

Little Ship Lost

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Little Ship Lost

by [Beatrice Otter](#)

Summary

On a routine mission, a wormhole opens up near *Enterprise*, and a ship pops out. It's challenging to rescue people who don't trust you.

Notes

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Betaed by Sixbeforelunch

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Jean-Luc sat in the command chair on the bridge, stared straight ahead at the viewscreen, and did not fidget, sigh, or otherwise show how dull the afternoon was.

He didn't like to call any mission boring; while it was the lure of the unknown that had drawn him to Starfleet, he was a man devoted to his duty. Routine mapping and deployment of communications and sensor relays might not be the most exciting thing *Enterprise* ever did, but it was certainly valuable both to Starfleet and the Federation as a whole. And, of course, a period of routine duties between the more exciting missions was good for the mental health of the crew from the Captain down to the lowest crewmember. Counselor Troi had remarked that at the latest briefing, when Will and Geordi complained about the latest in a string of milk runs, and of course she had been right.

The problem was simply that while every other member of the crew had duties to carry out and a station to run, the captain did not. This freed him to make decisions without distraction. But on a routine mission like this, there were no decisions to make and no orders to give. And he had to spend at least *some* time, during his bridge shift, actually out *on* the bridge instead of in his ready room.

There wasn't even anyone to talk to. Will was taking advantage of the long stretch of quiet missions to rotate through Gamma and Beta shifts, and Counselor Troi was engaged in her counseling duties. With little possibility of first contact or diplomacy, there was no need for her particular talents on the bridge.

Jean-Luc had determined how long he should stay out on the bridge before retreating to his ready room where there was always work of some sort waiting. And truly, it wasn't very long in the overall scheme of things. But the waiting was tedious.

There were five minutes left in the allotted time when Data cocked his head.

"Sir, there appears to be a wormhole forming, half a light-year away."

"Onscreen," Jean-Luc said. "Is there any chance it's stable?" They'd never found a truly permanent wormhole, but some could last for months or even years, allowing for all manner of research and sometimes even commerce.

"It does not appear to be," Data said. "I am detecting a high fluctuation of methogenic emissions and chroniton particles."

"Take us closer," Jean-Luc said. "But carefully." The wormhole was visibly unstable, expanding and contracting at random in a way that was slightly disturbing to watch. The helmsman brought them to a stop well clear of its effects.

They'd been monitoring the wormhole for about half an hour when Worf stiffened behind him. "Sir, there appears to be a ship caught in the entrance to the wormhole. It is damaged, but there are three life signs aboard."

"Hail them," Jean-Luc said.

"No response," Worf said. "The configuration is ... difficult to make out. The computer cannot identify it."

"The wormhole's stability is rapidly decaying," Data said. "I estimate it will close permanently within the next fifteen minutes—possibly sooner."

"Tractor them out so that they are clear," Jean-Luc ordered.

The beam extracted the ship with very little time to lose, for the wormhole collapsed behind them as they came out.

"Try hailing them again," Jean-Luc said.

"No response," Worf reported. "The craft has writing on it in English, and a *very* rudimentary warp drive. It may be a 21st Century craft."

Jean-Luc nodded. The surviving data from that era was so fragmentary, it was unsurprising that the computer couldn't recognize it. "I seem to recall that Earth's development and use of subspace communications lagged behind that of the warp drive. Open a signal on a radio frequency, Mister Worf."

Worf nodded that the signal was broadcasting.

"This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Federation Starship *Enterprise*," he said. "Do you require assistance?"

A crackle of static came through the speakers. "*This is Daniel Gonzalez, of the S.S. Ether Ore. What the hell just happened?*"

**United Federation of Planets
Bureau of Social Services
Department of Displaced People**

Name: Daniel Mark Gonzalez

Date of Birth: 2020

Place of Birth: Tacoma, Washington, United States of America, Earth

Species: Human

Ethnicity: Latino

Preferred Form of Address: Mister, Sergeant, Sarge

Type of displacement: Temporal

Age at displacement: 49

Displaced with group: yes

List of displaced persons in group: Starr Buckner, Owen Walker

Last Place of Residence: Fayetteville, Georgia, Earth

Citizenship: United States of America, Georgia

Life stage: Middle Age

Education: Masters of Engineering

Profession: Starship Captain/miner (*S.S. Ether Ore*)

Cultural and religious affiliations:

Organizational affiliations: United States Air Force, Georgia Institute of Technology, Rise Up Space Mining Company, *S.S. Ether Ore*

Allergies/sensitivities: None

Physical Health Concerns:

Mental Health Concerns:

Social Needs:

Trauma History: Lived through the Second United States Civil War, served in the military during World War III, lived through the Post-Atomic Horror

Caseworker:

Intake Assessment Coordinator: Deanna Troi, Lt. Cmdr (Starfleet), PhD (Counseling)

Time-Travel Specific Information:

Was the time travel intentional? No

Is the time travel repeatable? No

Can the traveler be returned to their home time? No

Are there any perceptible changes to the timeline? No

Method of time travel: Unstable wormhole, since collapsed

Is further investigation by the Department of Temporal Investigations required? No

Date travelled from: 2070

Date travelled to: Stardate 44752.1

Are there family or other affiliative connections remaining? Strong connections with the crew of his ship (Starr Buckner, Owen Walker). Mr. Gonzalez had no surviving family to his knowledge. His company no longer exists.

Deanna paused and sat back in her chair. The question was, what should she put in the 'Mental Health Concerns' field? Gonzalez had *layers* of

trauma—they all did—and all the symptoms one would expect from it: paranoia, anxiety, mood disorders, fatalism, hyperreactivity, and she suspected that a laundry list of other symptoms would manifest once they felt stable and secure in their new home. Beverly's medical report revealed a corresponding list of physical symptoms, plus a great many other problems: long-term radiation poisoning and chronic malnutrition were only the start of it.

Yet this form would have to be signed off on by Gonzalez himself as accurate. He couldn't *override* her analysis, but he could *dispute* it, and the conflict would impede their therapeutic relationship. He would be less likely to open up if he felt she would not listen to his concerns.

On the other hand, he wasn't going to be her responsibility long-term. Once the *Enterprise* was back in Federation space, he and his crew would be picked up (along with their ship) and taken back to Earth, where the ship would become a museum piece and the crew would become the problem of the DDP. And it might be better to have that fight *now*, with someone temporary, than it would be to pass the baton to whoever his long-term counselor ended up being.

On the third hand, while some of Gonzalez's issues were immediately apparent to her, she hadn't done anything like a full workup with him. He hadn't requested it, and officially all she was doing was coordinating his crew's intake into the Department of Displaced Persons client list. So there was a high likelihood of getting the details wrong.

Gonzalez was (despite everything) fully functional, and as such he couldn't be required to have therapy. Better not to antagonize him, to increase the chances of him being willing to work with a counselor wherever he ended up.

She kept it simple and wrote "Trauma" in the field for mental health challenges his caseworker would need to be aware of.

Beverly hadn't filled in the physical health section, only attached his medical records. And the same was true of the reports for the other time travelers. Deanna reached up to tap her commbadge, then realized it was almost lunchtime. Instead, she saved her work, stretched, and got up to head to Sickbay.

"How do we know that this isn't some sort of trap? Or trick?"

"Captain Gonzalez, we would have nothing to gain by that," Jean-Luc said. Stranded ships didn't usually have to be convinced to accept help. "Your ship is amazing for the technological and social state of your home, but it is quite literally *centuries* behind my own vessel. If I wanted to take something from you, I could simply *do* it. There would be no need for theatrics or traps."

The turbolift doors hissed open and Jean-Luc glanced back to see Counselor Troi emerge. He took a deep breath and continued. "My people have a strong principle of offering aid to those in distress. Your ship is damaged, and it is a short-range craft despite having low warp capabilities. Your own sensors should be able to tell you that there are no habitable planets within your vessel's range. Let us help you."

"How do we know you weren't the ones who did ... whatever the hell that was that brought us here?" Gonzalez said.

"What could we possibly gain?" Jean-Luc said holding on to his patience with both hands.

"Maybe you want credit for saving us so our people will be more willing to do what you want." Gonzalez's voice was tense but even.

"Gonzalez, correct me if I'm wrong," Jean-Luc said, "but I believe your Earth is fragmented into a multitude of tiny local jurisdictions. Many of them are actively hostile to each other. All of them have trouble providing basic needs like medical care and safe housing and clean water to their population. If we *had* abducted your vessel to make ourselves look heroic, most of those jurisdictions would not care. And none of them have the sort of resources that would make it worth our while, even collectively. All we want to do is carry you back to your homeworld, and provide you with any needed medical care along the way."

There was a short pause. *"I'll have to talk it over with my crew."*

"Please do so," Jean-Luc said.

"The transmission has ended," Worf said.

"What is that about?" Troi asked.

"That was the captain of the *S.S. Ether Ore*, one of the early asteroid mining ships from the mid-21st Century on Earth," Jean-Luc said.

"During World War III?" Troi asked.

"The period immediately following, actually," Jean-Luc said. "The Post-Atomic Horror. Within a few years of Earth's first contact with Vulcans."

"No reliable records of the *Ether Ore* exist, as the period's documentation is fragmentary," Data said. "However, there was a late 21st Century 'ghost story' about the ship, which vanished within sight of a sister vessel and within range of Earth's limited sensors of the time."

"They fell through a wormhole," Jean-Luc said, "and their ship was damaged in the process. The wormhole is now closed, with few lingering traces on our sensors. But even in best condition their ship could barely make Warp One and it's not designed for long-term travel. They'll need assistance to get anywhere, and medical attention for their crew. But they are, as you heard, paranoid, and have so far refused help."

Troi turned and stared out the viewscreen which showed the small ship. "I don't know how much I can tell you that will be useful. They're frightened, wary. Suspicious."

"Hardly surprising, given the era they come from," Jean-Luc said. "That century is notorious for brutality, exploitation, and injustice."

"They undoubtedly have layers of mental and emotional trauma," Troi said, "but if they're functional enough to be running a starship, they will probably have decent coping mechanisms. They'll probably be expecting antagonism, and will react strongly to any hint of conflict. Be calm, firm, and let them have space—trauma victims often don't react well to feeling trapped. Lower the stakes whenever possible—don't raise them."

Jean-Luc nodded. None of it was new to him, exactly, but the reminder was good. He tried to let his irritation with Gonzalez's intransigence trickle away.

"With no wormhole and a ghost story about the ship vanishing, I'm assuming we won't be able to return them to their own time?" Troi asked. As the closest thing the ship had to a social worker, she would be the one responsible for coordinating their intake with the Federation's Department of Displaced People.

"Unfortunately not."

"They are hailing us," Worf said.

"Put them on speakers," Jean-Luc said.

"Assuming we were to take you up on your offer, what would that look like?"

"We would make room for your ship in one of our shuttle bays," Jean-Luc said. "You would receive quarters onboard *Enterprise*, and necessities such as food, water, and medical care. Once we're done with our current mapping assignment, we'll find a transport that can take you and your ship back to Earth."

"How much would that cost?"

"Nothing," Jean-Luc said. "We have the space for your ship, and it doesn't have enough mass to inconvenience us." And the ship was historically invaluable. Researchers on Earth would be fighting for access to it, should Gonzalez allow it.

"Right," Gonzalez said, drawing it out. *"You're just going to help us out of the goodness of your hearts. You're going to haul us and an entire ship all the way from here to Earth—wherever here is. All just out of the goodness of your heart."*

"That's right," Jean-Luc said.

There was a pause. *"Fine,"* he said at last. *"We'll do this your way. How do I dock my ship on your monstrosity?"*

"Deanna!" Beverly brightened as Deanna popped her head into Beverly's office. "What can I do for you?"

Aside from the time travelers, things had been fairly quiet of late, which meant that Beverly had time to catch up on routine paperwork. There was a lot of it, as Chief Medical Officer of a starship, despite the competence of her staff. Besides setting the duty roster and personnel evaluations for her staff, and writing up her clinical work, she also had to oversee and manage all the medical research her people did, plus a variety of other more minor tasks. But Beverly had promised herself a few hours' research work this afternoon, on samples from the incident at Tarchannen III, as a reward for her diligence this morning. "If you're looking for a lunch partner, I'm afraid I've still got about half an hour's worth of work before I can take a break," Beverly said.

"Too bad," Deanna said. "Is filling in your part of the intake forms for the Department of Displaced People forms part of the work in your inbox?"

"No," Beverly said. "I'm done with that."

"You attached your full report," Deanna said. "You didn't give a summary for the main assessment form."

"Doesn't the computer do that?" Beverly said. The computer was quite capable of producing an abstract of any document in the system.

"I'm afraid not," Deanna said. "The DDP wants a personal evaluation of what you think their caseworkers will need to know. The full medical records are for their future doctors; the DDP assessment form is for their future caseworker."

Beverly sighed. "All right, I'll have it to you by the end of the day."

"There's no rush," Deanna said. "As long as it's done by the time they leave the ship and formally enter the care of their social workers."

"I'd rather get it done sooner than later," Beverly said. Chances were, there would be *some* new excitement or problem to solve between now and when their guests left, and she wouldn't want to have to finish the paperwork in a scramble.

"All right," Deanna said. "Sure you won't join me for lunch?"

Beverly made a face. "Next time, maybe." She watched Deanna go and turned back to her work with a sigh.

Jean-Luc stood in the shuttle bay watching the small mining vessel make its approach. Counselor Troi and Commander Worf flanked him, with Beverly and a nurse off to the side with an anti-grav stretcher and various medical supplies in case they were needed. LaForge and a team of engineers were present to make sure the primitive ship was parked stably and safely.

"Are you *sure* we should have security so visibly present?" Jean-Luc murmured.

Worf stiffened. "They are from a violent time period, and their responses to our offers of help have been hostile," he pointed out.

"Yes, but I don't want to feed into their paranoia," Jean-Luc said. "A security team outside the bay doors in the corridor would probably be sufficient."

"They *are* paranoid, and they're used to state violence," Troi said. "They'll never believe we don't *have* security, they'll just assume we're hiding it for some reason."

"And the last thing we want is to make them *more* paranoid," Jean-Luc said as the ship touched down.

It was an odd ship, boxy, with oversized nacelles that were braced with rather more struts than was usual. But then, they had only a rudimentary structural integrity field, and no artificial gravity; the purely mechanical systems had to be up to the stress of pushing the ship into warp drive. It was not designed to fly in atmosphere; those early mining ships had been little more than tugs, going out to the asteroid field, finding asteroids with suitable minerals, and towing them back to Earth to be processed.

Because it wasn't designed to be landed, they'd used the tractor beam to bring it in to the bay, and hold it steady while LaForge and his crew braced it. It was an interesting procedure, and Gonzalez and his crew stayed inside their ship until it was finished—the last thing anyone needed was for the ship to settle as they were climbing out of the airlock and crush them underneath. LaForge and his crew were competent, and it didn't take long for them to get the little ship secured. When it was, they radioed the *Ether Ore's* crew that it was safe to unstrap from their seats and emerge from their ship.

A brown-skinned male human with short hair emerged first. He was wearing a grey jumpsuit with lots of pockets, and he eyed them warily as he swung down out of the airlock. He stumbled slightly, but caught himself, and he took his time surveying the bay, his eyes lingering on the shuttlecraft tucked up against the walls, smaller but sleeker than his own craft. At last he whistled, and two more heads poked out of the craft.

The first to come out was a dark-skinned human female. She was short and heavy-set, with a solid weight to her that belied Jean-Luc's mental image of people from the Post-Atomic Horror being emaciated and starved-looking. She was more graceful than her crewmate as she jumped down, and seemed less interested in staring at Jean-Luc and his crew, though she found the shuttles no less interesting.

The final crewmate of the *Ether Ore* was, to Jean-Luc's surprise, an adolescent. He was fair-skinned, lean and gawky, with straight black hair and a prominent nose it would probably take him a few years to grow into.

Once the three had emerged, they walked over to Jean-Luc and his officers. The two adults kept the adolescent behind them, he noted.

"I'm Captain Jean-Luc Picard," he said. "Welcome to the *Enterprise*."

Ten Forward was fairly busy, as it usually was around lunchtime. Deanna had planned to take a seat at the bar rather than take up a whole table to herself, but one of her temporary charges was in the corner.

Starr Buckner was leaning faux-casually against the wall, face turned to the window, but the quality of her attention was not that of a woman absorbed in stargazing. She was tense, alert, with the edgy quality to it that came with hyper-alertness. With her dark skin and dark clothing, she blended into the shadows fairly well.

But none of it bled through into her body language, so Deanna wasn't going to address it directly. She approached casually, noting the difference between when Starr sensed her approach and when she turned to face her. "Are you here for lunch?" Deanna asked.

Starr shrugged. "Mostly here for the view, but I could eat."

"You're welcome to join me, if you want," Deanna said, gesturing to a table that a waiter was just clearing off.

Starr hesitated briefly, before smiling and saying "Sure," with more pleasure than she felt.

They sat down as the waiter bustled off. "You'll have to tell me what's good here," Starr said.

"All the food is replicated, so it's the same thing as is available in your quarters," Deanna said. "Are you interested in something familiar, or something new?"

"I've tried familiar stuff, and nothing's as familiar as it sounds like it will be," Starr said.

"How so?" Deanna asked. "Replicator recipes tend to be standardized to the most popular version, unless someone's uploaded their personal favorite."

"Well, for example, whatever version of French Fries your replicators are copying, I don't think the potatoes are fried in the same kind of oil we used back in my day," Starr said.

"Really?" Deanna said.

"Yeah," Starr said. "It was kinda weird. If I wanted to try something new, what would you recommend?"

"What are you hungry for?" Deanna asked. "What do you like?"

"Stuff with bread and meat and veggies," Starr said. "Not fried."

"How about a stuffed kimden roll?" Deanna said. "It's a Betazoid dish—kimden is a type of grain a little like rye, and stuffed rolls are baked with meat and vegetables and cheese inside. The replicator has a variety of recipes; you could try it with Terran meat such as beef or pork or lamb, if you wanted. Humans often prefer it that way."

"Sounds good," Starr said. "You're from Betazoid, right?"

"Betazed is the name of the planet, but yes," Deanna said.

"What's it like?"

"Quiet," Deanna said. "Both in the sense of peaceful, and also in the auditory sense. Betazoids are telepaths. We *can* speak, and have a spoken language, but we often talk mind-to-mind instead, when we're in public." She grimaced. "Well, it's quiet anywhere my mother *isn't*, I should say."

"Sounds like there's feelings there," Starr said.

"I love my mother," Deanna said. "But we get along much better when we're not in the same star system." She wasn't Starr's therapist, and this wasn't a counseling session, but sharing personal information could create a sense of intimacy, which might be helpful in promoting Starr's integration to her new timeline. Like all three of the *Ether Ore's* crew, she was still in a bit of shock at what had happened to them.

"My little sister and dad were like that," Starr said quietly. A yawning chasm of grief opened up within her, but all that showed on the surface was that she looked away, back out the window.

Deanna wondered whether they had still been alive when Starr and her ship fell through the wormhole to the future. It hadn't come up in any previous conversation. All of their time traveling guests had lost people to the wars and horror of the 21st Century before they lost the rest to time.

"What can I get for you?"

Deanna looked up at the waiter with a smile. "I'd like an order of stuffed kimden rolls please, the Fifth House recipe."

"I'd like some stuffed kimden rolls too," Starr said. "What kinds do you have?"

The waiter looked up the variations on his PADD, and Starr chose which one she wanted. He was back in a few minutes with their food, steaming and fragrant. Deanna tore into hers with gusto.

Starr took a nibble of hers.

"What do you think?" Deanna asked.

"It's weird, but I don't *dis*-like it," Starr said, taking a bigger bite. "So what's the Fifth House?"

"Betazed has a vestigial aristocracy," Deanna said. "I'm a daughter of the Fifth House, and this is the family recipe. I programmed it into the computer when I was posted here."

Starr nodded. "Why did you call it the Fifth House recipe instead of the Troi recipe, if your aristocracy is vestigial?"

"It's not a Troi recipe," Deanna said. "My father was Human, not Betazoid. It's why I'm an empath, not a telepath."

"Oh," Starr said. "So you're biracial?"

"We don't tend to group things in terms of races, so I've never heard that particular term used," Deanna said. "But it probably fits, yes."

From there the conversation turned to questions about what Betazed was like, and how Deanna came to join Starfleet. It was pleasant—Starr was a good conversationalist—but Deanna noted how deftly she avoided talking about her personal history.

**United Federation of Planets
Bureau of Social Services
Department of Displaced People**

Name: Starr Buckner

Date of Birth: 2031

Place of Birth: Chicago, Illinois, United States of America, Earth

Species: Human

Ethnicity: African-American

Preferred Form of Address: Ms.

Type of displacement: Temporal

Age at displacement: 38

Displaced with group: yes

List of displaced persons in group: Daniel Gonzalez, Owen Walker

Last Place of Residence: Fayetteville, Georgia, Earth

Citizenship: United States of America, Georgia

Life stage: Adulthood

Education: Masters of Engineering

Profession: Spacer/Miner

Cultural and religious affiliations:

Organizational affiliations: United States Air Force, Georgia Institute of Technology, Rise Up Space Mining Company, *S.S. Ether Ore*

Allergies/sensitivities: Peanuts

Physical Health Concerns: Chronic radiation poisoning (in treatment),

Mental Health Concerns: Trauma

Social Needs:

Trauma History: Served in the military during World War III, lived through the Post-Atomic Horror

Caseworker:

Intake Assessment Coordinator: Deanna Troi, Lt. Cmdr (Starfleet), PhD (Counseling)

Time-Travel Specific Information:

Was the time travel intentional? No

Is the time travel repeatable? No

Can the traveler be returned to their home time? No

Are there any perceptible changes to the timeline? No

Method of time travel: Unstable wormhole, since collapsed

Is further investigation by the Department of Temporal Investigations required? No

Date travelled from: 2070

Date travelled to: Stardate 44752.1

Are there family or other affiliative connections remaining? No

Beverly had treated refugees, before, and victims of natural disaster; Starfleet ships were usually the first responders to any sort of calamity or crisis. And there were often cultural differences that made communication difficult. In many ways, this was the ideal situation: a small group (well within their resources with no need for triage), a language the translators could handle easily, no acute injuries.

She looked at the readout on the tricorder and sighed. *Chronic* issues, on the other hand....

"What is it, doc?" the boy said nervously. His name was Owen Walker, and he was an orphan, which was all the medical history she had for him.

She gave him a reassuring smile. "You have a lot of chronic radiation damage," she said. "It's not immediately life-threatening, but you probably have a number of symptoms related to it, and a higher risk of various cancers. Usually, radiation damage is fairly simple to treat, but this is old enough—and long-term enough—that it's going to take a number of treatments, and possibly some attention from a specialist when you get back to Earth."

"I didn't think you could treat radiation damage." Owen scrunched up his face.

"They can, but mostly the treatments are only effective within a couple of days after exposure," Captain Gonzalez said. He was on another biobed with Selar treating him; he'd been reassured to see a Vulcan. "And there weren't exactly enough doses to go around even for those closest to the bombs, much less the background stuff."

"That was certainly true in the Twenty-First Century," Beverly said, nodding. "But we have much better treatments available now, and can actually reverse some of the tissue damage. Perhaps all of it. I'm assuming you'll all need treatment for chronic radiation damage."

"That's a safe bet," said the third refugee, Starr Buckner, who was being treated by Doctor Martin. "What are the side effects?"

"That depends on what specific course of treatment you need," Beverly said. "There are several, depending on a variety of factors. None of them have severe or long-term side-effects. We'll have to do a more in-depth scan, and possibly consult with a specialist—we don't normally see people with this type of long-term damage in the Federation, because it's so easy to treat. Fortunately, if you've lived with it this long, a slight delay while we figure out treatment options shouldn't be a problem."

While they were talking, the tricorder finished scanning Owen. Ah. Radiation was not, unsurprisingly, the only problem. She lowered her voice. They'd all three declined to be examined in private, but there was no need to shout. "Besides the radiation damage and the various scrapes and bruises I already fixed, you do have a few other problems. You have lingering problems from minor chronic malnutrition at key developmental stages, which will require long-term treatments in addition to the radiation treatment."

Owen scowled. "My parents fed me as best they could. Sometimes they went hungry so that I could eat."

"I'm sure that's true," Beverly said. "You are in remarkable health for someone who was a child during a period of social and

economic collapse, and that tells me your parents did a very good job taking care of you, and probably other people too. But there were things they couldn't control, and times when there wasn't enough food, and that left a mark. We can treat that, now, and you will live longer and healthier if we do."

"What would that treatment look like?" Owen asked.

"First, you are still growing, so we'll put you on nutritional supplements to make up for what you didn't get when you were younger," Beverly said. "Some of it will fix itself as you finish growing. We'll also have some treatments to stimulate brain development and strengthen your organs and bones. Like the treatment for radiation damage, it may need a long-term treatment plan."

"Okay," he said.

"The last thing you have is something that's much easier to treat," Beverly said. "You have a type of intestinal parasite called pinworms."

"Worms?" Owen said. "Gross. I assume you can get rid of them?"

"Yes," Beverly said. "I'll be giving you a medication to kill the worms, and you'll need to make sure you drink plenty of water over the next several days." She went over to the medication replicator, called up the appropriate anthelmintic, and loaded it into a hypodermic. After that, she gave him all the vaccinations he needed and the first dose of supplemental nutrients.

"Do you need to take a break, get something to eat?" Beverly asked when it was done.

"No," Owen said. "I'm good. We actually ate, like, just before we got sucked into that thing—wormhole?—which wasn't good 'cause I almost threw up. But I'm not hungry yet."

"Do you need anything for nausea?" Beverly asked.

"No," he said.

"Are there any other symptoms or long-term health concerns you want to address?"

Owen hesitated. "No."

Which probably meant there *was* something, he just didn't want to talk to her about it. "You can come by sickbay any time, if you change your mind," Beverly said. "Unless we're in a red alert. Then only come by if it's an emergency. But any other time is fine, even during a yellow alert, even if it's something that seems trivial and stupid to you."

"How will I know if it's a red alert?" Owen asked.

"There will be red flashing lights and a siren. You can't miss it."

"Fair enough," Owen said. "So what's a red alert? Is that a specific problem, or just any problem?"

"Red alert is used for any major threat to the ship. It calls every crew member to their action stations, and heightens security, and several other things," Beverly said. He reminded her a little bit of Wesley, now off at Starfleet Academy. Wesley had grown up knowing all about Starfleet things, of course, but he had always been curious about the ships and the engines, and of course he'd been working an apprenticeship on *Enterprise* before he went away to Starfleet, just as Owen had been working on the *Ether Ore*. But she was in the middle of an examination, and it was unprofessional to dwell on her feelings.

She smiled at Owen. "Now that we've got the basics out of the way, I can have someone show you to the quarters that you've been assigned. But you'd have to come back in a day or two for us to look at that radiation damage. Or we can get started on the scans now, and you can settle into your quarters later. Which would you prefer?"

Geordi and Lieutenant Oblata were discussing the practicalities of a suggested change in the intermix formula that Utopia Planitia had just published, when the kid from the old mining ship wandered into Engineering.

"Engineering is restricted," Ensign T'Kaal said, from where she was working at the Master Systems Display.

"I just wanna see what a warp core that can go warp *nine* looks like," the kid said.

Geordi had occasionally tried to sneak into Engineering on his mother's ship with a similar goal. "It's fine," he told T'Kaal. He turned to the kid. "I'm Lieutenant Commander Geordi LaForge, chief engineer."

"Owen Walker, apprentice spacer."

Owen stuck out his hand and they shook hands.

"You still planning on being a spacer, in the new century you're in?" Geordi asked.

Owen grimaced. "Probably? Maybe? I dunno, there's a lot to learn and I don't even know what jobs there *are* in space now."

"Must be rough," Geordi said sympathetically. "But you'll probably get career counselling once you're on Earth, so you won't have to figure it all out on your own."

"Yeah." The kid let out a heavy sigh. "But I really do want to see your warp core, it must be *amazing*."

"Sure," Geordi said. "Come on and see." It wasn't like he was very busy at the moment; routine maintenance was all current, duty shifts for the next month were all set and published, and he had no paperwork waiting for him.

He gave the kid a tour of engineering; nothing classified, of course, and nothing about weapons or shields beyond noting that they existed, but fairly thorough for all that. The kid had a surprisingly comprehensive grounding in basic warp theory, considering he came from only seven years after the Human-built warp-capable ship, and Geordi said as much.

"Thanks," Owen said. "Starr and Daniel wouldn't have let me aboard if I didn't know all that stuff, even though I'm not allowed anywhere *near* the engines. I had to memorize every bolt and panel and wire and what they did while we were building her."

"You helped build your ship?" Geordi said. "How old were you?"

"Fourteen, when we started," Owen said. "What else did I have to do? There weren't any kids my age to hang out with, around the hanger."

"What about school?" Geordi asked.

"What *about* school?" Owen said. "I know all the adults go on and on about how much school they had to go through, but that was back in the old days. They would have had to send me back into Atlanta to find a high school I could have gone to, and it's not like I would have learned as much there as I did working on the ship."

"Right," Geordi said. He'd known that most social system—including schools—had collapsed after World War III and had to be rebuilt from scratch, but he hadn't really thought about what that would look like. "It's a good ship," he said. "Solidly built, from what I can see. I'd be interested in seeing inside it."

"As what, a history museum?" Owen said.

"Well, sure," Geordi said. "That's why we're taking it back with us instead of abandoning it. Do you know how little survives from the Early Warp era? A lot of ships had fatal accidents of one kind or another, and the ones that didn't break down or meltdown or crash were used until they fell to pieces and then taken apart and melted down for scrap. A first-generation ship in pristine condition? When you get back to Earth, you're going to have at *least* a dozen museums and universities competing for the honor of examining and displaying your ship."

Owen shifted uncomfortably on his feet. "Does the Georgia Institute of Technology still exist?" he asked. "Because they worked with us on the design and helped us figure out warp mechanics and helped train our ground crew and the crew of our sister ship the *Firmametal*. I think they should have dibs, if they're still around."

"I don't know," Geordi admitted. "Computer, does the Georgia Institute of Technology still exist?"

"The Georgia Institute of Technology, commonly referred to as Georgia Tech, is a public research university located in Atlanta, Georgia, on Earth," the computer intoned.

"There you go," Geordi said.

"If you want to see inside our ship, you'd have to ask Daniel about it," Owen said. "He'd probably say it's okay if you let him poke through your engineering room."

**United Federation of Planets
Bureau of Social Services
Department of Displaced People**

Name: Owen Walker

Date of Birth: 2054

Place of Birth: Phoenix, Arizona, Earth

Species: Human

Ethnicity: Native Californian (Chumash)

Preferred Form of Address: Mister

Type of displacement: Temporal

Age at displacement: 16

Displaced with group: yes

List of displaced persons in group: Daniel Gonzalez, Starr Buckner

Last Place of Residence: Fayetteville, Georgia, Earth

Citizenship: Georgia

Life stage: Late Adolescence

Education: apprenticeship/no degree

Profession: apprentice spacer

Cultural and religious affiliations:

Organizational affiliations: Georgia Institute of Technology, Rise Up Space Mining Company, *S.S. Ether Ore*

Allergies/sensitivities: Peaches

Physical Health Concerns: Chronic radiation poisoning (in treatment), stunted growth due to past malnutrition

Mental Health Concerns: Trauma

Social Needs:

Trauma History: lived through the Post-Atomic Horror, parents died in childhood.

Caseworker:

Intake Assessment Coordinator: Deanna Troi, Lt. Cmdr (Starfleet), PhD (Counseling)

Time-Travel Specific Information:

Was the time travel intentional? No

Is the time travel repeatable? No

Can the traveler be returned to their home time? No

Are there any perceptible changes to the timeline? No

Method of time travel: Unstable wormhole, since collapsed

Is further investigation by the Department of Temporal Investigations required? No

Date travelled from: 2070

Date travelled to: Stardate 44752.1

Are there family or other affiliative connections remaining? No

Chances were, Deanna's presence would not be needed while their new guests were in Sickbay being treated for the bumps and scrapes they'd gotten when their ship was trapped in the wormhole. However, her mediation skills might be useful if there was a conflict, her empathy might be useful to notice if something made their new guest uncomfortable or hostile, and her observations of them might be useful when she started their casefile.

Beverly had made smart choices about assigning doctors to their new guests; Gonzalez had been reassured by the Vulcan, and Buckner by Doctor Martin. (Deanna's knowledge of Earth history was hazy, but she recalled that Earth had a history of heightened ethnic violence and oppression based on phenotype, which might have had something to do with it; Martin's skin was lighter than Buckner's, but they shared a similar hair texture.)

"So, Doctor Selar," Martinez was saying quietly, "they tell me that we travelled in time, like something out of a bad science fiction movie. Were they telling the truth?"

"They are," Selar said. "I am uncertain as to the precise date on Earth as counted in your calendar, but it is approximately 304.7 Earth years after Vulcans first contacted your people." She glanced over at Deanna with a raised eyebrow.

Gonzalez followed her gaze. "Who's that?" he asked.

Interesting. Captain Picard had introduced her; perhaps he was testing to see what Selar would say.

"That is Counsellor Troi, the head of our mental health department aboard ship," Selar said. "She will be seeing that you are taken care of during your stay, and that you are connected with an appropriate social worker on Earth or whichever planet you choose to go to."

"We have a choice?" Gonzalez asked.

Since she was being talked about, Deanna stepped in. "Of course," she said. "You are displaced people, and all Federation worlds are required to take in displaced people as needed. However, different planets have different requirements, and provide different services. We assumed that you would want to go back to Earth because it is your home planet, but if you'd like to explore other options, I'd be happy to help with it; and if you try Earth and decide you don't like it, you can move to a different world—freedom of movement is one of the fundamental freedoms defined in the Federation's constitution."

Gonzalez nodded slowly, but went in a different direction. "So why did you look over at her while you answered my question about when we are?" he asked Selar. "Is she your superior?"

"She outranks me, but we are in different departments," Selar said, "and both of us are under Doctor Crusher's command. I looked to her because I wondered if an evaluation for clinical paranoia would be beneficial, and she would be the one to make that evaluation."

"Paranoia?" Gonzalez said. "For not believing a *really fucking unbelievable* thing?"

"It's less unbelievable to us because we have centuries more experience with space travel than you do," Deanna said. "Wormholes are exceedingly rare and temporary, but they do happen, and our scientists have studied them. They sometimes join two different times, as well as two different areas of space. It's a known phenomena. There are also a handful of other documented methods of time travel. All are rare, but Starfleet ships are science and exploration vessels—we seek out rare phenomena. We're far more likely to encounter such things than the average person."

Gonzalez nodded. "Okay," he said.

Deanna didn't think he fully believed them, but he didn't fully *disbelieve* them, either. He was wary, withholding judgment. If nothing else, arriving at Earth and seeing how different it was from the Earth he had left would convince him, and there was nothing to be gained by arguing with him at this point. He was so freshly arrived in the present (his future) that he hadn't had time to process it.

Gonzalez turned back to Selar. "Could we go to Vulcan if we wanted to?" he asked.

"Yes," Selar said. "Vulcan, like all Federation planets, takes in displaced people. There are several cities on Vulcan with a sizeable Human population, most notably Shi'Kahr and Vulcana Regar. But most Humans who move to Vulcan leave eventually; they find the gravity oppressive and the heat too much even for those comfortable with warmer temperatures."

"Yeah, but what about the *social* climate?" Gonzalez asked. "With three hundred years' difference between our ship and your ships, we're probably not going to be able to get jobs on a ship or space mining platform without a hell of a lot of retraining. Would we get it on Earth? What would we live on in the meantime? I know on Vulcan you make sure people are taken care of."

"Federation law requires that all people in the Federation be provided with the necessities of life including safe, accessible, and private housing, food, data access, education, and healthcare," Selar said.

"You won't ever have to work if you don't want to or can't find something that suits you," Deanna said. "Most Federation planets have substantial cultural and social pressure for people to do meaningful work and contribute to society, but that has nothing to do with whether or not you will receive what you need to live on. If you want to train to work in space again, your social worker will help you figure out what education you'll need and how to get it. But regardless of any other work you might choose, you'll probably be in high demand as an educational speaker."

"A speaker about what?" Gonzalez asked. "Not warp design and shipbuilding, if you're working with Vulcans."

"History," Deanna said.

"I'm not a historian, I barely know anything about it. Why would they want me to talk about history?"

"Because your life is, to us, history," Deanna said. "Time travel is rare, and we strive to return people to their own timelines if at all possible. Historians will be thrilled to get to speak with people who actually lived through such a momentous period in Earth's history."

Gonzalez sagged a little on the biobed and his eyes widened, but didn't otherwise show the freefalling chaos he was feeling. For the first time since she'd met him, he lost the edge of suspicion that this was all some great trick.

Enterprise, like all majority-Human Starfleet ships, synchronized its clocks with Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco. Which was convenient when consulting with the Admiralty, but not when consulting with other Earth bureaucracies that might be headquartered in other parts of the planet. The Bureau of Social Services was headquartered in Kinshasa (eight hours ahead of San Francisco), but the DPP was headquartered in Delhi, which was just about exactly opposite San Francisco. There was no time that worked for both of them, so it had taken a few days to set a meeting that was doable. But, at last, Deanna had a call with the Starfleet liaison in the Department of Displaced People.

"Good evening—or I suppose it's morning for you," Ms. Kulkarni said. "What can I do for Starfleet?" She was new to her job since the last time Deanna had needed to connect a displaced person with Earth's social services.

"Good evening, and thank you for meeting with me at such an odd hour," Deanna said.

Ms. Kulkarni waved that away. "I've often thought they should have the Starfleet liaison be stationed at one of our regional headquarters in the Americas, but that would make too much sense for government bureaucracy. I'm used to it. What can I do for you?"

"We just rescued a ship that fell through an unstable wormhole with both a temporal and a spatial displacement," Deanna said.

Kulkarni sagged. "Oh, gods and goddesses, is Temporal Investigations going to get involved in this?"

"I hope not," Deanna said. "The time travel was clearly accidental on both ends, it can't be repeated or reversed—the wormhole was *very* unstable and collapsed as we were pulling them out of it—and there's apparently an urban legend about the ship's disappearance, so I doubt the timeline was altered by their coming here. If we hadn't saved them, they would have been destroyed by the wormhole, so I would think there would be a greater risk of altering the timeline if we *did* send them back. But you never can tell about the Department of Temporal Investigations, so who knows?"

"All right," Kulkarni said, "I suppose there's nothing we can do about *that* at this point. When and where are the displaced people coming from, and what services are they going to need?"

"They're from Earth, a place called Georgia," Deanna said.

"So, Eastern Europe?"

"I don't think so." Deanna frowned. "They were displaced from the mid-21st Century, the year 2070, during the Post-Atomic Horror. Before the collapse of most of Earth's governments, the two adults held citizenship in the United States of America. Even fought in one of its militaries. Is there a Georgia in the Americas?" Her knowledge of Earth's geography was sketchy, but she was pretty sure that the United States of America had been on the North American continent, not in Europe.

"You are telling me that I am going to have two soldiers *from World War Three* dropped in my lap whenever they get back to Earth?" Kulkarni said.

"I'm afraid so," Deanna said. "For what it's worth, they seem fairly functional and not sociopathic. There's definitely trauma and trust issues that may shade over into paranoia."

"So I should look on the bright side, eh?" Kulkarni said. "Well, tell me all about them, and I'll find someone in the department who knows that time period—and hopefully also if there's a Georgia in the Americas. We'll have something prepared by the time they get here."

"The oldest, Daniel Gonzalez, is forty-nine years old. He voluntarily enlisted some years before World War Three, evidently because of poverty and the promise of education for soldiers. He was the ship's captain. Starr Buckner was his first mate. She was drafted at the beginning of the war. Apparently they served together, and formed a lasting friendship through their shared experiences. She's thirty-eight. Owen Walker is the youngest; he's only sixteen, and he was an orphan even before their temporal displacement. They've all been fairly cagey about how, exactly, he became connected with their group, but I don't sense anything untoward or concerning in their interactions—I'm an empath, by the way."

Kulkarni nodded. "There are a lot of reasons people from a time of societal collapse might be wary of giving personal information to a government official, so I'll take your word for it for now. We'll want a more thorough evaluation when they get here, of course, but it's enough to get things started. What are they like as people?"

"Gonzalez is the most openly suspicious," Deanna said. "And he seems to trust Vulcans more than Humans."

"I thought most Humans from the pre-Federation era disliked and distrusted Vulcans?" Kulkarni said. "Xenophobia was a noted hallmark of the period."

Deanna shrugged. "I know very little about Earth's history in any period, but there are always exceptions."

"True. And the rest?"

"Buckner is *very* good at concealing her emotions under a pleasant, conversational exterior," Deanna said. "It'll be easy for her to fall through the cracks, but she's not any less traumatized and grieving than Gonzalez is. Owen is fairly cheerful, all things considered, and interested in the future he's found himself in; he doesn't like talking about his past, but he always has questions about *Enterprise* and the Federation and Earth in the current century. But he's very defensive about his parents—he loved them and respects how much they sacrificed to protect him and make sure he had what he needed."

"Good to know," Kulkarni said, finishing up the notes she was taking. "Do they all get along well?"

"They seem to," Deanna said. "They will almost certainly want to stick together, at least to start with."

"Have you started on their travel arrangements?" Kulkarni said. "How long do I have to prepare for their arrival?"

Deanna shrugged. "It's hard to say—their ship is a priceless historical artifact, so it will be sent back to Earth for study and display. And they don't want to be separated from it, so it's not just a matter of booking passage for them on the most convenient passenger liner and shipping the ship home as freight. At this point, it's looking like they might have to hitch rides on cargo ships, which will be much slower."

"On the other hand, it might give more time to acclimate to the future, before arriving on a homeworld so drastically different from what they remember," Kulkarni said. "And coming from the Post-Atomic Horror, a crew berth on a cargo ship would probably feel like a luxury liner to them."

"You wouldn't believe how excited they were over unlimited hot water for showers," Deanna said.

"We've given you all quarters of your own," Deanna said as she led the three time-travelers through the *Enterprise's* corridors to their quarters, "though you can let me know if you would rather share quarters, and we can get you into a suite. They're all the same, though only one has an actual window—the other two are only viewscreens. Most people do prefer the actual window, but some prefer viewscreens, because you can set them to show whatever view you want. We assumed you'd rather be next to each other, which did cut down on the available options."

She showed them into the window-view quarters that she assumed Captain Gonzalez would take, and showed them how the replicator worked. It wasn't the first time she'd made this explanation for people from outside the Federation, and as expected they were impressed by it.

"Now *this* is some sci-fi bullshit, and I mean that in the *best* possible sense," Starr said.

"How does it work?" Owen asked.

"I don't care," Starr said. "We'll look it up later." She stepped up to it. "Computer, what kind of chocolate do you have?"

"There are 4,057 items containing chocolate," the computer intoned.

"I want a bar of milk chocolate with peanuts in it," Starr said.

A candy bar materialized. Starr took it and bit into it, moaning in bliss.

"A woman after my own heart," Deanna said, a little amused.

"Hey, Owen, have you ever had chocolate?" Starr asked.

"I don't ... think so?" Owen said. "I mean, I know what it is, I've heard old people moan about missing it all my life."

"You're going to love it," Starr said, breaking off a square and handing it to him.

Owen popped it in his mouth. "Yeah, it's good, I guess," he said after a minute.

"It's good *you guess*?" Gonzalez said, with some outrage. "First chocolate he's ever had, and it's good *he guesses*." He gave Owen a gentle swat. "Philistine." He stepped up to the replicator himself. "I want hot cocoa made by melting real chocolate in milk, with a dash of cinnamon." He took his drink from the replicator and took a sip. "Thank you, Jesus," he breathed.

"Okay, my turn," Owen said. "Cherries," he told the replicator. A bowl of cherries materialized, and he popped one in his mouth. "Eh, I've had better, but they're not bad."

Once they were done with their treats, she showed them how to recycle the dishes and cherry pits, and showed them the bathroom.

"We have *showers*?" Owen said, awed. "In *space*?"

Deanna closed the shower door. "The shower compartments are sealed so that if the ship loses gravity—which is *extremely* unlikely, and hasn't happened in my entire time serving in Starfleet—the water can't escape to damage anything."

"How much water do we get a day?" Starr said. "What's the limit on shower length?"

"It's unlimited," Deanna said. "Unless something goes *really* wrong with either the water filtration system or the ship's power, which, again, hasn't happened during my time in Starfleet."

"Unlimited?" Owen said. "You're kidding. Is there a limit on *hot* water? Is that whole unlimited time in the shower with hot water?"

"Of course," Deanna said, bemused. Why would you have water but not hot water? Especially on a warp-capable ship? The power requirements for heating water were negligible compared to the power needed to run the warp drive even when they were hanging motionless in space. It was funny that they seemed to find the shower almost as awe-inspiring as the replicator. But then, she'd never experienced anything like what they'd been through; it was only natural that their ideas of unusual and important differed from her own.

"You know, we told ghost stories about ships that disappeared in space in the Engineering department at Starfleet Academy," Geordi said. Gonzalez had given him a tour, and now they were sitting in the acceleration couches for a while before climbing down and heading to Engineering so Geordi could show him the *Enterprise's* warp core. The couches were comfortable, but at an odd angle; the ship wasn't designed for gravity, and although there was a 'floor' (because human beings did better psychologically with one), there were controls and equipment on five of the ship's six sides, and 'fore' and 'aft' were more useful than 'up' and 'down.'

They'd had an interesting puzzle, figuring out how to brace the ship so that the nacelles wouldn't be stressed by the ship's gravity. If it weren't that figuring out how to tie everything down in the shuttlebay would be an equal challenge, he might have suggested they just turn gravity off in the bay and let the *Ether Ore* float. He'd suggested that they arrange for it to be towed, on the way back to Earth, rather than put in a cargo bay.

"Ghost stories, huh," Gonzalez said. "Was *Ether Ore* one of them?"

"Yup," Geordi said. "Vanished into nowhere within sight of another vessel."

"That would have been our sister ship, the *Firmametal*," Gonzalez said.

"How did you manage to build *two* ships—two *warp capable* ships—less than seven years after humans developed Warp Drive?" Geordi asked. "It's not like Earth had a lot of resources to spare—most of the planet had been bombed back to the stone age, and a warp capable ship takes a lot of resources to build."

"I served with one of Cochrane's team, during the war," Gonzalez said. "Lily wanted to make sure that the people building warp-capable ships were trustworthy, so we had a head start because she knew me. She'd been giving us updates even before their first successful warp flight—not enough to build our own ship and get credit for their idea, but enough that we weren't starting from scratch after they'd done their proof of concept.

"And she also vouched for us and Georgia Tech with the Vulcans. They'd show up every so often to give a seminar on Warp 101 and Basic Starship Design and stuff like that. And a couple of times when we couldn't get the raw materials or parts we needed because of transportation problems, they sent a ship to retrieve it for us from wherever it was on Earth. They promised that if we could figure out how to get asteroids back to Earth, they'd build us a refinery in space and train us to use it. They're really big on mining asteroids instead of habitable planets, are the Vulcans. Big on ecology and sustainable land-use management. And with the warp drive and an orbital refinery, it makes sense to do it. Maybe it wouldn't have before the War, when there were decent supply lines and international treaties and stuff like that, but you have no idea how *hard* it is to trade for raw materials and large commodities across any distance now." He made a face. "Then, I suppose."

Gonzalez sighed, slouching down in his cradle. "We'd just made our first successful run, and the *Firmametal* was gearing up for *their* first crack at bringing back an asteroid, when we fell through that wormhole. All that work, for nothing."

"Not for nothing," Geordi said. "You *did* it. And I bet your sister ship was just as successful."

"Then why aren't there records of it?" Gonzalez asked.

"There have got to be records *somewhere*," Geordi said. "It's just getting them all into the historical database that's the problem, and getting them all collected into a coherent form. The Vulcans have their own records, too, and *they* weren't in the middle of a global catastrophe. Bet you *they* could tell you what happened to the *Firmametal*."

"Yeah, probably," Gonzalez said. He looked down at his hands. "Why did you have to pull us out? Why couldn't you have shoved us back

through to where we came from?"

Geordi shrugged. "We didn't know which side of the wormhole you were from," he said. "And even if we had, wormholes aren't like cracks in space, they're more like tubes between two points. When you're in a wormhole, you're in a space *within* our space-time dimension. The wormhole was collapsing as we pulled you out. If we'd shoved you in, you probably wouldn't have made it back through your side of the wormhole. You'd probably have gotten trapped ... and nobody knows what *that* would be like, or if you'd ever be able to get out of it. We've sent probes into collapsing wormholes, but we've never gotten them back, or even gotten a signal from them."

The heat patterns on Gonzalez's face changed in a way that probably indicated the blood had drained out, a little bit. "Ugh," he said. "I guess it's a good thing you pulled us out on this side, then."

"Probably," Geordi said. "Wanna go see my engine core?"

As they clambered out of the *Ether Ore*, Geordi had an idea. "Say, can we get a picture of the two of us standing outside your ship?"

"Sure," Gonzalez said, and Geordi snagged a passing crewmember to take a picture with their PADD and send it to his account. When he was done showing Gonzalez around Main Engineering, Geordi sent a copy of the picture on to a couple of old buddies from his Academy days. *Remember that old ghost story about that Early Warp ship that disappeared into thin air in front of its sister ship? The S.S. Ether Ore just fell out of a wormhole right in front of the Enterprise.*

It took a couple of days for people to respond—his classmates were spread out throughout Starfleet—but he got back a wave of responses, everything from complaints that there weren't actual ghosts, to requests for pictures of the inside of it. It was a nice distraction from the tedium of the surveys they were doing.

"I've been thinking about the next play we should do," Beverly said as she and Deanna wandered through the corridors. They'd been at a concert in Ten Forward that had gone late, and there had been a reception afterwards, so they were both headed to bed as soon as they reached their quarters. "I've been sticking mostly to plays by or about Humans, because it's what I know and the majority of our crew is Human. Do you think many of our other crew members would be interested in having one of their favorite plays put on?"

"Probably," Deanna said. "Though not all of us have thespian traditions that can be put on by aliens—Betazoid plays, for example, all have telepathy as a major component of the art."

"True," Beverly said. "I'll ask around."

They came around a curve in the corridor just in time to see Owen furtively looking both ways before darting across the corridor to Starr's door, blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He glanced up to see them and sagged, as if he'd gotten caught at something.

"Is everything alright?" Beverly asked. "Do you need something?"

"Couldn't sleep, was just going to see if I could sleep with Starr," he said.

"Do you sleep with her on a regular basis?" Deanna asked.

His face turned beet-red and he broadcasted the sort of mortification only an adolescent could feel. "Not that way! Gross! She's like my *mom*."

"I believe you," Deanna said. "I know what you meant. It was poor phrasing on both our parts. Would you like to have her added as a parent/guardian in your files? We could move you both to a shared suite, if you and she would prefer that."

"Would it be that easy?" Owen said with a frown.

"Certainly," Deanna said. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"I mean, there were a lot of hoops to jump through back home," Owen said. "She and my dad and I lived together for like three years before he died, but they weren't married and he didn't leave a will or anything, and it was easier just to have me officially emancipated and apprenticed to the shipbuilding company. One of the social workers had this thing about—there were all these rules and guidelines and laws they'd had, back before the war, and she was pretending they still applied, and I was like, dude, that was *forever* ago, but she was one of those old people who had trouble adapting."

"They had social workers in the Post-Atomic Horror?" Beverly asked, surprised.

Deanna was surprised, too; the very name conjured up images of barbarism and violence and decay. Though, she supposed if that were all there was to it, it wouldn't have lasted so short a time.

"Some places did, yeah," Owen said, scornfully. "The ones that weren't shitholes." He rolled his eyes. "Georgia was pretty good, especially if you were close to Atlanta. They made sure nobody went hungry and everybody got to see a doctor or nurse when they were sick. It's why Dad and I came to Georgia. And why we were building spaceships *there*, instead of Florida and Texas, which already had launchpads and control rooms and stuff."

"Thank you for telling us," Deanna said. "You and Starr can have your paperwork updated in the morning."

"Ok," he said.

"Good night," Beverly said.

"Good night," Owen echoed. He keyed open Starr's door, and slipped inside.

"Well, I guess that teaches us not to assume," Beverly said. She shook her head as they walked on. "I am glad he does actually have a guardian, though. Sixteen is just too young to be on his own."

"Not to mention, it makes being displaced far less traumatic," Deanna said. "He'll be healthier and happier than he would have if they'd been separated in time."

It took a little over a month for *Enterprise* to finish its mapping mission and make its way back to more heavily-travelled space, but at last their course intersected with a Caitian freighter headed in the right direction to take the *Ether Ore* and its crew on the first leg of their journey.

"You're sure this thing is safe?" Gonzalez asked, eyeing the transporter nervously.

"Absolutely," Deanna said. No need to go into the various transporter accidents she'd seen in her years in Starfleet; there were no unusual circumstances at the moment that might cause, say, a duplication of the people being transported. "I've used it many times myself."

"What does it feel like?" Owen asked. Starr put her hand on his shoulder.

"Not much," Deanna said. "It's practically instantaneous. I'm sorry Captain Picard couldn't be here to see you off; he got a call from the Admiralty he had to take."

"Thank him for all his efforts," Starr said. "And thank you for taking care of us all this time and helping us get back to Earth."

"You're welcome," Deanna said. "I hope your travel is uneventful, but if you have problems, you have my communications information as well as that of your social worker from the Department of Displaced People. One of us should be able to straighten out any problems."

"We'll try not to need the help," Gonzalez said. "We're fairly resourceful people ourselves."

"Of course," Deanna said. "But please do keep your social worker informed, at least."

"The freighter is signaling their readiness," the transporter chief said. "Please stand on the circles on the transporter pad, facing me."

The three time-travelers picked up their bags and stepped up to the platform. Starr waved good-bye.

"Energizing," the transporter chief said, and they disappeared.

Deanna thanked the chief and left the room. She had a full schedule of appointments this afternoon.

End Notes

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