



Epiphany Trek

The Actor's Tale

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Harry felt like a sardine. He reflected, while squeezing past another knot of people, that the Starflight Museum had always been a popular tourist attraction, but he'd never seen it this packed before. He took Jo's elbow so that they could ooze their way through the sea of humanity together. Jo looked just as surprised at the crowd. "They must be having a special exhibit."

Harry grimaced. "Their timing is perfect. They couldn't schedule their big event next month?"

Jo poked him gently in the ribs. "Oh, I'm sure the museum director deliberately planned this so that Harry Roberts would be personally inconvenienced."

"Well, it sure is feeling like that. My last chance to visit the old *Paige* for awhile, and I spend the majority of the day swimming upstream."

"Cheer up, Harry. The crowd should thin out once we get nearer to the *Paige*. She hasn't got the patina of age yet. You know how graffiti done yesterday is considered an eyesore, but ancient graffiti is considered valuable? Give her another hundred years or so and the public will start to find her truly interesting."

Harry just grunted and made his way forward. They were finally approaching the area where the old *Paige* had been berthed. On the past few occasions Harry had stopped by the area had been relatively quiet, but this time was different. The place was packed, and more people were continuing to pour in. Harry and Jo stood stunned and let the crowd carry them toward the old ship. It took awhile, but the tide finally washed them close enough to see two docents directing traffic. Harry pulled the nearest one aside. "Excuse me, Miss. I don't care very much about the outside. I just want to take a little stroll around the inside. Can you get me through the crowd?"

"I'm very sorry, Sir. Due to the volume of people, we're only allowing groups of twenty inside at a time. If you want to tour the inside, you'll have to stand in that line." She pointed to a line that snaked back and forth on itself into the distance.

Harry smiled ingratiatingly. "I'm not usually one to cut ahead in a line, but I'm this ship's last captain. I don't have much time here and I really would like to visit the old girl before I leave on my next cruise. Would you see if you could squeeze me in, please?"

The woman looked him up and down, noting the civilian clothing. "Do you have any ID on you?"

"Of course." Harry showed her his Starfleet ID. Jo also displayed her ID. "This is Josephine d'Avril, the *Paige*'s Chief Engineer."

The woman smiled warmly. "Right this way, Captain Roberts. Commander d'Avril. I'm sure we can accommodate you." She led the way to the access door. "If you'll just wait here, you can go in with the next group." The woman at the head of the line frowned. "Wait a minute! My family and I have been waiting in

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this line for the past 3 hours! They should get at the end of the line like everyone else!”

Jo could tell that Harry was about to tell the woman where to go. She jabbed his ribs again. He glared at her, but the brief interruption gave the docent time to take the matter in hand. “Ma’am, I appreciate your sense of fairness, but this is Captain Roberts and Commander d’Avril. They were part of this ship’s last crew and they’re only here for a very short time.”

The outraged woman’s demeanor softened immediately. “Oh, pardon me! Please go right ahead!” She turned to Harry and Jo, beaming. “Captain Roberts, I am **so** pleased to meet you! Commander d’Avril, it is indeed a privilege to meet you!” She shook hands with both of them. “You two and the rest of this ship’s crew are **such** an inspiration!”

Harry and Jo exchanged mystified glances, but shook her hand. “Thank you. A pleasure meeting you too.” Further pleasantries were interrupted by the appearance of the interior docent calling for the next group.

Once inside, Harry relaxed within the familiar surroundings. His eyes slid over each piece of equipment with fondness noting once again the changes that had been made to ensure the safety of curious tourists. He glanced over at Jo. She was doing the same thing. “Is this is your first time back, Jo?”

“Yes. The last time I was aboard was during her decommissioning ceremony. They’ve made some changes.”

“They had to. You don’t want some member of the public poking the wrong thing and getting bit. All things considered, they didn’t do a bad job of it.” Harry pointed at the center seat. “They even kept my cup holder like I asked them to.”

Jo shook her head. “I suppose they did, but I keep looking at the changes and thinking I need to fix them.” She shrugged. “Old habits die hard, I guess.”

As the tour group moved toward engineering Harry felt a tug on his sleeve. He looked down at a pair of girls. They looked up at Harry admiringly. “Are you really Captain Roberts?”

“Yes, I am.”

“OH! This is just a real honor, Captain! Our friends will be sooo jealous when we tell them that we got to meet you! Can we have your autograph, please?”

Harry glanced at Jo who just shrugged. “Uh, sure. What would you like me to sign?” The young blonde held out her PADD. Harry took it and signed his name. He handed it over to Jo. Jo looked at the girl. “Would you like my autograph too?”

“Were you part of the crew too?”

“I certainly was. I was the Chief Engineer.”

“I sure would!” Jo signed and handed the PADD back. “Wow! Thanks!” The girl clutched the PADD to her as if it was the most precious object in the universe.

Harry turned to the redhead. "What about you? What would you like me to sign?"

"Oh I want you to sign something more *personal*." She pulled up her sleeve and offered a bare arm.

"You want me to sign your arm?"

"I sure do!"

Harry and Jo signed the arm. The girl squealed with delight, grabbed her sister's hand and both raced after the tour group. Harry and Jo followed along more sedately. They arrived in engineering just in time to hear the girls, still squealing in dolphin tones, "Grandpa! We just got to meet Hell and Back Harry! He signed his autograph! Look!" They looked back at the entrance and pointed at Harry.

The older man frowned. "That's not Harry Roberts! Doesn't look anything like him!"

The rest of the tour group was no longer paying attention to the docent guiding them. They were looking at Harry and smiling. Several of them started toward him. "Captain Roberts!" "Can we get your autograph!" "You're a real hero!" "What a thrill to meet you!"

Harry, smile frozen on his face, waved at his admirers. "Sorry folks, even heroes need to use the head once in awhile." He began backing away, pulling at Jo's arm and whispering urgently. "I think it's time for us to leave. I don't know what's going on and I'm not sure I want to. How do we get out of here without having to deal with the crowd outside?"

Jo thought for a moment then headed back out of engineering and off down the corridor. "I know where the museum staff had to have put the emergency exit. We can go out that way and avoid the crowd altogether." Harry followed along. There was no reason to hurry. Neither of them was going to get lost in the Paige and they could enjoy the trip in peace. Harry poked his head into his former quarters and smiled. Much as he wanted to, there wasn't time to lay down for a nap.

Harry and Jo took their time, and their exit from the *Paige* by way of the museum-installed emergency exit was, thankfully, unnoticed by anyone else. The joint decision to have lunch somewhere away from the museum was unanimous. Half an hour later, they were seated at an unremarkable table in a cozy, quiet, and just as unremarkable cafe. It should have been a comfortable luncheon, but the silence between them was deafening. Harry couldn't help shooting suspicious glances at Jo out of the corner of his eye, and he was pretty sure he caught Jo doing the same thing to him. Time stretched on as they chewed their food and waited like characters in a murder mystery drama waiting for the culprit to be discovered. It was Jo who finally broke the tension. "All right, Harry. Give!"

Harry stopped in mid-chew. "Give what?"

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“Hell and Back Harry? What was all that about?”

“Let me know when you find out.”

Jo leaned closer, eyes narrowing. “You didn't set all that up?”

“No, I thought you did!”

“Not me, Harry! Then who did?”

Harry threw up his hands. “Admiral Mustard did it on the bridge with the tricorder!”

Jo just blinked at him. “How about being serious, Harry?”

“I am serious. Is it any better a guess than saying that every single one of those people in that museum were Starfleet personnel in disguise including the little kid in the diapers?”

“Sure, he was obviously the youngest Ensign in the service. Why not? And while we're at it don't forget that we've unknowingly had mind altering substances put in our food so that we're just imagining that we took a trip to the Star Flight Museum.” Jo sat back shaking her head. “Either this is the most elaborate practical joke in the history of jokes, or there's some simple explanation.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Like...?”

“Like... um.... ah....” Jo's voice trailed off and Harry could see the mental gears churning madly. “Well, I'm sure there's got to be one.” Jo nodded decisively.

“And we're both going to laugh when we find out what it is, right?”

“Yes. Of course. I'm sure it will be quite hilarious when we find out.”

Harry rolled his eyes and took another bite. “I guess I'd better start practicing my chuckles now.”

The mystery of the strange afternoon was quickly forgotten over the next few days as the final preparations for sending the *Paige's* descendant on her space tests were made. It had been over a year since work had begun on her, and Harry couldn't wait to take her out. The endless rounds of design and progress meetings, inspections, and consultations was wearing on his nerves. Once the ship was out of spacedock, he could stop explaining to the construction engineers for the umpteenth time why this or that particular unusual design feature had to be there. Like her predecessor, the *Mitchell Paige II* had a unique job to do necessitating some equally unique systems and design.

Two days later, Harry found himself whistling happily as he approached Starfleet HQ for his final briefing and orders. The aide in Admiral Rivas' office waved Harry inside. “The Admiral is expecting you Captain Roberts. Go right

in.”

Rivas smiled broadly at Harry's entrance and waved him to a seat. “Have a seat, Captain Roberts.” She waited until Harry was comfortably settled. “The *Paige* is ready to go tomorrow isn't she?”

“Yes, Sir. It's been a long time, but I'm looking forward to running her through her paces.”

“I've got some good news for you, Roberts. You're being promoted to Fleet Captain!”

Harry squirmed uncomfortably. “With all due respect, Sir, it doesn't take a Fleet Captain to oversee a ship's space test.”

“No it doesn't. We have another assignment for you.”

Harry gritted his teeth. “Am I being removed from command of the *Paige*, Sir?”

“Of course not! This assignment is only temporary. You'll rejoin the *Paige* once it's complete.”

“Ooookay...” For the life of him, Harry could not think of another assignment that would take priority over space tests of a new vessel.

Rivas grinned. “We would like you to do a recruiting tour for us, Roberts.”

“Me, Sir? You want me to convince civilians to join Starfleet?”

“Not convince, Roberts. We want you to be an ambassador for Starfleet. Meet and greet, shake hands, get young people thinking about the service... that sort of thing.”

Harry stared at Rivas. “Have you read my service record, Sir? I've got some good things on it, but I've got almost as many bad ones. I'm hardly a by-the-book sort of person, I can be downright curmudgeonly at times, and it's been noted that I tend to lack diplomacy. I don't think I'd make a very good ambassador.”

Rivas took a deep breath and leaned forward. “Tell me, Roberts... Have you ever seen *Star Trek* on the Tri-D?”

“On occasion, but not in the last year. I've been pretty busy.” Harry flogged his brain without success to try to make sense of Rivas' departure from the subject of the recruiting tour.

“As you know, *Star Trek* gets its story lines from Starfleet logs.”

That much, Harry was aware of. “Yes, 'Star Trek: Tales from the Starfleet Archives'. They take old logs and rehash them into Tri-D shows. I've seen some, both good and bad.”

“Well, the producers put out a new episode a month ago that was not only good but has caught the public's imagination. They did an episode on the *Paige*'s last voyage into the nebula. The response to the story has been fantastic.”

Harry gasped, “That's why the old *Paige* was swarming with people a few days ago!” He wasn't about to mention the 'Hell-and-Back' appellation.

“Exactly! The old *Paige* has become quite the tourist destination. Starfleet has been inundated with requests to have 'Hell-and-Back' Harry Roberts speak

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or come to dinner engagements. The higher ups have decided that they may as well take advantage of it and try to get some recruiting done.”

Harry sat stunned. What had started out to be a glorious day was turning into a nightmare. It was a full minute before he could force words out of his mouth. “I thought Star Trek only dragged out the old logs.”

“Normally they do, but apparently the Paige's story was too good to wait.” Rivas shrugged. “The publicity works well for Starfleet. We always need good people, and if a Tri-D show can get us more of them, we're going to take advantage of it.” She smiled. “Will you do this for us, Captain Roberts?”

Harry struggled with his emotions. Rivas was right. Starfleet did need more people. There were never enough. On the other hand, his baby was about to be born, and he wouldn't be there to see it. On the third hand, he doubted that many people would want to be in Starfleet if they knew about the unpleasant and sometimes downright dangerous aspects. He wanted to run screaming from the room. He looked up to see Rivas waiting for his answer. “I'll do it, Sir.”

Rivas looked relieved. “Thank you, Captain Roberts. Report to Commander Batak tomorrow morning. He'll be arranging the recruiting tour.” She stood and offered Harry her hand. “Congratulations, Captain!”

Harry waited until he was outside to voice his response. “Thanks... I think...”

Harry's existence went from one of rounds of design and technological meetings and inspections to one consisting of meeting endless hordes of people, telling the same stories over and over, and answering endless questions. He tried not to sound bored the fifteenth time he recounted the tale of his first impression of Starfleet Academy and tried to treat every question put to him seriously. Harry also stomped flat Batak's attempts to get him to cut his conversations short in the interest of meeting more people.

Most people Harry didn't mind. Some gushed about how wonderful he and his crew were. Harry learned to say thank you and promise to pass the compliments along. Some people, mostly younger, were intensely interested in what Starfleet and starships were like. Harry tried his best to give them an honest account. Some of those came starry eyed at the idea and left disappointed. Batak was constantly reminding him that he was supposed to be emphasizing the positive.

The people Harry truly disliked were the first-class idiots. He had one in front of him now. The man had asked twice about what he considered to be Starfleet's overly aggressive stance in the Romulan sector. Harry had already responded twice with an opinion the man apparently disagreed with. Harry stared at him when the question was asked a third time. “Look, I've already given you my opinion twice. I don't care whether you agree with me or not.

Now, get out of my face before I do something you'll regret." As Harry rose slowly to his feet and advanced with deliberate steps, the large man apparently decided that he had an urgent appointment elsewhere.

Harry watched the retreating back then turned to find a bit of space. He heard Batak fussing at the crowd still in line. Harry walked away. He was fuming and felt ready to kill someone... namely one Commander Batak. Sectaarns were noted for being fastidiously detail oriented, and Batak was all that and more. The only thing that made the whole tour tolerable was the regular reports from the Paige on how the shakedown was going. According to Regina and Jo, all was well, and the ship was performing better than anybody had expected. He lit a cigar only to have it snatched from his hand mid-inhale by Commander Batak. Harry rounded on the man, "HEY! What do you think you're doing?"

Batak's lavender head plumes quivered angrily, and he eyed Harry with disapproval. "Ca'tain Roberts. For the twenty-seventh time, Fleet Ca'tains do NOT smoke!"

Harry snatched the cigar back and blew a smoke ring in Batak's face. "Well THIS Fleet Captain DOES!"

Batak puffed up like a marshmallow. "Can't you at least kee' the smoking 'rivate? It isn't the image Starfleet wishes to 'roject. You come from an acting family. How about doing a little acting?"

"Not on your life! If people want to see Harry Roberts, they'll see Harry Roberts... the REAL Harry Roberts... cigar, warts, and all." Harry took another drag on the cigar. "Nor will I lie to them about what Starfleet life is like. Sure, Starfleet can be a great adventure, but it can also be boring and downright dangerous at times. I understand that Starfleet needs people, but they need people willing to accept the bad parts with the good." Harry poked a finger into Batak's shoulder. "I'm going to tell people like it is, and I'm certainly not going to put up with fools. That last idiot asked the same question three times because he didn't like the answer I gave him the first two times. If he was offended because I refused to answer him again, he was MEANT to be."

"You could, at least, have been more di'lomatic about it!"

Harry growled, "I'm a starship captain, not a diplomat. The man was being obnoxious, and I called him on it. If you want diplomacy, call up the Federation Diplomatic Corps. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm taking the rest of the afternoon off." Harry stalked off leaving Batak puffing and unpuffing his feathers in outrage.

"So how's the new girl working out?" Harry was in his latest quarters with his feet up. Jo and Regina were checking in with him from the new Paige. Both women were smiling. "She's sweet, Harry! You couldn't ask for a better

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successor to the old *Paige*. She does everything the old girl did, only better.” Jo's grin was a mile wide.

Regina nodded, “Some minor issues have cropped up, but the team has been able to deal with them quickly.” She looked doubtfully at Harry. “You probably won't be able to sleep once you get here.”

“Why not?”

“The new *Paige* doesn't make half the funny sounds the old one did. She's too quiet. You might have to actually consult the instruments to see what the status of her systems are instead of listening to see if you can hear the right noise.”

Harry chuckled then grimaced. “I'd rather be there.”

Jo and Regina exchanged glances. “The recruiting tour's not going well, Harry?”

“Oh it's going well enough, but I'm getting tired of people, and Batak is going to drive me insane. The other day I told some kid that it was alright to feel scared sometimes. The Chicken about blew his feathers because I admitted that I knew what it was like to be in a bad situation and feel scared.” Harry sighed.

“Chicken?”

“Yeah, Batak is constantly clucking at me about one thing or another. Apparently, I don't fit the 'image' of one of Starfleet's Finest and the man is determined to try to make me fit. I don't know why he just didn't hire the actor that played me on the *Paige*'s episode of *Star Trek* and give him a script.”

“Hmmm...” Regina was obviously thinking. Harry waited while she gathered her thoughts. “Harry, why don't you suggest to Batak that they film a recruiting short on the new *Paige*? You won't have to deal with crowds of people, you can say what you feel needs to be said your own way, and you'll be able to get some work done on the *Paige* at the same time.”

Jo nodded. “If Starfleet is wanting to capitalize on the name *Mitchell Paige*, letting the public actually see what she's become would be a big boost to them.”

Harry smiled as a vision of himself back in familiar circumstances beckoned to him. “Great suggestion! I'll see if I can get Batak to agree to do it.” He signed off the call and sat back whistling. If he played his cards right, Batak would jump at the chance.

Harry's prediction came true the next morning. Commander Batak received Harry's suggestion with surprising eagerness. “An excellent suggestion, Ca'tain! One short can reach billions very efficiently.” The head plumes began bobbing excitedly. “Just think, 'A new *Mitchell 'aige*... a new future for Starfleet! We could even do a tie-in with the *Star Trek* show! 'erfect!” Was it Harry's imagination or were there overtones of relief in Batak's response? It didn't matter, Harry could command his ship, still do what Starfleet had asked, and

finally divest himself of his feathered shadow. A win-win-win situation if Harry had ever seen one. It would take a week for the Chicken to arrange everything for the shoot. Harry intended to spend that week getting to know his new ship.

One week later, Harry was having the time of his life. Living and working on the new *Paige* was a treat, and his crew was eager to show him around. She was a beautiful ship, sleek and efficient, and far roomier than the old *Paige*... and everything was new. There were no salvaged, jury-rigged, or second hand parts on this ship. The best part of all was that the *Mitchell Paige* now had an official classification. Starfleet never had figured out just what the old *Paige's* classification was. Many officers had had many words to describe the old girl... not all of them complimentary, but she had always been the oddball that was neither fish nor fowl. *U.S.S. Mitchel Paige*, NGC-1942-A, was a Search and Rescue Cruiser thank you very much.

The one thing that Harry had not expected was the increased size of the crew. A ship four times the size of the old *Paige* needed a crew that was four times the size. His cozy little family of 200 had turned into a crowd of 800 and he frequently found himself reading name badges. Not to worry... it was only a matter of time before he learned to recognize everyone by sight.

"Captain Roberts!" Harry turned to face the owner of the deep, resonant voice. He certainly did not recognize the voice, and the face was only vaguely familiar. His eyes flicked to the man's name badge, 'Deguerre'. Harry took the proffered hand and shook it firmly while searching for some sign of the man's rank. The man was several inches taller than Harry and slender. His uniform was entirely devoid of any rank pips or other indicators. Sparkling white teeth flashed in a deep chocolate skinned face and the warm, resonant voice rolled out again filling the corridor. "How do you do, Captain. I'm Quinn Deguerre. Commander Batak asked me to come for the short you'll be shooting. He'll be along shortly. He had some production details he needed to supervise."

"Mr. Deguerre, good to meet you. I don't know why, but your name seems familiar."

"I'm an actor, Captain. Perhaps you've seen some of my movies. My latest work was playing you in Start Trek."

"You're the one they picked to play me?" Harry goggled.

Deguerre threw back his head and laughed. "At the time of production, the public had no idea what Harry Roberts really looked like, so they could have cast anyone. I was the one lucky enough to get the role. If your exploits were half as exciting as the script, I stand in awe." Deguerre bowed.

"I have no idea. I still haven't seen the episode."

"I'll arrange a private viewing for you. I'd love to get your opinion whether or not I did a good job of portraying you."

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“Great! I'd really like to know what all the fuss is about.” Harry looked Deguerre up and down. “Would you like a tour of the ship?”

Deguerre nodded eagerly. “I would indeed, Captain! I've always been interested in space exploration. I've not had the opportunity to do any exploring of my own, but I try to keep up with the latest news from those who do.”

Harry looked around. “I don't see Batak yet.”

“Oh, I'm quite sure he'll be along eventually. If we start our tour now we can stay ahead of him for awhile. The man's fussing is enough to drive one to distraction.”

Harry laughed and clapped Deguerre on the shoulder. “Agreed! Why don't we start in Engineering. You can meet the best Chief Engineer in Starfleet and see what makes this girl run.”

Harry was surprised to hear Quinn's voice change as the day and tour wore on. It was still deep and warm, but the room-filling resonance had disappeared. Curious, Harry asked, “What happened to your voice?”

They were catching a snack in the cafeteria and Quinn paused mid-chew, “Excuse me?”

“Your voice isn't the same one you had when we first met. What happened?”

“Oh that's my 'actor' voice. I keep it in my back pocket and pull it out when I need it.”

“Why did you need it when you first met me? You weren't acting then. At least you seemed pretty genuine.”

Quinn looked rueful. “I wasn't acting, Harry. It's just that I've been an actor so long, I'm instinctively 'on' when I first meet someone now and the 'voice' kicks in. This is my 'regular' voice. The only acting I'll be doing while I'm here will be when they shoot the short.” He took another bite of his sandwich. “I must say, Harry, that I'm impressed. This ship and crew are nothing short of amazing. A sly grin crept onto the dark face. I admit to a certain amount of desire to play hooky from my acting and arrange to get left behind so that I can spend more time here.”

“If you can arrange it, you'd be welcome, Quinn. You seem pretty knowledgeable for a layperson. I think you'd make a great addition to the crew with a bit of specialized training.”

“Ah, dreams.” Quinn sighed wistfully then winced as Commander Batak, in all his purple and gold glory, finally caught up to the pair. “There you two are! I've been looking all over for you!” Batak had apparently been looking long enough that he was puffed up with annoyance. “Mr. Deguerre, I see you have made the acquaintance of Ca'tain Roberts. Very Good! We can get on with the shoot tomorrow morning.”

“Don't be so hasty, Commander.” Quinn put his sandwich down with studied casualness. Harry noted that the 'voice' was back. “I need more time to study this ship and her crew. If I am to do the best job I can, I need the time to

get the feel of the situation. It is not something that can be rushed. I am sure you would agree that quality is more desirable than speed?" Quinn paused inquiringly.

"Yes, I do see your point, Mr. Deguerre. How long do you feel you will need to absorb the information."

"I would say two weeks should suffice, Commander. Unless, of course, there is an immovable deadline?"

"No, there's no hard deadline." Batak nodded. "Take your time, Mr. Deguerre. I want this to be the best short Starfleet has ever made. I'll inform the production crew that the shoot has been postponed. I have other business to attend to. I will rejoin you two weeks from now." He bustled off, head plumes bobbing.

Harry managed to hide his grin until Batak was out of sight. "Wonderful! Have you worked with Batak before?"

Quinn chuckled and put the 'voice' back in his pocket. "No, I've not worked with Batak before, but I have worked with Sectaarns in the past. You can't beat them when it comes to detailed artistry, but I haven't met one that wasn't a perfectionist. Some are easier to work with than others. Unfortunately, Batak doesn't seem to be one of those."

Harry smiled. "But we won't have to worry about that for a while."

Quinn grinned back. "No we won't."

Batak had been gone a week when Quinn, Harry, Jo, and Regina found themselves sitting in the *Paige's* theater for a private screening of the episode of *Star Trek* that starred the old *Mitchell Paige*. The hour-long episode told the story of the *Paige's* journey to rescue the *Bosworth* and chronicled the bittersweet aftermath. The episode was well-written with good acting and fast-paced action. When the final credits rolled, Quinn turned to his companions. "Well, that's what the production team did with the Starfleet logs. What do you think?"

Jo shrugged. "It's a good story, but then I wasn't there. Regina? Harry? You were the ones that went through the actual event. Your opinions?"

"Well, I recognized about a third of what actually happened. The rest sure didn't happen the way the show makes it out." Regina looked at Harry. "Harry, you didn't really say, 'Surrender is not an option.' did you? I wasn't with you the entire time, but it doesn't sound like you."

Harry shook his head emphatically. "I said a lot of things... quite a few of them unrepeatable in polite company. I know I didn't say *that*!" He glowered at Quinn who shrugged. "I'm an actor, Harry. I'm handed a character and a script. I become the person the production team calls for. Had I known you beforehand, I would have played you differently."

Regina and Jo rose to leave. Regina was due on the bridge shortly, and Jo

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had an engineering department briefing to attend. Quinn was left alone with Harry. "Harry, can you tell me something?" Harry nodded and Quinn continued, "What is it like to actually be a starship captain?"

Harry paused, obviously deep in thought. "It can be boring. We spend a lot of time just going from one place to another. It can be a joy when we deliver a badly needed cargo to its destination or haul a disabled ship out of harm's way. It can be a burden when things are in crisis mode. If I had to sum it up in one word it would be responsibility. No matter what happens on the ship, the captain is responsible. The final decision on course of action is always the captain's. Sometimes that decision costs lives." Quinn watched Harry's face closely. He could tell Harry knew the cost he spoke of personally. "I know more than a few captains that had to make such decisions once too often. It takes them years to come to terms with it... some never do."

"So how do you go about making such decisions?"

"You know the capabilities of your ship and crew, you weigh what you know about the situation, then you calculate what needs to be done to get the best outcome. Sometimes you have the luxury of time to get the input of others. Sometimes you have to make the decision immediately without any input. One way or the other you MUST make a decision. A lot of people try for the captaincy. Most don't make it because they can't make a decision in a crisis. They're so afraid of failing that they freeze. Those that do make captain have learned to accept the consequences of their decisions... good or bad."

"What do you do if your calculations indicate that there is not likely to be a good outcome no matter what?"

"You become an actor." Harry laughed. "No matter what you might feel, you put on a confident face. If the captain appears confident, the crew will be confident. You also keep the crew busy doing something... anything... constructive. In a bad situation, any feeling of control goes a long way. You keep the crew focused and working toward the desired outcome. I know of crews that have survived against incredible odds because they never gave up hope."

Harry looked at Quinn as if seeing him for the first time. "So maybe you can tell me what it's like to be an actor? My father is... was... an actor, but he wasn't very good."

"Fair enough." Quinn nodded. "An actor must become the character he plays. It's not enough to know what the character is like. In order to make the audience believe, you have to wear the character and make them part of yourself." Quinn paused for thought. "An actor must have an unshakeable sense of self to be able to become another. Two things happen to those who lack a strong sense of self. They are either mediocre actors who are unable to adequately portray their character, or they go mad." Quinn paused suddenly then continued in a strangely monotone voice. "I had a friend who went mad. He got one role that consumed him so utterly that he could not reconcile the new

personality with his own. On opening night, he gave the best... and last... performance of his life." Quinn looked at Harry with pained eyes. "It took him years of counseling to recover, but he was never the person he was before." He smiled wanly. "I guess acting can be as dangerous as being a starship captain."

Harry's memory flashed to his father. "I think I understand Dad a bit better now. He never did quite know who he was. I guess I should be grateful that he was simply mediocre." Harry smiled. "The last letter I had from him said he had started a youth theater and was coaching kids in stagecraft. He sounded happy."

"He'll probably do well, Harry. Many times, a mediocre actor can become a outstanding director. It sounds like he may have found his niche."

"I hope so." Harry rose to leave. "Time for me to hit the sack. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Harry." Quinn knew he had too much to think about to sleep anytime soon and headed for the lounge to indulge in some weighty pondering.

Days later, Harry was relaxing on the bridge. Rather, he was relishing in the *Paige's* oh-so-comfortable center seat. The first shift was going like clockwork, and it was a real joy to see and hear the new ship humming along just as she should. He looked back over his shoulder at their observer and gestured at the main viewscreen. "Great scenery, isn't it?" The *Paige* was currently in orbit around Starbase 230, and Quinn seemed dumbstruck at the sight of the station hanging in front of the curtain of stars. "It is truly a wondrous sight. Thank you for allowing me to share it with you."

"Anytime Quinn. I think..." Harry's comment was interrupted by a call from Lieutenant F'dar. "I'm picking up a distress call, Captain!"

"Put it on speaker."

"Aye, Sir. Comm channels are open." The bridge speaker came to life. "This is the *Royal Sovereign* requesting assistance."

"*Royal Sovereign*, this is the *U.S.S. Mitchell Paige*. What is the nature of your emergency?"

"We have lost power. Repairs are underway, but we may need a tow. Can you assist?"

"What are your coordinates, *Royal Sovereign*?"

"We are en route from Earth to Bolia. Current coordinates are -332.-141.7."

Harry looked at Quinn. "Well, you're about to see the *Paige* in action, Quinn." Quinn's answering grin spoke volumes. Harry smiled back. "We are on our way *Royal Sovereign*. ETA..."

Harry glanced inquiringly at the helmsman. "Course plotted, Sir. ETA is ten hours."

Harry nodded. "ETA is ten hours, *Royal Sovereign*. Paige out." Harry turned to his crew. "F'dar, advise Starfleet that we will be assisting the *Royal Sovereign*. Zaru, take us out of orbit and make for the *Sovereign*, best speed possible."

"Aye, Sir." The acknowledgments came as one, and the *Paige* headed for

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open space.

In a bit under ten hours, the *Paige* was in sight of the *Royal Sovereign*. The *Paige's* main viewscreen showed a graceful old liner apparently floating at ease. Harry sat back in his chair. “*Royal Sovereign*, this is the *U.S.S. Mitchell Paige*. We have you in sight. What is your current situation?”

The ship on the screen blinked out to be replaced with a view of the *Sovereign's* bridge with a dark haired woman in the center seat. Apparently, the *Paige's* bridge was also visible to the *Sovereign* because the woman smiled broadly. “Welcome, *Mitchell Paige*. I am Captain Haralambos. We currently have the situation almost under control, but it appears that our warp engines will not be back on line anytime soon. As we are three days out of port, we will definitely need a tow.”

Harry nodded at the screen. “Captain Roberts here. Do you need assistance? We can beam over some of our engineers if you think you can use them.”

“Not necessary, thank you. My engineers tell me that the warp engines will require service at a spacedock, but that the impulse engines should be repaired shortly. Can you stand by, Captain Roberts?”

“Certainly.” Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Quinn staring intently at the viewscreen. “Something wrong, Quinn?”

Quinn shook his head and stepped forward. “If I may, Harry?” At Harry's nod, he addressed the screen. “Captain Haralambos, it is good to see you again even if the circumstances are less than ideal.”

Captain Haralambos smiled fondly. “Quinn Deguerre! You are the last person I would have expected coming to our rescue.”

“The universe works in mysterious ways.”

“It does indeed.”

Quinn turned to Harry. “Harry, am I correct in assuming that things are under control and stable for the time being?”

“As far as I can see.” Harry turned to the screen. “Do you agree, Captain Haralambos?”

“Yes, we are certainly not in any kind of emergency mode.”

Quinn continued, “Then would anyone object to my beaming over to the *Sovereign* to catch up with an old friend?”

Harry shrugged. “Fine with me. You can beam back once we're ready to tow.”

Quinn raised an eyebrow at the screen. “Captain Haralambos, may I come aboard?”

“Of course! I'll meet you in the transporter room.”

Since the *Paige* was likely going to be on station for several hours, Harry decided to use the time to catch up on datawork. He was wading through a particularly complicated set of numbers when he was startled by the ready room intercom. When he looked back at the data he'd been studying a moment ago, he

realized that he'd lost his place and would have to start over. Harry sighed and keyed the intercom. "Harry here."

"Sorry to disturb you, Harry. I've got an urgent message from Starfleet."

"Put it through." A moment later, Harry heard a different voice. "Captain Roberts, this is Admiral Gosolv. We have an emergency situation on Science Station 942. They are currently orbiting a star by the name of Hypatia, and it has unexpectedly become unstable. They estimate that it will go nova in 36 hours. Radiation will be at lethal levels in 24 hours. You have 23 hours to get there and remove all personnel from the station. That will leave sufficient time to get to a safe distance from the star before it begins its nova sequence."

"We are currently in a rescue situation, Admiral. Are there no other ships available?"

"There are none that are close enough to assist in time."

Everything old is new again, Harry reflected. "Yes, Sir. This situation is stable for the moment. Let Station 942 know we're on our way and to be ready to evacuate immediately."

"Acknowledged, Captain. Gosolv out."

Harry keyed the intercom. "Comm, put me through to the *Royal Sovereign*."

Captain Haralambos was the first thing Quinn saw when he materialized on the *Royal Sovereign*. She was little changed from the last time he'd seen her, although her dark hair was now touched with grey at the temples, and her face was no longer that of a carefree young woman. She smiled warmly. "Mr. Deguerre, it's good to see you again!"

Quinn returned the smile as he stepped off the transporter platform. "I could say the same about you, Captain. It has been too long."

"Welcome to the *Royal Sovereign*. Why don't you come with me and we can catch up while I give you a tour of the ship."

"I would love to!" Quinn offered her his arm and they headed into the corridor. "So you're a captain now, Elena! How long have you been running this fine vessel?"

Elena's eyes twinkled. "Five years now, and I've loved every minute of it. The only thing I haven't loved is the company's upper management. They can be worse than Ferrengi when it comes to spending credits." She shrugged. "Oh well, I've learned to deal with them. I'm not going to inflict them on you. So, what would you like to see first?"

Quinn's eyes roamed the richly decorated corridor. Solid panels alternated with carved ones on the walls. Niches with beautiful sculptures were placed at regular intervals. "The decoration is the first thing that caught my eye... other than you, of course."

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“Flatterer! The sculptures tell a story if you look at them in order.”

Quinn touched the nearest statue. It had a smooth crystalline structure. “Marble?” Quinn took a good guess.

“No, it's zeolite. Not quite what one would expect, but the sculptor did an excellent job. There are a couple hundred of these placed all over the ship.”

“Lovely paneling as well, I see.” Quinn was looking at one of the carved panels with interest. The carving was very deep. In fact, it looked like it went all the way through the panel and there might be something in a space behind it. “Are these disguising something?”

Elena laughed. “Yes, the carved panels hide emergency supplies and the passive CO₂ scrubbers. Floral motifs mean scrubbers. Geometric motifs mean supplies. Solid panels with a single circular rosette are the entrances to service corridors.”

Quinn looked up and down the corridor. “How do you tell which service corridor goes where?”

“The crew knows from memory, but just inside each corridor is a status panel. You can get information on the major ship systems as well as information on where the corridor goes. It's quite ingenious... available to any crew that needs it but invisible to the passengers.” Elena urged Quinn on down the corridor. “Come, there's a lot more to see.” A moment later, the nearest comm panel beeped. Frowning, Elena answered, “Haralambos here.”

“Captain, this is Sandros. I have an urgent message from the *Mitchell Paige*.”

Elena glanced at Quinn who shrugged. “Put it through to the intercom, please.” She waited a moment, then keyed the corridor intercom. “Captain Haralambos here.”

“Captain, is your situation stable for the next 36 hours?” Quinn thought Harry's voice sounded a little weary but said nothing.

“Yes it is, Captain Roberts.”

“We need to leave you for a short time. We have a science station in need of immediate evacuation. It's a small crew so the actual evacuation shouldn't take long. We'll be back as soon as we have them all collected.”

“Very good, Captain.”

“Is Deguerre with you?”

“Yes, he is.” Elena motioned Quinn over to the intercom and stepped aside.

“Deguerre here.”

“Quinn, do you want to beam back aboard the *Paige* or stay on the *Sovereign*?”

Quinn smiled at Elena. “All is under control here, Harry, and the Captain and I have some catching up to do. If your mission is that urgent, I will just be under foot. I will be fine here.”

“Fair enough. Enjoy yourself. We'll be back as soon as we can. *Paige* out.”

Quinn smiled. “The *Paige* is a very efficient ship. I'm sure they'll be back

before we know it.” “Now,” he said turning back to Elena, “you said that there was quite a bit more of your ship to look at?”

Over the two hours, Elena and Quinn walked up and down corridors and peeked into magnificently decorated public spaces. Elena was understandably proud of her charge. Old the ship might be, but Quinn thought it was the most beautiful one he'd ever seen. In between the attractions Elena pointed out, the two talked about what had happened since they'd last met. The conversation had covered about the first two years when the intercom inserted itself once again. “Bridge to Captain Haralambos.” Elena keyed the nearest comm panel. “Haralambos here.”

“Captain, we are about ready to test the repairs.”

“Very good. I'm on my way.” She looked at Quinn. “Duty calls, Quinn. If you'll go down this corridor and take the second left, you'll come to the main dining room. There's a small lounge area to the right of the entrance. Make yourself comfortable, and I'll join you once we've finished testing.”

“Yes, Ma'am!” Quinn smiled and gave her his best salute. Elena shooed him off with a grin, and the two headed in opposite directions.

Quinn followed the directions he'd been given and found the promised lounge. The lounge was as opulently decorated as the dining room beyond with plush chairs, heavy drapery, and sculpture. A young steward greeted him as he sank into one of the chairs. “What can I get for you, Sir?”

It was a bit early for heavy drinking Quinn decided. “Sparkling white wine, if you please,”

“Right away, Sir.” The crewman disappeared into the back of the lounge to procure the requested beverage.

Quinn settled more comfortably into his chair to wait. A minute later, the ship shuddered violently and he was dumped out of, and under, the chair just in time to avoid being crushed as the contents of the lounge went flying. The upheaval was accompanied by a tremendous roaring and crashing noise. When the shuddering, roaring, and crashing finally ceased, Quinn found himself half buried in debris. The only light was the dim emergency lights, and the air was thick with dust. Quinn looked toward the dining room entrance. It was completely filled with debris. He called out to the crewman that had gone to get his drink. “Sir, are you all right?” There was no answer. Quinn tried his Starfleet comm badge. “This is Deguerre. Can anyone hear me?” Silence was his only answer.

Quinn picked his way through the wreckage of the lounge in the direction the young steward had taken. He found the man lying crumpled against a bulkhead. Quinn didn't have any medical training, but he could tell the man's neck was not at a natural angle. He checked for a pulse anyway. There was none. Quinn stood and swallowed the metallic taste in his mouth. Fear was a wonderful thing under the right circumstances, but Quinn recognized it as an enemy in the current situation. A bit deeper into the lounge was a comm panel.

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Quinn scrambled over debris to reach it and keyed it. "This is Deguerre. Can anyone hear me?" He listened to the silence and tried again. "Bridge, this is Deguerre. Do you read me?" Silence again. It was impossible to tell whether the intercom was out of order or there was no one to hear him.

The corridor outside was little better than the lounge. Not far from the entrance to the left was a closed bulkhead and no apparent means of opening it. Quinn reversed direction and went back past the lounge. The corridor that he had originally come down was blocked with rubble and debris. He realized with a start that if he and Elena had still been standing where they parted company, they would both be dead. Hopefully, Elena was safe on the bridge by now.

Quinn swallowed again and forced himself to think of his current predicament as an act in a play. Right about now, he should be turning to the next page of the script and reading his next line... only there was no line. The script was blank this time. There was nobody to tell him what to do or say. He was on his own.

Quinn's hope was correct. Elena was on the bridge and functional even if the bridge itself was in disarray. She had barely managed being dumped from the center seat by the shuddering ship and was now assisting those around her who hadn't been so lucky. Elena quickly glanced around the bridge as she struggled to get Lieutenant Sandros back into his seat. He had a bad cut above one eye. "All stations, report!" There was no response from the dazed crew. "ALL STATIONS, REPORT!" Elena's shouted command worked. The bridge crew began to function again as long-standing discipline asserted itself.

The answers began coming. "Helm out."

"Communications down."

"Power levels at minimum, Captain."

"Life support down." Elena didn't wait to hear more. She slapped the intercom. "Bridge to Engineering!" She didn't breathe for several seconds until she heard the answering voice. "Engineering. This is Kypros."

"Mr. Kypros, we are getting the message that Life Support is down. What is the situation on your end?"

"Affirmative. When we powered up that last time, there was a surge that blew several systems including Life Support. The oxygen generators are gone, we're attempting to get at least one working again."

Elena thought quickly. One oxygen generator, combined with the CO₂ scrubbers, was sufficient... barely... to support everyone on the ship for a few days. It wouldn't be pleasant, but they could survive long enough for the *Paige* to return. "Do it! The *Paige* is due back in 36 hours. Don't worry about the engines, just get as much of Life Support back up and running as you can."

"Aye! Engineering out."

Elena set the intercom to broadcast. “Attention all crew and passengers! This is Captain Haralambos. We have a serious situation at hand, but we are working to resolve it. Assistance is on its way. Please remain calm. All section heads, report to the bridge. That is all.” She cut the intercom and took a deep breath. It was time to take her own advice and remain calm.

Since the main corridor was blocked, Quinn returned the lounge to see what course of action was possible there. As he entered, he could hear voices from behind the debris in the entrance to the dining room. Listening closely, he could hear several voices clearly with more, less distinct voices, in the background. From the pitch and cadence of the voices, it seemed that both men and women were present. More importantly, Quinn could detect signs of panic in the voices. He called out, “Hello! Can you hear me?” The voices fell silent, then answered him all at once which resulted in an unintelligible babble.

“Please, don't all speak at once. I can't make out what you're saying. How are you faring?” A shrill female voice answered him. “Please, get us out of here!”

“Madame, please calm yourself. First, are any of you injured?”

“Some. There are two that are very bad off. A few are dead!”

“All right. Are any crew members present?”

“No, not alive. We can't get out. The doors are blocked.

“I'll see what I can do on this side to assist you. I know it is difficult, but try to stay calm. Panic is counterproductive. Do what you can for the injured until I can reach you.”

“We'll try. Thank you.” The woman's voice had lost the shrill brittle timbre. “Are you a crewman?”

Quinn paused. There were people alive on the other side of the rubble pile with no crew available to direct them. Without direction they were likely to slip back into panic mode... and that could kill them. It took him only an instant to make his decision. It was a role he'd played before. He cleared his throat. “Yes madame, I am. I'll join you as soon as I can find a way in.” It didn't take more than a cursory look at the mass of debris blocking the dining room to realize that he would never be able to shift it safely, and Quinn retreated to what was left of the lounge to take stock.

First step, how long would he have to hold down the fort? His chronometer was miraculously still working and told him that he had 34 hours to go until the *Paige* returned. The task was not impossible. Just keep the people calm long enough and real rescue would be at hand. A thought forced its way into his mind. What if the *Paige* met with misfortune along the way and didn't return? Quinn swallowed the sudden knot in his throat and chased the thought away. If the *Paige* never came back there was nothing he could do about it. He had a plan of action and needed to concentrate on that.

Second step, he would need to be suitably attired in order to sell himself as part of the *Sovereign's* crew. Quinn's eyes slid to the body of the dead steward. The man was wearing a jacket that he no longer had a use for. Quinn gently

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removed it from the corpse and read the name badge, "Elgrin." He addressed the body, "If you don't mind Mr.Elgrin, I need to borrow your jacket. I will do my best to make you proud of me." Quinn frowned. At least some of the people he was trying to reach would have met Steward Elgrin and would recognize that he was an imposter. Quinn ripped the name badge off the jacket. Who would question a ripped jacket and missing name badge under the circumstances? His face was recognizable to movie fans but in the dim light, and as begrimed as he now was with dust and dirt, such recognition was unlikely. People tended to see what they expected to see. They expected a crewman, not an actor. He donned the jacket. The fit was lousy, but he doubted anyone would notice.

Now to find a way into the dining room that wasn't blocked. Elena had mentioned service corridors. Quinn worked his way into the back areas of the lounge to see if he could locate one. Sure enough, there was a solid panel with a circular rosette in the center. Now, how does one go about opening the thing? He searched, in vain, for any sign of a latch. It couldn't be hidden too well, or the crew would never be able to open it. The only obvious thing on the panel was the rosette decoration. Could that be the opening mechanism? As Quinn poked and prodded the rosette, he felt the outer ring turn slightly. "Ah hah!" He grasped the ring firmly, turned it to the right, and waited. A minute later, he was still waiting. Was the panel jammed or did he need to do something else? He placed his hand back on the rosette, and the center depressed slightly. Quinn pushed firmly on the rosette center and was rewarded when the panel slid a few centimeters to the right revealing the corridor beyond. He placed his hands on the panel edge and heaved. The panel slid a bit further and stopped, but it was now wide enough for him to slide through the opening.

Quinn only had to go a few feet into the corridor to find the promised status panel. Even though the lights were dim, the panel seemed to be fully functional. Quinn examined it carefully. Oxygen and carbon dioxide levels were in the green. Power levels showed in the yellow which would explain the low lighting. There were other indicator bars for systems that he could not identify. Rather than waste time trying to decipher them, Quinn looked instead at the diagram of the ship and located his present position. From what he could see, every bulkhead door was flashing red, but the door linking his present corridor to the dining room was still green. Quinn headed quickly in the indicated direction.

Twelve hours after leaving the *Royal Sovereign*, the *Mitchell Paige* came within range of Science Station 942. From all appearances, everything seemed normal. If the star it was orbiting was in imminent danger of going nova, there was no outward sign. Harry signaled to Lieutenant F'dar. "Hail the station, Mr. F'dar."

"Aye, Sir" F'dar turned to his board and then nodded to Harry. "Comm

channel open, Sir.”

“Science Station 942, this is Captain Roberts of the *U.S.S. Mitchell Paige*. Are you ready to evacuate?”

A breathless voice answered. “Oh thank heaven! This is Sandra Grady. I'm team lead here. We're almost ready to go... just a few more things we need to pack.”

Harry frowned. “How much more?”

“Oh not too much. We've only got half the data and instruments to go.”

“Half the...? How long is this going to take you?”

“No more than twelve or thirteen more hours.”

Harry shook his head. “You don't have twelve or thirteen more hours to pack. You need to be out of there in eleven hours if we're going to be at a safe distance when this star starts to go. Leave the damn stuff! Instruments and data can be replaced. Your lives are more important.”

“You don't understand, Captain. The work we've done here is our lives. We can't leave it behind.”

Harry grimaced. “All right, I'll send a team over to help, but whatever isn't packed in ten hours stays. Paige out.” He shook his head and keyed the intercom. “Bridge to Commander Hammond.”

Regina's voice came back at once. “Hammond here.”

“Regina, assemble a team of ten. The station crew has more stuff to pack and they'll never finish in time on their own. Get over there and move what they've already packed to the transporter room. We'll start beaming that aboard immediately. People who aren't moving stuff can help them pack whatever else they want to take with them.”

“I'm on it, Harry.”

“Oh, one more thing. They have ten hours to pack. It will take an hour to finish beaming everything and everyone aboard the *Paige*. Anything not ready to go in ten hours... leave it.”

“Understood! Hammond out.”

Ten hours following the explosion aboard the *Royal Sovereign*, Quinn was working among the passengers trapped in the ship's dining room. When 'Steward Quinn' had stepped out of the service corridor, no one had questioned his identity. He had spent the last few hours moving amongst the passengers, reassuring them that help was on the way, and seeing to the comfort of the wounded. He had organized the 50 able-bodied passengers into teams of ten. He had found some first aid kits in the corridor. These he handed to one team and assigned them to assisting the wounded. The other four teams he assigned to clearing areas of the dining room as best they could so that the lanes they would use for evacuation would be safe to navigate. He circulated among the teams

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assisting as needed and dispensing frequent encouragement.

Quinn glanced around the room. So far, so good. Everyone was focused on their tasks with no sign of panic. He yawned. Stress could be very tiring. Quinn wondered if he could take a few minutes for a nap. His eyes slid to the nearest team. Two of them were yawning widely. The stress must be getting to all of them Quinn decided. More yawns sounded throughout the room. Odd, Quinn thought. Something in the air perhaps? The thought sent him racing for the service corridor. He made his way to the status panel again and checked the indicator bars. The oxygen indicator was lower, but still in the green. The CO₂ indicator was into the yellow. Quinn watched it closely for a minute. The indicator was moving very slowly toward the red. No doubt about it, the CO₂ levels were rising.

Back on the bridge, Elena poked her head out from under the comm station. “Anything yet, Mr. Sandros?”

Sandros ran his hands over the board once more, but there was no answer to his fingers. “Nothing, Captain. Try the next relay.”

Elena ducked back under the station. She and Sandros had tested and eliminated half the existing relays as unworkable. All they needed was one to be able to contact someone outside the *Sovereign*. It would be extremely low powered, but at least they could let someone know what was happening. At least a few of the internal communications systems were working.

“Engineering to Bridge!”

Elena marked the relay she was currently on and acknowledged the call. “Bridge, Haralambos here. What's happening Mr. Kypros?” She felt exhausted.

“We were able to get one of the oxygen generators working, but the CO₂ levels are rising.”

“What about the passive scrubbers? They should be able to handle the load.”

“Aye, Sir. They should, but I took a look at the ones I could readily reach. The chemicals in them are so old that they're calcified. Assuming all the scrubbers are the same, they're not scrubbing anything.”

Elena suppressed the urge to scream in rage. She knew the head office had found a more 'cost effective' maintenance company. Standard procedure was to replace the scrubber chemicals between outbound runs. Apparently, the new company saved money by cutting corners, and now she and 1,100 passengers and crew were going to pay the price. Elena forced herself to put her rage aside. “Mr. Kypros, do what you can to get as many bulkhead doors open as possible. Let's get the passengers to the life pods. There's no reason to launch them, but we can use them for survival until the *Paige* returns.”

“Aye, Sir. There's not enough power to open them, but I'll get a team out to

try to do it manually.”

“Good. Bridge out.” Elena yawned and turned to the helmsman. “Mr. Heran, set a CO₂ alarm for red level plus 10%. Then take the bridge crew and help get the bulkhead doors open. Get all the passengers you can to the life pods.”

“Aye, Sir. What about you?”

“Mr. Sandros and I will continue trying to get communications working again and a message out. We'll join you once we have that done or when the alarm sounds... whichever happens first.”

“Aye, Sir!”

Within a minute, Elena and Sandros were alone on the bridge. She looked at Sandros who nodded back. “Let's get back to work, Mr. Sandros.”

Five hours into the evacuation of Science Station 942, Harry beamed over to the station to check on progress. It seems they had moved an entire station full of containers to the *Paige* already. Why was the station still full of stuff? Harry wormed his way down narrow corridors and through cramped rooms. The old *Paige* had been crowded, but nothing like this. He reflected that despite an entire crew of 800 at his disposal only about a dozen were of any use due to the cramped quarters. Harry finally found Regina closing a full container in one of the labs while members of the station crew were packing two others. He pulled her aside. “How close are you to being done.”

“We'll make it... barely. There's only one problem.”

“What problem?”

“It's Grady. Apparently, the main scientific instrument is the station itself. I didn't understand half of what she was saying, but it appears that she built this fantastic instrument that they then built a science station around. They can't remove the device from the station. She wants us to move the station. She says she won't leave without it.”

“The entire station?” Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Regina nodded. “That's right... the entire station.”

Harry began calculating the mass of the station. Unless he was greatly underestimating the mass, the *Paige* should be able to move it. “OK, so we put the tractors on the station and haul it out of here. The really delicate stuff still has to be packed carefully, but it should be doable.”

“I already thought of that. It's doable except for one thing. Grady told me that the gravitational fluxes of the tractors would destroy the thing.”

“So we need to move the station without tractor beams? With what? Ropes and chains?”

“That's what I was told, Harry.”

Harry threw up his hands. “Keep working. I'll see if I can talk some sense

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into Doctor Grady.”

Fifteen hours after the explosion on the *Sovereign*, Quinn was still working his teams but had started rotating them in the name of making sure that everyone got some rest. He didn't dare tell anyone that it was an attempt to reduce the rate at which the CO₂ was rising. He'd checked the status panel several times since. The indicator bar was continuing its inexorable march toward the red. Like all liners, the ship would have life pods with their own life support systems. Perhaps he could get the passengers to them. Another check of the status panel showed that the idea was not an option. Many of the bulkheads were now green, but those in the area of the dining room were still flashing red.

Quinn returned to the dining room to see what options remained and tried to remember what Elena had told him about the ship. She had mentioned passive CO₂ scrubbers. Why weren't they working? Quinn looked around the dining room. The teams had made good progress in clearing what would become evacuation lanes. Sure enough, there were the panels with the floral carvings in them. Quinn checked the nearest one and was quickly able to push the panel aside revealing the filters that did the scrubbing. He had seen pictures of similar filters that had been used in the old stations when space exploration was still in its infancy. He pulled the first one out to see it packed with a rock-hard, black substance. In the pictures, the filters had always been light colored when new and very dark when used up. The filter in his hand didn't look capable of filtering anything.

Think Quinn! He yawned for the umpteenth time and forced his brain to evaluate what resources might still be available. The old space station crews had always had a ground crew that they could consult when problems cropped up. Quinn had only himself and 50 passengers. A ground crew would likely have advised him to replace the scrubber chemical and wait for rescue, but replace with what?

Quinn tried to remember what he'd read about such things. What had the crews of the space stations used in their scrubbers? He knew there had been several chemicals. Quinn closed his eyes and envisioned the page he'd read so long ago just as he would have envisioned a page of a past script. Calcium oxide was one chemical... so was activated carbon and zeolite. He checked the supply areas of the service corridor. No stockpiles of any such chemicals were in evidence.

Quinn returned to the dining room and sat heavily against the remains of one of the once beautiful sculptures. He looked around the room in a desperate hope that some inspiration would make itself known. None was forthcoming, so he watched his teams. Half were still working, and the other half were resting. He could feel his throat closing with emotion. He had failed them. These had

become his people the moment he had stepped into his present role, and he had let them down. By the time the *Paige* returned, they would be dead from CO₂ poisoning.

Quinn picked up a handful of sculpture debris and regarded it wistfully. The crystalline structure of the material glittered gently in the dim light, and the words of a long distant play rose to mind. "The sweet lady of death comes in a shroud of crimson and crystal." What sort of crystal, Quinn wondered idly. Would it be a shroud of the crystal he now held in his hand? His mind wandered back to Elena and their conversation about the ship's sculptures. Ah yes, the sculptor had done the fine work in zeolite. The thought thumped Quinn in the back of his head. They were made of zeolite!

Quinn lurched to his feet and roused the nearest resting team. "Team Three, I have an urgent assignment for you. The air scrubbers are malfunctioning, and we need to fix them."

The entire team was on their feet. "What do we need to do, Sir?"

"Gather as much of the statue debris as you can and break it into pea-sized chunks. Use the table linens to gather the chunks into bundles. We'll empty out the filters and pack the bundles into the frames. Tell teams one and four to assist you."

"Right away!" The team hurried off to follow the instructions.

Quinn gathered up teams two and five and set them to pulling and emptying every scrubber filter they could find. He was far from confident that the plan would work, but he would act as if it were a guaranteed success for their sake.

With two hours remaining in the evacuation of Science Station 942, Harry had made no progress in getting Doctor Grady to agree to leave without her beloved station. He supposed that he could always inject her with one of Doc Varta's sedative hyposprays and carry her off, but it would be far better if she would come voluntarily. "Doctor Grady, I assure you that your life is worth far more than any object in the universe. Please be reasonable." Harry was maintaining his pleasant expression with great difficulty.

Grady's arms were crossed. "You're not a scientist, Captain. You don't understand. This instrument is my life. I've worked on it for over 20 years. The data contained within it is irreplaceable."

Harry took a deep breath, and the woman took the opportunity to continue. "We've added volumes to the knowledge about solar particle emanation and waveforms, not to mention the other areas of solar study."

Harry's mind flashed to his college class in basic solar studies. He might not be a scientist, but he might be able to act like one long enough to convince her that he understood. He smiled his most disarming smile. "We have a bit of

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time. Please, tell me about the latest information you have. I was always under the impression that the waveform of solar particles was directly related to the zone of emanation.”

“That is what we had always thought. However, in observation of this particular star we have found that it is not always the case. The alpha and beta-negative particle waveforms comply with zone logic, but the others do not.”

Grady paused, apparently waiting for Harry to ask questions. Harry realized that the woman was rapidly getting far too afield for his level of expertise. Rather than ask a question that would betray just how little he knew, Harry nodded and motioned for her to continue. She did so. “The waveforms of the theta-prime particles are especially eccentric in their appearance and behavior. They almost seem to be anti-zone logic.”

Harry nodded again. “I can see why you're so fascinated with this star, Doctor Grady. I am very impressed.”

Grady suddenly relaxed. “I didn't know you were a solar scholar, Captain!”

Good, she was buying it. Harry remembered the solar class well. He'd passed, but it had been a struggle. “Captains come from many different backgrounds. Mine is in the sciences. I do understand what it's like to have the work and focus of your life ripped out from under you.” All too well, Harry reflected.

“Then you understand why I can't leave.”

“May I make a suggestion?”

“Of course.”

“We can rig the station with relays directly to the *Paige's* databanks. She is a new ship with state-of-the-art sensors. When the star novas, the station will transmit all the data it can gather up to the last to us, and you can sort through it at your leisure. There's never been this class of star that's gone nova while monitored, has there?”

“No.”

“Then this is the opportunity of a lifetime. You said that you've added volumes to the knowledge of solar study. You will be able to add volumes more with this one event.” Harry could see Grady's demeanor softening. “You still have the plans and knowledge of how to build the instrument. Another can be built... if not by you, then by others.”

“Well...”

Harry didn't let her finish. “The station is a loss. We can't save it. We can save you. You'll be able to analyze and disseminate the data you've gathered for years to come. Is it really a job you want to leave to others?”

Grady's eyes widened. “No, I don't. Now that you say it, I don't.” She nodded. “Let's rig those sensors, Captain. I can show you just where to hook them in.”

The station slowly emptied of the remaining objects and people as the final

two hours wore on. Harry had called in Jo to assist in rigging the promised sensor relays. The two of them, together with Doctor Grady, had made the last connection when Harry's comm badge beeped. He straightened his back as he keyed the badge. "Roberts here."

"This is Regina. Time to go, Harry."

"Right. Has the station been double checked?"

"Already done. We've confirmed that the rooms were empty and then sealed them behind us. The only room we haven't done is the sensor room and the transporter room. All station personnel have been evacuated except for Doctor Grady."

Harry nodded to himself. "Good job. Get the team back to the Paige. We'll take care of double checking the sensor room and transporter room on our way out."

"On our way. Hammond out."

Harry motioned to the women. "After you, Ladies. The curtain is going down."

Hours later, the *Mitchell Paige* watched from a safe distance in awe as the star named Hypatia gave up its life in a blaze of glory. The bright star shivered then shrank in on itself. Minutes passed, and the star was hidden in clouds of glowing multi-color gas that expanded outward in a beautiful, silent display. Harry keyed the intercom. "Are you getting the data, Doctor Grady?"

"The station is no longer transmitting. It's gone." Grady's voice sounded choked. "We got data right up to the point the shock wave hit."

"My condolences, Doctor. I know how much it meant to you."

"Thank you, Captain. I take comfort in the fact that it did not die in vain. I have a feeling it will take years to do through all the data we collected in the last day."

"I'm glad you'll have those years to do it. Bridge out." Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't have to play solar scholar any longer. "We're done here. Mr. Zaru, get us back to the Royal Sovereign, best possible speed."

"Aye, Sir." The stars in the viewscreen blurred as the *Paige* jumped to warp speed.

Safely ensconced in one of the Royal Sovereign's crowded life pods, Captain Haralambos checked the pod chronometer. The *Mitchell Paige* should be on her way back by now. Hopefully, they would pick up the emergency beacon on the way in and realize that the situation was not as they had left it. "Mr. Kypros, what is the final tally? Is everyone safe?"

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“The last head count was 757.”

“That leaves 347 unaccounted for. How many dead?”

“Unknown, Sir. We counted several bodies in each area we were able to open. However, there were three areas we couldn't reach. The main dining room was cut off as was the port-side promenade and observation lounge. There is a chance that anyone alive in the promenade and lounge could make it to nearby life pods. If they did, I hope they realized we're in the middle of nowhere and didn't launch them.

“Hopefully, there is some of the crew with them to guide them. What about the dining room?”

“If anyone is still alive in there, they won't be for long. That area is completely cut off.”

“I see.” Elena turned away to compose herself. The owners of the *Royal Sovereign* had always been 'frugal.' This time, their frugality had turned criminal. If she survived this ordeal, she would see that the *Royal Sovereign's* owners answered for their wanton negligence. She owed it to her lost crew, passengers, and Quinn.

Twelve hours after leaving Hypatia, the Mitchell Paige was back within range of the *Royal Sovereign*. “Harry, I'm getting an emergency beacon from the *Sovereign*! Very low powered.”

Harry stared hard at the vessel in the viewscreen. “Something's wrong. Helm, take us closer and circle around her slowly. I want a better look.”

“Aye, Sir.”

The *Sovereign's* image began to grow larger. There were few lights on her and, as the port side came into view, Harry could see a blackened, distorted area. “F'dar, any word from the *Sovereign*?”

“No, Sir. I've been trying to hail her. No answer except for the beacon.”

“Kendric, scan the interior. Find out if there are any life forms in there and their location. Zaru, scan the area for evidence of other ships. If this is the result of an attack, the attacker may still be hanging around.”

Long minutes passed as scanners and sensors hummed busily and displayed the results to their watchers. Zaru shook his head. “No other ships in the area, Sir. I doubt that she was attacked.”

“Good. That's one less thing to worry about. Any surviving life forms?”

Kendric's fingers moved over her board. “I'm reading about 800 lifeforms aboard. Here are their locations.” Little blips superimposed themselves over the *Sovereign* on the viewscreen.”

“What is the atmosphere like in there?”

“One moment.” More long minutes passed with more humming. “In the areas of lifeform clusters along the perimeter atmosphere is normal. In the rest of the ship... oxygen levels are low but survivable. Carbon dioxide levels lethal... except for the area of this lifeform cluster.” The one interior cluster blinked briefly. “CO₂ levels are elevated but survivable in that area.”

“That's where we'll start.” Harry turned to the comm station. “Any answer yet?”

F'dar was smiling. “Sir! I've located Mr. Deguerre's comm badge! It's in that interior area.”

Harry smiled. “First good news we've had this morning. Let's see if his comm badge is attached to a living person.” He keyed his own comm badge. “Roberts to Deguerre. Do you read me?”

Harry held his breath. His reward came a moment later with Quinn's distinctive voice. “This is Quinn. I'm glad you were able to make it back.”

“What's the situation there, Quinn?”

“I've got 58 passengers trapped in the main dining room. We have several wounded. We're all out of breath, but we're still among the living. I don't know about anyone else.”

“Stand by, Quinn. We're going to evacuate your area first. Get everyone around you in a tight group. We'll lock on to your comm badge and do a mass transport with the cargo transporter.”

“Acknowledged. I'll signal when we're ready.”

“Agreed.” Harry turned to the comm station. “Notify the cargo transporter crew to be ready to beam over 58 persons on my signal, and tell Doc to get down there with some of his staff.”

“Aye, Sir.”

A few minutes later came the signal Harry was waiting for. “*Mitchell Paige*, this is Quinn. We are ready to beam over.”

Harry was waiting in the cargo room. He nodded to the transporter chief. “Energize.” The transporter pad sparkled and then resolved into a group of people clutching each other. Once materialization was complete, the group began to break apart. Several people were gently handed over to Doc and the medical team who whisked them off to sick bay. A few people just sat on the transporter pad and cried while others offered comfort.

Harry spotted Quinn's head moving through the crowd. Quinn was ushering people off the pad with a smile here and a touch on the shoulder there. One man stopped and grasped Quinn's hand like a lifeline. “Steward Quinn! I don't know how to thank you.” He glanced at his departing fellow passengers. “My wife and I will never forget what you've done.”

Quinn smiled warmly. “You are most welcome, but most of the work was done by you and the other passengers.”

“Yes, but you showed us the way. Thank you.” The man put his arm around the woman next to him and guided her out into the corridor.

Harry looked Quinn up and down critically. “*Steward Quinn?*”

“It's a very long story, Harry. I'll tell you about it later.”

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Several hours later, all 994 Sovereign survivors were safely on board the *Paige*, and the ship was bound for Starbase 230 at top speed. Harry turned the bridge over to Regina and made his way to Quinn's quarters. His knock on the door got a quick response. "Come in." Quinn was sitting on the bed and slipping on a shoe. He looked up at his guest. "Ah, Harry. I'll be with you in a moment."

Harry made himself comfortable in a chair. "No rush. You look a lot better than the last time I saw you."

Quinn smiled in answer. "A shower, a bit of rest, a fresh set of clothes, and some fresh air go a long way in improving anyone's appearance." He slipped on his second shoe. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"You can tell me what happened and why people were addressing you as steward Quinn."

"Very well. Elena will be far more informative on what happened to cause the emergency, but from my perspective..." Quinn slipped into storytelling mode, and Harry found himself caught up in the moment. Harry would reflect later that the man was a superb narrator. The tale was told in a matter-of-fact manner that managed to keep Harry riveted for the better part of an hour. Quinn finally shrugged. "I didn't save those people in the dining room, Harry. They saved themselves. All I did was give them a bit of direction and encouragement."

"You did exactly what needed to be done, Quinn. Given the circumstances, I don't think I or my crew could have done any better."

"That's high praise, Harry, but don't forget to give equal credit to my most excellent advisor."

"Advisor?"

"Yes, my advisor. Do you remember the evening we discussed what it was like to do our respective jobs?"

"I do."

"So did I. It was your advice to stay confident and keep everyone busy I was following. What can I say... it worked."

Harry stretched in his seat. "Then we both learned something that evening."

"Indeed?"

"You told me what it was like to be an actor. I never figured on having to use the information on a rescue mission."

"So tell me your story, Harry. What happened with the science station?"

"Fair enough." Harry proceeded to relate an account of the *Paige's* evacuation mission while Quinn listened raptly. "...and that's when we located your comm badge. You know the rest." Harry glanced sidelong at Quinn. "Doctor Grady wants me to visit her sometime when I have time to go over the data we collected. I'll have to politely decline the invitation. I'd be lost in the

first five minutes with her.”

Quinn applauded. “Bravo! My compliments to you. It's a difficult task to convincingly play an expert to an expert. Well done, Sir!”

A week later, the entire bridge crew of the *U.S.S. Mitchell Paige* was being fussed at by Commander Batak for the final time. “Remember, we want this to look as genuine as possible. Just do your jobs, but try to do them as artistically as possible.” He turned to Quinn who was standing behind the center seat. “Action!”

Quinn smiled at the recorder. “We've shown you just a glimpse into the world of Starfleet. I hope that you have learned as much as I have.”

Batak then signaled silently to Harry as the recorder shifted its focus to the center seat. “Starfleet is a job like no other. When you serve in Starfleet, you will find new challenges around every corner, and you will be tested to your limits. It's a demanding and sometimes dangerous life, but you will find rewards... personal rewards... that you can find nowhere else. If this is the kind of life you think you would like, contact your local Starfleet recruiting office to discuss it.”

Batak shouted, “Cut! Excellent work, everyone. Thank you for your efforts.” He nodded to Harry and Quinn. “Captain. Mr. Deguerre. Thank you. I'll get the recording to the editors right away.” He gathered up his production crew and hustled from the bridge. Harry gave a great sigh of relief. “Finally! Now I can have my bridge back.”

Quinn proffered his hand. “I must take my leave as well, Harry. I have a new assignment in a few days. Thank you for the adventure.”

Harry shook the hand. “What's the name of your next movie, Quinn? I may just be able to see it this time.”

“Starfleet Academy.” Quinn was smiling.

“Another episode of Star Trek?”

“No, Harry. I've decided to earn the uniform you lent me. I will be attending Starfleet Academy as a cadet. If I pass, perhaps we will end up serving together somewhere in the future.”

“I think you'll do well, Quinn. Good luck to you.”

“And to you, Captain.” Harry heard Quinn's voice, fading, as the bridge doors closed behind him. “Small to greater matters must give way.”