

Captain Peter Koester looked around in confusion. The bridge was empty. While all the consoles were brightly lit, several indications on each one blinking in its normal fashion as the standard background noise filled the space, not a single other member of the crew, aside from himself sitting in the center seat, was present.

“Bridge to K’danz,” Koester said after pressing the intercom on the arm of his command chair. He waited several seconds before adding, “Carrie, are you hearing me?” After receiving no answer for several seconds, the captain touched the intercom button again and said, “Bridge to Chief Kyman. Are you there, COB?” Still no response. Frustrated, Koester stabbed at the button once again as he said, “Koester to Phillip Winters. Please respond.” Again, silence. The same result followed when he tried contacting main engineering and the sickbay.

“This is ridiculous,” Koester mumbled to himself. “Where the hell is everyone?” He started to get up out of his command chair to go looking for anyone that might be able to explain what was happening when he heard the sound of one of the turbolifts swish open. Turning to look at who it was entering the bridge, all Koester saw in the brief instant was a flash of red and grey and black before he was enveloped in a tight hug that almost knocked him to the floor. As he recovered his wits and looked down to see what was embracing him, he was shocked to recognize Cassie, a woman who was actually several hundred years old but looked like a young woman in her mid-twenties, once the lone resident of the dream world of Laxia, a planet that had suffered grave environmental damage before Koester had rescued her.

“Okay, I get it,” Koester said with a smile, returning the woman’s hug. “This is a dream. What are you doing in my head again, Cassie?”

Cassie looked up at Koester, her black curly hair framing her smiling, cherubic face as she said, “I wanted to let you know I’m coming for a visit.”

“You can’t send a communiqué by subspace like everyone else?” the captain asked as he extricated himself from Cassie’s grasp and then held her an arms length away to look at her *Starfleet Academy* cadet’s uniform, upon the collar of which she wore the three elongated pips of a second-class midshipman.

“I’m on summer break, and I’ve missed you,” Cassie said, her smile only slightly fading. “I haven’t seen you in so long. And it’s not like I show up in your dreams all the time.”

“When do you arrive?” Koester asked, gesturing for Cassie to take a seat in the chair where Counselor Gera normally sat to the left of the captain’s chair and explain further.

“The day after tomorrow,” Cassie said, her beaming smile returning again.

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Dauntless*!

Star Trek: Dauntless

“Electronic Dreams, Technological Nightmares” By PJK

Based on a character created by Sarah Lucia

Captain’s log, stardate 61505.9:

The Dauntless has dropped out of warp in order to rendezvous with a Starfleet runabout transporting several new members of our crew and one passenger; an old, close friend of mine.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

The runabout *Mystic* dropped out of warp not far from where the Sovereign-class starship *Dauntless* sat dead in space. As it approached the starship, lining up almost directly between the huge warp nacelles, each glowing a brilliant electric blue, the door of the main shuttlebay rolled upward and the runabout flew in through the atmosphere retaining field, which buzzed with energy as the small vessel passed through it.

Several minutes later, the newly arrived crew members disembarked, and Commander K’danz, the starship’s first officer, and Chief Pono Kyman, the Command Master Chief or Chief of the Boat as he preferred to be called, greeted each one and informed them where and to whom they were to report.

Off to one side of the shuttlebay stood Captain Koester, waiting for the final passenger to disembark the runabout. He smiled as he saw Cassie step out of the door and onto the deck, looking exactly as she had in the captain's dream, glancing around almost nervously until she spotted the captain. Dropping her dufflebag on the deck, she ran over and jumped up into Koester's arms, also exactly as she had in the captain's dream. For a moment, it seemed to the captain like she was also going to lean up and kiss him, and was thankful when the moment quickly passed, especially when he noticed Kyman's look of amusement and K'danz's look of disapproval.

"You have no idea how much I've missed you," Cassie said as the captain walked over and picked up the cadet's duffle bag and started walking with her out of the shuttlebay and toward the starship's guest quarters. "Do you realize since I've been back in the real world, you are the only one I've been able to link with?"

"What do you mean?" Koester asked.

"The way I used to visit the dreams and guide anyone who visited Laxia," Cassie explained. "I can't do that anymore. Except, sometimes, with you. I think, with everything that happened between us, during your first visit to my world and then later when you rescued me, that a bond of some sort has formed between us."

"Wouldn't be the first time," the captain remarked, mostly to himself, as Cassie continued talking.

"I don't think you could ever understand how lonely I've been."

"How can you be lonely?" Koester asked. "You've been living on Earth for the past two years. You have an entire populated planet to make friends with. Just your fellow cadets alone would be enough, I would think?"

"I have made quite a few friends, but it's not the same," Cassie said in a near-whine, sounding almost like the little girl she projected into the dreams of people who had fallen under Laxia's spell before its doom. "In dreams I could go almost anywhere imaginable. Now I spend most of my time at *Starfleet Academy*, attending classes, doing homework, studying. This trip is my first time out of San Francisco since I arrived on Earth two years ago."

"You need to go sightseeing more," the captain remarked.

The two quickly arrived at the guest quarters Cassie would use during her visit, where the cadet dropped her duffle off on the bed before following the captain to the main crew lounge on deck eleven. There, at one of Koester's favorite tables, the two ordered drinks and started catching up on the two years since they had last seen one another.

"So, besides being lonely on a campus full of cadets, how are you doing at the Academy?" the captain asked his visitor as one of the waiters brought them their drinks.

"I'm doing really well, all things considered," Cassie replied before taking a sip from her drink.

"What do they call you there?" Koester asked. "Cadet Cassie doesn't sound too official." This caused the visiting woman to blush slightly.

"I have to admit something to you, though I don't know how you'll react," she replied. "When the admitting office asked me for a last name, I didn't have one to tell them, so I gave them yours. I'm officially Cadet Cassie Koester. Try saying that five times fast. Anyway, I hope you don't mind. You're the closest thing I have to family."

The captain tried to look stern for a moment, but could only hold it for several seconds before breaking out in a smile and soft chuckle. When Cassie looked at him with puzzlement, he said, "The Academy contacted me, as your sponsor, to find out if we were actually related. I've known what name you chose since you first entered the Academy, and no, I don't mind. In fact, I was touched." Koester then filled his visitor in on his own recent news, including his marriage to another Starfleet officer and their honeymoon cruise on Pacifica. As the conversation progressed, Cassie made an emotional admission.

"I miss Laxia," the cadet admitted. "I miss being able to inhabit other people's dreams, guide them to be able to do anything they can imagine, visiting worlds wilder than those even you have visited. Worlds of pure imagination."

"Have you ever had the chance to use a holodeck?" Koester asked.

"You mean a holographic environmental simulator?" Cassie asked with a shrug. "We use them on rare occasions for bridge simulations and stellar cartography classes, but that's it."

Koester held up one finger, telling Cassie to wait for a moment, as he tapped his combadge.

"Captain Koester to Gem Koester."

"Go ahead, Dad," came the reply a moment later.

"Could you meet me in 10-Forward. I need a favor from you."

"Be right there," the captain's daughter replied. Several minutes later, the carved wood doors of the lounge parted and admitted the teenage girl.

"Gem, you remember Cassie, don't you?" Koester said.

"Yeah. You rescued her from that planet that was being hit by a bunch of huge asteroids," Gem replied as she shook Cassie's hand and then looked over her Academy cadet uniform. "You're in the Academy now?"

“Yes I am. Just about to start my third year,” Cassie replied before Gem looked back at her father.

“What did you want me for?” she asked.

“Cassie has never had the opportunity to really use a holodeck,” the captain said. “Why don’t you take her down to holodeck one and show her your favorite program?”

“Really?” Gem asked with a surprised smile. “For how long?”

“A couple of hours would be okay.”

Gem was almost hopping with excitement as she grabbed Cassie’s hand and almost literally dragged her out of the lounge, heading toward the nearest holodeck.

* * * *

I’m so hungry! Been too long.

The intelligence slowly moved through deep space, far from any star or planet. It was barely conscious, only one thought on its mind.

So hungry! Too long.

It could not go on any further. The distance from any source of food was too great. It appeared it would starve to death in the frigid cold of space.

Hungry!

* * * *

“Computer, load program K-11-Alpha, level one,” Gem Koester told the computer interface outside the door to holodeck one. She glanced at Cassie, who in spite of herself had a look of anticipation and excitement on her face, as the computer announced the program was loaded and the doors slowly slid open. Gem lead Cassie into the holodeck, which looked like a swamp with old broken jungle gyms in the middle of a small clearing.

“What is this program?” Cassie asked as she noticed what looked like various weapons sitting next to one of the broken pipe structures.

“My favorite,” Gem replied, picking up a sword and taking a position in front of Cassie. “Klingon calisthenics. A program I got from my Uncle Kargoth.” She then nodded toward one of the other nearby weapons and added, “You might want to grab one of those while you can.”

“While I can?” Cassie said as she grabbed hold of a sharp sword-like weapon with a spiked ball on the end of it just as the background noise was split by a piercing scream. Wide-eyed, Cassie spun around to see a strange creature she had never seen before, not even in anyone’s wildest dream, rush out of the brush and run at both Gem and herself. She instinctively raised her weapon to ward off the creature’s attack as Gem parried with her own sword, plunging it into the gut of the creature, which made a surprised sounding gurgle before it faded from view.

“What in the universe was that?!?” Cassie demanded to know. “What kind of program is this?!?”

“Like I said,” replied Gem. “Klingon calisthenics. Keeps you on your toes.”

“Unless they get cut off!” Cassie protested. “Your father lets you run this program? You’re going to get killed, and wind up taking me with you!”

Without warning, Gem suddenly swung her sword at Cassie’s torso, causing the visiting cadet to scream as she started to flinch. However, before she could get out of the way, the blade disappeared, leaving nothing but a hilt in Gem’s hand as she completed the swing. The teenage girl looked at Cassie with a wicked smile as she said, “Safety protocols prevent us from getting injured or injuring ourselves.”

“Cool!” Cassie remarked, glancing at her own weapon before looking back at Gem. “Can we do it again, now that I know what is going on?”

Gem smiled again as she said, “Computer. Level two.”

* * * *

Hunger!

The intelligence was quickly fading. It would not be much longer before what little life-force was left was snuffed out by the absolute cold of space.

And then it felt it.

Tendrils of consciousness reached out like an octopus tentacle, and one of them found what it sought. A new chance at life. A new source of food.

Hunger!

Like a starving man unexpectedly coming across a picnic basket sitting in the wilderness, the intelligence quickly moved toward the new source of food it identified. The starship *Dauntless*.

* * * *

“That was fun,” Cassie admitted as she and Gem took a break from the calisthenics program. The two had made it up to level three before deciding to take a break. Covered with sweat, the pair had ordered some drinks, which had materialized on a nearby rock, before sitting back against a tree to drink and talk.

* * * *

The intelligence entered the starship through a small vent near the impulse exhaust and quickly moved through the ship’s circuitry. It moved throughout the ship, looking for the best source of food. In a matter of seconds it found a potential smorgasbord. All it would take was the right conditions.

* * * *

“Another fruit juice?” Gem asked as both she and Cassie stood up, brushing off their clothes.

“Not now. I’m fine, thanks. What other sorts of programs do you have?”

Gem smiled as she said, “Computer, load program Gem Koester-beta one.” A moment later the scenery faded from the early morning swamp setting to dark night in a thick forest outside a medieval Earth castle. Somewhere in the distance, wolves howling could be heard.

“What’s this?” Cassie asked, eyes wide with wonder.

“Castle Dracula,” Gem said, stepping toward the huge wooden front doors. “Care to explore?”

Before Cassie could reply, a piercing scream filled the air once again. Both girls turned to see the skull-faced alien creature they had defeated in level two of the calisthenics program coming running toward them, a nasty looking spiked gauntlet on one arm, a broadsword in the other.

“What the...?” Gem said just as the creature swung the sword down at her head, barely missing, before it stuck in the wood of the drawbridge the two girls were standing on. The creature snarled. “What is going... Oh no!” Gem said with a stammer as she noticed the slice in the sleeve of her blouse and blood welling from a cut on her arm.

“I thought you said the safety protocols prevented you from getting hurt in here,” Cassie said, also noticing Gem’s injury.

“They’re supposed to,” Gem said unsurely as the skull-faced creature suddenly pulled its weapon free of the drawbridge and, with a blood-curdling scream, lunged at the pair of girls.

“Run!” Cassie yelled.

* * * *

In the port warp nacelle, Lieutenant Spot, the non-corporeal Damonian science officer aboard the *Dauntless*, was bathing his ‘daughter’ Dot - who was born aboard the starship just a few months before - in the engine’s plasma stream, when suddenly both of them sensed a presence aboard the ship.

“What is that, Daddy?” Dot asked, squirming slightly against the plasma flow as she felt the new consciousness.

“I’m not sure,” Spot replied before adding, “Wait here.” Less than a second later, Spot was on the bridge, appearing like a small circle of red light on the deck in front of the command chair. “Excuse me, Commander Wallace, but have we encountered another race similar to my own?”

Commander Alasdair Wallace reacted with surprise, not expecting Spot’s slightly mechanical-sounding voice, before looking down at the circle of light at his feet and replying, “We’re on course toward Sector 515, Leftenant. Haven’t encountered anyone or anything since the *Mystic* dropped off her passengers and then headed back to *Starbase 82*. Why d’you ask?”

“It’s hard to explain, Commander. Just... a feeling,” Spot replied.

* * * *

Down in the commanding officer's quarters, Captain Peter Koester sat at his desk, going over the schedule for upcoming missions while talking with his first officer, Commander K'danz, and her husband, Chief Engineer Dar, both of whom sat on the couch near the cabin's windows and sipping from glasses of synthale. Their conversation was interrupted by the frantic call of the captain's daughter.

"Daddy! Help! We're stuck in holodeck one!"

Koester exchanged a look of concern with Dar before touching the intercom button on his desk and saying, "What's wrong, Sweetie?"

Gem sounded out of breath, as if she were running as she spoke.

"Cassie and I are trapped in the holodeck. The doors won't open and we can't access the arch. The program has gone crazy. I think the safety protocols are turned off."

That got everyone's attention. Koester looked at Dar again and said, "Get down there. See if you can shut down the holodeck from the control panel. I'll call the bridge and see if they can cut power from up there." As Dar nodded and quickly left the cabin, Koester then said, "Bridge, this is the captain. Shut down power to holodeck one."

On the bridge, the captain's call interrupted Spot's description of the feeling he and Dot had experienced.

"Hold on a second, Lieutenant," Wallace said, turning to face Lt Commander Amanda Windsor at the engineering console. "Windsor, cut power to holodeck one."

Windsor entered the necessary commands into her console, but was both surprised and frustrated when she did not obtain the desired results.

"I cannot shut down the power to holodeck one, Commander."

"Then shut them all down," Wallace ordered. Again, Windsor frowned as nothing happened.

"No joy, Commander."

"Cap'n, we're having a wee problem shutting down the holodeck," Wallace reported. "Request permission to shut down all power on deck eight."

In the captain's cabin, K'danz had joined Koester at his desk, where they were both looking at a status display on his computer monitor. A small red blob pulsed on the diagram of the starship where the holodecks were located on deck eight.

"Do it," Koester ordered.

Back on the bridge, Wallace nodded in the direction of Amanda Windsor and said, "You heard the Cap'n." Windsor nodded as well, then pressed the control to shut down all power on deck eight.

* * * *

On deck eight, Lt Commander Dar and Lieutenant John Smith were just nearing the doors to holodeck one when all the lights suddenly went dark.

"The captain must be having trouble shutting down the holodeck," Dar remarked as he and the junior engineer groped around in the dark before Smith found what they were looking for, an emergency locker close to the corridor intersection where several palm beacons were stored. Passing one to the chief engineer before turning one on himself, Smith then joined Dar in front of the bright red holodeck door.

"This is strange," Dar remarked as he scanned the circuits behind the control panel with a tricorder. "The entire deck is dark, but I'm still reading power in the holodeck!"

"How is that possible?" Smith asked.

"It shouldn't be," the half-Klingon chief engineer replied.

* * * *

The turbolift doors swished open and both Captain Koester and Commander K'danz rushed out, heading toward the engineering console where both Wallace and Windsor were monitoring the status of the events on deck eight.

"Status?" Koester asked as he joined the two other officers near the console.

"All power has been shut down on deck eight," Wallace reported. "All non-essential personnel are being evacuated, which when you consider the number of crew cabins on that deck, was quite a feat."

"Commander Wallace, Commander Dar is on the intercom with a status report," Windsor stated. Wallace leaned toward the console and pressed the intercom control.

"Go ahead, Dar."

“Commander, are you running some sort of special program to keep the holodeck powered up while the rest of the deck is down?” Dar asked.

“Negative. All power to deck eight has been shut down.”

“What’s going on down there, Dar?” Koester asked.

“According to readings, the holodeck is still active, Captain,” Dar reported. “We can’t get the door open yet, but Smith and I will continue to try.”

Down on deck eight, Smith was continuing his attempt to detect where the holodeck was receiving its power from and why they could not get access through the door. He switched the scan mode, puzzled at the readings he was receiving.

“Captain, how many people did you say were trapped in the holodeck?” he asked.

“Two,” Koester replied. “My daughter Gem and a visiting friend.”

“Then why am I registering three life-form readings inside?” Smith asked as he showed Dar the indication on his tricorder.

“It’s true, sir. There are three life-forms in there,” Dar confirmed.

* * * *

Gem and Cassie crouched in fear in the dungeon of the holographic castle. They were being stalked by the skull-faced creature who growled menacingly from time to time, making known how much closer it was moving to the two girls. Both had been disarmed by the creature when they first tried to defend themselves, resulting in the creature breaking Gem’s leg with its gauntlet before they managed to limp away and hide. Now it appeared the creature had found them once again.

“Gem Koester to Captain Koester! We need help!” Gem cried, tears streaming down her face from the pain in her leg.

“We’re doing the best we can, Sweetie. Hold in there!” her father replied. Suddenly, the skull-faced creature dropped down directly in front of the two girls from somewhere above, howling a roar that would have froze the blood of the most battle-hardened Klingon. Both girls screamed at the top of their lungs as the creature raised its sword above its head, the screams audible through the open communications link.

“Gem! What’s happening? Gem?!?” Captain Koester yelled just as one of the screams was suddenly cut off by a sickening ripping sound.

On the bridge, K’danz looked at her captain with an expression of horror while Koester’s face became a mask of desperation, as the only sound that could be heard through the open com channel was Cassie’s hushed voice mumbling, “Oh my gods oh my gods oh my gods oh my gods...”

“Cassie? Cassie, what’s happening?” Koester asked.

“Gem...,” Cassie started to say before breaking down in a sob. “Gem... is dead.”

* * * *

On the bridge, it was dead silent except for the occasional bleeps of the console interfaces. Every eye was on the captain and what his reaction would be. It appeared for a moment like a tear was forming in his eye before he turned around and calmly walked over to the tactical console where Marine Captain April Mendez stood.

“Captain, I want a squad of Marines to meet me at the entrance to holodeck one in two minutes, fully armed and armored.” He then looked back at his first officer as he added, “One way or another, I’m going to get in there. If I have to tear the entire holodeck and half the deck apart, I will get in there.”

“Captain, if I may?” interrupted a British-accented voice from the captain’s combadge. Koester looked down toward his feet, where Lieutenant Spot could be seen brightly against the blue carpet. “I have been working with Commander Dar and Ensign Faggio on a way for me to participate in holodeck programs with a simulated physicality. It could come in handy in this situation, especially since I can enter the holodeck without using the door.”

“I’ll give you fifteen minutes, Lieutenant. After that, I’ll blast the doors off the hinges if I have to,” Koester said.

“Very good, sir,” Spot replied. “I’ll keep you updated.” And in a heartbeat, Spot was gone.

* * * *

So good. This meal is so good.

The entity knew it was best not to devour too much at once. Feasting too quick would make it ill. These two beings would do well enough to raise the entity's strength if it could keep them isolated from the rest of the beings trying to access the space. Soon enough, the entity would be strong enough again and then it could easily feast on the others. It was only a matter of time.

* * * *

Cassie was surprised when the skull-faced creature faded from view just after it had embedded its sword in Gem's body. Soon, even the sword faded too, leaving a large, open gash in Gem's chest which oozed blood in spite of the lack of any heartbeat. Tears pouring down her plump cheeks, she grabbed Gem's body and dragged it to where she hoped she would be safe, somehow sensing the inevitable return of the creature that had killed Gem or something perhaps even worse. Hidden in a dark opening below a flight of stone stairs, Cassie was about to press on her own combadge to call for help once again when a sudden intake of breath almost caused her to scream. Cassie jumped back as Gem suddenly sat up, feeling herself all over for any sign of injury. And while the torn cloth of her blouse, still soaked with blood, attested to her recent attack, all evidence of injury was gone.

"What...? What happened?" Gem asked with a gasp.

"I... I don't know," Cassie whispered in amazement as another growl could be heard from somewhere above.

* * * *

A familiar figure formed in the center of the dark, stone hallway of the holographic castle. The bald-headed man lifted up his arms to look at his hands and smiled.

"It worked," Spot said, impressed in spite of himself. His new voice, much deeper and with what might be called an North American accent, surprised him, having gotten used to his British accent ever since his admission to the Academy almost fifteen years earlier.

Pulling a tricorder out of the holster on his brand new hip, he started scanning the holographic environment for Cadet Cassie, surprised when the device registered two strong life-form readings and one intermittent one.

"Maybe Gem is still alive?" Spot remarked, rushing toward where the life-form readings were located. "Good thing I look like a doctor now," he added with a sarcastic smirk.

Almost a minute later, Spot was slowly proceeding down a large set of stone steps when he heard whispering from below them. Cautiously leaning over the edge, he called down, "Cadet Cassie?"

Slowly, a smudged and tear-stained face framed by locks of black curly hair emerged from under the stairs and looked up at Spot, a look of relief flooding Cassie's face when she saw it was a man wearing a Starfleet uniform coming down the stairs and not a horrible monster. Spot was even more surprised when not only Cassie emerged from under the stairs, but Gem Koester as well. Gem's expression was also one of surprise when she saw who was standing above them on the stairs.

"Doctor?" Gem asked. "When did they get you working again? And why are you wearing that old uniform?"

Spot looked down and noticed for the first time he was wearing the style of uniform Starfleet had used a little more than a decade before, the blue shoulders of the uniform indicating medical division. The science officer had forgotten that when he, Dar and Faggio had started working on a way for the non-corporeal entity to participate in holodeck programs, they had used the patterns of the original Emergency Medical Hologram Mark 1 stored in the computer files as the basis for his physical character.

"Sorry to confuse you, but I'm not the Doctor. I'm Lieutenant Spot," Spot replied as he gestured for both Cassie and Gem to join him while he changed the setting on his tricorder to detect the exit. "What's been happening in here?"

"Monsters," Cassie replied as she and Gem started following Spot back up the stairs. "Are you going to get us out of here?"

"I'll do my best," Spot answered. "What do you mean, monsters?"

Before either of the girls could answer, out of nowhere a large hairy creature dropped from the ceiling, brandishing an axe with a blade the size of the ready room desk. Both Cassie and Gem screamed, falling back down the stairs as the axe literally cut Spot in half, his legs landing in a heap on the steps while his head and torso flew across the hall, both halves fading away before the body hit the floor. The creature with the axe looked confused before it too faded away like a character deleted from the program. Cassie and Gem whimpered with fright, clinging

to each other, unsure in which direction to look. Suddenly, the EMH reappeared next to the two girls, causing them to go into another bout of screams before Gem recognized the man next to them again.

“Oh. That’s what you mean by monsters,” Spot said wryly.

* * * *

“What’s going on?” Captain Koester asked as he rushed down the corridor toward Dar, Smith and several other members of the engineering staff who had joined them attempting to gain access into the holodeck. In the time since the captain had left the bridge, power had been restored to deck eight to help Dar and his crew access the holodeck, still without success. Behind the captain, a squad of armored Starfleet Marines, lead by Lt Colonel Sean McIntyre, moved down the corridor ready to ‘invade’ the holodeck as soon as the doors were finally opened.

“I’m not entirely sure, Captain, except that we definitely have four life-form readings in there,” Dar reported.

“Cassie, Spot, whatever it is in there attacking them... What’s the fourth?” Koester asked, a faint glimmer of hope starting to show on his face. “Could it be...? Could it be Gem?”

“We won’t know for sure until we can get these doors open, Captain,” Lieutenant Smith said before turning his attention back to the circuit board behind the control panel he had disassembled. As they continued to work, Doctor Justin MacMillan, the starship’s Chief Medical Officer, arrived on the scene as well.

“I heard there are casualties, Cap’n?” the doctor said, pulling out his own tricorder to start scanning through the bulkhead.

“We’ve had... conflicting reports,” Koester responded, still hoping Cassie’s account from inside the holodeck was mistaken. “Right now we’re detecting four life-forms in there, but we can only positively identify two of them, Cassie and Mister Spot.”

“One’s human, one’s near-human, one’s Daminian...,” MacMillan reported. “This last one... I’m cross-referencin’.”

A look of puzzlement crossed the CMO’s face. He looked up several files contained in the tricorder before looking at the captain.

“Sir, I’ve got a report of an encounter with a similar life-form several decades ago. Accordin’ to the files, the *Enterprise-1701* encountered an entity like this at Beta XII-A. The entity fed on strong negative emotions, particularly anger ‘n hate, though fear ‘n panic were also experienced, which were instigated by the creature. The report also states various crew members were killed and then returned to life by the entity in order to provide continued sustenance.”

“So Gem may be alive!” Captain Koester exclaimed. “Does the report say how the *Enterprise* crew overcame the entity?”

“Aye, Cap’n,” MacMillan replied. “They laughed at it.”

“Excuse me?” Lt Colonel McIntyre asked, looking at the medical officer strangely.

“As I said, the entity fed on negative emotions. Positive emotions drained its strength and drove it away.”

“So what you’re saying is if we start laughing, it will weaken the entity?” Koester asked.

“I can’t be sure this is the exact same entity, Cap’n. But under the circumstances, it couldn’t hurt, could it?”

Koester shrugged his shoulders, then looked at Dar and asked, “How close are you to getting those doors open, Commander?”

“Truthfully, Skipper, they should be open already. We’ve done everything except fire an isomagnetic disintegrator at it,” Dar reported.

The gathered group started looking at one another, a few shrugging their shoulders. Then Gunnery Sergeant Christopher O’Laughlin stepped forward and said, “Why did the chicken cross the road?” Looks of confusion appeared on most of the gathered crew’s faces. “To get to the other side!” O’Laughlin finally answered, ending the sentence with a simulated rim shot. The Gunny’s fellow Marines looked at him as if he had grown a second head.

“What was that?” McIntyre asked, not sure what O’Laughlin was talking about.

“It was a joke, sir,” O’Laughlin replied with a hint of frustration. “Don’t anyone in the 24th century know what a joke is?”

“I know a joke,” Lieutenant Smith said, looking up from the work he was performing on the control panel. “Heard it from some Lurian I met at the bar on *Deep Space Nine*. Told me it was supposed to be the funniest joke in the universe.” Smith then proceeded to tell everyone the joke he had heard. At first, Captain Koester was appalled, his crew telling jokes when his daughter was trapped with an evil alien entity and could be killed (again) at any second. But as Smith reached the punch-line, even the captain could not help but laugh.

* * * *

NO, the entity thought. The horror and frustration had been delicious, but merely just an appetizer for the main course that was to come. But now it felt humor and good nature. The entity started to weaken.

* * * *

“...That was no Targ, that was my wife!” McIntyre said, causing another round of hilarious laughter to fill the corridor. Tears streamed down the face of several of the Marines as one or two leaned against the corridor bulkhead, unable to stand up straight they were laughing so hard.

“Captain Koester to Lieutenant Spot, what’s going on in there?” the captain asked as he tried to catch his breath.

Inside the holodeck, the scenery had changed to a dark and scary looking forest. Spot stood protectively over both Gem and Cassie as he tried to lead them to where his tricorder said the computer arch and exit doors were located, hidden amongst the holographic landscape.

“We’re still trying to make our way toward the exit, Captain,” Spot reported, his voice sounding more like the holographic doctor than his own regular accent. “Though the creature that was attacking the cadet and your daughter seems to have retreated for some reason.”

“Gem is alive?!?” Koester asked, a flood of relief and good feelings.

“Yes, Captain. She’s right here with me.”

“Oh thank God!” Koester exclaimed.

* * * *

Hunger! Starvation!

The entity suddenly found its food supply gone. It started to weaken once again.

* * * *

“...And then I said to him, if this is my thermometer, where did I put my stylus?”

Doctor MacMillan’s story caused another round of raucous laughter, during which Lieutenant Smith finally managed to activate the circuits he had been working on. With a hiss, the holodeck doors slowly slid open and Captain Koester, Lt Commander Dar and several of the Marines rushed inside, finding the forest program still running.

“Computer, end program!” Koester ordered. Almost immediately the scenery faded, replaced by the empty yellow-grid floor and metal grid walls. Standing several meters in from the door were Lieutenant Spot, still inhabiting his holographic body, Cadet Cassie and Gem. Bloody and bruised, she ran over to her father’s embrace as soon as she realized he was really standing in front of her.

“What happened?” Gem asked her father as he hugged her back tightly.

“I’m not sure,” he started to reply before Doctor MacMillan’s voice caught his attention.

“Incredible!” the CMO said.

Both Captain Koester and his daughter looked up toward where McMillan, Dar and McIntyre all stared and where two of the Marines now aimed their weapons. High above, near the ceiling of the holodeck, could be seen the swirling, ethereal form of the entity that had caused the incident.

“What is it?” McIntyre asked.

“A being that survives on the negative emotions of others,” MacMillan replied, trying to scan the entity as thoroughly as possible with his tricorder. As they all watched, the entity started descending toward the deck and, to their surprise, through it.

“It’s getting away!” exclaimed Gunny O’Laughlin.

“We have to stop it! Keep it isolated, before it wrecks more havoc aboard my ship!” Koester added.

“I’ll find it again, Captain,” Spot said a moment before his holographic body faded away. Several seconds later, the familiar British-accented voice of the Damianian officer could be heard through the captain’s combadge. “It’s gone, sir. The entity has left the ship. And I don’t think it will be coming back.”

“What makes you say that, Lieutenant?” Koester asked.

“Because I could feel it was very weak. I think it’s manipulation of the holodeck to scare your daughter and guest was it’s last ditch effort to endure. We’re too deep in space for it to reach another source of food. I do not think it will survive.”

“That’s too bad,” Koester said, actually sorry in spite of the uproar the entity had caused. He then turned to Doctor MacMillan and said, “Why don’t you take these two down to sickbay and give them the once-over, just to make sure everything is back to normal?”

“Aye, Cap’n,” MacMillan replied, leading the way back out of the holodeck, followed closely by Cassie, Gem and, finally, her father.

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 61530.5:

Thankfully, the remainder of Cassie’s visit was quiet. Now it is time for her to head back toward Earth and her Academy classes.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Captain Koester, carrying his guest’s duffle bag on his shoulder, and his daughter Gem walked with Cassie through the corridors of the *Dauntless*, heading toward the transporter room. The *Dauntless* was making a stop at *Starbase 718*, where Cassie would catch a transport back to Earth and her next semester at the Academy.

“Thank you, Captain. I had a really good time visiting,” Cassie said as the trio entered the transporter room, where Chief Blackman stood ready behind the control console.

“I’m glad we could entertain you before you go back to class. And please, call me Peter when we’re off duty,” the captain insisted, placing the duffle on the floor before giving Cassie a warm hug. Cassie then turned to hug Gem. When she was finished, Captain Koester’s demeanor had suddenly changed. “Attention, Cadet!” Instinctively, Cassie snapped to attention in front of the captain. Koester performed a cursory inspection of Cassie’s uniform, walking completely around her, before standing almost nose to nose with her and saying, “What’s your name, Cadet?”

“Midshipman Second Class Cassie Koester, sir!”

A small smile creased the captain’s lips as he said, “You realize the name Koester has a certain reputation within Starfleet.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Cassie replied.

“I expect that reputation to remain untarnished. Am I clear?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Captain Koester nodded slightly before stepping back and smiling. Cassie smiled as well as she relaxed her stance and leaned down to pick up her duffle bag before turning and stepping up on the transporter platform.

“Study hard. Do well. Write often. And make some more friends!” the captain admonished as Cassie indicated she was ready to beam over to the starbase. “Now that you know how a holodeck works, maybe you can host some adventures for your fellow cadets.”

A look of fear briefly passed through Cassie’s wide eyes before she replied, “I’ll stick to dorm room study parties, thanks.” Seconds later, after saying goodbye once again, Cassie dematerialized. The captain turned to his daughter and, reaching out to hold her hand, led her back out into the corridor.

“Well, Gem, I still have a few hours before my nightly inspection tour of the ship. Want to do something together?”

“Sure. Like what?” Gem replied.

“Well, I have a new holodeck program I’ve been wanting to try out...”

The captain suddenly stopped short as Gem stopped dead in the middle of the corridor.

“What’s the matter?” the captain asked.

“I’m... um... not in the mood for the holodeck. Can we do something else? Like clean the torpedo tubes? Or field strip Gunny’s weapons? Maybe flush out the sanitary systems?”

Koester could not help but chuckle as he put his arm around his daughter’s shoulder and said, “How about we just head to 10-Forward for dinner?”

Gem smiled as she replied, “Sounds good to me. I’m starving.”

The End