needed medical care. She wondered what she looked like after five minutes spent sprinting through the unnatural cold.

About one hundred meters from the nearest building, she lost her footing on a bare patch of ice, and slipped and fell, hard. Unfortunately, her reaction times were still impaired. She tried to break her fall with her gloved hands, but she was too slow. Her face hit the ice, and the momentum she’d built up running sent her sliding across the sea’s surface until she hit another snowdrift.

“Ouch,” she whimpered, but it was more out of instinct than anything. She was so numb that she hadn’t actually felt the impact as anything more than a massive “thud.” But as she forced herself back to her feet, she could see in the dim twilight that she’d left a red patch in the snow. She reached up and touched her nose with a glove. It came away bloody. *Great, broken nose*, she thought. *At least it doesn’t hurt*, she added, trying to find the silver lining.

She didn’t have it in her to run anymore. She knew she was risking further damage to her skin and lungs by prolonging her exposure, but at this point, what did it matter? Five minutes, seven minutes ... if she was already at the point where she could break her nose and not even feel it, what difference could another couple of minutes possibly make?

Slowly, she trudged toward the nearest building. As she approached it, an exterior light came on – probably on a motion sensor, Maren figured. Inside the structure, a dog started barking. It sounded large and vicious. She walked up to the door anyway and toggled the intercom.

“I’ll be right there,” a male voice answered over the speaker, after a moment. *Don’t you even want to know who it is?* Maren wondered, but then again, she figured in a place this small and isolated, no one would expect strangers.

After a few moments that felt like light years to Maren, the door slid open. A slender, balding man of about 40 stood on the other side. When he saw her face, his expression changed from mild curiosity to horrified shock. He didn’t hesitate or ask questions. He simply gathered her into his arms and pulled her inside.

Alert was, and had always been, a scientific station. Inside, Maren briefly noticed that the building was mostly laboratory space with a small living area, and that the dog had been put in a crate. The balding man guided her over to the sofa. “Lie down,” he said, in a no-nonsense tone. He reminded her of The Doctor.

She did as she was told. The man returned a moment later with a cold, wet washcloth and dabbed gently at Maren’s nose.

“Can you feel that?” he asked.

Feeling dazed, she shook her head. The man nodded tersely in reply, then strode over to a nearby desk and activated the comm. “Infirmary,” she heard him say.

There was a pause. “*Infirmary, this is Jessica,*” came a voice over the speaker.

“Yeah, this is Neil Abbott over at the microbial lab. I need a transport right away.”

“*Has there been another containment failure?*”

“No, no, nothing like that. I’ve got a girl here in bad shape. She just showed up on my doorstep out of nowhere wearing a spacesuit.”

“*What in the ...* “

“Yeah, I know. Just send someone over right away, okay?”

“*You got it.*”

The man walked back over to Maren and looked down at her questioningly. “What were you doing out there? And where did you come from?”

The warmer air inside the building was starting to allow some of the sensation to return to Maren’s face, and her nose was beginning to throb with pain. “I’m Maren O’Connor,” she said, wincing with the effort. “I’m a cadet at Starfleet Academy. This was my survival test.” Suddenly overwhelmed by exhaustion, she closed her eyes. “Can you please call Commander Llewellyn Schmidt at Earth Spacedock and tell him I made it to safety? And to go fuck himself?” she asked. Then she opened her eyes again. “Okay, maybe not that last part,” she said, making a weak attempt at a smile. It hurt to move her lips, though, and tears sprang to her eyes.

“Okay, okay. Stop talking,” the man said softly. “Try not to move. I’ve got a skimmer on the way to get you some help. I’m Neil.”

“Thanks, Neil,” Maren said. She closed her eyes again. The pain was getting to be too much. The last thing she remembered hearing before she slipped into unconsciousness was Neil’s voice, requesting Earth Spacedock.

Neil

“She’s not moving,” Icheb said, watching the tracking screen. Lira tapped something out on her console.

“The shuttle commander reports she entered a building on the northeast edge of town,” she said after a moment. “He says he sees a medical skimmer headed for her position.” She gave Icheb an encouraging smile. “Sounds like she made it, sir.”

Icheb was relieved to know that help was on the way, but he remained anxious. He had no idea what the last few minutes may have done to her. He eyed her biometric readout with concern. She was hypothermic, her blood oxygen level was still depressed, and it was extraordinarily likely that she had significant damage to her skin from exposure. He turned to Schmidt. “You almost killed her.”

“She almost killed herself,” Schmidt retorted flatly. “She could have punched out at any time. She chose not to.”

Icheb shut his mouth as he realized Schmidt was right. Maren was just as stubborn as he had been when he had wandered lost in the Martian desert for five days rather than activate his own emergency beacon.

“Commander, I have an incoming comm for you from a Neil Abbott?” Lira said. “He says he’s with O’Connor.”

It would have been imperceptible to anyone but Icheb, but with his enhanced vision, he was sure he saw Schmidt pale slightly. “Put him on audio,” Schmidt said.

Lira touched her console and nodded at the commander. “He’s on, sir.”

“This is Commander Schmidt.”

“Lew. It’s been a while.” The man’s words were friendly, but his voice sounded hostile, and again, Icheb saw a subtle reaction out of Schmidt – there was a slight twitch at the corner of his lips, and his blinking became more frequent. “I’m at the science station at Alert in North America,” Neil said over the comm. “I’ve got a girl here named Maren O’Connor who told me to tell you she made it to safety. Unfortunately, she passed out right afterward. I’ve got medics here taking her to our infirmary. I just thought you should know.”

“Thank you, Neil. We’re aware of the situation,” Schmidt replied, as Icheb fought the urge to speak out of turn and start questioning the man on the comm himself. “What’s her condition?”

“I won’t lie to you, Lew, she looks pretty grim,” Neil said. “Broken nose, frostbite, hypothermia. She’s cyanotic, too, like she was oxygen deprived or something. She said something about a survival test? What the hell did you do, just dump her in the middle of the arctic and tell her to fend for herself?”

That’s precisely what he did, Icheb thought, but stayed silent.

“Miss O’Connor is a Starfleet cadet,” Schmidt said. “You know all cadets undergo similar survival scenarios designed to expose them to the harsh conditions they may encounter in emergency situations on other planets. She had the ability to end the test at any time if she felt her life was truly in danger.”

“Then this girl is either stupid or suicidal,” Neil replied. “Because if she had shown up on my doorstep even five minutes later, I doubt there would have been anything anyone could have done to save her. As it is, if she comes out of this without any permanent damage, I’ll be surprised. Anyway, we’re leaving now for the infirmary. You can contact them for any updates. Abbott out.”

Icheb’s heart dropped as the call disconnected. His mouth had been halfway open, about to tell a perfect stranger to tell Maren he loved her. Now, he closed it and stared at the floor, feeling frustrated and helpless.

Schmidt turned to him. “You’re dismissed, Lieutenant,” he said quietly. “Go replicate some warm clothes and I’ll send orders to the transportation room to beam you down.”

Icheb looked at him in surprise. “Sir?” he asked.

“You heard me. Get down there. I’ll be along shortly,” the commander said.

“Yes, sir,” Icheb said, afraid to say anything else, lest Schmidt change his mind. Feeling stunned and anxious, he rushed out of the monitoring room. He didn’t bother to replicate warm clothes. He just ran as fast as he could to the turbolifts.

Maren drifted in and out of consciousness as she floated on the antigrav stretcher. She was surrounded by people, and she picked up snippets of their conversations as she faded in and out.

“Cyanotic ... must have run out of air ... ”

“Core temp 33.8. I’m going to need a warming suit ... ”

“... cellular regeneration chamber ready ... ”

“No, set the break first.”

“I found her ID. This is the girl that was all over the news a couple of years ago. The Daystrom Prize kid.”

“What is she doing here?”

“Abbott said something about a survival test.”

“Her sats are dropping. Get a mask on her.”

She barely felt the hypospray they pressed against her neck, but she heard its familiar hiss. A moment later, everything went dark.

Icheb entered the transporter room at a full sprint, in direct violation of Starfleet regulations prohibiting officers running in the main corridors during non-emergencies. He didn't care if the station wasn't at red alert – Maren was injured, and to him, that was an emergency.

The transporter chief, a human non-com in his early 50s, looked up from his console in surprise. “Lieutenant, did I miss something?” he asked, quirked an eyebrow upwards and glancing at the totally inactive alert klaxon.

“You should have instructions from Commander Schmidt authorizing my transport to Alert, Nunavut,” Icheb said, ignoring the crewman's question. His voice remained level, but the words came out rushed.

The chief raised his eyebrows. “Not exactly dressed for the weather down there, are you?” he said.

“I don't need to be,” Icheb replied. He reached over to the image of Earth on the chief's console screen and zoomed in on Alert's coordinates until individual structures were visible. He pointed to the infirmary. “You're going to beam me directly into the lobby of this building. I'll replicate whatever I need after I get there.”

The chief shrugged and nodded his assent. “As you wish, sir,” he said.

Icheb turned around and hurried up onto the dais. “Energize,” he said.

“Aye, sir.”

When Icheb arrived in the lobby of the Alert infirmary, the first thing he noticed was how small it was. There were only two chairs in what passed for the waiting room, which apparently also served as the information desk and registration area. There were two people in the room – a young brunette woman sitting behind a workstation, and a balding, middle-aged man sitting in one of the visitors' chairs. Both were human, and both looked surprised to see Icheb materialize out of thin air.

“Sir, can I help you?” the woman behind the desk asked.

Icheb nodded. “I'm looking for Maren O'Connor. I was told she was brought here.”

The man stood up and walked over. “I'm the one who called,” he said. “Dr. Neil Abbott,” he introduced himself. He offered Icheb a quick handshake and gave him an appraising look, eyeing Icheb's youthful face and the two pips on his collar. “Schmidt couldn't even be bothered to come down himself, eh?” he said, with a bitter chuckle. “Just like him to send a fresh-faced kid to clean up his messes.”

Icheb ignored the comment about his age. He was used to it by now. “I'm Lieutenant Icheb,” he said. “Commander Schmidt is on his way, but I wanted to be here. Maren – ” he stopped himself – “Cadet O'Connor and I are very close. I'd like to see her as soon as possible.”

The man's face softened. “Ah. I see.”

“She's in isolation receiving treatment for severe exposure,” the woman at the desk interjected. “You're going to have to wait.”

“Then I need a complete report on her condition,” Icheb said, desperation creeping into his voice.

“Jessica, why don't you take him back and let him have a look?” Neil said. “I'm sure Drs. M'riss and Mohammed won't mind filling him in.”

Icheb shot the stranger a grateful look.

The woman, however, shook her head. “I have to stay here,” she said. “I have to be here when Commander Schmidt arrives.” She then gave Neil a knowing smirk. “*You* probably shouldn't be, though,” she said. “Why don't you go ahead and take him back? It's not as if you don't know your way around.”

Neil smirked. “I guess I've been in here enough times myself,” he conceded. He nodded at Icheb and motioned for him to follow, then headed for the double doors at the back of the room. “Thanks, Jess,” he said, as they passed by the brunette.

“No problem,” she replied.

As the two men walked down the short corridor to the isolation chamber, Icheb wondered what Jessica had meant when she said Neil shouldn't be there when Schmidt arrived. He asked Neil as much.

“Oh, that?” Neil asked with a slightly bitter smile. “Schmidt and I have some ... history,” he explained. “We were roommates at the Academy.”

“You're Starfleet?” Icheb asked in surprise.

“Not anymore. I quit eight years in. It wasn't what I thought it would be.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s just say your girlfriend is lucky to be alive. Schmidt’s gotten people killed before.”

“On the survival test?” Icheb was unaware of anyone actually having died as a result of the test. Maren wasn’t the first to sustain severe injuries, but Starfleet was very good at extracting cadets before it was too late to save them.

Neil shook his head. “No. This was a long time ago,” he said, with a faraway look. “Way before he was assigned to command. Anyway, we’re not on good terms, he and I. This incident just reminded me why. And Jessica back there just witnessed my epic rage when I realized who this girl is.”

“Maren?” Icheb asked.

Neil nodded. “Yeah. She introduced herself when she arrived at my house, and I thought her name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it, and I certainly didn’t recognize her.” Icheb blanched at that, wondering just how much damage her pretty face had taken. “Then they found her Academy ID card, and I realized who she was. She won the Daystrom a couple of years back, right?”

Icheb nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Neil shook his head in disgust. “I can’t believe Starfleet would risk losing an asset like her for a stupid *test*. That girl is a once-in-a-generation talent and she’s only 22. She’s probably got 150 years or more of innovation in front of her. If I were Starfleet, I’d keep her in a fully-staffed lab somewhere safe, not dump her alone in the Arctic. And I certainly wouldn’t send her into space.”

“Maren wouldn’t be happy anywhere *but* space,” Icheb protested. “And every cadet takes the test. She could have requested rescue at any time.”

Neil narrowed his eyes. “You sound just like him. Schmidt, I mean. That’s what he told me over comm.”

“It’s the truth,” Icheb said. “But Maren is a singularly determined individual. She does not permit herself to fail.”

“Well, she damn near determined herself to death tonight,” Neil said, as they reached the end of the corridor. “Here she is.”

Through a transparent window, Icheb could see Maren lying on a biobed. The room was hazy with some sort of vapor – something to soothe and repair her lungs, he guessed. She was wearing a full-body silver suit that concealed everything but her face, which was covered in deep purple welts. An arch-shaped device was positioned above her head, bathing her frost-burned skin with light. The area around her nose was swollen and bruised, as were both eye sockets.

Aside from the familiar shape of her slender frame, she was absolutely unrecognizable as the girl he loved. Fighting back waves of emotion, he reached up and pressed one hand against the window. The surface was warm to the touch.

“Doctor M’riss,” Neil said beside him, “This is Lieutenant Icheb. He’s here to check on Miss O’Connor.”

The Caitian doctor, whose fur was a patchwork of white, orange, brown and red, swished toward them with unquestionably feline grace. “We’re warrming her up,” she purred. “We don’t yet know if there will be perrmanent damage.”

“When will you know?” Icheb asked, without taking his eyes off of Maren.

“Perhaps tomorrrow,” M’riss replied. “She’s a fighterrr,” she added. “Most Terrrrans wouldn’t have survived this farrrr.”

Icheb nodded, but said nothing. He stayed silent for a long moment. “Can I see her chart?” he finally asked.

M’riss nodded and retrieved a PADD from a nearby cart.

“Chances arre, she’ll be all rrright,” the doctor said as she handed it over. “There’s just no way to be surrre until she wakes up, and we’re keeping her unconscious while her skin and lungs regenerrrate.”

Icheb nodded. He glanced over the chart, which had details on the treatments they were giving her and was streaming a live reading of her vital signs. Her oxygen level had stabilized at 93 percent. He suspected the damage to her lungs would make it impossible for her to reach full saturation until they were fully repaired. Her heart rate had come down – it was beating at a steady 74 BPM. That was high for Maren, but her body was probably working hard to heal itself, he reasoned. Her blood pressure was normal and so was her brain function. He allowed himself a small sigh of relief. It could have been so much worse.

He looked up and peered through the window again at his sleeping love. “When will the treatments be complete?” he asked.

“She’s scheduled for fourteen hours in the chamberrr,” M’riss replied. “After that, we’ll run more tests. When she’s stable enough, she’ll be transferred to Starrrfleet Medical.”

Icheb nodded again, still staring at Maren. It hurt him to see her like this, but he couldn’t look away.

“Come on,” Neil said, lightly touching his arm. “There’s nothing you can do here. If you like, you can stay with me at the lab tonight. The accommodations are pretty Spartan, but it’s warm and it’s close by. If anything changes, we can arrange to have you notified.”

Icheb hesitated. He didn’t want to leave her. But Neil was right, there was nothing he could do for her. She was locked in an isolation room, unaware of his presence. He just hoped she wasn’t in any pain.

He turned to the Caitian doctor. “If she regains consciousness before I return, please notify me immediately,” he said. Then he added quietly,

“Also, tell her I’m here and that I love her.”

“Of courrrrse,” M’riss purred.

Icheb took one long last look at Maren; then turned and followed Neil back down the hall.

Bad Blood

When they arrived back at the lobby, Schmidt was waiting for them.

“Neil,” he said, cautiously offering a hand to shake, which Neil pointedly ignored.

“Lew,” he said with a curt nod.

Schmidt returned the nod and awkwardly let his hand fall to his side. He turned to Icheb. “How is she, Lieutenant?”

Before Icheb could reply, it was Neil who answered, with surprising fire for such a seemingly mild-mannered scientist. “Why don’t you go back there and see for yourself how she is?” he demanded. “Or are you afraid to face the consequences of your little experiment?”

Schmidt looked taken aback. For the first time since Icheb had met the man, a look of genuine worry crossed his face. “How bad is she?”

“She looks like absolute shit and her lungs are half-frozen. They nearly had to put her on bypass. They still don’t know if she’ll have lasting brain damage from the oxygen deprivation. How *dare* you risk a genius like that just for some stupid test? When that poor little girl stumbled into my lab, I thought she was dead for sure. The doctors here don’t even fully understand how she survived.”

For a moment, Schmidt looked subdued, but the effect was fleeting. When he spoke again, his voice took on its usual arrogance. “That ‘poor little girl’ is a Starfleet cadet,” he said. “In four months’ time, she’ll be an officer, giving orders and making decisions that could have interstellar repercussions. If she can’t handle herself in an emergency, she has no business wearing the uniform. It’s my job to find out what these cadets are made of.”

“By trying to kill them?” Neil asked, incredulous. “How *dare* you play with the lives of children?!” he shouted. “*Especially* our best and brightest. They deserve your protection, not ... *whatever* this is.”

“Survival of the fittest,” Schmidt said somberly.

“That’s bullshit, and you know it!” Neil was yelling now. “Was it survival of the fittest when you left Caris on that moon to die?!”

Icheb watched both men, feeling stunned. Neil had clearly understated the extent of the “history” between them. A long silence filled the air. When Schmidt spoke again, his voice was quieter, and shaky.

“That was different and you know it, Neil. These tests are performed under controlled conditions —“

“Controlled conditions like -60 windchill? That doesn’t happen naturally on this planet anymore unless we *make* it happen,” Neil shouted. “You ordered up this cold front. Why? Just to force her to fail? I thought that’s what the *Kobayashi Maru* was for.”

“O’Connor *broke* the *Kobayashi Maru* test,” Schmidt snapped. “She studied the code, found a glitch, and exploited it. I had to bring *him* in just to lock her out of the escape pod computer so she wouldn’t rig *this* test in her favor, too,” he added, jerking a thumb toward Icheb. “I never expected her to try to make it here. It was my assumption that she would stay near the pod.”

“Well, she didn’t,” Neil snapped back. “And if she suffers lasting impairment because of it, I will personally find the best lawyer in the Federation and pay her family’s legal expenses when they sue Starfleet. Something’s got to change, Lew. You take your best and brightest and you try to break them. I mean, you forced her goddamn boyfriend to help you orchestrate this shitshow?” he asked, gesturing toward Icheb. “What was *that* about? Just to prove he could abandon her like you did Caris? To turn him into *you*?”

Icheb looked at Neil wide-eyed. The man was absolutely correct in his assumption that part of the reason he had been called in was to see if he could put Maren in lethal danger. He didn’t have any idea who Caris was, but he suspected she had played a major role in shaping both of these men into what they were today.

Schmidt glared at Neil for a long moment. “Sometimes difficult choices have to be made.”

“You didn’t have to leave her there to die.” Neil’s voice broke. A single tear escaped one eye, which he wiped away angrily.

A stony silence settled between the two men, and they stared at each other with what appeared to be a lifetime’s worth of mutual resentment in their eyes. Icheb glanced back at the registration desk, where Jessica was sitting wide-eyed, the fingers of one hand pressed to her lips as she stared at the emotional display. She caught Icheb’s glance and gave him a questioning look. All he could do was lightly shrug. He knew exactly as much as she did about whatever had happened between Neil and Schmidt.

Finally, Neil broke eye contact with Schmidt. “Go check on the girl,” he said, shaking his head with disgust. “See for yourself, and just remember, she was lucky. She could have ended up exactly like Caris.”

At that, Schmidt looked almost shaken.

“Come on,” Neil said to Icheb. He turned back to Schmidt. “I’m taking your Lieutenant to stay with me for the night. If you want to stay Earthside, there’s billeting on the west end of town. I’m sure you can also beam back up to the comfort of your quarters at the station, if you prefer.”

Schmidt didn’t argue, so Icheb followed Neil. “Where’s your coat?” Neil asked.

“I didn’t bring one,” he replied. “I wanted to get here as soon as possible. I assumed I could replicate one when I arrived, if necessary.”

Neil shook his head. “You assumed wrongly,” he said, but his voice was sympathetic. “Our access to replicators is somewhat limited here because of the power required just to keep our facilities operational and to run our experiments. All the hospital has is a medical replicator. There’s one replicator in town that can generate winter gear, but it’s in the general store, and that’s closed down for the night. But don’t worry, we keep a few extra coats around just in case.” He walked over to a closet at the side of the lobby. “What are you, about a medium?”

Icheb nodded, feeling grateful. “You’re being very kind to me,” he said. “Thank you.”

Neil handed him a thick, full length coat with built-in mittens and a heavy hood. “Don’t mention it,” he replied, shrugging his own coat on. “It’s the least I could do after what he’s put you through. Now, come on. Let’s go.”

Caris

It wasn't a long walk from the infirmary to Neil's residence, but the frigid air against Icheb's face gave him a good idea of what Maren must have endured unprotected. Each time he or Neil exhaled, the vapor immediately crystallized and fell to the ground as snow. They walked there in silence. Icheb looked up at the star-filled sky, where the aurora was just beginning to put on its colorful display. He wished Maren were beside him to see it, too.

When they arrived at Neil's laboratory, the scientist leaned in front of the eyescanner next to the door, and it slid open. "After you," he said, gesturing to Icheb to step inside.

As they entered the lab, Icheb's eyes were instantly drawn to the bloodstained sofa in the living area. A washcloth had been dropped on the floor beside it, and it, too, was saturated with blood. He must have displayed a visible reaction, because Neil immediately rushed over to pick up the washcloth and took it into the nearby kitchen area. "I'm sorry," he apologized, looking truly remorseful. "I wasn't thinking. You didn't need to see that."

"No, I'm fine," Icheb replied, but he was lying. He felt sick to his stomach at the sight.

Neil shed his coat and took Icheb's, too, draping them over a nearby dining chair. "I'll get the handheld," he said. He walked over to the lab area and retrieved a portable sonic cleaner and disinfectant. As Icheb followed him with his eyes, he noticed there was a dog, sound asleep in a crate, snoring softly.

As Neil returned with the device and ran it over the stains on the sofa, they rapidly disappeared. "I really wish you hadn't seen that," Neil said. "This is the only place I have for you to sleep tonight."

"I don't really sleep," said Icheb. It was the truth. He regenerated, and he didn't have an alcove here. One night without regeneration wouldn't kill him, but as far as sleep went, he'd be fortunate to manage more than a twenty-minute nap.

Neil cast him a questioning glance, and seemed to really notice, for the first time, the visible implant on Icheb's face. A look of recognition crossed his face. "I know who you are," he said. "You were Borg. *Voyager* brought you back from the Delta Quadrant."

Icheb nodded. He was used to being recognized. Now Maren was semi-famous, too, at least in the scientific community. It was strange for both of them.

Neil eyed him with curiosity, but didn't press further. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

Icheb wasn't, but he nodded anyway. He required nourishment, especially if he was going to skip regeneration. "Yes, sir," he said.

Neil gave him a stern look. "You can call me Neil, or Dr. Abbott, or just 'hey you,' but please stop calling me 'sir,'" he said. "I haven't worn the uniform for a long time, and it's disconcerting to hear you call me that."

"Yes, sir," Icheb replied automatically, before he could catch himself. He gave Neil a tiny, slightly sheepish smile. "I mean, Dr. Abbott."

"That's better," Neil said, with a small smile of his own. He walked over to the replicator in the kitchen area. "What'll it be?" he asked.

Normally, Icheb would have ordered nutritional supplement 13B. It met all his dietary needs in an efficient manner, and its taste was inoffensive. But right now, he didn't feel like being efficient. Back at the Academy, whenever either of them was upset about something, Maren would replicate them peanut butter sandwiches and chocolate milk. *Comfort food*, she'd called it. Right now, Icheb felt he could use some comfort. "A peanut butter sandwich and a glass of chocolate milk," he requested.

Neil's eyes widened slightly. "Geez, you *are* just a kid, aren't you?" he said, bemused. "And here I was going to offer you a beer."

"I don't really drink," Icheb replied.

"That's a shame," Neil said. "Because if anyone needs a drink tonight, it's probably you."

He replicated the requested items and set them on the table for Icheb, then retrieved two glasses and a bottle of scotch from the countertop and brought them over. "In case you change your mind," he said, pouring a glass for Icheb and sliding it toward him. He sat down at the other end of the table and poured his own drink. He rolled the liquid around in the glass a bit before taking a long sip. He closed his eyes as he swallowed it down.

"May I ask you a question?" Icheb asked him.

The scientist gave him a wary glance, but nodded. "Go ahead."

"Who is Caris?"

Neil sighed. "I had a feeling you were going to ask me that."

He took another long drink of his scotch and closed his eyes again. Then he set his glass down carefully on the table in front of him. "Caris was my wife," he said, after a long moment. "Me, Lew and Caris, we were all three assigned to the *Ajax*. Lew and Caris got sent on an away mission to an uncharted Class P moon to determine whether it had any mining value. I wasn't along for the ride – geology was her specialty, not mine. The system we were in had a lot of radioactive noise, so they had to take a shuttle because we couldn't use transporters. Lew was the pilot." He sighed and took another sip of his drink, seemingly willing himself to continue.

“While they were down there, we detected an incoming neutronic storm,” he said. “The captain ordered them to return to the ship immediately.” He paused and swallowed hard. “But Caris was dragging her feet. She had just found an unidentified element in the rocky surface below the ice, and she was determined to get a sample to take back for analysis. She told the others to go ahead, that she’d catch up in a minute. But as she was climbing out of the excavation site, she slipped and lost her footing on the ice, and lost her grip on the climbing rope. She fell about 30 meters, broke her leg, and shattered her EV suit’s faceplate.” His eyes welled up at the memory.

“The others had all made it back to the shuttle, so she told Lew to just leave her, and he did,” Neil said, his voice thick with the effort of fighting back tears. “He didn’t even try to save her. He could have flown the shuttle over to the excavation site, lowered someone else down to pull her out, but he didn’t. He said there was no time – neutronic storms move faster than warp, you know?”

Icheb nodded. The Borg called them particle density anomalies – classification 3472 – and they were extraordinarily damaging to both technology and organic life. If Schmidt had tried to save Caris, it was likely everyone on the away team would have perished. But he also knew that if it was Maren in that situation, he probably would have taken the risk. He suspected Neil felt the same way about Caris.

“He was my best friend, and he left her there,” Neil said quietly, still sounding disbelieving after all the intervening years. “I didn’t even get to say goodbye. We recovered her body three days later, after the storm had passed and radiation levels had dropped enough. The last words I ever heard from her were recorded on the shuttle’s comm. She said, ‘Tell Neil I’m sorry, and I love him.’ Lew didn’t even give her a reply.”

“I’m very sorry,” said Icheb, sincerely.

“It was a long time ago,” Neil said, shaking his head sadly. “But seeing your girlfriend tonight took me right back.”

“I quit Starfleet the day we buried her,” he added, after a few moments’ silence. “I couldn’t do it anymore, not without her.” He set his glass down. “I hadn’t seen or spoken to Lew in twelve years before tonight.” He frowned across the table at Icheb. “Is what happened tonight normal now?” he asked. “I know everyone has to do the survival test, but I don’t remember it being this bad. I mean, I spent three days on a swampy moon trying to avoid poisonous creatures, but at least it was M-class. The only way I was going to die was if I did something stupid.”

Icheb shook his head. “No. Maren’s test was not standard protocol,” he said. “Commander Schmidt sets everyone up to fail their first time. He analyzes their strengths and weaknesses and uses them to plan a worst-case scenario. But he usually only needs standard equipment to do it.”

“After Maren broke the *Kobayashi Maru* simulator, he realized she could program her way out of anything,” Icheb continued. “He wanted to force her to face the test as designed – a test of survival, not of technical skill. He chose the arctic because she hates the cold. But as far as I know, this is the first time he’s instructed weather control to alter conditions for a survival test, and the first time he’s tried to lock anyone out of the pod’s internal systems. And it’s certainly the first time he’s called in someone close to the test subject to assist with developing the scenario. I told him I thought it was a conflict of interest, but he said I should consider it a psychological test, to see if I could send her into a potentially lethal situation.”

“And how did that make you feel?” Neil asked.

Icheb looked up from his sandwich and met his gaze. Neil was staring at him with an oddly intense expression.

“Terrible,” Icheb answered. “I hated every minute of it.”

Neil sighed heavily. “Don’t let them do it to you,” he said. “Don’t let them turn you into one of them. You’ve been assimilated before – Command is no different.” He shook his head and took another swig of his scotch. “I swear to God, sometimes I think the Borg are more honorable than we are – at least they’re up front about their intentions.”

Icheb put down his sandwich. “I’m unsure what you mean.”

Neil sighed and set down his drink. “I’m sorry. It’s been a long night. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. I just mean that not everyone at Command has your best interests in mind, or Maren’s, or anyone else’s. To some of them, you’re simply ... well, *drones*, for lack of a better comparison. Useful for your function and very little else. Have you ever noticed that the Vulcans consistently get the highest marks during performance reviews?”

Icheb nodded. He had, in fact, observed this phenomenon, although his marks were typically just as high.

“It’s because they’re logical and efficient, and don’t let their personal lives affect their work,” Neil said. “The only reason they don’t staff every starship with as many as they can is that they tend to irritate the humans.”

“Logic and efficiency are extremely valuable traits, but emotion can also be a powerful motivator,” Icheb pointed out. “Anger over injustice, compassion for the suffering, curiosity about the unknown – often, emotions become catalysts for action. That’s why we fight wars, go on humanitarian missions, and travel to uncharted space, isn’t it?”

Neil smiled and shook his head. “That was fine when the Federation was smaller,” he said. “Now, it’s so large as to be practically ungovernable. People are easier to manage when their emotions don’t get in the way of their utility. When Caris died, Lew was commended for his decision to leave her behind. You know: ‘The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one.’ It’s not that they weren’t sad to lose her – but ultimately, her death came down to a numbers game. Statistical probabilities were more important than compassion or love – or Caris’s life. Sometimes I worry that this utilitarian approach to things will spread beyond Starfleet itself and affect the entire Federation. Maybe we’ll sacrifice one planet to save a few others, or drop our support of worlds that take more resources than they give back. We can’t just keep expanding forever, or we really will become the Borg.”

Icheb stared silently at his still-untouched glass of chocolate milk. He picked it up and took a sip, just to give himself something to do while he processed Neil’s words. He set it back down, and then eyed the glass of scotch Neil had given him. “Is that synthetic?” he asked warily. Synthelol did bad things to his cortical array.

Neil shook his head. “No, it’s the real deal. Friend of mine brought it in from Aberdeen a few weeks ago.”

Icheb picked up the glass and took a sip. It burned going down, but it was a strangely pleasant feeling. He wasn’t much of a drinker, but the prospect of being awake all night without something to ease the tension he was feeling was enough to convince him to partake. “Thank you,” he said, nodding at Neil.

“You’re welcome,” Neil replied. “And I’m sorry to have gone off on a tangent like that. Seeing Lew tonight just reminded me of all the reasons I left Starfleet. Don’t get me wrong – you people do a lot of good, and the Federation isn’t evil. It’s just ... unwieldy. And the more our leaders try to manage it, the further it gets from what it was created to be. I often wonder if the Borg started the same way.”

Icheb shook his head. “No. The Federation was built on respect for diversity – disparate worlds in cooperation together. The Borg Collective strives for unity and the perfection of the whole. No matter how much pressure the Federation puts on worlds to conform to its ideals, it will never be the same thing as a hive mind. As long as its citizens remain individuals with free will, the Federation will never become the Borg.”

“I suppose I find that reassuring, coming from you,” Neil said, taking another sip of his scotch.

“I realize the Federation is imperfect,” Icheb said. “I’ve experienced its imperfection firsthand, more times than I care to recount. But out of all the societies the Borg had encountered as of my separation from the Collective, this is the one I like the most.” He took another small sip of his drink, enjoying the warming sensation it gave him. He eyed Neil cautiously. “I’m very sorry about your wife.”

Neil nodded. “I’m sorry about your girlfriend,” he replied. “I mean, I’m glad she’s alive, but I’m sorry this happened to her, and to you. I have to say, though, I’m honestly a little surprised this hasn’t soured you on Starfleet.”

Icheb shrugged. “This is our dream,” he said. “Maren’s and mine. We both want to experience as much of the universe as we can, and Starfleet is the best way to do it. No one else but the Borg have the resources to take us where we desire to go.”

“And where is that?” Neil asked.

“*Everywhere*,” Icheb replied. “As you stated back at the infirmary, Maren might have 150 years of innovation in front of her. I plan to be working with her the entire time. Starfleet is already developing a practical slipstream drive because of a problem she solved when she was 20. She and I have other ideas, too. If we can utilize Federation resources to develop our theories, intergalactic travel may be feasible within our lifetimes. Possibly even instant intergalactic travel.”

Neil raised his eyebrows. “Wow. You two *are* ambitious.”

Icheb didn't argue. It was the truth.

A World of Hurt

The next morning, Icheb and Neil walked back to the infirmary together. Icheb had a headache, a dull throbbing pain that he attributed to either lack of regeneration, the two-and-a-half glasses of scotch he'd consumed the night before, or both.

According to his memory files from the night before, he had sat drinking with Neil until he had become so dizzy that the older man had been forced to assist him in walking over to the sofa, where he passed out and slept for nearly six hours – almost a full regeneration cycle.

He remembered talking about Maren a lot – his plans to propose to her, the history of their relationship. Neil had shared similar stories about Caris.

It was unlike Icheb to open up to a stranger, or even most acquaintances and friends. The only people he consistently confided in were Maren, John, and sometimes Seven of Nine. But the alcohol had loosened his reserve, and he had found himself enjoying the conversation with Neil. It had been a pleasant distraction from his worries about Maren's condition. Unfortunately, that distraction had come at a price, and he was paying it now. He rubbed at his forehead with one gloved hand and grimaced.

"They can give you something for that at the infirmary," Neil said, with a lightly amused smirk. "Hangover special, they call it."

Icheb nodded. "I'm aware of it. I graduated from Starfleet Academy only a year ago, remember? It was one of the most frequently replicated things in their infirmary."

Neil chuckled. "I'll bet."

They reached the double doors of the medical facility and entered the lobby. There was no one at the front desk yet, but to Icheb's surprise, Schmidt was already there waiting.

"She's awake," he told Icheb. "I haven't seen her. I thought you should be the first."

"Coward," Neil muttered, giving Schmidt a disdainful look.

"No, I appreciate it," Icheb said sincerely. He really wanted to be first. "Have they apprised you of her condition?"

"She needs another round of breathing treatments before they'll allow her to be transferred to San Francisco, but otherwise, she's improving. They told me to warn you that her facial injuries were severe enough that she'll probably need additional regenerative treatment at Starfleet Medical before she looks like her old self again."

"Understood, sir." Icheb nodded. He himself had needed extensive dermal regeneration after the removal of his Borg exoplating. Even so, some of his scars were still visible. He hoped that they would be able to do better for Maren – partly for selfish reasons, since he thought she was the most beautiful girl in the entire universe.

"You're dismissed, Lieutenant," Schmidt said. "Go on in and see her. I'll wait here with Dr. Abbott." Neil looked surprised and less-than-pleased by the suggestion, but Schmidt gave him an almost pleading look. "You and I need to talk," he said. "Please, Neil."

Icheb was intrigued by Schmidt's overture toward Neil, but not enough to delay his departure for Maren's room. He set off down the corridor toward the isolation ward.

Neil and Schmidt watched Icheb go. Neil cast Schmidt a questioning glance. "Feeling guilty?" he inquired. "You're acting almost human toward that kid."

Schmidt sighed. "I'm not a monster, Neil. No matter how much you want to believe that I am."

Neil rolled his eyes and jerked a thumb back toward where Icheb had just disappeared around the corner. "That alien kid spent his formative years on a Borg cube, and I'm pretty sure he's more human than you are," he said. "I don't know how you do it, Lew. Sending bright kids like that into danger, just to prove to them that the universe is a cruel place? They'll find out soon enough. Why put them through it?"

"You know why," Schmidt replied. "But that's not what I came to talk about."

"I think it's exactly what you came to talk about," Neil retorted. "Caris died twelve years ago last week. What was O'Connor's test, some sort of sick re-creation? Some sort of attempt to prove to yourself you were right? Only it didn't work, did it, because she's just like Caris, isn't she? Her boyfriend told me all about her last night. Smart and tenacious. Sweet but strong. You expected her to give up, and she didn't. So what now? Does she fail? Pass? What the hell was the point of all this?"

Schmidt set his jaw, took a step toward Neil, and lowered his voice. "That girl *is* just like Caris," he said. "And quite frankly, she scares the hell out of me. She's a lethal combination of reckless youth and relentless perseverance, and there is every possibility that in a few scant years, she will be commanding the engineering department of the most dangerous mission the fleet has ever undertaken." He sighed and took a step back. "It doesn't seem to matter how many times I tell them she isn't ready – the people with influence over the Delta Quadrant project have been grooming her for this since the beginning," he said. "She gave them slipstream, and they think she can give them a lot more. But her complete inability to recognize a lost cause is going to get a lot of people killed someday; mark my words. At least Caris only got *herself* killed."

Any amount of sense Schmidt had been making to Neil up until that point was obliterated with his last sentence. Hot tears sprang to Neil's

eyes, and his grief felt fresh all over again. “Caris didn’t kill herself, you bastard. You did!” he screamed; then finally did what he hadn’t been able to do all those years ago on the *Ajax* – pulled his arm back, swung at his old roommate, and punched him square in the jaw, sending him crashing to the ground, knocking over a visitor’s chair in the process, which went clattering across the polished concrete floor.

Neil stared at his own fist in mild shock. Other than during tactical training, he had never hit another human being in his life. But for the last twelve years, every time he’d heard Schmidt’s name or thought about the man, he’d daydreamed about it. Now that the moment had finally come, it was less satisfying than he had imagined.

Slowly, Schmidt picked himself back up off the floor, rubbing his jaw. He glared at Neil, but conceded, “You deserved that. I hope it made you feel better.”

Neil shook his head disgustedly. “I could kill you and it wouldn’t bring her back.”

Schmidt sighed heavily and locked eyes with him. “Neil, if it would, I’d do it myself.”

Do Quitters Ever Win?

As Icheb reached the isolation chamber, he could see through the window that Maren was sitting up and drinking a nutrition supplement – not her preferred breakfast, but probably the most beneficial, under the circumstances. He noted that it was amazing what 14 hours could do – even with his enhanced vision, as he looked through the slightly tinted transparent aluminum, it almost appeared as if the previous 24 hours hadn’t happened. Her nose was still visibly swollen, but the angry purple welts were gone. Except for a number of shiny reddish-pink patches on her face and ears where the worst of the damage had been, her skin looked smooth and pale.

“Lieutenant,” M’riss greeted him as he reached the door. “I take it you’re here for a visit?”

“Yes,” Icheb said, nodding. “May I enter?”

M’riss cocked her head and looked at him curiously. “The sterrilization field won’t affect your implants?” she asked. “I’m sorry,” she added. “I don’t know much about Borrrg biology.”

Icheb shook his head. “I’ll be fine,” he said.

M’riss nodded. “All rrright,” she purred. “Follow me.”

Icheb tried to remain composed as he followed the Caitian doctor into Maren’s isolation room. All he really wanted was to run to her and embrace her, but he wasn’t sure if that would damage her or not.

Inside the room, it was uncomfortably warm. As he passed through the sterilization field, his skin tingled slightly. His implants registered the field and gave him a detailed analysis, but issued no warnings.

Maren looked over at them as they entered the chamber. “Icheb!” she cried. An excited grin started to spread across her face, but as it stretched the raw patches of new skin, she winced and quickly stopped smiling. Her eyes still shone with happiness as she looked at him, though, and he wondered, not for the first time, how he had been fortunate enough for her to fall in love with him.

“Hello, Maren,” he said, smiling back at her. He glanced at the doctor. “Will it harm her if I – “

“No,” M’riss cut him off, anticipating the question. “You can touch her. Just avoid the damaged areas on her face.”

Well, that ruled out kissing, Icheb thought with disappointment. Up this close, he could see that Maren’s lips were bright pink and slightly swollen. “Would you excuse us?” he asked M’riss.

“Of courrrse,” the Caitian replied, and left the room to give them some privacy.

Gently, Icheb took a seat at the foot of Maren’s bed and took one of her hands in his. With her free hand, she shoved away the tray table that held her nutritional supplement and a PADD. “How do you feel?” he asked her.

Maren relaxed against the biobed slightly. “A lot better now that you’re here,” she said, squeezing his hand. “How did you even get clearance to come down?”

“Commander Schmidt ordered me to transport as soon as Dr. Abbott notified us of your condition,” he said. “I presume you already knew that I lied about the trip to Andor,” he added. “I’m very sorry. I didn’t want to assist him, but I had no choice.”

“I know,” Maren said. “And I know you tried to help me. Thank you for that.”

Icheb sighed. “I just hope Commander Schmidt doesn’t find out,” he said. “He was suspicious.”

“I’ll never tell,” she said, with just enough of a smile to convey her emotion without straining her healing skin. She squeezed his hand again. “Besides, I think he’s got other things on his mind by now. You know whenever one of us gets really messed up during the test, they always launch an inquiry.”

Icheb’s eyes blurred. *Really messed up* was an understatement. “You nearly died,” he said, gripping her hand tight. His voice came out as barely more than a whisper. “Why didn’t you activate your beacon? You could have come home and tried again next month. The second test is always easier than the first.”

With her free hand, she reached out and brushed a tear away from his cheek. “For the same reason you didn’t activate yours,” she said. He voice was gentle, but pointed. Her green eyes locked on his. “I guess we’re both stubborn,” she added, with another tiny smile.

Icheb nodded and forced back his tears. He was supposed to be comforting her, not the other way around. He glanced up at her biobed readout. Her oxygen level was up to 95 percent. “Have they determined whether there will be any permanent damage from the oxygen deprivation?” he asked.

Maren shook her head. “They’re still running tests,” she said. “I’m sure that when I get back to San Francisco I’ll have to do the whole cognitive battery all over again, and probably have a psych eval. They’re convinced no sane person would do what I did, and maybe they’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking, leaving the pod. I just wanted to win so badly. I knew Schmidt wanted me to fail, and there was no way I was going to give him the satisfaction.”

“I’m not convinced it’s satisfaction he was after,” Icheb said.

Maren narrowed her eyes in confusion. “What do you mean?” she asked.

"I learned a few things about him last night," Icheb said. "I don't think he's actually a sadist. I think he's trying to teach us when to quit."

"Quit? Quit what? Starfleet?"

"No. I mean I think he wants us to realize that sometimes you have to give up." Icheb had given a lot of thought to this issue over the past 24 hours, and after hearing Neil's story about Caris, he had been convinced he was right. "We spend four years at the Academy learning to persist in the face of difficulties, to overcome them and succeed," he said. "Even the *Kobayashi Maru* is set up that way – we're expected to keep trying, even in the face of certain failure. But I believe Commander Schmidt has turned this test into a test of something very different – I think the true way to pass the first test is to punch out."

Maren screwed up her face in utter confusion, but winced as the expression pulled on her raw skin. Returning her face to a more neutral expression, she said, "But *you* passed the test on the first try, and they didn't make you take it again."

"That's because those are the rules," Icheb said. "Commander Schmidt doesn't have the authority to rewrite the rules of the test. He can alter the parameters of each cadet's individual experience, but the rules were set in place long before he was placed in command. I think that, on his own, he's decided that there needs to be a test of whether we can admit our own weakness. A test of our ability to surrender without a fight."

"And you think that he wants us to surrender?"

"Yes." Icheb nodded. "By actually surviving the first test, we believed we were proving our determination, our intelligence, and our physical superiority. But I believe what we actually proved is that we don't know when to quit."

Maren looked at him for a long moment, stunned. "Icheb, where is all this insight coming from?" she asked.

"I stayed with Dr. Abbott last night," Icheb explained. "He and Commander Schmidt knew each other before. They were assigned together, along with Dr. Abbott's wife, on the *Ajax*."

"Dr. Abbott has a wife?" Maren asked in surprise. "I don't remember much about last night, but his place looked like a total bachelor pad."

Icheb shook his head. "It is. He *had* a wife," he explained. "She was killed on an away mission, under conditions not unlike the conditions you faced for your test – a class P moon, lethal cold, solid ice. The *Ajax* detected a neutronic storm and ordered them to evacuate, but she had just made a major scientific discovery and refused to immediately comply. She completed her task and tried to get back to the shuttle, but she was injured on the way, and Commander Schmidt was forced to leave her. Dr. Abbott has never forgiven him for it. Now, I think the commander uses the survival test to recreate that scenario, in many different forms, for many different people. I think he realizes that what people like you and me fear most is not death, but giving up – abandoning our mission. Caris was that way, and she died because of it."

"Caris?" Maren asked.

"Dr. Abbott's wife," Icheb explained. "That was her name."

"I see," Maren said. She looked a little stunned. "So we both failed?"

"I don't know," Icheb said. "Officially, I passed, because I survived the duration of the test, and those are the rules. But I don't know what Schmidt wrote in my file about it. And I still don't know yet if you passed or failed. It hasn't been 72 hours yet, but you were able to reach safety and notify Command, albeit through Dr. Abbott. I believe that also falls within the guidelines. But I think this test was personal for Commander Schmidt. It was far too similar to the circumstances under which Caris died. He subjected you to the exact same climatic conditions and gave you an impossible scenario that he knew you would be determined to solve, even at the risk of your own life. He even brought me in at least partly to see if I could put you in danger if ordered. He told me as much when I objected to the assignment. It wasn't just about locking you out. This was as much a test for me as it was for you."

"So, did you pass?" Maren asked, with just a hint of a wry smile.

Icheb shook his head. "No. I did everything possible to give you an advantage, and if they ever find out, I'll be forced to decide between you and my career." Maren's eyes widened, and Icheb felt his stomach drop as he realized Maren's risky stunt had probably saved him from ever having to make that choice. "I should thank you for what you did," he said quietly. "I believe you were correct when you said that your injuries are sufficiently severe that no one is going to question me further about this." The guilt he felt at the realization was almost overwhelming. "But please, Maren, don't ever put yourself at risk like that again," he begged her. "Particularly not for a test. Not everything you desire to achieve is worth dying for."

Maren looked back at him, her green eyes moist with tears. "Icheb, I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean for this to happen. I just wanted to succeed so badly ..."

Icheb reached for her and pulled her into a careful but secure embrace. "Shhh," he told her. "I know. I did the same thing, remember? But I never properly apologized to you. I told you I was sorry you were frightened. What I should have apologized for was risking my life in the first place. Until yesterday, I still believed I had done the right thing. Watching you showed me I was wrong." He held her a little tighter, still taking care not to hurt her. "I don't know what I would do if I lost you," he murmured beside her reddened, scarred ear.

Despite her injuries, she turned and pressed her lips against his cheek, kissing him softly. "Likewise," she whispered, melting deeper into his embrace. After a moment, she added, "Let's hope we never have to find out."

Epilogue: Lessons Learned

Residence and laboratory of Dr. Neil Abbott

Alert, Nunavut

Three weeks later

Maren hugged herself against the chill as she climbed the few steps up to Neil's door and buzzed the intercom. It was a comparatively balmy -18 C today, but that was still way colder than she liked it. At least this time, she was dressed the part, in thick cold-weather gear with a hood that closed around her face, leaving little more than her green eyes exposed to the cold.

"I'll be right there," came the now-familiar voice over the speaker. Maren couldn't help but smile.

The door slid open, and Neil blinked rapidly in surprise. "Miss O'Connor?"

Maren loosened her hood to let him see her face, and grinned as she saw his features melt into a relieved expression at the sight of her smooth, pale, lightly freckled skin. "All better," she told him, still smiling. "I was cleared for regular activity a week ago. I would have called you sooner, but I was busy with the inquiry. I just came to say thank you. I had some extra transporter credits, and it just felt like the right thing to do to come see you in person. I mean, you saved my life."

"It was nothing. Please, come in," Neil said, motioning for her to enter the lab. Maren gladly took him up on the opportunity to get out of the cold.

As she stepped inside, the memories of the night she'd last been there burned in the back of her mind, but she quickly doused the flames. She was okay now. No matter how terrible the test had been, she'd passed it. Her parents were pissed, and Schmidt was in danger of losing his job, but she was here, and alive, and ultimately no worse for the wear, thanks to The Doctor's excellent care at Starfleet Medical ... and thanks to Neil.

She pulled an isochip out of her coat pocket and handed it to him. "I brought you something," she told him. "A gift, of sorts. You can take it or leave it." She wasn't entirely sure he would want the gift, but she had given a lot of thought to what she would have wanted if Icheb hadn't made it through his test, and more than anything, she would have wanted access to his personal logs – particularly the ones he'd marked 'private.' As next of kin, Neil would have received Caris's standard personal logs, but not the private, passcode-protected ones.

Neil looked at the chip curiously. "What's this?"

"I hacked into Caris's old files and downloaded her private logs," Maren explained. Neil's eyes widened in surprise. "Don't worry, I didn't listen to them," she added quickly. "I have no idea what's in them. And maybe it's been so long you just want to let it go, and that's fine. But I know if it was me, and I lost Icheb, I'd want this piece of him. I'd want the chance to get to know him even better than I did in life."

Neil's eyes filled with tears as he silently took the chip and closed it in his hand. "Thank you," he said, hoarsely. He cleared his throat and blinked back the tears. "You could get in a lot of trouble for this, you know."

Maren smirked slightly. "Only if they catch me," she said. "And I don't think they will." She'd hacked into classified personnel documents dozens of times over the past four years, and most of them were a hell of a lot more sensitive than this one. It was extremely unlikely Starfleet would notice or care about the intrusion, but, as always, she'd meticulously covered her steps just in case.

Neil looked at her with a bemused expression. "You know, there's a fine line between confidence and hubris," he told her. "Don't wind up like Icarus."

Maren got the reference. The ancient myth about the boy who flew too close to the sun with the wings of wax his father gave him. It hadn't ended well. "I'll try to be careful," she promised Neil, with a small smile.

Neil shook his head, looking a bit unnerved by the gift, but also profoundly grateful. Carefully – almost reverently – he slipped the isochip into his pants pocket. "So, the inquiry," he said. "They called to question me a couple of times, but I haven't heard much more. Just how much trouble is Lew in?"

Maren shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "I know they're not happy with him. I think it was the weather control thing that pushed them over the edge. You're not supposed to tamper with that unless the benefits outweigh the impact. Screwing with one cadet apparently doesn't qualify."

"When will you know the outcome?" Neil asked.

"This afternoon," Maren replied. "I have to be back at the Academy by 1400 hours for the final verdict."

Neil nodded thoughtfully, his face unreadable. Maren couldn't tell if he was hoping for the worst for Schmidt, or just curious what would become of his old friend.

"I can let you know what happens if you like," she told him.

Neil shook his head. "You know, it's been a while since I've been to San Francisco," he said. "I might just take an afternoon trip."

There were far more people in the room than Maren had expected. It seemed more than a few other Starfleet Academy students and their families were interested to see what became of the legendary Commander Lewellyn Schmidt. He was sitting at a long table facing the disciplinary commission, and his face was being projected onto two large screens on either side of the room. He looked miserable but stoic, and Maren almost felt sorry for him.

Beside her, Icheb slipped his hand into hers and squeezed it. He'd gotten clearance from B'Elanna to take a shuttle to Earth for the final hearing, with explicit instructions to tell Schmidt exactly what B'Elanna thought of him – instructions that Maren was quite certain Icheb had no intention of carrying out. She suspected B'Elanna knew that just as well as she did, but had simply wanted to get her feelings off her chest.

Maren squeezed his hand back and glanced over at him. He looked troubled, but she couldn't pinpoint what was bothering him. Usually, she could read him like a book, but today he was oddly quiet, even for him. She had no idea what was happening in his overactive mind.

Gently, she nudged him. "You okay?" she whispered.

He glanced down at her and nodded. His expression changed slightly – there was just a hint of a reassuring smile in his eyes – but still, he said nothing. Maren knew better than to push him. He'd talk when he was ready.

She returned her attention to the front of the room, where the inquiry panel was just filing in. Admiral T'Lott, the Academy commandant, was presiding. Maren's advisor, Professor O'Brien was up there, along with a number of other faculty and administrators who made up the inquiry board, most of whom she didn't know very well.

She and Icheb were seated near the front of the gallery, since it was her survival test that had spurred the inquiry. She craned her neck to look behind her, to see if she could spot her parents in the crowd. Icheb had arranged for them to transport in for the day, and she was looking forward to showing them that she was back to full health. The last time they had seen her, she had been at Starfleet Medical with a face full of scars and damaged lungs that refused to keep her oxygen levels up when she exerted herself too much. They had been extremely concerned, but she had insisted they go home after one interminable day dealing with her mother Elise's overdramatic worrying and a surprise visit from Seven that had been awkward, at best.

She couldn't find them in the crowd, but she did see Neil, standing at the back of the room, leaning against the smooth stone wall. She also spotted Tom Paris – B'Elanna hadn't been able to get away from work for the day, but Tom had flown Icheb in. He was sitting next to Seven and The Doctor, and the three of them appeared to be deep in some sort of discussion.

She turned back around in her seat just in time to see Admiral T'Lott reach out and touch the console on the long, curved podium. An artificial chime sounded loudly throughout the chamber. "The hearing will now come to order," the Bolian announced, in his notoriously thunderous baritone. The room, previously noisy with conversation, settled into quiet.

"We are here today to announce the findings of the special inquiry into the events leading to the injury of Cadet First Class Maren O'Connor, with particular emphasis on the conduct of Commander Lewellyn Schmidt," said T'Lott. "As most of you know, Cadet O'Connor sustained life-threatening injuries requiring extensive treatment at Starfleet Medical during her survival test. The inquiry board has spent the past two weeks conducting interviews with the numerous individuals involved in designing Cadet O'Connor's test in order to determine whether Starfleet safety protocols were breached, and if not, whether those safety protocols need to be updated." The enormous Bolian glanced down at a PADD and looked up again, straight at Commander Schmidt. "Commander Schmidt, please rise," he said. Then he squinted out at the crowd. "Cadet O'Connor, please come forward as well."

Maren swallowed hard. She wasn't sure why she hadn't expected to be called up front, but it was a surprise all the same. With a nervous glance at Icheb, she stood up and did as she was told, edging her way over to the aisle and walking toward the dais until she was standing side-by-side with Schmidt, just a couple of meters apart.

"Cadet," T'Lott addressed her, "the inquiry board has found that in large part, your injuries were caused by your own failure to recognize the danger of your situation and activate your emergency beacon." Maren nodded. She'd heard that lecture more times than she could count over the past three weeks. "However, your responsibility is mitigated by the fact that Commander Schmidt used artificial means to create a scenario in which it would be impossible for you to survive, and blocked you from accessing information that would have been available to other cadets, which would have allowed you to make a more fully-informed decision about your situation. We find that unacceptable."

Maren stared straight ahead and tried not to fidget. She didn't dare glance over at Schmidt, whom she was fairly certain had to be plotting her murder at this very moment.

"Additionally, despite your unorthodox and needlessly risky approach to the test, you did manage to survive it," T'Lott continued. "For that, you are to be congratulated. With that said, your passage of the test came at significant cost to the Federation. For that reason, the disciplinary board has decided to issue you 35 demerits. I suggest you behave yourself until graduation."

Maren drew in her breath and nodded. "Yes, sir," she said. *35 demerits*. Add that to the ten she'd received for breaking the *Kobayashi Maru* simulator, the three she'd received the night she and Icheb had broken into the Observatory after hours, and the two she'd gotten when she'd been caught breaking curfew plebe year, and that made 50. At 60, you were kicked out.

Luckily, with Icheb off-world, all she really did anymore was study. The likelihood of any further run-ins with the disciplinary board were pretty slim. She breathed a small sigh of relief.

"Commander Schmidt," T'Lott said, his booming voice drawing Maren immediately out of her thoughts. This time, she couldn't stop herself from glancing over at Schmidt. For someone she was pretty sure was about to face the Starfleet equivalent of a 20th-century firing squad, he looked surprisingly nonplussed, almost as if he was just calmly waiting to discover his fate, but didn't much care what it was.

“During the course of their investigation, the inquiry board found several anomalies with regard to Cadet O’Connor’s test,” T’Lott said. “You admitted to communicating orders to Earth Weather Control without express authorization by the President, and reprogramming the cadet’s escape pod to lock her out of the maintenance systems. You testified that this was necessary due to the cadet’s prior history of using her prodigious engineering skills to her advantage to defeat previous scenarios. The inquiry board disagrees.”

Beside her, Schmidt frowned, but otherwise gave no reaction.

“While certain members of the inquiry board concur that Cadet O’Connor’s propensity to program her way out of any situation is cause for some concern, her engineering skill is her greatest strength as a cadet and future Starfleet officer,” T’Lott continued. “Indeed, the cadet has already proven her worth to Starfleet through her work on the slipstream drive project, for which she was awarded the Daystrom Prize. To intentionally deny her the ability to use the single greatest resource at her disposal is a step that you have not taken with regard to any other cadet the inquiry board is aware of in your eight years of service as director of the survival testing program.”

“Additionally, during the course of the inquiry board’s investigation, certain ethical questions came up. You brought in an outside programmer to reprogram Cadet O’Connor’s pod, knowing that the programmer in question shares a close personal relationship with the cadet and has for some years. Multiple witnesses have testified that when that programmer told you he felt his involvement was a conflict of interest, you told him to consider it a post-academy psych test.”

At that, a few murmurs went through the crowd. On the monitors behind the dais, Maren could see expressions of surprise and disapproval on a number of faces directly behind Schmidt and herself.

“As you know, such a test does not exist unless expressly ordered by an officer’s commanding officer or CMO,” T’Lott said. “In this case, no such test was ordered, nor has the programmer’s psychological stability been called into question at any time. Put succinctly, Commander, you were out of line.”

By now, Schmidt looked uncomfortable. He shifted on his feet almost imperceptibly, looking as if he wanted to be anywhere else but here. Although Maren was standing right beside him, she continued watching him on the monitors behind the dais, not wanting to turn her head in his direction, lest he return her gaze. She had the uneasy feeling she was watching the end of a man’s career, and that ultimately, it was all her fault. After all – as everyone kept reminding her – she could have just punched out.

“Before the inquiry board issues its final declaration, you will be given a chance to speak for yourself,” T’Lott told Schmidt. “This isn’t your first time before the board, so you know the procedure. You have five minutes. The inquiry board will then briefly break to consider your words and, if necessary, amend their judgment. You may begin now.”

Finally, Maren did look over at Schmidt. For a man his age, he looked older than he should. Much of his dark hair had already gone white, giving him a salt-and-pepper look that might have been attractive had his face not looked so haggard. Quite simply, the man looked exhausted.

With a heavy sigh, Schmidt reached out and triggered the microphone on the long desk. For a long moment, he was silent. Then he turned to face Maren.

“Cadet O’Connor, congratulations on your achievement and impending graduation,” he said. “I have no doubt you will make a fine Starfleet officer, and I am sincerely glad you have not suffered lasting damage from your exposure to the elements.”

Maren’s cheeks burned at the unexpected words of praise. “Thank you, sir,” she murmured, just loudly enough for him to hear, but not so loudly that the microphone picked it up and broadcast her voice throughout the massive chamber.

Schmidt turned back to the panel. “Sirs, I won’t be needing five minutes. I’m going to use this time to announce my resignation, effective immediately.”

A gasp went through the crowd, including Maren, who turned to look at Schmidt, wide-eyed. He glanced at her briefly before turning back to the dais, where T’Lott, O’Brien and the inquiry board looked every bit as stunned as she felt.

“I want to say that it has truly been a pleasure to serve the Federation these last twenty years,” said Schmidt. He glanced over at Maren. “And truly, there are no hard feelings, Cadet. I honestly wish you the best in the future.” There was a kind of sadness to his voice as he said the words, along with a note of apprehension, even worry. Maren got the distinct impression that although she had passed the test in Starfleet’s eyes, in Schmidt’s, she had failed it. Maybe Icheb was right about the whole ‘knowing when to quit’ thing. Either way, she had feeling that while Schmidt sincerely wished her the best, he was also expecting the worst. “I yield my time,” he finished, looking back up at the panel.

“Resignations must be submitted in writing,” T’Lott protested, looking stern.

“It’s already in your inbox, sir,” Schmidt replied. “Thumbprinted and witnessed. I apologize for the poor timing, but I think we can all agree it’s time for me to go. I’ve provided a list of possible replacements to head up the testing program.”

T’Lott looked like he wanted to protest, but this obviously wasn’t the place to do it. Behind Maren, the crowd was whispering furiously to each other, the din growing louder with every passing second.

“Order!” shouted T’Lott, and the room went almost silent. The only sound was T’Lott’s voice reverberating off the polished stone walls.

“Obviously, this hearing is adjourned,” the Commandant said. “Schmidt, meet me in my office in fifteen minutes,” he added, with a stern look down at the newly-resigned former officer.

Maren turned to Schmidt in disbelief. All around them, people were milling around, filing out of the room, staring at them, talking, shouting, but somehow she filtered it all out. “Why did you do that?” she asked, her voice coming out in a breathless gasp.

Schmidt met her gaze, his lips set in a grim line, somewhere between a grimace and a smile. “Sometimes you have to know when to quit,” he said.

The words pierced Maren like a phaser beam. “That’s all it ever was, wasn’t it?” she asked. “Icheb told me he thought you were trying to teach us that. Why didn’t you just tell them?”

“Because I failed my own test,” he replied, with a rueful half-smile. “I let my emotions get in the way of my duty. I know you think I set you up for revenge, O’Connor, but that wasn’t it. Believe it or not, I admire you.”

Maren’s jaw dropped open. “What?” she asked. Surely she had heard him incorrectly.

“Come on, O’Connor. Not everyone – hell, not *anyone* but you – can say they won the Daystrom at 20. And that exploit you pulled on the *Kobayashi Maru* was inspired. But your single-mindedness makes you a danger to yourself and others. What happened to you during the test was *exactly* the scenario I was trying to avoid.” He sighed heavily, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow. It *was* a bit warm here under the bright dais lights, Maren realized.

“I knew a girl like you once,” Schmidt said, after a moment’s silence. “Whip-smart, resourceful, and determined. Too determined for her own good, it turned out. She was more afraid of failure than she was of death, so death caught up to her first. She was only thirty. Sure, there’s a new element on the periodic table now, thanks to her tenacity, but everyone who knew her would rather have her alive today, rather than just a footnote in a chemistry book. I’ve been watching your career since you won the Daystrom, O’Connor, and I am genuinely worried that you will turn out the same way. The difference is, when you do, it’s incredibly likely that you’re going to take a lot of innocent people with you.”

“I don’t understand,” Maren said, frowning. “I would never knowingly put another person’s life at risk.”

“And that’s part of the problem,” Schmidt snapped. “You have a remarkable inability to see the bigger picture. You can hyperfocus on a problem of incredible magnitude and solve it with ease, but you don’t think about the consequences down the line. Sometimes putting someone else’s life at risk is called for. Sometimes it’s the right thing to do.”

He sighed again, and locked his eyes on hers. “You haven’t run into your impossible scenario yet, O’Connor, but when you do, I want you to remember this day, and everything that led up to it,” he said, in grave tones. “Life is not a simulation you can tweak with some exotic code – especially life in Starfleet. Space is dark, cold, airless, and dangerous as hell. Quite frankly, it makes your survival test look like a walk through Golden Gate Park on a summer’s day.”

Maren blanched at that, but she knew, deep down, he was telling her the truth. She racked her brain for something to say, but before she could open her mouth, she was interrupted by another voice.

“I think you’ve made your point, Lew.” Maren turned in surprise to see Neil and Icheb standing next to them. She’d been so absorbed in her conversation with Schmidt that she hadn’t noticed them come up. A quick glance around the rest of the room revealed that it had mostly emptied. Only her parents, Seven, Tom and the Doctor remained, standing at the rear of the chamber, making what she assumed was the universe’s most awkward small talk. She understood completely why Icheb wasn’t up there with them.

“Neil,” Schmidt acknowledged the scientist, with a curt nod. “Come to see my downfall?” he added, wryly.

Neil shook his head. “No, Lew. I came to bury the hatchet.”

Schmidt raised an eyebrow, looking skeptical. “Three weeks ago you were ready to destroy me.”

“That was then,” Neil said. “This is now. Look, Caris has been gone a long time. It’s time we both moved on, isn’t it? That’s what you’ve been lecturing the girl about, right? Knowing when to quit? Well, I’m quitting. I quit blaming you. I quit hating you.”

Schmidt stared silently at Neil, still looking disbelieving. Neil sighed. “Come on, Lew. If even half of what you just said to Maren is the truth, then you can’t be the bastard I thought you were. If all of this – ” he gestured around at the grand empty chamber – “was about preventing her from becoming another Caris, well, it’s not the way I would have done it, but it proves you’re not heartless. It proves you gave a damn about her death.”

“Damn it, Neil, there wasn’t a moment during the last twelve years I didn’t think about it,” Schmidt said, his voice suddenly choked with emotion. “Don’t think for a minute that I wouldn’t have traded my life for hers if I could have. I still would. I told you that three weeks ago.”

Neil nodded silently, then slowly extended his hand for Schmidt to shake. Schmidt took it, looking like he might burst into tears at any moment.

“You’re late,” Neil said, as the two men shook hands. “That big Bolian admiral gave you fifteen minutes, remember? I wouldn’t want to piss him off.”

“He’s not my boss anymore,” Schmidt pointed out, with a wry smile.

“Then you should have time for a drink after he reams you out,” Neil replied. “Seeing as how you’re unemployed now, the first round is on me. Come on, I’ll walk over with you.”

Schmidt stared at Neil for a long moment, then finally nodded. “I think I’d like that very much,” he said. “Thank you.”

The two men excused themselves, wishing Maren and Icheb good luck as they departed. As they walked away, the couple exchanged a long, bewildered look. “What just happened?” Maren asked Icheb.

Her boyfriend shook his head as he gazed after Neil and Schmidt. “I think you broke the survival test,” he said. “However, I believe you may

have inadvertently repaired something much more important.”

Maren stared after the two men as they exited the chamber. She had a lot of thinking to do. But first, there were more pressing matters to attend to. She took Icheb by the hand and headed toward the rear of the hall, where Tom and The Doctor were holding court. “Come on,” she said, tugging Icheb along. “Let’s go rescue Seven and my parents.”

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