



Bridge, USS Portland

Near the start of Mission Seven

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Coln Jena (NPC Beauvoir), Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Commander Timothy Rouse, Admiral Washington (played by Alenis Meru)

It had been a few days' journey from the Borg-infested nebula. The less damaged vessels were taking care of cleanup duty, and a few Olympic class vessels were en route to the nebula to deal with the thousands of drones regenerating in their alcoves, disconnected from the collective. The Portland had spent the last few days limping home at low to medium warp, so as not to stress the old girl and add to the severe damage the ship had suffered.

At the center chair, Alenis took a sip of her tea, her mind already on her week at the spa. As much as she was loathe to admit it, she needed a vacation.

Jena sat at one of the ancillary stations. She'd asked the Captain's permission to be on the Bridge when they arrived, because she'd wanted to see Trill from orbit. She'd kept quiet as she watched the Bridge crew go about their duty. She smiled, she was happy to be back on the Portland. The Starbase had been fun for a little while, but the Portland was her home.

Jason checked the sensors as they dropped out of warp. There didn't appear to be any problems. So, he reported. "We have arrived, Captain."

After looking at Meru to ask her for permission to take over Tim stood up from his seat before saying. "Start docking procedure with the shipyard," They had been ordered to dock at the shipyard in order to get the much needed repairs.

"Yes," replied Alenis, "hail the shipyard for an approach vector and set course."

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The planet Trill floated like a precious gem in the blackness of space. The pale green of the land, with its blur tinted mountain contrasted with the purple of its many oceans.

"It's beautiful." Jena said completely forgetting Bridge protocol.

Arthur subtly sneered at the image, but decided not to elaborate. Instead, he focused on the tactical console and tried not to be a huge ass.

As the Portland approached the shipyard, the weapons system on the starbase began to light up.

Although briefly readying himself to activate the shields at a moment's notice, Arthur reasoned that the starbase had no ill intent. Furthermore, the captain didn't give the order to raise shields, and the ship's new chief tactical officer wasn't looking to screw up the one chance he had to make a semi-decent impression on his new commanding officer.

Alenis raised her eyebrow, but as she saw the three salvos of torpedoes sail by harmlessly, she realized what was happening. "It's a salute to the fallen," she said, solemnly, as silence fell over the bridge crew.

A moment later, the silence was interrupted by Admiral Washington appearing on screen. His ship wasn't as badly damaged, so he had managed to make it back to Trill first. "Captain Alenis," he said, in a solemn tone, "Starfleet salutes the bravery of your crew and those who gave their lives to protect the Federation."

"Thank you," replied Alenis. "I would return the honour, but our weapons systems are offline." She glanced over at Tim for a second and then back at the Admiral. Surely, he would be wanting to spend some time with his new grandson. "We are badly in need of repair; permission to dock?"

"Granted," replied Admiral Washington. "I look forward to meeting you at the banquet tonight. And Commander Rouse,"

"Yes, sir?" He asked even though he already suspected the what the question would be.

"I'd like to arrange some playtime with Andy. 1300 hours, sharp."

Tim couldn't help but grin before replying. "Of course, sir."

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### *Angry Parents*

MD1, 1400 hours

Bridge, USS Portland

**Authors: Capt. Alenis Meru, Lt. Cmdr. Tyrlai Zade, Novia, her parents, and two cat-monkeys (played by Tyrlai Zade)**

The USS Portland limped through space at low warp as repairs were underway. She had been tossed several and ten light years by the gravitic wake of the dark energy explosion. The dark energy itself had done what dark energy does, expanded quickly and vanished without a trace. The Portland had oriented itself and was heading for the closest repair yard it could find, a Starbase and capital refit yard orbiting Trill.

The bridge of the Portland was slowly returning to normalcy. Repair crews had cleaned up the debris and were working on repairing damaged circuitry and consoles. And, of course, they had fixed the command chair, which had been nearly ripped off its bolts from the shockwave.

Alenis glanced over at the empty auxiliary console and smiled. Fortunately, with the dark energy reactor completely annihilated in the explosion, Shras didn't have any reason to be on the bridge and was no doubt writing reports, poring over sensor logs of the explosion, or bothering Lieutenant Beauvoir in the science lab.

With all that had happened, she knew she would have reams of paperwork to file. But that could all wait; for now, she was just glad to be on the bridge with the crew that had stood with her in the face of certain destruction.

Novia beamed proudly from her spot at the back of the bridge. With the help of her cat-monkeys she had managed to lead five crewman to safety, including the injured Master Paladin and had received a summons from the Captain. She hoped it was a good one and for their part Berelca and Zinzac seemed to think it was a good thing. She watched the stars swim by quietly thrilled to see everything from the bridge.

"Sir," One of the yellow clad crewman spoke up, "there is a Trill science vessel on intercept."

"Oh?" asked Alenis. "I'm not aware of any scheduled rendezvous, and if they wanted to watch Shras' dark energy experiments, they're a little late for the party."

"Me neither," replied the crewman on operations.

Tyrlai Zade stepped through the turbolift doors. She had been trying to find a better system for the repairs Portland needed but there wasn't a suitable yard for a dozen light years. It was the holes they had drilled into the hull and gravitic damage to the superstructure. It required more than most space-docks could handle. She scowled glancing at her data as she walked past the excited looking Trill girl and her rat monkeys. She stepped back to one of the auxiliary consoles and began the process of filing reports. Some of her reports had to be filed securely from the bridge for no other reason than over-cautiousness, but in this case not worth being rebellious about.

"They are hailing us, sir."

"Onscreen." Alenis said.

A pair of middle aged Trill appeared on the viewscreen wearing Trill academy uniforms. They were tall and dark haired, the man a touch shorter than the woman and bore the bright blue eyes of the Trill girl. The woman spoke first. "How dare you take out child into a combat zone. She is a valuable and accomplished young lady and in no way were you mandated to put her so carelessly into harms way."

Novia took a step forward, hopes raising for a moment.

"I do apologize for,..." Alenis was interrupted by the shrill edge of the woman on the viewscreen.

"I don't care for your pathetic excuses, Captain. Not only was she not evacuated with the other children but she was left to wander about foolishly with Borg on the ship."

Novia deflated, she wanted to explain that she had not been wandering about, she had known exactly what she was doing.

"And why is she covered in alien creatures even now! I want those things removed and destroyed before we collect her."

"No!" Novia screamed, eyes glistening as she backed away from the screen and into the Diplomatic Officer who turned away from her reports for a moment to look at the terrified girl with her equally terrified monkeys.

Tyrlai straightened and stepped over to the Captains side and blinking with a mixture of surprise and clear distaste. "Mother, how very nice to see you."

"Mother?!" exclaimed Alenis, her eyes nearly popping out of her head in shock. She had never discussed Tyrlai's family at length; the last time the subject came up, Tyrlai claimed to be 'practically an orphan.' "You mean, you and Novia are..."

"Who?" Tyrlai asked with a puzzled look at Alenis.

"But, but,..." Novia stepped forward, a little faster on the uptake. "You said my sister died."

"She should have! But she always had so very little sense." The woman sneered audibly and turned to the Captain again. "You will have Novia ready at the transporter room when we arrive and you will have the bodies of those things ready for dissection. So help me if I find so much as a microbe has infected our daughter I will,...."

"You can rest assured that all pets are carefully inspected for armful microbes," replied Alenis. Giving a whistle, she beckoned Ko-ko, who was 'holding' an engineer's micro-resonator in her beak. Dropping the tool, Ko-ko flapped her wings and fluttered over to her perch on Alenis' shoulder. "And as Captain of this vessel, unless you can speak to me with respect--"

"We are not members of your precious Starfleet, we have real jobs, science." Mrs Yenn scowled in reply. "Im sure you are used to your underling jumping when you bark," she glanced in Tyrlai's direction. "Don't expect that treatment from us."

<tagses maybe>

Tyrlai looked over at Novia who was still blinking back tears and then looked suddenly down to where Berelca had come over and was cautiously sniffing Tyrlai's boot. "What do you

mean new clan member?" Tyrlai's eyes widened and she looked over at Novia. "The monkeys are telepathic?"

Novia nodded looking even wider eyed and more frightened.

"What!?" The Trill woman onscreen reddened noticeably with rage. "Telepathic alien beasts messing with my daughters brain! You will phaser those beasts dead immediately."

Novia howled, "No!" As Zinzac trembled and crouched on her shoulder. Berelca in turned chittered and hopped up and down next to Tyrlai. Looking at Berlec, Zinzac calmed almost immediately and Novia looked over at her new sister wiping away tears.

Tyrlai stepped forward and glared at her mother. Slightly greyer at the temples than Tyrlai remembered but no less savagely stern. "These rat-monkeys,..."

"Cat-monkeys." Novia corrected her.

"Sorry, cat-monkeys, are a protected species and in order to be properly studied will have to remain with Nova here."

"Novia." Novia corrected Tyrlai again.

"According to whom!" The threatening voice from the screen challenged her.

"The Federation Diplomatic Corps." Tyrlai Zade matched her mothers tone and then some.

The woman stared, a hint of surprise at the daughter she hadn't seen in twelve years. She shook it off quickly. "Captain Meru, we arrive in twenty two minutes and will be beaming aboard to discuss these failures."

"My name is Captain Alenis," replied Meru coldly, glaring at the parents, "and this is my ship, which means nothing gets phasered unless I say so. Now," she sighed, glancing over at one of the operations crewmen, "my crew will arrange to have you transported directly to my ready room for some afternoon tea." Laying on the sarcasm, she continued. "I look forward to having you aboard."

The screen went blank suddenly and returned to a sensor view of the approaching Trill Science vessel.

Tyrlai looked over, fidgeting as she did so for a few moments. "So, any questions about why I ran away at age twelve?"

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*A Date with Alice and Bob (part 1)*

**Trill homeworld, Cafe outside the AI Symposium  
Just prior to the arrival of the USS Portland**

The food dispenser whirled and glowed. From nothing, a delicate and decorative cup and saucer materialized, the dark liquid steamed inside. Kent picked up the synthesized beverage and walked outside, searching for an open table in the fine afternoon air. He was not alone in appreciating the cafe and climate this day, and he failed to find an open table. Yet his attention settled on a table with a single occupant, a young woman perusing a PADD while she casually picked at the fruitful pastry before her. He pondered his greeting as he approached the woman, perhaps he would try something simple and direct.

"Excuse me, miss. I can't seem to locate an open table, might I join you?"

The woman looked up from her PADD. In front of her stood a tall and slender man clad in a black and gray Starfleet uniform, a teacup carefully held in front of him. A quick glance about the courtyard confirmed his statement, and she thought he seemed harmless enough.

In a casual sigh, she responded "Sure, why not" as she resumed studying the PADD. She would not get far before being interrupted again.

"So, are you here for the symposium?" Kent asked as he lifted the cup to sip the concoction.

Without looking up from her work, she replied flatly, "Yes, do you mind?" She made a gesture to the device which affixed her attention.

Kent smiled, appreciated a little challenge, and engaged a conversation despite her reluctance. "I'm sorry, where are my manners. I'm Kent Draven. And you are?"

His words hung in the air, she paused leaving him in delightful anticipation. She had no fondness for Starfleet officers, but this one had a hint of charm in his persistence. She let him linger just a bit more, enjoying the control of the conversation at this moment.

"Madison Sanders," she answered with a polite smile, finally giving up on her efforts to read the PADD in peace.

"A pleasure to meet you, Madison." Kent raised his cup to her as he said her name.

"Likewise, I'm sure. What brings you to this symposium?"

Kent managed another sip, "Oh, I'm analyzing the feasibility of using AI in decryption algorithms to speed the processes. What's your field?"

"Cybernetics," she said politely as she tapped at the tablet on the table, hoping to indicate her intention to return to her reading.

From his peripheral vision, Kent spotted another familiar Starfleet uniform heading his way. Quickly he set the cup on the saucer. "Oh no, Madison I'm terribly sorry for this." Madison looked up just in time to see another officer swing his leg over the chair next to her and sit down as he placed a full plate of fragrantly spicy food on the table.

"Kent! I thought that was you! I haven't seen you since you left for the Yeager. I see you

traded in that gold uniform for a proper gray one. Leave the gold for those of us who ought to wear it." With a smile, the newcomer pointed his thumbs to gold panels of his own uniform. His attention quickly shifted to the other side of the table. "Kent, aren't you going to introduce me to your lovely friend?"

Reluctantly, he complied, "Lieutenant Ramon Astacio, meet Miss Madison Sanders."

Like a buzzard examining a fresh kill, Ramon tried to size up his new mark. "Well hello, Maddie--"

"Madison, *never* 'Maddie'. And I don't believe I invited you to this table." She was quick to stop his momentum and locked a stern gaze with him to emphasize her point.

"Wow, you picked a feisty one, Kent. Clearly not a Trill, no spots. Are you a Terran?" Ramon, still full of himself, began to casually eat his meal as he finished the question.

Determined to not invite more conversation than necessary, Madison picked up her PADD to feign reading and quickly responded, "as a matter of fact my parents were born on Earth. I, however, was born in an orbital station. Elsewhere. So whatever you would call that."

Kent's cup shuttered against the saucer in frustration, "My God, Ramon. That dish comes replicated with silverware. You're not supposed to eat it with your fingers like an animal."

Shoveling another load into his face, Ramon laughed. "What? It's just rice and vegetables. And some spices. We're not all fancy like you. Whaddya got today, more tea?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I'm trying some local Trill tea. *Bocha* I believe they call this variety." Kent took another sip from the teacup.

Ramon continued eating without utensils. "You know, if you're drinking Trill tea, the real stuff is better than the replicated stuff, as long as you're here."

"I know. I'm just seeing if I like it enough to bother with fresh tea. I'm not too sure about this one anyway."

Ramon turned his attention back to the woman who had been pleasantly ignoring the conversation. "Watch out for this guy, Maddie. He will try to charm you over tea, then serenade you in another language. How many is that, Kent, eight, nine languages you speak?"

"It's eleven actually." Madison looked up at Kent over the PADD, an eyebrow raised. *Impressive* she thought.

Laughing, Ramon countered, "awesome, just one shy of bragging it a dozen."

"It's actually seventeen if you count all the Earth languages I speak too."

Feeling bested, Ramon changed the subject. "So, you finally have a date with Alice and Bob?"

Pleased it was brought up, Kent leaned back in his chair, took another sip of tea, and replied, "yes, finally. No more *communications analyst* for me. I'm waiting for the Portland here."

Intrigued, Madison interrupted, "a date with Alice... *and* Bob?"

Kent and Ramon smiled at each other. Kent was quick to offer an explanation before Ramon sunk the situation. "You see, back in X-school, that's the xenocryptology school, Ramon and I knew each other before he went into computer engineering. There's this old story that says cryptology was once explained in a bar, drawn on a napkin. Let's say two people want to talk, person A and person B, or *Alice* and *Bob*, but they are afraid of someone eavesdropping, we will call this person Eve. They develop a code so they can communicate without Eve knowing the true conversation. Supposedly since then, the convention of calling the players Alice, Bob, and Eve stuck. So, now I'm Eve, and I have *a date* on a new ship to be decoding messages between Alice and Bob, whoever they turn out to be. The phrase 'to have a date with Alice and Bob' was something we coined back then."

The pleasant-turning conversation was interrupted by a voice coming through Kent's commbadge:

=/\= Lieutenant Draven, please report to the transportation center. Commander Rouse is arriving.=/\=

Kent tapped his badge, "Acknowledged, on my way." He took one last sip of his tea and stood up. "Sounds like the Portland finally made orbit. I'm off to meet the XO. Madison, it's been a pleasure to meet you, I hope to see you again soon. Ramon, it's been interesting as always."

*to be continued...*

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### *Meet the Parents*

MD1, 1422 hours (shortly after "Angry Parents")

Bridge, USS Portland

**Authors: Capt. Alenis Meru, Eilis Ross, Lt. Cmdr. Tyrlai Zade, Novia, her parents, and two cat-monkeys (played by Tyrlai Zade)**

In the twenty-one minutes since the hail from Tyrlai's parents, the ready room of the Portland was frantically cleaned and polished, with some of Alenis' finest teas put out. Inside, Alenis, Tyrlai, Eilis, Novia, and the two cat-monkeys anxiously awaited the transport of the irate parents.

Alenis looked down at her chronometer. "So, I guess they should be arriving any second--"

Tyrlai looked down at Berelca after receiving pictures about the clan and strength and



banana cubes. "Have these been telepathic since the beginning?"

Novia looked up and nodded. "They don't send to people who aren't part of the clan and they don't trust things they can't sense telepathically. Like the holo-Captain. They've gotten more complex but they are still cat monkeys, they can't handle advanced concepts."

Tyrlai nodded. "Sorry I mentioned it, I was surprised, I know full well how mother is."

Novia looked down and spoke more quietly. "They told me you had died. That you asked them to have another girl. To go to the science academy like you were going to."

"Yeah." Tyrlai wasn't quite sure what her parents were thinking, Novia would eventually hear about the slave-girl joined to Zade, all of Trill seemed to know. "How to put this, I never died, I wasn't going to make it into the science academy, I was good at gymnastics."

Novia looked over at her new sister in shock. "The other kids must have teased you terribly."

"Yes," Tyrlai nodded, "yes they did."

"Kids can be so cruel," interjected Alenis in an understanding tone. "When I first arrived on Earth from Bajor, they used to--"

Before she could get into the details, she was interrupted mid-sentence by the shimmer of the transporter beam. "Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Yenn, it's a pleasure to finally meet you in person. You've met Commander Zade and Novia, and this is Ms. Eilis Ross, Novia's teacher."

Hedria Yenn sniffed dismissively. "I'm sure things are different in Starfleet but we do not allow criminals near children on Trill." Hedria walked in front of Tyrlai as she spoke and looked her up and down dismissively. "My apologies to the Zade symbiont, but I will not have this unsuitable host in the same room as my Novia."

Zinzac growled, the fur on his back raising. Tyrlai looked over perplexed, she was not used to being part of a telepathic clan.

"I believe I demanded those creatures be destroyed, Captain. Or was my com signal not clear enough?"

Alenis looked Hedria up and down, sizing her up. The woman was definitely a piece of work, that was for sure. "First off," she started, in a firm tone, placing her hands on her hips in an aggressive stance, "these creatures are not yours, and you are in no position to demand their destruction. They are a rare endangered species, and are in the care of the crew of the USS Portland, specifically our Chief Monkey-Tender, Acting Petty Officer Novia Yenn." Alenis turned towards Novia and nodded at her, offering her a hint of a smile to reassure her that the cat-monkeys were safe. "Second, regardless of your feelings about your own daughter, Commander Zade is a trusted officer, and while you are on my ship to discuss official business, you will treat her with respect. Third, unless you also happen to be a Starfleet Admiral, I don't take orders from you. Are we clear?"

Hedria walked from where she had stood glaring at Tyrlai to stand in front of Alenis, still glaring. "I am not one of your precious little crewpeople. I am the parent of the small girl you endangered, so let's dispense of the notion that there is some battle to win here. I am Novia's mother, so I have already won. You have to realize that there are consequences for your actions,..."

Berelca growled touching off another growl from Zinzac, Tyrlai looked over and saw Novia staring daggers with her fists clenched. The fear and anger coming off the cat-monkeys was palpable. Tyrlai wondered just how the girl was managing.

",... Novia will come with me and these beasts will be phased to death and THAT is a promise." Hedria finished and Tyrlai was also amazed at how quickly she had rediscovered how to tune her mother out.

"NO!" Novia shouted, the cat monkeys howled angrily in unison. Pictures of gristly wounding and death whirled through her mind, focusing on what had been the monkeys real mother, a picture with a horrified Novia looking on from underbrush in the distance. The girl stepped between Alenis and Tyrlai and said in a measured but fierce tone. "That will not happen."

"Novia Trinn Yenn, you will listen,..."

"No," Tyrlai interjected, "that will not happen. There may be risks,..."

"Who do you think you are, interrupting me? I will have you know,..." Hedria glared back at Tyrlai.

"Zade." Tyrlai replied, drawing out the syllable into a resonant sound that cut off even her mother's terse retorts.

Eilis raised her hand, interrupting the little family feud that was playing out before her. "If I may speak... Novia here is one of my best students, and she has grown in leaps and bounds in social skills and academic achievement since she was enrolled in the Portland program. She has even earned a commendation from the captain, and has learned about responsibility and maturity in her efforts to take care of her pets. Regardless of your feelings for your other daughter, I would encourage you to please consider what is best for Novia. She's excelling here, much more than she would in a regular school."

Hedria looked over at the teacher. "One of?" She then glared over at Novia. "We talked about your slacking."

Novia looked panicked. "But, but,..."

Alenis stepped forward. "The Portland needs extensive repairs, the Trill Orbital Yards are the closest. Novia can have a visit home and we can discuss this further when everyone has calmed down."

"This, I suppose will be minimally acceptable." Hedria seemed to calm, ever so slightly. "Do not expect me to yield on the matter of these parasites." She waved her hand dismissively. "Come, Adris, we return to Trill." Hedria stalked out the swooshing doors barking instructions to an unfortunate crewman to lead her to the transporter.

Adris stood smiling pleasantly for several seconds. "It will be some time before she notices I am not following and comes to fetch me. I do apologize for my wife, Captain, there is a part of her that means well."

"I understand," replied Alenis. In truth, she wasn't that much worse than Shras, and she was able to tolerate him for short periods of time. "Just... do me one favour, okay?"

Adris seemed apologetically dubious. "I have a limited influence on events I am afraid."

"I grew up without my father," started Alenis, recalling those cold winters in Minneapolis, with her mother busy working to support her and without her father to comfort her. As she looked into Adris' eyes though, she saw a look just like those distant memories of her own father three decades ago. Her voice began to weaken; even as she tried to exude confidence as a Starfleet captain, this was one thing she hadn't made peace with. "He didn't make it off Bajor. I missed out on so much time with him... don't let the same happen to Novia. Or to Tyrlai."

"I message Novia several times a week, is that not so, Novia?"

Novia nodded. "It's true, mother is not to know, she considers it to be coddling."

Adris smiled and stepped over to Tyrlai. "I message Tyrlai weekly," he said making Tyrlai's eyes widen in clear surprise. "Which have all been blocked at the receiving end."

Tyrlai blushed, she had forgotten. It had been an angry and betrayed, newly-joined fifteen-year-old's act of impetuosity. "It was just mother who disavowed me."

"Yes, Tyrlai." Adris said reaching out to hold her by her shoulder. "She signed both our names to the document but I have never ratified it. You are still my daughter and I am very proud of you." He stepped back. "Now I should go before she returns and ruins the moment."

Tyrlai turned blinking away tears as her father walked from the room.

A long, awkward silence fell over the room. No one had ever seen Tyrlai like this; she had always been known to have a devil-may-care attitude, or at least keep up the facade of one. Also blinking away tears, Alenis placed a hand on her second officer's shoulder. "Tyrlai..." she started, pausing to clear her throat. "If you need anyone to talk to..."

"No time,..." Tyrlai whispered so only Alenis could hear. She then wiped her eyes and turned. "Novia, I need you to record some tutorials on how to take care of the cat-monkeys."

"You can't take them from me!!"

"Nobody is taking them from you, but if mother does what I expect her to I may need to take care of them at some point during your visit and I will need to know how." She walked over to Novia and looked down at her brushing away her tears as well. "I promise, nobody is taking them away. Now go make the holo's, I'm very bad at responsibility, if you don't record it I won't remember to do it."

Novia nodded and headed for the door. After it had wooshed shut she waited longer for the Cat-Monkeys to lose interest in her. They kept contact usually only with people that were in sight. She turned back to Alenis. "I had no idea they were telepathic. She's had them for months, Novia is the focus of a telepathic gestalt. My mother is going to try and kill them and if they die, I can't begin to explain how much damage it will do to Novia. Just a prolonged absence from them could be harmful, but if she is in contact with them when they die she could be psychologically fractured. If she were an adult, she would have a chance, but at her age, never. She'd go up in smoke psychologically speaking. It would be like me losing Zade, only she would live."

Alenis was taken aback. She suspected that they might have been telepathic; they had a certain quality to them that was not unlike Ko-ko, but hadn't realized that the telepathic bond was this strong. "It's a big ship. We'll hide Berelca and Zinzac in the Jeffries tubes if we have to, but I can guarantee you that she's not going to harm a single hair on those creatures' heads so long as she's on my ship."

"We may need to do that." Tyrlai nodded. "But we need something more permanent. We need Novia away from Mother more or less permanently, which normally would not be difficult, mother has no taste for any actual motherly activities, she's only interested in acclaim. But, the second I mentioned not destroying the cat-monkeys I might have well sealed the notion in her head. She will do it out of spite" Tyrlai ran her hands through her long black hair as if grasping for notions. "I'm going to have to go back to Trill." She kicked Ko-ko's stand causing the bird to flutter up from her perch for a moment and then, once resettled, began a long squawking scolding of the Trill woman.

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*The best-laid plans...*

Captain's Office, USS Portland

MD2, 0900 hours

**Authors: Alenis Meru, Timothy Rouse, Adm. Washington (played by Alenis Meru)**

Morning tea on the USS Portland had by now become a regular affair. On a daily basis, Captain Alenis would invite her two most highly trusted officers -- Executive Officer Timothy Rouse and Chief Morale Officer Ko-ko -- for tea to discuss the running of the ship and anything else that came into their mind. With the important logistical discussions out of the way, they had some time before they had finished their tea for a little bit of friendly chatter.

"So, Tim," said Alenis, reaching for her half-empty mug of tea, "do you have any plans for

shore leave?"

"You have no idea how life is with a newborn do you?" He asked with a grin. "I plan on catching up on sleep."

"Sleep is for the weak," joked Alenis, before taking a sip of her tea. "I've booked a week at the Illaria Falls Relaxation Centre. It's the most exclusive and highest-rated spa on Trill. I had to call in a few favours to get a reservation; usually they're booked years in advance. This time next Friday, I'll be sitting in a Trill mud bath and finally relaxing for once."

"I hear that's a very good one. I tried to convince Ellen to go there, but she wasn't ready to leave Andy."

"Good luck getting reservations," replied Alenis. "You would not believe what I had to go through--"

It was at that moment that they were interrupted by a beeping at the console. "Captain," called out a voice over the intercom, "priority message from Admiral Washington."

Alenis sighed. "Put it through to my office," she replied, pressing a button on her console to project the image onto one of the side walls. A few seconds later, the Starfleet logo was replaced by the bearded face of Admiral Washington.

"Captain Alenis," he said, looking at Alenis through the subspace channel, "Timothy," he added, nodding at the father of his grandson. "How is my grandson doing?"

"Perfect. Looking more like his mother every day." He said with a smile.

"Excellent; I would hope so," replied Washington. Holding back a smile, he looked over at Alenis. "Meru, Tim, I have your orders. You are to proceed to Starbase 66 in the Trill system. There, your crew will be given shore leave while a team from the Starfleet Corps of Engineers inspects the Portland to determine the extent of the damage."

Alenis closed her eyes and sighed for a moment. The fact that they were bringing in SCE for an inspection and that Admiral Washington didn't just say to stop for repairs wasn't a good sign. "Admiral," replied Alenis, "does this mean that the Portland is going to be scrapped?"

Washington considered the question carefully. He recognized the look that was in Alenis' eyes. He would get the same look when talking about his first command, also a Miranda class. "Captain," said Washington, staring into Alenis' eyes, "I know exactly how you feel. I feel the same way about my first command, the USS Toulouse. But these decisions are made in the best interests of Starfleet." He sighed deeply. "Honestly... there are a number of voices out there who think the Miranda class should be phased out altogether. The resources that would go into repairing a heavily damaged hundred year old ship..."

"I understand, Admiral," replied Alenis. "But the crew..."

"Starfleet will find places for all of them," countered the Admiral with a wave of the hand. "And given your service record, you might be in line for something larger. A Cheyenne class, perhaps, or even a Galaxy."

Alenis glanced over at Tim, an uncomfortable look on her face.

"Is there still a change they might be able to fix her?" Tim asked. He didn't want his family to be separated.

"It might be possible," replied the Admiral, "but judging by your damage reports, Starfleet may want to simply write it off." He looked down at Tim. "Commander Rouse, you should be happy. This could be a shot at the big chair for you."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm not interested right now." Tim said. "I've only been a XO for less than a year."

Washington gave Tim a disappointed look. "Mister Rouse, I'm afraid you may not have a lot of choice in where you go if the Portland is scrapped." He sighed deeply. Changing the subject, he continued. "Anyways, aside from some well-deserved shore leave, I'd like the Portland to participate in the AI symposium being held on Trill. I've been reading your reports; I'm sure your crew has much research to share."

At that point, a nervous look appeared on Alenis' face. "When does this symposium--"

"The symposium will kick off with a banquet next Friday evening. I expect both of you to be there."

"But Admiral," replied Alenis. "I've already made reservations at--"

"Cancel them, Captain, that's an order."

Alenis' heart sank. The dream of a Captain's spa day was over. "Is that all, Admiral?"

"One more thing." Washington looked down at Tim. "Mr. Rouse, I expect to meet my grandson the moment you arrive on Trill. Are we clear?"

"That shouldn't be a problem," He replied.

"Excellent. Washington out." With that, the projection shut off.

Alenis sighed in frustration. Apparently a little vacation once in a while was too much to ask. "Well, so much for my week at the spa."

"Too bad you can't be in two places at once." Tim said with a chuckle.

Looking up at Ko-ko, a mischevious smile appeared on Alenis' face. "Hmmmmmm, maybe I can..."

"Oh no, that look can only bring trouble." he said. "What are you gonna do?" Tim asked with a smile.

"Well..." mused Alenis. "It is an AI symposium, and we do have a hologram who looks, walks, and talks just like me..."

Tim closed his eyes as he counted to ten. He knew her good enough to know there was no point of talking her out of it. "Just do me a favor, please pretend I knew nothing about this."

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Can it be done?

Holo-lab, USS Portland

MD02, 1000 hours

**Authors: Capt. Alenis Meru, Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan**

Alenis strolled through the corridors of the Portland, PADD in hand, to see her resident holographic expert. She had an invitation for him, and also a favour to ask. She wasn't sure it was possible, but if it was, she would be able to have her cake and eat it too.

"Lieutenant Kallan," she called out as she strolled into the holo-laboratory.

The lab had returned to a state of semi-normalcy by now. Marcus had requisitioned the help of several crewman engineers and operations officers, and the lab had been organized into still-functional or salvageable equipment -- the latter being worked on by said crewman -- and a pile of scrap, which was busy being carted out on grav sleds for catalog and ultimate recycle. Marcus, himself, looked cleaned up and freshly shaved, with a fresh uniform to boot.

"Captain," Marcus responded, setting down his diagnostic tricorder and turning to face her. The assorted crewmen all halted in their work and came to attention. "We're almost done, here."

Looking around, Alenis took in the scene before her. It wasn't totally clean yet, but at least there was a method to the mess. "At ease." She stepped towards Marcus. "Sorry about your lab. But I do have good news," she added, sliding a PADD containing the invitation to the symposium across his terminal towards him.

"The lab's inconsequential to what we've gained. Oh?" He took up the PADD. "As if this Stardate, you have been transferred to the USS Garbage Scow." Marcus smirked, and then actually read the invitation. "Oh. Oh, this is a surprise. This'll be fun." He looked up at Alenis. "Thank you, Captain."

"You're welcome," replied Alenis. "I'm sure you'll have much to present. Our interactions with the Borg, as well as our friend Nerys..."

"Present?" Marcus looked surprised. "You intend me to represent the Portland? I mean, I

suppose I could throw together a talk or two." He shrugged. "And I'm not about to put Nerys on show."

"You are one of the guests of honour at the banquet... apparently word of your good work leaked out to Admiral Washington somehow," she replied with a wink, so much as admitting that she was the one who put him up to it. "Now, I don't want to put her up on some stage like it's some kind of kennel club dog show, but speaking of the banquet, I was wondering if you could do a favour for me..."

"Anything, Captain, you know that," Marcus replied.

"Okay." Alenis took a deep breath and nervously straightened her uniform before launching into her request. "As you are no doubt aware, it is of the utmost importance that the Captain of a vessel take a little break from time to time, in order to keep her performance in peak shape. Ergo, I have booked reservations at one of the most luxurious spas on Trill. However, Admiral Washington has insisted that my presence is mandatory at this banquet, which conflicts with my reservation. I was thinking, if I could get someone to go in my stead, someone who looks, talks, and acts just like me..."

He blinked. Then, he laughed. "You realize that if you get caught, you're going to seriously piss off the Admiral," Marcus said. Holding up a hand, he said, "Of course, Nerys would be able to replicate the exact look on his face if he found out..." His kidding gave way to a thought. "Um, how exactly are we going to install holo-emitters everywhere throughout the banquet facility? I mean, if you suddenly got your hands on a mobile emitter, which technically doesn't exist..."

"The emitters shouldn't be a problem," replied Alenis. "It is an AI symposium after all; I'm sure the hall will be equipped with emitters for presentation purposes." She rubbed her chin for a moment, pondering the problem. "The question is; is her program stable enough to transfer out of the Portland's computer core?"

"Without going into too many details, the short answer is 'yes', although her program is horribly piggish on active memory," Marcus explained. He had become proud of Nerys' progress as an AI and as an individual, although the technical challenges of letting her matrix settle over the past few months were only resolved with dedicated, auxiliary holo-memory. "Someone would definitely notice her memory footprint, so we'd have to install some hardware on-site." He paused. A question came to mind that he thought he would never ask. "Have you, um, spoken to her? Nerys. Is she complicit in these shenanigans?"

"She's been so tired of being cooped up in the few areas of the ship that have holo-emitters that she'll be happy to get out anywhere," replied Alenis with a wave of the hand. "Besides," replied Alenis, "I think it's a good idea, so since she's a copy of me, that means she will as well."

Marcus inwardly sighed. He'd have to bring this up to the hologram, himself. "Right. I'll come up with a checklist for transferring her matrix, as well as what materials I'll need. Anything else, sir?"



"No, that will be all," replied Alenis, relieved at having enlisted Marcus in her little plot. She tugged her tunic and looked around the room. "How are things otherwise? Are you getting along with our Cardassian guest?"

"Guest?" Marcus shook his head. "Haven't met a Cardassian, sir. I've been knee-deep in salvage."

"Oh, you haven't?" asked Alenis, raising an eyebrow. "She's an AI researcher on Cardassia Prime. A guest of the Federation; she was on board Jatok's ship and is hitching a ride with us to the symposium." She took a quick breath and pressed her comm badge. "Alenis to Gil Korat, if you're available, please report to the holographic lab. I'd like to show you some of our Chief Operations Officer's work."

"Yes, Captain, I am on my way," replied a female voice. Marcus' jaw dropped and the color left his face. "Merry? Merry's here?"

Shortly thereafter, a Cardassian woman dressed in a uniform not too dissimilar from Cardassian bridge staff came into the holographics lab. A centimeter or two taller than Marcus, slender, and graceful. "Gil Korat reporting as ordered," she said to Alenis. And then when noticing Marcus, she simply gave him a curt nod and something of a frown. "Hello, Marcus. You've gained weight."

"So that's why you didn't reply to my communique," Marcus replied, still flabbergasted. "When did you transfer back to Cardassia?"

"When my fiancée abandoned me," she replied dryly.

Marcus held out his hands, palms forward. "Whoah. That was your idea. I never said..."

"Well, I see you two have a lot to catch up on," replied Alenis, anxiously straightening her uniform. She didn't know that Marcus and Merry had a history together. But, knowing which personnel matters to intervene in and which to leave alone was something she learned as an executive officer, and this was definitely the latter. "I should get back to my personnel reports. Ms. Korat, I'm sure you'll be impressed at the Mr. Kallan's research."

With that, Alenis backed off the holo-lab, leaving Marcus and his guest to get caught up.

"Thank you, Captain," Meriatha replied, favoring Alenis with a polite nod. But as the Captain tactfully retreated, she looked Marcus' way, and then glanced to either side at the various piles of junk. "...but I suspect not."

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### Close Encounter

Tue Apr 05, 2016 8:28 pm

Set morning two on Trill

Lt Cdr Tyrlai Zade, Ensign Ash Sullivan

It had been a long journey to Trill but once it was reached the crew were granted some shore leave. Shore leave that Ash was more than happy to take. At the academy he had spent more nights in the quarters of his peers than in his own but he learned quickly that a ship environment made habits like that difficult to keep up. It was hard to have a no-strings-attached relationship with someone who was stuck in the same tin can as you. So Ash had made it a personal policy not to get involved with shipmates, and for that reason shore leave was his favorite time of every mission.

Sullivan had knocked back a few drinks at a quiet bar before making his way to a popular nightclub called Club Candor. He wore a pair of black skinny leg jeans, a tight white t-shirt that showed off his athletic build and a tailored, silver-blue blazer. Sitting at a small table he looked around the room, seeing if anyone caught his eye.

The Trill woman was tall, wearing an ice blue shimmering dress, mid thigh length resembling the cheongsam from Earth. She had long straight black hair silken smooth and tied back with an intricate ribboned braidwork. Her eyes were blue and she had the leopard pattern of Trill spotting tracing down her neck and along her long tanned legs. She was swaying with the music at the edge of the dance floor seemingly lost in thought. She was young, perhaps mid twenties and moved with smooth grace.

The woman's legs were the first thing Ash noticed. Beautiful, long, toned and lightly spotted with the familiar pattern of a Trill.

'Good.' He thought to himself, 'A local's a safe bet to avoid any ties to work.'

His eyes moved upward and he took in the rest of her finely formed body before his gaze was finally caught by her bright blue eyes, highlighted by the colour of her dress. They were dazzling, particularly under the lights of the nightclub, and they were what truly drew Ash in.

He finished the drink he had ordered and then very slowly moved in the Trill woman's direction, making his way through the dance floor to try and draw her attention before giving her his.

Her head was buzzing lightly from the synthahol but she was still eight hundred with an uncanny sense of pattern recognition. The human was moving through the crowd in a singular pattern. Staying at least at the edge of her field of vision. The only one not moving with the flow of the crowd. He was kind of perfect, not local, she didn't recognize him from the ship. There were new crew-members now and again but what were the odds? He was 99.9% likely to be from the station down for the ice festival.

She just needed to get her family and her sister out of her head for a couple hours. Her sister, the concept was so very odd. Her little sister had been on Portland for weeks and she hadn't known. It made sense in retrospect. Her parents had disavowed her so they could apply to have one last chance at a little super-genius. She had naturally assumed it was to get back at her, mostly because she was angry and fifteen and not very self actualized. She walked over to the little table at the edge of the dance floor that held her drinks and

downed one, it had not helped at all to learn they just wanted a different daughter. The spite thing was actually easier to take.

It also didn't help that Novia was in fact a freaking little genius. And also sweet and clearly every bit as desperate for any sort of contact that she had been at that age. It would have been far easier if the child was a spoiled brat. But she couldn't hate Novia for having the practical scientific gifts that had eluded her, quite the opposite. She posed in profile turned and stared at the human for a moment, the slit of her dress ran all the way to her beaded hip of the clingy material. She had eight hundred years of experience in attracting attention on dance floors and even with her inner monologue rambling on despite all her best efforts she still knew exactly how to position herself to get noticed.

It didn't hurt

Ash noticed her gaze fairly quickly and while he didn't return the stare he smiled a bright wide smile. She had gotten his attention and he had gotten hers. Still smiling he moved over to her table, now being more direct in his movements. "G'Day." His signature greeting, though frustratingly the Universal Translator always changed it to "Hi" even when talking to an English speaking person. Like Australian was some sort of foreign language.

"Can I buy you a drink?" He asked with a wink.

Tyrlai looked him over, definitely not from the Portland, she would have noticed this one. Far too pretty for his own good. He knew it too, she had met a few of his type when she worked the pub just off campus in San Francisco. "I came prepared actually." Tyrlai waved a hand over her tray of sparkly blue shot glasses filled with a wispy and aromatic, synthaholic version of ice whiskey. "It's a local concoction brewed from the icevines in the polar glacier fields." Which was kind of true. These had been concocted from a replicator pattern she'd devised.

"How about a dance then?" He suggested, nodding towards the dance floor.

"Drink first." Tyrlai smiled, handing him a sparkly blue glass and downing one more of her own. Setting her glass down she walked out on the floor. Swaying her hips to the melodic ice festival tunes picking a style midway between Earth club dancing and the formal steps of the Trill music.

Ash followed suit, quickly downing the ice whiskey. The drink was smooth with a warm finish which spread through his body quickly as he stepped out onto the dance floor. Ash moved to the music as he followed the Trill woman out into the crowd of people moving to the music. "My name's Ash by the way." He half shouted over the music.

Tyrlai smiled back as she began swaying along with the Trill music in a pattern she hoped he could adapt to. "I'm Tyrlai," she replied, "you are a long way from home, mister Ash."

"That all depends on where I call home doesn't it?" Ash asked with a grin. "For example, tonight I'm calling my hotel room home, which means I'm really only a few blocks from it."

Tyrlai had downed her fourth ice whisky and it had suddenly started working. The troubles with Novia and her mother had fled and her mind was free to reel through normal thoughts. Her dance moves became more natural and a little suggestive. More than one lifetime of dance and gymnastics took over, and more than one of paranoia and tactics also took over and she began to notice the stares. Ash was not the only one watching, other eyes glanced in her direction repeatedly. Here she was Zade, and Zade had been gone for twelve years and people were interested. She placed her hands on the Humans shoulders. "That actually sounds preferable to here, if you don't mind." She smiled and fluttered her eyes.

Ash raised his eyebrows, surprised and somewhat impressed at Tyrlai's forwardness. They were both attracted to each other and obviously both had the same intentions. If he was at all hesitant the spark in her beautiful eyes convinced him. "Of course." He replied placing his arms around her waist and moving closer. "Should we finish this tray of ice whiskey?" He asked nodding to the tray on her table.

Tyrlai almost kicked herself for forgetting. She quickly sorted the remaining shot glasses into two parcels of three glasses each. She moved to one end of the tray and motioned him to the other. She downed the first and paused a handful of seconds before the second and a pair of handfuls before the third. Her head swimming ever so lightly she lead him out into the crisp evening air.

Ash followed suit with the whiskey before following Tyrlai out of the club and into the cool night air. Her beauty, confidence and impressive drinking ability were intoxicating and for a moment he lost his bearings admiring her. "Uhhh..." He started looking for a familiar landmark or street name. "This way, my hotel's this way." He said grabbing her by the arm and walking somewhat hurriedly towards his place of residence. A few moments later they were in the lobby, then the turbolift and as the doors closed Ash leant in to kiss Tyrlai, placing one hand on the small of her back and pulling her body into his.

Tyrlai responded, her hands roaming as she leaned in. The turbolift slowed and the doors to his room wooshed open. She had forgotten her small avalanche of other problems as she wrapped her arms around him.

Ash's free hand moved up her back as they continued to kiss while moving onto the couch. "Another drink? I have a real bottle of spiced rum from Earth. Non-synthahol." He asked between kisses as he allowed his lips to move down Tyrlai's neck, following her spots.

Tyrlai arched her back and leaned her head back making a soft 'hmmmmmm'. She reached down and managed to pull one of her heels off and let it slip to the floor. "I never touch the real stuff." She said looking him in eyes once again and smirking. "It interferes with my gymnastic training."

'A gymnast!' Ash thought to himself excitedly, his eyes lighting up even more. "We'll skip the drink then." He said running a hand down and then back up Tyrlai's thigh while he kissed her shoulder.

Tyrlai leaned back towards and then onto the couch. Reaching for the wooden toggles of her dress, returning the kissing and caressing while one hand managed to slip the silken garment off to reveal matching undergarments over light coppery skin with leopard Trill spotting. She pulled the ribbon from her long black hair and shook it free and then started on his clothing. She leaned in a purred, "Let me know if Im going too fast for you."

Ash let his blazer slide off his shoulders and onto the floor before lifting his shirt over his head, revealing a strong chest and a toned 6-pack. "Don't worry I'll try to keep up." He said as he fumbled with his belt buckle and lent in to kiss her once again.

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It was a touch before seven local Trill time when the chirp woke her. She heard the sound of the sonic shower in the antechamber, and expected her nights host has risen early. She smiled in a weary contented way and then, in a panic jumped out of bed and to the floor, pulling her combage from the pouch in her dress where it lay on the floor. "Computer, no visual broadcast." She said cognizant of her lack of any clothing.

It was Novia's panicked voice that came over the comm. "She's going to kill them, please, please come help!!"

Tyrlai tapped her badge again, standing and looking for the rest of her clothing. "Computer, execute, Tyrlai C-M-Four." There was a clear transporter whine and suddenly she was dancing madly as sharp clawed cat monkeys attempted to clamber their way up her slender form. "Ow, stop, ow, you need those trimmed, OW-- Bed NOW!!" Tyrlai pointed and Berelca and Zinzac jumped to the bed and sat together sending Tyrlai pictures of her mother morphed into the guise of an alien predatory animal stalking Novia.

"She will be fine. Let's get you somewhere safe while I think of a way to handle her." Tyrlai located her undergarments and slid her way into them, looking over at the dress and deciding she needed something with more shoulder protection. She walked over to the dresser and began looking through the stuff inside.

"Good morning." Ash said as he stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. He walked up behind Tyrlai and kissed her neck while wrapping his arms round her waist. "There's probably a few shirts in the bottom drawer you could try on." He said before something on the bed caught his eye. "Um... are these friends of yours?" He asked as he stepped backwards and pointed to the two creatures occupying his bed.

Tyrlai picked the largest shirt she could find and pulled it over her head. "They are my sisters, my mother may have tried to have them murdered. I will need to go find out whats going on." She managed to extricate her head and pull the shirt down as far as it would go, it made a frustratingly micro mini but one that had shoulders. "I'm sorry, this was wonderful and I hate to go so quickly,..."

"I'm sorry you have to leave." He said walking up behind her and again wrapping his arms around her waist. "I really enjoyed it as well." He added resting his head on her shoulder.

"But it does sound like you've got a serious family situation going on."

Tyrlai warmed to the moment but then noticed the curiosity coming in telepathic picture form from the pair on the bed and stepped free gathering her dress and sending a mental image of monkeys on her shoulders. "Sorry, the cat-monkeys are telepathic and my little sister is on the other end of that connection so,..." she offered her hand as the pair of silvery white creatures clambered up one on each shoulder of his shirt, which fit her like an unusually skimpy evening dress.. "It was nice meeting you, Ash>"

"It was very nice meeting you." He replied.

Tyrlai blew a kiss as she shimmered from view, arriving a few moments later on the USS Portland, barefoot in a skimpy shirt with a pair of cat-monkeys on her shoulders, having been displaced to the corridor no doubt for safety reasons just as the turbolift opened and a trio of smirking crewmen looked her up and down. "Emergency pet rescue drill. As you were."

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*A Date with Alice and Bob (part 2)*

**Trill homeworld**

**Upon arrival of the USS Portland**

**Authors: Kent Draven and Timothy Rouse**

*Previously,*

*Lt Kent Draven was waiting on Trill for transfer to the USS Portland. In a cafe courtyard outside the AI symposium, he was enjoying some conversation over a cup of tea before being summoned to meet Cmdr Rouse as he beamed down to the planet*

Kent made his way to the transportation center, navigated to the proper transporter room and checked in with the operator. The room glowed and shimmered as the officer was beamed in. "Greetings, Commander Rouse. I'm Lieutenant Draven, your new intelligence officer. Welcome to Trill, I heard you hit a bit of trouble before getting here."

Stepping off the transporter pad and towards the man who was waiting for him. "Lieutenant," he said with a nod of his head. "We've had some problems indeed," Causing his son to be born on a escape pod. "I hope your trip here was less problematic."

"Quite uneventful, in fact. However, your delay permitted me to attend some interesting lectures here at the symposium. Most of the fringe topics were in these few days leading up to the main upcoming events." Slowly they walked from the transporter room to the open atrium, the warm sunlit air and gentle breeze of Trill filled the structure as the indigenous decorative flora danced with the passing wind. "These extra days on Trill have been great, but I'm very excited to get up to the ship and get started, sir."

"Well, Unfortunately there isn't much to do for you at the moment. Unless you have an engineering degree." Tim said as the two men walked through the atrium. "The ship is heavily damaged as a result of the mission."

Draven lost some excitement at the news of having to wait longer before getting started, but Trill was not a bad place to be stuck for a few extra days. "No sir, I doubt I could be much help in that regard. I took a few engineering extension courses during my down time on the Yeager, but I would probably be more in the way than anything else." He recalled the Starfleet extension courses; his engineering knowledge extended little beyond being able to identify the difference between a hyper spanner and a sonic driver. He could manage some damage control, or basic tinkering, but battle repairs were likely well beyond his skills. His thoughts turned to the possibilities planetside, and to the young woman he had just met, and abruptly left, at the cafe. "There is a great cafe nearby, just outside the symposium hall, if you would like to relax a moment," he offered.

Did he have time to relax Tim thought. He was planning of finding a toy for Andy. A real toy, not a replicated one. He knew he was still too young for toys, but with the Portlands missions you never knew when another chance to look for one would arise. "A cup of coffee can't hurt" he said with a smile. "And these surroundings for a meeting with a new officer are better than my office. Or the icy environment of the location where the symposium is held."

Draven led the way back to the cafe. "I'm not a huge fan of icy weather, so I decided to wait on the warmer side of the planet. Fortunately, a few of the early lectures and conferences were here, too. We can just beam to the other side when we're ready." As they approached the cafe, Draven looked around the tables: more open tables now, but that wasn't what he was searching for. Madison, the young woman he just met, had apparently departed unfortunately, but luckily so had his obnoxious acquaintance Ramon. Draven strolled up the outdoor food station, glanced over the menu for another local tea he hadn't tried yet, and took the replicated beverage to a nearby open table. As he sat, he breathed in heavily, taking in the fresh warm air, well aware of the cold temperatures that awaited him shortly. "So Commander, what's the latest with the ship and crew?"

Tim followed the Portland's new Intelligence officer and sat down opposite of him, taking his coffee with him. "As said earlier, the Portland is heavily damaged. Engineering teams are determining if she is salvageable or not." He explained. "Our last missions should give you enough backlogs to occupy you for a while."

Draven pulled out his pocket-PADD, interfaced it with the planetary network and accessed the Portland's data files, now available since the ship's arrival. He briefly scrolled through some mission highlight files and a few crew files before putting the device away. "Hm, quite a ride indeed. I'm looking forward to serving with such an experienced crew." The two traded a few chit-chat remarks as they finished their drinks at the cafe. Kent paused, took a sip of tea, and then a long slow breath of the warm air. "Well Commander, I supposed we should get over to the main conference, and I could meet up with the rest of the crew. It's been pleasant and I'm sure I will see you around the ship and on Trill." Draven stood and began back toward the transportation center.

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## ***Take a Hike***

### **Multiple Locations, Trill**

#### **MD 05 - Morning Two on Trill (After Close Encounter)**

After Tyrlai shimmered away, Ash made his way over to his wardrobe to find some clean clothes. Putting on his shirt and slacks, he reflected on the last night. What a night. He and Tyrlai clicked almost instantly and were clearly after the same thing. Neither of them tried to ask for or offer contact information, they didn't even know each other's full name. Hell, Tyrlai may not have even been her real name for all Ash knew. It had been a while since he'd had such a great night and he felt better for it. Now however it was time to get some breakfast before he headed off for a 2-day hike up Bes Manev, Trill's tallest mountain. He pulled on a large coat and a beanie before heading out.

He wandered through the streets near his hotel until he stumbled across a small café that appeared to have some French inspiration. He took a seat at a small outdoor table, enjoying the morning chill. He would have loved to do a full hike right to the top of Bes Manev but that took around 2 months and it was a bad time of year for a full expedition. Not knowing how much time off he'd have and not wanting to be away from the ship too long he opted for a popular 2-day group hike that his friend had helped him get onto. He could beam in to Summit Camp, a half-day's climb from the highest point on Trill, ascend to the summit, camp the night then return to Summit Camp the following day. After a few minutes Ash finished off the bacon and eggs and coffee he'd ordered. After paying for his meal he headed for the Transport Hub and checked the time. He was scheduled to beam up at 11 am local time and already had his gear and supplies for the trip downloaded to the transporter buffers at Summit. It was 10:30, 'Always better to be early than late.' He thought to himself as he walked.

Checking in at the Transport Hub was fairly painless and right on time he found himself materializing in a cabin on the side of Bes Manev in his snow gear. There were a few other climbers gearing up when he arrived and it looked like he was the last to arrive for this hike. He quickly made his way to a locker that had his name on it where he found all his climbing gear.

"Morning Star Fleet." Someone said from behind him. "We leave in ten."

Ash turned to see the guide for this trek standing behind him. "Joey. I knew you got me onto this hike but I didn't know you were the guide. You look good man." He said shaking hands with his friend.

"Good to see you too man. I guess last time we spoke face-to-face I didn't exactly look like someone who'd be doing this sort of thing." That was an understatement. Ash and Joey were friends in their first year of the Academy but Joey dropped out because of the physical expectations of potential security officers. Joey wasn't much of an exercise enthusiast. Now he was like a completely different person. Strong, thin and full of energy. "I guess I just found something I was passionate about, now I run an extreme tourism company, hiking the biggest, most exciting mountains in the Quadrant."



"No kidding." Ash replied pulling his pack onto his back and fastening it around his waist. To preserve the feel of a proper hike there were transport inhibitors blocking everything but emergency transports above Summit Camp. That meant they all had to carry their camping and climbing gear up with them. "I still reckon I can out climb you mate."

"Of course you do." Joey said rolling his eyes and opening the door to the cabin, exposing everyone to the icy environment outside. "You all picked probably the hardest season to climb so we're going to face frozen slopes, snowdrifts and forecast's suggest there might be some fresh snow coming down overnight on us up there. If anyone wants to change their mind, now's your last chance." He shouted over the wind. "No? Okay helmets on. They've got built in comms so we can all hear everything you say out there and they'll also provide oxygen. The air's pretty thin up here."

With the group suited up and ready to go the hike began with everyone filing out of the cabin and heading for the first cliff face they needed to scale.

*To be continued...*

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**Who:** Lt JG Marcus Kallan, Gil Meriatha Korat (NPC), Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Coln Jena (NPC)

**Where:** Computer Core, USS Portland

**When:** Before or during the Symposium on Trill

Most of the crew's efforts to patch together the Portland were focused on much of her external-facing systems and shoring up structures. The computer core, one of the most heavily-defended and shielded places of the ship, suffered only minor damage, which had already been repaired. As a consequence, it was very quiet, with only the hum of subspace fields and isolinear components filling the room.

It was a sound Marcus found very comforting.

He sat at the console usually operated by an Operations crewman or Ensign assigned to monitor computer core systems, whom he relieved -- not so much feeling generous, but just wanting the space to himself. A number of PADDs littered the console top while he quietly tapped and worked, putting together his notes on the Nerys hologram. Most of the facts he knew by heart, having worked on her -- with her? -- over the past few months to exclusivity. All that really remained was organization of information, presentation imagery, and the 24th-century equivalent of a PowerPoint deck.

"I thought I'd find you here," came an almost accusatory alto, accompanied by the turbo doors quietly whooshing open and closed. "You've been avoiding me," the female voice said. Coming into the subdued glow of the computer core revealed a Cardassian woman's face.

"Hi, Merry," Marcus replied, not looking up from his work. "I thought you'd find me when you were ready for round two of harassment."

"Clearly no one here is doing that," Meriatha said. She slowly circled the main console,

tracing its edges with her hand. She regarded the older, but upgraded and uprated core. "This is inferior technology," she observed dryly.

"Yeah, no kidding. But it's home," Marcus said. He sighed; there was no getting any work done while she was here. Might as well get the unpleasantness out of the way. "Go on and say it."

"Say what?"

"What you came here to say."

Meratha turned to look at Marcus over her shoulder. Rather than coy, her facial expression looked a combination of disappointment and disapproval. "You left me," she sneered.

"I was transferred," Marcus said in defense, a hint of defensive anger creeping into his voice. "And we weren't engaged."

"We were!" Meriatha slapped the console with her hand. "There were wedding preparations on Cardassia Prime! Family was coming from all over the quadrant! You abandoned me!"

Marcus pointed an accusatory finger. "That was all in your head, Merry! We were talking about it, not cementing the deal!" He ran both hands through his hair, exasperation setting in. "We've had this fight a thousand times before!"

"Thirty four times, actually," she corrected him. "Hyperbole doesn't suit you." Now she was looking coy.

"Damnit, Merry, go back to your post, and leave me alone," Marcus said, jaw tightening with frustration.

"For the duration of the Symposium, I'm assigned to you, to my chagrin," she responded, looking, again, disappointed.

"Huh? How? Why?" Marcus' frustration and anger dissolved to confusion. "Why haven't I received transfer orders?"

"Because I'm here to deliver them to you, right now," Merry said. Completing her circuit of the console, she got dangerously close to Marcus, hands slinking up the front of his chest to curl behind his shoulders.

"...Wait, what?..." Marcus was completely disarmed. He began to stammer a protest, but she cut him off.

"Thirty four times we have had a heated argument. And thirty three times, we had a very enjoyable night afterwards," the Cardassian woman purred. "For being a human, you always knew how to be belligerent in *just* the right way."

"Merry, I... I can't..." Marcus whispered, looking a mixture of afraid and seduced, peering down into her eyes. He licked his lips -- why were they so dry, all of a sudden? "I'm... involved with someone..."

"Good, that will make it that much more delicious..." And that's when Meriatha went in for the kiss.

"I could do this by myself, you know?" Jena said as she and her father made their way to the Computer Core.

"Yes, but after the last fiasco, you promised Commander Rouse, you would not." Jason replied.

The young woman sighed. "I was worried about you, and nobody would tell me anything."

"I understand and I appreciate that, but there is protocol for a reason." Jason said.

Jena rolled her eyes. "But it's just a request for another datablock."

Before Jason could reply, they entered the room to find Marcus and a Cardassian female in a romantic embrace.

"I apologies for the intrusion, Lieutenant." Jason said. "Come on, Jena, we will return later."

"Hey, Marcus, who's the dame?" Jena asked in a faux New York accent.

Pulling free of Meriatha's embrace, Marcus looked dumbfounded at Jason and Jena. "Oh, wait, guys! This isn't what you think it is," he stammered, trying to disengage. Merry turned to regard the two, putting on a honey-sweet fake Cardassian smile. "Oh, hello. I'm Meriatha Korat. My supervisor and fiancé and I were just catching up." Marcus, ever-so-graceful, tripped on the foot rung of the console chair and stumbled a meter away, barely catching himself and preventing himself from spilling to the ground. "No! We've been over this! We're not engaged!"

"So, Meriatha, how did you and Marcus meet?" Jena asked.

"We were serving together at the Daystrom Annex on Starbase 173," Merry said, leaving the fumbling Marcus behind and approaching Jason and Jena. She extended a hand to the young woman. "I was an exchange officer. Marcus was my peer, then my superior. Science is not a rapid means of advancement in the Cardassian military, I'm afraid." She seemed more interested in conversing with Jena, and barely acknowledged Jason.

"Beauvy, help," Marcus mouthed silently, looking desperate. Pointing at him and Jena and then himself, he jutted his thumb towards the exit, and looked hopeful.

Reading Marcus' lips and expression, Jason said. "Ladies, if you will excuse us, I have something of importance to discuss with Lieutenant Kallan." And directed Marcus to the

door.

Glancing up at Jason, Merry said, "Of course. Rescue your friend, Lieutenant, it's quite all right. If you don't mind, I would love to converse with your daughter." In typical Cardassian fashion, she knew more than she let on, and apparently already knew who Jason was as well as his daughter.

When Marcus scampered past like a fearful dog, Merry said, "Thank you for your time, Lieutenant. I look forward to working with you. Again."

Marcus grimaced, and then scurried out the door.

\*\*\*\*\*

When they were in the corridor, Jason said. "Miss Korat seems pleasant." His manner and tone made it evident that he was suspicious of her attentions.

"She's a black widow," Marcus breathed, looking as if he were halfway into a panic attack. Gasping for air and clutching his chest, he panted, "Please don't tell Nikki. And you should make sure Jena doesn't pick up any bad habits. Cardassian women are friggin' dangerous, and she'll use her and anyone else on board to manipulate me back to her." He barked out a couple of coughs and pounded his chest, trying to get his breathing under control.

"Deep calming breaths, remember?" Jason said familiar with his friend's anxiety attacks. "I will not tell Nikki, because that is your responsibility."

"W-What?" Marcus almost had his panic under control, until that was mentioned. "No, I can't. It'll... she'll have a meltdown! It'd be like going to warp without inertial dampeners! Splut!" He shook his head. "No, I'll just... I'll just bury myself in the symposium. I'll cite Conflict of Interest with Rouse and get Merry reassigned. I'll... I'll..." Another cough, and Marcus slumped down to the deck, looking very pale. This was the worst Jason had ever seen Marcus. This was a Nikki-level freak-out.

Remaining calm, Jason grabbed a medkit from a nearby locker. He scanned Marcus with the tri-corer, and waited for the results. Hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) and high serotonin absorption. Taking a hypo, he prepared a solution of dextrose-saline and a low concentration of a partial serotonin inhibitor and pressed it to his friend's neck. "You have been over doing, it again, my friend. You may think like a Vulcan, but you do not have the constitution of one. You must take care of yourself." He said as his friend began to calm down.

Marcus did begin to calm, but that was only because of the hypo. "I... need to lie down," he said, scrambling to his feet with Jason's help. "Just... keep an eye on the both of them, okay?" He jutted a thumb back towards the computer lab.

"I will." Jason promised and watched Marcus make his way to the turbolift before returning to the Computer Core.

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*Crying in the Corridors*

Jeffries Tube 14-Beta

En route to Trill

**Authors: Ens. Ronald Robers and Ens. Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru)**

What was that sound? Crying? That was a sound nobody ever liked to hear. Especially not in a Jeffries tube. Especially not in a ship where so many things had happened in so little time that there were countless things that could cause the crying. A lost loved one. A bruised up knee maybe? A final sob before a catastrophic chain reaction?! Probably not that last one, but still, Ron had to investigate. He wasn't the best at fixing people, but there were still times when he liked to think his attempts were appreciated.

A twist and a turn later and he happened upon the source of the sobbing. The poor girl. She wasn't injured or in immediate distress. Just what could have been the problem?

"Hey there," he spoke softly, trying to break through the sounds of sorrow.

Nikki looked up to see her assistant chief, next to her. She had been crying so hard that she didn't even notice. Quickly, she wiped her tears away, but it was no use hiding it. "Hi Robert," she said in a glum tone.

He took a seat next to her in as non-awkward a way as possible. He didn't typically like getting in other people's business but he knew tensions were high. It had been a rough ride and some people had not taken it as well as others. It had been quite the doozy, even for him. If there was ever a time to try and forge bonds and help people in need it was situations like this.

"It's Ronald," he smirked as he gave her a playful punch on the shoulder. "What's up? Something got you down? Don't tell me that Shrass guy is still on your mind."

"I..." Nikki blushed at forgetting her own assistant chief's name; this was the sort of thing that could only happen to her. She looked up at Ronald, locking eyes with him for a moment, before her own eyes darted off towards her lunch pail. "Are you hungry?" she asked, opening it up and turning it towards him. "I have half a tuna sandwich... and some candy..."

"With mayo, mustard, pepper, and hot sauce?" Ron already knew the answer to that one so with a chuckle he went on to address the second part of the offer. "But if not I'm more of a sweets guy anyway. Fits my charming personality. Lemme guess. Knowing you, which I don't, I'd say something ridiculous. Judging by the silly shape of that chocolate covered something I'd have to say beans. Baked beans! No. Peanuts! Wait! Coffee beans!"

"Yes!" exclaimed Nikki. "Chocolate covered Raktajino beans! They're one of my favourites! Have some!" She slid the package over towards Ron and unwrapped her sandwich. "They go great with Raktajino," she added, motioning towards her thermos.

"You look like you could use a pick-me-up more than I do," Ron signaled Nikki to keep the caffeinated beverage, though he couldn't help but help himself to a couple of the candy coated beans. That was practically instinct. "So, what brings someone such as yourself to a jefferies tube like this? I can't imagine this being a comfortable place to kick back and relax. Do you always eat your lunches like this?"

"I was working on this EPS conduit," replied Nikki, motioning towards the pile of tools and open access cover near them. "I brought my lunch with me because it might take a while and..." She sighed and popped a couple of the coffee beans into her mouth. "Sometimes I like to eat alone, and just listen to the hum of the ship's systems."

"How romantic." The young man certainly didn't think so, but it sounded like an accurate assessment of the statement. Most people probably would have thought so. "I find it distracting. Then again sometimes I have to be listening very closely to things when going about my duties. That's why I tune it out," he smirked as he tapped the hearing device that snaked its way into his ear. "Haven't heard that hum in a long time."

Nikki smiled slightly. Ronald had a good sense of humour; he was the sort of guy who could brighten up any room. "I hope they fix the Portland," she blurted out, getting to the crux of why she was upset this time.

"Is that all that's bugging you," Ron questioned in a nonchalant manner, putting his cold metallic arm around Nikki in as warm and comforting a way as a cold metallic arm could be placed. "Come now, dear. This is the twenty-fourth century! We've fixed decades neglected derelict space stations. We've fixed and made planets! This old boat'll be fine. And, worst case scenario, we just go back in time and prevent most of this damage from even happening. Though," he interrupted himself in mock uncertainty, "I suppose if we were to do that we already would have, huh?"

Nikki blushed a little at the mention of time travel. "Well, we have done it before... or in the future... or something like that..."

"Right! It's just way too mind-boggling if you ask me. Just keep me right on the line of standard time," Ron said with a confident nod. "I don't need to waste any time with the could-have-bes and the no-longer-has-happeneds. Lets just worry about the present and the future and not the future-past's-present... Well, what I'm trying to say is: Portland will be fine!"

Nikki smiled at Ronald and picked up her hyperspanner. "You better be right," she replied, getting back to work, "otherwise I'll have replaced all these EPS conduits for nothing!"

It looked like it had been quite the chore, at least to Ron. Tedious, repetitive, but necessary. It wasn't something to be suffered alone and bored. "Well, if it'll make you feel better, I can help you out with these conduits. But it's not because I like you," he added for both clarity and humor, "but because no one should have to do so much work alone. No one."

Nikki blushed and reached for more of her candies. "Thanks," she replied. "Just be careful; that is my favourite hyperspanner."

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**Who:** Lt. JG Marcus Kallan and Alenis Nerys

**Where:** Holodeck One, USS Portland

**When:** Before the Symposium

The holodeck was still a mess after the fight with the Borg, but crews had restored rudimentary functionality on Marcus' orders. After all, it would probably be rude to keep Nerys locked up in active memory. Having sent a notice to her program before arriving on deck, he hoped that she wouldn't be cross with him for waking her up so early. Or maybe she had spent the night with Jason again.

*Wait, he thought. Did he really just think that?*

Marcus shook his head. This assignment had really changed him. Or, perhaps, warped him. "Computer, activate the Nerys hologram," he said aloud, chuckling to himself.

"Good morning hun..." started the hologram, the excited look in her eyes rapidly dissipating as she realized that it was Marcus in front of her and not Jason. "Oh. It's you," she added, the disappointment evident in her voice. "I thought a photonic apple a day was supposed to keep you away."

"I don't like apples," Marcus replied. "Look, I won't keep you from your half-Vulcan love-slave. I just wanted to warn you about Captain Alenis' shenanigans."

"Oh?" asked the hologram, raising an eyebrow. "And what shenanigans would these be?"

"She plans on letting you be the Captain during the symposium while she scampers off to hide in a spa somewhere," Marcus explained, shaking his head. "In other words, you get to make believe you're... you. Sort of." He shrugged. "I don't think she thinks of you as a person, yet, so I thought I would let you know and give you the option to run screaming from this nonsense."

"Well," mused the hologram, placing a finger on her chin the same way that Meru used to when she was pondering a question, "I suppose it will be fun to have a change of scenery. No offense, but being cooped up in the same five or six rooms is starting to get on my nerves a little."

Rolling his eyes, Marcus corrected her. "I gave you full control over your algorithms. You can create holographic representations of any part of the ship. You... wait, what? You're not actually going to play body-double for a Starfleet captain, are you?"

"Any part of the ship with holo-emitters," corrected Nerys. "And this sounds exciting. Going undercover as myself, getting to attend a banquet... where's your sense of adventure and whimsy?" she asked, teasing Marcus, a man whose idea of adventure was trying a protein

cube with a flavour not advertised as extra-mild. "It's like one of those secret agent holonovels, only real life."

"I... okay. I tried to warn you," Marcus said with a sigh. "I'll upload the parameters to your program when we're ready to transfer you. I need to shanghai some officers into making some mad science that'll facilitate this rodeo." Shaking his head, he turned to leave. "Thanks, Nerys."

"You're welcome," she replied, pausing for a moment. "One more thing... while you're playing with my program, I wouldn't mind losing about five pounds. And perhaps a few years as well..."

"Just like a flesh-and-blood person, you have full control over your own physical parameters," Marcus said, rolling his eyes. "Whereas we meat-puppets need to do laps and are forever bound to the forward march of time, you have full control over the parameters to your program. Go nuts. "

Nerys smiled. "Hmmmmm... just promise you'll fix my physical avatar if I break it, okay?"

"Actually, not to be a Debbie Downer or anything, but it's impossible to back up your program." Marcus leveled a look at her. "You're as fragile as any of us, Nerys. Please be careful." He snarked. "And don't break Jason, either."

"Don't worry," she replied, giving Marcus that little mischievous smirk that the captain would give when she was up to something, "I'll be gentle."

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### *Covert Computing...*

**Who:** Lt. JG Marcus Kallan, others

**Where:** USS Portland, Cargo Bay One

**When:** One day before the Symposium

The cargo bay had been re-purposed to hold a variety of materials salvaged, but not yet processed, from the ongoing repairs. Marcus stood in front of a number of crates, marked only with an Operations designation and a serial number, looking over a PADD.

"And I only *thought* we were making progress with the repairs," Sera stated as she walked through the cargo bay doors, Starfleet issued repair kit in tow. The Chief Engineer gave the contents of the cargo bay a once over before adding, "We aren't rebuilding the whole Portland again are we?"

"If we are, I am not going to work on the sanitation systems." Jason said as he entered the Cargo Bay. "Once was more than enough."

Malbi walked in and very nearly turned around and exited. There was no way she was going to work on sanitation; she had done her time and then some as a janitor on her home world. She quietly walked up to the group and nodded in greeting to Kallan and Williams.



"Hi, guys," Marcus said, still pouring over his PADD. "So. I need your help." He turned, and showed the PADD to the trio, a diagram of some sort of holographic contraption being displayed. "We've got 23 hours to get working an experimental holo-transfer mesh network that will allow for pulsed data transfer of a holo-matrix primarily running aboard the Portland to run planetside at the Symposium on Trill." He looked over at Jason. *That* holo-matrix.

Perhaps still suffering the aftereffects of the Dark Energy radiation, Sera asked, "So we're almost creating a mobile holo-emitter for Nerys?" She could have kicked herself for blurting out Nerys' name in front of the group. Emotion reading was still very new to her, and she didn't quite get how the Betazoids were able to handle it. Trying for the save and to take the attention off of her reddening face, Sera quickly added, "Umm.. have you considered tying in her program with the Deflector? We don't have a big Deflector dish like other ships, but I think we could slip her program and disguise it as passive scans of the planet."

Out of breath, Nikki barged in, clutching a coffee in one hand and a half-eaten cookie in the other, with a PADD or three precariously tucked under her arms. "I'm here!" she exclaimed as she darted over to the table and released her arms, letting the PADDs clatter to the table in front of her. "That's a good idea," she said, looking around the room, having only caught the last half of Sera's plan. "Maybe we should get our guest to help? I hear Gil Korat is also an expert in holograms."

"Uh, no, we need to keep this on the down-low," Marcus replied to Nikki, although it was clear the usually-unflappable scientist was bothered by the notion as he tugged at his uniform collar and swallowed a bit. That was not a conversation he was looking forward to. "The fewer folks we involve, the better. Normally I wouldn't go out of my way to irritate Washington, but the Captain seemed adamant, so, here we are."

Marcus continued, sending a glance towards Sera. He didn't know the extent of her new-found abilities, and hoped she hadn't read him like a book. "The, um, the deflector dish is a good idea. But we're going to need to seriously dial back the power output. We don't want to blow out every subspace relay on Trill, and I don't want to risk corrupting Nerys' program."

Sera took a few moments to think. She wasn't sure who Gil Korat was or why a Cardassian was aboard, but she had been absorbed into the glitch fest that had been the Portlands systems since the repairs of the Borg showdown and had probably missed a lot. In her head, she did a few mathematical equations which came out sounding like she was whispering to herself. "Ok, we could configure a PADD to contain the base elements of her program. Every couple of seconds we could send short bursts of information, maybe 80 or so quads to the PADD. She'd be able to function normally, just don't ask her to recite the Federation Charter while juggling."

"That should not be a problem, after all, I do not recall the symposium program containing a talent portion." Jason said.

"And the PADD can be the relay between the holo-emitters at the Symposium. Excellent." Marcus nodded in approval. "We'd have to modify the PADD to accommodate holo-matrix data, toss in some extra memory, and the like - but, in theory, it should work."

Sera happened to find a PADD in the pile of components next to her. She picked it up and examined it a bit, mentally going over its components. "If we remove the components that light the display, we could modify it with some memory." She then flipped the PADD around in her hands, looking for some extra room, "Then, maybe we could remove the speaker and mic function in order to fit the link for the holo-emitters." Sera then held out the PADD for the others to examine.

Malbi nodded in agreement as she examined the PADD, "That sounds feasible. With those modifications, it should have plenty of memory for the program, even with its complexity. If not, I can go through the program, line by line, and condense some portions until it fits."

"Would what we are doing damage Nerys' program in any way?" Jason asked trying to keep worry from his voice.

"And, are we going to get in trouble?" added Nikki

"Of course not, on both counts," Marcus replied, smirking confidently. "Jason, the amount of hardware I have devoted to Nerys' program being stabilized means that, with a pulsed relay, she'd lose at most a couple of seconds if the connection cut out." Glancing over at Nikki, he shrugged. "We're following orders. And you'll all get credit in the paper and presentation I'm writing for the symposium." He wagged his fingers at Nikki. "You'd be *published*."

"Besides, if we get caught we can play it off as an experiment in holographic telecommunications. That is what this Symposium is supposed to be about anyway," Sera shrugged. With all of the focus over the last...as long as she had been aboard the ship, being dedicated to keeping the ship flying it was nice to have something different to do.

"Omigod!" exclaimed Nikki, waving her fists in excitement. "Uncle Reg is going to be so proud!"

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## The Truth

**Who:** Gil Meriatha Korat (NPC) and Ensign Nikki Barclay (NPC)

**Where:** Holographics Lab, USS Portland

**When:** During the Symposium, Mission 7

Holographic algorithms and probability matrices flashed past on the screen in front of a certain Cardassian exchange officer. She was intently, and expertly, scanning through work that normally would be associated with the chief of operations.

The doors to the holo-lab on the Portland whooshed open, revealing Ensign Nikki Barclay, in her usual frantic state, clutching a PADD under her arm. "Hey Marcus," she exclaimed,

walking in, "I've looked into things to do on Trill; there are some nice nature trails, and I've found a restaurant that claims to have the best protein-cube salad on--"

Freezing in place, Nikki started at the Cardassian in front of her. "You're not Marcus," she said, stating the obvious.

The Cardassian woman said, without turning around, "And you aren't Lieutenant Kallan, either." She placed emphasis on Marcus' rank for a reason. "Since you're on a first-name basis with him, perhaps you can tell me where he is? I've a few security locks on his research that I need undone if I'm going to..."

"Security locks!" exclaimed Nikki, her mind instantly wandering to the worst possible conclusion. "What are you, some sort of spy? Omigod, you're trying to steal Nerys' program! Well, I won't let you kidnap her! I'll... I'll... I can scream pretty loud!"

"Ensign Nikki Barclay," the Cardassian woman said, finally turning to regard Nikki with a critical eye. "I've read your file. You've impressive skills that would go very far in the Cardassian Union. Unfortunately your emotional deficiencies would require more conditioning than you'd be worth." She stood up from her seat and crossed the room halfway to Nikki, a hand outstretched. "Gil Meriatha Korat. I had Lieutenant Kallan first." As if the personal attack and arrogance didn't happen, she seemed as if she actually expected Nikki to take her hand in greeting.

Nikki reached for Meriatha's hand, but at the last instant, she pulled away. "You haven't eaten any Yamok sauce recently, have you? I'm deathly allergic. At least, I think I am. I've avoided it for years. This one time, I had a chicken wing that had some yamok sauce on it and I--" Freezing in place, Nikki stared at Meriatha. "Wait," she said, with caution in her voice, "what do you mean you had him first?"

"Had him," Merry repeated, her hand dropping slowly to her side, and then she began ticking off the different permutations on her fingers. "Met him, worked with him, pursued him, bedded him, declared I would bear his children," she said. "We were to be married on Cardassia. It was going to be a glorious wedding..." She almost pouted. Almost.

Picking her jaw up off the floor, Nikki shook her head in disbelief. "I'm sorry, you must be confused," she said, clearly in denial. "Perhaps you're thinking of a different Marcus. This Marcus hasn't been engaged before. He would have told me if he were, and since he didn't, that means that clearly, you must be mistaken."

Nodding, with a growing smirk, Merry said, "Yes, that must be the case. Human males seem to forget to brag when it's most advantageous." Folding her arms across her chest and shifting her weight to one hip, she looked Nikki up and down. Seemingly random, she stated, "You don't look very fertile."

Nikki placed her hands on her hips and angrily glared at the Cardassian. "I'll have you know I'm very fertile! Dr. Silverton told me so on my triweekly visit to sickbay!"

Laughing with an almost musical cadence, she said, "Then you're wasting your time on Marcus, I'm afraid. His legacy isn't nearly as important to him as his work, which, I suppose, is a faulty human trait. Something about 'responsibility to Starfleet' and 'space is dangerous and not for raising children'. Something about his trauma about the Borg, I think." She clucked her tongue dismissively. "Still, it's not like we didn't have plenty of practice at Starbase 173..."

An odd sound emanated from Nikki. It began as a groan, and crescendoed through a squeal and into a scream, punctuated by a stamping of her feet and a clattering of her PADDs on the floor. "No!" she exclaimed. "It's not like that! We have something special between the two of us! He even told me so himself!"

"Oh, you precious, naive child," Meriatha said, feigning being moved by Nikki's outburst. She even bent down to pick up a PADD for Nikki. Offering it to her, she said, "Then perhaps you should confront him and learn the truth. I wouldn't want you to have wasted your best years on someone as deceitful as Marcus." Inwardly, Merry was rather pleased at the turnabout which lead Nikki right into her trap.

"Deceitful?" asked Nikki, slowly taking the PADD in her hand. "I think you have the wrong Marcus. He's the most honest person I know. He..." Nikki's voice began to tremble and her body began to quiver. "He... told me that himself."

Nodding, and still maintaining her soft, sympathetic voice, Meriatha said, "I'm sorry. You would have found out eventually. Better it be from a friend than from him." For all her manipulations, she certainly had no trouble completely sabotaging her supposed superior officer's love life.

"I... I..." Nikki looked around, utterly devastated by the information she was receiving. "How could I have been so stupid?" she cried, throwing her PADD onto a desk. "I thought he loved me. Even more than how much he loved his work and his stupid protein cubes..."

Time to put the icing on the cake. "And... yamok sauce," Meriatha added. She didn't even need to make it sound plausible, given Nikki's emotional state. "Couldn't get enough of it," she quipped. She switched to a matter-of-factly way of speaking. "So, if you see him, please let him know I need his assistance with something pressing." And she turned to resume her work, as if Nikki wasn't even there.

Staring at her terminal, Meriatha didn't even bother looking at Nikki. But she heard the whoosh of the door opening, the sound of fast steps heading out of the room and down the corridor, and before the door closed, a faint sobbing.

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Marcus' Talk

**Who:** Lt. JG Marcus Kallan and a room full of Starfleet, scientists, and laureates

**Where/When/Why:** Trill Symposium

"...Holomatrix science has increased dramatically in the last three decades. The Bynar enhancements aboard the USS Enterprise-D were but the first step in heuristic and simulation processing power; studied by Starfleet's best, these upgrades became the foundation for Dr. Lewis Zimmerman's research at Jupiter station..."

"...and as you can see here, this is a standard EMH Mark I template. And when I overlay progressive changes at T-equals-entropy-introduction, and then T-equals-160 hours, and then T-equals-400 hours, the rapid destabilization of the damaged matrix began to reorganize itself. Was it by sheer luck? Or can this entropy effect be explained?..."

"...This program, which I dub 'Portland Penny' after the discussion held between Francis Pettyjoy and Ada Lovejoy at the founding of Portland, Maine, on Earth..."

"...Without divulging Starfleet confidential information, I think it's safe to say that mostly everyone in this room has heard of the notable simulations to exhibit sentient or near-sentient qualities. Ladies and gentlemen and non- and complex- gendered species, *this blows the lid off of accidental sentience*. I predict with three-sigma confidence that entropy-induced sentience events will only increase in the next five years, with math still being formulated that will bring things closer to five-sigma..."

"...and in the end, the Daystrom Institute artificial intelligence annex remains committed to researching this subject. I hope you enjoyed this talk. Thank you. Yes, thank you all. Questions. Yes, over there..."

"...No, sorry, I'm afraid transferring the holo-matrix to planetside would require technology that's not available to 24th-century science. Maybe 29th century." *laughter throughout the room*

"...Correct. The Portland's holo-facilities can't support a matrix of this size or complexity. With the help of Portland engineering and operations staff, I created a series-13-rated memory extension and, well, effectively bolted it onto the side of the Portland." *laughter* "I know, *really* scientific. But I didn't have many options at the time."

"...Good question. Very good question. You can see here -- just a second, let me pull it up -- ah, here we are. You can see here that triple-redundant heuristic routines were composed in order to effectively trap and harness these personality defects created by the psy-tricorder linkage to the EMH-I program. If these programs hadn't been spawned by the self-correcting mechanism, Portland Penny would probably be some kind of Khan Noonien Singh."

"...I'm being told our time is up. Thank you, everyone. Thank you. I'll be here the entire symposium if you want to talk more, duties permitting. Thank you. Try the fish."

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### *The Banquet*

The first night of the symposium

Somewhere on Trill

**Authors: Alenis Meru, Timothy Rouse, Admiral Washington (played by Alenis Meru)**

After having her program brought online in a quiet broom closet, the holographic Alenis Nerys snuck out and headed for the pre-arranged rendezvous point. There, in the corner of the main lobby of the convention hall, stood the man she was to rendezvous with.

"Tim!" shouted the hologram, clad in a full-dress uniform, heading towards him with a little spring in her step. This was the first time she had been off the Portland, and she was relieved not only that her program was functioning, but that she was able to get out of being cooped up there. As she approached, she wrapped her arms around Tim and gave him a hug. "I'm so excited," she whispered. "Pretending to be the real me... it's like something out of a spy thriller..."

Tim shook his head. He still couldn't believe Meru was serious in her plans to send the hologram in her place. "Yeah, well. This isn't a spy thriller but real life. Please act as Meru, and don't hug everyone you see, will you."

"Okay." The hologram straightened her uniform. "I'll try. It's just so exciting to get off the ship finally... how do I look?"

"You look..." Tim paused and sighed for a moment, hoping that she wouldn't get found out. "Just like the captain. Now let's see if we can find the rest of the crew."

As they looked around, they were interrupted by Admiral Washington, who had broken off a conversation to greet Tim and what he thought was the captain. Tim's muscles tightened up as the Admiral approached; he hadn't had much time to talk to him since the birth of Andy, and he knew that Washington was an observant type.

"Captain Alenis, Commander Rouse," called out the Admiral as he approached. "I thought that was the two of you over there. Is Ellen taking care of Andy tonight?"

Tim tried to smile, afraid his facial expression would give away the EMH. "Yes, she is."

"Ah," replied the Admiral. "I trust he is enjoying the stuffed animals I gave him?" he asked. While he was often worried about spoiling Ellen when she was growing up, Washington felt very differently about Andy. Not knowing his favourite colour, he had brought over a half-dozen stuffed animals, representing animals from all over the quadrant to playtime earlier in the afternoon. "Does he have a favourite?"

"He loves the lion. He is constantly cuddling with it whenever he is playing on the ground." He said, feeling a little uncomfortable to talk about such personal things. He still had trouble seeing the Admiral as Ellen's dad.

Washington chuckled slightly. Of the ones he had purchased, it was his favourite as well. "Very good," he replied, turning his attention to the hologram. "And Captain Alenis, I must say you're looking great tonight. Have you been working out?"

"I..." the hologram paused for a moment, remembering that she had done a little work on

her physical parameters earlier. "Um, yes... I've been trying to hit the holodeck for some Hal'Kareth more often. It's relaxing."

"Very good," replied Washington. "My doctor tells me to exercise more. I just get so busy with paperwork coming across my desk that I can spend my whole day without getting out of my chair. You know how it is," he replied with a smirk.

"Yes, I believe that's why they invented XO's," countered the hologram.

Tim looked at her with warning look in his eyes. "I'll take that as a complement."

"As you should." Washington paused for a moment and stared at Alenis, examining her closely. "Hmmm," he mused, "something seems different about you."

"I..." Meru froze, not knowing what to say.

"It must be a new hairstyle or new make up," Tim said quickly, saving the stammering hologram. "You know how that is with woman."

"Ah, yes," replied Washington. "I remember my wife used to change her hair every couple days. I always told her that she was beautiful just the way she was but..." he trailed off, the memories of his wife and his loss almost overpowering, even for a gruff Starfleet Admiral.

"Well," he said,

tugging on his tunic to remove the wrinkles, "I must go greet some of the scientists from the Daystrom institute. Enjoy the banquet. And Tim," he said, pausing for a moment, "take good care of Andy."

"I will, sir." Tim replied.

As Washington walked away, the hologram leaned over towards Tim. "Do you think he suspects anything?" she whispered.

"Let's hope not or both our jobs would be on the line," he said.

"Well then," replied Nerys, straightening her tunic, "I guess the best thing to do is just act naturally. Shall I get you a drink?"

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## The Truth, Part I

**Who:** Gil Meriatha Korat (NPC) and Ensign Nikki Barclay (NPC)

**Where:** TBD, probably the Portland or the Symposium grounds

**When:** During the Symposium, Mission 7

Holographic algorithms and probability matrices flashed past on the screen in front of a certain Cardassian exchange officer. She was intently, and expertly, scanning through work that normally would be associated with the chief of operations.

The doors to the holo-lab on the Portland whooshed open, revealing Ensign Nikki Barclay, in her usual frantic state, clutching a PADD under her arm. "Hey Marcus," she exclaimed, walking in, "I've looked into things to do on Trill; there are some nice nature trails, and I've found a restaurant that claims to have the best protein-cube salad on--"

Freezing in place, Nikki started at the Cardassian in front of her. "You're not Marcus," she said, stating the obvious.

The Cardassian woman said, without turning around, "And you aren't Lieutenant Kallan, either." She placed emphasis on Marcus' rank for a reason. "Since you're on a first-name basis with him, perhaps you can tell me where he is? I've a few security locks on his research that I need undone if I'm going to..."

"Security locks!" exclaimed Nikki, her mind instantly wandering to the worst possible conclusion. "What are you, some sort of spy? Omigod, you're trying to steal Nerys' program! Well, I won't let you kidnap her! I'll... I'll... I can scream pretty loud!"

"Ensign Nikki Barclay," the Cardassian woman said, finally turning to regard Nikki with a critical eye. "I've read your file. You've impressive skills that would go very far in the Cardassian Union. Unfortunately your emotional deficiencies would require more conditioning than you'd be worth." She stood up from her seat and crossed the room halfway to Nikki, a hand outstretched. "Gil Meriatha Korat. I had Lieutenant Kallan first." As if the personal attack and arrogance didn't happen, she seemed as if she actually expected Nikki to take her hand in greeting.

Nikki reached for Meriatha's hand, but at the last instant, she pulled away. "You haven't eaten any Yamok sauce recently, have you? I'm deathly allergic. At least, I think I am. I've avoided it for years. This one time, I had a chicken wing that had some yamok sauce on it and I--" Freezing in place, Nikki stared at Meriatha. "Wait," she said, with caution in her voice, "what do you mean you had him first?"

"Had him," Merry repeated, her hand dropping slowly to her side, and then she began ticking off the different permutations on her fingers. "Met him, worked with him, pursued him, bedded him, declared I would bear his children," she said. "We were to be married on Cardassia. It was going to be a glorious wedding..." She almost pouted. Almost.

Picking her jaw up off the floor, Nikki shook her head in disbelief. "I'm sorry, you must be confused," she said, clearly in denial. "Perhaps you're thinking of a different Marcus. This Marcus hasn't been engaged before. He would have told me if he were, and since he didn't, that means that clearly, you must be mistaken."

Nodding, with a growing smirk, Merry said, "Yes, that must be the case. Human males seem to forget to brag when it's most advantageous." Folding her arms across her chest and shifting her weight to one hip, she looked Nikki up and down. Seemingly random, she stated, "You don't look very fertile."



Nikki placed her hands on her hips and angrily glared at the Cardassian. "I'll have you know I'm very fertile! Dr. Silverton told me so on my triweekly visit to sickbay!"

Laughing with an almost musical cadence, she said, "Then you're wasting your time on Marcus, I'm afraid. His legacy isn't nearly as important to him as his work, which, I suppose, is a faulty human trait. Something about 'responsibility to Starfleet' and 'space is dangerous and not for raising children'. Something about his trauma about the Borg, I think." She clucked her tongue dismissively. "Still, it's not like we didn't have plenty of practice at Starbase 173..."

An odd sound emanated from Nikki. It began as a groan, and crescendoed through a squeal and into a scream, punctuated by a stamping of her feet and a clattering of her PADDs on the floor. "No!" she exclaimed. "It's not like that! We have something special between the two of us! He even told me so himself!"

"Oh, you precious, naive child," Meriatha said, feigning being moved by Nikki's outburst. She even bent down to pick up a PADD for Nikki. Offering it to her, she said, "Then perhaps you should confront him and learn the truth. I wouldn't want you to have wasted your best years on someone as deceitful as Marcus." Inwardly, Merry was rather pleased at the turnabout which lead Nikki right into her trap.

"Deceitful?" asked Nikki, slowly taking the PADD in her hand. "I think you have the wrong Marcus. He's the most honest person I know. He..." Nikki's voice began to tremble and her body began to quiver. "He... told me that himself."

Nodding, and still maintaining her soft, sympathetic voice, Meriatha said, "I'm sorry. You would have found out eventually. Better it be from a friend than from him." For all her manipulations, she certainly had no trouble completely sabotaging her supposed superior officer's love life.

"I... I..." Nikki looked around, utterly devastated by the information she was receiving. "How could I have been so stupid?" she cried, throwing her PADD onto a desk. "I thought he loved me. Even more than how much he loved his work and his stupid protein cubes..."

Time to put the icing on the cake. "And... yamok sauce," Meriatha added. She didn't even need to make it sound plausible, given Nikki's emotional state. "Couldn't get enough of it," she quipped. She switched to a matter-of-factly way of speaking. "So, if you see him, please let him know I need his assistance with something pressing." And she turned to resume her work, as if Nikki wasn't even there.

Staring at her terminal, Meriatha didn't even bother looking at Nikki. But she heard the whoosh of the door opening, the sound of fast steps heading out of the room and down the corridor, and before the door closed, a faint sobbing.

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## The Truth, Part II

"Nikki!" Marcus called out, the doors to her quarters whooshing open and closed. Marcus, jacket unfastened at the shoulder, came ambling in excitedly with an armload of PADDs from a half-dozen different cultures. "My talk was a blast! I got a holo-call from Captain Maddox when his phone was ringing off the hook! Well, if he had a phone, I mean... Uh, Nikki?" He looked around the dark room, surprised to see it in a bit of disarray, and completely unaware as to what transpired between Nikki and Merry.

On the couch, next to an end table whose vase had fallen off and cracked on the floor, a lump of blankets stirred for a moment before a head popped out. "You!" exclaimed Nikki, her distress obvious by the tears running down her cheeks. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Uh, what?" Marcus seemed bewildered. "Nik, everyone's down planetside for the symposium. And I had my presentation tonight. And we agreed that you couldn't come because you had Engineering..."

"Oh, your presentation," replied Nikki, throwing the blankets onto the floor and swiftly standing up, placing her hands on her hips and glaring at Marcus. "Well, I hope that went very well for you," she added in an acidic tone. "While you were down hobnobbing with all those scientists, I had the most interesting conversation with one of our guests. I'll have you know that no one takes advantage of Nikki Christina Barclay!"

"I still have no idea what you're on about," Marcus replied, setting his pile of PADDs down. "Who is taking advantage of you?"

"Oh, please," shot back Nikki. "I wasn't born yesterday. I'm not some poor, innocent Cardassian scientist that you can string along with dreams of building a life together then leave at the altar!" As she stepped towards Marcus, she jabbed him hard in the chest with her finger. "That's right, I know about what you did on Cardassia to that poor woman!"

"Ow!" Marcus rubbed his chest. "Hey, that's not cool!" Listening to Nikki go on about Merry, however, caused the color to drain from his already pale complexion. "Oh, God, you've been talking to Merry. Look, Nikki, everything about her is a fabrication. I never agreed to marry her; that was her idea. I never set foot on Cardassia. We had a fling at Daystrom, and I cut it short when I was transferred. I mean, she's so manipulative, she's got three superior officers up the chain in Daystrom wrapped around her finger to get assigned to the Portland. It's like she wanted the COI in being my subordinate."

"Oh, yeah, you're the real victim in all of this, and Merry is just some crazy, irrational, jilted ex out to get you," shot back Nikki, sarcastically. "You must think I'm real dumb, trying to convince me that it is at all possible that this poor Cardassian woman could be anything less than truthful. Why..."

Nikki trailed off. In all her frustration, she didn't even consider the possibility that it was Merry who was the manipulative one. But as she looked into Marcus' eyes, she didn't see any of the telltale signs that he was telling a little white lie, those same telltale signs which cost him two hours of replicator time in the senior officer's poker game last week. "Why... why..." she started, her anger melting away as she began to blubber in her usual frantic

style. "Why don't we start from the beginning, okay?"

Marcus wordlessly took her hand and led her back to the couch, where he sat the both of them down. "Remember when I said that my only real experience in serious relationships was with a Cardassian?" He began, his voice taking that uncharacteristic gentle tone that he uses no where else except in her company. "It took me a month of talk therapy to get over the damage she did to me, Nik. It's a cultural thing, Cardassian manipulation. It's how they communicate with people they... have interest in." He took both of her hands up and held them together in his. "And it's not for me. This is for me."

"Oh, Marcus," replied Nikki, her anger and frustration melting away in Marcus' hands. "I shouldn't have doubted you..."

"I'm going to see Rouse tomorrow and get her kicked off the ship. I've had enough." Marcus shrugged, affecting a frown and looking away. "I don't care if she's a part of whatever Washington has going on. She's disruptive, and I just validated Nerys' study, so he owes me."

Nikki took a deep breath and looked back towards Marcus. "First things first," she replied, "I found a nice restaurant in the capital city; they say they serve the best protein cube salad in the whole sector. It's very... bland...?"

"Sounds great," Marcus said with a reassuring smile. She hadn't destroyed everything. Damaged, but not destroyed. He leaned in to give Nikki a kiss, although his thoughts were elsewhere. And perhaps that was her goal, after all.

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*Friends?*

USS Portland

Following the events of Meet the Parents

**Authors: Novia Yenn (played by Lt. Commander Tyrlai Zade) and Coln Jena (played by Lt. Jason Beauvoir)**

Jena was passing a jeffies tube when she heard what sounded like crying. Stopping. "Hello, is there anybody there?" She called softly.

"No." Came the lightly sniffing reply from just off to one side before a turn. Novia sat looking scared, her long legs clutched to her chest and two forlorn looking cat monkeys crouched at each of her feet.

"Well, you're rather noisy for someone who isn't there." Jena replied.

"She wouldn't listen to anything, all she want's to do is kill my friends." Novia sighed and glanced up from her cat-monkeys. "She never listens."

"Who does?" Jena asked with genuine concern in her voice. Jena wasn't the cat-monkeys' biggest fan, but she didn't wish to see them dead.

"My mother, she's very cross." Novia shook her head sadly and things started crashing out of her in a flood. "Mother always gets what she want, she wont stop. My sister promised to stop her, but I don't know how. Berelc says shes a twin star and they are very impressed but they don't know mother. And shes never going to let me stay on the ship and Ill have to go home and I will be alone and have no friends which isn't much different but the teacher likes me and I only just found out my sister was alive and I don't know what to do." She looked up hopefully, as if maybe Jenna had already gone through this and knew what to do.

Jena looked at the fear and sadness in the girl's eyes and felt for her. "Perhaps my father can help, he's the Portland's Chief Science Officer. He could explain that the cat-monkeys are free of parasites and disease." She suggested.

"You haven't met mother. She's not quite that reasonable." She wiped away the tears, since she had been found her hiding place was clearly not as good as she thought. "Book." she thought a picture to Berelc who darted over to fetch the book she had thrown and caught up with her at the door where she stepped out and cat monkey hopping on each shoulder as she did. "It's not cause of disease, its cause they are telepathic. Mother doesn't want them in my brain."

Jena raised a quizzical eyebrow. "They're telepathic?" She asked. "Interesting. I'm no expert, but I haven't observed any bad-effects of your exposure to Thing-One and Thing-Two. It's like domestic canines that adopt you into their pack."

"Their names are Zinzac and Berelca." Novia bristled, "and yes it's kind of exactly like that. And now they think my sister is part of the pack just because shes my sister. Which she shouldn't even be because she's supposed to be dead."

"Your sister?" Jena asked. She then put two and two together. "Is Tyrlai Zade your sister?"

"Apparently." Novia threw up her hands making the cat-monkeys scramble to keep their perch. "There are strict ecological regulations on Trill and population control is one of them. If you want more than two children you have to be a colonist somewhere else. You can apply for a waiver to replace a child who dies, which my parents did. I am the replacement. They told me all my life how much my sister accomplished before she was lost in a boating accident. And how I had such big shoes to fill to replace their brilliant, tragically-drowned daughter. Only she wasn't lost in a boating accident, she ran away and ended up with a symbiont by accident. It's almost impossible to be joined on purpose. And I pulled her grade reports, she was below average in almost everything. She got top levels in applied agility and communications. Not technical communications mind you, actual communications. She was good at gymnastics and talking. I have been studying for twelve years to replace a girl who's academic reports primarily feature the word 'remedial'." She turned towards a corridor wall and shouted, "Remedial!"

"And now mother is going to punish my pets." All three of them shook their heads sadly. Berelca looked over at Jena and gave her a morose "mroww."

Jena looked at the girl and her pets. She knew what it was like to be lied to by the people

you loved. The man who until recently she thought of as her father, and loved as such, turned out to be just some guy her mother married because she was pregnant and alone. "I won't pretend to know exactly how you feel, but I have some experience with a deceitful mother, and I will do every I can to help you, even if it means talking to your mother, myself." She promised.

Novia suddenly embraced Jena and hugged her hard blinking away just a few fresh tears. "Thank you so much." She held on for a little while longer, a process that involved cat-monkeys scampering from shoulder to shoulder and across both girls heads and then let Jena go for breathing purposes. "You mustn't talk to mother though. Apparently my sister has a plan." Novia sounded and looked dubious about that, Zinzac chirped optimistically.

Jena was taken aback by Novia's sudden embrace. "Okay, I'll leave it to her. Your sister is a bit unorthodox, but she cares." She told the girl.

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**Who:** Commander Timothy Rouse, Lt. JG Marcus Kallan

**Where:** Rouse's office

**When:** After the symposium

Storming along to Rouse's office on Deck 2, Marcus was in a bad mood. This was unlike any of his other usual bad moods because Nikki was involved. He wasn't going to let Merry ruin his relationship with Nikki, and he wasn't going to let Cardassian twisting of the truth to interfere with his duties aboard the Portland. He was going to get Merry reassigned, and that was that.

Tim, trying to read his way through an new huge stack of padds, stood up to get his coffeecup refilled when the chime of his door ringed. Grabbing his mug he yelled "enter" and saw the Portland's Chief of Operations storm into his office. Clearly in a hurry. "Lieutenant," he acknowledged his present.

"Commander. Do you, uh, have a moment?" Marcus waited at the doorway. He saw that Tim was busy and clearly didn't want to interrupt something. "I've a personnel issue to discuss with you. Potential conflict of interest. Potential conflict of crazy, really."

He raised his left eyebrow upon hearing the reason for his presence. Motioned towards the chair he said "Tell me what's going on."

Marcus came in and sat. Quickly. "Look, it's about Gil Korat. I don't know what strings she pulled to get assigned here but it's simply not working out. She's manipulative and gone off the deep end. And I'm pretty sure she thinks we're married, when we're not." He was picking at his fingernails like a nervous git while talking. "Worst of all, she's supposed to be my subordinate. Top Cardassian Guls get taken down when their rivals get their love interests..." He coughed. "Ex-love interests assigned to their commands. It's real cloak and dagger stuff."

"Let me recap this. Your ex has been posted on the Portland, in your department, and she claims she is your wife." Tim said. This sounded to be a true Portlandish type of problem.

Nodding seriously, as if he were immune to the absurdity, Marcus said, "Yes, sir. That's exactly it. Maybe by Cardassian laws, under some technicality, that's the truth. I don't know. I got out of trying to figure them out around the same time I bailed on our relationship. But you'll see, by Federation records, I'm single." He swallowed. "Mostly. Definitely unmarried. Never married. Nope."

"By what claim are you married? Did you have some sort of ceremony?" Tim asked. Cardassian law wasn't his field of experience.

"No, no ceremony," Marcus shrugged. "Look, I don't think Cardassians do the 'mating for life' thing like Klingons do, so other than... uh... well you know what I mean. No ceremony!" Marcus was getting red in the face, and he put his fingers at the side of his neck, apparently reading his pulse. "I'm just trying to solve COI issues, that's all. And I'm not going to have her sabotage my career and N-... professional relationships... here on the Portland."

"Offcourse, I'll see what I can do," Tim said as he made a note on a padd. "I can't promiss anything for now, because I don't know the reason for her reassignment. It didn't come through, like normal cases, so it might be a higher up issue."

"Right." Marcus looked as if he had hoped for more, but then a look of acceptance emerged as he began nodding. "Okay, thanks, Commander. I appreciate it." Starting to fidget as he had a lack for anything else to say, he moved to stand and leave.

"I'm sure we can come up with a solution," Tim said, trying to reassure the chief. "I'll get back to as soon as I can."

Giving Tim a nod, Marcus turned and left, leaving his issue in the capable hands of the XO. Portlandish problem, indeed...

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### *Confronting the Captain's Demons*

Counselor's Office, USS Portland

Shortly before arrival on Trill

**Authors: Alenis Meru, Delainey Carlisle**

Carrying a travel mug of tea, Alenis made her way down to the counselor's office for her appointment. She was less than thrilled about the idea of going to see a shrink, but Tim had her over a barrel and she didn't have much of a choice.

Strolling into Delainey's office, she looked around for the counselor. "Dr. Carlisle? I'm here for my appointment."

Emerging from her en suite bathroom, Delainey heard the Captain call her name and she turned in Meru's direction, offering a polite smile. "Hello, Captain. Your timing is perfect. May I get you something from the replicator? I was just going to get myself some strawberry lemonade." Before crossing to the alcove which held the replicator unit, Delainey gestured

for Meru to take a seat wherever she felt comfortable.

Resisting the urge to ask for a glass of springwine, Alenis glanced over at the replicator. "That does sound good... I suppose I could go for one as well. With mint leaves."

"Coming right up," Carlisle replied with a polite smile. She made note of Meru's glance toward the replicator and her slight hesitation. It didn't necessarily mean anything significant, but it was something she couldn't help but notice for a moment. Perhaps the other woman was just trying to decide if she needed more liquid refreshment. If Meru was anything like Delainey, she spent most of her day drinking liquids of some sort just to make the report reading palatable. It seemed the later the shifts, the healthier the drink.

Within a few moments, Delainey had retrieved both of their drinks and handed the lemonade with mint off to the Captain. She gestured for Meru to make herself comfortable in any one of the chairs available in her reception area, and the counselor took a seat across from her, asking casually, "So, what brings you my way?"

"Well, you come highly recommended by Brad and Tyrlai," she explained. "They strongly encouraged... more like insisted... that I make an appointment with you."

Carlisle appreciated Alenis' honesty but wasn't quite sure what to make of her response. "Oh? What do you think about that?" The counselor got the impression Meru didn't agree with them at all, but she didn't want to put words in the Captain's mouth.

Alenis took a deep breath. "I know it's a cliché, that the big shot captain doesn't want to talk to her shrink or anyone else about anything, lest she actually come to terms with her weaknesses and her pain." She offered Delainey a knowing look; surely this wasn't the counselor's first assignment. "But I've never been one to talk to counselors. Well," she added, her eyes narrowing slightly, "apart from Arvel..."

Delainey offered a knowing nod. Doctor Silverton had informed her the former counselor and the captain had been involved romantically, so Meru's statement didn't surprise her. Given Arvel's current circumstances, passing judgment on him hardly mattered, but in truth, the notion of a counselor becoming romantically involved with his superior and client didn't sit well with her. Carlisle wasn't a prude by any means, but she considered certain ethical principles sacred, especially those concerning relationships in which there was an imbalance of power. In this case, she didn't believe the double imbalance of power meant that they canceled each other out. She couldn't help but wonder what came first and was tempted to ask, but it wasn't apparent that had anything to do with why Meru was here, and Delainey didn't want to risk their fragile relationship by asking. Instead, she said, "in your opinion, why do you think they insisted you come speak to me now?"

Alenis took a deep breath. "Dr. Silverton... he suggested that he saw something troubling me while we were on the away mission. He knows of my history with the Borg, and as one of his responsibilities is to make sure the Captain is in peak condition, both physically and mentally, he 'suggested'," said Alenis, placing scare quotes around the word 'suggested,' "that I see you as soon as the battle is over. And since we survived..."

Delainey understood what the air quotes meant and she wondered if Meru's choice to use them said more about how she felt about it rather than how Silverton did. Carlisle couldn't be sure, but she thought she detected a note of anger the captain was trying to hide. "Since we survived," Delainey echoed with a nod. "Is there something troubling you? Was he right?"

"There was," admitted Alenis. She sighed deeply and glanced around the room. "This is all confidential, right?"

"Unless you are about to tell me you are in immediate danger to yourself or the crew, yes, this will stay between you and I."

"Okay," she said, taking a deep breath and looking at Delainey. "To be honest, I had never gotten over what had happened at New Algiers. Almost everyone on the Gol died; I was the highest ranking officer to make it off. I would have nightmares, I was taking sleeping pills, and at one point, I was going through a bottle of springwine a day. I think Ko-ko was the only thing that was keeping me sane. But now..." Alenis trailed off and glanced around the room once more.

"I don't know what it is. Whether it was reconnecting with the Prophets, having died and come back, or having gotten revenge on the Borg, I feel like I'm at peace for the first time in years."

"Okay," Delainey replied, her tone not so much skeptical but curious. She wouldn't be a social scientist if she didn't question what was presented to her at face value. It wasn't exactly a secret Alenis struggled emotionally ever since New Algiers, but it did concern Carlisle that she hadn't realized Meru was drinking so heavily. Now of course she was claiming to be more at peace, but Delainey was less curious about why that was and more concerned about whether it was true. She'd known people to be so eager to feel better or to avoid painful psychological examination that they would often prematurely announce they had taken care of the problem. "I'm glad you're feeling better, but I think we owe it to ourselves to be skeptical of this recovery just for your health and safety," Carlisle offered. "After all, you didn't develop these problems overnight, so realistically, I would expect it to take more than a bit of time to work through." She paused then added, "I want to make sure I understand what you're saying. Are you saying you're no longer experiencing the symptoms which caused you to rely on pills and alcohol, or are you saying you're still experiencing those things and you've found better ways to manage them?"

"I've been reading more religious texts," she admitted. "I had always been a little aloof from my Bajoran heritage, growing up as a refugee on earth. But after visiting the planet for the first time in decades, I've been trying to make up for lost time with the Prophets. There is a lot of wisdom there..." She paused and took another deep breath. "That, and having died and come back only to stare down a Borg armada kind of takes the edge off anything I could possibly be afraid of."

Meru wasn't the first person to report finding perspective after trauma or to find solace in



religion, and Delainey wasn't about to minimize the positive impact of either on mental health, but that didn't seem to be what she was hearing. "I'm concerned you haven't found a healthier way to cope with your feelings as much as your recent experiences have shamed you into deciding your feelings shouldn't exist or matter in comparison. As I said, I'm not certain problems that have developed over time can disappear so easily."

"I don't suppose you have any suggestions, do you?" countered Alenis, remembering why she didn't like visiting counselors in the first place.

Delainey detected the challenge in her words, but refused to take the bait. She didn't become a counselor to prove herself and to prove to the people she worked with that she was right, but she recognized an honest concession when she heard it. "I think we should meet for regular sessions," Delainey said honestly. "As I said, you didn't get here overnight and it won't change overnight, but recovering from all the trauma you've suffered requires very specific sustained help, help that you've gotten only piecemeal over time." Carlisle paused, then added, "Before we can do any of that, however, it's important for you to understand you're not weak because you couldn't put a stop to this yourself. You're one of the strongest people I know, Meru, and if psychological trauma could be healed simply by deciding it was so, I'm certain you'd be healed 50 times over."

Alenis blushed slightly at the compliment. She was never good at taking them, but what Delainey had said really spoke to her. She strove to never show any weakness, which helped her rise through the ranks of Starfleet. But there was a downside to that, and it was that she had never gotten the help that she so very badly needed. "So... every other week then?" she asked, changing the subject.

"That would work," Carlisle replied with a nod. "I'm also open to every week, but it's up to you."

"Well, I am usually rather busy..." Alenis reached over for a PADD that contained her schedule and flicked through it. Reports, meetings, and bridge duty had her pretty much booked solid until after her little vacation. "Mind if we do it two weeks from Thursday? I'm planning on spending shore leave at the spa, without my comm badge."

If Delainey didn't know any better, she would say the captain was stalling, but she couldn't very well disapprove of the woman taking time for herself. "That'll work for now, as long as we can get on a more regular schedule after that. I know you don't want to lose any progress you make."

"Sounds good," replied Alenis, standing up from the chair and breathing a sigh of relief. "Two weeks from Thursday it is."

"It's a date," Delainey replied with a grin, noting how relieved she seemed to be to have that much breathing room. She hoped Meru wouldn't find some reason to cancel, but for now, Carlisle was hopeful, and that was the best way to be as a therapist.

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## *Return to Sanity*

Various Locations, USS Portland

Third day on Trill (After "Take a Hike")

The scene of the base camp shimmered out of existence and was replaced with the familiar sight of the Portland's Transporter Room. While everyone was down on Trill the ship was manned by a skeleton crew and Ash didn't even recognise the officer who stood before him. The gold clad ensign looked a little surprised when Ash first appeared which he realised was likely due to his appearance. He had just finished his hike up Bes Manev, his clothes were messy, his hair hanging loosely on his shoulders and he hadn't shaved in about 3 days. Not the typical appearance of an officer returning from shore leave.

"Thanks ensign." He said simply before making his way out into the corridor, not bothering to explain the way he looked.

An empty starship was one of the most peaceful locations in the universe as far as Ash was concerned. No hustle and bustle of busy crew members, just the gentle constant hum of the warp drive. He preferred the mechanical company of a starship over human contact any day of the week, sure he got on with others easily but he'd just as happily be alone. He wanted to explore the ship now that it was mostly empty and people wouldn't be asking too many questions about where he's going and why he's going there but first he needed to unpack from his camping trip and change into a fresh uniform.

Arriving at his quarters he placed his belongings away neatly before heading into the bathroom for a shower. A few minutes later he emerged, clean, freshly shaven and with his long hair tied once again in a tight bun. He'd been hiking back down the mountain for the majority of the day and has absolutely exhausted. He lay down on the bed, initially just to rest his eyes but ended up falling completely asleep.

It was two hours before he woke up to the sound of some engineers working in a nearby Jeffries Tube. They obviously didn't think there would be anyone on board who they might disturb with their repairs. Ash got out of bed and pulled on a clean uniform before leaving his quarters and heading for his office. It too was empty with most of the security systems were running on automatic. Ash took a seat behind his desk and browsed quickly over the reports of the last few days. There weren't any major incidents aside from one officer returning to the ship a little drunk after a party on Trill. He'd made a bit of a mess of the Transporter Room, "Maybe that was why the ensign had looked a little wary of me earlier." He said to himself with a laugh.

After only two days away it was amazing how much paperwork had piled up. Reports he had to sign off on, new duty rosters, equipment acquisition requests, the list went on. "This is going to need coffee." He thought to himself as he went to the replicator. He was in for a long night.

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*Just another morning in sickbay...*

Sickbay, USS Portland

While orbiting Trill

**Authors: Brad Silverton and Nikki Barclay**

Brad had settled in for a quiet morning. He had been looking forward to this for a long time. No appointments. No reports. No deadlines. Just a quiet morning to catch up on reading some of the latest research out of Starfleet Medical.

"DOCTOR SILVERTOOOOOON!!!" screamed a voice that was all too familiar to Brad. It was Ensign Nikki Barclay, though her voice sounded a little more high pitched than usual due to the Doppler effect caused by her rapid rush towards Brad's office. But as she stopped in the doorway, she doubled over, panting, out of breath, unable to explain what was wrong.

"If I only had a piece of gold-pressed latinum for every time..." Brad's thought to himself as he got up and entered the main room of sickbay. "What brings you to sickbay today?"

Nikki held up her finger as she caught her breath. "Sore throat... feeling warm... nausea... tiredness..." she managed to gasp before she was able to look up at Brad. "This can only mean one thing..."

Brad replied matter of factly, "You're drunk?"

"I am NOT drunk," protested Nikki, loudly. "Why, I... I..." Raising a finger to make a point, she opened her mouth but no words came out. Instead she frantically dug through her messenger bag for a PADD. "Here," she said, practically shoving the PADD in Brad's face.

"Mononucleosis? You do realize that mono is an adolescent illness that adults develop an immunity to? Could it possibly be something more common? Then again... it can be exchanged through saliva of an infected person. Tell me ensign... are you.... active with anyone that I should know about." Brad decided that if his peace and quiet was to be disturbed that he would at least be a little entertained by it.

"I... I..." Nikki indignantly placed her hands on her hips. "That's none of your business!" she exclaimed. "A lady doesn't kiss and tell, especially not on someone as cute as Lieutenant Kal-..."

Freezing mid-word, Nikki looked up at Brad and began shaking uncontrollably. They had agreed to keep their relationship under wraps for now -- after all, they didn't want to be the subject of ship's gossip, or have to fill out Starfleet's form 46-C disclosing the commencement of a romantic relationship among officers of a different rank. "I mean... I mean... nothing!"

"Whoa wait a second Ensign Bar.... Nikki. I was just teasing because of how mono gets transmitted. I wasn't really trying to pry. Look I'll do a few tests to clear this up. If it is mono, I'll give you a double dose of medication for yourself and any mystery person that may or

may not have come in contact with you. I'm positive though that it is nothing. "

His expression turned stern and cross "However just so we are clear... the ship's crew's personal business is their own until it causes medical emergencies and needs that I need to deal for their own safety. I will ask what medical question I deem fit."

And just like a light switch his expression changed back to warm and inviting. "If medical information was recorded then said information would need to be sealed for the protection of the patients."

"Oh." Nikki paused, relieved that doctor-patient confidentiality still applied and that her secret was still safe with Brad. Though their relationship was mostly based upon Nikki's medical needs (real or perceived), and though Brad tended to be more annoyed than anything when Nikki would visit his office on a regular basis, Nikki considered Brad one of her few friends on board. For a moment, there was an awkward silence, filled only by the mechanical whirring and beeping of the various medical instruments in sickbay. "So... is there anyone new in your life?" asked Nikki, awkwardly.

Brad tried not to react with a slight wince but it did slip out. While he was understanding of secrecy and the situation Nikki was in, having been on a blind date with superior officer Major Judith Rouse, he didn't feel they were THAT close.

"I'm not seeing anyone currently. Between taking care of the ships crew and my research.... well there just really isn't that much time for a social life." He had responded while grabbing a tricorder and starting to scan Nikki to find out if there was anything actually wrong with her.

"Oh," replied Nikki, trying to sound sympathetic but sounding more as though she pitied Brad. Pausing for a moment, she placed a hand on his shoulder. "There, there," she said, trying to comfort him. "I'm sure a handsome young doctor like yourself will find someone soon. Hmmmmmm..." she placed her other hand on her chin for a brief moment, then raised one finger in the air excitedly when she had an idea. "Perhaps I can get Ellen and Maria to set you up with someone!"

"Yeah they actually already tried setting me up on a blind date. It went well enough but things just didn't click." Brad kept working and was talking about it like it was as an unimportant topic as was what type of sandwich did he have planned for lunch. To him, dating was something that could wait for a career. He stopped for a second and starred off into nothing while he was wrestling with his internal conversation with himself. 'Career first? And how many star fleet officers had fallen into that trap?' He chuckled and then noticed Nikki starring at him. He tried changing the subject...

"Well Ensign you actually do have a slight infection of the esophagus. Ask for maintenance to double check the purifiers in your quarters and food replicator. That coupled with an over active imagination in perhaps standing up too quickly to cause a head rush is what I believe your true symptoms to be."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Nikki, a horrified expression on her face. While she wasn't exactly right on her diagnosis, the fact that there was something wrong with her, in her eyes, vindicated her. "Hmmmmmm, I wonder if I can do a baryon sweep of my quarters..." she wondered aloud before turning back to Brad. "Please tell me you can fix it," she begged.

'Ug you have got to be kiddin...' Brad thought to himself that there was no way someone was this much of a hypochondriac. It just was not possible. He thought momentarily about research and a paper on Nikki herself but stopped when he realized he would be laughed out of Starfleet medical.

"Yes ensign I can take care of it." He walked over and grabbed a hypo and loaded a vial into it. He then returned to her and administered the antibiotic.

"You'll be fine by the morning. Is there anything else I can do for you today?"

"Ummmmmm..." Nikki paused for a moment, standing there sheepishly as she rotated her foot. "Well, I suppose I need form 46-C and any medical clearance required for... you know..."

Brad thought about lying to her that she was contagious and dangerous. Just to mess with Marcus. That thought only lasted for a moment. Brad wasn't going to get in the way of whatever they had between them no matter their professional differences of opinion. He wasn't going to be THAT guy.

"Nikki, I hereby medically clear you for any body fluid exchanges you care to engage in."

Well he wasn't going to be THAT guy but he was going to have a little fun at Nikki's expense for ruining his quiet morning.

Nikki exhaled. "That's a relief," she replied.

"As for form 46-C. Disclosures during medical examinations are sealed in records. At any rate that form really isn't a medical one. It is more for counseling so unless you intend to say anything to your direct senior officer or a counselor then I think our business today is concluded." Brad finished with a warm reassuring smile.

"Oh. Good." Nikki paused for a moment and stared at Brad, the awkward silence interrupted only by her stomach rumbling. "... better go get breakfast. I hear it's salmon bagel day in the mess hall."

And with that, she was off, leaving Brad once more to his peace and quiet...

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**Who:** Nerys (NPC, Alenis Meru), Meriatha Korat (NPC, Marcus Kallan), Malbi (NPC, Alenis Meru)

**When:** After the Symposium

**Where:** Holodeck One

Even without Marcus' codes, Meriatha was able to identify that Marcus had been working on a secret project. Ever since he was called away from Daystrom, his communiques became more infrequent. Curiosity and the arrogance of a Cardassian intellectual drove her to know what her former lover was working on. And now, she was within moments of figuring that out.

"Computer, bar access to holodeck one," Merry said as she removed the access panel beneath the main terminal of the holodeck's arch. As the computer complied, she produced a series of isolinear calipers and began tweaking certain circuits, causing snippets of random holograms to flash briefly. "It's not in the cached data," she mused aloud, and attempted another circuit pathway that appeared to be a recent addition.

Appearing in the holodeck, Nerys had a shocked look on her face. She was in the middle of reading a chapter in an old Bajoran religious text when she found herself being summoned somewhere. Seeing the grid pattern of the holodeck on the walls around her, her expression of shock was replaced with one of irritation. "Who are you and why are you interrupting to bring me here?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips and scowling at Merry. "Didn't you see I was active in my quarters?"

Merry approached Nerys, looking at her with a mixture of amusement and wonder. "Computer, what am I looking at?" She asked. The computer's familiar female voice replied, "This is an independently-running memory-resident hologram. Filename, Nerys01."

"Who owns the program?" Merry asked.

"That information is classified," said the computer.

"Oh, is it, now?" Murmured the Cardassian woman. Finally addressing Nerys, she asked, "Maybe you can answer the question better. What are you?"

"You know, it's kind of rude to ask someone who owns them," countered the hologram, less than enthused by the Cardassian woman's lack of manners. "And perhaps you can answer that question first -- I don't recall any Cardassians being stationed on the Portland."

"Portland? You're... aware," Merry breathed, an excited smile briefly showing on her face. Ignoring the question, she instead raced back to the archway console. "Computer, show me an active memory schematic of the current hologram." "Unable to comply. That information is..." "Yes, I know, classified," Merry finished, her tone droll. "How about where the memory is physically located?" "Active holographic memory is located in crawlspace 05-A-03." "In the wall, then?" The Cardassian woman picked up a hyperspanner and headed over in that direction. Halting halfway, however, she answered, "Gil Meriatha Korat. Exchange officer. And you have a striking resemblance to the ship's captain. But then that's expected, isn't it?"

"Yes, well, it's a long story, and..." Nerys froze for a second as Merry headed off towards the crawlspace. "Wait, what are you doing with my program! I don't want to have to call security!"

"Computer, disable voice routines for current running hologram," She said with a confident smirk, crouching down by the panel which allowed access to the crawlspace where Marcus had installed his contraption to allow the Nerys program to flourish.

In that instant, Nerys tried to should, but no sounds came out of her mouth. Of course, what Merry hadn't bargained for was that Nerys was no ordinary hologram and had some more control over her program than most did. Closing her eyes, she shimmered for a moment and returned, resetting her program and returning it to its default state -- including its volume settings.

Darting over towards a panel near the wall, Nerys pushed a button to speak into the intercom. "Nerys to security," she called out, "I need a team in Holodeck One. Someone is trying to tamper with my program."

"This is Ensign Locke in Security. Please identify yourself," came the reply. Nerys' program was on a need-to-know basis still, with the majority of ship's personnel only aware of some sort of experimental holographic technology aboard. But even then, wasn't the Portland frequently a testbed for experimental technologies? Such things were commonplace, but certainly not the knowledge of a sentient hologram. And while Nerys certainly had command over certain ship's functions like any other crew member, the computer struggled with attaching a proper identifier to her comm signal.

Merry, in the meantime, hummed a Cardassian wedding song to herself softly as she worked, pulling away a panel and exposing part of the cylindrical device Marcus had constructed.

"This is..." Nerys paused for a moment and sighed, closing the channel. Still not everyone on the ship was aware of her program or the circumstances surrounding her creation, and right now she needed help from someone who was not only aware of her and technically competent, but who might be able to force Merry to stand down.

"Nerys to Malbi, I need you down in Holodeck One immediately. Some Cardassian is tampering with my program, and I need you to use your Klingon charms to persuade her otherwise." With that, Nerys turned back towards Merry. "You know, from what I've heard, Malbi is very good at Klingon martial arts..."

A few moments later, the holodeck doors opened again to reveal a tall, powerfully-built Klingon in a yellow uniform, with a phaser by her side. Not that she needed it; her fists were powerful enough weapons. "Excuse me miss, I think we have a problem here," she said, slowly stepping towards the Cardassian and watching her hands carefully for any concealed weapons.

"Actually, I was just finishing," the Cardassian woman finished, turning to affect Malbi with a charming smile. You know, those smiles that typically drive Klingons into a rage? "I was just performing some calibrations for Lieutenant Kallan. I believe we both report to him, yes?" Blink, blink.

"That's a lie, she was tampering with my hardware!" shouted the hologram.

Malbi nodded and walked slowly towards the Cardassian, clenching her fists as she did so in an effort to look more intimidating. "You're just a passenger; you aren't authorized to do any 'calibrations,'" she replied, ready to 'recalibrate' Merry's face if she tried anything funny.

"Actually, I'm an exchange officer. You should check up on the crew manifest. If you could read, that is." Merry turned to regard Nerys with a plain smile -- no doubt hoping to manipulate Malbi into assaulting her, which would make her 'tampering' all that less an issue. "I haven't altered your program one bit. Just took a curious look, is all." Smiling to all around, she asked, "May I go?"

For a moment, Malbi considered mopping the floor with Merry. Surely, she deserved it, but she quickly realized that the Cardassians enjoyed provoking reactions out of people. "I'm keeping an eye on you, Cardassian," she warned in a scowling tone.

"Oh, I'm quite flattered," Merry responded with a smile. "If you'll excuse me." She gave one last glance at Nerys, eyes slightly narrowing, and then turned to leave. Oh the secrets she'll find...

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### *The Hardest Part*

Who: Lt. JG Sera Williams, Ensign Nikki Barclay

Where: Engineering

When: After the Symposium

Sera, dressed in civilian attire with a large travel bag strapped around her shoulder, walked through the doors to Main Engineering for what could be the last time. She had set the schedules a couple of days ago, so she knew that Nikki would be around somewhere as this was her shift. Sera took a look at the warp core. It looked like a curious abomination of present day technology smashed into an ancient shell. Much akin to strapping jet engine to a horse drawn carriage. That's part of the charm that she loved about working here. However, there was something that she had to do, something more important.

"Sera!" exclaimed Nikki, bounding towards her chief and good friend from one of the consoles at the side of engineering. "Omigod, thank goodness you're here. The EPS relays on deck six blew out last night, and with all the damage to the Portland's systems, we haven't been able to..." Pausing mid-sentence, Nikki's eyes narrowed as she looked Sera up and down. "Wait... why aren't you wearing your uniform? And what's in the bag?"

Sera's face brightened at the site of her friend bounding through Engineering, no doubt interrupting the work of every engineer in the big room. Her smile slowly faded as reality hit home. Knowing better than to present Nikki with the information here, in front of everyone. Sera decided to take the discussion to somewhere a bit more private. She nodded toward the Chief Engineer's Office, and requested, "Mind if we talk in there?"

"Sure..." replied Nikki, a sense of dread overcoming her. She knew that whenever someone



wanted privacy, the conversation was rarely good. Shaking, she followed Sera into the room. "I didn't forget about my performance review, did I?" she asked, her voice wavering. "Because if you look at my duty logs, you can clearly see that--"

"It isn't anything like that. Its about me," Sera replied, stopping her friend from melting down in front of everyone. She motioned for Nikki to follow as she made her way to the door to her old office as it opened.

"Here we are," Sera delayed as she quickly polarized the transparent aluminum windows so that no one would be able to see inside, making them much like the old one-way mirrors. She pulled a PADD out of her bag and reached toward Nikki, making it easier for her friend to grab the device. "So, you know how my dad went missing awhile back?" Not really giving Nikki a chance to respond, she sort of shook the PADD and nodded toward it as if it contained everything anyone would need, "Selina was scouring recent subspace transmissions from the quadrant, I tell you that girl will make a fantastic Intel agent one day,"

Realizing that she was getting off topic more than a bit, Sera said, "Well, she found something. It's small but it gives off an identical signature to his old shuttle that he never used." Sera's eyes filled with hope as she spoke.

As she flipped through the PADD, a look of horror appeared on Nikki's face. "You mean... you're leaving us?" she asked

"I... have too," the Chief Engineer started before Nikki began again in earnest.

"You be careful!" exclaimed Nikki, interrupting whatever Sera was about to say and taking on the tone of a concerned mother. "This could be dangerous. Watch your back. Keep a comm line open to each other at all times. Make sure you get a site to site transporter. And a portable field generator, which can reflect disruptor blasts. And some body armour. And sunscreen; do you know what the UV index is on Nimbus III?" she added, oblivious to the fact that all that equipment weighted at least a hundred pounds.

After everything they had been through together, Sera knew better than to stop Nikki when she was on a roll like this. Once she was finished, Sera added, "All of that is on the shuttle. I even had the doctor give us any and all vaccines that could be given."

"Okay, good." Nikki paused for a few seconds and stared Sera in the eye. She was more than just a commanding officer to her; Sera was her closest friend on the Portland. She had looked out for her, kept her out of trouble, and even calmed her down from time to time when her anxieties would act up. It would be difficult to replace someone like her, and Nikki dreaded the challenge of meeting a new chief.

After staring into Sera's eyes for several seconds, Nikki suddenly bounded towards Sera, almost knocking her over, as she gave her friend a big hug and began sobbing uncontrollably. "You be safe, Sera," she managed to say between fits of tears as she held her friend tightly, as if she could stop her from going.

Sera closed her eyes and returned her friend's bear hug. Her own eyes were welling with tears, this was truly it. With how Starfleet worked, if Sera ever put the uniform on, there was no telling where she would wind up. "Don't let this bucket of bolts fall apart without me. And, take care of Marcus. You two fix each other." The last part was meant to be said with a joking smile, but through the tears it didn't really come out that way.

"I will," replied Nikki through her tears as a console flashed and beeped beside her. Breaking away from Sera, she darted over towards it. "Another fried EPS relay..." she mused, before looking around engineering. With Sera out of uniform, she was the highest ranking officer around. "All right, everyone," she called out, drawing on an untapped reserve of confidence that she didn't think she had in her, "shut off main power to Deck Six, and go to emergency batteries. Jenkins, T'Prel, Nonokian, I want you to inspect the EPS system and run a level six diagnostic. I want to know what's causing these power surges. You have two hours."

Rather than keep it going, Sera decided to use the well-timed distraction to slip out of the Chief Engineer's office. She wiped a few tears from her eyes as the departing officer made her way to the turbolift.

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*Time for some personal stuff, part I*

**When:** Before the runabout mission

**Where:** Captain's ready room

**Authors:** **Admiral Alenis Meru, Commander Timothy Rouse and baby Andy.**

With Andy on his arm and a diaper bag over his shoulder Tim pressed the chime of Meru's office. They had planned the activities for today for a while now, but he was getting very nervous as the moment was approaching.

"Come in," called out Meru, sipping her morning tea as she looked over her reports from Gamma shift. There was nothing much to report; a couple mundane spatial anomalies not worth altering course to check out, and a couple malfunctioning replicators down on deck three. "Tim, Andy, good morning!" she exclaimed, happy to see the little baby. "Would you care for some tea?"

"Rather some coffee for me," Tim said as he walked in and placed Andy on a carpet near the couch, before taking a seat on the couch himself.

Meru smiled as she walked over to the replicator. "One large coffee, black," she called out, glancing over her shoulder at Andy as he lay on the carpet. Ko-ko, seeing the baby, had flown over close to him and emitted a few relaxing coos. "How is the little man doing?" Meru asked as she brought the freshly replicated coffee to Tim.

"Now he's asleep, of course." He said with a sigh. "Can't wait for the day when he starts doing that during the night." He accepted his coffee. "Everything ready for later?"

"I suppose," replied Meru. "I've got my dress uniform all neatly pressed, and all of the

arrangements have been made." She paused for a moment. "Tim, I just have to ask. Are you sure you're ready for this?"

He smiled as he looked from Meru to Andy. "I couldn't be more ready. I love her more than I could ever think possible to love anyone." He said softly. He wasn't at ease talking about his feelings. "And we have a son together. I'm surprised the Admiral hasn't mentioned anything about the subject since we revealed our relationship to him." He said chuckling.

"That's good," replied Meru. She was very happy for Timothy, though part of her was a little jealous. A little part of her wished that she could have what he did. "I trust your judgement and I know you will be great together." She paused for a moment and looked down at the baby. "So... what's your big plan?"

"I'm taking her home," he said. "Sort of. There is a holoprogram from the area I'm from. I've taken her there before, but because her pregnancy I couldn't show it before. My brother and I always went there as often as we could when we were little. Michael asked his wife there as well."

Alenis smiled. "That's so romantic. I'm sure she'll say yes," she said, with Ko-ko cooing in agreement. "I guess I'll be on babysitting duty for the time being then?"

"Let's hope so!" He replied. He was nervous.

Standing up, Alenis walked around her desk over towards Tim and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Relax," she said, "this is just the next stage in what I know is a beautiful relationship. All you have to do is be yourself and Ellen will surely say yes." Removing her hand, she placed it on her hips. "Now go out there and ask that woman to marry you. That's an order!"

As Tim left, Alenis picked up Andy and held him in front of her. "So, looks like you're hanging out with me and Ko-ko for the day. We'll have lots of fun together, playing with starships and--" Pausing mid-sentence, Alenis wrinkled her nose and sniffed the air. There was no doubt; he needed a diaper change.

Placing him back on the ground for a moment, Alenis looked around her office for a moment, then tapped her comm badge. "Yeoman al-Nablusi, I need your assistance in my office. And bring a diaper bag..."

*To be continued....*

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*Time for some personal stuff, part II*

**When:** Before the runabout mission

**Where:** Holodeck 1

**Authors:** **Commander Timothy Rouse** and **Petty Officer Ellen Washington**.

"Will you please tell me where we're going?" Ellen asked again. Tim had picked her up after

her shift. He looked absolutely gorgeous in the black jeans and grey shirt he was wearing. Especially with that grin on his face. Not that this usual uniform didn't look good on him...

"Almost there," he said, grabbed her hand and pulled her to him. Turning her around he wrapped his arms around her and whispered, "Close your eyes," She did and followed him as he guided her in the holodeck where the program he wanted was already running. "Just a few more steps."

When they were fully emerged in the program he stopped and whispered her to open her eyes and moved his hands to her waist. At first she didn't say anything. When she found her words again, she said. "This is beautiful, where are we?" and leaned against him.

"This is my home. The place I grew up and where I hope to live again someday," He placed a kiss on her hair before he continued. "We're on mount Hays," he said. "Down there is the city, nestled against the mountain. And over there you can see the many islands that lie in the pacific ocean. See the path there. I want to take that with you. At the top the view is even more beautiful."

"That explains why you said to bring walking shoes." Ellen said chuckling. Tim grabbed a small backpack and removed a pair of sunglasses from it and handed her one. "It's about an hour to the top. I can't wait to show you." he said as they started walking. "As soon as we were old enough Michael and I would go here whenever we got a chance. It was our little heaven. I hope to take Andy here as well when he is older."

If she didn't love their surroundings already, she would now because of the effect it had on Tim. She hadn't seen him so relaxed in a long time. With everything they had gone through lately. The Captain's dead and resurrection, the Portland almost being destroyed by the Borg. Andrew's birth had been their silver lining.

When they reached the top Ellen couldn't stop looking around her. "You were right," she said. "The views are even more stunning from here." "The view is indeed stunning." Tim agreed. He wasn't looking at their surrounding, but at Ellen. Noticing his voice had changed to a more huskier tone she turned around to him.

Having her full attention Tim grabbed the little square box from his backpocket, went on one knee and asked. "Ellen Marie Washington. I love you with all my heart. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you make me the happiest man of the universe and marry me?"

"Yes, yes, yes," she said, or more yelled, and ran in his arms. Finding his lips she kissed him as if their lives depended on it.

*To be continued...*

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*An Unrealized Future*

Who: Lt. JG Marcus Kallan and Lt. JG Sera Williams  
Where: Holographics Lab, USS Portland  
When: Before Sera's departure, after the Symposium

Marcus fiddled with the holographic display in front of him in his lab. The lab was cobbled together with holographic equipment spanning three decades, encompassing advanced holographic technology from the late Sixties to the present. Somehow, he used this equipment to analyze a sentient hologram, fool Borg, and earn him high prestige from giving a stellar lecture at the Symposium on Trill... and his career aboard the Portland had just gotten started.

The translucent image that turned slowly on the small section of holographic deck was a humanoid, roughly Marcus' height, but slightly more bulky. Equipment that seemed vaguely Borg studded the hologram's visage, but the actual person was not rendered in any detail.

Sera, wearing her civilian clothing and a travel bag thrown over her shoulder, stepped through the doors of the Holographics Lab. She still had a goodbye left to say. Instantly, the former Chief Engineer was drawn to the holographic display. It was something that she had seen before, during the mission to resurrect the Captain. Sera stepped closer, getting lost in examining the Borg-like figure.

Marcus glanced over. Had it been anyone else, including Nikki, he'd be fumbling for the 'off' switch. Instead, he half-grinned. "Hi, Sera. I can tell this is familiar to you from the look on your face," he said. Chuckling, and running a hand through his hair, he asked, "Maybe you can tell me what it's supposed to be? I have a dream where I look at myself in a reflective surface and I see a monster. I've had it several times since we rescued Captain Banninga and blew up that transwarp conduit."

"For me, it started with the Bajoran orb," Sera started, trying to remember. She dropped her travel bag, which hit the ground in a soft thud. "I was a Captain," she paused. Maybe the radiation damage had caused some sort of hallucination, but since the accident she too had had certain visions more frequently. "I think... I think this was you. Something had happened to you, something traumatic, but I don't know what it was."

"Assimilation, but not," Marcus responded, looking at the holographic display. He tapped a few controls and the image merged with his own. Not a perfect representation of the unrealized future, but close enough. "Either way, it's both fascinating and terrifying." He chuckled, looking down, perhaps out of embarrassment. "And all the time, I knew I had you backing me up. Like, how Nikki and I are now."

Sera's eyes studied the merged representation. It wasn't exactly what she remembered seeing but it was enough to bring back a few of the memories from the vision. "I remember feeling as though the person behind this meant something, somehow. Something big. But there was something else, something painful that was between them." She reached a hand toward the near-assimilated human's hand as she whispered an echo of her vision, "Sacrifices must be made for this plan to succeed. I volunteered. Give the order."

"Payback," Marcus said aloud, having a sudden recollection of his dreams, and perhaps echoing what his future, alternate self was thinking: revenge. "Everything I've done in my career, Sera... Everything was because of revenge. I wanted to get back at the Borg for taking my family away from me. So I studied them. Learned them. Mastered their technologies. And this is what revenge did to me, apparently... it consumed me."

Sera nodded back with understanding, she had remembered everything. "You beamed yourself over to the Eclipse, and sacrificed yourself to give us time, time we needed to save the Captain. I think this, you, regained his humanity at the end," Sera replied. The worst part of the story made her hesitate, "I... I let you go. Ordered the future crew to complete your plan. I even got everyone on that decommissioned ship where we met our end." Tears welled in her eyes, as she added, "What does that say about me?"

"It means you were... are... command material, and that you let officers do what is necessary," Marcus replied gently. "And that you are a kind person that helped a monster of a man hold on to his humanity. If things were different... all of the dreams make sense, now." He shrugged lightly, looking away - clearly he was conflicted, with him and Nikki getting fairly serious in recent weeks.

She wanted to reach over and clasp Marcus' hand. "Things are how they are," Sera replied, a bit more quietly than she had intended. Looking to Marcus, Sera said, "You have been a great friend. Through my accident, you and Nikki were the only ones to check up on me with any regularity." Smiling she added, "And I almost came to enjoy your protein cubes."

"They're not so bad, once you get used to them," Marcus said quietly. Looking up, he looked mildly remorseful, but he affected a smile the best he could. Marcus wasn't used to genuine smiles. "Take care of yourself, Sera. We'll meet again."

---

*Flashing lights and replicators...*

**Who: Lt. JG Sera Williams, Ensign Malbi**

**Where: Deck 2, USS Portland**

**When: During the Symposium**

Never mind the warp blowing the ship and the space around it to bits or glitch in the life support systems. There was that got a repair team ready more than bad replicators on the senior staff level. Sera had made due this morning by giving the chef a try in the mess hall, but the complaints had been rolling in all morning...some more adamant than others. With a sigh, the Lieutenant exited the turbolift with her repair kit in hand.

Taking a look around the deck, she had to admit that the repair crews had done a fantastic job of restoring the Portland. The sterile white of the 2280s and 2290s was brighter than she could remember seeing. As she walked down the corridor, she ticked off the occupants. *Captain, Tim, Marcus, Jason, mine...* and there was the EPS conduit that she wanted to check. With a few creative tugs, the Chief Engineer popped the panel off. *Come on, tell me what's wrong*, she whispered to herself as she talked to the ship.

Malbi was walking down the corridor when she heard the woman, clearly an engineer, muttering to herself. Or to the ship, Malbi wasn't sure. Either way, that was generally an indication of a problem; not necessarily a mental health problem, but certainly something was troubling this engineer.

Malbi approached with heavy footsteps, so as not to startle the woman from behind, then cleared her throat before she asked, "Ma'am, are you in need of assistance?"

The approaching footsteps alerted Sera to the fact someone was coming, and had probably heard her talking to herself. With her cheeks a brighter shade of red, Sera removed her head from the EPS conduit to see the Klingon approaching. With the new arrival being the only Klingon who was part of the Portland's crew, Sera didn't need to ask her name. "Ah, Ensign Malbi. I'm Sera Williams, Chief Engineer," she said as she put out her hand for a handshake.

Malbi shook the engineer's hand and replied, "Pleased to meet you."

Sera pointed at the open panel to the EPS Conduit, then added, "The replicators on the deck are malfunctioning. I'm just trying to figure out why... and hoping the ship would make it easy this time and tell me what's going on."

"Perhaps I could help with that," Malbi suggested, kneeling down next to Williams.

"Sure, I'll take all the help I can get," Sera replied as she opened her toolbox. "The replicators are scrambling what they are creating, if you order a cup of water, you'd get the cup made of water. So we have a power problem or a computer glitch on the deck...or a creature living inside the walls," the last part was an attempt at a joke. She had never been around a Klingon, at least a real one, so she was still trying to figure them out as a species.

The EPS conduit looked exactly like what it was. Its housing was built in the 2270s, it was running equipment from the 2390s, and showed patches and spliced together technology from every refit era in the last hundred or so years of Starfleet technological history. It was a small miracle that any of it actually worked.

"For the sake of simplicity, let us assume it is the result of a glitch in the computer program. That is easy enough to fix, we just need to replace the current program with one from the lower decks. If that doesn't resolve the issue, we can move on to other solutions," Malbi replied after some thought. She had interpreted Williams' last comment as humor, something Malbi had been improving on, and decided to attempt a joke in return. "And if it turns out the issue is a *creature*, I will leave and let science handle the situation." Malbi was still working on her human sense of humor.

Giving a small shrug, Sera responded, "Or catch it for meat if the replicators aren't fixed." In her head, she counted panels down the corridor. She walked toward and removed the second wall panel, revealing a small console. It stored the programs and acted as a processing hub. "If it is a glitch, this is the cause," Sera added, making a hand gesture that welcomed Malbi to try her hand.

Malbi pulled a tricorder out of her toolkit and scanned the device. "Well it seems to be intact, but that doesn't mean that something can't be wrong with the program. I'll see if I can pull up the program from a working replicator." She paused and typed a few things into her tricorder. "There it is. I'll just replace the programs now... Do we have access to a replicator to see if that worked?"

"My quarters is there," Sera said, pointing toward a nearby door as she stood up from the EPS conduit she had been working on. She quickly replaced the paneling, and walked toward her room. With a *whoosh*, the door opened to reveal her living conditions. The room matched virtually all senior officer quarters in sizes and layout. However, Sera's workbench was covered in PADDs and projects in various states of finish. There was also a second bed that belonged to Sera's sister. The Chief Engineer walked toward the replicator and ordered, "Two waters, cool."

With a *beep* of acknowledgement, the machine began to materialize two perfect glasses of water. "Seems to be working," Sera sighed as she grabbed one of the cups. She took a sip and said, "It tastes like water, we'll find out if it isn't soon enough."

Malbi grabbed the other glass and scanned it with a tricorder. "The tricorder scans say that it is indeed water," Malbi confirmed before taking a drink herself, "And quite good water, too."

Glad that she wasn't going to need another trip to Sickbay, Sera nodded at the Klingon crewmember. "Thanks for the help, it looks like we saved the day," she said in a mock heroic voice. Giving a small wave while heading to the door, the Chief Engineer said, "It was nice to meet you."

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### *New Chief*

Holodeck Two, USS Portland

**Authors: Alenis Meru, Ash Sullivan**

"Submit!"

Her assailant had thrown her to the ground, and Captain Alenis was struggling to resist. The tall, powerfully build male had several inches and at least 60 pounds on her, and in a battle of raw strength, he would be able to easily toss her around like a rag doll.

Fortunately, the Bajoran martial art of Hal'Kereth was not just about strength. It was about the application of force in precise locations to bring your enemy to heel. And, seeing a vulnerable elbow where she could apply leverage, Alenis managed to push her opponent off of her, roll over, and get on top of him.

"Submit!" she exclaimed, holding her opponent down to the ground. But she was distracted by the whooshing of the door open, allowing the man to turn the tables once more.

"Computer, delete opponent," she called out as she was pushed to the ground again.



Standing up, she straightened the burgundy robe she was wearing, the traditional attire of practitioners of Hal'Kereth, and pushed her hair back. "Ensign Sullivan," she said, recognizing the burly man at the door, "Is my time up already?"

"Oh I'm sorry captain. I didn't realise there was an active program running." Ash apologised, "I can come back when you're finished." He offered.

"Oh no, it's quite alright," replied Meru, looking at Ash's clothing. His robe was similar to hers, only differing somewhat in colour and style. "Judging by your attire, we're here for the same thing. We could share the holodeck."

"Oh well if you don't mind ma'am." Ash said relaxing his stance a little. "Most of my martial arts experience has been Earth based but I'm always open to something new. What program were you running?"

"Alenis Beta Four," replied Meru. "It's for the Bajoran martial art of Hal'Kereth. I'm no master, but I find the physical exercise and the mental discipline to be quite helpful."

"Maybe you could show me a move or two?" Ash suggested as he began doing some basic stretches to warm up.

Meru chuckles slightly. "One does not simply show another a move in Hal'Kereth." As she spoke, she began some warm-up movements, turning in place and moving her hands carefully and deliberately. "It requires a knowledge of physics, a mastery of mental discipline, and a deep connection with the Prophets." Taking a few slow, deep breaths, Meru sized up Ash. "Though, I can see what I can do..."

Ash finished up his stretches then turned to face the captain, adopting a boxers stance. "I am a quick learner." He said with a grin.

"Hmmmm. Well, in that case, I suppose we can postpone the rigorous theological studies and the hours of prayer and quiet meditation." Taking a couple steps back, Alenis took up a defensive posture. "Come at me," she challenged.

Ash smiled at his captain's quip. His last CO seemed to have the sense of humour of a Vulcan and would never really socialise with officers like this. "As you wish." He said moving forward a taking a bit of a wild swing just to see what the captain would do.

With a quick sidestep, Meru dodged the incoming attack. As she did so, she made a quick spin and grabbed Ash's arm, conserving her angular momentum and adding it to his, sending him off balance. "It's not about brute strength," she said, as she saw Ash stumble -- choosing not to follow up, as she felt her point had been made. "It is more about agility, balance, and knowing exactly where to apply pressure. Of course, it was developed by monks."

"I get it. Slow and steady, tortoise and the hare right?" He said as he regained his balance. He bent his knees, lowering his centre of gravity, and adopted a more defensive stance. "Your turn." He said as he took a deep breath, waiting for the captains attack.

"Okay..." Meru held back for a moment, examining her target and his defensive posture, trying to find the optimum vector for her attack. Spotting an opening, she swiftly rushed in.

Ash was surprised at the speed with which the captain attacked but he was prepared this time. He had left himself open deliberately and as Meru lunged toward him he spun and dropped down to one knee causing her to barrel into his shoulder from behind. Using her own momentum against her, Ash flipped Meru over his shoulder causing to land on her back in front of him.

"Oof.." Alenis slowly got up from the mat. "Nice counter," she said as she rose to her feet. "Say, with the departure of Lt. Kian, I'm in need of a new security chief. What do you think?"

The captain's question had blindsided Ash more than the throw-down she had given him a moment ago. He wasn't particularly thrilled about the Assistant Chief position he had received when he arrived on the Portland and taking on Chief of Security was the last thing on his wish list. "Captain, I'm uhhh... a little surprised that you would... offer me this position. I mean don't get me wrong I'm very grateful but surely there are other, more qualified members of the department." He replied in an uncharacteristically nervous tone.

Listening to Ash, Meru was a little surprised -- she had thought that he would jump at the opportunity. But, more importantly, he left her an opening. Before Ash had finished speaking, she had rushed in with a textbook throw and sent him down towards the mat. As she paced a knee on his chest, she smirked at him. "You know, a good Chief of Security never lets his guard down," she said. "Thing is, I need a Chief and I think you're ready for a little more responsibility."

This was the most unorthodox job offer Ash had ever experienced. "I'm sorry captain I just don't know if that's what I want for my career right now." He said trying to push her off but realising he was in a very difficult position. "Are you just going to kneel on my chest until I accept?"

"Rouse has the bridge, so I have all day," countered Meru in a nonchalant tone, using her arm to help pin him to the mat. "So, what do you say? This could be a big opportunity for you, and I am going to at least need someone for our next mission."

Nothing terrified Ash more than responsibility. He'd always seen himself floating round the galaxy, bouncing from starship to starship for the rest of his career and doing as little paperwork as possible. Ash saw a chance to get a handle on the captain and rather than trying to grapple with her, since she clearly had the upper hand, he resorted to brute force to push her off to one side while he rolled and got himself back to his feet. "It's just such an important task, I'm not sure I'd be able to handle it." He lied. He knew full well he could handle the Portland's security department he just didn't really want to.

"Your service record begs to differ." Meru straightened her robe and took up a defensive stance. "At the very least, I am going to need you to take on the role of acting chief for the time being. And this isn't a request, it's an order."

The captain clearly wasn't taking no for an answer here. Rather than trying to keep pushing the offer away Ash, albeit reluctantly, accepted. "Yes ma'am. Thank you for the opportunity." He responded, though he didn't really feel thankful at the time. "When would my duties as acting chief begin?" He said once again moving towards Meru to attack, though this time more slowly using yet another Judo technique he'd learned at the academy.

"Right away," replied Meru, recognizing Ash's offensive stance and taking on a defensive stance of her own. "That is, unless you have some big plans for shore leave on Trill."

"I just got back from a hike up Bes Manev but didn't have anything else planned, no." Ash replied before striking, trying to catch the captain off guard.

Spotting Ash's approach, Meru was able to parry the attack before jumping backwards, taking herself out of his striking range. She then flashed him a smile and headed over to the bench to grab a hand towel. "Then it's official. I'll fill out the paperwork later today." After wiping the sweat off her face, she turned back towards Ash. "Oh, and by the way, we can't have an ensign as a department head. Congratulations on your promotion, Lieutenant Sullivan."

"Lieutenant?" Ash replied. "Thank you ma'am. I don't know what to say." He added, as a wide smile spread across his face. He may not have liked responsibility but an extra pip was a welcome surprise.

"They usually go on about how they're ready for the extra responsibility and won't let me down," replied Meru, nonchalantly, as she picked up her gym bag and began heading for the door. "I've got the pip in my office. Stop by sometime this afternoon and we'll make it official."

"I will thank you ma'am. And uh... I won't let you down." He said with a chuckle.

"I'm sure you won't," replied Meru over her shoulder as she left the holodeck. "Enjoy your holodeck session, Lieutenant."

"I will captain." He shouted through the closing doors, and enjoy it he did.

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### *New Chief, part II*

Captain's Ready Room, USS Portland

**Authors: Alenis Meru, Ash Sullivan**

After completing his workout, Ash jogged back to his room and showered, before changing into a fresh clean uniform. Walking across the bridge he waved to the security officer on duty before proceeding to the door to captain's ready room. Holding a small, gift wrapped box in one hand he pressed the chime and nervously straightened his tunic.

"Come in," called out the voice on the other side of the door, a voice that was unmistakably

that of Captain Alenis.

"Good afternoon Captain. You said to drop by?" Ash said simply. Having been told about this promotion while being pinned to a mat on the holodeck, he wasn't sure how formal this ceremony would be.

"Yes, I did." Meru fumbled with her PADDs for a moment, trying to find the right one, before reaching for a small jewelry box. "Ah, here it is, the official documentation. As of today, stardate 69811.4, I hereby promote you to--"

Freezing in place, Meru stared down into the empty jewelry box. "Your pips... they were just here. I don't know where..."

Trailing off, she stared over at Ko-ko. The bird tilted her head and stared back. Meru sighed.

"Actually I brought something for Ensign Ko-ko." Ash said as he held out the box he had brought with him. "When I was down on Trill a merchant showed me this local herb that they mix in with tea leaves that's supposed to be very relaxing. The smell reminded me of mint but its quite sweet. I bought some for myself to try in my tea but I remembered how much our moral officer liked mint leaves so I got her a box." He explained placing the gift wrapped box down on the captain's desk.

Meru smiled. "That's so thoughtful," she said, before looking around the room again. "Why don't you distract her with her gift while I search her perch for the pip. She likes to collect small, shiny things..."

Ash laughed at the unique circumstances of his promotion. "Yes ma'am." He said as he began unwrapping the small box. The box popped open with a small hiss and the sweet smell of mint slowly wafted through the room. Ash pinched a few leaves between his fingers before resealing the box and placing it down on the desk in front of him. "Ensign Ko-ko? I have something for you." He said in a warm tone as he placed the leaves in his left palm and held it out towards the bird, close enough for her to smell it but far enough that she'd need to leave her perch to get to it.

As Ko-ko jumped down from her perch onto the desk and curiously towards the pleasant smelling leaves, Meru got up and headed for Ko-ko's perch. The bird turned her head at Meru, detecting her presence and her movement, but continued towards the leaves anyways, more interested by the potential for treats. She paused for a second, attempting to read Ash to determine if he had any threatening thoughts. Detecting none, she stepped forward and took a nibble of the minty leaves.

After getting a small taste, Ko-ko excitedly picked at the remainder, eating out of Ash's hand, not even getting distracted when Meru exclaimed "found it!" behind her.

"She seems to like them." Ash said with a smile as Ko-ko finished off her leaves and looked up at him expectantly.

"That's good," replied Alenis, stepping close towards Ash to pin the pips on his collar. "Congratulations. As your commanding officer, I officially appoint you as Lieutenant Junior Grade Ash Sullivan."

"Thank you ma'am." Ash said with a sharp salute.

"You're welcome. You've earned it." Meru stepped back and returned the salute. "Now, unless you have anything else, you are dismissed. I think I need to take Ko-ko for a walk..."

"Aye captain." Ash replied simply before turning and leaving the office.

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*Time for some personal stuff, part III*

**When:** Before the runabout mission

**Where:** Captain's Quarters

**Authors:** **Captain Alenis Meru**, **Commander Timothy Rouse**, **Major Judith Rouse** and **Petty Officer Ellen Washington**.

As they were walking back hand in hand Tim got nervous for the next part of his big plan. He had managed to send "yes" to Meru, signalling her they could proceed with their plans. Before they reached Meru's quarters Tim stopped Ellen and looked her in the eyes. "When do you want to get married?"

"I... uhm..." she said as she thought about that. Looking back at him she continued. "The sooner the better, I guess."

Tim smiled. "Two souls think alike," he said. "I have another surprise for you. I have already planned our marriage... for now..."

Ellen just looked at him before smiling. "You're joking," But seeing the look in his eyes she saw he wasn't. "Ok, but what about Andy? I want him there when I marry his daddy."

He quickly kissed her before saying, "How long do you need to change into your dress uniform? I've arranged Meru to marry us with Judith and Maria as our witnesses. I've also asked your father but he is too far away from our location to come by, I hope that isn't a problem?"

"I've never wanted a big wedding. What you've arranged sounds perfect. Give me ten minutes and I'll be ready."

***Ten minutes later...***

As they entered the Captain's quarters Andy immediately started to wiggle in his aunt's hand, wanting to go to either of his parents. Tim took him from Judith and gave his sister a kiss on her cheek. "Thanks for being here, little one." "I wouldn't miss your wedding for a beat, big one." Judith replied. "I wish I could say the same." Tim said which got him an annoyed look on his sister's face. "Give it a rest, will ya."

Meru cleared her throat. This was by far the most pleasant duty of a Starfleet captain, and she had rearranged her quarters and changed into her dress uniform for the task. A small podium was replicated, and her window frame was decorated with white fabric and flowers to make it look like an arch. Of course, there were hints of Bajoran culture as well – a Kava root was hung from the ceiling, and the tables were littered with katterpods; an old tradition meant to symbolize good fortune for the new couple.

With her white gloves, she turned the page on the heavy, Bajoran religious book in front of her. “If you don’t mind, I have a few words to say.”

The people in the room, all 4 of them, turned to the Captain. Tim took Ellen's hand, curious what Meru had to say.

Alenis looked around the room for a moment and straightened her tunic. “Thank you. It is not every day that I am pressed into service as a marriage commissioner, so I hope I don’t ruin everything.” She took a deep breath. “We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Timothy Rouse and Ellen Washington. Over the past several months, I have had the pleasure of knowing both of you. Ellen has always had a smile for me whenever I would go to sickbay, and Timothy... Tim, you are my friend and my closest confidant. In that time, I have had the pleasure of watching your relationship grow and blossom, from a chance encounter into something special.”

“I’m reminded of the tale of Krenneth and Airja in ancient Bajoran mythology. Two lovers, whose love burned so brightly that it brought light to the Kendra valley. Prevented by their d’jarras from engaging in earthly passions, they fled to the heavens, where they became the brightest stars in the southern hemisphere. For thousands of years, Airja would cross the night sky and Krenneth would follow, always at her side.” Alenis paused for a moment. “Of course, Starfleet knows them as BRX-1156 and Exulon B, but I think this is more romantic.”

“All too often, as scientists, we dismiss a great many things as silly superstitions. As a rationalist, we must know that the odds against true love are astronomical. Yet, be it due to a higher power or the kinship of all living things, here we stand, witnessing it. Just like Krenneth and Airja, Timothy and Ellen have a love that burns brightly as they streak across the heavens as part of this travelling family that we call the Portland.”

Almost choking up, Alenis paused for a moment and bowed before the bride and groom, an old Bajoran tradition. “Timothy, Ellen, it is my honour to marry you.”

Reaching into her pocket for the ring, a look of shock appeared on Meru’s face. “The ring,” she gasped, feeling a tidal wave of dread crash upon her. She had lost Tim’s ring, a priceless family heirloom, and ruined his wedding day. Frantically, she looked around the room. As she did so, her eyes locked with those of Ko-ko. Knowing that the bird liked shiny things, she called her over with a whistle. Flying over, the glint of gold and diamond catching the light caught her eye.

Ko-ko landed on the podium, dropped the ring into Tim’s hand, and then flew up to his

favourite perch on on Meru's left shoulder.

Meru cleared her throat, relieved. "Timothy, do you take Ellen to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?"

Looking into Ellen's gorgeous blue eyes Tim's mouth shaped in a smile before he said. "I do."

"Ellen, do you take Timothy to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?"

"I do," she said as she looked into Tim's eyes.

Meru smiled. "By the power vested in me by Starfleet command, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Timothy, you may kiss the bride"

Tim needed to be told that twice. He lifted his head towards hers and touched her lips with his.

As Tim and Ellen kissed, slow, romantic classical music began playing. Maria and Judith, in perfect synchronization, stood at attention near the door, then drew each a silver cavalry saber and held it aloft, creating an arch over the door.

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*The next assignment...*

Starbase 66

**Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Admiral Washington (NPC Meru), Commander Timothy Rouse, Lieutenant Jason Beauvoir, PO Ellen Washington (NPC Tim), Lieutenant Arthur Reynolds, Lieutenant Brad Silverton**

With Raven on her shoulder and Washington by her side, Alenis strolled through Starbase 66 above Trill. The corridor that they were walking down had large windows on one side, showing the various ships in the starbase undergoing refits and repairs.

"So, I bet you are wondering what your new assignment is," said Washington, interrupting their idle chatter.

"Sir?" asked Alenis, a little surprised.

"Don't worry, it's only temporary." Washington paused for a moment. "While normally, a ship that old and that badly damaged would be cut up for scrap, I managed to pull a few strings. Apparently, there is a sentient being which can't be removed from the ship without collapsing her program, so Starfleet has no choice but to fix her up. And install a few upgrades while they're at it."

"Oh?" asked Alenis, concealing her excitement over the fact that the Portland family wasn't going to be split up, at least not yet. "What sort of upgrades?"

"You'll find out when you get her back." Washington turned towards the window and pointed out. "There, that's your new assignment," he said.

"The Prometheus?!" exclaimed Alenis, in surprise. As a tactical officer, she knew that with its multi-vector assault mode, the Prometheus class was extremely flexible in combat, but a challenge to command. Starfleet officers had to really know their tactics to get the most of the ship."

"No, in the docking bay next to it."

"A runabout?" Alenis was confused.

"That will take you to your next assignment," explained Washington. "Your rendezvous point is already set into its navigational computers, and you will find a PADD on the pilot's seat with your orders. There's not much else I can tell you; it's all classified, of course."

"Of course," replied Alenis as she strolled towards the docking hatch with the Admiral. Outside the hatch, though, she saw a familiar face, one which made her smile. "Tim," she said, looking at her executive officer and close friend. "I guess you just can't get away from me, can you?"

"No, apparently not. No matter how hard I try." he said with a chuckle.

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Jason waited by at the docking hatch, he'd received orders to report here at this time, but very little else. He consulted the contents of the satchel, that hung from his shoulder, for what seemed like the hundredth time. He was nervous and a little angry, having just found out that Jena had lied to him and not with his sister, her aunt on the Endeavour.

"Good morning," Ellen said as she saw the Science officer who was already present at the hatch. "You got the call as well?"

"Bonjour, Miss Washington. Yes, do you have any idea what this is about?" Jason said.

"I might have an idea," Arthur admitted when he finally reached the hatch and overheard Jason's question, nothing but a PADD in his hand with tactical schematics of a certain ship. "But it's probably nothing." He held out a hand to shake, trying to be as cordial as humanly possible for someone with his background. "Arthur Couer-Reynolds, Chief of Tactical. Expert with guns, not-so-expert with people." With a smirk, and maybe even a chuckle, he added in an unintentionally smarmy tone, "Can't say I didn't warn ya."

Ellen accepted the offered hand. "Ellen Washington, I'm here in case you do something stupid and get hurt."



"Yeah, well, I try not to," Arthur answered in his usual, smarmy way before Jason spoke next.

"Bonjour, Mr. Couer-Reynolds, I am Jason Beauvoir, Chief Science Officer. I am also Ship's Linguist, but I am able to defend myself, should words fail." Jason said. His manner was amicable, but his voice was devoid of emotion.

"A gentleman and a scholar," Arthur exclaimed with an equal amount of sass. Some might mistake it for arrogance, as if he were looking down on them. Whether or not that was truly the case wasn't clear yet, however. "Well, it's nice meeting both of you. But I'm not gonna lie. I have a bad feeling about this little assignment. I can't be the only one... can I?"

"A pleasure to meet you too, Arthur." Jason said. "As for having a bad feeling about this assignment, I have learned when it comes to Starfleet, hope for the best, but plan for the worst."

Dr Silverton was a little late. Not terribly late mind you but almost enough to miss the departure. He wasn't sure about this new assignment. Not that he had a choice. Just that he was starting to get to an important point in some research in some new vaccines and the timing was critical. Nurse Hill would be able to monitor everything while he and Ellen were gone. He was relieved to see so many shipmates there. At least it wouldn't be boring. Walking up behind everyone he announced himself, "So does anyone know what and where exactly we are going?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Arthur answered aloud, but just under his breath, he muttered, "Unless I'm right."

When Ellen saw Tim and the Captain approach she raised her eyebrows in surprise. She didn't know Tim would also be on this away mission. In response to the unspoken question on her face Tim simply smiled. This would be their first away mission together. That was going to be interesting.

Stepping inside the runabout with Tim, Alenis was pleasantly surprised to see all her senior staff present. The idle chatter stopped and they all looked up at her. "Well, I suppose I couldn't ask for a better crew... of whatever ship we're on..."