

WOLF

A Short Star Trek: The Next Generation Story

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The planetary system was unremarkable. The solitary red giant star was catalogued as 2247-925. The bodies orbiting it counted in their number two gas giants with the usual gaggle of moons, one burned out rocky husk the size of Mars in an inner orbit, and a pair of captured comets dancing around each other in the outermost track. What inner planets there may have been had long since been devoured by the expanding bloat of the red star as it swelled toward its final death, still eons in the future.

Between the two bodies of swirling hydrogen clouds (listed prosaically as 2247-925/2 and 2247-925/3), was a sparsely populated necklace of nickel-iron and carbonaceous chondrites in barely enough numbers to be referred to as an asteroid field, its total mass probably no more than that of a small moon. It was toward one of these tiny islands of matter in the unending sea of space that a small starship - a Starfleet runabout - coasted. The boxy little starship's orbit matched the rock's within a few kilometers per second. Its pilot played its directional thrusters in gentle concert and teased spurts of thrust from the impulse engines until ship and asteroid circled the star in perfect *pas de deus*.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard, late of the Starships Stargazer and Enterprise-D, and current commanding officer of the USS Enterprise-E, sat back in a chair at the briefing table in the runabout's aft compartment. He sat rigidly still, his chin cupped thoughtfully in one hand, alone with his thoughts. A billion kilometers outside the wide panoramic windows in the tiny starship's stern, the grotesque ember of a star half again the size of Aldebaran edged into view glowing dully, still big enough to fill one window frame even at this distance. The red light filtering into the room was not enough to overpower the interior lights, but it cast a sanguine tinge on Picard's face, and on that of his first officer across the table.

Commander William Riker craned his neck to see the asteroid as their ship swung into its "at-anchor" position parallel to the asteroid's long axis. As in most belts, even Sol's relatively dense one, there wasn't another asteroid within human eyesight. "Looks like a big round rock from here," he said, as much to himself as to his captain. "I'm glad we can finally find out what this is all about."

"Indeed." Picard muttered, and Riker heard a certain familiar tone.

"You said you didn't know what this was about, Sir. Now you sound like you do."

"Not actually, Number One. Just... suspicions."

"Can you share, Sir?"

Picard began to stand as he said, "Anything I have to offer would be speculation, Will." And Riker knew to let it lie at that.

A soft chime preceded a human voice over the intraship comm: "Holding station one kilometer off the base, Captain. Shall we hail them?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Lefler," Captain Picard said. "We'll come forward directly."

"Robin," Lieutenant Commander Geordi LaForge smiled, "you are handy to have around."

The young woman beamed a brilliant smile back at LaForge from the pilot's station and said, "I know. That's why I made sure I got back aboard the new Enterprise; I knew you couldn't do without me. Lefler's law number six: make sure the boss knows you're indispensable."

He laughed. Robin Lefler was as brilliant an engineer as he'd ever known at her age, but she never failed to amaze him with her variety of other talents. That she could pilot a runabout was indeed in her personnel jacket, but her presence on this mission was as an engineering specialist, not a pilot. Nevertheless she'd gleefully spelled him at the controls when he needed a break during their two-day flight from Starbase 223, and she handled this orbital rendezvous perfectly, and on manual. "For practice," she'd said. And Geordi had long ago learned to trust her judgement.

At the engineering station behind Lefler, Ensign Sonya Gomez keyed the communications console and leaned in needlessly close to the sound pickup. "This is the USS Delaware calling... calling the asteroid." She shrugged uncertainly at LaForge. "Who exactly am I calling, Commander?"

He was in mid-shrug himself when Picard and Riker emerged from the aft compartment. Picard said, "You're addressing Commander Elizabeth Shelby, Ensign."

Gomez leaned into the pickup again, more visibly nervous with the captain present, but her first syllable was cut off. "Delaware, this is Commander Shelby." Gomez hovered at the edge of a response, but once again was cut short as Shelby continued; "We can beam you over immediately." Gomez now leaned back, frustrated.

Riker smirked, "All business, and as impatient as ever."

Gomez jumped and reached for the console. "Oh, sir," she said, "the mike was still open..." She killed the transmit key.

"I heard that, Riker," Shelby said. Was that a hint of humor in her voice? "Would you like time to shower and change first?" then, after a grunted laugh, "Shave?"

Riker smiled broadly, stroking his beard, and Gomez dropped her head into her hands. Picard leaned cautiously over the mortified ensign and reopened the channel. "Immediately will be fine, Commander. Give us two minutes to lock down the ship..."

"Already done, sir," Lefler said, and Gomez rolled her eyes at her crewmate's efficiency.

Picard spared Lefler a more complimentary look and continued after a beat, "As I was saying, immediately will be fine."

The asteroid's briefing room was of adequate size, but far less comfortably appointed than those aboard starships were. The floor was bare of carpet and the walls free of decoration. The table was composite rather than wood, and the unpadded plastic chairs would start to get uncomfortable rather quickly. It was impersonal, cold, much like the transporter room and dull gray corridors had been. The decor gave the base a feeling of impermanence. Shelby had ushered her guests into the room and let them find seats. Two of her own officers were already present, and she introduced everyone all around. Shelby's second in command was a short, gruff, surly human with a little more hair than Picard and a much squarer head, named Commander Duval. Next to him was a lanky Vulcan Lieutenant Commander whom she introduced as Tosik. Both wore engineering gold.

"As you all know," Shelby began, "I'm supposed to be Starfleet's resident expert on the Borg. When you first met me, when I was assigned to the previous Enterprise, I admit that I was pretty full of myself with that job description." She smiled at herself a little, pacing at the head of the conference table. "By the time I left the Enterprise, you might say, I was knocked down a peg."

Riker found himself smiling again. Shelby noticed, and laughed lightly, mostly at herself, he thought. That in itself showed how she'd changed from their first meeting.

"You gentlemen are certainly far more qualified at this point than I am. Which is partly why Starfleet wanted you here."

Picard straightened minutely in his chair. "Commander, generally speaking, I go where Starfleet Command points me. As do we all. This is not the first time I've been in the dark about a classified assignment. Nevertheless..."

"You're here at my request, Sir," she answered his unfinished question. "To observe, suggest, help me test, what I hope will be the weapon we need against a real Borg incursion."

"Real?" Gomez blurted. Then she realized she'd spoken out of turn and blanched.

LaForge said, "It's okay, Sonya, you're here to contribute."

"I... just meant the first two... incursions... were plenty real to me."

"I can appreciate that, Ensign," Shelby went on, "but each time it was only one Borg vessel. We still can't figure out why they'd sent only one, and it is beyond us why the second attempt was lead by their queen herself. I'd say it was arrogance, if I didn't know better. If they'd come at Earth with even as few as five of those monsters they'd have won hands down. Our worry now is that we may have pissed them off by killing her, and they may not hold back with the next attack."

Riker interjected, "One assessment is that we may have broken their spirit and that they may just give up on us after this."

"I don't believe they have a spirit to break, Will."

"Spirit," Picard said quietly, "is irrelevant." Riker felt gooseflesh rise hearing those words in that voice. It was a frightening momentary flashback to when Picard himself had been taken by the Borg and forced to speak for them. Everyone went silent for a moment. Picard saw their reaction and smiled self-consciously. "Forgive me. But you see my point."

“While it is also possible that they may give up on us,” Shelby continued after a moment, “– after all, we’re a good 60,000 light years from their home base – enough of us at Starfleet have enough doubt that we’re still working on the problem. Even with ninety-nine percent of the fleet’s resources going into the Dominion war, that remaining one percent is going here, into this project.”

“Which is?” Riker asked.

Shelby paced over to the large viewscreen covering one wall of the room and stood at ease in front of it facing her audience. “I have spent quite a lot of time in these last few years digging through Federation records going back to the beginning of Earth’s exploration of the galaxy. Particularly our conflicts with others. I was looking for something, anything, that looked like it might be useful against the Borg threat. A weapon; a tactic; anything. I didn’t expect much, really. But I think I may have hit paydirt.” She tapped the screen controls and stepped aside.

What appeared before them was a simple cylinder – no, a cone. Irregularly shaped along its length, brownish in color. Its surface looked old and scarred. Stars floated by in the background. There seemed to be a glow at the open end. It looked more like a naturally occurring object than a manufactured artifact. There was nothing there to indicate scale, so it could have been as small as a flute as far as anyone could tell. At the bottom corner of the screen a time display ticked off, and Riker noticed right away that it was very old footage indeed that they were watching.

“That’s over a hundred years ago!” Gomez said quietly.

“Yeeesss...” Picard said, rapt.

The magnification of the recording snapped back to a lower power, and now they could all see that the object orbited a planet. Clouds swirled serenely across a marbled sphere of green and blue, and this strange – vessel? hovered placidly above it.

Then a beam lashed out from it. The magnification clicked back another notch and showed the very air exploding in lightning-like flashes that must have covered thousands of square kilometers. The reaction boiled atmosphere into steam as it lanced through in the instant before it struck solid ground. At orbital distance it was difficult to see the result, especially through the newborn cloud layer, but within a few moments a thick brown cloud began to rise into the lower atmosphere, top out into an anvil shape, and drift downwind. It reminded Riker of seeing a volcano from orbit. Only this volcano had a hurricane swirling around it as the beam reacted with the air. Then the camera switched to close-up for a moment and we saw the beam blasting into the skin of the planet, hurling chunks of blazing magma into the stratosphere as the planet’s crust exploded in mountain-sized divots. A wider view again showed the weapon – for that’s what it had to be – yawing and pitching in place to trace a pattern on the surface.

Riker was reminded of what the Crystalline Entity did to Melona IV, and he thought sadly of Carmen, whom he never got to know.

The beam pulsed and flickered, but never ended. The device swung in geometric patterns in its low orbit as the planet moved below it, and it blew glowing fissures out of the face of this once beautiful world, each burning puzzle piece apparently miles on a side. The force was such that masses of crust, whole shattered mountain ranges, were thrown almost into low orbit before the burning planet’s gravity reclaimed them.

Robin Lefler’s voice, low in her throat, said, “The power in that beam must be... I have no adjectives for it.”

Gomez whispered, “I can only think of one thing that would do that, but it’s inconceivable.”

The sudden blue-white spears of twin phaser beams were so unexpected that everyone jumped, except Shelby, who’d seen the footage before, and Picard. They lanced from the ship taking the pictures and seemed to travel for far too long before they hit its skin, wasting their energies in a sparkling wash that had as much effect as a garden hose. The phasers’ travel time lent some sense of scale, and LaForge muttered, “It must be kilometers long.”

And it turned toward them.

Not quickly, for its mass was immense, but surely enough it turned. And they were looking down its throat into a dazzling inferno. The picture swung abruptly as the recording ship turned to flee, then the camera switched to a view aft. The planet fell away as the starship broke orbit, and they could see that it was already nothing but a patchwork quilt of boiling magma outlining scorched rock, the glow softened by a caul of cloud that had once been oceans. In one orbit the device had reduced a thriving, though thankfully uninhabited world to a cinder.

But the machine leapt after them, and in an instant the viewscreen flared white and the picture was gone.

Shelby brought the room lights up slowly to give everyone the chance to catch their breath. Gomez was stunned into silence, Lefler amazed. La Forge’s blue prosthetic eyes held Shelby in a look of impatient interest, urging her to explain what they just saw.

But Picard spoke. “That was from the log of the Constellation, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” Shelby answered. “The original USS Constellation. Downloaded to the original Enterprise before the Constellation’s destruction. On stardate 4202, 106 years ago, they encountered this thing doing what you just saw – basically eating planetary system L-374 for lunch. Once it sliced a planet up like that it tracted in the debris for

fuel. No one knows for sure, but Captain Kirk of the Enterprise speculated it was some ancient doomsday weapon, still destroying everything in its path eons after it wiped out its own makers.”

“God, how hideous,” Gomez muttered.

“Really,” Lefler put in. “Talk about overkill.”

“I read about it,” LaForge said, remembering. “But I never expected there were visual records.”

Shelby answered, “They’ve been classified for over a century.”

“Elizabeth,” Riker said, “Are you telling us this monstrosity still exists, and you’re proposing using it against the Borg?”

“No, no. I mean, yes, it still exists, it probably will still exist for millions of years more; the hull is pure neutronium, so it’ll never...”

“Pure...?” Lefler blurted. “That’s not feasible. How do you form it? It’s the densest naturally occurring element in the universe. That ship should have collapsed into a ball from its own gravity and fallen to the center of any planet it came near.”

“Yes it should have, Lieutenant. And we still have no idea how it was made or how it worked. When Commodore Decker rammed the Constellation down its throat and set off her impulse reactors, it blew out every component *not* made of neutronium. The only thing left is the hull. It’s in storage in a... really big hangar somewhere classified.”

Gomez looked shocked. “He did what?”

Picard explained, “As the story goes, Ensign, Mathew Decker tried to stop this device and it wrecked his ship. He had to transport his entire crew down to the nearest class-M planet and hope for rescue. The original Enterprise answered the distress call, but it was too late to save the crew. The machine had destroyed the planet by then.” Gomez closed her eyes and lowered her head, an odd sound coming from her throat. “There is some doubt as to exactly what happened next, but the official record states that the machine almost wrecked the Enterprise as well, but Decker set his impulse engines to explode and took his ship into the thing’s... mouth, muzzle, whatever you choose to call it.”

“God...”

“Indeed.”

No one spoke for a few moments, and respect for the dead hung in the air. At last Shelby said, “But what we’re really interested in is the thing’s weapon. A beam of one hundred percent pure anti-proton.”

“But that’s...” Lefler began. Then caught herself. “Never mind, I should have known better.”

“It’s not impossible, Robin, but it’s... just so...” Gomez took a deep breath and started over. “The antimatter we use is molecular antihydrogen. That’s about as fine as our technology allows us to process it. We can produce limited amounts of pure antiprotons, but to produce it in the amount that... thing... must use is prohibitively expensive. And that beam was operating almost continually. Even something as big as that... thing... wouldn’t be able to store that much antimatter.”

LaForge smiled to himself. Sonya’s social skills and self-image needed some refinement, but when she was talking about her work she was unstoppable.

Shelby looked over her audience for a moment, letting them... assimilate the information they’d just taken in. “Will you all join me out in the corridor, please?” and she went through the door.

The corridor outside the briefing room had what was obviously a bank of shuttered windows along the side opposite the room. Shelby crossed to a control pad set into the vertical between two windows and tapped a key. Shutter panels slid upward.

The asteroid had been hollowed out. They stood in a gallery inside the wall high at one end, overlooking a cavernous expanse at least three kilometers long and two around. The walls were lined with hectares of coarse netting to snare drifting rocks, for, unlike the asteroid-based O’Neill habitats, this one had not been set spinning for gravity. Spacesuited workers, scuttling work bees and Sphinx pods also showed that it was not pressurized.

In the middle of all this bustling activity was a white tube. Picard saw no more at first than that – a huge white tube, running the length of the cavern away from his vantagepoint. But its lines carried his eyes down its length, and there at the far end a good kilometer away were a quartet of warp nacelles in a starburst arrangement, and he knew it was a ship. Then he knew what it was, and his eyes darted to the front end directly beneath the gallery windows. It was hard to see from this location, but it seemed to be round... and open. He turned to Shelby in shock. But LaForge knew too.

“This is...” LaForge said to Shelby, his electronic eyes wide, “This is... an antimatter cannon...”

She nodded proudly. “The biggest God damned one we could build, Geordi.”

USS Wolf. Aptly named, I think.” Commander Shelby said.
 “Simple and to the point,” Lefler agreed, “not that the Borg will even understand the reference.”
 “No indeed,” Picard said levelly. “They had no designation for Wolf 359. It was just another star to them.”

“A star where they killed eleven thousand people,” Shelby added. Picard closed his eyes as if a momentary headache had caught him. Shelby bit her lip and said, “Sorry, Sir.”

But Picard wouldn’t have it. “Continue, please, Commander.”

She turned back to the viewscreen immediately, wisely getting right back to business. It had been Picard’s knowledge, his mind under the control of the relentless half-machine beings called the Borg, that had made that slaughter possible.

“One thousand meters long, one hundred in diameter. The aperture is sixty meters in diameter.” Shelby tapped off details with a remote on a huge cross-sectional diagram of the vessel she’d built. “The ‘gunbarrel,’ if you will, is about eight hundred meters long and works more or less like a rail gun. Anti-hydrogen in slush form is shot into it at the root from one of ten torroidal tanks along the length, through a piping system arranged radially and out this nozzle at the rear. The entire contents of each tank go into each shot. Ten tanks, ten shots. Ensign Gomez, if you ever do figure out how Decker’s doomsday machine kept up continuous fire, please let us know. Unlike it, we can run out of ammo. Electromagnetic field coils accelerate the antimatter slush up along the length of the tube and heat it up to a gaseous state. Expansion of the gas fills the whole chamber as the volume of gas moves forward. At the muzzle is a ring of subspace field coils to both constrict the resulting particle beam and accelerate it up to about point-nine cee.”

Lefler noted, “Then it’s a sublight weapon only.”

“I’m afraid so,” Shelby answered. “To shoot at a Borg ship, you’ll have to get them to come out of warp first. We have four torpedo launchers mounted around the muzzle to help encourage them. But I have confidence that when this hits them, no amount of adaptation will help.”

Gomez looked uncomfortable. She was always uncomfortable speaking to an officer, but here it was something else. “Excuse me, Ma’am? But that’s a huge volume of antimatter to put into a single ship. It’s three times the amount a supply tanker is allowed to carry. The consequences of a containment failure on any one tank...”

“Oh, don’t think I haven’t had my share of bad visions about that,” Shelby said, then shrugged lightly. “Ensign, did you know that when the first atomic weapon was exploded in 1945, the scientists suspected that it might set off a chain reaction in the atmosphere and burn up the Earth?”

Gomez nodded understanding. “Yes I did, Ma’am.” She said sheepishly, “And they had to go ahead anyway because they were at war.”

“How do you intend to test this?” Picard asked Shelby.

“We’re going to shoot something.”

Though spartan, the asteroid base was intended to house its crews for the duration of the project. Tunneled within its walls were quarters, common rooms, a gymnasium, a rec room and a cafeteria. Due to their lengthwise placement within the walls of the asteroid the rooms tended to be long and narrow, and there wasn’t a curved corridor to be seen. Sonya Gomez found that the difference from a starship’s ubiquitous concentric circling hallways took a little getting used to. Being in a single passageway that went straight for more than a hundred meters was unusual, and this base had some that were almost a kilometer long. Turbolifts were limited to vertical travel in this temporary site, so the hallways were wide and dozens of small 2-passenger hovercarts glided up and down them – the irony of anti-gravity vehicles operating in an artificial gravity field was not lost on the young engineer. The effect of looking down the wide horizontal shaft, seeming to converge at infinity, was slightly vertiginous.

Sonya and Robin Lefler found a bank of replicators at one end of the long, narrow cafeteria. Though her few years in the service had blunted Sonya’s youthful enthusiasm just a bit, she still had the habit of saying “thank you” to a food slot when she took her meal. It was intelligent circuitry, after all. Commander LaForge had once told her that she got along better with the machinery than she did with people. It was true; though she essentially liked people as individuals, she always felt uncomfortable with strangers and was a little agoraphobic in crowds of

strangers. She'd always carried what she considered a healthy fear of authority figures, instilled by her father's strict code of household behavior (which certainly led to her thanking replicators for making things for her), but such a thing got in the way in the service. It was good to respect a senior officer, but not to fear them. Captain Picard was such an imposing personality that Sonya couldn't help but lose her composure around him. Lieutenant Commander LaForge was different. He was a very outgoing, open person. Even though he was her immediate boss, she felt at ease around him, even slipping up and calling him Geordi in lighter moments, which he thankfully didn't seem to mind. With their trays full of lunch in hand, they could see no empty tables in the room. It was just shy of 1300 hours, and A-shift's lunch was just winding down.

"We should've waited a few more minutes," Gomez said, looking hopelessly for a place to sit, feeling the weight of several dozen strangers around her.

"Oh, baloney," Lefler waved a hand at her, "How else do you expect to meet people?" She sighted a table for six with only three people sitting, and set a straight course for it.

Sonya followed her hesitantly. "If you *want* to meet people," she muttered to herself. "What if you just want lunch?"

The three men at the targeted table were huddled in conversation when the women approached, so they didn't see them until Lefler asked, "Hi! Room for two more?" and sat herself down. All three men reacted in variations of surprise. They were of a people that Sonya had never seen before, basically human in form, but covered with a fine indigo fur and crowned with rich heads of equally deep blue hair.

Calmly, but menacingly, one of them said, "No. Away." And shoed the women with a toss of the hand. He then turned back to his friends and continued in an odd rhythmic language, ignoring Sonya and Robin.

Lefler seemed to accept this in stride, said, "Okay, sorry," and simply got up again and scanned for another table. There was one nearby with another three occupants; two of the strange new species and one human. She locked on and headed straight for it, smiling.

Down the row of tables Sonya saw a whole table-full of people get up and leave. "Oh look, Robin," she said with false brightness, "there's an empty one over there."

"No," said one of the blue men to them, "Please." He gestured to the empty seats at his table. "New people we meet so not often."

The nearer one beamed a broad smile at Lefler that revealed a single dental ridge, rather than teeth. The second, whose fur was tinged with gray, glowered at the women, though not as menacingly as the three at the previous table. The third, wearing a Starfleet gold uniform and an ensign's pip, merely raised a curious eyebrow. Sonya hesitated to sit, seeing the older man glowering at them with solid jade-green eyes. Lefler had already sat. She looked up at Sonya and patted the seat next to her. Sonya didn't try to mask her sigh of resignation as she gave up and sat. The blue man continued formally in carefully pronounced English, "I Drosenagla Buta Denda Ramlitakana am. This my father is..." he indicated the older man, who still looked horribly unhappy "...Drosenagla Buto Tawan Ramlitakana, and this is our friend, Bob." Sonya swore she saw Lefler barely stop a double take at "Bob" when she was expecting another parade of syllables. Sonya herself certainly let her eyebrows rocket upwards before she could stop them. He continued, "Ignore bad manners from others there," he nodded at the table of people that snubbed the women. "Religion theirs very strict."

Lefler had already begun digging into her soufflé, but she managed to finish her mouthful in time to introduce herself and Gomez. Sonya raised a piece of her grilled cheese sandwich in hello and smiled unenthusiastically. "Those are very long names." Robin said and then glanced at Bob. "Well, you two anyway," she smiled winningly at the other two. "Are there shorter forms?"

"You call me Denda. My father is..." he met his father's glare and seemed to change his mind "... well, his name is Tawan, but better call him Buto Drosenagla to prevent yelling." The elder Drosenagla's glare only increased in intensity at his son, but Lefler failed to stifle the short laugh. Even the so-far enigmatic Bob smiled slightly. Denda went on, "We civilian contractors are. I control systems analyst. My father is propulsion technician. Bob is part of Wolf's crew. You two?"

Sonya was content to let Lefler speak for them both while she worked on her lunch. "Sonya is our antimatter specialist. I'm an engineer, but I'm hoping for chief engineer someday." She smiled winningly and took a petite bite. After swallowing, she went on, "We're on loan here from the Enterprise."

One of the men at the other table looked startled. "Enterprise," he said. "Is Enterprise here?"

"No," Lefler said, "She's still back at Earth under repair."

The blue man went back to his intense conference.

"Mm," Denda grunted, "We read about Borg encounter yours. Amazing survived you at all. Maybe next time Wolf we have ready, eh?" He directed the question to Sonya, probably hoping to get her to join in. She nodded

noncommittally, wanting only to get the grilled cheese into her previously empty stomach. Robin had barely touched her soufflé, and Sonya had visions of being trapped at this table for hours.

“So,” Lefler said after another miniscule bite, “I’ve never met people like you before. Where are you two from.”

Sonya looked at Lefler in shock. How could anybody be that direct? she whispered, “Robin!”

“I like not...” the father began, but Denda stopped him.

“Father not as used to out among different cultures being as am I.” He said to his father, “Question was meant to not offend us; lady curious just was.” Then to Robin he said, “From Bonn we are, about five light years from here, in next system to galactic east. Starfleet call it “Alturis Beta Three,” but of course we do not. Blues we are light and dark, pinks and browns you are, but inside we much like humans.”

His father glared at him and muttered a syllable in their language. From the tone Sonya was sure he said “No we’re not” in a most insulted manner.

“People all people are,” Denda said to his father. “Federation this teach.”

“Not all,” Buto Drosenagla said, shifting his glare to the three at the first table.

Sonya found herself looking at the third member of the party while she chewed her sandwich. He seemed content to listen to the conversation going on around him, and if he reacted at all he hid it well. She realized he hadn’t said a word, much less volunteered where he was from. She began to wonder if he even knew what was going on. Maybe he was a hologram.

“Bob?” Sonya said around a mouthful.

He met her eyes neutrally. She raised her eyebrows and nodded, prompting him.

“I’m from New Jersey,” was all he said. Sonya looked at Robin pleadingly.

Denda said, “Met Bob here. Despite what Father about humans say, found we had much in common with each other.”

“Is Bonn a Federation member?” Lefler asked. Maybe a quarter of her lunch had been eaten, and Sonya stuffed the last bite of her own grilled cheese into her mouth. Could she leave now, she wondered? Or did courtesy demand she sit it out until Robin was ready? Were the walls *actually* closing in?

“Oh, no.” Denda said mildly, while his father’s eyes seemed to narrow at the prospect. “But our R&D corporation has been working contracts classified for fleet for a while now. Some admiral or another liked our work past and hired engineering business ours for project. Bob assigned here was, I think.” Denda looked at Bob as if to turn the conversation over to him.

Sonya finished her soda. Bob remained passive.

“Bob?” she prompted.

He seemed to wake up. “Yes. Assigned here.”

Sonya leaned in to whisper to Lefler, “Eat faster.”

By 1300 hours the room was almost empty. The Bonns at the first table had left a few minutes before, with an unreadable parting glance at either Sonya and Robin or the other Bonns at their table – difficult to tell with the characteristic opaque green eyes. Denda’s father stood abruptly and insisted they must go back to work. Denda apologized suavely and held Lefler’s hand for an instant, nodded politely to Sonya, and the three of them left. Bob said nothing, met no one’s eyes. Sonya felt her shoulders relax suddenly. She hadn’t been aware how tense she’d been. “Could that have been more awkward?” she asked herself aloud, rife with sarcasm.

Lefler grinned and said, “The fur on his hand is soft as Eiderdown.” Sonya rolled her eyes. After finally eating the last of her lunch, Robin added, “I think Bob liked you.”

Sonya stared at her in amazement.

From the exterior of the asteroid it looked no different than any other. Picard knew there was a rather huge rolling corrugated tritanium door there at the end, but it was disguised from the outside by a holo projector which recreated an image of the asteroid’s end in its natural state, before the engineers had bored a two-kilometer diameter hole through it. Picard wondered all at once what they’d done with all the debris they’d dug out of this thing. This project was so important that they’d disguised an asteroid which was almost impossible to find, in a star system so out of the way it didn’t even have a name. It would be foolish to leave a cloud of tailings drifting down-orbit advertising a construction operation. He queried the runabout’s sensors. They picked out a few hundred asteroids on this side of the system, and nothing smaller. Well, no matter. Perhaps they’d dumped it into the star.

The holo field faded, showing bare unmarked alloy and smooth-hewn rock. Two huge doors rolled back in opposite directions and light spilled out into the void, illuminating nothing. A small fleet of work pods and two other

runabouts scooted out and hovered around, waiting. In time, an ugly blunt snout began to emerge slowly, like an eel poking its head out of its undersea den to see if a potential meal presented itself.

The USS Wolf emerged from its lair. In the dull red glow of 2247-925 it looked more than sinister to Picard. The other two runabouts scuttled in and anchored tractor beams to its hull, acting as tugs. Their impulse exhausts were pouring spent plasma harmlessly on the asteroid shell, whereas the Wolf could only move its great mass safely with small spurts of its forward thrusters inside the hangar. The whole image reminded Picard of a swarm of insects shepherding some great lethargic queen out of her hive. He was finding it hard to pin down his feelings about this whole affair, and he was indeed having a strong reaction to it.

“Number One,” he said to Riker, gazing out of the runabout’s windscreen with him.

“Captain?”

“Why did you join Starfleet?”

Riker breathed an ironic laugh, seeing where his captain was going. “Overwhelming curiosity to see what was out here, Sir. Adventure, romance. The usual young man dreams.”

Picard nodded. “Myself also. I felt there was more to life than grapes and wine. My father, my brother, couldn’t understand that. Why would I want to leave such an honored and traditional vocation? It had been generations since a Picard had wondered very far from the vineyard. To them, the rest of the galaxy was no different than Paris, New York, London, Saint Petersburg; just another place where other people lived. Our tradition was there in LaBarre. So why go anywhere else?”

“It’s been my experience,” LaForge said from the pilot’s seat, “that people who ask that question can’t have it explained to them. It’s... just not within them to understand.”

“Indeed.” Picard answered. “So off I trotted to join Starfleet to placate my ‘overwhelming curiosity’ – dear God was it forty nine years ago? Incredible. And do you know, Will, Geordi... that curiosity is still not sated to this day.” He ran his eyes along the length of the most monstrous weapon the United Federation of Planets had ever constructed. Not a single research lab aboard. Not one compartment among two dozen devoted to science or exploration. He thought of his last Enterprise, the ‘D.’ Science labs from stem to stern, not that she’d had a stem. She’d had families aboard – families! What a hopeful thing to do. The intent of the whole Galaxy class project had been to commit long duration exploration missions for up to a decade, ranging far afield from known space, engaging once again in that original Enterprise’s legendary mission of seeking out new peoples and places that we hadn’t seen before. Exploration. Surely the noblest of vocations, at least to Jean-Luc Picard’s mind. But the ‘D’ had never been used much for that purpose, had it? He’d ended up shuttling diplomats around and rescuing colonists and putting down brush wars, never getting far enough away from Federation space to discover much of any significance. Except, perhaps, the bloody Borg.

Then there was his new Enterprise; a product of the post-Borg era. Still equipped for a degree of exploration work, but essentially a battleship armed with weapons beyond what even the Galaxy class ships could mount. Just in the last ten years his gloried vision of discoveries yet to come had been bludgeoned to death under the weight of Cardassian actions, Maquis uprisings, Romulan incursions, and full scale war with the Klingons. And now these Dominion beings from the other side of the galaxy. What a tragedy it was that the Bajoran wormhole had raised hopes of wondrous new realms to explore, only to end up embroiling the Federation in yet another unwanted war, its most costly to date. He was surprised to find himself thinking that they should just find a way to close the wormhole permanently and be done with it.

“But,” Picard continued to Riker, “here I find myself about to test a new way to destroy our enemies.” He turned and sat heavily in a passenger seat and looked at his crew. “This is not what I signed on for, gentlemen, ladies.”

Lefler said quietly, “But we go where Starfleet tells us to, Sir?”

He smiled painfully. “Indeed we do, Lieutenant.”

“It’s not that they’re wrong,” Riker said. “There’s no doubt we need a weapon like this at this point in history. Shelby brought up the first atomic weapons. In the context of the times they were necessary. Hopefully the future will judge this the same.”

“Oh no, they are not wrong at all, Number One, more’s the pity. I don’t have to like it, though.”

The trip to the other side of the star system, arcing around the bloated red giant to arrive at a point exactly opposite the asteroid’s orbit, took eight hours at full impulse. Picard, perhaps in defiance of his current assignment, took a full range of sensor readings from the star for the sake of pure research. The little fleet passed within about 40 million kilometers of its surface on their parabolic fall past it, and at that range its ugly red face filled their view like a burning wall in front of their noses. Once it had been a normal main sequence G2 sun not too different from Sol,

possibly with life-bearing planets. But that had been five billion years ago. Some day Sol would look like this, the Earth a long gone tidbit swallowed up by the very source of its life. All good things ...

They arrived at a scene much like the one they'd left across the system. A large asteroid, maybe two kilometers around though not a perfect ball by a long shot. Riker could see work crews buzzing around it, and a Starfleet freighter standing off a kilometer or so.

Commander Shelby was in command of the Wolf for this test, and she crewed it with a minimum engineering staff and a bridge crew only. The ship itself was mostly automated, but there was only so much that could be done with that. A crew was essential in the reactor room in case of emergencies, although the weapon itself was entirely automated. The idea had been to keep the fighting crew to a minimum because no one really believed there was that much chance of surviving a direct shootout with a Borg cube. There were probably about 20 people aboard at the moment, though a nominal combat crew would be more like seventy people. Still, quite a small crew for a kilometer-long starship. Riker had been paging through the specs on a PADD Shelby had given him before they left. Every screen had been topped with a "most secret" classification and he'd had to sign for the PADD, which was copy-protected and locked to his thumbprint. He'd have to turn it in afterwards.

Crew spaces were sparse aboard the Wolf, since the ship was intended for deployment only in reaction to a Borg attack. It was figured to be out for a week on average, a month at the most. There was a superstructure at the fore end of the tubular hull that enclosed only control spaces, bunkrooms, a galley, and a shuttle hangar. Engineering was tucked away in the stern, with a couple of turbolift shafts and a long walkway connecting. That was the extent of USS Wolf's accommodations. Not much more comfortable than a submarine 500 years ago. That was a fair analogy, actually, Riker thought - one of the old attack subs, all weapon and a crew jammed in so tight they slept with the torpedoes. The captain was right, he thought, we seem to have taken a step backward with this.

La Forge, Gomez and Lefler had the test schematics up on the main viewscreen in the Delaware's aft compartment. It was rather ingenious what they'd done, Robin thought. Since they were testing an anti-Borg weapon, they'd built themselves a simulated Borg ship with as little expense as possible. A solid iron asteroid about the size of a Borg cube (although round) had been singled out. It had been fitted with several hundred metaphasic deflector shield generators on continually rotating frequencies powered by three pretty huge fusion reactors that alternately handed off primary and backup power to the shields. It simulated fairly well the adaptability the Borg showed when dealing with energy weapons.

"What do you think, Sonya?" LaForge asked.

"I almost have no basis to judge by, Commander. No one's ever dumped this much antimatter onto something before. At least not that we know of. As for their simulated Borg... I suppose it's as good a sim as any. But we still don't know the mechanism behind the Borg's adaptability. I can sure tell you what's going to happen if that beam breaks through and touches that asteroid, though."

"Mm-hm, me too!" La Forge asked, "How far away do you think we should stand off, Sonya?"

She laughed, "How does Earth sound? Oh, um... Sir. I'm sorry. Sir."

Geordi smiled brilliantly at her. "You actually relaxed for a second there."

Gomez' olive complexion turned bright crimson and she turned back to the screen to hide her own smile.

One drawback with the design was that the antimatter cannon was aimable only by pointing the ship. The beam came straight out and that was that. Shelby supposed that some kind of electromagnetic steering field could be conjured up for future mods, but right now it worked like a gun. You had to be flying straight at your enemy, or holding still pointing at him, to shoot him. Any difficulty the enemy might have hitting the tiny target silhouette presented by the ship's small cross-section was offset by how easy it was to aim at a target with no lateral movement. Wolf would be a sitting duck when she was firing. Well, one thing at a time.

She turned to her communications officer. "All ships."

"All ships, aye," he acknowledged.

"This is Shelby. I want everyone accounted for before we proceed. Runabouts, are you on stations?"

The three runabouts were stationed fifty thousand kilometers away at three of the other four cardinal points to the Wolf, although the Wolf itself had to be within five thousand for its beam to hit cohesively. That was another temporary drawback; the beam spread after that distance like a flashlight. They needed to add an annular confinement field too to keep the beam focused. She heard "Delaware, aye," then Duval's voice, "Hudson, aye," and Tosik formally acknowledged, "This is the James, we are on station."

"Acknowledged. Freighter Orontes, are all your work crews aboard?"

"Orontes, aye," a woman's voice answered. "We're starting back for the barn now. Good luck, Lizzy."

Shelby closed her eyes at the momentary stab of annoyance that hit her. The Orontes captain was an old friend, but the last thing Shelby wanted was for anyone in the universe to call her “Lizzy” on an open channel. And with Picard and Riker listening in! That overgrown bearded frat boy was going to bring this up some day, she knew it. “Thanks,” she said evenly, not trusting her voice. “Okay, everyone. Five minute warning. Red alert. Weapons, tie into helm. Helm, release to weps. Mr. Tomita, aim the ship please.”

“Aye, sir,” the weapons officer acknowledged, as the ship’s speakers blared a claxon sound.

“Here’s the plan, people: We will fire a five-second test shot from each of the four forward phaser emplacements. That shouldn’t even dent the target’s shields and will provide calibration for the test instruments. There will then be one shot from the big gun. After the sensors have chewed on their data from that, follow-up shots are authorized at my order until we blow up the asteroid or empty our magazines. If we fail, then the project fails; we’ll never kill a Borg if we can’t do this.”

They had all ten tanks filled with semi-frozen antihydrogen slush. Enough to fuel half the fleet if it were more refined. Not for the first time, Shelby had thoughts of accidental collisions or containment failures, and she shuddered imperceptibly as she pushed the thoughts back into their respective cubbies to be ignored.

She knew it was too much to hope for that the first shot would succeed. The thought of facing down a Borg cube and needing more than one shot – giving them time to analyze it, or repair any damage the first shot caused, or just to get a shot off themselves – gave her another shudder. This had to work. And if it did, she herself was ready to take on the next Borg that showed itself in the Alpha Quadrant.

“Tactical,” she commanded, “Red alert. Forward shields to maximum. And I mean *maximum*.”

She had no idea how big an explosion to expect, but she felt horribly close to the target. She had a nasty feeling it was going to be like firing an old-fashioned shotgun into battleship armor from a foot away.

Robin Lefler found herself pretty fascinated by this whole exercise while she watched the Wolf rotate to a firing position on her viewscreen at the copilot’s chair. That thing’s warp dynamics must be crappy as hell with that big blunt nose and straight sides, which was probably why they needed four warp nacelles to get a decent speed out of it. But really, if you looked at it, it had the beauty of simplicity. The most efficient ways to enclose a space were a ball, a cube, and a tube. The designers had just taken a tube, put what they needed inside it, tacked on the engines and there you were: instant starship. It had the beauty of being the right shape for the design purpose, and the right shape for inexpensive construction. In the back of her mind she was already working on hull shape refinements to suggest. An undercut at the bottom of the stern would help guide the warp field spill wake, for one thing, and eliminate the usual field turbulence associated with blunt objects at warp.

She saw directional thrusters flare minutely on the big tube’s ends to cancel its rotation, and it settled into an attitude pointing right at the big chunk of iron. It was up-orbit as well, so that any debris would tend to drift away from the ship. Not that any pieces would drift fast enough to be a danger five thousand k away.

Commander Shelby was broadcasting every command on an open channel to keep everyone alert. Lefler heard her say, “Thrusters at station-keeping,” and the acknowledgement from her helm. “Impulse power at station-keeping.” That was something Robin hadn’t thought of – the particle stream was being thrown out of the front of the ship by a huge electromagnetic rail gun (well, without the rails, but it was the same principle). That would produce a considerable amount of aftward thrust. They’d have to counter that with automatic forward thrusts from the impulse engines. “Alright,” Shelby’s voice announced, “Secondary weapons. Phaser one, fire.”

There was the characteristic flare from the collimator strip above the Wolf’s “muzzle” as energy coalesced into a coherent beam. The phaser beam glowed like a flare and traced a straight five-thousand-kilometer-long line. The asteroid target was actually nearly invisible in the optical range because it was such a dark brown color, and the dim red sun was so weak at this range. But it was visible enough when the phaser hit it. A bubble of shield energy flared bright green around it and the weapon’s energy discharge reaction sizzled and snaked upon its surface briefly, and then went out. Robin leaned back to get a look at the readouts on Sonya’s panel at the test station behind her. The asteroid’s deflector grid showed no loss in strength at all. This part of the test was testing the target as much as it was testing the new ship. They wanted to make sure the parameters were valid.

“Phaser one test good,” Shelby’s voice crackled. “Phaser two, fire.”

The shot was repeated for all four of the Wolf’s forward phasers, arranged evenly around the circumference of the muzzle between the ship’s still-unloaded photon torpedo tubes. Each time they hit, the shield bubble reacted the same way, and each time it firmed up to its starting specs perfectly.

Shelby’s palms were sweaty. It wasn’t like her career was riding on this or anything; she’d just move on to the next project if this didn’t work. It was her baby, though, and she wanted it to go perfectly. Besides, if this did work, she just might be able to get herself command of this ship for good, and a captaincy to go with it.

“Well, everything works so far,” she said to the general audience. “All right, I want a ‘go’ ‘no-go’ from all stations. Helm.”

“Go,” was the sharp response.

“Weapons.”

“Go, Ma’am.”

“Engines.”

“Go.”

“Targeting.”

“Aye aye, *Sir!*”

She smiled at the enthusiasm. “weapon antimatter containment.”

“Secure. Go.”

“Electromagnetic driver.”

“Go.”

Each facet of the big weapon’s function was covered by a crewman for this first ever shot, and each person responded with a firm and certain affirmative. The first-time checklist lasted almost five minutes, but it was necessary to get everything right. Her career may not exactly go up in smoke if this didn’t work, but she would go up in smoke literally if it went wrong. And again she envisioned the horrors that could happen with this ship in service – collisions, containment failures, structural failure, taking a hit in battle – all of which would be beyond unpleasant for her and any ship within a half million kilometers of her.

She took a deep breath. “Very well. Main weapon: target the asteroid dead center...” she let her breath out slowly “... and fire.”

Sonya Gomez saw the energy spike of Wolf’s massive electromagnetic coils on her instruments even as she heard Shelby give the command. A white fluorescent cloud in the shape of a light beam stabbed from the Wolf’s open jaws and closed the distance to the asteroid in microseconds. If she’d been able to view the ship and the target in one picture they’d have both been so small they’d be invisible, and the matter stream itself would be a barely apparent white hairline against the black sky. But she had two of the Delaware’s cameras locked onto the ship and the asteroid respectively so they could monitor the important parts and not the in-between.

The asteroid’s shields held. The matter stream had defocused to impact roughly a two hundred-meter diameter area from its starting width of sixty. The shields flared into an incandescent green ball around the asteroid, so bright they were opaque. Her instruments showed the field generators cycling randomly to push more and more power to the impacted area. The shield frequency rotated intelligently until it found a harmonic opposite to the beam’s for maximum resistance. The shields held. Sonya felt a welling disappointment. Fearsome as this weapon was, it was also a very good idea in light of the Borg threat. God, how much antimatter was pouring out of that ship? She saw the impulse engines on the stern flare to counter the beam’s push. Tiny sparkles crackled in the matter stream, probably dust and micrometeoroids drifting into it and being blown into oblivion. But the shields held.

For about a second.

They crumpled like a bursting balloon. The glowing green field peeled back around the little rock as the grid generators failed in cascade from the impact area outward.

Immediately, the beam touched the iron mass.

The explosion was off every scale Sonya was monitoring. The asteroid splashed away like a ball of ice cream hit by a fire hose, the splash being composed of blazing subatomic reactions. Every molecule in the asteroid annihilated under the antimatter onslaught in the next quarter of a second. The energy released by debonding atomic particles on this scale was of cosmic proportions. The beam itself lasted for two full seconds, but after the first second and a quarter it was pouring antihydrogen through a boiling white fireball the size of a moon.

Sonya crossed herself without realizing it and muttered “Sweet Mary, Mother of God...”

The Wolf’s viewscreen whited out, then blacked out to save the crew’s eyes. It popped back on an instant later at a stopped-down setting and showed a sparkling ball of subatomic particles four thousand kilometers in diameter. The forward shields suddenly flared against the expanding heat front, and a few moments later the blast wave hit. The crew felt the lurch slightly as acceleration fields kicked in. The ship was pushed backward fifty kilometers before the impulse engines negated the sudden rearward acceleration. Her shields glowed almost as fiercely as the asteroid’s had, but it was mostly heat and they absorbed it and dispersed it and kept it from getting through. The push backwards killed a little of their orbital velocity around the star, and the Wolf’s orbit moved in toward the star minutely. With the station-keeping command in the computer, the ship brought itself back to its previous velocity immediately, though there was no longer anything to keep station on. There were a few chunks that had blown off at

first, but most of the solid iron body had simply blown away as a haze of particles that had once made up iron atoms. The cloud of reacting particles died quickly, and only a few rapidly-spinning boulders, moving away from “ground” zero at several thousand kph, remained of the target.

Shelby found herself in the captain’s chair. She’d been standing when she gave the order to fire. She realized she was staring at the empty viewscreen with her mouth hanging open.

“Okay,” she said, shaking herself. “Um. *That* worked...”

Well, *I'm* impressed." La Forge announced, a slight choke in his voice. It was the first comment to break two full minutes of silence in the runabout Delaware since the explosion had died away. He'd meant it to be a little flippant to break the tension hanging in the cabin, and Gomez let out a little giggle before she choked it back in self-conscious panic.

"Indeed." Picard whispered, studying readouts.

LaForge added, "Instead of 'ready, aim, fire,' though, I think you should say 'I'll huff and I'll puff...'"

Lefler chuckled. Picard looked up from his screen long enough to spare Geordi a pained look. Geordi decided he'd done enough to lighten the mood.

Riker's expression seemed to be one of concern. Geordi could only speculate at what the first officer was thinking. From an engineering viewpoint, this weapon was a colossal achievement and a technological milestone. From a sociological viewpoint, however, he could see... a few problems.

"Captain?" Riker said tentatively.

Picard grunted acknowledgement absently over his shoulder.

"What are we going to tell the Klingons about this?"

Picard rotated his chair to face Riker, apparently surprised by the question. "Hm," he grunted. "Or any of our allies, for that matter. For the moment it's still classified, though."

Lefler added, "Well, barring anyone doing a subspace scan intentionally looking this way, we're about 150 light years from anything remotely affiliated with the Klingon or Romulan Empires. So it'll be 150 years before anybody outside the Federation sees that flash in the electromagnetic spectrum."

"Which is why the test was held out here," Riker said. "Granted a disclosure is far in the future, but that ship has the potential of being the thing that saves the Alpha Quadrant from the Borg. The Klingons would be righteously pissed if, say, a Borg incursion did them some major harm and they found out we had the means to stop it, and kept it to ourselves."

"And God forbid the Romulans should find out," LaForge said. "They'd almost certainly think we were planning on using it against them, allies or not."

Picard shook his head. "I think, Geordi, that our alliance with the Romulans will not last long. Once they feel that the Dominion is no longer a threat to them, they may well abandon us to the Jem'Hadar's mercies. No, I think it more likely that if word gets out about the Wolf, our allies will ask us why we're not using it against the Dominion."

Gomez ventured, "Shouldn't we, Sir?"

"No," Riker answered. "It would be too valuable a commodity to risk in combat. We'd have to hold it back for its primary purpose. The Borg."

"And the Klingons would pitch a fit," Lefler said.

Newton's laws were no less valid for their age. A few minutes of well-synchronized boost at half impulse power sent the Wolf and her three escorts falling on a parabolic course around the star to catch up with the base asteroid on the other side at something near an eighth of the speed of light. Once they were on course all four shut down their drives and coasted the rest of the way, a probably-unnecessary precaution against being detected, in case the explosion had drawn somebody's attention. They were actually traveling quite a bit faster than local escape velocity, and they'd have to decelerate to match speed with the asteroid base even though they were coming up behind it as it sped around its sun.

Commander Elizabeth Shelby sat in the captain's chair of the USS Wolf and tried to keep her mind from straying to a dream vision: that ghostly spear of glowing antiprotons boring unchecked through the hull of a Borg cube - or two - with herself sitting right here commanding the most powerful ship in the fleet, four gold pips of her captaincy showing proudly on her collar. Yes, it was quite a proud moment for her. Remaining humble was difficult. Besides, she'd worked her ass off on this project, she should be allowed to strut a little. She'd just have to wait for an admiral to show up to do the strutting. Well. Six more hours to go before they were back at base. Almost twenty since she'd gotten any sleep. She may as well retire to the captain's cabin. She stood.

“Mister Eng,” she said to the helmsman, “You have the ship. I’ll be in my cabin.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

There was a time, Shelby admitted to herself as she left the bridge, when her ambition had outweighed her common sense. Like when she’d gone aboard the Enterprise and tried to run over Riker to get his job. She’d made herself a few enemies in her “brash youth.” Sometimes the problem with life was that you changed and the people you’d hurt in the past didn’t know it. To them you’d always be an asshole. Well, at least with Riker she seems to have straightened things out. There was still a little edginess in their dealings with one another, but he seems to realize that she’s just another person who deals with life as best she can. Aren’t we all? Riker. What a stiff he’d been when they first met. Seems to have softened up quite a bit since then. Especially around the waistline.

The captain’s cabin was almost directly aft of the bridge. Inside, there were only enough essentials for the immediate two-day test run. She needed a shower. In the mirror, the circles of fatigue under her eyes stood out like dark nebulae. Her blonde hair was piled atop her head in total disarray. “Dear God,” she muttered to herself, “Call this captain material?” *I ought to cut it shorter*, she thought. Maybe not; she was already short enough. The hair gave her another eight centimeters at least.

A blue-faced figure appeared in the mirror.

She spun, her heart suddenly pounding.

One of the design engineers from that nearby system.

He had a phaser pointed at her.

He said, “Please, you will –“

Shelby had no idea where the kick came from, but the next thing she knew she’d knocked the phaser from his hand with a passable cross-kick. Academy training, somewhere deep in the back of her brain. He was off balance; hadn’t expected it. Once she planted both feet again she followed through with a firm left hook to his jaw. Even with the impact she felt how soft his fur was, and from the fact that it hadn’t hurt much she knew she hadn’t managed to get much power behind the punch. He staggered away and she dove on the phaser, landed on it. She’d have to roll sideways to use it. But then the blue man landed hard on top of her back and the phaser jabbed her below the sternum and her breath blew out of her lungs all at once. She tried to roll, tried to reach up, tried to breath, but all their combined weight was pinning her hands under her and she needed to get air into her squashed lungs.

The fur on the fist that struck her in the temple was soft as Eiderdown. The bones in it were not.

A sensor readout bleeped a change on Delaware’s tactical panel. LaForge said, “Captain,” into the comm panel. Picard acknowledged from the aft compartment. “The Wolf’s impulse engines just came on line.”

“Indeed? Hail them. I’ll be right there.”

LaForge nodded to Gomez and she keyed intership. “Wolf this is Delaware. Acknowledge, please,” she said.

Nothing.

“Oh, I hate when this happens,” Geordi mumbled. “USS Wolf, this is the Delaware,” he repeated. “Please acknowledge.”

Nothing.

Picard and Riker stepped double-time through the doors aft. Picard went straight to the comm panel and repeated the hail, also answered by silence.

“They’re accelerating,” Lefler reported.

Riker said, “Lefler, whatever they do, you follow them, got it?”

“Aye, Sir.”

“Delaware,” the speaker said, “This is Lieutenant Commander Tosik in the Hudson. We are unable to contact the Wolf. Do you know why they are departing from plan?” Tosik’s Vulcan evenness was in stark contrast to the edge of worry building in Geordi’s stomach.

Picard answered, “Commander, we are also unable to contact them. I suspect something may be wrong.”

“I concur.”

“Me too,” said another voice. “This is Duval in the James. Suggestions anyone?”

“This is Riker. Don’t lose her for one thing. Let’s see what she does.”

“Tosik here. Perhaps we could beam over...”

“Their shields just went up,” Lefler reported. “Warp drive just came on line.”

“... Perhaps we could not,” Duval finished.

“Merde,” Picard cursed. “I don’t like this one bit. Picard to all runabouts. It looks as though Wolf is going to go to warp. I suggest we follow her until we know more.”

The Wolf was far too close to the star’s enormous gravity well to attempt warp, but by the time it crossed the orbit of the first planet, it would be safe even with Wolf’s poor warp dynamics and untried engines. The huge ship’s

impulse engines throttled up to full now, and she accelerated quickly. The parabolic orbital curve she was tracing extended on Delaware's tracking screen with her increase in speed. She was definitely heading out of the star system. Gomez set the comm system to repeat the hail continually.

Lefler suggested, "Her hangar deck could fit us if we could get inside her shields. Didn't Ensign Ro do that one time?"

"Once, yes" Picard said, "But with our cooperation."

Riker said, "I wish O'Brien were here. I've seen him beam through shields. Geordi?"

"Mmm," LaForge said, "The way he got aboard the Phoenix that time. Robin, you're our transporter specialist. What do you think?"

"I know the technique, but you need to know the shield frequency and recycle time. Is that in the specs, sir?"

Riker scrolled through the information on his classified PADD. "No."

"Sir, can we keep up?" Lefler asked. "Isn't the Wolf much faster at warp speed than a runabout?"

"Now *that* may be a problem," Riker admitted.

Two hours at full impulse later instruments showed the local gravity well was weak enough to go to warp. The crews of the runabouts readied themselves. Lefler had Delaware's warp core on line for the last fifteen minutes.

"Any change in status, Ensign Gomez?" Picard asked.

"No, Sir. Her shields are up, engines at full impulse." A flair on a readout, and a telltale bleeped. "There it is, Sir, they're forming a warp field."

Picard touched Lefler's shoulder and she nodded while she watched her instruments. "We'll be right with them, Captain," she said.

At the instant the wolf's massive warp coils energized they gave off the characteristic blue/white flash as cascading plasma brought their immense magnetic fields into play. Lefler increased her finger pressure on the warp-initiate key. But instead of suddenly sweeping off into subspace, the glow in the Wolf's warp nacelles flickered and died.

"Robin wait!" Gomez shouted, too loud, her excitement getting the better of her.

Lefler, startled, raised both hands above her shoulders in the cadet's classic "I didn't do nothing" pose to show she was off the key.

The USS James, however, distended abruptly and disappeared into the starburst flash of warp transition. Her helmsman wasn't quite so alert.

There was a barely discernable puff of smoke and debris under the Wolf's stern. A tiny stick-shaped object floated there, still inside the deflector shield bubble. It glowed a mild blue, then went dark. LaForge had a camera on it immediately and put a magnified view up on the central screen.

"Somebody ejected the warp core!" Gomez exclaimed, still excited.

LaForge said, "I can not *wait* to find out what's going on here!"

A flare of white light announced the return of the James, which rolled back into formation promptly. Commander Duval's voice crackled over the cabin speaker, "All right, what the hell was that all about?"

Picard stabbed the transmit key again and began, "Wolf. Commander Shelby, will you please..."

Riker had an uneasy feeling. Something he'd read. He tabbed through entries on his PADD, found it, said to himself, "Damn, I thought I'd seen that..." Abruptly he ordered, "Lefler, look sharp on the throttles..."

The Wolf's nacelles flared into life again.

"What...?" Gomez said

"She has two warp reactors," Riker finished.

The Wolf blazed into warp, and was gone.

The USS Delaware and her two sister ships had warped out of the system less than a minute behind the USS Wolf. It may take them several hours to catch up. Depending on Wolf's speed it may take several days. They may not be able to do it at all. Precious time had been lost in moments of confusion, which Picard had cut short with a firm, decisively barked order to pursue. But the model runabouts they were using topped out at warp six. The Wolf was rated at warp nine point two max, nine point seven emergency speed. But, Robin Lefler thought to herself, Wolf's warp dynamics plainly sucked, and it wouldn't be possible to maintain such a high speed for long without enormous structural strain. But, also, whoever was flying her might not care, either. The blown warp core would certainly be a factor. Four-nacelled ships that depended upon two reactors didn't make as good speed with only one running. Some ships used each reactor to power one pair of nacelles. Had that been the case with the Wolf, ejecting

one core would have disabled her until the engineering staff could reconfigure the drive software to run the ship on the warp field generated by two nacelles, lest the asymmetric driving force shear the ship in half. But the Wolf took the concept further, according to Riker's spec manual. With a Borg cube on your tail, stopping to change a flat, as it were, was not an option, so the pair of antimatter reactors powered all four nacelles evenly. Having lost one, the Wolf's warp dynamics were intact, bad as they may be, and although her speed must certainly be reduced she was perfectly capable of starflight.

They were following Wolf's warp signature and the faint plasma trail from her impulse engine exhaust. They wouldn't know how fast Wolf was actually going until they caught up with her, at least to sensor range. Or they may never know.

From the navigation console, LaForge turned to Captain Picard, who was pacing like, well like a wolf in a cage. "I have a solid course for them, Sir," he said.

"Tell me."

"Once they swung out of 2247 dash 925's singularity well, they established a course to galactic east. The trail shows a heading of eighty-seven mark three-five-zero. Pretty much a straight line to the next system over.

"Bonn?" Lefler exclaimed. "Oh, no."

"Well," LaForge read his readout, "Alturis Beta. Bonn?"

Gomez said, "Isn't that where your fuzzy friend was from, Robin?" She realized the captain was present, and quickly corrected herself, "...Lieutenant?"

"Denda. Bonn is the indigenous name for their planet."

Picard sat down opposite Lefler and gave her his full attention. "Please. Lieutenant, what do you know that may help us?"

Lefler recounted their lunch with the Drosenaglas, and noted that there were at least three other Bonns at the station, probably more considering they were from a contracting firm.

"Well, that doesn't tell us much," Riker said.

Picard thought aloud: "Some peoples have different ideas about property than we do. Perhaps the Bonns may think that because they worked on the project they should have use of the ship."

"The impression I got," Lefler offered, "was that Denda, at least, was proud of his work and his association with the Federation."

"But his father gave me the creeps," Gomez added.

"How so?" Picard asked.

"Well, Sir. Umm. He was... belligerent, I guess. No, not quite. He just obviously didn't want us around. And he kept staring at the other blue people at the next table."

"Staring. How? Conspiratory? Hateful? Admiring?"

"The second one," Gomez said. "Hateful. Sir."

Lefler's eyes lit. "Oh crap," she said. "Crap, um, Sir."

Picard nodded encouragement.

"Two things they said," Lefler explained. "The ones at the next table were worried when they heard we were from the Enterprise. More than worried. They were afraid the Enterprise was here. Really worried about it. The other thing was something Denda said about them."

She hesitated. LaForge spoke up: "Well, don't stop now, Robin! What?"

She went on, "I guess I have a standard reaction of ignoring people when they show a cultural bias. It just breezed right over my head at the time. Denda said the others had a very strict religion. So what, right? I let it pass. But there was obviously some serious animosity over it."

"Oh, sacré merde," Picard groaned. "Lieutenant, please get on the library computer and get everything Starfleet has on this planet."

She accessed the LCARS database on planetary governments and punched up the information on Bonn – or more precisely, Alturis Beta Three.

Bonn was not a member of the United Federation of Planets, nor would they be considered for membership. One of the primary prerequisites for Federation membership was that the planet in question be sufficiently developed socially to have established a single world government. Bonn was still fractionated into countries and republics and island city-states. According to the Federation contact report, twenty-five nations occupied Bonn's four continents, with an additional ten on as many large islands. The individual nations were insular and unfriendly toward each other. The bases for these animosities appeared to be complex and manifold, as with any world at Bonn's level of development. One nation, called "Condra," had become the most industrially advanced. It had developed spaceflight first, and was now in its first faltering steps toward starflight. Bonn's first manned hyperlight probe to a neighboring star, five years ago, was what caught the attention of Federation explorers. They were

surprised to discover that, though 300 years behind in starflight, the Bonns were quite advanced in other aspects of mechanical design, and their industrial designers were quick studies. Many corporations from Condra dove right into the technology sharing program, and were eager to become subcontractors on Starfleet naval projects.

The second-largest nation on Bonn, Theronn, was less far along industrially. They had their own space program, but it was confined to low orbit and satellite programs. They had apparently visited their own moon, but they had nothing like the capabilities of their neighbors, who had established a scientific colony on the system's fourth planet. The lesser nation had pointedly declined any association with the Federation as long as they treated with their rivals. Federation diplomats continued their entreaties, which continued to fall on deaf ears. There was some debate in council whether this unfair situation should continue, or the Federation should just pull out of the Bonn system and tell them we'll be back when they can work and play well together.

The island nations were what could be considered 'third world' nations, with little industrial base and largely agrarian economies. They were principally customers for the larger two nations' products, having little but food to offer in return.

The religious situation on Bonn was no better than the political one. Ancient rivalries were still intact. And acts of violence were common. Practitioners of the major religions seem to have gravitated together, and for the most part each country had its own state faith. This has led to continual squabbling among the island countries, and there was evidence of full scale war between Condra and Theronn as recently as ten standard years ago. Orbital scans revealed goodly-sized nuclear stockpiles on both sides, but there was no evidence of any nukes having been used in war. Specifics of the various religions have not been discussed with Federation emissaries, and the association was too new for the diplomats to feel comfortable prying.

All factions had been behaving themselves as long as they'd been associated with the Federation, though. Federation proposals to mediate had been rebuffed firmly. There was obvious xenophobia in that respect.

That was pretty much all there was on Bonn's socio-political structure. Their business practices were well documented from years of dealing with Condra's corporations. The company Denda worked for had been contracting with Starfleet Engineering Division for three years as a private company not necessarily associated with their government or religion – the report made a point of mentioning "or religion" – in the last year gaining security clearance to work on classified projects such as Wolf, so long as personnel stayed in seclusion during the project.

She left the display up and turned to the captain. He, in turn, looked at Riker.

Riker closed his eyes and rubbed them. They had all the clues they needed. "I have seen *far* too many religious wars in this galaxy," he said.

"And now in this one," Picard said, "one side has the power to win for all time."

"I will not let you use my ship for murder!" Commander Shelby screamed through her cabin door, punctuating the last word with her fist. She was getting hoarse from screaming, but if there was anything Elizabeth Shelby could do for a long time, it was make noise. Unfortunately they'd turned off her comm system before she'd awakened, twelve hours ago. According to her cabin's chrono she'd been unconscious for at least twelve before that. A whole day since her ship was taken from her. The lump on her head throbbed mercilessly, and most of that side of her face was bruised. "Where's my crew?" she bellowed. "What have you done with them? Let me *out* of here, you evil bastards!"

She had to take a break. Her throat hurt too much. She got some water from the replicator and sat, staring at the door.

"What a damn disgrace," she said to herself. "How can I expect a promotion if I let myself get hijacked by a couple of overgrown plush dolls?"

What in hell were they doing with her ship? Nothing good came to mind. She'd created a hugely powerful weapon here, and there was only one reason for anybody to steal it: to kill people. That's what it was made for, after all. If you could think of Borg as people. Well, many of them were *ex*-people. Damn it, how did that contractor and his friends get aboard anyway? It was Starfleet personnel only during a test flight. There was plenty of security at the base. None on board, though – only the twenty crew. God, she hoped they hadn't killed the crew. They hadn't killed her, so maybe that was one good sign. They were thieves and kidnapers, but not killers yet. If she could just get them to talk to her...

"Let me the hell *out* of here!"

Good, her voice felt much better. Her hands hurt from pounding on the door. Though. She started staring at the ventilation shaft, wondering if she could fit. No. Stupid. The main trunks could pass a human, but the room ducts weren't even big enough for her slender build. Too bad the replicator could only make food, not a damn phaser.

Wait, was it possible to make an explosive out of food products?

“Oh, Lizzy,” she said to herself, “you *are* losing it.”

Her comm panel came to life. On the screen, the face of one of the Bonn contractors appeared. She didn't know them well enough to be able to tell which one. Before she could say a word he said quickly, “Ship yours we need. No crew harmed are, locked away all in bunkroom. Intention ours was to borrow, and unharmed return. Engineer yours, before we could stun him, warp core number one eject. Not our fault! Damage not on us! Done we be in five days, then ship we give back. Would sooner be if both cores intact. Blame engineer! You stay in cabin yours. Be comfortable. No harm to Federation people meant.”

“Now just a fu...” the comm panel went dead instantly. “...Oooohhhh, *crapcrapcrapCRAP!*”

Lefler had stayed up front at the controls – someone had to – but the rest gathered in the Delaware's aft compartment at its small table. The forward wall screen was split into two similar scenes of the other two runabouts' aft rooms, each with three of their crew, minus pilots. A feed to the cockpits included the pilots in the conversations without their needing to leave the controls. Any starship could certainly run itself, of course, but regulations and common sense said that someone had to be up front at all times in case the universe, as was its wont, pulled a surprise out of its hat.

As it happened Picard was the senior officer aboard all three ships, and was thus the default commander of this little expedition. He no doubt would have assumed command anyway. Lieutenant Commander Tosik and Commander Duval, despite having more relevance to take charge due to their familiarity with all concerned, were happy to yield responsibility to him.

Duval was saying, “According to what we heard from base, five of the twenty-five Bonn contractors are unaccounted for. None of them were scheduled for leave at home, so they're probably on the Wolf. Five people could probably operate the ship for a limited amount of time, but not if anything went wrong. You need a crew for things going wrong.”

“Wait a minute,” Gomez said with the light of realization in her dark eyes. “It couldn't be as simple as... could it...?” she said tentatively to LaForge.

“An idea, Ensign?” Riker asked.

“Well, Sir, it may sound silly, Sir...” she continued nervously, “but what if they just... want to go home?”

Duval said, “So they steal a top secret starship to do it? That's ridiculous!”

Gomez lowered her head and whispered. “Yes, Sir, it is, Sir.”

LaForge heard Sonya lose a notch of her spine just then. It was hard enough to get her to speak up around senior officers. When one put her down like that, however unintentionally, she often held her tongue for the rest of the meeting. That was partly why she was still an ensign while Lefler had progressed in rank ahead of her – Robin never let anything stand in the way of her opinion. But in this situation that could cost them, because Gomez certainly had something to contribute here. “She has a point, Captain,” he said. “I mean, it may not be the case, but what do we know about their social customs? Their association with the Federation is very new. They may know as little about how to act in our society as we do about theirs.” Gomez didn't meet Geordi's eyes, but he saw her smile a thanks. “Maybe they figure with the construction of the ship done, they can use it to go home.”

“Okay,” Duval said, “I hadn't thought of that.” Gomez looked up, rejoining the meeting. “But I think the situation smells.” On the other screen Tosik raised an eyebrow. Duval saw it and shook his head. He went on, “I mean the whole thing reeks of violence. Why steal Wolf just for a trip home?”

“Indeed,” Tosik said. “It would have been more sensible to procure a runabout at a time other than during the test procedure. Why steal a large experimental warship just to transport five persons?”

Lefler's voice chimed in, “Because it's hard to stow away on something as small as a runabout. Sir.”

“Plenty of room on the Wolf,” someone from Hudson's crew added.

“Nevertheless,” the Vulcan continued, “It would seem far easier to abscond with a runabout directly from the base, taking it when no one was about, and drawing no attention to oneself.”

Someone behind Tosik said, “Sir, the only way out of the asteroid with any ship is the main hangar door. It's locked down, guarded, force field sealed, and controllable only from the flight center. And everyone would see it opening. It *would* be easier to take a ship once its outside.”

Picard summed up, “So if this theory is valid, then the Bonns only want transportation home. Then all we need do is allow them to go there and disembark, and we may go about our business without further incident.”

Riker added, sotto voce, “Don't forget the part where we arrest their asses.”

“Oh like hell,” Duval said. Picard’s eyebrows now raised. “Sorry, Sir,” The commander continued sheepishly. “I just don’t buy it. When someone steals a kilometer-long antimatter cannon with a nearly full magazine, they’re going to blow something up.”

“That is the only logical conclusion,” Tosik said with finality.

Picard thought for a moment. “I concur, I’m afraid.” He met Gomez’s eyes, “But it’s refreshing that someone considers that people may indeed have good intentions as well as evil.” She smiled and blushed lightly.

“So,” Picard continued, “What can we do about it?”

“With just a runabout’s phasers?” someone said, “If Wolf’s shields are up, we can’t even annoy them.”

One of Hudson’s crew offered, “Enough concentrated phaser fire will eventually wear down any shield. If all three of us concentrate on, say, the impulse deck area... pulse the beams... the rebound effect flexes the shield envelope... if we keep it up, eventually the shields will dimple and one of us will punch through. Take out the sublight engines.”

Tosik said, “I would point out that, if at full impulse, the ship will be traveling at one quarter the speed of light. If we disable its impulse engines it will have no way to change course or speed. It will continue on until it hits something, and there will then be a very large explosion. If that something is Alturis Beta Three...”

Duval added, “And I’d like to point out that the Wolf’s aft phasers will be carving into us while we’re trying this precision marksmanship.”

Someone off screen, one of the other pilots, said “So we make continuous coordinated attack runs, evading return fire while we come around. Having three targets in constant motion will confuse the hell out of any civilian contractor trying to shoot at us.”

“But not the Wolf’s defensive combat computer,” Riker said, reading his PADD’s data, “which is fully automated, fully operational, and I quote, ‘capable of handling twenty-four targets simultaneously in each defensive quadrant.’”

“Crap.” The voice said.

“We got no cards to play,” Duval said. “Three runabouts against a thousand-meter starship. The word ‘inadequate’ is inadequate.”

“We have five days to come up with something,” Riker said.

In the early hours of the third day of the pursuit, Commander Duval’s voice chirped into being in the Delaware’s cockpit. It was two in the morning. LaForge and Gomez were on watch. Everyone else was asleep in the bunk compartment. Duval said, “Thar she blows.”

LaForge stifled the yawn he had going, resisted the urge to ask “whereaway?” and wordlessly accepted the sensor patch-through from the James. The Wolf was about an hour ahead of them doing warp five point seven. They were indeed gaining on her marginally. She was still on a straight-line course for Alturis Beta. When she arrived there, the runabouts would still be about ten minutes behind her. In ten minutes the Wolf could turn at least two major cities and their populations into glowing clouds of quarks.

“Okay, Commander,” LaForge answered, “We’ve got it.”

Someone from the Hudson, not Tosik, confirmed reception also. LaForge wondered how the Vulcan would have reacted to the old Earthly seafaring slang that Duval had used.

Gomez asked sleepily, “Should I wake the others?”

“No, let ‘em sleep, Sonya. The situation won’t change by oh-six-hundred. There’s nothing duller than a long tail chase.” His yawn came back to finish what it had started, and Geordi let it have its way. “All we can do is follow them until we catch up.”

“I should have brought a book.”

LaForge chuckled, and ran through the Delaware’s status check one more time. Not that it needed continual checking, but there was nothing else to do except drive on and wait.

All systems nominal.

Gomez said, “Commander?” hesitantly.

“Mmm hmm?”

“How old were you when you made lieutenant?”

Already knowing where this was going, Geordi answered. “Let’s see – I think I was about 22. Over-achiever, I guess. Let me guess, Sonya, you have a birthday coming up.”

She nodded and blushed. “Two weeks ago, actually. Twenty-nine.”

“Uh-oh,” he jibed, “big three-oh approaching; shields up!”

Gomez made a gagging sound and they laughed together a little.

LaForge regarded his officer. Young and energetic, yes. But even now her posture showed her key personality trait – she was sitting slumped a little forward, her legs crossed, her hands clasped together in her lap. Arms huddled in to her body as if hugging herself with her elbows. Sonya was one of the most insecure people he knew. She could be very outgoing with her peers, but with an officer around, or anyone she perceived as an older authority figure, she retracted her antenna and closed her shutters.

“Sonya, you’re a good – no, you’re a *great* engineer. I’ve only met two people in my life with more savvy of antimatter systems.”

She looked stricken. “Who?”

“Me, and an old guy named Montgomery Scott.”

Everybody knew who Scotty was. Sonya relaxed again and shared a chuckle at the joke. Then she sobered and said, “But?”

“No ‘but’ Sonya, you’re the best person I have for the job you do. That’s why you and Robin are along on this little camp-out.” He saw her flinch microscopically at the mention of Robin’s name, and his prosthetic eyes registered a slight flush in the infrared around her neck. “Does it bother you that Robin made looey before you did?”

She breathed a frustrated sigh. “I’m not being, um, petty, Sir. It’s more disappointment in myself than anything like anger at Robin. But she’s two years younger than me, and she made looey two years ago, at 25! I can’t help but feel... I don’t know...” there was a word she was having trouble using. “...some degree of...failure.”

Geordi pointed a finger at her nose. “No. Don’t say that about yourself. Didn’t I just tell you you were the best antimatter specialist I have?”

“Yessir.” She hung her head. Meekly, she asked, “What’s keeping me back, then, Sir?”

It was his turn to sigh, only his was of exasperation. He didn’t want to go here. “Well, for one thing, Sonya, there’s only room for so many Lieutenants on a ship. Eventually you run out of departments for them to be in charge of. Lieutenant Tandosee rotated out just at the time Robin’s review came up that year, and Robin was clearly the best choice for both the job and the promotion. Sonya, don’t take this badly, please, but she is very good with people. She’s clearly in charge of her staff.”

Gomez attempted to smile and joked, “Yessir, I know, I’m one of them.”

“Do you think you could handle people as well as she does? I know you have the ability to make decisions and analyze problems, but...”

“...But my social skills suck. I know, Commander.”

He shook his head. “Well, social skills have never been a requirement for command, God knows.” She laughed out loud, and caught herself short before she embarrassed herself. Geordi continued. “Okay. I guess you deserve a straight answer. The issue to me is self confidence. Frankly: No matter how well you do your job, until you show me that you’d be able to command a staff of junior officers firmly and decisively, and *with confidence*, I can’t in good conscience justify a lieutenantcy for you to *my* superiors.”

She looked at her hands in her lap. She was squeezing her fists together nervously, white knuckles on olive skin. She was shaking a little too. She always did that when she was on the spot like this. “I see,” she whispered.

The world below was pristine and blue, flecked with tatters of peaceful clouds painting their intricate patterns along jetstreams and tradewinds. As she orbited around, a continent rolled leisurely into view. Brown, green, dotted with lakes. A smear of gray where a city lay. Candle-flickers of city lights on the approaching limb where night began. From this height, she was surprised to be able to see the v-shaped wakes of cargo ships plying the seas. It was a beautiful little planet. If only she could take it with her. Keep it. Make it hers. She found herself coveting the tiny sphere. Maybe not all of it. Maybe just... maybe just that city. Its people. Its technology. For herself. Its distinctiveness would be incorporated. She reached out and dug her hands into the soil around the city, cupped it in her hands, and lifted it to her eyes to look. Tiny blue people. Screaming. Running. Dying. She looked down to the planet and saw the divot she’d scooped out. That was all she’d wanted. The rest was waste. She opened her mouth. A golden shaft of light shot out and speared the little planet. Atmosphere ignited. Rock exploded. Blue people flashed into vapor. It was hers. It fed her now. She was Shelby. Of Borg. Shelby. Queen of the Borg.

Her pounding heart woke her. Commander Shelby lay unmoving on her bunk. She felt like she hadn’t breathed in a year. She took in air sharply and deeply. Looked around. Woke up fully before trying to move. The room lights were on. She hadn’t turned them off to sleep since she’d been locked in. She didn’t want to sleep long enough to need the dark.

She remembered the dream.

Dear God, how in hell did Picard live with his memories?

Two icons showed on the tracking display on the Delaware's main panel. To the right, a Starfleet emblem. At left, another. The right icon was marked with a small block of text beneath it which read "USS Wolf, NX-75984, Range .42LY, Speed W5.7." The left icon listed the names of all three runabouts, grouped in formation so closely that at this scale it was pointless to show separate symbols.

Picard stared at the screen, having little better to do. He knew intellectually that the distance between the two symbols was indeed closing gradually. But there was no apparent relative movement visible. It seemed to him their closing speed was no greater than the rate at which stars formed, and civilizations rose and fell, or the galaxy turned on its axis. He wondered if they'd catch up to their quarry before the galaxy completed another full revolution. Four days now. Ah well, he'd had longer waits in his life. Lying abed after his heart replacement surgery while his Academy classmates progressed without him. Those interminable weeks in a tiny shuttle packed with survivors of the Stargazer's last – hm, second-to-last – battle. Virtually any dealings with that omnipotent buffoon, Q, never seemed to end.

The stars were sparse in this area of the Alpha Quadrant, in the low star-density region between two of the Milky Way's spiral arms. They were near the border with Beta Quadrant, as far from the Bajoran Wormhole as they could be and still keep the whole Beta Quadrant between them and the Borg in the Delta Quadrant. Billions upon billions of stars in a galaxy a hundred thousand light years across and they still had to hide from warmongering races halfway across its disk. He longed for the day, probably millennia in the future, when mankind found a way to traverse the immense void between galaxies themselves. Maybe there was one out there where everyone lived in peace. No, come to think of it, he'd read something about an encounter James Kirk had had with people from the Andromeda galaxy. They hadn't been very friendly, he recalled. And, hadn't the planet killer that had inspired the design of the Wolf itself come from outside our own galaxy? For all he knew it and others like it had wiped out all life in its home galaxy before coming to ours.

Damn. Was everyone in the universe fighting with everyone else? Surely that can't be the only reason for life to exist. Wasn't there anyone out there besides himself who wanted to improve themselves by learning and exploring, rather than conquering and enslaving?

Riker, returning from the head, broke Picard's reverie. "Captain, you look awfully somber."

Picard grunted a grudging laugh. "Will, this is going to sound a bit peevish, but I haven't been having a very good time lately."

Riker chuckled. "It has been a rough year or two, hasn't it, Sir? Between the Borg and the Dominion. Almost losing the new Enterprise on top of losing the last one."

Picard's eyebrows lifted, crinkling his brow up to his hairless scalp, and a hint of a smile played at his mouth. "May I remind you, Number One," he admonished, "that you were in command of our former ship when it was destroyed."

"Yes, Sir," Riker smiled, knowing he was being kidded. "The hearing board reminded me of that often. But..."

"But, Commander Riker?"

In a tone of voice emulating a whiney teenager, Riker finished, "... well... Deanna was driving!"

She'd been locked in her cabin for five days, desperation and fury raging within, both vying for control over her reason. Her hands hurt. She'd pried the ventilator grid off barehanded, finally giving in to the absurd hope she'd be able to crawl through. The grate lay on the floor. Her anger didn't make her feel any the less stupid for actually having tried to get into an air vent. She couldn't even squeeze her damn head into the opening. And as soon as it went into the wall the narrow trunk made a ninety-degree vertical turn that nothing larger than a squirrel could have negotiated. And she'd known that before she'd pried the panel off the wall.

She had a foreboding sense that she was almost out of time. Her captors must be nearing the end of their voyage – he'd said five days. She had black visions of her hoped-for title of Commander (Captain?) Shelby, creator of the weapon that saved the Federation from the Borg and the Jem'Hadar, transforming into Commander (civilian?) Shelby, the pariah who resurrected a doomsday machine and let terrorists steal it.

Pocket doors. Everything in Starfleet was sliding automatic pocket doors. If the door swung in, she could remove the hinges and escape. If the door swung out, she could probably smash it down. No. It slid open, into the

wall. On the floor in front of the door were the bent and snapped remains of a half dozen butter knives she'd used to try to pry the door open, the nearest things to actual weapons or tools she could coax from the food replicator. When she'd decided to take the vent grille off, she'd asked the replicator for a screwdriver. It had given her the drink. Synthelol, too, not even real.

With the comm panel off and her commbadge confiscated she couldn't command the ship's computer to alter the replicator pathways to give her objects other than food. She could hope her kidnappers would talk to her again, and forget to turn off her panel. Pipe dream. The only other time they'd spoken to her, they were on and off in less than a minute. They would never let her finish such a command string.

Hey. Wait a minute.

"Any second now, Captain," Lefler reported, watching a readout. "Alturis Beta's singularity mass is smaller than average and Bonn is pretty far out from it, so they'll be able to break out of warp pretty near the planet. Maybe fifteen minutes out at full impulse."

The Wolf's warp signature was strong on the display now that they were close by. There was very little chance that her pirate crew didn't know they were being followed unless they didn't know how to work the sensor platforms. That seemed fairly unlikely to Picard. The runabouts were trailing ten minutes behind the Wolf now. If they neutralized warp at the same spot the Wolf did, they'd still be ten minutes behind her with little or no hope of catching up if she ran at full impulse to Bonn. If the Wolf held off coming out of warp to a spot closer to the star than the safe limit, it would be a tremendous risk to do the same. But a planetful of people may be at stake. And they still had no idea what to do about it.

With a dismayed shake of his head, LaForge reported, "Wolf's shields are still up, Captain. I just don't see anything we can do to stop them."

"Nor do I, Geordi," Picard answered. "Ensign Gomez put me on ship-to-ship with the James and the Hudson, please."

The ensign took a moment to tear herself away from the ships' plot, waiting for something to happen. "Ship-to-ship, Sir."

"This is Picard. When the Wolf comes out of warp, wherever it may be, I want the three of us to continue past that point and overtake her as much as possible before coming out ourselves. Right on top of her if possible."

"Oh, my God, Captain..." Gomez started as Duval and Tosik acknowledged, Duval with a fatalistic sigh.

"Ensign..." Picard began to chide her for her outburst.

"Oh, Sir, I mean ... right on top of her ... that gave me an idea."

Picard raised an eyebrow. "Pray continue then, Ensign."

An alarm bleeped urgently. "She's out of warp, Sir," Lefler said. "Further out than we anticipated! Twenty-five minutes to Bonn orbit. We can hold warp six for another ten minutes and be right on top of them."

Riker smiled broadly. "Our first break." Then to Gomez: "You think you can give us another one?"

"Remember how they used the runabouts to as tugs to pull the Wolf out of the hangar, Sir?"

"Sonya," LaForge said, "We don't have enough power between us to tow ... Hey, wait a minute..."

Picard looked impatiently at LaForge. He furrowed his brow pointedly.

"Sir," Gomez went on, "we don't have enough power between us to tow a ship that big if it doesn't want to be towed, but the runabouts' engines are a whole lot more powerful than Wolf's directional thrusters."

Lefler laughed. "Sure! We can lock onto the hull with tractor beams and steer them anywhere *but* at the planet! But no, Sonya – the tractors won't be able to get a solid lock on the Wolf with her shields up. We'll slip pretty badly."

Gomez shook her head. "Get underneath. Our shields against their shields, and push."

Lefler scrunched her face up. "Pretty iffy, but sure, it could work. We could try the tractors as well to supplement our grip."

"And if we time it right," Gomez went on, "we could alter their course radically enough that they would overshoot their orbital insertion point and sail on past the planet."

LaForge nodded, "It would take them a while to get realigned. It would buy us some time."

Riker added. "It's an option that doesn't require firing on the Wolf. At least not right away."

Picard's mouth pinched in thought. Then he nodded sharply. "Make it so."

Alturis Beta was a painfully bright point about a quarter the size of Sol seen from Earth when the runabouts reached their critical downwarping limit. Picard held their speed for five more minutes. Limits were there for minimal safety considerations. Minimal was unacceptable with this many lives at stake. They might have had considerably more time if the planet had been on the far side of its sun, requiring the pirates – that’s the only way Picard could think of them now – to spend hours at sublight swinging around the star. But the planet was right there in front of them, ten minutes ahead of the USS Wolf and her weapon. The huge starship was visible to the naked eye now, perhaps a thousand kilometers ahead of them, shining brightly in reflected starlight.

LaForge said, “They’re starting to slow for orbital insertion. They’re doing it a lot sooner than they need to.”

“They’re unsure of themselves,” Riker postulated. “Being careful on unfamiliar controls. Sir, I don’t think they know we’re here.”

“Based on the fact that we’re still alive?” LaForge asked. Riker nodded grimly.

Lefler offered, “Well, there’s only five of them. Maybe they couldn’t spare someone for tactical.”

“All ships: Close and surround the Wolf,” Picard ordered. “Shields up.”

The three tiny starships, gnats against Wolf’s mass, swarmed forward at full impulse. The Hudson and James slid into formation below the big ship’s bow. The Enterprise crew in the Delaware slightly astern of them. Ahead, magnified on the viewscreen, the pristine planet Bonn circled its star serenely with gentle pale veils of clouds around its tropics. The Wolf wasn’t pointed right at it, she was aiming ahead of the orbital track to meet the planet and fall into orbit. Her impulse engines were still thrusting at minimal power this far out, with terminal maneuvers still ahead.

Picard saw on the tactical plot that his ships were in position. This would be tricky. He said, “Engage.”

The two runabouts touched their tiny shield bubbles against the Wolf’s own. Then tractor beams, oscillating cones of sparkling blue gravitons, popped into being like flashlight beams, skittering and washing over the Wolf’s deflector shields, raising holiday-sparkler nimbuses; not gripping but helping minutely. Like trying to hold on to a fish, Riker thought. Without pausing, all three of the small ships pitched up at sixty degrees and their impulse engines flared to full power. Their propulsive force was indeed much greater than the larger ship’s control thrusters, which immediately began firing automatically to right the ship, and the USS Wolf’s nose reared upward out of the plane of the system’s ecliptic. So far it was only a rotation, though, and with her impulse engines at minimum the deflection from her forward course was nil. It continued forward with its belly facing the planet.

“Mark,” Lefler called when the ship itself had achieved sixty degrees relative to its line of flight. The runabouts stopped thrusting, and Picard watched the tracking display. Wolf’s engines continued thrusting, and indeed her course began arcing up and away from Alturis Beta Three’s orbit.

We need an experience tug pilot, Riker thought to himself.

Picard barked, “Commander Tosik, with us please.”

Tosik disengaged the Hudson’s tractor beam and brought the runabout quickly around behind the Wolf. Together with the Delaware, each ship attempted to lock their tractors onto one of the Wolf’s opposing warp nacelles and push from behind, to give the huge vessel a shove upward and out of the system’s ecliptic plane. Their shield bubbles bumped against the Wolf’s and dazzled as the beams danced madly for a lock-on.

A moment before the plan might have worked, the Wolf’s impulse deck flared brightly, and a fan of glowing red plasma blasted outward radially from her stern. Her four massive engines, each backed by a fusion reactor more powerful than any pair of runabouts’, was thrown into full reverse. Spent plasma poured through her thrust-reverser slats and fanned out into the void, and the runabout crews felt their little ships lurch against their compensating force fields. The tractor beams were holding somewhat, and the Wolf was tugging at them now. Picard ordered the runabouts to resume thrusting, but against the Wolf’s engines their forward speed began to ebb immediately. They would be no match for such power, and this move would play hell with all their orbital dynamics. They were already within the orbit of the planet’s moon, but way too slow to maintain it. They would fall toward Bonn’s gravity well.

The main view screen blinked to life on Delaware’s bridge. A fuzzy blue face appeared. If facial expressions were the same for Bonns and humans, this being was exasperated.

“What do you?!” he shouted. “Where from you come? Follow us not should you have!”

“Heave to!” Picard answered with martial force. “You have stolen a Federation warship. If you do not cease fighting us and surrender the USS Wolf to us, you risk inciting punitive action against your world.”

“What? Fight us?” the being said in wonder.

Lefler caught Picard's attention long enough to say, "That's not Denda or his father – I think it's one of the ones from the other table, the 'strict-religion' guys."

The Bonn went on, "Starfleet Federation no harm from us meant! Ship we return! We want to not harm you! Go away! Please!"

"It's too late for that now..." The Wolf's thrust had brought the chain of ships to a relative halt, and was now pulling them all backward against the planet's gravity. The maneuver was sloppy as hell; the Bonns were just applying opposite force to the situation without considering any other tactics. "... and if we don't all stop this thrust-match right away we may fall into your homeworld."

"Then you stop!" the blue man ordered. He stabbed at controls off screen. A series of phaser beams lanced out from the Wolf's defensive batteries. Each runabout was hit exactly twice in rapid succession. At a range of less than ten meters they could hardly miss, automatic or not. It was shocking for a moment until everyone realized no one was damaged.

"That had to be an automated defense system they just turned on," LaForge said. "That was too damn good."

Lefler checked a panel. "Shields holding – they hit us at one-one hundredth power. It was just a warning."

Picard considered for a second. "He said he didn't want to hurt us. Let's see how much he means it." Gomez shot him a wary look, which he caught peripherally and chose to ignore. "Maintain full impulse. All reserve power to the tractor beams."

Another round of phaser bursts rippled from the Wolf and tagged all the smaller ships. This volley was at a higher setting, and the James abruptly dropped away. "We're all right," Duval reported. "Control circuit burnout... auxiliary engaged... we're coming back, Captain."

"No," Picard said heavily. "All ships disengage. This is not working, and we can't stop them if we're all dead."

The runabouts backed away, and the Wolf seemed to shake off its confusion – perhaps the Bonns trying to decide how best to come back on course. Then it pitched its nose slowly back down, fired its engines and realigned for a standard orbit around Bonn, as deadly as it ever had been.

Gomez dropped heavily into her seat again and said, "Nuts."

When Shelby's comm panel came back to life, she was sitting against the wall directly under it. She heard the tone it made reactivating and stood up smartly to face the screen.

The same blue contractor as before faced her. He spoke urgently: "Starfleet ships yours are here, I need you talk to them..."

She gave him less than a sentence to see if he had anything to say that she could use. He had, and now she cut him off before he could finish and cut her off. "Computer," she spoke as quickly as she could and still have the machine understand her, "Voiceprint Shelby Elizabeth security code Shelby Epsilon three..."

"What? No, to them you talk..."

Quickly now: "Security code fifteen execute. Repeat..."

"Stop it!" the Bonn stabbed buttons on his panel furiously, trying to cut her off. It didn't work. She smiled. It reminded her of herself, pounding on her own door for days. That door slid open on its own now and she calmly stood a chair in the doorway to keep it from closing again. She went back to the comm panel. Her adrenaline was pumping hard, but for the first time in days she felt she had some control.

"All hands this is Shelby. Split into two groups, I want the bridge and engineering secured. Move!"

Gomez exclaimed "Her shields are down!"

The cabin speakers announced: "Starfleet vessels, this is Commander Shelby. My ship has been taken and my crew and I have been locked in quarters. I don't know the situation aboard just yet, but I've managed a code fifteen. No telling how long before these guys figure out how to bypass it from the bridge. We'll see what we can do here. I'd appreciate a little help."

Riker keyed the mike. "Shelby, this is Riker. We suspect five Alturans aboard."

"Riker, can you beam me into my bridge?"

"Not alone, you don't. We'll beam you here first, then we'll both beam over, armed."

"Hurry. I have no commbadge, you'll have to scan for me. I'm in my cabin."

While Riker sprinted back to the weapons locker to get another phaser and a spare commbadge for Shelby, Gomez, showing uncharacteristic sharpness, rushed back to the runabout's two-stage transporter booth just behind the cockpit and started scanning. "Got her," she said. Immediately Commander Shelby shimmered into presence.

Riker, trotting back into the cockpit, stopped short when he saw her. Her hair was a curly blonde tangle hanging limply to one side. A bruise covered one side of her face. She clearly hadn't changed or showered in the five days of her captivity. She saw his reaction and said, "Shut up. Get on."

He smiled at her and stepped onto the transporter pad, handing her a phaser and badge.

“Wait!” Lefler said in disgust. “Wolf’s shields just went back up.”

“*Damn* it!” Shelby shouted and punched out, hitting Riker hard in the ribs. As he bounced off the transporter booth wall she realized what she’d done and grabbed him by the arm as his knees buckled. “Oh crap, I’m sorry. Will, I’m sorry. I’ve been punching walls for five days, I forgot you were there.”

“S’okay,” he grunted. “You’ve been under a little pressure lately.”

She looked around, seeing where she was for the first time. “All you brought was a runabout?”

The rest of the crew had been staring in amazement at the scene. Now Picard said “Three, actually. It’s all that was handy, you know.”

Under control of its hijackers once again, the USS Wolf fell into orbit around Alturis Beta Three. The three runabouts buzzed about her like mosquitoes, waiting for an opening, finding none. Continued attempts to hail her bridge met with no response, but the freed crewmembers had gotten to a comm panel. The engineering officer, Lieutenant Bidura, spoke to Shelby. The crew had secured engineering and taken prisoner three of their former captors.

“We have the remaining core shut down, Commander,” he reported, “and the impulse deck. Seems to be too late, I suppose, if we are at their destination. I am sorry, Ma’am.”

“Don’t worry about it, Lieutenant. Is the weapon disabled?”

“No, Ma’am, and we cannot bring the shields down either. Remember we designed this thing so a Borg party in engineering had limited ability to harm us.”

“Yes, I know.” Shelby explained to Picard: “Absolute final control for the main weapon and the deflector shields is on the bridge. There’s no way to override from anywhere else.”

Picard gave her an ironic smile. “It seemed sensible at the time,” he said.

Shelby spoke to her crew again. “Can we get into the bridge?”

“No Ma’am. They have a full security lock down in effect, including a force field. We cannot even burn our way in with phaser rifles.”

“What about your prisoners? Make them talk to their friends.”

“They refuse of course. They are all of the same cause.”

She sighed heavily, feeling quite helpless again. “All right, Rachime. Get a crew into the Jefferies tubes and try to cut power to the main weapon. I know we made it impossible to do that, but be creative. Make sure everybody has commbadges on, if those shields come down and it hits the fan I want to be able to beam everybody out of there stat.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” the engineer answered with a fatalistic sigh.

Outside the viewports, the massive starship hung in Bonn’s sky. Below, deep indigo ocean rolled past. An archipelago of small islands capped with cumulus bonnets. To the south, a tropical storm swirled. Shelby remembered a dream, vaguely, and felt a touch of panic.

Picard sat furtively at the comm station and keyed the mike. “This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of Starfleet calling the Bonns aboard the USS Wolf. Please respond. I ask you to stop what you’re doing and allow us to take our ship back. I warn you again that any aggressive action you take may cause reprisals from the United Federation of Planets.”

There was only the slight hydrogen hiss of the carrier wave for a moment. Then the lyrical cadence of the Bonn’s voice: “Starfleet Captain, Kadentawa Buta Disda Henk, I am. Harm you not I want. Beg you I do to go away. Harm aliens I must not, but show my brothers this ship I must! At stake is so much, you do not see.”

Picard muted the mike, looked to Lefler. She picked up on his unspoken question. She explained “His given name is Disda. The form is: family name, title, given name and I think clan name.”

“How do I address him formally, Lieutenant?”

“Buta Kadentawa. Bu-*ta* meaning the son. His father would be Bu-*to*...” Picard held up a hand indicating he had quite enough information and opened the audio pickup again.

“Buta Kadentawa,” Picard answered, “You are correct, I do not see. If you would lower your shields and let us come aboard, I think we can discuss this and come to some agreement. You see, that is how we do things in the Federation. You cannot just take what you want; that is not our way. If all you want is to show the ship to your people, that could certainly have been arranged. All this was unnecessary.”

“My country we approach now. You be quiet.”

A land mass rose over the eastern horizon as their orbit brought them around the planet. The Dream hovered in the back of Shelby’s mind, not quite clear, just beyond remembering.

In his native language, flowing in rhythmic cadence like a song, Kadentawa broadcast to his nation. The Delaware's translator spoke with his voice in English: "My friends, my people, look up to heaven and see what I have brought! A weapon so wonderful and powerful that our enemies will never dare to attack us again, now that we have this. War will be impossible now, because no one will be able to beat us. No one will dare."

Riker whispered, "Oh, how many times has history heard that ridiculous claim?"

The alien voice went on: "Our new friends, the Federation, have helped us build this wonderful ship. With them, and with this, our enemies will keep us down no more. By our laws, we have built this ship together and we share its use." (this last seemed a pointed comment at the Starfleet personnel) "And the Federation will honor this, as they honor all planets' traditions."

Picard hung his head and sighed in frustration. He transmitted directly to the Wolf's bridge. "Buta Kadentawa, that is not our way. We honor your traditions, yes, but we do not trade warships. You've helped us build this ship, yes, and you have been paid for your work. That is the end of it. I'm sorry. We can certainly arrange a trade agreement whereby our engineers share technology with your world – mark that: your planet, not just your country. But this? No, I'm afraid you have the wrong idea. Now please drop your shields and allow us to beam over before this goes any further."

"Speak for Federation you do not. Ship I give back to you in twenty minutes. I go home, you go home. Build then you new ship for my people. We, Federation, be friends."

"Twenty minutes?" Gomez said, "Why twenty minutes?"

"Don't you see it, Sonya?" Lefler said with an obvious edge of fear, "This isn't Denda's country below us. We thought all the Bonns on the project were from Condra – the technologically superior nation – but these five aren't *from* Denda's country. Remember he said they were from a stricter religion; with what we know now that can only mean they're from the other country. Denda's enemies. They're spies or something. Maybe planted in Denda's company to do this. What's below us now is Theronn; the country that says it's being oppressed by Condra. Now they have a weapon that's superior to anything even Condra has. What happens in twenty minutes is that the Wolf will be *over Condra!*"

"Oh, Christ," Shelby whispered.

Ocean showed on the horizon, and the terminator between day and night. It crept toward them too quickly.

Shelby keyed the intership. "Bidura, do anything you have to. Turn off the weapon, get the shields down, gas the bridge, *eject* the bridge module, *anything*. We are way past out of time!"

The engineer's answer didn't come immediately, which meant he was indeed trying something at the time.

"We built her too good, Ma'am" he said, out of breath. "Whatever is happening out there, do not wait for us."

Picard locked eyes with Shelby, as both knew the only way left.

"It's your ship, Commander," the Captain said.

Shelby nodded. "All runabouts, this is Commander Shelby." She took a deep determined breath. "I want a concentrated attack on the Wolf's bridge. I don't care what it takes, we have to get through those shields and take out the bridge. To the Wolf crew: get everyone aft to engineering and stand by." She looked at her almost-command as it hung, looking not at all unlike that planet-killer of a century ago, over a cloud-swirled deep blue ocean. "Remember that entire hull is an antimatter tank, so target only the bridge. Pattern Bravo. Let's go, people. Execute."

Tosik and Duval's pilots acknowledged simultaneously. Lefler moved to the copilot's seat to operate the phaser panel while LaForge flew. The runabouts scattered, turned and came at the Wolf from three different vectors. Their phasers struck out and stabbed at the warship's deflectors. Her shields sparkled pale green where the beams splashed their energies, and they held. The gunners pulsed their beams; the rebounding effect would weaken the shield bubble. They pulled away one-by-one before they could cross paths and collide and retreated for another attack run.

The power of a modern ship's impulse engines made maneuvering in orbit less tricky than it once was, but the pilots still had to account for the fact that they were moving laterally at orbital velocities while also trying to execute a coordinated attack. Although the ship's control computers compensated by figuring what the pilot wanted to do, the basics of orbital dynamics still applied, and they got in the way of this kind of maneuvering. Slowing down made you fall lower and cut a tighter radius from the planet's center, thus appearing to go faster than a higher, faster object; speeding up put you in a higher orbit with more distance to go to catch up to a slower object. It was counterintuitive to the way a throttle was supposed to work. If one didn't want to end up porpoising all over the sky and never reaching the objective, one had to use huge amounts of thrust to counteract nature's laws, keep from falling into the atmosphere, and drive in straight lines. LaForge drove straight as possible at the great ship's bridge while Lefler tapped the phaser fire control and aimed the beam. Wolf was not shooting back. Maybe the engineering crew managed to cut phaser power. Or maybe the Alturan truly didn't want to hurt them. Or maybe the two remaining aliens had their furry little hands full just keeping the ship in orbit.

“Stop you will!” the Bonn shouted across the vacuum. “Hurt you I do not want to! But stop it!”

After the second pass drew no return fire, Picard ordered his de facto fighter squadron to come to a relative rest and fire point-blank into the bridge module. The runabouts drew together line-abreast and began pouring phaser energy into the Wolf’s shields. They were formidable indeed. But runabouts didn’t have the most powerful phasers one could find on a starship. The Bonns finally activated the defensive phasers, and a staccato ripple of short bursts issued from Wolf’s hull, bouncing the runabout crews a bit.

“Stop now!” the voice of the Bonn crackled through dancing electrons on the shield surface. “Done almost am I. Ship you have soon. Why do you stop not?”

Gomez muttered, “I really hate their sentence structure.”

Lefler quipped, “You found a structure?”

Shelby order evasive maneuvers and the defensive firing stopped.

“Buta Kadentawa!” Picard called out. “I cannot let you harm anyone with our starship. Don’t you see that?”

Another land mass loomed over the planet’s horizon. It was night over there, city lights glowing like fireflies about an hour past the terminator. Shelby felt a chill of déjà vu. The Wolf’s directional thrusters flared and the great cylinder rotated its muzzle to face directly down at the planet’s surface. Shelby’s chill turned to cold fear. She lifted an arm, irrationally reaching out, wanting to grab hold of the nightmare, grab onto the ship and pluck it from space.

“Captain,” she said, her voice barely a whisper, “we can’t let them.”

Picard met Shelby’s eyes. They both knew the weight of the situation. He met Riker’s eyes then too. The command decision passed between them all, unspoken.

“Geordi,” Riker ordered, “Put us in the way.”

LaForge didn’t hesitate, but his sigh and his headshake spoke eloquently. “Getting in the way, Sir.”

He slowed the USS Delaware, dropped her below the USS Wolf, then fired an angled thruster burn to match the big ship’s orbital velocity again. He rotated the runabout’s nose vertically.

Shelby stared straight down (up?) the barrel of the largest, most destructive single gun ever made by humankind. She could feel, in her imagination, her skin being annihilated cell by cell, in a time frame where femtoseconds lasted for eternities. The main injector would glow with its magnetic field, down at the root of the tunnel. Then a spray of antihydrogen would gush outward in a fan shape, meeting the magnetic field of the accelerator coils. She saw herself watching this happen, and saw the beam obliterate the runabout’s windows, console, Lefler and Geordi, then her, particle by particle, atom by atom, watching as they all died.

Gomez choked back a small animal cry. “Sweet Jesus,” she strangled out, “Captain? Sir?...”

“As you were, Ensign,” Picard said firmly. “Buta Kadentawa. I hope you meant what you said. If you do not wish to harm us, If you do not wish to risk war with the Federation, then end this. Do not fire on your own people. Let us come aboard and take our ship back where it belongs.”

“My own people?” came the angry reply. “Not my own people! Tyrants! Murderers! Family mine they kill! Cities ours they bomb.” In his fury he reverted to his own language, and the ship’s translator kicked in. “You can not call them even people who do not believe in the Spirit of Heaven. They do not pray, they do not give tribute. They speak his name aloud and defile it. And with all that they have the nerve to hold their scientific advances over us, deny us their secrets. They travel freely to the other planets while we have to beg rides on their ships as workers and assistants. When we demand our share, they destroy our factories from orbit. My factory. My family’s factory! They are all dead! Now the enemy will all be dead!”

They were about to cross over the western coast of the “enemy’s” continent. An alarm twittered for attention on Gomez’s panel. “Oh my God oh my God.” She cried out “Captain, he’s powering up the antimatter cannon!” Riker clamped a firm hand on her shoulder and stared her down. Her panicked expression didn’t relax any, but she held her tongue. Sweat stained her chest and back. It’s not that no one else is scared, Shelby thought, it’s just that we’re too steeped in Starfleet nobility to let it show. What the hell is wrong with us? The other junior officer, Lefler, was also less than cool, but she was holding her own. Riker looked resolute as always. He’d been here before. This was how he’d looked when he’d ordered the Crusher boy to ram the Enterprise into the Borg cube over Earth years ago. Picard may as well have been ordering tea for all the emotion he showed now. But after all he’s been through, all the times he’s faced death, was this time any different? Shelby had heard survivors of life-and-death situations say that once through that, the rest was gravy. Meaning that once you’ve cheated death the rest of your life is a gift, and there’s no sense complaining when your number is finally called. Or maybe it was that Picard was so sure that his bluff would never be called.

“You will kill us too, if you fire,” Picard said calmly, reasonably, to the Bonn. Then all hopes for friendly relations with the Federation will be gone. Do you want this? Do your people - *you’re* people - realize this?”

Commander Tosik radioed, “Captain Picard, I urgently recommend you move out of the way. Scans show that the weapon is about to fire.”

The Bonn's voice, now without its musical quality and heavy with throatiness, spoke to them: "Defend you those who my family killed? Protect them you would?"

Picard answered, "We defend and protect everyone. It is our most sacredly held belief that we not let others come to harm because of us." An exaggeration, but it might work.

The silence stretched. Shelby couldn't pull her eyes away from the infinite depths of the black shaft before her. "Then, with my enemies, you burn too."

It didn't work. Shelby tensed. Outside, down the long, deep tunnel of the weapon she'd created, a faint glow started.

And when the gun powered up...

"Holy crap," she swore. "Lefler! phasers right now! Quarter power. Hit that light source."

Lefler tapped off the safety and keyed quarter power while she said, "But, the shields?" And she hit the trigger even with the question on her lips.

The phaser beam dashed down the eight hundred meter tunnel lighting its whole interior as it went in a sparkling coruscation. The ribwork of rings that made up the electromagnetic accelerator coils stood out in sharp, shiny relief from their own harsh shadows. They looked like a rib cage. She felt like she was looking down the throat of some massive, gaping fish. The beam impacted at the hub of a complicated-looking array of piping – the antimatter injector nozzle. The explosion was probably a lot larger than it looked, way down there, 800 meters away in a sixty-meter diameter tunnel. A fireball rolled up at them – down at them – propelled by the activated accelerator coils in the walls.

"Geordi," Shelby ordered briskly, "Zee plus one hundred meters, now."

Training and instinct superceded LaForge's surprise. The runabout jogged out of the way just as a roiling cloud of flaming plasma spit from the Wolf's muzzle and dissipated. But that was all. The nozzle was fused shut.

"What did you!?" The Bonn's voice hissed at them.

Gomez was crying, trying to keep it quiet. Riker's grip on her shoulder softened to a reassuring squeeze. Lefler let out a huge sigh and said, "The shields went down for the shot? They didn't do that at the test."

"You just didn't notice," Shelby answered. "The shield segment in front of the muzzle comes down for the shot. I guess I'm a little more tired than I thought or I'd have remembered sooner."

Riker said, "I was having a little trouble remembering things in the last few seconds myself."

"Not me," LaForge said. "I remembered everything very clearly. My whole life in about half a minute. I'm glad we didn't die just then, there are some things I need to work on."

Picard was smiling proudly at Shelby. "Well done, Commander. I was not anxious to follow through with my stance."

The Bonn was raging on the speakers, back into his native tongue and translated by the computer. He no longer had anything good to say about the Federation. The pleasant cadence of Bonn's conversational language had turned to a harsh martial stridence, all sharp, clipped syllables. But he was, essentially, defanged now, with the Wolf's engines off line and the weapon disabled. Abruptly, he stopped.

Had that been the sound of a phaser?

Then the voice of Engineering Lieutenant Bidura was there in his singsong Indian dialect. "We are on the bridge, commander Shelby," he reported. "The ship is ours again."

"Shields are down," LaForge announced.

Shelby shooed Gomez out of her chair and dropped into it herself like a string-cut marionette, all the tension released from her. She took a moment to close her eyes and smile to herself. "Thank you, Rashime. You are a wonderful person." Riker looked like he couldn't believe she'd just said that to another being. She looked at him tiredly, but still not too tired to tease. "What's the matter, Riker? Never heard me compliment someone before?"

He thought for a moment with exaggerated difficulty. "Nope."

She laughed out loud. "Rachime. How long to get the Wolf spaceworthy again?"

"If you are in a hurry, an hour. If not, I should check for damage from the ejected warp core, and send a crew to see if there is any critical damage in the gun barrel. Someone shot a big hole in it without asking my permission."

She laughed again. She was so damn tired she was getting giddy. She'd hate to collapse in a giggling fit in front of Jean-Luc Picard. And it would give Riker years worth of ammunition. The release of tension now that this was over was intoxicating.

Bleep.

A light blinked on the comm panel. Incoming message from the planet. "Someone down there finally noticed us," Shelby said. "RF band." She looked to Picard, and he nodded a go-ahead to her. As long as she was sitting there. She keyed the call. "This is Commander Elizabeth Shelby of the Federation starship USS Wolf." That sounded rather nice, she thought. "We apologize for this intrusion..."

The translator filtered a harsh, upset voice. “We heard the voice of our enemy. We saw his first attack attempt...” The phaser burst exploding? “... He will not see another chance. You Federation people must go now. Go, for we wish you no harm. Go while we make an example of these zealots.”

An alarm sounded. The threat warning panel came alive on Lefler’s weapon station. “Missile launch on the planet!” she called out. “Multiple launches.”

Gomez sniffed loudly and said in a quavering voice, “Oh, Jesus, if they hit that ship...”

“Picard to runabouts. We must intercept those incoming missiles...”

“Sir!” Lefler interrupted, a tiny flash of panic on her face at the breach of protocol. “Thirty-six missile launches. Nuclear warheads. Small warheads - tactical, but nuclear. More powering up on the ground. All over the continent.”

Picard froze. He looked to Riker. Riker looked to Shelby. Shelby looked back to Picard.

Bidura’s voice: “Captain Picard, not even Wolf’s shields can handle that, and we are dead in space at this time.”

“Wolf’s defensive phasers...” Riker began.

“I am afraid I pulled the main power coupling the last time this blue fellow started shooting at you.”

“Lefler, time to impact?”

“Six gees acceleration... six minutes to orbit. The nearest one.”

Bidura’s response was like the sound of a coffin closing: “I need fifteen to restore phasers, an hour to move the ship.”

It took only a moment to decide. Shelby gave the order. “Bidura, abandon ship. No wait - stay where you are, we’re beaming you out. Got that everybody? Start beaming. We have six minutes to get the hell away from this planet. Geordi, get going!”

The engineer didn’t even bother to answer. He swung back to the two-pad transporter. With the three of them working as fast as the systems would go, they just might make it before they were all vaporized.

Gomez was starting to shake visibly. “Sir?” she pleaded to Picard. “The planet... all those people... All that antimatter...”

“Yes, I know, Ensign. I know. There are no...” his voice caught “...no rabbits left to pull out of the hat.”

Sonya Gomez bolted out of the cockpit, sobbing. She ran through the narrow little central corridor and into the aft compartment. The aft compartment with its panoramic picture window. The ship was still nose-up to the planet, pointing accusingly at its murderer. The continent below edged away, the ocean shoreline lapping at its east coast placidly. People sleeping. City lights like strings of jewelry. They laid their cities out radially down there. They looked like illuminated spider webs. Moving lights – aircraft? Or missiles. There – *that* was a missile. A cloud glowed briefly as a rocket exhaust passed upward through it, then the booster flame became a tiny spark again. To the north, there was an aurora, pretty green curtains dancing. All those sleeping people. All that antimatter.

Sonya slowly went to her knees, one leg at a time. Was God closer in space? Or was He back watching Earth, letting other Gods tend to their own worlds? Four hundred years exploring space and no one had come close to finding that answer. Did it matter? She needed to talk to Him, so He was there.

The compartment door opened and Riker ushered in a few of Wolf’s crewpeople. One was saying that they’d told the computer to erect the shields after the last person beamed out. And there were two Bonns, their wrists bound behind their waists with some cable. Everyone noticed Sonya, but they saw her emotions and looked away politely. She watched them come in, not caring that her face was scrunched and soaked with tears. The Bonns turned their jade eyes away from her and sat at the briefing table with their backs to her, only a few centimeters away.

She wouldn’t have that.

“Oh, no.” she croaked. She grabbed the nearest Bonn by his shoulders and dragged him out of his chair. “You watch!” she shouted in his face and slammed his back on the carpeted decksole. One of the Wolf crew moved to stop her, But Riker stopped him with a hand on his arm. Let her.

She wrenched the blue man up, using his thick head of hair as a grip. “You watch!” was all she could say now and she jammed his face against the windows. The runabout rotated, pointed up-orbit, and was suddenly underway at full impulse. The light-speckled land mass below fell behind. The USS Wolf fell behind. The ocean fell behind. Bonn fell behind. In less than a minute it was a full globe, receding. The other two runabouts slid into formation behind the Delaware. Behind them, the planet Alturis Beta Three got smaller and smaller. The Bonn struggled, but Sonya’s strength came from somewhere deep inside her anger. She mashed his face into the glass, her own face pressing there next to his, her lips against his furry blue ear. “You watch,” she whispered, her voice harsh and grating from sobbing.

The Wolf was too small to see now, but the nuclear explosion that enveloped it flared like a match being lit. A point of light glowed there for a moment while the fireball died away. That one didn’t breach the shields. “You watch.” She watched with him. So many deaths must not go unseen.

Another match flared.

Another.

The runabouts skirted over Bonn's small moon. Its crater-pocked landscape rolled swiftly beneath them. They were very close to its surface, but their velocity would keep them from falling into orbit. Robin was using the moon as a shield. That was unnecessary. The explosion wouldn't be that big. But just before Lefler arced the flight path to go behind the moon ...

The explosion came.

It was like a sun had been born over the rim of the moon.

Kadentawa Buta Disda Henk shrieked, squirmed, kicked. Sonya lost her grip on him, but got it back quickly. "You *watch!*" she screamed and slammed him into the window. Sonya was a small person, but she was fit, and the Bonns were close to her size. And nowhere near as mad. The blood from his nose was deep violet.

The other Bonn had folded into a ball on the deck, his shrieks counterpoint to his leader's. One of the crew of the late USS Wolf held him there in case he got violent. But he didn't.

Bonn's moon receded. The runabouts were probably at a quarter of the speed of light by now. The moon's entire disk was framed by a billowing, burning white sphere of subatomic particles. Particles that used to be people, trees, ocean, air, everything.

Sonya finally felt the energy seep out of her as if a valve had been opened. She let the blue man go. He pulled away, turned away, fell down. Stayed down. He kept shrieking. She couldn't get up herself. She sat with her back against the rear wall, crying softly now, her anger no longer able to drive her muscles. She brought her knees up and hugged them, and hid her head between them. Time passed.

When she looked up again, Robin was sitting next to her. Robin's eyes were red too. But not very. She was always the stronger of the two of them. That was why Robin was a lieutenant now while Sonya was still an ensign.

Riker didn't look so good either. The Bonns had run out of steam and stopped screaming, but they weren't moving, like they were in shock. They were curled up together in the aft corner, much like Sonya and Robin. Riker was glaring at them looking like he wanted to twist their arms off and beat them with the severed limbs.

She tried to speak, but her throat was too constricted. But Riker heard whatever sound she'd made and looked at her.

"Can we... go back to the Enterprise now? Sir?" she managed to say.

He nodded. "Very soon, Ensign. We have to go back and see if we can do anything at Bonn, first."

She looked at the inanimate pair of fuzzy blue men.

"Make them look," she said.

EPILOGUE

The holographic image hung in the air over the conference table and rotated slowly, so everyone there could see all sides. It was a cursory survey mapped onto a globe, sent by subspace transmission from Alturis Beta Three by the first Federation starships to arrive. Ships were converging on mercy missions from all directions, but the very reason the Wolf project had been situated out here was because of its remoteness from most Federation, Klingon and Romulan territories. The first ship of any size had taken a week to get there, staging from Starbase 223, and it dropped Fleet Admiral Alynna Nechayev off at the asteroid base on its way. Meanwhile, three runabouts and a freighter had been all there was to render aid to the seared husk of Bonn.

As best anyone could interpret the sensor data, six ten-kiloton tactical nuclear missiles had hit the USS Wolf in succession. Each one had been big enough to destroy the center of a large city. Wolf's shields held until the sixth missile. Whether it had penetrated the shields or just caused enough damage aboard the ship to cause it to explode, no one would ever know. The rest of the three dozen or more missiles that were in flight were most likely simply annihilated by the Wolf's antimatter explosion without going off.

All it probably took to set off the Wolf's full load of semi-frozen antihydrogen slush was contact with the holding tank walls after the electromagnetic containment fields failed. That explosion alone would have been tremendous, and enough to cause apocalyptic damage to the planet's surface beneath the ship. But warmed by the nuclear blasts and the initial antimatter reaction, the mass of slush quickly expanded into a gaseous antimatter cloud that contacted the atmosphere. The chain reaction that followed was the explosion that the runabout crews had seen, that had rivaled the star Alturis Beta for a moment in its glare.

The Wolf had just orbited over the ocean when it happened. That may have contributed to the destruction. What better to react with antihydrogen than H₂O? Much of the planet's western ocean had gone into the resulting chain reaction, as had practically all of the atmosphere on that hemisphere. It blow-torched the planet to its bare rocky crust over at least a third of its surface. The heat pulse and concussion wavefront wrapped around the planet at several times the speed of sound, evaporating lakes and toppling and burning forests. The two major nations and the continents they occupied were struck on their facing shores and were skinned to the bone for much of their breadth. Condra, the country that had been the target of the hijackers' attack, was wiped clean from the face of their planet. But nearly half of their own country was equally obliterated, including their capital city. All of the island nations had been scoured of life sentient, animal and plant as the oceans that once fed them and protected them surged over them in concussion-born tidal waves. People on the day side had time to watch and wonder at a spectacular daytime light show of sparkling plasma that raced toward them from the horizon before they were hit with overpressure winds in the hypersonic range and tidal waves that reached as high as the low clouds that had been blasted away before them. People on the far side, opposite ground zero, saw a blazing aurora reach a curtain into the sky all around them, shepherding before it roiling clouds that continually evaporated and recondensed from the constantly changing heat and pressure forces; a curtain that closed quickly upon them. Those who were scientists probably recognized their world's doom happening, but, since the sun was high in the sky and not going nova, wondered in ignorance and terror at the reasons. Then the winds and tides must have reversed, because a goodly portion of the planet's oceans and atmosphere were annihilated in the blast, and what was left rushed back to fill the empty ocean basin, which was much deeper now from being scoured of eons of sediment and muck. At ground zero, the crust had probably been burned through to the planet's molten mantel, but the intruding ocean waters had flash-quenched the liquid rock and sent exploding geysers of steam and fractured rock soaring into the voided sky. The remaining air all over the world spread to fill the vacuum in a great planetary inhaling and thinned to just over half its former density and pressure, leaving populations who survived the plasma front, floods, waves, tornadoes, hurricanes and firestorms, gasping like beached fish. There was as much air to breath at the former sea level now as there had been on a high mountain, which was just enough to keep you alive if you didn't move around too much. The high mountains, though, now poked their caps through the rarified atmosphere into the border of space. Those peaks that weren't denuded of their glaciers and snowcaps by the reaction now saw the ice and snow sublime away into the partial vacuum. Ocean water thrown into suborbit by the blast rained back down for days all over the planet. Dust, steam clouds and smoke from flash-burned forests hung like a death caul all over the world, blocking the sun. Firestorms still raged, devouring the remaining few of Bonn's forests, destroying the very mechanism that might have a chance of restoring the breathable atmosphere.

The holoimage was repulsive to look at. But seated around the asteroid base's briefing table Captain Picard, Commanders Duval, Riker and Shelby, and Admiral Nechayev looked at it. They read the stats, they listened to the recorded reports, and no one said much of anything.

Bonn was dead. A whole planet was dead. It would never again support life in any meaningful fashion. Not without a few million years of natural recovery. The planetary ecology was obliterated. If the atmospheric density was ever to return to normal it would require eons of plants expelling oxygen, but most of the world's plants had been wiped out and the rest were dying. Of its population of nearly four billion people, less than one billion survived, half of them injured, all of them essentially homeless and helpless. The whole world's infrastructure had been destroyed. There was no power anywhere. The only food was in stock houses in the least damaged areas. Riots to get at it included mobs numbering in the thousands. There was so little livestock left that no one dared butcher any for food without fear of bringing the breeding population to the edge of extinction. That, of course, wasn't stopping people who hadn't eaten in week from killing it anyway.

"What can we do?" Nechayev whispered. "Can we relocate a billion people? It would take every starship we have left a hundred years, and that's if we didn't need them all against the Jem'Hadar."

Shelby started to speak, changed her mind, started again. "I feel... I feel responsible. I'd like to be involved with... whatever it is we do."

"You can't blame yourself, Elizabeth," Riker said to Shelby. "We can't blame ourselves for the actions of a madman."

"Yes," the admiral agreed, "that's an old debate: is the owner of a weapon responsible if it's stolen and used by the thief? I tend to think not. People are responsible only for their own actions. Legally speaking, in most accepted judicial systems, Starfleet is not accountable for this disaster."

Picard smiled ironically. "An appropriate word. 'Disaster' is Latin for 'evil star.' I'm sure the people of Bonn will be thinking of Starfleet in that vein."

"In fact," Nechayev said, "those Alturans who know what happened are inclined to hold us responsible. That's emotion talking, I hope. Once the anger fades..."

"If it ever does," Shelby interjected. Nechayev eyed her for the interruption, but Shelby was staring at the rotating image of the corpse of Bonn. The admiral nodded to herself.

"...if the anger fades. I hope reason will prevail."

"One may hope," Picard mused. "But what can be reasonable about this?"

Shelby stood and came to attention. Everyone's eyes went to her. "Admiral Nechayev, I would like to officially volunteer to head up the efforts to aid the people of Alturis Beta Three."

Nechayev gave her a look of deep consideration. "I thought you might. Shelby, we need you on the Borg projects. I was planning on assigning you to the Fleet yards at Planitia to supervise construction of the first six Wolf-class starships."

Riker sat upright like he'd been stung. Nechayev eyed him pointedly.

"Of course we're building more, Riker," she said before he could give voice to his obvious outrage. "The concept was brilliant, the execution perfect. The ship worked just fine."

Riker looked at the charred remains of the planet hovering over the desk. He turned the hologram off in disgust.

"Will," Picard said, "She's right. The weapon worked perfectly. All this tragedy happened because it was stolen and misused, not because of any fault in its design or in our justification for building it. The reason for its construction still exists. We need as many of them as we can get."

"And what, Sir? Ram Cardassia with them and reduce it to this." He waved at where the hologram had been.

"Of course not, Number One," Picard spat out angrily. "We may be at war, but we still fight with humanity and honor. But, I imagine," he went on more calmly, looking to the admiral for conformation, "that we can free up most of the fleet guarding Earth from the Borg now and send them to the front." Nechayev nodded. "No, we need them, Will."

Riker exhaled an indignant huff. "But we don't have to like it," he said, parroting Picard's statement of over a week ago.

Picard nodded somberly.

Shelby cleared her throat. "Anyone can supervise that, Ma'am. I recommend Commander Duval. He was as involved in this project as I." Nechayev started to speak, but Shelby went on, "Please, Admiral." And she met Nechayev's eyes. "How could I do any good at Mars while my mind is on Bonn?"

"If you interrupt me again, Shelby, I *will* say no."

Shelby smiled slightly. "Thank you, Ma'am."

Robin buzzed at the bunk room door marked with the flowing, looping script of Bonn as well as standard Starfleet characters. "Denda? Drosenagla Denda?" she said into the audio pickup. "It's Robin Lefler. We met in the lunch room last week?"

There was no reply. The station's twenty Bonns had gone into seclusion the moment they'd heard about their home. There was no brig aboard the station, but the five hijackers were being kept in another locked bunk room under human guard until their people decided what to do with them. Starfleet and the Federation certainly had enough charges to file against them, but Admiral Nechayev had brought the news that the decision had been made to turn them over to whatever may be left of the Bonn governments.

"Denda?"

The door hissed open. The younger Drosenagla stood glaring in the doorway. Behind him, his fellows sat in a circle around a small figurine and glowing lamp. Robin supposed it would have been a candle if there had been any aboard. Denda's father bared his dental ridge at her. Less threatening than fangs, but the emotion it conveyed hit her as hard.

"What do she here?" Drosenagla Tawan hissed. This time she couldn't brush off the hostility. She felt it like a slap. No one had bothered them since they locked themselves away. What right did she have to annoy them? But someone had to reach out, didn't they?

"Well, I just wanted to, to see if you were all right..."

"All right?" Denda asked, perplexed. "You would be?"

She lowered her head, unable to meet his featureless, penetrating eyes. "No." She ventured a look again. "What will you do?"

Denda stepped outside and closed the door. "You interrupt mourning." He spoke in the clipped tones of anger, all the music gone from his voice.

"I'm... I'm sorry." She said, frustrated that he wasn't letting her communicate. She wanted very badly to communicate. "I thought you weren't of the 'strict' religion."

For a moment she realized the question may have been rude and he may get angrier. But Denda had been around humans long enough that such things didn't get to him. "Not strict," he answered matter-of-factly, "Just the same; religious."

She nodded, uncomfortable. "There's something I wanted to ask. It's been bothering me. You knew last week when we talked... you knew the Bonns at that other table were from your...what, rival? rival country."

"Rival not. Enemy was. Enemy is."

"Well why didn't you say anything?" she blurted. "You could tell who they were, you must have suspected they were spies."

"Knew spies they were," Denda said evenly. "Thought only plans or technology they after. Reported it, Father did to company. Company said, take care of it will they when home we go."

"But, surely... I mean, didn't you think to tell us? We could have arrested them. Or at least watched them!"

Denda's eyes narrowed. "You're fault is, you know."

Robin rocked back on her heels, the ridiculous accusation like a blow. "What? How our fault?"

"Federation teach, everyone same. Everyone friends. No fighting, no arguing over thing you believe. Together, everyone live in peace. What Tosik Commander say? Diversity infinite in combinations infinite? So strange that was to me, but somewhere inside me, felt it did I that that was true. Like thing shown to me in bright light from darkness!"

"A revelation?" Robin offered.

"Yes, that. Believed it all, I did. Tried to live it, while here on job at least, with Federation people." He shook his head violently back and forth and squeezed his beautiful eyes shut. Then he looked at her, and she saw the – not hatred, but a kind of disgust. "Stupid!" he spat. "Stupid for listening. Stupid for trying. Nothing does Federation know about me and my people."

He turned to palm the door open and go back inside. "Should have let Father kill those five like he wanted."

Again, his words shocked her like a slap. She wanted to protest his uncivilized brutality. But she couldn't. Look where civility had gotten him.

"What will you do?" she asked again.

He sighed, if that's what that whistling breath through his nose meant. "Take we the worldkillers. To colony we go on fourth planet ours. Few hundred thousand there. Court system, it has. Try them. Maybe to Bonn send them back."

"Send them home? What kind of punishment is that?"

"What better? Live they then like everyone else, no air, no water, no sun. Father, wants he to still kill them. Not enough, now I say. Torture them first. Beside, on Bonn, find out will someone who they are. *Tell* everyone, we will who they are! Then, they die, maybe nice and slow."

There was no reply to that. She could become indignant, lecture him on Federation morals, tell him there's no difference between the murderer and the executioner. But she didn't have the strength to climb out of her depression and onto her high horse today. Besides, she realized with a yet another shock, she agreed with him.

Having nothing more to say, she left him.

They'd brought the Delaware into the asteroid's hangar with the other two runabouts and parked it in one of the small pressurized garages in the wall. LaForge wanted to check it over inside and out before they went on another two-day flight through the void. Combat, no matter how light a hit one took, often had unexpected effects on a spacecraft, and he'd heard of runabout warp cores blowing for less reason than a couple of phaser hits. He asked Gomez to check over the propulsion systems while he checked out the hull and control systems. She'd said nothing more than "Yes, Sir," and gone about her assignment. And that was not Sonya Gomez.

Geordi was worried about Gomez. When she'd first come aboard the Enterprise-D during that fateful week when they'd first met the Borg, Sonya had been a whirring bundle of energy unable to hold still, full of excitement about exploring the wonders of the universe and unable to stop talking about it for a second. He smiled to remember that the first time she'd met Captain Picard she'd spilled hot chocolate all over him in her blustering. Of course she was older and wiser now than that hyper 22-year-old, and somewhat more sedate, but since Bonn she seemed to have withdrawn almost completely. Having once been a withdrawn youngster himself, Geordi knew to leave her alone for a while. But he was worried. If she stayed this down for much longer he'd wonder if she was going to stay that way forever. Thanks to the Dominion war Starfleet psychologists were rediscovering old phenomena long thought abolished – post traumatic stress for one. Helplessly witnessing three billion people die while you ran away could surely be described as traumatic. Geordi was working through it by, well, by working. If he didn't have the Delaware to check out he'd probably be elbowing his way into helping them check out the others ships. The alternative was just sitting in his cabin sulking. Then he'd probably be in the same shape as Sonya. He'd have to get Counselor Troi to talk to her when they got back to the Enterprise. On the other hand, Deanna Troi had her own worries with her homeworld, Betazed, having been occupied by the combined Dominion and Cardassian forces. Damn, but the Federation was in a sorry state these days.

Gomez was under the runabout with the antimatter pod inspection hatch open and her head stuck up inside the ship. LaForge happened to be nearby checking the clamps that held the modular travel pod to the runabout's frame. He heard her voice, meek and uncertain, echo hollowly under the short expanse of ship's flat bottom between them.

"Geordi?"

He knelt to where he could see her under there. "Mmm hmm?"

She crawled out from under and surfaced in front of the starboard impulse pack. They ended up leaning side-by-side on the starboard nacelle, which was just a little too high to sit on. She was hesitant, trying to think.

"Was anybody right?" she finally asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I felt... I felt such anger towards that man... because he took the Wolf just to kill people."

"And now?" Geordi prompted.

"I remember what he said about his family, and about what the other country was doing to his."

"Uh huh," Geordi nodded. "And now you don't know who to blame."

"...If anybody."

He nodded. "I hear you." This was the most Sonya had talked to him in almost a week. He was going to keep her talking. As exhausting as the old Sonya Gomez was, he liked her a whole lot. "Well, it's hard not to feel guilty about it. But I wonder if they wouldn't have found another way to destroy themselves eventually, you know?"

"Especially with us around to help," she said cynically. She gave a sharp ironic laugh, then choked it back. It almost turned into a sob, which she also choked back.

Geordi thought about putting an arm around her, but it wasn't a thing a superior officer should do with someone who worked under him. Besides, his state of mind wasn't far from needing a good cry either and he didn't want her to get him started. His cybernetic eyes were tear-proof, of course, but he hated having to clean them.

"Actually," she said through angry, misting eyes, "I think I do know who to blame."

He looked at her cautiously. "Who, Sonya?"

"Everybody."

Riker had gone ahead to the Delaware to check on LaForge and the junior crewpeople, and Duval had left citing a million things to do. Shelby had turned the hologram of Bonn back on, and now she studied the less damaged hemisphere in greater magnification, a scrolling mass of text on the desktop viewer giving additional details. There were elevated plateaus where the tsunamis hadn't scoured the land, and shielded valleys where the heat pulse hadn't

scorched the trees bare. The point opposite the blast was fortunately mostly land. Had it been ocean, there might not be any habitable land surface at all. Judging by what he'd seen of how the Alturans – Bonns – got along with each other, Picard thought the greatest challenge Shelby faced was getting them all to live together on the remaining viable land mass.

She was already thinking ahead: "I suppose we could eventually tractor comets in from the outer system and drop them into the atmosphere over the dead side. They'd burn up and add their water to the atmosphere... It'd take an awful lot, though, to add back the missing five hundred millibars planetwide. But that's for later. Food and shelter first."

Picard nodded. "For a billion," he mused hopelessly.

Nechayev had been deep in thought since Riker had left. Now she leaned forward and rested her arms on the desktop, hands clasped together. "Shelby, I want you to consider the possibility of moving the entire surviving population to their fourth planet colony."

Shelby stuttered for a moment. One of the rare times Picard had seen her nonplussed. "Well, Ma'am, of course I'd considered it, but it would be an astronomical undertaking! As you and the Captain have pointed out, even in peacetime we wouldn't have the ships, even with help from every other major power in the quadrant."

The admiral nodded. "I know, Commander. I know. But I'd like you to see if you can find a way. If we can get everyone off the planet, or at least into some kind of underground shelters, I might have a way of... well, I've been debating with myself whether to even bring this up. Mind you, it's something I'm not actually allowed to discuss."

Picard was immediately intrigued when an admiral said such words.

Nechayev pointed a firm finger at each officer in turn. "What I'm about to tell you doesn't leave this room until I discuss it with Fleet and the President."

"Yes Ma'am," Shelby said, not bothering to hide her look of astonishment. Picard nodded expectantly, knowing that Nechayev knew him well enough to take that as affirmation.

"If you know your history, you may have heard of this project," the admiral went on. "But you may have assumed it was abandoned as a failure. It was not, and the Federation has been perfecting it in secret for almost a century."

Picard knew his history, and he smiled at Nechayev's courage in bringing this up. If it could be pulled off, it would be a landmark achievement and the fulfillment of a centuries-old dream.

Admiral Nechayev asked, "Have either of you ever heard of Project Genesis?"