

Star Trek Exploration

The Adventures of the USS Explorer

The Valley

by P. D. Hutcheson

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1.....	6
Chapter 2.....	15
Chapter 3.....	23
Chapter 4.....	34
Chapter 5.....	38
Chapter 6.....	48
Chapter 7.....	54
Chapter 8.....	63
Chapter 9.....	71
Authors' Notes.....	80

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Introduction

The changes in the United Federation of Planets since the Dominion War, over the last ten years, may not seem very great to the normal Federation citizen; however, to the informed members of the Federation, especially those in Starfleet, there have been many.

The new President of the Federation Council, who came to the position just before the assassination of the Romulan Star Empire High Council, would heartily agree with them.

With the help of the Romulan Commander Donatra and Captain Picard, the Federation has avoided the destruction of Earth at the hands of the Romulan Praetor Shinzon.

Thought of as a traitor for helping Captain Picard, Commander Donatra was removed from command of her warbird and made commander of the Romulan Empire Diplomatic Liaison garrison on Earth. The council thought this was a good way to be rid of a perceived troublemaker.

However, as most of these things go, she excelled in the position and made a name for herself in the Romulan High Council as well as in the Federation council. She assisted and advised the Romulan Ambassador to the Federation Council and was instrumental in arranging the exchange program between Starfleet and the Romulan Fleet. Many officers on both sides were serving on each other's vessels; however, there is still tension and deep distrust between the members of both fleets.

During the recent visit by the new Praetor to the Federation Council, the Praetor had two private meetings. One with the Federation President, which was expected and one with Commander Donatra, which was very unexpected.

The exchange program with the Klingons has continued to this day. It had gotten to the point where, in some cases, it was difficult to identify the flag of a ship with its crew complement. Starfleet technicians replaced warriors on many Klingon war ships and released many Klingons to other duties, such as security. Starfleet Commander Worf had shown Starfleet the value of having Klingon Security officers.

Following the Dominion War, many of the border worlds of the Klingon Empire began seeking entrance into the Federation, especially those left to fend for themselves during the war. They had been supported by the Federation during the war. The forthcoming induction of the first of these worlds into the Federation was a very heated topic in the Empire and on the planet. Many Klingon warriors saw this as the beginning of the fall of the Klingon Empire. Thus, on the planets themselves, riots have broken out against the Planetary Governors.

However, the Federation and Klingon Empire continued to work toward full diplomatic relations through the soon to be completed Klingon-Federation Accords.

Project Icarus is underway. The President is facing challenges in the Federation Council. The completion of the USS Explorer in route and the gathering of the right officers—in

her estimation—was the key to success of the project. Trying something new in expanding the exploration of the Alpha Quadrant was not popular.

The acceptance of the first Klingon Empire world into the federation under the new Federation-Klingon accord will be followed closely by three more worlds seeking Federation membership.

The President could only ride the wave of time and look toward the future with the hope that sins of the past aren't visited on her future. She is convinced her future is in the tunnel with the USS Explorer.

Following the escape from the nebula, the creatures eating the energy and the skin of the vessels, the USS Tunnel arrived and repair of the fleet ships began.

Following the repair of the USS Explorer fleet, the fleet is again on the way to the target sector.

Their arrival is imminent, and they are looking forward to exploring the new, to them, sector. They are very cognizant of the previous 2 missions by Captains Pike, Kirk and Picard and hope not to get into the trouble of many of the previous Captains' exploits.

Update:

Arriving in sector and the planetary system, the fleet is immediately scanned with a beam that rendered the four crews' unconscious.

Once recovered they began exploring the system sending the four ships and shuttle craft to different planets/moons to survey these bodies.

Finding strange areas on four of the planets/moons intensified the surveys and focused the teams on these areas. Finally satisfied with the data being collected the ships readied away teams to beam down to the areas discovered by the survey to examine them closer and bring back samples.

As the away teams prepared to beam down, the four captains disappeared from their ships.

Authors Note:

Books 4, 5, 6, & 7 are novellas that were to be combined into 2 books with the first half of each novella either combined together like the Star Trek Corps of Engineers 4 or 5 ebooks combined into a novel or combined by chapters as in book 4, chapter 1, book 5 chapter 1, etc. However, book 6 is not ready and book 7 is still in chapter 1, so I have decided to put the novellas up and do the combination books at a later date if ever.

Please enjoy the shorter books.

Chapter 1

A loud gong shattered the silence and startled him. Slowly, groggily, he awoke, becoming aware of a loud commotion in the area. He could tell by the sound echoing off the walls he was in a small room. With his eyes closed it was difficult to identify his surroundings. Because of the sharp pain just behind the eyes, he was not going to open his eyes anytime soon either!

He tried to remain quiet in case he was being observed. "Never give away anything to anyone," he remembered from this training. So, he lay very quiet and tried to gain a sense of his surroundings.

The first sense came from inside. His head hurt. He had never had a sinus headache or a migraine but had seen people with one or the other and he was pretty sure a sinus headache is exactly what he had. Although he never had one, his sister had suffered migraines and he was sure this was not one. A severer hangover was an alternate theory, but he was sure he had not been drinking because his stomach was not upset, queasy, but not upset.

He felt pains, many pains, centering in spots around his eyes just below the surface of his facial skin. The pain was not centralized but spread around the eyes and felt like it was pressing on his skull.

Moving down from his head, he attempted to take a check of the rest of his body. He tried to move a finger and the pain shot up his arm and through his neck to explode over his brain adding to the sinus pain. He almost cried out. He took a chance and tried to move his toes slightly. He was ready for the pain this time and it did not disappoint him, much to his chagrin.

As the pain ebbed, his thoughts turned outward. He tried to figure out what he was laying on. He could tell it was very hard, as in stone or steal, and cold, but not ice cold as a grave. *Well, at least I am not dead, he thought, but I knew this. If I were dead, I would not be in this much pain!*

He tried to remain still, to allow the pain to continue subside. It hurt less to breathe when he lay quietly. He focused on his hearing. He could tell he was in an oddly shaped room since the sound waves echoed differently from each direction.

He recognized the sounds of a large fight, but the words and guttural sounds escaped his understanding. He wondered if he was wearing his commbadge, (commbadge, where did that come from) which contained a universal translator (a what?). If he was wearing it, he was sure it was not working. He listened to the sounds, but it left him with the same feeling he had when he walked into a room, without the translator, where only Klingon was being spoken. It was only guttural gibberish.

He continued to assess his situation as the pain subsided. He felt warm, which contrasted with the cold beneath him. From these feelings he determined he was lying on a bare,

solid surface in a warm climate. This was another second good thing; he would not freeze to death.

So, I am alive and will not freeze to death, he thought, what else might I figure out? How about how I got here? What was the last thing I remembered?

He thought past the pain and tried to remember what he was doing before he woke up. *I was ... on a ... yes, he was on a ship. What ship? Where? The ... the ... Oh heck!* He thought through the pain. He became frustrated, as the questions came more readily, but the answers would not come to him!

Well, if he could not remember the name of the ship, maybe what he was doing? He was ... was ... in ... the ship, but where in the ship. He was ... on the bridge, it just came to him. Yes, he was on the bridge of the ship. He was on the bridge ... in his chair, but which chair. He was in the ... the middle chair. He was in the captain's chair. But how could that be if he could not remember being the captain of a ship. Maybe a first officer or a watch officer he was enjoying the center seat for a while, while the captain was off the bridge. Was he the captain...first officer... watch officer...ugh, it would not come to him? He tried to raise his hand to his forehead, and the worst pain in the universal seemed to hit him right in the head, instead of his hand. He froze, and as the pain ebbed away, he shifted his hand back to the surface on which he lay.

But he was starting to get into this game, this very important game; the game to figure out where he was, who he was and where he was from. How he could get back to ... the ship. The ship ... ugh! He could not think. The pain was closing in and he felt himself drifting ... drifting off into the abyss of unconsciousness.

• • •

It was very quiet. It was so quiet he could hear his own breathing as he slowly became conscious again. He could feel the temperature had become cooler. It made the surface he was lying on feel warm. By touching the surface with his fingers, he discovered it was warm to the touch.

He was also not in serious pain as before, discovering this when he moved his fingers to touch the surface. Only a few twinges of pain were left of the massive pain he felt earlier. He was very thankful sleep had overtaken him.

He raised a finger and touched a few points on his face over the worst pain centers in an attempt to discover if he was physically injured. Luckily, he was not.

He opened his eyes and experienced the dread of blindness. He could not see anything. Panic started to grip him. BLIND, he was blind! He looked to the left and then to the right. Nothing! Nothing but darkness. He looked up and down, still nothing. Not even the smallest pinpoint of light. He looked at his hand waving in front of his face and could not see it. As the panic took him, he began to scream and he rolled off the slightly raised surface and hit another surface, which sent waves of pain through his body. He screamed more as he rolled over onto his back and lay there. Slowly the screams of shock and pain subsided into the moaning of loss. He was blind, totally blind! How could he function? How could he be whatever he was? A captain, first officer, crewman... How could he be

the person he was? As he moaned and pondered these questions, he quieted, and a thankful sleep took him again.

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A loud gong shattered the silence and startled him awake. He sat up remembering the revelation he was blind. He sensed light through his eyelids and opened his eyes. He jerked back banging his head on the stone surface. The pain added to the pain from the brightness before his eyes. The room was very bright, almost blinding, but he could see! He screamed with happy, overjoyed with the realization he was not blind after all. *But then what caused his blindness*, he wondered to himself. He realized the answer to the question would remain a mystery for a while longer because he had no way of knowing or of finding out the answer.

As his eyes slowly adjusted to the brightness of the room, he became aware of the fact the pain he had been feeling before this, was now gone. His back hurt a bit, and of course, his head still hurt; but he figured this minor pain was because he had slept on a stone floor and banged his head on it. Next to him, he could make out a pallet of stone with an animal skin on it.

He looked at the animal skin, which was of a bright blue hue and of a very soft fur. He had never seen a skin of this type and adjusted his initial impression it was an animal skin. He realized it could be anything. He smelled the 'skin' to determine if he could discern any animal odor, other than his own smell, which was very ripe by now, but to no avail. There was no smell. No indication of what type of creature the skin was from. He decided to leave this line of questioning for a time when he had more information.

He next tried to figure out how many days he had been in this room and found it an impossible task at first. He was not sure if it was light out when he awoke the first time. It was very disturbingly dark the second time and now it was blindingly bright out. He was pretty sure he would have been able to detect this blinding light if it had been daytime the first time he had awoken. But on the other hand, there was the gong and the noise. These clues led him to conclude he must have awakened in the afternoon when the sun had not been shining into the room. So, he had been here maybe an afternoon, a night and this morning. He believed it to be only half a day and a night, thus he had only been here for basically two days, or a better estimate would be almost one full day.

Through squinted eyes he looked around the room. He could still not see much, but he could determine the basic dimensions of the stone room, he assumed the walls were stone from the feel of the floor, were approximately three meters square and about two and a half meters tall. The last was an estimate since he was flat on this back and trying to stare through the bright light to distinguish the corner with the ceiling. The very bright light was coming in through an opening in the center of the wall directly in front of where he sat next to the sleeping pallet.

Looking to the left, he noticed a low table against the wall across the room from the sleeping pallet. On the table was what he thought might be some food in a barely recognizable form. Most of the 'food' looked like fruit with a few round rolls, or what looked like rolls. He slid the meter plus distance across floor to the table to examine the food more closely and looked around the objects to see if they were booby trapped.

‘Booby trapped?’ He thought, “Where did this suspicion and mistrust come from?” While he knew caution, he realized he was becoming more paranoid than cautious. He also realized it was time to trust a bit, but not fully. He could not completely trust whatever or whoever put him here and took most of his memory, but he did believe he could trust them some. There had to be a reason he was not just killed out right!

He reached over and tentatively touched the fruit. When he felt nothing and nothing untold happened to him—no explosion or electrocution—he picked up the fruit closest to him. He scratched it with a fingernail and a line of liquid seeped from the cut in the thin skin. He touched the liquid cautiously. When it did not burn him, he placed his finger in his mouth and touched it to his tongue.

He tried to remember his survival training which preached caution, caution and more caution. He also remembered the chief instructor telling them to take a test taste of one item and seeing if they felt sick in an hour. If he were still ok, then the item was probable ok to eat in small amounts. Then he could increase it daily as needed. However, he was not to test more than one item per day, so the bread roll looking item would have to wait until the next day.

More memories, a chief instructor, survival school; he felt better as his memories slowly returned. And returned in a way which was beneficial to him! He could imagine what would happen if he ate everything on the table, he was very hungry, and it did not agree with him. He could have died...but then, he could have been killed to begin with. The thought, *he could trust whoever or whatever had put him here*; kept coming up in his mind, almost like it was programmed into his essence. His training still screamed caution and the fact it was better to err on the side of caution and survive, then to leave a nice corpse, crossed his mind!

He closed his eyes and took a very small bite of the fruit. It reminded him of a pink grapefruit with a pound of sugar on it, even though it resembled a Mango. He rolled it around in his mouth sucking all the juice from the pulp and then swallowed the pulp. Nothing. No pain, burning or ill feelings. Rather a delightful flavor! He waited a few more minutes before trying a larger piece just to be sure it was not harmful.

He repeated the process with a normal bite and had no ill effects after a guesstimated five minutes, so he finished the fruit. After another five minutes he ate the rest of the fruit which resembled the one he tested. *There is caution and then there is over caution*, he thought as the fruit disappeared greedily. He felt very hungry and the fruit went a long way to satisfy the hunger.

The fruit tasted very good, but the juice was very sticky. He looked around the room for something to clean up with and found a small rag in the back corner of the room beyond the sleeping pallet. He wiped his hands and face with the rag and returned it to the place where he found it.

His eyes having adjusted somewhat to the elevated light levels, he looked around the rest of the room. It still hurt to look toward the opening, but he could see into the back corners. He figured crawling on all fours was safer than bumping into something or stubbing a toe. So, he crawled and kept his eyes squinted, almost shutting his eyes.

He crawled to the front of room on the side of the doorway with the sleeping pallet. Turning so his back was facing the opening, he found a deep, round hole with a distinctly foul odor. The odor seemed to dissipate quickly with distance and was gone beyond a foot away.

He moved across the doorway, which was the normal width for a human, to the other side. *'Human,' where did I get that word from,"* he thought, *"but it fits somehow.* Could I be called human? Maybe my name is human. He sat down facing away from the light and tried to remember about himself again. What did he know...was he Captain Human of a ship? This did not seem to fit, it sounded wrong. He was a human captain of a ship. This sounded much better to him. He was the human captain of the . . . of the . . . *blast!* This was so frustrating! He knew by his reaction he normally had a good memory. Something was causing the memory loss; keeping him from finding out who he was and where he should be. He shook his head as if to clear the cobwebs and cause a memory to pop out, but to no avail. Facing defeat again, something he knew in his heart he did not like to do; he ceased his efforts at memory recall.

He turned back to his exploration of the final corner of the room. Continuing his exploration would take his mind off the failure to remember who he was. But the thought of exploring somehow felt right. Maybe he was an explorer! Well, if was an explorer, it was high time he got to the exploring.

In this new corner he found a small, triangular opening in the wall about a meter off the floor. A clear fluid was flowing out of the hole with enough force to send it, in a tight stream, into a round bowl-shaped indentation in the floor approximately a half-meter in diameter about 25 centimeters from both walls.

He looked into the liquid in the depression. He saw another small hole in the center of the depression where, he guessed, the fluid flowed out of the bowl. The holes being the same size kept about 10 centimeters of fluid in the indentation.

He put his finger into the fluid. He assumed anyone who went to this much trouble to make him comfortable and have the minimum requirements of existence would not want to harm him. He was beginning to trust them. The fluid felt slightly warm to the touch. He tentatively tapped his tongue with his wet finger. The fluid had a very, very faint metallic taste to it, but otherwise, was tasteless. He did not feel any ill effects, burning or distress. Following his training, he cupped his hands to hold the fluid and took a small sip from his cupped hands.

He released the rest of the fluid into the bowl and wiped his hands over the bowl to dry them by friction. He was surprised he could remember simple survival skills and even the person who taught them but could not remember locations and names. That knowledge was gone. "Maybe the knowledge would help me in some way," he reasoned, "and this was the reason why the other memories were gone." He was very pleased with himself for this conclusion. At least he could still reason and reasoning was the most important survival trait. That and caution!

He crawled back to the table and tried the other type of the fruit, thinking it was some type of item as the sweet grapefruit was. "Sweet Grapefruit?" He wondered where this thought had originated. This fruit tasted like an apple but looked like a fuzzy brown plum

with pink spots. He set aside the round, bread like roll for tomorrow, just to ensure he was not violating the one item a day rule.

He felt the need to use the large hole in the floor, so he crawled over to it and squatted over it. Once he was finished, he jumped with surprise at feeling a warm fluid washing his backside. *Well, this is nice*, he thought once he got over the shock of something unexpected happening back there! Visions of the story of the snake rising out of the facilities came to mind. A warm, almost hot, stream of air to dry him followed the warm fluid. He left the corner and crawled to the pallet. After a few moments of thought, he crawled to the fluid stream and wet his hands. Then he crawled back over to the corner. Sitting up on his knees, he put his hands over the hole in the floor. A stream of hot air played over his hands as he rubbed them in the stream. Within moments his hands were dry and another piece of knowledge about his room came to light.

He noticed the light in the doorway had become visibly brighter, but not as blinding as when he got up. *I must be getting used to the brightness*, he thought. He returned to the table and finished the fruit. When he was done, he went back and cleaned his sticky hands. He got the rag and cleaned it, but when he held it up for the hot air blast, the blast did not come. He laid the rag on the floor in the doorway where the air was the warmest.

Returning to the pallet, he laid down to think about what he had discovered. He reviewed the unique bathroom, marveling in the engineering and simplicity of its design and execution. He felt very comfortable as he continued to mull over the day. He lay on the pallet lost in thought as the warm, very gentle breeze played over his human body, warmed on the inside by a full stomach. He felt refreshed and warm all over...

• • •

The loud gong startled him awake again. He realized quickly he had fallen asleep and had napped for a while. The room was much dimmer now. He could see the entire room and a small globe in the center of the ceiling was also providing illumination. He looked out the doorway and saw a short corridor of stone walls ending in another stone wall with a bright light at the ceiling. The ruckus he heard was coming from the direction of the corridor, but he did not see an opening at the end of the corridor!

As he began to move to the doorway the light at the end of the corridor began to brighten. He slowly, cautiously entered the corridor and began moving slowly toward the far wall. The farther he moved down the corridor the brighter the light got until halfway down the light was painfully blinding. He turned and retreated to the room. The blinding light dimmed to the level it was before he left the room.

He realized while he really wanted to leave the room, the thing controlling this place did not want him to leave. *I will have to stem the desire to escape and/or find out what the noise is about until I am allowed to leave by the powers that be*, he thought.

He turned to the table to satisfy his hunger. This time he tried a bit of the roll. *Not a bad taste*, he thought, *but it is fairly dry*. He ate the rest of the roll after he counted to one hundred to give time for a reaction to occur. He figured if the fruit had not killed him, the rolls would not.

He went to the bowl to take care of his thirst. He removed the fruit from the bowl it was in and used the fruit bowl as a cup to bring the water back to the table. He consumed the water and fruit together.

Finally, he went to the *toilet* to take care of business and to clean up. He felt tired again and settled down lying back on the sleeping pallet. He wondered if the food was drugged because it made him very sleepy after he ate it.

The gong sounded loudly again. He sat up and looked down the corridor in the direction of the light. He watched as the light quickly dimmed out. The dim light in the ceiling also dimmed out and plunged the room into the total darkness he found when he had first opened his eyes.

At this point there was nothing to do but to lie down and get some sleep.

• • •

A loud gong shattered the silence and startled him awake. He was not as startled as the first few times since he was getting used to the gong and was feeling safe and secure in his room. But it still hurt his ears! He sat up and looked around the room. The dim ceiling light only lit the room. The light at the end of the corridor was just as dim and barely lit the corridor.

He got up and got a drink of the water from the stream over the bowl. He tried the bread like roll and found it still tasteless as if it was copied in look and texture, but the copier was not aware of the taste. He used the edge of the rag to cut, or rather saw one of fruits into small pieces. He tore a roll open and added the fruit into the roll soaking the juice into the roll.

He was surprised to find the roll's flavor was changed subtlety by the fruit. It also enhanced the flavor of the fruit. He ate the roll quickly and repeated the process with the other type of fruit, the sweet grapefruit. The roll made the fruit flavor less sweet, but more earthy. He enjoyed the rest of the sweet grapefruit roll and then finished the rest of the food provided in a like manner.

He went to the corner and washed hands and face. He cleaned up the table and eating area with the rag and then washed the rag. He laid the rag at the head of the pallet to dry.

He was not sure what to do next. He approached the corridor, and the light became blinding again. *Not this time I guess*, he thought.

He lay down for a few minutes trying to think about his situation. He went over and over his short life in this room so far and had a faint feeling of loss. He was not sure why he felt a sense of loss, but it was there. He focused on this sense and tried to narrow his focus down to just that thought.

• • •

The loud gong awoke him again. Another nap had captured him for a while. He looked around the room and found it had not changed, which did not surprise him. He felt stronger and very refreshed as if recovering from a surgery. The image of a surgery which came to mind seemed familiar, but he could not find any scar where he imagined the surgery to be.

He rose slowly and walked to the doorway. The expected reaction to his stepping through the doorway did not occur; the corridor light did not brighten. He continued slowly to the end of the corridor to examine the extent of his prison and found the corridor did not end.

Concealed by illusion, the corridor took a right turn and there was an opening only four meters beyond the turn. He walked to the opening and looked out past a small ledge into what appeared to be a valley. He could not see beyond the ledge onto the valley floor and a strong wind precluded his walking out on the ledge.

He imagined the valley floor to be a thin strip of land in the form of a rocky oval like a stretched football. The oval valley was surrounded by a mountain range on both sides coming together at both ends. He guessed, from looking at the range across from him, he was approximately halfway up the side of the mountain. The sides of the mountains, which were visible to him, resembled the grassy prairies of the mid North American continent on Earth. However, the grassy sides of the mountains very quickly gave way to the craggy mountains resembling the spires of the Himalayas on the Asia continent. He stared for a long time at the mountains across the valley, drinking in the beauty of the picture postcard scene.

He suddenly realized the sound of the loud commotion, what sounded like fighting, was gone. He still wondered where it was coming from and the only explanation, he could come up with was from somewhere below in the valley. He got down on his hands and knees and slowly crawled on his stomach toward the edge of the ledge fighting the strong wind. Halfway to the edge, he was almost blown over on his back. The wind got stronger as he slowly inched out onto the ledge. He immediately started moving back into the safety of the cave mouth. The wind began to wane as he moved back to the cave.

He stood in the mouth of the cave and leaned out to look at the sides of the mountain he was living in to see if there was a way down to the valley floor. He found none. Neither was there a way to the top of the mountain he discovered after laying on his back and sliding out onto the ledge as far as the wind would let him. As the wind started to pick up, he quickly slid back into the mouth of the cave.

He looked back across the valley, again admiring the view. On his second scan of the panorama, he noticed the grass on the other side of the valley was not moving. It was stark still, resembling the picture postcard he had thought of earlier. No wind blowing! He was stumped as to how this could happen, wind on one side and no wind on the other. *Another mystery, he thought, to add to add to the list.*

The thought of baby-steps came to mind. Each time he woke up he was allowed to go one step further, just like taking baby steps. He also felt better and stronger.

He watched for a few more minutes. As he turned to return to his room, the loud gong sounded again. He spun around so fast he almost lost his balance. He tried to determine of source of the sound by listening for the echo, but the ledge blocked his view.

As he looked up and down the valley, he saw it coming over the ridge and up the valley toward him, the black wall. A curtain of blackness so dark he could not visually penetrate it. It moved swiftly up the valley and reminded him of a blanket being pulled over a child. He turned and moved inside the cave mouth just as it swept passed him leaving

only a blinding darkness behind it. The darkness was so black he could not see the finger he raised to almost touch his eye.

He felt his way back down the corridor, made the turn and continued to move very slowly until he reached the doorway to the room. Once in the doorway, he dropped to his hands and knees and crawled to the sleeping pallet. Rolling on to the pallet he reviewed his short day.

Gonged awake and ate; slept or napped; gonged and ate; explored; and finally, the darkness.

He then reviewed his stay in this realm. *Realm? Where did that thought come from*, he wondered to himself. He arrived and the pain kept him in on the sleeping pallet. He awoke and the light kept him in the room. He awoke and the ledge and wind kept him from exploring further.

As he faded to a restful sleep, he was sure tomorrow would reveal the valley and the commotion.

Chapter 2

The loud gong shattered the silence and awakened him from a very sound sleep. Although the sleeping pallet was hard rock, with only what he thought of as a fur animal skin, he was warm and well rested with no aches or pains. It was like the rock relaxed into a consistency of a sofa cushion after he fell asleep and solidified to its normal hard rock when he awoke. The thought of sleeping in zero gravity came to mind. He wondered if he might be levitated above the pallet after he fell asleep. He came to the conclusion he would find the answer in due time if it was important, he know it.

He rose with a great anticipation of what the day had in store for him. After eating crudely made fruit sandwiches and cleaning up himself and the room, he went down the tunnel to the ledge and, as he had predicted, the wind was gone. What was unexpected was that the ledge had a one-meter-high wall around it which converted the ledge into a balcony! He walked onto the balcony and looked at the valley walls to ensure nothing else had changed. He found sheer cliffs as expected, with no hand holds or anyway to climb up the face of the mountain.

Then he moved to the balcony wall. He tested the strength of the balcony wall carefully. "Yes," he told himself, "The controlling entity would not cause him to be hurt," but just in case he wanted to be safe rather than sorry. He found it as it appeared, rock solid. He leaned against the wall and looked over at the valley floor and was again surprised.

He had expected a grassy plain, but now he saw that the majority of the valley floor was forest. At least it would be a forest if the steel rod straight tan trunks and the few top branches with blue foliage could be called trees. A large area just below the balcony was cleared of trees and the bare ground was a hallucinogenic pattern of brown and brick red, with a bit of yellow thrown in. It reminded him of a gaming field without markings. He scanned the area for any movement and saw nothing but the treetops moving together in the breeze. The ground around the clearing within the trees was covered by what looked to be a large type of mottled tan/yellow/green bushes he did not recognize. It reminded him of something his infant child would produce on his shirt!

He leaned over a little more to see directly below him to where the side of the mountain meets the valley floor and saw a stream flowing along the edge of the mountain. Next to the stream toward the clearing was what appeared to be a dirt road. He was not sure if it was a road or a well-traveled animal track. The road led into the forest. He could only follow it with his eyes a short way to the north. At least this was the direction he assigned based on the fact that the sun seemed to be moving toward him and he had always considered the sun to move from east to west.

His thoughts returned to the road and the forest. He could now make out a number of small clearings in the forest to the north. He left wondering about the reason for the clearing for later and turned to look the other way.

To the south the track headed along the river for about a kilometer and then turned abruptly into the forest. He looked back to the clearing and noticed a track to the south on

the far side. He had just about missed it because of the grass and the forest. He only noticed it because of the trampled look of the grass where it opened onto the clearing. He did not see one to the north.

He looked beyond the point where the southern road disappeared into the forest and saw a larger clearing further south. This clearing looked to be a quarter the size of the clearing before him. He began to wonder about the uses to which these clearings could be put too and found he could think of too many for any of them to be correct.

He surveyed the valley again to see if he missed anything and decided he had not. With that done, he looked at the area around and below the balcony to see if there was a way down to the valley floor. None was evident. The walls were sheer enough not be climbable without years of training and a lot of climbing equipment. The area below the balcony was a shear drop to the base of the river. Since he could not climb or slide down the face of the mountain, he resigned himself to being a prisoner for the time being.

He turned and slowly returned to the room. He noticed immediately the room had changed in his absence. There was a partition around the water corner and a sliding door attached to the partition. There was another small spigot hole just above the level of his head and a small indentation in the wall containing an object about half the size of his fist. He leaned into the alcove created by the partition and retrieved the object. Sniffing it delivered a pungent odor and a lick returned a bad taste unlike anything he had ever experienced. This was definitely not for consumption! He replaced the item in the alcove's wall niche. Moving beyond the new alcove, he saw the food had been replenished with more fruit and rolls.

He also noticed there was what appeared to be a cutting tool. It resembled a wire cheese slicer, without the roller, but with the handle protruding from the end like a knife. He picked it up and looked at it closely. He was sure he had never seen this design or a tool like this before.

He placed the cutting edge against the palm of his hand and pushed down, he was not cut. Just as he thought, the *entities will give me nothing which will hurt me*. He now assumed it was designed to only cut the fruit and thus, it could not be used as a weapon. Not that he seemed to need a weapon. It would also not help him climb to the bottom of the mountain.

He tried the slicer on the grapefruit, and it cut a piece off the fruit without a bit of effort. He placed the fruit on a mat which was on the table and picked up a roll. He put the slicer against the end and attempted to cut the roll open. The knife cut the roll as easy as a hot knife through butter. He put the roll down and examined the slicer a lot closer. He could not determine how this slicer could cut the hard crust of the roll, but then again, he did not have to know as long as the device worked as desired.

He put the slicer down and grabbed the roll and fruit slice and started consuming his lunch. He continued cutting the rolls and fruit and in short order had reduced the fare to a juice-covered mat. He used the washing area to clean the mat and the toilet to dry it. He wondered why the drier worked for the mat and not the cloth, but again dropped the thought because he knew he would not find the answer before the entity was ready.

He looked at the alcove and thought it looked like a very primitive refresher. Maybe...he removed his clothes and tried the alcove. He stepped into the alcove, and nothing happened. He slid the door closed and the water began to spray out of the top hole. He moved around under the spray. He noticed the spray did not change to a cleansing fluid. He looked at the object in the niche and saw it was bubbling from the spray bouncing off him. *Is this the soap*, he wondered. He picked up the soap and it slipped out of his hand bouncing on the floor. He leaned down and retrieved it. He used the soap and his hands to lather his body and then he rinsed off under the water. When he was done, he turned to open the door.

As he touched the door the water stopped, and a warm breeze began to emerge from a hole in the ceiling he had not seen earlier. He opened the door a crack and the breeze became stronger. He opened the door all the way and the breeze changed to a very warm wind. It dried him quickly, but he had to use the rag to finish the process. He dried the rag and put it away.

While he was cleaning himself, the commotion and ruckus began again. He dressed quickly and walked to the balcony. The balcony was not as deep as it had been, and he found a chair was molded into the right side of the balcony edge. He sat down and found he had a commanding view of the valley. He looked to the clearing and saw a very revolting sight. Combat! It was gladiatorial in its violence. He looked away. Two sides seemed to be hacking and slugging it out with medieval weapons. He looked back once his stomach was back under control. He could barely make out swords, maces and pikes, most of the weapons used during the Crusades on Earth. Memories flooded into his mind of the history of Earth, the barbaric history of Earth. This was just as utterly barbaric. He looked upon the scene as living, and dying, history. An Earth of the distance past. An Earth they had grown out of. He became fascinated by the living history before him! He got caught up in the scene. He had only seen something like this during movie night. *Movie night? Movie?* He was not sure where the thought of a movie came from and had no idea what a movie was, but like the rest of his disconnected thoughts, movie somehow felt right. He did not even realize he did not know what Earth was either since it also felt right to him, very right.

He wished he could get closer to the fighting to better see the combatants. From his vantage point on the side of the mountain, he could barely tell they were not animals although one group was very close.

He concentrated on the forces to the northern side of the clearing. From this distance they looked like two Horta or blobs, one on top of the other. They seemed to be connected by a very short trunk, which barely resembled a neck. The lower blob was definitely for mobility since it had six short, stumpy legs, which propelled it slowly across the clearing. The upper blob had four very flexible limbs, which resembled tentacles more than arms, but ended in grasping appendages. He could not recognize a head or any opening from this distance. His overall impression of the thing was that it was built by a committee to destroy everything in its path, if but slowly.

The forces to the Southern side of the clearing were another matter. Again, he was just as far away as he was from the northerners, and it was difficult to make out the creatures. They reminded him of an inflated octopus on top of a squid. The short, tentacle-like legs

provided mobility while the longer tentacles under the globed head were used for manipulation. The upper tentacles were much longer than the lower ones, but otherwise just as nondescript. The weapons that these creatures carried looked, from this distance, to be a part of the creature as if it was growing out of the end of a tentacle.

From his observations he determined the forces of the north were winning. Mostly from the fact the Southerners were being pushed back by the Northerners who were two-thirds of the way across the field. They were very slowly forcing the southerners back into the forest, fighting from the backs of the dead and dying on the ground. He watched the carnage with revulsion. He was very glad to have a point of view which was well removed from the fighting. He could see appendages being hacked from bodies, while maces were battering what was left. He was well removed from the visible, graphic nature of the battle by the distance, thus he could not see the fluids squirting from the damaged bodies, or see and hear the crushing of bones, if they had bones, and bodies beneath the feet of the victors. He could imagine Klingon's in the middle of the battle glorying in the carnage. *Klingon's*, he wondered.

The battle continued. He watched it. Fascinated one moment and disgusted the next, by what he saw. It was like watching a very old war picture on movie night. *Movie Night?* But he was also stupefied by what he saw. It made absolutely no sense to him. *And since I am a Captain, I guess I should know*, he thought to himself. He looked back to the battle trying to use an analytical eye and not having much success. He had to turn away often.

He observed that while the Southerners were much more mobile than the Northerners they did not run away or back away from the blows delivered by the Northerners. They just kept fighting. This observation was well beyond his experience watching movies or in Starfleet. Starfleet! He had another memory snippet. He tried to concentrate as much to pull up a further memory as to take his mind off the battle. Starfleet was an organization . . . an organization in which he was a . . . a member. This sounded right to him. His ship was a . . . a . . . a Starfleet ship. Now, the only question he had was, "What was Starfleet?" He tried to remember more about the ship, who he was and what Starfleet was for a few minutes before the battle pulled him away from his thoughts. The noise was deafening and did not allow him to be distracted for long.

He continued to watch in horrified amazement as the Northerners pushed the Southerners up against the forest leaving a horror of dismembered, bloodied corpses in its wake. He did not see many of the Northerners within the multitude of littered corpses. He was very glad he could not see the carnage up close for fear of losing the remnants of his last meal he was now barely keeping down. He was pretty sure this was the first time he had witnessed carnage of this magnitude. He tried to remember a similar scene and could not. He knew it did not mean he had never witnessed something this brutal, but only the fact he could not remember it. This thought did not make him feel better or view the horrible scene any differently. He looked back on the battle.

As the first Northerner reached the forest, a loud gong sounded over the continuous sound of the battle, which brought the fighting to an abrupt halt. It also startled him again. He was beginning to hate the gong! Before the echo of the gong had finished bouncing between the mountainsides, the Northerners had ceased fighting. Blows in progress were pulled away from their intended targets. All the weapons on both sides fell

to the ground. The Northerners began to back away still facing their foes. The Southerners back away toward the edges of the field. As the two sides backed away, the captain could see the final results of the battle. He fully understood the reason the ground had looked brown and red, the color of fresh and dried blood. He had to work hard to keep his stomach down as the stench began to reach him.

He rose and ran to the hole in the floor and lost his own internal battle as he regurgitated his feast of a few hours before. He noted the fruit and rolls tasted much better going down than coming back up. This thought caused him to smile for a moment, but the sight he had seen came back to haunt him. It appalled him greatly, but it was the stench which got him. He was not expecting such a rretched smell. As the vivid images returned to his memory; he felt he had never in his career seen bodies flopping around with smashed heads and missing limbs like he had just witnessed. He was very, very sure of this!

He recovered slowly. When he felt up to it, he cleaned up the corner. He made sure to keep his nose a foot away from the hole. He washed out the rag he had used for cleaning and hung it up to dry. It was then he noticed there was more than one rag now. There was a larger rag hanging by the fresher. He thanked the entities for seeing his need and fulfilling it.

He finally lay down on the pallet looking revoltingly at his dinner on the table. He was on the verge of sleep when the gong sounded again. A few moments later the darkness took the room. He followed shortly thereafter into the darkness of a troubled sleep.

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The gong woke him from a very tenuous and troubled sleep. Nightmares, based in his observations of the day before, plagued him. He relived the scenes over and over. Every slash was . . . every crash was . . . vivid in his memory. He reasoned that being a captain, he *must* have seen worse than the battle of yesterday. But he had no memory of anything this horrible or anything even remotely close to this carnage.

But then, if he was a captain and had seen this all before—and maybe worse—why did it affect him so? Why could he not act detached. It was not as if he was a combatant. It was not as if he was part of the horror. As if he was fighting for *his* life. He felt his empty stomach becoming queasy as he lay on the pallet with these thoughts, and more, going through his mind generating more and more questions.

He did not want to face the day knowing he might have to witness another battle as violent or worse. But face the day he must! He must find out why he was here and what he must do to get back to his captaincy. The captain felt he would be much happier captaining a vessel than watching the massacre he knew would be completed this day. But a captain must set the example for his crew.

He sat up on the pallet for a moment before standing and removed his uniform. He walked over and entered the shower. He took the rag with him to act as a washcloth. He reveled in the warm water. As his very relaxing shower came to an end, he said, “I wish this was a bit hotter.” He was surprised to hear his own gravelly voice and realized these were the first words he had said since waking up here.

He was also surprised when the temperature increased slightly. "Five degrees hotter," he said. The shower became warmer still. "Normal temperature," he said. He felt the temperature return to what it was before. He adjusted to temperature a few more times just to ensure he was controlling the temperature and it was not a coincidence.

Satisfied, he opened the shower door and dried off feeling much better than he had when he had entered. Much, much better. The dreams were beginning to wane as he relaxed from the shower. He dressed, ate and cleaned up the room. The captain surveyed the room before walking to the balcony. This day he found an opening in the balcony wall against the mountain on the other side of the balcony from the chair. He walked to the opening and found the top of the path. He visually followed it down to the river, losing it in places. He guessed it would be somewhat of a long walk and he did not feel up to a long walk just yet. So, he decided not to follow the path today, but wait until he was feeling a hundred percent again. He walked to the chair and sat down.

The valley was unchanged but for the clearing. The bodies he had seen the day before where gone. *There must be one heck of a night crew*, he thought, *since there were thousands of body parts to clean up*. He became aware of the fact the brown colored ground was stained by the spilled blood of the creatures fighting the battle.

As he watched the Southerners and Northerners entered the clear from their perspective roads and move along the edge of the forest toward the far side. They began taking up positions for the battle that would inevitably occur. Once the forces had formed a line, it advanced toward the other advancing line. A second line followed and so on. The first line slowly continued to advance.

Catapults were moved to the edge of the clearing just inside the forest line. He had a difficult time seeing them until they fired, and the arms appeared above the trees. The catapults took a horrible toll on both sides every time they were employed. The large rocks would cut a path through the opposing forces like a scythe, leaving only death, misery and destruction behind it. The destruction continued into the trees to damage the catapults. Slowly the rocks became few and far between as the lines continued to advance over the bodies of the fallen. Then the lines came together!

While the carnage abhorred him, he was fascinated by the mechanics of what was happening before him. He could not see any reason for the battle or warfare. While the Southerners fought valiantly, it became obvious to the captain that they were out matched. The Northerners tore through the Southerners ranks with a viciousness that was unmatched in his experience. It seemed to him the Southerners were strictly fighting a holding battle; they were not trying to win, but just hold out till the end of the day! At that, they were also losing.

After a few hours of watching and examining the battle, he came to the conclusion the warfare could go on only as long as the Southerners could hold out. They were being decimated. Very slowly, but surely, decimated. Most of the corpses, or pieces of corpses on the battlefield were Southern.

He saw the Northerners still had casualties, but most were only maimed to the point they could not fight anymore, which seemed very hard to do to one of them. Many of the

Northerners continue fighting even though they had a bad cut or even a limb or two missing.

He became tired of watching in the bright sun. The humidity was making him perspire, so he rose slowly to return to his room. He entered the tunnel, walked down the hallway and into his room. He noticed another type of foodstuff was added to the bowl on the table. He reached down and picked up the knife and the new item. The new item seemed to have a roll type texture. He used the knife to cut it open and found the item was an elongated roll with fruit inside. He tasted it tentatively and was very glad he had. It tasted very different and *not* for the better. Having the fruit inside the roll made it very bitter. He put it aside after the first bite. He cut the rolls open and sliced the fruit for his sandwiches as he had done for the last ... he was not sure how long. It seemed a long time.

He sat down, cross-legged before the table and ate slowly. He felt like life had slowed from what he imagined the life of a ship captain to be. He envisaged the captains of old, hard as nails, in a fast-paced environment, giving orders, directing his crew on a life-or-death mission. Exciting, robust, invigorating, exhilarating, he imagined the captain's life to be all of this. He remembered stories he read as a youth. The great sea fairing tombs in the library. His desire to be one of them pushing him toward that dream. Then, finally, walking onto his bridge for the first time; hearing 'Captain on the bridge' for the first time; knowing his dream had only started. He sighed loudly as if he had none of this now. Was this what retirement felt like? The loss of purpose? He was not sure...

He made a point to slow down and enjoy what this life offered. Figuring a captain did not get many vacations or chances to enjoy life. The meals were the high point of his day. At least the fruit was. He really enjoyed the different flavors. He started mixing them on the rolls to make more interesting sandwiches. He slowly finished the meal savoring each morsel. He cleaned up quickly, discarding the fruit rolls and hoping his invisible benefactors would get the idea he just did *not* like them. He walked slowly to the Balcony.

He went to the railing and stood there as he observed the Northerners had just about reached the other side of the clearing. He thought the body count was not as much as the day before, the piles did not seem as high. This revelation disturbed him. He knew he was not a cynical person, at least he felt he wasn't, but he was becoming cynical in his estimation. This disturbed him the most. He watched as the first of the Northerners hacked a tree.

As if the damage to the tree was a cue, the gong sounded. The fighting ceased immediately. Both sides backed away from each other and began to move back down the track into the woods.

Shortly after the last of the combatants entered the forest the gong sounded again, and the darkness began to draw its curtain down the valley. He looked once again at the valley floor littered with corpses and then he turned to head back to his room. He made it around the turn in the corridor before the lights went out. He returned to his pallet in the dark and went to sleep as his head hit the hard surface.

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The fleetcom channel opened and Admiral Donatra stated, “*This is Admiral Donatra with an update briefing for all ships.*” She paused for a moment before continuing.

“*As you are aware, the captains of the Explorer, Galileo, Pioneer and Voyager have been taken by forces unknown. All ships have been directed to search for their captains and some headway has been made. The commbadge carrier signals have been detected on the adjacent planets or moons. Captain Fossey and the SCE Engineering team are working on breaking through the energy field which surrounded each planet the moment the captains were abducted. You are directed to pass any information on the energy field to the Galileo.*”

She paused again to catch her breath before continuing.

“*This information you should already know. What you don’t know is that the survey is almost complete and that the same energy field around the planets also surrounds the sun. Initial readings show the field around the sun is much denser than the field around the planets. We have also discovered dense energy fields moving within the larger field. The Cabot and Hudson will complete the survey of the sun within the hour. The Clark is . . . Standby,*” she said as the voice circuit muted.

The pause was much longer this time. “*The Clark has entered a return vector to the Explorer and is not responding to communications attempts. We have dispatched a rescue shuttle, which has just this moment beamed over the rescue team. Standby.*”

Another long pause before continuing, “*The rescue team reports the crewmembers are in a comatose state and they have a blue glow around them. They are returning to the Explorer with the runabout. We will know more after the medical team has them in sickbay.*”

“*This concludes the update. We will have another update every six hours. captains, I suggest you rest your crews and yourselves. Donatra out.*”

The acting captain looked from his science officer to his chief engineer trying to get some sense out of the update he had just heard.

Chapter 3

First gong sounded and as was becoming usual, it again, startled him awake. It sounded like it was in his head it was so loud. He jumped up and ran to the balcony. Ignoring the chair and path, he went to the balcony edge and looked over the railing to the valley floor. The clearing was empty, no corpses, no weapons, no nothing. The night crew did a thorough clean up again. He stood wondering how they could clean up the battlefield so quickly, so silently and so immaculately! And in the dark! He stared at the battle ground to see if he could detect any debris left over from yesterday's battle. He was not sure how long he was asleep, but he admired the efficiency of the clean-up crew!

The captain turned away from the scene and returned to his room. The first thing he noticed was there weren't any of the new, ready-made sandwiches he had tried yesterday. He ate slowly, making his own sandwiches into an excellent meal and then cleaned up the small mess quickly. He washed his clothes and showered. After dressing in his still damp clothing, he returned to the balcony and saw the forces from both sides were beginning to come down the tracks from their respective clearings. He was surprised the combat had not started as yet. It had taken quite some time to get back to the outlook.

Feeling refreshed and fully invigorated after his meal, he turned and followed the path down the side of the hill. The walk down was pretty easy since the grade was steady and gentle. He made a note to return to the room at second gong, to keep from having to climb the path in the dark.

The path followed the side of the mountain and performed a switchback where the Northern track left the side of the river and entered the forest. He could now see beyond a rocky outcrop at the source of the river. The river flowed out of a cave about fifty meters above the riverbed and ran down the side of the mountain.

He could see the Northerners camp from his vantage point and noticed it was not very large. This surprised him. He felt it should be much larger. *Was that the captain's experience coming through*, he wondered. He had expected the encampment to be twice as large to support an army of the size he thought would be needed to sustain the daily losses. It must be the captain's experience had been giving him these feelings. He wondered; *can I trust these feelings?*

He continued down the path following the river. The gurgling of the water flowing in the river came to him and turned the walk into a very pleasant stroll. As he looked down at the river, he noticed its path was about a meter wide and did not seem to vary in width as it followed the curvature of the mountainside. He passed his balcony as he followed the path south to the valley floor.

As suspected, he encountered a second switchback where the southern track left the forest, and the river entered the forest. He could see the Southerners encampment and clearing and found it was only slightly bigger than the Northerners camp. More surprises! This encampment should be four times the size it was. Still confused by the small size of both the encampments, he turned and continued down the path.

As he came down the path to a point opposite the center of the clearing, he arrived at another balcony. This balcony was almost a duplicate of the balcony outside his room. It was just as wide, but the chair was on the opposite, and it was only twenty meters above the clearing on the mountain side of the river.

He sat down as the front lines began to battle. He watched in horrible fascination as the bloodshed continued. He was only about seventy-three meters from the fighting as well as being across the river, thus he had a very good look at the combatants.

Swords, maces, lances; all wheeled by creatures of almost indescribable horror. The beasts to the North were even more hideous than he first expected. Though his original observation, he thought the beasts to be two Horta or blobs, one on top of the other.

While this was true, the Horta would have been highly upset at the idea of any resemblance beyond a very basic likeness. On close examination these beasts looked more like a slimy beetle with a small carapace and no head. The lower body part sprouted six short, stumpy legs, which propelled it slowly at a constant pace. Some of the beasts were large enough to have the bottom of the lower body part touch the ground. The beast produced slime, like a snail, to move the body over the ground. A small opening on the front of the beast seemed to be an air intake since the long thin blisters along the bottom of the body pulsated slowly, rhythmically like the lungs in his chest.

He moved his gaze to the flexible middle connection of the two body parts. This non-descript area was smaller than a normal beetle to which he was comparing the beast. His gaze moved upward. He had difficulty seeing this body part since it was in constant movement. Diametrically opposed to the slow-moving lower body part, the upper part was a constant blur. He could still make out the four very flexible tentacle-like limbs, but just. When one of the beasts was finally struck down, he managed to get a better, if not gorier, look at the body. On top of the upper body part was a bulge that seemed to have one eye in the center pointing straight ahead. The eye in the dying beast did not move and from the lack of movement he surmised the eye was fixed in place. There were no openings on the top of the beast, which to him, was confusing. He was not sure how it imbibed nourishment since there did not seem to be a mouth. Finally, while he could not smell the beast from his vantage point, he imagined from the disgusting look of the beast that it extruded a very rank odor.

Repulsed, he concentrated on the forces to the South. His initial thought of the southerners reminding him of an inflated octopus on top of a squid still held true. The smaller tentacles providing mobility were much faster than the northerner's six short, stumpy legs.

The upper body had an opening much like a mouth, which seemed to cycle rhythmically. The upper body also had eyes scattered around it in what appeared to be a random pattern. The tentacles ended in suckers that held the weapons they carried.

As repulsive as the northerners were, these creatures were almost beautiful. Their movements were as fluid as a harmonic melody. They all but danced a ballet in their combat. The majestic movement seemed hypnotic. The more he watched, the more involved he became. He slowly lost himself in the ballet the southerners were performing in their combat with the northerners. He became so lost in the moment; it was a jolt when

the creature on which he was focused was cut down by two of the northerners. He shook his head to clear it as he recovered. He focused back on the battle, drawn to it as if he was addicted to strong drug and needed his next fix an hour ago.

He observed the southerners were also much faster in their movements and thus, could get out of the way of the slower moving northerners. What cost the southerners' numbers and members was the fact that the northerners, with their longer reach, could deliver a blow before the southerners could get close to deliver a blow of their own.

The captain, who felt he should have a stronger stomach, could only stand to watch the carnage up close for a short while before he had to turn away. The sight of the blood flowing from the battlefield into the river and coloring it red was the last straw. He stood and started the long walk up the path. He did not look back at the battle. He paused at the first switchback and noticed a rock he could sit on to rest. He kept his eyes averted from the battle raging less than a football field away. He stared up the valley toward the distant end away from the battle to try to get a sense of the terrain and distance. It was lost in a fog like mist.

After a short pause, he continued up the gentle incline of the path, wishing he had a container to carry water for his thirst. He arrived at the second switchback and paused on an identical rock as was at the first stop. The sounds of the battle were not diminished even though he was farther away. He looked out at the other end of the valley and found the same fog like mist preventing him from gauging the distance. The thought of walking beyond the boundaries of the valley occurred to him. But he doubted he could walk to the distant end of the valley in one battle period.

Following a longer rest than he initially thought he needed, he started up the last part of the trail to the balcony. He was surprised by his lack of energy and multiple rest breaks. Arriving at the balcony, he watched the battle while he sat down in the chair and rested from the trek back up the mountain. He could not see the blood squirting and the limbs flying any more. As tired as he was, focusing on the battle was not easy and for that, he was very thankful.

The battle had continued. He guesstimated it had taken about seven meters of battle to return to the balcony and he was winded on arrival. He needed to get back in fighting shape. *Where did that phase come from*, he thought, *fighting shape*? He wondered if he was supposed to join in the battle when he got his strength back, he sincerely hoped not.

He rose slowly and walked to his room and saw there was more food than usual. The roll sandwich was back, but it was different than the last time. He gave it a try and found the flavor was better than the sandwiches he had made.

He put two aside and devoured the rest of the sandwiches, rolls and fruit. Cleaned up and went back to the chair for the rest of the afternoon.

The second gong started him to the point he almost rolled off the chair and down the mountain. He watched as the two sides backed away and began the return to their encampments. He ran down the path to the first switchback and watched the Northerners turn into the forest and enter their encampment. The first thing which struck him was the fact no one came out to greet the returning *heroes*! No one was minding the camp while

the combatants where off fighting the battle? This sounded very strange to him. He continued watching as he tried to figure out this mystery.

The Northerners slowly moved across the encampment, placing their equipment on the ground near their sleeping pallets and ate the *food* in the bowls next to the pallets. He suddenly realized the pallets were not visible when he had looked into the camp earlier. They resembled his pallet. They were slightly raised and a size to just fit the owner.

He saw the last of the combatants had turned onto the track and realized it was time to return to his room. He ran up the path trying to get some exercise, not because he did not have time, which he really didn't. He arrived in the nick of time and out of breath. The last of the Southerners were just entering their encampment.

He returned to his room and settled down for the night. He saw his bowl was empty. Blast! The sandwiches he had saved were gone. He could use them right now. He came to the conclusion whatever force was controlling this place and providing the food, they were only setting out enough food for him each day and he did not have to, or was he allowed to, save any. He decided he would have to carry his 'midnight' snack with him next time.

The darkness took the room as he lay down on the sleeping pallet. As he thought about the mysteries of the day, sleep took him quickly.

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The captain woke slowly as the first gong sounded. He arose and ate breakfast. Cleaned up and showered. Dried off and dressed. The new thing this morning was a dedicated washrag for the shower. He had been using the cloth rag to wash himself. He then rinsed the rag and hung it on the shower stall to dry. Now he had a dedicated washrag on a towel hook in the shower stall. This seemed an improvement since he had a dry towel to use in the room. It was not dusty, but he still had spills to clean and needed a dry napkin with meals. So, this was definitely an improvement over the wet napkin or waiting until after a meal to wash up.

It was becoming a game between him and his keepers to see who would create the next new item or broach the next new idea. The only problem was, they learned fast! The breaking of the bread led to the cutting tool. The fruit in the roll led to the sandwich. Using the rag in the shower led to the washcloth. Hanging the rag on the shower door led to the shower hook. He wondered what would be next as he left the room and started his second sojourn to the river balcony.

He heard the battle in the hallway as he turned the corner before he saw the carnage below from the balcony. He felt a grumbling in the pit of his stomach. The fighting still upset him, but he knew he had to keep the upset, physical as well as mental, under control so he could continue the journey the keepers had him on. He was very sure by now they had a plan for him. They were leading him down a path to a goal he could not see yet. He turned and started down the path along the side of the mountain.

He followed the path at a slow, steady pace to conserve his energy. He noticed at the first turn, and then at the second, the resting rocks were not there. He wondered if they had

been taken away or just rolled down the mountain. Glancing over the edge of the path answered the latter in the negative.

When he finally arrived at the lower balcony, he found the path continued downward at the same gentle pace to the river.

He went to the balcony railing and leaned over to see where along the river the path ended. He saw the path led right up to the river across from the point where the Northern track entered the forest.

He saw this as an opportunity to snoop around the Northerners camp. The captain walked down the path to the rivers' edge hopeful he could cross the river into the Northerner's camp.

He saw what appeared to be a stone bridge just under the surface of the water. The bridge was not very wide, but it allowed the path to continue across the river. He assumed the stone bridge would not be visible from the rivers' edge on the opposite side since the Northerner's had not tried to cross it when they passed by on the way to the battle. The bridge did not emerge from the water on the far edge of the river. A brush like ground cover on either side of the river obscured the entrance into and exit from the river from the view of the road.

The captain walked slowly across the river to the bushes on the far side. He crossed the trail and ducked into the ground cover on the other side. Once in the forest edge, he looked down the road for a moment to ensure he was not seen or followed.

He walked through the forest the short distance to the encampment. He was not sure how to interpret what he saw. He moved to the first sleeping pallet and saw the pallet was just large enough to hold one of the creatures as he had originally thought. There was a small table at what he assumed was the head of the pallet, with a bowl and small dish on it. The dish held a clear fluid, which a dip of the finger and a taste told him was water. He dipped a finger into the bowl, which had mushy gruel, and held it to his mouth. The rancid odor kept him from tasting the gruel. He absentmindedly washed his finger in the dish of water and dried it on his clothes as he looked around.

The scene reminded him of the phrase, 'out of chaos comes order.' The camp was roughly a perfect square with the pallets and tables lined up in rows and columns. With his limited visibility from the path the previous day, he could not see this fact earlier. This amazed him. The encampment showed a rigid order was followed, but the fighting he had observed, again and again, showed only chaos!

He walked around the clearing and was amazed to find no personal effects, nothing of a personal nature. No pictures, no letters or writings, no spare clothing! Not even a washcloth, nothing! He was astonished at this revelation. While he did not have any personal items, beside his clothes and the commbadge, he . . . *commbadge?* A communicator?

He sat down on the nearest sleeping pallet and pulled the commbadge off his shirt and examined it. To the naked eye, it looked like a piece of jewelry. He wondered how to activate it. He tapped it, slapped it, bounced it on the ground and finally bit it. Nothing would cause it to activate. He looked it over as closely as he could but there were not any buttons or visible openings. He placed the commbadge back on his shirt.

He continued to search the camp for any information about the Northerners and did not find anything of value, even a minute value. He was getting ready to return to the river when the second gong sounded.

He knew he did not have much time to clear out of the area and get back to his room before the darkness came. He sprinted across the camp and down the short trail to the river. He saw the Northerners were beginning to straggle up the trail toward their camp. He ran to the bushes and waited a moment, listening. When he did not hear an alert or shout, he sprinted across the river and hid behind the other bush.

Nothing! The Northerners ignored him completely. He took a chance and began to trot up the path. He paused at the balcony and looked back over his route to see if he was being followed, he was not. He continued his trek up the path pausing at the first switchback. Still no notice and the Southerners had reached the end of the trail and begin entering the forest. He sprinted to the second switchback as the last Northerner turned into the forest. He leaned against the resting stone, it was back, to catch his breath. He finished the last distance at a dead run and arrived just in time for the last gong. He turned into the cave as the blanket of darkness started up the valley. He made it to the room and sat down on the pallet. His chest heaving, his heart pounding, but still thinking like a man . . . he reached out and grabbed the bowl of sandwiches as the room was plunged into darkness. "Thanks, keepers," he said barely recognizing his own voice.

He ate in silence and darkness. He found eating in the dark to be fun since he did not know what was next on the menu. He could not tell what the next sandwich was before he took a bite and then, surprise! But then some surprises were not that good. He found a new sandwich and it was not as good as the others.

When he was done, he found the rag and crawled the short distance to the shower and cleaned up. He laid the rag on the floor to dry and returned to the pallet and the mental darkness of sleep.

• • •

The gong sounded, which brought him instantly awake. He rose and he took care of his morning duties as quickly as he could. He walked quickly to the balcony and trotted down the path, though the switchbacks and the next balcony and down to the river. At the bush, the path forked and continued down the side of the river next to the mountain. He walked along the new path to a point just under the balcony. The combatants were moving out onto the field of battle to again fight, what was to him, a senseless conflict.

He looked straight at them, and they did not seem to see him! Both sides stayed to the purpose at hand, getting ready to battle. They did not pay one bit of attention to him as he trotted down the path not sixty meters away in plain view of both of the combatant forces. He arrived at the Southerners entrance to the forest and found bushes guarding the crossing just as at the Northern end of the path.

He crossed the river on the submerged stone path and hid behind the bushes as the last Southerner exited the forest and headed down the trail. The captain entered the encampment and found it almost identical to the Northern camp. The same sleeping pallets in rows and columns with a table, bowl and dish at the head of each one—the only

difference was the size of the encampment; there were twice as many sleeping pallets. He walked around the clearing and back to the entrance by the river.

He moved to the first pallet and sat down. Then reached over to the table and verified the dish held water. He turned his attention to the bowl. It held a clear broth with, from the smell, what appeared to be sliced fruit in it. He put a finger in the broth and tasted it. He was greeted by a slight bitter taste with a sweet then sour after taste. The flavor was the most complicated he had experienced so far. *“At least I could find a meal here,”* he thought.

He rose with the intention of returning to the river’s edge and the lower balcony. He turned and found he was facing a Southerner standing about one meter from him. He immediately reacted by taking a defensive stance. The creature stood quietly looking him over as if it had discovered a new curiosity. The Southerner was moving no more than the upper part of its body in a non-threatening manner. It seemed to be breathing from the rhythmic movements of its upper torso. He began to relax as he realized there was no danger. He slowly stood upright and stared at the creature with about the same level of curiosity.

His first impression of the Southerners from the upper balcony and his second impression from the lower balcony were validated by this close up examination of the Southerner. It flinched occasionally as it stood regarding him.

“Hello,” he said after the creature completed its examination. The creature’s reaction was to turn its upper body and point an opening toward him. A soft noise issued from the opening. He turned his ear to listen but got nothing intelligible. He turned back to face the creature and asked, “Can you understand me?”

More soft noises came from the Southerner’s opening. He was beginning to believe the opening was its equivalent of a mouth or sound box. He watched closely, trying to make something out of the noise the creature was producing. After many minutes had passed, he began to catch a word here and there.

He continued to listen carefully until he caught the question “what are they?” The captain thought for a few seconds until he realized he was the ‘they’ to which the being referred. He answered with, “I am a human.”

The Southerner asked, “What are human?”

“It is what I am. A human is a creature of the type standing before you. I am called Captain,” he said and then asked, “What type of creature are you?”

“We are Pluronians,” the creature answered before asking, “What are we doing where?”

The captain considered the answers he was receiving. Pluronian was speaking in the plural tense, like a movie he had once seen where monarchs would talk in the plural to show they spoke for the people, they never used I, they only used we.

“I am exploring or learning about this world,” he answered.

“We know not this world.”

“I am a visitor, not from here.”

“We know not ‘visitor’, we are from where?”

“I don’t know. I awoke here and have no memory of any time before.”

“We are of here. We always have of here been,” it said flatly. It did not seem to comprehend anything outside its own existence.

A short pause gave them both a chance to think about what they had learned. The flinching continued. He asked, “How long have you have been fighting that war?”

“We know not ‘war’,” the Pluronian again stated flatly as if distracted.

“Can you hear the noise of battle?” He pointed to the North.

“We know not ‘battle’,” it said.

“That battle,” he said incredulously, continuing to point to the North, “that is causing the noise.”

The Pluronian glanced to the North and said, “We know only of the scourge.”

“Then how long have you been fighting the scourge?”

“We know not ‘fighting’, the scourge always has of here been.”

He thought about its response for a moment and shook his head to clear the cobwebs and try to think clearly. The Pluronians have always been here fighting the scourge. This was about all he knew at this point. He was not even sure how this one learned his language!

He asked, “You are not in the scourge?”

“We are of the scourge always,” it said.

“But you are not participating in the scourge?”

“We know not ‘participating’,” it returned.

“You know,” he said and then acted out the hacking and fighting and pointed to the North, “being part of?”

“We are of the scourge always,” it said again.

“Well, *this is getting me no were*,” he thought.

“The others you fight in the scourge, who are they?” He asked pointing up and over to indicate the next camp, he hoped.

“We scourge the Singurian,” it said turning its attention to the North. The creature had a funny look.

“Why,” he asked.

“We do,” was the simple answer he got as its attention returned to him. The creature seemed to believe that was all that was necessary, by its estimation.

“But *why* do you scourge the Singurians,” he asked again.

“We do of the scourge always,” it said.

He began to believe this simple creature did not have the information he needed to find out what was going on here. He tried another direction. "Why is this camp bigger than the Singurian's camp," he asked.

"We know not 'bigger,'" it said.

This was getting ridiculous and nowhere. He tried again with, "Why are there more pallets," he pointed to all the pallets in the encampment, "then in the Singurian's camp?"

"We know not the Singurian camp," it said, flinching more often now.

He was getting frustrated with the lack of information he was getting out of this creature. He said, "I have been to the Singurian's camp and there are less pallets."

"We have of here what needed. We always have what needed of here been," it answered, flinching to the point of trembling.

"So, you have the number of pallets you need to support the fighters you need," he said and then asked, "Where do the replacements come from?"

"We know not 'replacements,'" it stated as if in pain. He realized this was the first emotion he had noticed coming from the creature. It had answered all his questions in a calm, flat manner with less emotion than a Vulcan! *Vulcan?* Another memory!

He asked, "More of you to replace the ones killed in the scourge?"

"We know not 'killed,'" it stated. The trembling was becoming worse.

"The fallen ones," he said. He then acted out the act of dying and then indicated another stepping forward to take its place. He asked, "where are the ones that follow?"

The Pluronian made an untranslatable noise and began shaking as if it was having an Epileptic fit. He asked, "What is..."

The gong sounded. It was much louder in the camp, almost ear splitting. The startled captain looked around quickly. He looked back at the now still Pluronian and saw it was now very still. He turned and ran to the river, seeing the survivors of the battle were entering the trail. He ran across the river and down the path to the Northern bush.

He paused for only a moment to ensure he was not being followed. Convinced he was again being ignored; he began the long trot up the mountain path. Reaching the low balcony, he did not pause, but continued on up the path. At the first switchback he saw the last Pluronian was leaving the field of battle. He increased the speed of his trot.

At the second switchback he saw the last of the Singurians entering the encampment and knew his time was running out and this was going to be very close. He was only halfway to the balcony. He increased his speed to a full run, using what he felt was the last of his energy very quickly. His heart was pounding in his chest; an ache in his side offset the hollow developing within his stomach. He was three quarters of the way to the upper balcony when the last gong sounded.

He saw the darkness coming toward him. He continued toward the upper balcony at a dead run, trying to obtain its safety before the darkness arrived. It seemed to be closing on him at a steadily increasing rate. He sprinted the last one hundred meters as if he was in the Olympics of old. The darkness took him ten meters from the upper balcony.

He screamed, "No," and fell to his knees.

He crawled the final distance to the balcony. He felt along the side of the mountain and found the opening for his cave. Crawling quickly down the corridor he crashed headfirst into the wall as the corridor changed direction without him!

Disoriented, he made the turn and at a slower pace, crawled to his pallet, feeling in front of him with an outstretched hand. He crawled onto his sleeping pallet, too exhausted to eat. As his heaving chest calmed down and his heart stopped pounding, sleep took him quickly from his exhaustion.

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The fleetcom channel opened and Admiral Donatra stated, "*This is Admiral Donatra with a fleet update.*" She waited until all four captains were on the link.

"The survey is complete and available from Stellar Cartography if you have not received it already."

"Life sciences and engineering have determined that there are two energy fields around the planets. One is the dampening field that has been frustrating the retrieval of your captains. The other, a positive energy field, has been found to be sentient."

She waited for the reaction to set in and blow over.

"The positive energy fields have tentatively been given the name Positans."

Tom Paris observed, "*That implies that there are more than one.*"

"The count around the sun was up over a thousand and still climbing a few minutes ago."

Randy asked, "*Sir, are the Positans hostile?*"

There was a short pause before Ael answered, "*We are not sure, but the energy waves being emitted by the Positans shows a calm demeanor, so I would say no, not at this time.*"

When there were apparently no more questions she continued. "*The most disturbing event to happen since the last briefing has been the unscheduled return of the USS Cabot. The runabout was assigned to scan the energy field surrounding the sun. About halfway through their mission the runabout set a return course and headed back to the Explorer.*"

She paused. "*The crew did not respond to our hails and a shuttle was dispatched to rendezvous with the runabout. We will keep you up to date. Are there any questions?*"

Chief Borall stated, "I would like to have their data."

Jeffery stated, "Captain Fossey, sir. Chief Borall would like to request the data and any other information on the Breen dampening weapon and the countermeasures used to combat it."

"I will have the information sent to Chief Borall. Are there any other questions?"

When there were no questions, she ended the conference with, "*Then the next briefing will be in eight hours. Donatra out.*"

The connection closed.

Captain Flossy looked from his science officer to his chief engineer trying to get any of their thoughts about the update they had just heard. They did not add any comments. The science officer shrugged and returned to his station. The chief engineer busied himself at his console keeping his back to the captain.

He turned to the SCE Chief Engineer and caught sight of his back as the turbolift doors closed. He was sure he would be talking to him very soon. Knowing Chief Borall would be concentrating on the puzzle for some time, was not making his wait for action any easier.

He sighed and sat back in his command chair pondering the information he had just received.

Chapter 4

The captain woke slowly as the first gong sounded. He was still very tired and very hungry, having missed the meal the night before. He reached for the bowl and ate slowly letting the fruit work its magic. Feeling the strength slowly returning, the warm feeling slowly moving out from his center, he began to be revitalized. After he completed the meal, a nice warm, slow shower added to the refreshing warmth of the meal. He said, “warmer,” to raise the temperature to add heat to his aching muscles. He was not too surprised that his legs hurt from the punishment of the run up the mountain like an Olympic sprinter. “Two degrees hotter,” he commanded, wanting the temperature increased only a slight bit. The hot water pounded his back and the sore muscles, relieving the soreness and in some cases, the pain. He luxuriated in the warm stream of the cascading waters. The wisps of steam were working on his sinus cavities helping them to open up. *The sonic shower is nothing like this*, he thought; then wondered what a sonic shower was. “Water off,” he said.

Shower over, he dried off, dressed and finished cleaning the room. He was not surprised he had clean clothing, another service of the keepers! He could hear the noise of the battle coming down the corridor by now. He walked slowly, stiffly to the balcony and noticed the valley perspective was completely wrong. He looked around the balcony, the stone chair to the right, the path leading downward to the left. “That was it,” he thought as he looked down the path; then rushed to the edge of the balcony and stared at the river only 20 meters below. He looked up the mountain and could not see the upper balcony, nor could he see the path which had led up from this baloney only yesterday.

Again, he was amazed at the power of the keepers. They had moved his cave some one hundred and seventy meters down the mountainside! And they did it with him asleep in it! His shock at this revelation caused him to sit down sideways on the chair and try to fathom the power it would take to make the massive changes which moving a cave would take. *And it was done without waking me*, he thought. This was bordering on the unbelievable!

He slid around to sit on the chair and observe the battle, trying to learn more from it by integrating the information from the Pluronian he had talked to the day before. *If I were to make a log entry about what I have learned*, he thought *it would be something like—*

“Captain’s log, this stardate,” he said. Then he thought, *what was a stardate?* He continued, “whatever it was. For all their known experience, the Southern species, the Pluronians, have battled the Northern species, the Singurians, for an unknown reason. The Pluronian contacted stated the war, called the scourge, had always been fought and they always had enough creatures to fight it. My observations to date have shown the Singurians are always the victors and where the replacement combatants are gotten from is still unknown. The battles begin after first gong and

end on the second gong. Third gong brings the darkness, which continues until the next first gong. The cave I have occupied since arrival has been moved almost two hundred meters down the mountainside. I continue to investigate the cause of the battles and the creatures that are prosecuting it. I still have no information on my captors, who I call for purposes of identification only, the Keepers. Captain out."

Having put together a coherent evaluation of his current knowledge, he looked out over the battle scene. The fact he was lower reduced, somewhat, the amount of carnage which was visible; however, what he could see was enough to cause him distress. As he continued to watch the heat of the day relaxed him to the point he fell into a restful sleep.

The second gong startled him but did not scare him even though it was louder this close to the battlefield. He realized quickly he had fallen asleep and felt the better for it. He watched for a minute as the combatants backed away from each other and began to return to their encampments.

He rose from the chair and returned to the cave and consumed the bill de faire, which was changing daily. He found with each bowl a new fruit or sandwich was offered. Not all were to his liking, but most of them were. If he tasted the item and did not like it, he dropped it down the hole in the potty corner and never got another! If he did like it, he consumed it completely and received another in the proper rotation. The variety was increasing to the point where the mixture was not the same each day.

A thought came to him and started him thinking about how he could cause one of the sandwiches to be in the bowl each day. When he found the one, he really liked, he made um'ing noises to show how much he liked it. He also ate it slower and showed more enjoyment. If they caught on to what he was doing, he was hopeful he would get the same sandwich added to the bowl the next day. He also ate one very quickly and left some in the bowl. He hoped the second sandwich would skip a rotation.

As he finished, the third gong sounded, and he lay down. The darkness came on schedule and so did the sleep to rest his tired frame.

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With first gong, he awoke slowly. He was getting to the point where he was never sure what was in store for him. He ate and showered. The extra time he spent in the shower under the hot water finished restoring him. The thought of going back to a sonic shower was beginning to be a less than desirable consequence of his returning to his ship. He was still not sure what a sonic shower was, but he was sure it would not be as good!

He arrived on the balcony and started down the path walking to the Northern River crossing. He turned down the path following the river to the Southern clump of bushes where he crossed the river quickly. The captain arrived at the Southern camp to find the creature waiting for him at the first sleeping pallet. It sat on the edge of the pallet eating.

He walked to the pallet and sat down cross-legged on the ground about a meter in front of the Southerner. The creature before him continued consuming the contents of the bowl it was holding. He watched silently as it emptied the bowl and placed it back on the table at the end of the pallet.

It turned to ‘sit’ facing him and said, “Human, we questions have.” It was flinching already.

“What are your questions,” he asked.

It asked, “we the scourge are, human of what are?”

He thought for a minute to ensure he understood the meaning. The question seemed to be fairly clear, the Southerner wanted to know what humans did for a living.

“We are explorers. We seek to know.” He replied.

What served for its head, lolled to the side slightly and then straightened back up. It seemed to think for a moment as if trying to place the information into its frame of reference. This was confirmed when it asked, “What to know seek human?”

Since the question was based on and confirmed his thoughts about the subject of ‘what he did,’ no more of his thought was necessary.

“We seek to know all things,” he began, “we seek to know Pluronians, Singurians, and the scourge. To know all things.”

He waved his arms slowly to encompass the entire area, but not to attack or threaten the creature.

It was several moments before the Pluronian spoke. “We know not of the all, only little. We are. The Singurian are. These places are. These are,” it said tapping the sleeping pallet, then touched the bowl, “These are. The all gongs are,” it concluded.

He thought about this for a few moments trying to assimilate this information. If he understood the creature correctly, it knew very little about the world around it. In fact, if he was correct, it knew only enough to exist to fight the battles over and over. “But for how long,” he wondered. “How long have you been here,” he asked.

“We have always of here been,” it said.

“How many first gongs can you count,” he asked, trying to get a number.

“We know not ‘many,’” it said. After a moment it said, “We seek to know ‘many’.”

He was stunned by the revelation that this creature was trying to learn. He did not think it could be anything beyond what it was or knew—that it and the rest of the Pluronians were simply there to fight. This was a new development, and he took time to pursue it, rather than explore beyond the camp to the South. He stood and the creature rose to its full height. He pointed to the first pallet, held up one finger and said, “One.” He then moved to the second pallet and pointed to the first pallet and said, “one pallet.” Pointed to the second pallet, held up two fingers and said “two, two pallets.”

The Pluronian said, “one pallet, two pallets,” as he pointed to the first and then the second pallet.

“Yes, one, two,” he said, “This is called counting.”

“Counting.” It said, the flinching getting worse.

“Yes. One, two and three,” he said pointing to the third pallet and held up three fingers. Before the creature could respond, he pointed to the fourth pallet, held up four fingers and said “four.”

“Counting . . . One, two, three, four,” it said.

“Yes, yes, counting, one, two, three, four.” He hoped he could get the next part across to the creature. “Many is more than three,” he said.

The creature said, “more than three,” and then it asked, “four is many?”

“Counting is more than four,” he said. Pointing to the pallets as he walked past them, he said, “Five...six...seven...eight...nine...ten.” He stopped at ten and showed all ten fingers. The creature looked at the captain’s ten fingers and nodded at each pallet as it counted. Then it moved to the fourth pallet and said, “Is many,” and indicated the fourth thru tenth pallet. Then it moved to the back of the third pallet and stated, “many,” indicating all the rest of the pallets. It moved back to him and asked, “more after ten?” The flinching turned to spasms.

He was stunned. It took him a long moment to recover to the point he could quietly say, “Yes.”

The creature joined him at the eleventh pallet, and he began counting and pointing to each pallet as he counted it. At every tenth pallet, he stopped and showed each ten on his fingers but clenching and unclenching his hands for each ten, counting by ten. They finally got to one hundred and then to two hundred. At this point the creature took over and got to twenty-four hundred and one pallets. It turned to him in distress, shaking uncontrollably and collapsed to the ground as the second gong sounded. The shaking stopped immediately. The creature rose and began to return to the first pallet.

He began to walk to the river and met the remaining creatures returning to the encampment. They ignored him. So, he stops to count the remaining combatants. He counted only one hundred and fifty-seven Pluronians returned. Simple arithmetic told him that twenty-two hundred and forty-three had been lost!

He watched the last of the Pluronian’s entering the area and then turned to return across the river. Looking at the Northern entrance to the forest and saw that the last of the Singurians were on the short trek to the forest entrance. He realized he did not have time to make the cave or even get halfway to the cave. So, he followed the Pluronians into their camp.

He arrived at the first pallet and found the Pluronian he was talking to, at least he thought it was the Pluronian he was talking to, was waiting for him. The creature pointed at the second pallet, which was empty, indication it was for him.

He sat and watched as the creature quickly downed the contents of the bowl and disk and then lay down on the pallet. The captain looked around and saw the rest of the Pluronians had mimicked his ‘friend’. He reached out and picked up the bowl and found it contained three sandwiches as if the keepers knew he would have to stay the night in the Pluronian’s camp.

He ate them quickly, but not quickly enough. As he took the first bite of the last sandwich the third gong sounded as darkness quickly took the camp. He finished the sandwich in

the dark and lay down to let sleep take him. Before he dropped off into a restful sleep, he was struck by the thought that he was not afraid to be sleeping in the camp with a group of strange, alien creatures who spent their waking hours killing other creatures.

Chapter 5

The first gong sounded. The captain sat up quickly, totally disorientated. He was not in his room. Once he realized where he was, he scanned the camp to see if there were any changes. He was not in the least surprised to find all the pallets contained a creature even though most were empty the night before.

He looked back to the first pallet and found the creature sitting on the edge of the pallet consuming the contents of the bowl. Standing and scanning the area he saw the rest of the Pluronians were also eating. They all finished and drank the contents of the dish together. They rose together and began the march to the battle clearing.

Ignoring the bowl and dish at the end of his pallet, he trotted to the river, crossed it and trotted along the face of the mountain. He returned to the cave and found it much as he had left it. He stripped and showered as quickly as he could. He grabbed the bowl and returned to the observation chair to dine and contemplate his next move.

He found the same sandwich he had um'ed over the day before in his bowl. He um'ed over it again. The other one was not in the bowl, but then, neither were the others from the day before. Having finished his meal, he put the bowl down on the balcony next to the chair and thought about his continuing course of action.

He could return to the Pluronian camp and continue his talk with his 'friend'. But he was not sure he would learn anything new talking to it again. He spent yesterday teaching it to count and did not learn much in return. "If I returned to the camp now, would I learn anything," he asked himself. He let the thought mull around in the back of his head as the battle began.

He noticed there was no change to the battle, nor, he thought, would the outcome be changed. But would the numbers change, he wondered. He let this thought mull around with the other. Shortly he decided he would count the number of Pluronians returning to the camp at the end of the battle to see if there was a difference.

He also concluded he would have to enter the Singurian camp and see how many of them started out and how many returned. But that was for tomorrow.

He looked back to the battle and saw it was about halfway through the senseless slaughter. He got up and returned to his room to eat lunch. He noticed the bowl was back on the table and was full of food. The new fruit he got that day reminded him of a grapefruit sized, thin skinned watermelon. A very sweet, grapefruit sized, thin skinned watermelon. He finished the meal and cleaned up the area.

Returning to the balcony, he found the second gong was about to sound by the looking at the position of the combatants. He looked for the other bowl next to the chair but did not find it. "Just like home" he said softly.

When the battle ended, he counted the Pluronians as they returned to their camp. He counted one hundred and fifty-eight Pluronians.

Strange, he thought, very strange. One hundred and fifty-eight today and one hundred and fifty-seven yesterday. Then he realized the day before there were also one hundred and fifty-eight, the one hundred and fifty-seven which returned plus the one he was taking to. This put a new slant on things. He had never heard of such a thing! The same number of combatants returning each day, this was very strange. Not to mention the fact of the replacements on empty pallets the next morning.

He returned to this room and finished off a few of the fruit, since he was not really that hungry, and lay down for the night. He fell asleep so quickly he never heard the last gong sound.

• • •

The gong sounded and he attended to his morning routine as quickly as he could. He picked up the bowl of sandwiches and fruit, walked to the balcony and then down the path to the river. He ate the fruit and sandwiches on the way down to the river. He finished eating and left the bowl in the bush before crossing the river to the bushes opposite the entrance to the Northerners camp.

He hid behind the bushes as the Singurians were moving out onto the field of battle again, to fight their senseless conflict.

He was just beginning to understand how senseless the conflict was. As the Singurians marched past him, he was amazed at how the war was waged. They marched to the battle zone, engaged in battle and lost most of their fellows. When the Singurians had slaughtered enough of the Pluronians to reach the opposite side of the battle zone, the gong sounded, the war was over, and they all returned to their camp to do it all again the next day.

It was so futile! So, utterly futile!

He waited until the last of the Singurians passed. Then he carefully crossed the trail and walked into the Singurian camp. The captain moved to the first pallet and looked for any changes. He found nothing basically different from the Pluronian camp.

He walked around the parameter of the sleeping area counting the number of rows and columns of pallets. Simple math told him there were only nine hundred and thirty pallets. Not even a thousand Singurians where killing twenty-two hundred and forty-three Pluronians? This was very one sided! Tonight, he would have to count the remaining Singurians and find out their losses.

He continued around the camp clearing and was almost back to the first pallet when he heard a noise behind him. He ducked and shoulder rolled to his left. As he finished the roll and bounced back up to his feet, he found himself facing a very angry Singurian with a mace. It was the mace making the noise as it whorled over the combatant's head and then through the spot where the captain had been standing.

He backed up quickly to the first pallet and kept backing until he got passed the table. He saw a sword on the ground between the next two pallets and shoulder rolled as the mace tried to remove his head again.

The captain regained his feet with the sword in hand. He parried a swing to his mid-section and lunged forward as the mace continued in its arc around the Singurian. His enemy took a step back and stumbled on the edge of a sleeping pallet, landing on his back with a loud thump.

The Admiral would have liked that reaction, he thought. The memory of a person dressed like he was, came to mind. The person was saying, “the louder the thump a report makes when it was dropped on the ground, the more deliverable it is to the Admiral!” This was the first true memory he had had since arriving.

A point of the mace cutting his uniform brought the captain back to the reality of the moment. He stepped back from the enemy, who was raising the arc of the mace for a swing at his head.

The hole in his uniform brought back the reality of the situation. He thought, *anymore memories like that could get me killed!* The beast took a step toward him and continued to swing the mace, first high, then low and back to high. The captain tried to time his next thrust so the mace would not be carried around and get him from behind.

The Singurian tried to sweep his feet and the captain leaped into the air in his direction. The sword held out in front of him, the captain landed within a meter of the beast and thrust the sword into the beast’s central torso area. The Singurian reared back and howled in pain. He pulled out the sword and retreated as the mace came around and nicked his sword hand causing him to drop the sword.

The beast moved forward blocking his retrieval of the sword. He moved backwards and circled to the right. The beast followed him around the pallet. He thought he saw the realization of what he was doing in the beast’s eyes as he reached forward and recovered the sword.

“Not very smart are you,” he said as he blocked another blow. He continued to back away. He blocked each swing at his mid-section. He jumped over the blows to his ankles and ducked under the head blows. Watching . . . watching for the opening which would spell victory.

As he became more confident, he took more chances to find or make the opening for his sword to find its target. Block, jump, jump, duck. The attack continued. He knew in the back of his mind he could be killed, but he now saw this as a challenge he must win. He noticed the pattern was the same as the creatures used in the battle on the plain. He knew he could use this information against it.

Jumping over a swing at his knees the opening came as the mace continued back over the beast’s head. He advanced, stepping inside the arc of the swing, and plunged his sword again into the torso area of the creature. It roared and backed away from the captain. He let go of the sword and backed away as the mace came around at his head.

He ducked, rolled left and back up to his feet with another sword in his left hand. Not even realizing how the sword got in his hand, he transferred the sword to his right hand and parried another blow to the knees. The beast swung the mace around over its head and sent it as a guided missile toward his mid-section. He jumped out of the way, but not far enough to avoid being gashed in the side by one of the sharp spikes.

He looked down at the ragged cut and got mad. The ire began to grow inside him. He looked back at his opponent; the slowly bleeding cut forgotten. The beast had pulled the sword out of its chest and was moving toward him with the sword raised to strike the deathblow. He thought this was very strange since the Singurian's did not normally use swords.

The captain stepped to the side, avoiding the downward thrust and drew his blade sideways across the torso of the beast opening a large cut through its mid-section. He turned the blade and brought it vertical to parry the blow coming at his back as he stepped back outside of the beast's reach.

He stopped to catch his breath and examined the damage to the roaring beast. There were holes in its upper chest and a long straight gash across the lower chest. The smell which issued from the gash in its chest was almost enough to cause him to regurgitate the fruit he had consumed that morning. The creature's repugnant, rank insides began bulging from what would be a fatal wound in a human.

A stunned look in the creature's eyes was replaced by amazement as the beast realized it was badly wounded. The beast dropped its sword, leaned back and roared. He stepped forward and delivered another slice to the cut moving to the right side making the original cut deeper and extending the cut to the other side of its body. The bulge seemed to explode as the last of the membrane holding the innards within its body separated and allowed the beast's disgusting internal organs and the accompanying offensive odor to spill out over the ground before it. As the distasteful scene and the rancid odor hit him, the captain added his stomach contents to the disgusting mess on the ground. He stepped back from the creature and continued to retch.

He finally got himself under control enough to look back at the Singurian. The creature was trying to push the gore back into the huge gash in its chest, not realizing it was a futile effort. The beast's movements began to slow, and it began to teeter. He watched as the Singurian slowed to a stop and keeled over onto the gore and lay still.

Still stunned and in shock, he began to stagger toward the trail to the river. As he left the camp, another Singurian entered the camp from the forest and scanned the encampment. It walked to where its fallen comrade lay and examined the area. Then, ignoring its fallen comrade, it turned and saw the captain. It began walking after him.

The captain made it to the river before the last of his energy left him. He dropped to his knees on the bridge, as he was about to leave the river. His head hung down allowing his eyes to focus on the red liquid spreading out from him in the river. He looked up expecting the Singurian to end his day as it got to the river. He was confused, but then so was the beast. Although he was kneeling on the bridge, it seemed to him the Singurian could not find him. It turned away from the river and moved toward the encampment.

The captain looked back down at the river and saw the stain in river had increase. His only thought was that he was dying. He slowly leaned forward gaining speed as the last erg of effort to continue left him. He crashed onto path on the bank of the river, bounced and remained still as unconsciousness took him. His last thought was that the bowl he had left in the bush was gone.

• • •

The sounding of the first gong startled him. He was disoriented and had no idea where he was. He looked around and realized he was in his room. He rose painfully, slowly to a sitting position. He had a pain in almost every joint and muscle. Most were not very painful; his head ached like the worst hangover he had ever experienced. He winced at the many memories which followed this thought.

The memories of the previous day came slowly back to him. As the pain began to ebb, he slowly looked around the room. Nothing had changed, at least, nothing he could tell had changed.

He did not know how he had returned to his room since his last memory was of passing out on the riverbank.

He felt very hungry and looked over to where the bowl normally sat; it was not there! The pain in most of his body was almost gone and only a mild headache remained.

He remembered being gashed by his attacker and immediately looked down at the large gash in this side. It was gone! Not even a mark remained. No scar! Befuddled at this turn of events, he lay back down and went over the previous day.

Slowly, methodically he brought back the memories, almost retching at the memories of the smell, blood and gore. The fighting and slashing, the pain as he took blows to his own body.

Then, he remembered passing out on the path at the edge of the river. "How did I get here," he wondered. "What is going on here," he asked himself.

Then it hit him; the final memory of yesterday. He was dead!

But he could not be dead!

Had he really died?

If he was dead, was this bazaar valley the afterlife?

So many questions flooded his mind he could not think for a few moments. When his mind finally calmed down, he rested for a while to let the rest of the pain subside completely.

He finally rose to his feet and slowly walking the short distance to the balcony. He could not see any changes in the valley from his lower perspective. The battle was starting in the clearing before him. He hoped this was not the afterlife he would have to endure for all eternity.

He sat in the soft stone chair to think about what he had learned.

The Singurians are animals! He thought. They are vicious beasts that attack first and never ask questions later.

He lay for a while trying not to think, using the calming exercises which came to mind. His thoughts focused on being the captain of a ship. He tried to think of his duties and his first log entry came to mind. *If he were to continue his log entry about what he had learned, he thought, it would be something like—*

"Captain's log continued," he said out loud. "Stardate unknown. I died and came back to life, or at least it seems that way. I explored the Pluronian camp and met

one of the creatures. It was not very forth coming with any information; however, I did manage to teach it to count! I then explored the Singurian camp and was attacked by one of the creatures. In the final outcome, it seems, we both died. Still being very weak, I will return to the Pluronian camp tomorrow and try to get more information. Captain out.”

His mind wondered as he relaxed allowing the suns warmth to invigorate him.

He started. Opening his eyes and looking around he realized he had fallen asleep. He was still in the chair on the balcony.

Rising slowly and walking to the room. He sat on the sleeping pallet and consumed to contents of the bowl without really realizing it. He did not even notice the bowl had not been there when he had left the room.

He was sure the flavor of the contents was enhanced. He felt the energy within him being replenished with every morsel. After the meal he cleaned up and then lay down to sleep. He never heard the second or third gongs.

• • •

The first gong found him wide-awake and surprised. He crawled very quickly to the balcony in the darkness just in time to be dazzled by the curtain of light as it passed by him.

He rose from his knees and moved to the balcony. He surveyed the field and found it empty. He looked over both camps and found no visible activity. He turned and walked back to his room.

The captain ate the contents of the bowl, drank from the lower spigot and showered, then dressed. Completing the clean-up, he returned to the balcony and walked down the path to the Northern bush, crossed the river and walked down the side of the clearing.

He was ignored until he passed the line of the battle, when a Singurian broke from the fight to attack him. He ran for the Pluronian camp, but halfway down the track to the encampment, the Singurian pounced on him. He felt the sword slam into his back and out through his upper chest. The sword continued its journey into the ground, pinning him face down to the mucky soil. He did not feel the pain immediately as he flailed on the sword trying to pull it from the ground beneath him.

The Singurian, standing over him, was simply waiting, standing very still. The captain did not immediately understand why the monster was standing there—why it was waiting. Then, as the pain became intense, he realized—in a moment of clarity—it wanted the sword back. His head lulled back, and he finally fainted as the wall of pain encompassed him.

The Singurian failed to notice the faint smile on the captain as he fainted. It pulled the sword from the body and ground, then it moved quickly back to the battle, the captains' body forgotten.

• • •

The sounding of the first gong startled him. He was again disoriented and had no idea where he was. He looked around and realized he was in his room. He lay on the sleeping

pallet remembering the ordeal of yesterday, ending in his being struck or rather stuck to the ground by a Singurian's sword. When he completed his reverie, he returned from his thoughts and looked around his room. Nothing had changed, so he went to the table for a quick breakfast and then had a quick shower. During the shower he realized there was a new sandwich. He wondered why he did not notice it when he was eating it. Another mystery for him to work out.

He finished his morning routine and slowly returned to the balcony. He felt very sore with a slight pain in the back. This residual pain could be from the wound he received yesterday. He checked the place where he remembered the sword entering and found no wound, no scar, no nothing! Only a pain in the back where he thought the sword had emerged from his body. Very strange, very strange indeed!

He returned his thoughts and attention to the clearing before him. The battle was half over by the time he had arrived on the balcony. He had not realized he was moving so slowly this morning. He sat in the chair to conserve his strength. By second gong he was ready for sleep. He returned to the sleeping pallet and fell instantly to sleep.

• • •

The next morning, he awoke to the first gong and slowly ate and showered. He felt much better than the day before. While in the shower, he felt for the areas where the wounds should have been and still found nothing. However, the pain in the back was gone this morning, so he counted this as a blessing.

He finished his shower and dried himself. He dressed, ate and walked to the balcony feeling very refreshed and much, much better. He still could not figure out what was happening to him. He was mortally wounded and ended up healed on the sleeping pallet. *Was this how it was for the Pluronians and Singurians*, he wondered. It would explain a lot of his observations.

The Scourge eliminated most of the Pluronians and he had never noticed any replacements arriving. However, all the Pluronians were available for battle the next day. They must, somehow, be resurrected. Just as he seemed to be resurrected the morning after he was killed. But, to the logical captain, this seemed ludicrous! How can a person be killed over and over and never die! Maybe this was his personal hell, and he was already dead. Was the Devil running the place? Was he the entity the captain thought was in control of this bizarre world?

To test his theory, he walked down to the first bush and waited for the second gong. When it sounded, he walked to the battlefield and lay down next to a Pluronian which was missing a 'head' and a few limbs. Wrapping an arm around a part of the corpse, which was not too gross, he settled down to wait for the third gong. It was not a long wait. The darkness came swiftly.

He was not too disoriented by the darkness, but he was becoming sleepy. He struggled valiantly to remain awake, but finally lost the battle.

• • •

He woke at first gong in the empty clearing. The body he had wrapped his arm around was gone with all the others. Only the sticky ground remained of the battle of yesterday.

He got up and looked around the clearing. Seeing nothing, he walked to the Singurian end of the clearing and started down the track. The track was empty; the Singurians had not yet entered it. He met the Singurians just past the bridge over the river as they began to enter the track to the clearing.

The first one continued to approach him while the others stopped three meters away. He took a defensive stance as the beast approached and raised its sword.

He turned and ran to the bridge and crossed it. Turning, he saw the creature had not moved, but was staring after of him. It finally turned and continued slowly until the rest of the group caught up to him.

The captain turned and walked down the path parallel to the Singurians, who were totally oblivious to his existence. This did not surprise him. He had already figured out the river was a barrier the combatants could not see or go beyond. To them, nothing existed in the river or on the other side of the river.

He arrived at the Pluronian end of the path and crossed the river as the last of the Pluronians left the camp. Last of the Pluronians minus one he found as he entered the encampment.

A lone Pluronian was waiting for him at the first sleeping pallet. As he approached, the creature sat on the table end of the pallet facing the foot end. This left the foot end for him to sit on. He reached the pallet and sat down.

“Singurians and Pluronians scourge again,” the captain said wiggling into a comfortable position.

“We are the scourge,” the creature said flatly.

“You lose many of you. More than two thousand with each scourge.”

“We are to numbers known.”

“You are not upset by this,” he asked.

“We know not ‘upset’,” the creature said.

He thought about its answer for a moment before asking, “If I touch you,” and he reached out and touched the creature lightly, “do you feel the touch?”

“We the touch feel, yes.”

“Does it hurt you to be touched,” he asked.

“We not hurt are,” it said.

“If I touched you hard and caused hurt, would you like the hurt?”

“We would like the hurt not,” it said with what he thought was an annoyance.

“Then you would be upset because you would resent being touched hard and hurt,” he stated.

“We understand upset.”

“Back to the original question then, you are not upset by the two thousand Pluronians killed or touched hard,” he asked.

“We are upset not. We the scourge are. We only the scourge are. We always the scourge have been,” it concluded with a tilt of the head and a look of minor confusion.

“Have you tried to not scourge?” He asked.

“We have not,” it said quickly, without the confusion. A statement of undeniable fact delivered with a hint of repulsion. As if the most revolting thing in this crazy world would be not to scourge.

“Then try not scourging tomorrow,” he said.

“We scourge always,” it said more revolted than before.

“Not at next first gong tomorrow,” he said strongly as if ordering the creature to obey him.

The Pluronian cowered as it said, “we scourge tomorrow.”

He saw a tremor beginning in the creature’s many limbs. The captain also noticed the creature was beginning to lose the will to verbally fight with him on the subject. The shaking was growing more visible. He stood and screamed, “You will not scourge tomorrow!”

The Pluronian rebounded as if hit with a right-hand punch. It fell back against the table and froze in place for what seemed like an eternity before it looked up at him. “We scourge tomorrow not,” it said with what seemed to be a sigh.

He noticed the fighting had grown louder and the creature before him was badly shaking, thus he knew the second gong was not far away. “Thank you,” he said as he rose to leave.

The creature remained silent as it watched him rise. The shaking started to subside. It turned and retrieved its bowl and started consuming the contents as the tremors disappeared. He turned and walked to the river, arriving as the second gong sounded.

He walked up the track staying close to the river counting the Pluronians as they passed him. He again counted one hundred and fifty-seven. The outcome of the battle was always the same!

He continued walking shaking his head. He still did not believe the battles had gone on this way for all time. He crossed the clearing and entering the Northern track. Halfway to the bridge a Singurian emerged from the forest, then another and another. They were scattered along the track roughly three meters apart. He started to run up the track toward the bridge as they started moving forward to intercept him. He realized quickly he would not make it to the bridge.

The captain continued running until a beast blocked his path. As the creature reared back raising his huge sword over his head to deliver the death blow, he jumped, catching it in the mid-section and knock it over on its back with a flying kick. He scrambled to his feet and continued his run up the track to the bridge. Only two more creatures blocked his way. The next beast was swinging a mace with two limbs. *Big mistake, you big ugly fat fellow*, he thought. Leaping again, he flipped over and landed feet first on the beast’s chest and head. There was a loud crunch as the beast landed on its back with the captain’s full weight crushing the life out of it.

The captain did not hesitate but continued his run for the bridge. Only one beast remained in his path, however he saw the rest of the Singurians were pouring back onto the track and heading for the scene of the excitement. He did not look behind him to see if the beasts behind him were pursuing, he simply assumed they were and ran as fast as he could.

He finally arrived at the last Singurian between him and the bridge. The beast was beginning a swing of its sword at his mid-section. Avoiding the sword, he cut to the left and dove into the swiftly moving river. His momentum took him to the edge of one of the bridge stones. Grabbing the stone, he pulled himself onto the bridge. He lay there panting, the river rushing past him. Approximately three minutes past while he lay on the bridge catching his breath and regaining the energy he would need to return to the room. He rose and crossed the bridge. He turned and saw the Singurians looking around for him; they seemed very confused by his disappearance.

He walked up the path slowly and made the balcony as the third gong sounded. He walked quickly to his sleeping pallet as the darkness robbed the room of light. He reached out for some fruit from the bowl on his table, but never made it, as sleep took him quickly.

• • •

Captain Flossy looked from his science officer to his communications officer. He asked, “Comm any joy?”

The communications officer replied, “No joy, Sir. The signal is bouncing back from the energy field.”

“Keep trying to get through to the captain, Comm.” He ordered.

Turning back to the view screen, he frowned at the lack of success in breaching the energy field, by his people.

Chapter 6

He awoke before first gong, startled by the blinding darkness. He was not sure what woke him up. The captain was surprised to be awake before the first gong since this had only happened once before this time.

Feeling around he found he was not on his pallet. His back and neck hurt from sleeping on a hard surface, which seemed to confirm this. He continued to feel around in the darkness and found the table. He sat up to run his hand down the table and found the bowl of food. He ate quickly and messily, not being able to see the juice running out of the fruit and sandwiches. He crawled to the shower stall, stripped and showered in the dark. Since he normally showed with his eyes closed from the soap in his hair, showering in the dark was not a problem and did not slow him down at all.

While he was showering, he wondered how he had managed to awaken in the dark. He was still bothered by this since it had not happened since his first arrival, and he was pretty sure the darkness had been caused by the fact there was no exit from the room at the time. He continued to wonder about this and other mysteries he had found. He had to wash his back twice because his thoughts kept him from concentrating on washing and he missed a few spots or was not sure he had washed these spots.

When he was rinsed off and could see again, he grabbed his uniform and washed it also. He tried to get the blood out of the cloth. This disturbed him greatly because he could not tell the difference between his blood and the blood of the creatures, he shared the world with. This seemed very strange to him that he and the creatures, both Singurians and Pluronians, would have the same red blood as he did. He would think they would have the same-colored blood, coming from the same solar system, but he should not. So, in the end, the captain was not positive this blood was not his!

By the time the hot air had dried him and his uniform the first gong had sounded, and the light had arrived. He rushed down the corridor to the balcony, uniform in hand, where he completed dressing. He thought, *who is going to see me naked?* He observed his shirt was becoming very tattered from all the holes, but his pants were holding up well. He finished dressing with the inclusion of his shoes on his feet.

He sat in the stone chair to await the combat or rather, he hoped, the non-combat. Shortly, the Singurians began their march to the clearing. True to their word, he saw the Pluronians where remaining encamped. The first Pluronian was standing at the entrance to their camp blocking the way.

I have made a difference, he thought, very pleased with himself. He now knew he could effect change. He could get the Pluronians to follow his instructions. Now the great experiment was on. He wanted to see the effect on the Singurians. What would they do without their combatants?

He spoke out loud for the first time in a few days, “Captain’s Log: I have affected the scourge by getting the Pluronians to stay in their camp. This is a significant event since I can now affect my surroundings and the battles that go on every waking period. I am

planning to continue to affect the battles with the hope I can bring them to an end. Captain out."

He continued to watch the Singurians take the field, lining up for the battle that would not occur. They started to advance as they normally did. Halfway across the field they stop, seemingly confused. *Good for them, it is about time for this stupid war to come to an end.* The creatures began moving again, continuing their march across the field. As the first beast reached the forest, the second gong sounded and the Singurians began backing up and returning to their camp.

The captain rose from the chair and walking to the northern bridge, then down the path on his side of the river to the southern bridge. He crossed it and entered the Pluronian camp. The Pluronians had returned to their pallets on the second gong. He walked to the first pallet and addressed the creature, "you did not scourge."

"We scourge not."

"How do you feel," he asked.

"We are touched lightly," the creature said happily, or so it seemed. The creature lay down and indicated the empty, new pallet next to him.

The new pallet was out of alignment with the rest of the pallets as if it had been added to start a new row. He looked in the bowl on the table at the end of the pallet and found his fruit and sandwiches. He ate carefully since there were no facilities for cleaning up here. He finished and lay down on his new pallet as did the rest of the Pluronians. Third gong and sleep came almost instantly.

• • •

He woke at first gong, ate quickly and picked up the sword under the table at the head of the bed. The captain moved to the edge of the forest and penetrated the dense underbrush. He was surprised to get through it so quickly as if the two meters of dense underbrush were the façade of a movie set. The forest floor was devoid of brush beyond the perimeter. He walked as fast as he could manage through the forest, passing the idled catapults. He emerged from the dense underbrush at the perimeter of the forest as the Singurians were beginning to advance across the clearing.

He walked to the center of the clearing, arriving before the first beast. He waited for it. As the creature arrived, it swung its mace at him. The captain dodged the mace, plunged his sword into the ground, turned and walked quickly off the field.

Reaching the edge of the forest, he turned to see what would result from his action. Confused by the captains' plunging the sword in the ground, the Singurian struck the sword, knocking it over. The beast began the march across the field and reached the forest. They moved within a few feet of the captain but acted as if he was not there. He came to the conclusion; they could not see or sense past their boundaries. While he was standing in the dense undergrowth, he was outside the boundaries of the field of battle. This was very good information to have. It also set the boundaries of what he could get away with.

Second gong sounded and they backed up, returning to the Pluronian camp. He turned and ran back through the forest and again fought the underbrush on the camp side of the forest.

The third gong sounded almost before the captain returned to this Pluronian sleeping pallet. He quickly outlined his plan to the Pluronian leader before the darkness came. He found the leader was not responsive after the lights went out, but then as sleep quickly took him, he thought, *neither am I!*

• • •

At first gong the Pluronians awoke, ate and gathered their weapons. They moved to the tracks on both sides of the clearing and instead of turning onto the clearing as usual, they continued their route march across to clearing along the outer edge. The Pluronians arrived at the Northern side of the clearing as the last of the Singurians entered the clearing and the leader began advancing toward the Southern Forest. Completely out flanked, the Singurians where not ready for what happened next. The Pluronians began to advance. On each end of the clearing the Pluronians entered the clearing. The Singurian leader continued to advance, oblivious to the fact he was about to be attacked on both flanks. The Pluronians on the Northern edge of the clearing turned away from the potential battle and walked to the forest. At the same time, the two creatures hacked the trees. Second gong sounded immediately.

The Singurians began to backup and return to their camp. The Pluronians though were at the exit or chock point and used that moment and advantage to attack. The Singurians where taken totally by surprise and lost many members of their ranks before it donned on them to fight back. The Pluronians where cutting down the beasts as they came over the bodies of their fallen comrades.

The Pluronians on the far end of the clearing were having the same success attacking from behind. The Singurians were turning around to confront their foe but since they were not ready for a fight, they were struck down quickly with only one or two blows. This slaughter continued for about two hours until the Singurians were complete vanquished.

The captain left the forest and approached the Pluronian that turned and walked toward him. He said, "Congratulations, on your victory."

The creature said, "We have the scourge completed. Human with us are." The rest of the Pluronians were surrounding him. The crush of bodies was starting to affect him to the point he had to back away. "I cannot be with you. I have to find my way back to my ship. I am the captain. I must command my crew."

"We human's crew are," it said as it moved forward to stay close to him.

He again took a step backward and toward the river. "You are not my crew. I have another crew awaiting my return," he said before turning and running to the bush by the river. He crossed the river and trotted up the path to the other bush and then up to the balcony. He sat in the chair and calmed down. His breathing slowly returned to normal as he watched the Pluronians slowly leave the field and return to their encampment. As the

last of the creatures was leaving the clearing, he rose from his chair—*the center seat*, he thinks—and returns to his room.

He ate hungrily and then took a shower. The third gong sounded as he lay down on the sleeping pallet. A jumble of thoughts going through his mind prevented him from falling to sleep immediately. He just lay on the pallet thinking. Did his help and strategy really win the scourge? Did it make him their leader? Did they have a leader? He was not sure of any of the answers to these questions. He continued to mull over these and other questions until he finally fell asleep.

• • •

First gong sounded. He rose and ate. Showered and dressed. He walking to the chair and sat down. He saw the Singurians coming down the track toward the clearing. A movement on the clearing attracted his attention. A lone Pluronian was running across the field toward the forest. As it arrived at the far side, the Singurians reached the clearing edge. He was not sure what was going to happen, but it looked like something he might think of. He had already come to the conclusion that the Pluronians were the smarter of the two groups, far smarter. The Singurians were way down the other end of the scale; only understanding it was their job to kill. Only living to kill.

The Pluronians were emerging from the forest in mass, coming straight out of the forest, marching across the field of battle. They were three quarters of the way across before the Singurians began advancing. At this point the Pluronians stopped and waited for the Singurians to arrive. The captain was beginning to figure out the strategy the Pluronians were employing. He figured they would allow the Singurians to take the field and then attack with more room to their backs, prolonging the battle until they could overwhelm the beasts.

He could not have been more wrong. The beast leader raised his sword to strike the Pluronian in the front of the mass and the second gong sounded. The Singurian paused, lowered his sword and backed away.

Finally turning to return to their camp, the Singurians were attacked from behind. Again the losses to the Singurians where devastating. They never realized what was happening to them since the attack was out of their immediate purview. It was another slaughter!

As the last Singurian fell, the Pluronians turned and returned to their side of the field and melted into the forest.

He returned to the room and ate. Before third gong, he walked out to the balcony and looked at the field. He was amazed to see the bodies of the Singurians slowly dissolving into the ground. This was the first time he had witnessed the process. The captain was excited, and the keepers must have been horrified at the mistake of letting him see the process. Third gong sounded and the darkness fell quickly, quicker than any time before. He crawled back to his room and spent the better part of an hour thinking over what he had seen. Finally, the darkness and his overtaxed mind caused him to fall asleep.

• • •

First gong woke him slowly. He took the bowl in hand and walked out to the balcony. Sitting down in the chair he had breakfast. In between bits of the assorted fruits and sandwiches he watched the show on the field before him.

A lone Pluronian stepped out of the forest and walked to the center of the clearing. It stopped and sat down on the blood-soaked ground. He could see the rest of the creatures trotting across the field and disappearing into the forest. The captain was not about to speculate on the strategy this time, he would simply watch the show.

The Singurians entered the track and marched to the edge of the clearing. They turned as they always did and marched across the field. *The stupid beasts haven't learned a thing*, he thought. The beasts filled the first line and it advanced. They began filling the next line. The leader was out in front as usual advancing toward its seated foe. He was trying to figure out what the Pluronians had in mind. Their strategy eluded him. As the beast leader reached the lone Pluronian, it rose and backed away slowly keeping its attention.

At the moment it rose to where it could be seen over the beast leader, the rest of the creatures stormed out of the forest and attacked. The first two lines of Singurians fell before they even realized what was happening to them. The next row was cut down as they turned to fight. Half of the Singurians were killed or disabled before the rest of the beasts knew they were being attacked.

The creature's leader continued to slow backup toward its forest. When it arrived approximately three meters from the forest, two lines of Pluronians advanced quickly out of the forest and engaged the first line of Singurians. At that point in the battle, the creature in the Northern Forest slashed a tree and the second gong sounded. The Singurians stopped fighting, but the Pluronians continued the battle. Caught between the Pluronians attacking in the front and with the slaughter going on in the rear of the ranks, the Singurians did not last much beyond the second gong.

With the battle over, the Pluronians returned to their encampment, and he returns to his room. He showered and settled down on the sleeping pallet for the third gong, which he never heard.

• • •

He rose at first gong and ate quickly. The captain walked to the balcony and on down the path to the first bush. He crossed the bridge to the bush and then walked into the forest to the Singurian clearing. The beasts where gather their weapons in preparation for the march to the battlefield. He continued walking to the first pallet holding his hand out.

The beast leader advanced one step and he halted just out of striking distance. He said, "I need your help to return to my ship."

The leader looked at him strangely and did not seem to know what to do.

"I need your help," he said and then asked again, "Can you help me?"

"What ship," the leader asked.

"My spaceship," he answered quickly. *Spaceship? Where did that come from*, he wondered. *Must be another memory fragment*, he thought. *Wait a minute, just a minute*. He thought, *have I been getting memory fragments when asked questions*.

“Your spaceship is in orbit,” the beast leader asked pointing to the sky.

He followed the line that it pointed to and saw a bright pinpoint of light in the sky. He took a chance and said, “Yes, that is my ship, and I must return to it.”

“Then beam aboard, Captain. What is your difficulty? Contact the ship and beam up.”

The tables turned on the captain. He was thrown into a quandary trying to assimilate the new data into information he could use. He was a Captain of a spaceship, rather a starship. He could return to the starship by beaming aboard. He was not sure what a beaming was or how to contact his ship.

While he was pondering this information, the beast leader started to walk past him and lead the encampment.

“Why do you go that way,” he asked.

The leader stopped and turned to face him. “We must scourge the other. This is the way to go,” it said pointing to the forest opening, which led to the track.

He walks to the leader and said, “You will walk down the track to the clearing. Then you will line up on the clearing and march forward to be slaughtered in the scourge.” He did not make it a question, but more of a challenge. They turned and walked to the track and started down the track to the clearing.

“We have always done it this way,” it said.

“I would suggest that you change. You have been defeated in the last battles. The Pluronians have changed their strategy and you are losing the battles.”

“I have not won the last battles, this is true,” he said. It looked at him with questioning eyes trying to see into his soul. “Have you been teaching the other,” it asked.

“Yes, I taught them to count and to fight differently,” he said.

“You are the leader of the other?” It roared, turning toward him, raising his sword swing it in an arc that slice cleanly through the captain’s neck.

• • •

He woke at first gong very, very tired. He rose, ate and showered slowly. He continued to gain energy with everything he did. He walked to the balcony and watched the show.

As he settled down into his chair, the memory of his conversation with the Singurian leader came flooding back into his mind. He suddenly realized that this conversation led to his decapitation! He reached up and felt his neck. He felt nothing that would indicate that he lost his head!

He put his hands back down in his lap and watched the Singurians march onto the field. Their leader took the singular position before the line facing the single Pluronian sitting in the center of the clearing. However, to the captain’s surprise, the Singurians turned to face the forest and immediately marched into it. The fighting could be heard everywhere in the valley. The lone creature in the center of the clearing rose and began to back away to the Southern Forest, entering it. The Singurian followed the creature into the forest. It emerged a few minutes later with a bloody sword.

When the rest of the Singurians emerged from the forest, the leader marched back across the field and led the way back to the camp.

The captain rose to his feet, walked down the path to the first bush and crossed the river. Walking quickly to a position next to the Singurian leader as it returned to the camp.

He paced it as he said, "I am *not* their leader. Yes, I did help them, but I helped you also. Please, don't kill me again. I need help returning to my ship."

"You can return to your ship anytime you wish. Go now before I kill you again."

He stopped at the entrance to the Singurian camp and retraced his steps to the bridge, which he crossed. He walked slowly up the path to his balcony. He started to walk to his room when he realized that the second gong had not sounded. He ate, showered and cleaned up before returning to the balcony. He sat in his chair to see what was going to happen next.

• • •

Captain McLorn looked from his ops officer to his comm officer. He asked, "Comm any joy?"

The communications officer replied, "No joy, Sir. The signal is bouncing back from the energy field."

He touched his Combadge, "Captain Beck, McLorn, please respond." He waited for a reply. "Captain Beck, please respond."

When there was no response, he said, "Keep trying to get through to the captain, Comm."

Turning back to the view screen, he frowned at the lack of success. Where was Captain Beck and why was he not answering.

Chapter 7

He awoke almost falling out of his chair. There had not been a gong to signal the end of the battle or the coming darkness or even the wake-up gong. He rose to his feet, walked back to his room, ate and showered. Returning to the balcony, he sat down in the chair. After what he estimated to be a half hour, he decided to go investigate.

He walked down the path to the far bush and crossed the river. Walking into the Pluronian camp, he saw no one. He walked to the second sleeping pallet and found a sword under the table. He took the sword and walked into the forest heading north.

He emerged from the forest and walked across the clearing. The stench was much worse than the last time he had entered the battlefield after a fight. He reached the forest edge and struck the tree with his sword. The second gong sounded. He turned, his immediate task completed, returned to the forest and through it to the Pluronian encampment. He

settled down in a seated position on the second sleeping pallet to await the return of the Pluronians. The third gong sounded before he saw one.

• • •

He sat up quickly at first gong and found all the pallets occupied. *Nothing new*, he thought. Finding himself on the first pallet was. He reached for the bowl and found it contained his food. He ate quickly and rose. The rest of the creatures rose with him. He moved to the forest and walked through it to the clearing and stopped at the forest edge. He walked to the center of the clearing and sat down to await the arrival of the beast leader.

The captain did not have to wait long. The beast emerged from the forest and also walked across the field to the center. He raised his sword to strike the human but stopped when the captain asked him to sit.

“I still need your help,” the captain said.

“You are the other leader. I must scourge, you must scourge,” it said once it was seated.

“The scourge is over. The scourge is not necessary. The scourge is bad. There must be no more scourge,” he stated quietly.

This seemed to infuriate his opponent. “The scourge is all. The scourge is why I am here. No scourge, no me!” His eyes narrowed as he regarded the captain, before he roared, “No scourge, no you!”

“I am not of the scourge. I am of the ship. I will be here after the scourge is no more.”

“You can return to your ship when you want, return now. Let the scourge continue.”

He paused before saying, “the scourge is done. The Pluronians will not fight while I am their leader.” With that statement, he rose and turned to the forest, to which he returned.

He entered the clearing and found only two sleeping pallets! They seemed very small in the large clearing. The leader of the Pluronians was seated on the pallet. He walked to the pallet and sat down, “Where are the rest of the Pluronians?”

“They are necessary not; we scourge no longer. Human’s must go,” it said quietly and calmly.

“I cannot leave,” he said.

“Then human’s scourge must.”

“Humans have a law not to interfere with your people. It is known as the prime directive. It is a most important document to us.”

The leader looked at him for a moment and then said, “Then more human’s must scourge. Bring humans from your ship with their weapons.”

“The prime directive says I cannot fight, nor can other humans fight for you.”

He rose, securing the sword at the end of the pallet and departed the area without waiting for the creature to continue its demands. He walked down the track and across the clearing, striking the first tree on the other side to sound second gong. He continued walking to the bridge and up the path to his room.

He ate, showered and thought about his failed attempt to stop the slaughter. He fell asleep before the third gong brought the darkness.

• • •

The captain rose at first gong, ate, showered and walked out to the chair to see if he had made any difference. The leaders moved to the middle of the field and sat facing each other. He sat down in the chair, curious as to what was happening.

He could barely make out that they were talking as he had. After a few moments, both combatants rose and returned to the edge of the forest turned and faced each other again. This time as they began to walk across the field, the rest of the creatures and beasts existed the forest and followed their respective leaders.

The battle or scourge that followed was just as bloody as the first ones he had watched and just as upsetting. He was almost driven to nausea watching the battle unfold before him.

At the second gong he counted the returning creatures. *How did I know it would be one hundred and fifty-eight*, he asked himself, *I must be physic!*

Everything back to status-quo. He could not affect the outcome. But then again, according to the Prime-Directive he had just remembered about, he was ordered to do nothing, not to interfere with any culture. Even though he knew it was wrong not to attempt to stop the fighting, he must follow the prime directive. However, he could try to talk them into changing. With this in mind, he went to his room to eat and sleep.

• • •

The first gong awakened him from a very restful sleep. He rose quickly and ate a fast meal. He ran down the corridor to the balcony and turned onto the path. He ran to the far bush and crossed the river, but not in time to stop the Pluronians from leaving their camp. They marched past the bush. He walked into the encampment and to the first sleeping pallet where the leader sat, he assumed, waiting for him.

He sat down and looked at the leader for a moment before asking, “You don’t use strategy now?”

“We the scourge are. We scourge this way must. We scourge always. Human must the scourge change not. Humans the scourge are?”

“No, humans the scourge not. The Prime Directive will not allow us to scourge for you or the Singurians. I can only ask you to scourge no more,” he said.

The creature looked straight at him as said forcefully, “Humans the scourge must. Humans scourge with weapons. Human call ship and teach scourge with weapons.”

“No, the Prime Directive prevents my interference. No weapons or troops!” The captain was becoming exasperated at the creatures’ continued requests for weapons and help.

“We scourge,” it said pointing to itself and the forest. “Humans scourge,” it said pointing at and poked him gently.

He shouted, “No! No weapons or troops!”

“We scourge,” it said pointing to itself and flailing its limbs all around. “Human’s scourge,” it said poking him harder.

He screamed, “No! No! No!”

He did not see the pallet grow out of the ground behind him.

“Human’s scourge,” it said poking him even harder almost bowling him over.

Nor did he see the sword raised by the creature that grew out of the pallet.

He yelled, “No! For the final time, No!”

The leader pushed him over as the creature behind him plunged a sword into his abdomen pinning him to the sleeping pallet.

He screamed as the sword blade plunged through his chest and then he fainted from the agonizing pain.

The leader leaned forward and tapped the captain’s commbadge and said, “Starship hear us.”

• • •

“Captain, I have a communication from Captain David’s commbadge coming through,” reported the communications officer.

“Put it through and see if you can get a visual of the area,” the Captain Jeffery Fossey ordered.

“*Starship hear us*,” the voice said.

“We hear you, where is our Captain?” Captain Fossey asked.

“*We your Captain have here. We for scourge human’s need. We for scourge weapons need. Humans for scourge provide*,” the voice said.

Jeffery looked confused, as he listened to the voice, trying to figure out what the voice wanted, let alone what it was saying. First things first; he asked, “Who are we?”

“*We are the Pluronians*,” the creature said.

“Who are you,” the captain asked.

“*We are the Pluronians*,” the creature said.

Okay, he thought. On to the next subject, he asked, “What is the scourge?”

“*We are the scourge*,” the Pluronian stated flatly.

“I understand you are the scourge, but what is the scourge?” Jeffery asked, beginning to be annoyed by the creature’s lack of understanding.

“*We scourge is*,” the Pluronian repeated. “*We for scourge human’s need*.”

Jeff noticed the communications officer was trying to get his attention, “Standby,” he said stabbing the communication control on the chair arm to mute the connection.

“Captain I have uploaded the universal translation matrix,” she said, “and Captain—”

“Yes,” he said unnecessarily.

“—the captain’s commbadge has a log feature. The captain made two log entries. I am uploading them now.”

“Very good, Lieutenant. Play the log entries as soon as you have them and see if you can clean up the translation matrix,” Jeffery ordered.

“Yes, Sir,” she said as she returned to her duties. A few seconds later she said, “Here is the first entry sir.”

He recognized the voice of Captain Ryan Alan David immediately having worked for him for almost three years.

Captain’s log, stardate (what was a stardate?) whatever it was. For all their known experience, the Southern species, the Pluronians, have battled the Northern species, the Singurians, for an unknown reason. The Pluronian contact stated that the war, called the scourge, had always been fought and they always had enough creatures to fight it. My experiences show that the Singurians are always the victors and where the replacement combatants are gotten from is still unknown. The battles begin after first gong and end on the second gong. Third gong brings the darkness, which continues until first gong. The cave I have occupied since arrival has been moved almost two hundred meters down the mountainside. I continue to investigate the cause of the battles and the creatures that are persecuting it. Captain out.

“Very enlightening,” he said to himself out loud. This explains much. So, he thought, *they want human’s and weapons to fight a war. Or they will...*

“The second log is ready sir,” she stated.

Captain Fossey nodded, and the second log entry played over the bridge intercom system.

Captain’s log continued, stardate unknown. I died and came back to life, or at least it seems that way. I explored the Pluronian camp and met one of the creatures. It was not very forth coming with any information; however, I did manage to teach it to count! I then explored the Singurian camp and was attacked by one of the creatures. In the final outcome, it seems, we both died. Still being very weak, I will return to the Pluronian camp tomorrow and try to get more information. Captain out.

Dropped jaws and strange looks around the bridge met the captain’s statement that he had died! It took Jeff a few seconds to recover from the shock of learning his captain had died. But not only that, he had made a log entry after his death. This was a story that he was sure he would not believe! But he was not going to let the captain get away without telling it.

“Repeat the log entry, Lieutenant,” he ordered.

He listened again to the entry trying to get all the information he could from it, but there wasn't very much. It was obvious to him that the captain was not aware that the commbadge had a log capability. Captain David may not have even known that he had a commbadge since he sounded disoriented.

He punched the button on the communications panel to reopen the connection, "Singurian, this is Captain Fossey of the starship Galileo, return our Captain."

"*We are the captain to give ready,*" the voice stated. Then it asked, "*We here have humans, weapons when?*"

"We cannot provide humans and weapons for your scourge. The Prime Directive prevents the use of Starfleet personnel and weapons to fight a war. Return our Captain! *Return him at once,*" he shouted.

"*We will the captain scourge,*" the creature stated. It continued, "*We count one thousand to the captain scourge. One, two, three . . .*"

The counting continued.

The Ops officer stated, "at that rate we have about one hour..."

He stabbed the button on the communications panel to mute the link and pushed the fleetcom button and said, "Admiral Donatra, this is the Galileo, Captain Fossey."

"*Captain, standby,*" the Admiral said. A moment later she said, "*continued Captain.*"

"Admiral, we are in contact with the creatures that are holding Captain David. From what I can figure out from the communications with the Pluronian, they have given us approximately one hour to meet their demands for troops and weapons in exchange for the Captain."

"*Thank you for the report, Captain,*" the Admiral said.

Worf entered the screen and stated, "*You are aware that it is not Federation policy to meet the demands of kidnappers and terrorists.*"

Ael added, "*Continue to maintain connection with the Pluronians and brief us if the situation changes. Donatra out.*"

Great help they are, he thought. Now he was definitely in the hot seat now. Trapped between the Prime Directive and the death of his captain. Could he standby and let his friend and his Captain be killed without doing something. He had to come up with something. He tried to think clearly but the emotions of the moment caused a jumble of thoughts to call for attention at once. Finally, he stretched and used the Vulcan mind clearing technique he had learned at the Academy to get his thoughts under control. A primary thought came to the forefront, "*What would Captain David do,*" he wondered, "*What should I do next . . .*"

• • •

The Pluronian leader continued to count. The count went past seven hundred before the humans replied.

"*Pluronians, this is the Galileo.*"

The leader asked, “Humans coming when?” He was alone in the clearing with the battle raging in the distance. The inert captain on the next pallet with the sword through his chest lay quietly. The captain had regained conscious just after the count got to four hundred. Other than the pain when he moved, the fact that a sword was sticking out of his chest and pinned him to the sleeping pallet; did not really bother him. After all, he had been killed *once* already! *Dying twice in a week was no big deal*, he laughed to himself. The movement caused more pain.

He was watching the Pluronian leader as he awaited the negative answer he knew was coming. The Prime Directive would prevent this other captain from doing anything to save him. In the same way that he tried to talk the combatants out of continuing the scourge, this captain would have to talk the Pluronian into surrendering him.

“Humans and weapons are not coming. Our law, the Prime Directive, prevents us from interfering in Singurian and Pluronian affairs. We are not allowed to fight for either side. We are a people of exploration not of fighting. What you do by holding the captain hostage is also against our laws,” the other captain told him.

It seemed to him that the leader was becoming irate. It gave a snorting sound and then said, “We are. We always are. We the Singurian scourge. We the Singurian touch heavy with weapons of humans. Send weapons and humans now.”

It also seemed to him, after the display he just he heard that the Pluronians are very childlike. They know they want, and nothing will be allowed to get in the way.

“Send our Captain now and we will talk about ending the scourge for you,” the other Captain said.

“We scourge first the Singurian. Then captain you get,” the creature said slyly. The captain did not think the leader trusted the other captain. So, he had taught it not to trust now!

“We cannot transport to you,” the other captain stated changing the subject.

The Pluronian leader sat motionless for a moment and then said, “Humans come now.”

He sat up, as a low hum seemed to fill the area. There was a shimmering at the end of the sleeping pallets as the outline of a stick with three legs formed. The form filled quickly, and the hum dissipated. He looked around him and saw that four of these things were standing around his pallet.

There was a snap and hiss. The clear area at the top of the stick began to glow as the devices came to life. Beams shot out of the devices connecting them and enclosing him in a rectangle.

The hum returned. The Pluronian leader sat motionless for a moment and the hum died immediately. He remembered that the sticks were called pattern enhancers. *Nice try*, he thought. The light beams ceased, and the enhancers became inert.

The leader said, “humans, try not to take your captain.” The second gong sounded, but the leader ignored it and continued, “human’s scourge at first gong or captain be leader for scourge!”

“You will not hurt the captain, or we will scourge you,” the other captain said. He could hear the frustration in the other captain’s voice.

He was not aware that the Pluronians could show *emotion*, but now he could somehow tell that the creature was mad. It was also losing the ability to reason rationally, acting on emotion rather than reason.

The leader became physically agitated; he could see the tremors that were racking its body. “We scourge captain or human scourge Singurian. We will know now!”

He thought that this was getting out of hand, and it was time for this to end. He took a deep breath and let it out. He took another to measure how much wind he would have to send his message. A third time to test the message under his breath. When he was ready, he drew another deep breath and yelled, “Follow the Prime Directive Captain, Captain out.”

The connection closed and the Pluronian roared in frustration leaping to its feet. It moved quickly around the sleeping pallet where he was skewered, raising its sword. The sword fell toward his neck. His only thought was, *here we go again*. The sound of the whack was the last thing he heard as the darkness took him.

• • •

“That hangs it,” Captain Fossey stated. A direct order from the captain, made it doubly official. He had no choice but to follow orders to follow the Prime Directive, even though he was sure it would cost the captain his life. The pattern enhancers had been the one trick up his sleeve, to try and snatch the captain while the window was open. It failed.

“Sir,” the communications officer called for attention.

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

She continued, “I have cleaned up the translation matrix. Would you like me to transmit it to the captain’s commbadge?”

“Yes, Lieutenant,” he answered, “are you still in contact with the captain’s commbadge.”

“Yes, Sir. The carrier link is still open,” she said.

“When you download the new matrix, set the auto-record feature. Also, Include the Captains service file to autoplay on identification, his ears only.”

“Aye, Sir,” she said returning her attention to her console to carry out his instructions.

He touched the fleetcom button on the communications panel and said, “Admiral Donatra, this is the Galileo, Captain Fossey, with an update.”

“*Yes Captain, go ahead with your update,*” the Admiral said.

“Admiral, the creatures that are holding Captain David are still demanding troops and weapons. However, we do have some good news. The carrier link to the captains’ commbadge is still open. We have set it on auto record and have downloaded his service record and other information for his ears only.”

“*Thank you, Captain,*” the Admiral said.

“There is more Admiral. The creatures allowed us to beam down what they thought were weapons, but what were in actuality, pattern enhancers. We attempted to beam the captain out, but the return signal was blocked. We can still beam to the surface, but not back to the ship.”

Ael added, “*as before, continue to maintain a connection with the Pluronians and brief us if the situation changes. Donatra out.*”

• • •

He touched his commbadge and stated, “Captain Fossey,” in his steady, emotionless Vulcan manner that seemed to jump right out of any communication. “Borall here,” he said as he continued walking to the engineering section.

“Yes, Chief?”

“We have further modifications to the shuttle that I would like to test, sir,” the Chief Engineer said.

“*Your test is approved, keep ops advised. Fossey out.*”

The connection closed. He tapped his commbadge again and stated, “Galileo One, you are cleared to launch into a polar orbit of the planet.”

“*Roger, Chief. Shuttle One is launching at this time.*”

“Keep me advised of your progress, Borall out.” He arrived at engineering in time to see the shuttle lift and slide through the force shield over the shuttle bay. He sat down in the chair at the end of the console. He showed no emotion as he scanned the console and took in the status of not only the shuttle mission but also the entire ship. He did not immediately notice the looks of expectation on the engineers that sat at the other consoles and did not acknowledge them when he did look around the room.

The shuttle continued to drop toward the barrier. The mission this time was to settle into a stable orbit above the barrier and test the new modifications to the shield generators. His hope was still to use the shuttle to poke a hole in the barrier through which a transporter would operate.

This was the second try, and he was confident it would be the last; however, a human named Murphy and his laws kept interfering...

Chapter 8

First gong awoke him, screaming in pain. He opened his eyes to see a sword sticking out of his right leg! The Pluronian leader was standing over him, having just released its sword. The pattern enhancers were gone from around his pallet.

He sat up with minor pain, at least it was minor compared to the initial impalement! He reached for the bowl and ate slowly, watching as the Pluronians prepared for the scourge.

When he finished his meal, he placed the bowl back on the table. He turned as best he could to face the leader and stated, “I need to go back to my room and clean up.”

“We are cleaned in the darkness,” the leader said.

The captain recognized that this was the first proper sentence the creature had said. He was not sure if the creature had learned to speak Federation Basic or if the translator was working better, but he would bet on the latter.

Then he heard, “Positive voice identification, Ryan Alan David, Captain, Starfleet, Federation of Planets. Current assignment is Commander of the Federation Starship USS Galileo, attached to the USS Explorer fleet. Awarded Federation Star of Valor—”

“What,” he asked not knowing where the voice was coming from.

“Positive voice identification, Ryan Alan David, Captain, Starfleet, Federation of Planets. Current assignment is Commander of the Federation Starship USS Galileo, attached to the USS Explorer—”

“Ok, I heard that,” he said quietly, but not quietly enough.

“Who are you talking to human?”

“No one,” he answered, which was true. He had no idea where the voice was coming from. But now he knew who he was and what he was captain of. *Ryan Alan David, Captain of the USS Galileo*, he thought, Mom must be pleased!

By this time the creatures were lined up at the Northern edges of the tracks to the clearing. The leader reached down and pulled the sword out of his leg at the same time another creature grabbed his arms from behind. He was snatched to his feet, where he found he was standing between two creatures.

The leader turned and headed to the forest. Captain David followed it as directed by the escorts on either side of him. They proceeded through the forest without stopping and onto the field of battle. He was led to the center of the clearing where he was caused to await the Singurian leader. The leader walked across the field at a steady pace followed by his horde of beasts.

The Pluronian leader turned and tapped his commbadge and said, “Starship, hear me.”

• • •

“Galileo, Captain Fossey. What do you want?” The captain asked in a short tone of voice.

“Humans for the scourge have not arrived on the field, but your captain has. The rest is left to you,” the Pluronian leader stated.

Jeff muted the open channel, turned to the communication station and asked, “Lieutenant, do you have a visual?”

“Only fuzzy sir,” she responded.

“On the screen, please.”

The main view screen switched to a fuzz scene that he could barely detect was a clearing in the trees. There was a spot in the center of the clearing and a blob across the left side moving slowly towards the middle. He figured he did not have much time.

He reopened the channel. “We are not allowed to interfere in the internal workings of a planet. I cannot send humans with superior weapons to fight your war,” Jeffery stated just as flatly. *I sound like a broken record, he thought, and the looks of the bridge crew are surely representative of the rest or the crew. They think I will let their captain die only to assume his position. I have got to figure this out.*

“Your captain then dies,” stated the leader.

A thought hit him; *how do I know the captain is in danger. I cannot see him,*” Jeffery said.

The image on the screen began to clear. However, only the bit around the captain cleared. He could still not see the creature. He could see the blob was very close to the center now.

“I see the captain,” he said.

“Watch him die then,” the creature stated.

The scene on the ground expanded slightly, but it grew enough to see the creatures around him. He saw the leader of the horde advancing toward the captain come within striking distance. He watched the leader raise his sword.

What can I do? he wondered. With that thought came an answer.

He muted the channel and ordered, “Weapons, target the clearing and stun everything that moves through the hole they just provided.”

He watched the sword fall, striking the captain and cutting him deeply.

The crew on the bridge reacted in unison, yelling and turning away. Jeffery continued to stare at the scene as the captain’s lifeless body fell to the ground and the creatures advanced over it.

There was a flash of light, and the creatures began to drop to the ground as the screen went blank. He turned to the Communication position and looked questioningly at the Lieutenant. She turned to her console but turned back after a few moments.

“I have lost the visual, sir.” The screen returned to a view of the planet.

Damn, he thought, double damn. The rest of the crewmembers were slowly recovering from the image of the death of their Captain.

The intercom beeped and he touched the control to open the channel.

“Sir, we have a lock on the captain,” the transporter officer said.

“Beam him to sickbay,” he ordered as he exploded from the center seat. He was almost to the lift door before he remembered to transfer command. “Ops you have the conn.”

The door closed behind him. “Sickbay,” he ordered. The ride to the deck that the sickbay was on, took an eternity. He was about to bang on the door when it parted. He rushed from the lift, banging into a crewmember waiting by the door. He did not stop but uttered only an “excuse me.” He entered the sickbay as the EMH, and doctor were beginning their examination.

Over his shoulder the doctor said, “It doesn’t look good captain. I am not holding out any hope, but we will try our best.” He slid to a halt by the table as the doctor was talking and now, he just stared at the corpse. He did not hold out any hope either.

Ten minutes later, the hope completely died within him as the doctor declared Ryan Alan David, Captain of the Galileo, dead. Captain Jeffery Fossey hung his head in a moment of silence, which was shared by the doctor. He turned and silently left. He returned to the bridge slowly, trying to make sense of this and come to grips with his captain’s passing before facing the crew.

He did not really hear the captain on the bridge announcement as he entered the bridge and walked to what was now really *his* chair. *You must be strong for the crew*, he told himself. Jeffery sat down in the center seat, took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

He reached down and touched the fleetcom button and said, “Admiral Donatra, this is the USS Galileo, Jeffery Fossey commanding.”

“*Yes captain, what is your status?*” She asked in a guarded tone. Jeffery thought that she must be getting a lot of bad news as the Admiral is hesitant to ask the question!

“We have rescued Captain David, but not before he was fatally injured. He died on arrival to the sickbay.” He heard a few gasps for breath from the bridge crew as he delivered the news they already knew. The pause from the Admiral became noticeable, he said “Admiral did you receive my report. Captain David is dead, and we have recovered the body.”

“*Yes, captain. I received your report and took a moment of silence in his honor. Standby.*” After a few moments, she said, “Captain Fossey, you are ordered to take revenge on the planet. Kill the creatures.” He could hear the hate in her voice.

“NO, belay that order and continue your scanning of the planet. Fleet out.” Ambassador Worf ordered.

As the connection closed, Captain Fossey looked around at each of the bridge crewmembers. They were looking at him questioningly, apprehensively not knowing what was going to happen next.

He settled on the science officer and asked quietly, “Bruce, is the hole still open?”

Before she could answer the communications panel on his chair beeped. He touched the engineering button and heard Borall say, “Captain, everything is back to full operational

status. I am at a loss to explain it. Everything that was not working is now working.” He wished he could see the Vulcan’s face right now and confirm the surprised emotion he heard in his voice.

“Captain!” Commander Hutcherson said excitedly.

“Thank you Chief. Have your folks double check their systems,” the captain said touching the button to sever the connection. “Yes, Bruce, what is it?”

“Sensors are back to full operation and the planet is no longer, I guess you could call it, cloaked sir. I have a clear view of the surface with the three clears. But captain—”

“Yes, Bruce,” he said when the science officer paused.

“—there are no creatures. They are all gone. I am not registering any life forms.”

“Do we have transporters back?”

“Yes, sir,” stated the engineering officer on the bridge.

“Communications, assemble an away team, I will lead it. Bruce, you have the conn,” he said as he rose from the center chair.

Bruce stood and moved to the turbolift doors to block the captain’s way.

“Captain, we have lost one officer, I would not like to lose another, especially on *my* watch,” Bruce said.

“I will be careful, but as you stated there are no lifeforms on the planet.”

“Still be careful Captain,” he said as he stepped out of the captain’s way.

He entered the turbolift and turned around to face forward. He saw Bruce walking toward the center seat as the door closed. “Transporter room,” he commanded.

• • •

They arrived on the balcony. He entered the cave and saw the captain’s room even if he did not know it was the captain’s room. The shower, sleeping pallet and table where just the way the captain had left them. Jeffery returned to the balcony and found the security officers were fanning out from the northern bridge.

He walked down the path to the northern bridge and crossed. Lieutenant Harold Brower, the team leader, walked out of the Northern clearing and said, “Nothing found so far sir. We are checking the other clearings now.”

“Don’t forget the forests in between.”

“Already thought of that captain, they would make a dandy ambush location.”

They started walking along the path toward the central clearing. As they started across the clearing, the other security members exited the forest and walked abreast with him across the clearing. They entered the forest as he and Brower started down the southern track.

They arrived at the opening to the southern clearing and came up short. There, in the center of the clearing was a lone sleeping pallet with a creature sitting on it facing him.

It did not look up or change its position as they all entered the clearing and moved toward the creature. Captain Fossey moved within a meter of the pallet and Lieutenant Brower stepped in front of him as a shield.

“Lieutenant, please stand aside,” Jeffery said in a very hushed voice like he did not want to disturb the creature meditating before them.

“It killed the captain! We all saw it and I don’t want it to have a chance at you sir.”

“It will be fine, it is not armed now,” he said taking a step back and sitting on the ground before the creature. Harold moved to the right flank as the rest of the security contingent surrounded the creature keeping their weapons trained on it.

The creature looked up and focused on Jeffery. After a moment it asked, “You have taken the captain?”

“Yes, we have.”

“Return the captain. We must scourge. We cannot scourge without the captain.”

“No, we are not returning our dead captain to you, you killed him.”

“We know not dead. We know the captain must be here for us to scourge.”

“No.”

“Then we are not,” it said waving a limb around the clearing, “and the Singurian are not. The captain is not.”

“Yes, the captain is not.”

“Return the captain to clearing and he will be with the scourge.”

“No. I must return our dead to the stars from which we came.”

“Then we are not,” the creature said looking back down and reentering its meditation. The creature and the sleeping pallet slowly dissolved into the ground.

Jeffery and the security team jumped back. After the initial surprise wore off, he said, “Well, that was interesting!”

They looked around the clearing for more creatures and then returned to the Galileo.

• • •

As the doors parted, he was greeted with the familiar “Captain on the bridge.” He walked through to the captains’ ready room and hesitated for a moment before sitting in the chair behind the desk. *It is going take me a little while to get used to being the real captain*, he thought.

He reached out to the communication panel and activated a direct channel to the Admiral. When she answered, he briefed her on the planetary visit and the lack of results.

“*Thank you for the update, captain. How are you handling being the captain?*”

“I . . . I think I will be ok. But . . . I keep thinking about what Captain David would have done in this situation and I feel I am not getting it right. The crew is looking to me for leadership and I am not sure I can provide it. But I am trying.”

“All we can ask is that you do your best. Field promotions are never easy, not even regular promotions are easy, but I am sure you are up to the task. Having a mentor, even one that has gone on, will help you get over the ruff parts. Just keep thinking about what Captain David would have done and I am sure you will rise above your fears. I look to Admiral Saron and Captain Picard for inspiration. Call if you require assistance, and I will be your mentor in this troubling time,” she said.

“I thank you for your consideration, council and continued support,” he said. Then, wishing to change the subject, he asked, “Do you have any orders for the Galileo?”

“No new orders captain. Continue toward your mission of exploration. We will be consolidating the fleet shortly. I will have a complete update briefing at that time.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

“*Donatra* out.”

• • •

He rose from the desk and entered the bridge. He noticed that the crew was a little slow with the “captain on the bridge” announcement.

“Captain,” Bruce said as he slipped out of the center seat, “I have something interesting to show you.”

Jeff followed Bruce to the science station. Bruce called up the reading for the energy field over the last few hours. He pointed to the timeline and said, “this is where we beamed the captain aboard. The energy readings drop to almost zero and stay that way until you beamed down sir.” He scanned the timeline with his index finger, bringing it to a stop at the point where the beam down occurred. “Then it came back up while you were on the planet. I was afraid that we would not be able to get you back! But then, just before you beamed back up, the energy readings died off again.”

“That is very interesting. We found the planet empty when we first beamed down. When the energy field returned, we were entering the clearing where the creature was waiting.”

“I wonder if the energy field and the appearance of the creatures are related,” Bruce wondered out loud.

“Sounds like it. Very interesting,” he said.

“Pass your findings to the *Explorer* and continue monitoring. On the other task, how is the planetary survey going?”

“Almost completed, Captain.”

“How much longer?”

“About two hours to complete the core scan.”

“Very good, Bruce. I will be getting something to eat and a little rest. Let me know if anything exciting happens. You have the conn,” he ordered as he turned and headed to the turbolift.

After a quick meal, his favorite meal it was, he took a shower and went to bed. He tossed for a while before he entered a fitful sleep.

• • •

He was standing in the center of the clearing on the third planet of the Positan One system. His captain slowly dissolved into the ground before him, spouting very famous sayings from the past. "I have not begun to fight." "We shall overcome." "I shall return."

He looked down and saw that he was beginning to dissolve also. His screaming awakened him. Captain Jeffery Fossey looked around the familiar surrounds of his quarters. The dream was still very vivid in his mind. What was the dream trying to tell him? Why had his mind focused on that one incident? The creature dissolving into the ground, the energy shield going up and down.

It suddenly hit him. The captains' log mentioned that he had died. The Singurian leader had fatally wounded him twice before. He was not dead while he was on the planet.

He grabbed at his commbadge and yell, "Bridge, this is the captain."

"Commander Hutcherson, sir."

"Bruce, what are you still doing on duty? Hasn't the Bravo shift come on duty yet?"

"Come and gone sir. You have been asleep for over ten hours."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"You needed your rest and there is nothing going on. The survey is completed, and we are returning to the *Explorer*."

"Turn the ship around and resume orbit. How long will it take to get back to the planet?"

"About thirty-five minutes sir."

"Good, I will be on the bridge shortly. Fossey out."

He rose quickly, ordered a light breakfast on the way to a very quick shower. He dressed and grabbed his breakfast on the way out the door. He consumed the croissant and coffee in the lift heading to the bridge. Entering the bridge, he asked, "How much longer?"

"Twenty minutes, sir," reported Bruce as he jumped out of the captain's chair and returned to his duty station.

Fossey stabbed the intercom control for sickbay and said, "Doctor, captain here."

"Yes, captain."

"Please get Captain David ready to beam down to the planet, Doctor," he ordered.

"Excuse me sir! You are sending the captain's corpse on an away mission?"

"Yes, Doctor. Please do as I have instructed. captain out."

He looked around the bridge at the strange looks he was getting. He did not care.

"Communications, I need an away team of two large security members to accompany the captain to the surface. They are to be armed with cutting weapons only, swords and daggers. Is that understood?" He had turned to face the communications officer as he was speaking and saw her nodding without turning around. She set to the task.

He turned back to the front and asked, "how much longer helm?"

“Fifteen minutes, captain.”

He had to calm down and act like a captain, he thought. But will this bring the captain back. He did not know for sure what the crew thought of his actions, and he did not really care. They were carrying out his orders like the well-oiled machine he knew they were.

The communications panel beeped. He touched the intercom control and said, “Captain.”

The doctor stated, “We have Captain David ready for transport to the planet sir.”

“Excellent, get him to the transporter room as soon as possible. We will be ready for transport in about eight minutes.”

“Will do, Captain. Sickbay out.”

“Captain, the away team is assembled and awaiting Captain David,” said the communications officer.

He caught the fact that they were being to use the same tense as he was, the tense that said the captain was still alive. And he believed that.

“Transporter room,” he said opening a connection, “Away team,”

“Aye, sir”

“Beam down to the center of the clearing. Put the captain in the center of the field and one of you walk to the tree line and cut one of the trees. Are these instructions clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Captain out.” He closed the connection and turned to the science section and said, “Bruce, have them beam down as soon as we are within transporter range.”

“Yes, sir. Coming into range . . . now. The captain is on the planet sir.

“Thank you all,” he said. He thought, *I hope this will work...*”

Chapter 9

The captain woke slowly as first gong sounded. He was very tired and hungry. He reached for the bowl and touched a warm body! He sat up and looked around. The room had doubled in size and there was a security officer on a sleeping pallet on either side of him.

He reached back behind him and grabbed the bowl of fruit and sandwiches. He ate slowly letting the fruit work its magic. The others stirred and he heard a gasped, “Captain?” from his left.

The other security officer rolled over and said, “it worked!”

The captain looked at him questioningly.

“You have been dead for almost a full day captain. Captain Fossey was not sure returning you to the planet would cause you to be resurrected,” he said.

Captain David looked at him and said, “Markus, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir, Ensign Marcus Bing. This is Ensign Ryan Andrews. We were assigned to your body for the away team. Thankfully, that mission is over, and we can get on with guarding you.”

He handed them a sandwich and pointed at their bowl. He said, “The last thing I remember is being struck down in the middle of the clearing.”

He continued eating as the two Ensigns filled him in on the happenings since them.

“A lot has happened since then captain. We recovered your body and headed back to the Explorer before Captain Fossey ordered your return to the planet,” Ryan said.

Marcus finished his sandwich and continued, “We beamed down and cut a tree to make the second gong sound.”

Ryan said, “Third gong found us sitting in the center of the clearing.”

They finished their meal and cleaned up in the three showers at the back of the room. Each shower stall doubled as a toilet facility.

“Come with me,” the captain said after they had gotten ready to leave. He led the way to the balcony and found three seats to the right side. “The keepers have been busy he mumbled. Strange, questioning looks caused him to continue in a regular voice. “The Keepers are what I call the entities that control this place. And also, what is about to happen.” He pointed to the clearing before them.

The combatants were lining up on the field and slowly marching toward each other. The three watched as the combatants merged in a colophony of battle. As limbs went flying, Ensign Marcus was the first to retch with Ryan a very close second. They turned away, only glancing back occasionally.

By the time the battle was over, the two Ensigns could watch without major ill effects. The captain started counting as the combatants withdrew following the second gong. "One hundred and fifty-eight. Status Quo," he said.

"Dinner anyone?" the captain asked. He rose and they followed him back to the room. They ate and lay down on the sleeping pallet. Sleep came with the darkness.

• • •

They woke as first gong sounded. They eat and cleaned-up quickly. The captain led the two security guards down the mountain path, across the river and into the Pluronian encampment. He was not sure what he could do to stop the conflict between them and the Singurians, but he could try. He walked quickly and confidently to the first pallet. He sat in front of the creature and said, "The scourge must stop, and I have to return to my people." Ryan and Marcus sat at the side of the pallet to intercept any attack on their Captain.

"We must scourge. You will stay and scourge with us. The scourge is all."

"I know what you mean by that now. The Ensigns from my starship, the Galileo, have informed me. You cannot exist without the scourge, and I am the only reason for the scourge."

He continued, "If I am not here you will not exist. I would not want to kill off two races. However, I am ready to return to my ship and stop the scourge. So, this brings us to a crossroads."

He paused to allow the creature to assimilate his words and the thoughts behind them. As the pause lengthened a beeping started.

Faster than the security guards could react to, the creature reached forward and touched the captain's commbadge and said, "Yes, starship?"

As the creature returned quickly to its former position the captain and guards tried to react. The Ensigns moved forward, and the captain leaned backwards. They quickly realized there was nothing they could do and relaxed back to their former positions.

"Leader, this is Captain Fossey. Our captain is with you?"

"The humans are here," the leader stated.

"Captain, good to see you again. Are you well?"

"I am tired, but that is to be expected, captain," he used the honorific to show his support of his ex-first officer.

"Captain, we are standing by to retrieve you," Jeffery said. Pattern enhancers materialized around the group. The creature lowered its head as a hum began. Quicker than before, the creature thrust a limb forward leaving a sword in the chest of the captain. As the creature leaned back it said, "take your captain."

As the creature slowly dissolved in the transporter beam with the three Starfleet personnel, Captain Ryan Alan David looked down at the sword, then at each of the Ensigns and finally said, "Here we go again..."

• • •

The intercom beeped and he touched the control to open the channel.

“Sir, we have a lock on the captain,” the transporter officer said.

“Beam him to sickbay,” he ordered as he exploded from the center seat. He was almost to the lift door before he remembered to transfer command. “Bruce, you have the conn.”

The door closed behind him. “Sickbay,” he ordered. The ride to the deck that the sickbay was on, took an eternity. He was about to bang on the door when it parted. He rushed from the lift, banging into a crewmember waiting by the door. He did not stop but uttered only an “excuse me.” He entered the sickbay as the EMH, and doctor were beginning their examination.

Over his shoulder the doctor said, “It doesn’t look good captain. I am not holding out any hope, but we will try our best.” He slid to a halt by the table as the doctor was talking and now, he just stared at his captain with a sword through his chest. He did not hold out any hope either.

Ten minutes later, the hope completely died within him as the doctor declared Ryan Alan David, Captain of the Galileo, dead. Captain Jeffery Fossey touched his commbadge, “Transporter room, return Captain David to the surface.” He left sickbay and returned to the bridge.

He did not really hear the captain on the bridge announcement as he entered the bridge and walked to what was now really *his* chair.

He reached down and touched the fleetcom button and said, “Admiral Donatra, this is the USS Galileo, Jeffery Fossey commanding.”

“*Yes Captain, what is your status?*” She asked in a guarded tone. Jeffery thought that she must be getting a lot of bad news as the Admiral is hesitant to ask the question!

“We returned Captain David to the surface, and he was resuscitated. But before he could be returned to Galileo he was again fatally injured. He died on arrival to the sickbay. I have returned him to the surface for resuscitation. I am planning to attempt to retrieve him after resuscitation but before he is injured again.”

“*Thank you for the report, Captain. Standby.*” After a few moments, she said, “*Your plans are approved. Please notify us of the results of the uninjured retrieval. Admiral out.*”

“Bruce, you have the con,” as he left the center seat and headed for the turbolift. He continued back to his quarters for a snack and more rest. He did not know when he would be called to the bridge again.

• • •

It seemed only a few minutes after his head hit the mat that the communication panel above his bed started beeping. He looked to the bulkhead as he reached up to answer the beep. It had been just under 6 hours this time. “Captain,” he said.

“Captain, the day is dawning, and we have a lock on the captain down on the planet.”

“Beam him aboard,” he said, “I will be on the bridge shortly, captain out.” Jumping out of bed, he ran to the shower and donned a clean uniform. He took the turbolift to the bridge and heard the familiar ‘Captain on the Bridge’ as he emerged from the lift. Moving to the center seat as Bruce stood next to the chair, he sat down.

“Captain, our efforts to retrieve the captain have not proven successful. The transporter locks on the captain and begins to transport him to the ship but the signal degrades and it losses the lock. Engineering is working on the issue.”

“Thank you, Bruce. Aren’t you due to be relieved?”

“Yes, sir. I was relieved on the Science Station but stayed on to see to the recovery of the captain,” he said.

“Well sir, you are relieved and get something to eat and then rest up,” his captain told him.

“I will try just that captain,” he said as he headed to the turbolift. He detoured to the Science station and looked at the status, then satisfied, entered the lift.

• • •

The captain awoke on the pallet and surveyed the room. Both security officers were there and stirring awake. They ate, showered and cleaned-up the room. The captain walked to the balcony and felt the start of the transport beaming him away. However, the feeling went away. The two ensigns joined him.

“Did you feel the transport start and then go away?” He asked them.

“No, sir,” they responded.

Then the surrounding started dimming again as the feeling returned. He felt the familiar ‘being in two places at once’ caused by the transporter, but the feeling again went away, and the surrounding became solid again.

“I have the feeling the ship is trying to beam me abroad,” he told them, “However, they are being prevented from completing the beam-out.”

“You did shimmer for a second sir,” Ensign Ryan Andrews said.

“Well, let’s see what is going on,” he said and touched his commbadge, “Galileo, Captain David, are you trying to beam me aboard?”

“Captain Fossey, sir. Yes, we have been trying, but the signal is not strong enough to complete the beam-out.”

“I noticed. It seems the Keepers would like to keep me around for a while. captain out.”

“Well, gentlemen, why don’t we go find out what is on the agenda for today.” He turned and headed to the Pluronians camp. He took his time walking down the path to the river and crossing it. The camp was a buzz of activity as they entered it. He sat down next to the leaders’ pallet and the Ensign’s sat between them to prevent the captain from being killed again.

“Well, here we are. The ship tried to beam me aboard a few minutes ago and failed, so what do you have instore for me today?”

“We must scourge,” the leader replied.

“We will not help you,” the captain stated emphatically.

“Humans and weapons needed are,” it stated.

“No,” he yelled.

“Yes,” it yelled back.

They sat silent for a few seconds. “Release me, now! Let me return to my ship. You will not get what you want, the Prime Directive prevents us from providing you with weapons and humans for the scourge,” he said. Then he had a thought. He tapped his commbadge, “Galileo, Captain David.”

“Yes, Captain,” Jeff responded.

“Set the Phasers on stun and fire on the Pluronians’ camp. Please do not hit me, the security detail or the Pluronians leader,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir,” came the reply. In a moment, the sound of the Phasers was heard and the Pluronians in the camp fell to the ground stunned.

“There is your answer. No scourge today. I used the humans aboard the ship and our weapons, just as you asked for.” He sat defiant.

The leader surveyed the area and plunged a sword into the captain through the gap in the Ensigns.

• • •

He woke in the room and got up with a pain in his chest. *This is getting old*, he thought. They got up, ate, showered and cleaned-up the room.

The captain tapped his commbadge, “Galileo,” he said as he walked to the balcony.

“Fossey here Captain.”

“Don’t you ever sleep?” he asked.

“Only when you do, sir.”

“Then you are getting a lot! This is getting really old, so let’s try something new. Please set the phasers on stun and stun the entire Singurian camp, please.”

“Yes, Captain.”

RAD could hear the whine of the phasers as he sat down for the show. *I have tried to stop the one side, now let’s see what happens if the other side does not show up*, he thought.

The two Ensigns joined him in the seats, and they watch the show. It did not take long for the Pluronians to start marching out of there camp, down the trail and onto the field. They lined up as always and started advancing across the field. At the halfway point they stopped. One of the Pluronians walked forward two paces and stopped. It looked around and turned back to the group. He could see a discussion going on and finally the group moved forward to join the one out front and they began marching toward the other side of the field. Arriving at the trees, one stepped forward and hit the tree. The Second gong sounded, and they returned to their camp. The darkness came with the third gong.

• • •

They got up and ate, showered, cleaned-up and went to the balcony to watch the fun. Ryan called the ship and had the Singurian camp stunned again. He also had the ship beam up the security detail. They were not needed in his estimation.

He watched the show again. The Pluronians marched out of their camp and down the trail and onto the field. They stopped halfway across the field, for a moment and then continued to the tree line and hit a tree.

The second gong sounded, and they returned to their camp. Third gong sounded and darkness settled over the valley.

• • •

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This went on for a week.

• • •

He got up and ate, showered, cleaned-up and went to the balcony. Ryan called the ship and had the Singurian camp stunned again. He then walked to the Pluronian camp and sat in front of the leader.

After a moment the leader looked up at him. "We must scourge," it said.

"Scourge all you want. I have only done what you asked. The Singurians are scourged by humans with human weapons. It is done as you asked," he said.

"We must scourge!" it said.

"Be my guest. Go, scourge, win." He rose and left the camp. Walking across the river and up to the balcony he took a seat to watch the show.

The Pluronians marched out of their camp and down the trail and onto the field. They marched across the field and continued to the tree line and hit a tree.

The second gong sounded, and they returned to their camp. Third gong sounded and darkness settled over the valley.

• • •

Captain Fossey touched the fleetcom button on the chair arm. "Admiral Donatra, this is the USS Galileo, Jeffery Fossey commanding."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Sir, we have been monitoring the situation on the planet and Captain David seems to have the scourge at a standstill. The creatures continue their normal pattern but have

found no opponents. This has gone on for the seven of the planets days which have become much shorter. We monitored a pow-wow with the Pluronian leader and Captain David where he laid out our response to their demands. It was quite funny when I thought about it. He told them that he had caused humans to us human weapons against the Singurians as the leader demanded. Then he left the camp to watch the show. I am not sure how much longer this will go on. Do you have any orders for us?"

"Your Captain David is a genius. He gave them what they wanted, but not in a way that they wanted, so as not to violate the Prime Directive. Very smart your Captain David, Captain Fossey! No, Captain Fossey, no further orders, Donatra out." The channel closed.

He sat back in his chair with a smile on his face. There was a giggle behind him that stopped almost before it started. His smile broadened.

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He got up and ate, showered, cleaned-up and went to the balcony. Ryan called the ship and had the Singurian camp stunned again.

"Captain, Fossey here. The phasers are not working on the planet. We cannot stun the Singurians as requested."

"So, they figured out how to stop my solution to there scourging. Well, thank you anyway Captain."

He walked down to the Pluronian camp and sat in front of the leader.

"We scourge today," it said seeming very happy.

"Scourge all you want. I have only tried to do what you asked. The Singurians were scourged by humans with human weapons. It was done as you asked, but now prevent us from helping you," he said.

"We scourge without you. You do not scourge; you stop the scourge. We must scourge!" it said.

He shook his head lowering it to look down. He said, "Then you will release me to beam back to the ship?"

"You cannot go back. You must scourge with us." It said flatly.

He rose and returned to the balcony to watch the scourge. He watched for two cycles and then felt the transporter whine and the valley dimmed around him and the sickbay slowly formed as he became unconscious.

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The communications panel on his chair began beeping and he answered it. "Captain," came the voice of Chief Borall.

"Yes, Chief"

"Sir, we have breached the dampening field with a shuttle and have one in the field currently proving a whole in the field. We can beam through the shuttle."

"Have the transporter room beam the captain abroad," he ordered.

There was a slight hesitation from the Chief before he stated, "the captain is aboard, sir."

"Very good Chief. Please give your crew a well done!" he closed the connection and punched the button for sickbay, "Emit, how is Captain David?"

"Sir, you should come to sickbay," was the terse reply.

"Bruce, you have the conn," he said as he left the bridge. The turbolift dropped him within 10 feet of the sickbay. He entered and found the medical staff around a bed in the corner. A glance told him that the person on the bed was not doing well.

"Emit?" he asked, hopping his observation of the vials panel was wrong.

"The captain was beamed directly to the bed and his vital signs have been slowly diminishing since his arrival. We are trying to figure out why this is happening, but so far, all we can do is watch."

"Could it be something to do with the planet?"

"We cannot say at this time, but you could be right. This is the first time the captain has not arrived dead in sickbay. So, I am not sure if he can survive away from the planet. We will continue to monitor the situation and keep you advised, captain."

"Thank you, Emit"

He left sickbay and returned to the bridge that was still his.

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Captain Fossey touched the fleetcom button on the chair arm. "Admiral Donatra, this is the USS Galileo, Jeffery Fossey commanding."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Sir, we have Captain David back onboard. We also have a shuttle in the dampening field forming a whole that we can operate through without interference from the Positans."

"How is Captain David?"

"Not doing well. Emit states that his vital signs are slowly diminishing, and he is not sure why. I will update you as soon as I hear something."

"Thank you, Captain. Please have your engineering team contact the Explorer team and brief them on what was done to the shuttle. Donatra out." The connection closed.

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He pushed the button on the communications panel on his chair and said, "Chief Borall."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Have you notified Explorers' engineering staff of the shuttle modifications?"

"Yes, captain, right after I briefed you and beamed the captain to sickbay."

"Admiral Donatra was asking, and I knew you would have, but I just wanted to check for the Admiral. Thanks Chief. captain out."

Authors' Notes

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