

Vice Admiral Penji Fil turned the corner around the end of the bar, having just made use of the nearby rest room.

“Did I miss anything?” he asked once he was back in the main room of the Bastogne Lodge.

“We were waiting on you, Penji,” Vice Admiral Kalin Kale replied. “Hey, while you’re up, pass out another round of drinks. My Saurian brandy is running low.”

Fil sighed to himself, but wordlessly slipped behind the bar, grabbing a few more bottles from inside the chiller and the decanter of Saurian brandy from the bar top and carried them over to the gathered group of officers, placing them on the table in the middle.

“So, where were we?” Fil asked, returning to his seat and opening his own bottle of Bajoran ale, frowning at the taste as he took a sip. “I think you had just realized you were facing Vejur instead of the Borg, like you first thought.”

“Actually, it was even more complicated than that,” Captain Cathryn Pearson remarked as she resumed her story...

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Starbase 719

“A Tale Twice Told – Part 2” By PJK

A Typhon Sector Crisis Story

Eight people were gathered around the master systems display at the center of Starbase Ops; Captain Pearson, Starfleet Marine Corps Battalion commander Colonel Sean McIntyre, security chief Commander Michelle Petersen, science officer Lt Commander Makia Kyman, operations officer Lieutenant Jinny Erikson, *USS Dauntless* crew member Lieutenant (JG) Wyatt ‘Five’ Cerilli, and Captain James T. Kirk of the starship *Enterprise* and his chief engineer Montgomery ‘Scotty’ Scott. Kirk was sharing what little information his universe’s Starfleet had gathered regarding their mysterious adversary. Kirk was in the middle of explaining what had brought everyone to their present situation.

“After the vessel... Vejur, you called it?” He looked at Pearson, who nodded. “After Vejur destroyed both Andor and Tellar, it set course directly toward Earth, like it knew exactly where it was going. It was in the Wolf 359 system that several of the few remaining starships, including the *Enterprise*, intercepted it. We had already begun preliminary plans for establishing a new operating base outside of Federation space, and this information was inadvertently included in a last-ditch friendship message that was transmitted to the intruder that also included data about the Federation and the ideals that helped found it. To our surprise, the intruder immediately ceased its attack on us – though not before another three starships were literally vaporized in front of our eyes – and turned in the direction of the sector where we planned to re-group and re-build.”

“Fortunately, it seems the intruder vessel is limited in speed to around warp four,” Scotty explained. “It allowed what was left o’ the fleet to warp ahead and implement our plan here.”

“We have twenty starships available to us right now,” Kirk continued. “Six of them barely made it here, they were so badly damaged during our attempts to contact and stop the intruder. The rest of them are functional, though all damaged to some degree. We need to make use of your spacedock facility to repair our ships before Vejur... or whatever it is... gets here in a month!”

“An’ in order to do that, we need to make some emergent repairs t’ your space station here,” Scotty added. “While most o’ your damage is superficial, we needed to make it look convincing that your space station was goin’ t’ explode, so you’ve also lost a few key plasma conduits an’ distribution nodes.”

Erikson attempted to call up a damage report on the operations console, but none of the usual graphic displays appeared, only block indicators mainly showing power distribution and allocation.

"I can't make heads or tails of these displays!" the lieutenant complained. "What happened to our LCARS system? What is this junk?"

"Sorry, Lassie," Scotty responded. "That was my doin'. We had no clue how your main computer operatin' system worked, an' thinkin' we were goin' t' have to man your station with our own personnel, we didn'a think we would have the time t' learn it, so I developed a self-replicatin' program that mapped your computer system, then modified the operatin' system to something resemblin' what we normally use aboard our starship's and bases."

"In other words, you infected our computer with a virus," Erikson remarked with a tone of disgust.

"I suppose that's one way o' expressing it," Scotty admitted. "The self-replicatin' program over-wrote your original OS with th' program we're used to. You could call it a hybrid-OS, since your original system is still underneath it all, making sure we didn'a blow ourselves up for real."

Scotty took Erikson's place at the operations console and started rattling off a list of systems aboard the starbase that would require repair before attention could be turned to the starships. "All told," Scotty said, "It should take us twelve days to effect repairs..."

"Scotty, we don't have...", Kirk started to say when his engineer interrupted.

"Ah know, so I think with a little bit o' elbow grease and the help o' the starbase crew still left aboard, we can finish the station in three days, and start working on the most lightly damaged o' our ships. With luck and a little bit o' skill, we should have most of them in working order again before this beastie we're expecting arrives in the sector."

Pearson laughed to herself in spite of the gravity of the situation as she listened to the banter between Kirk and his engineer, and how some things never changed no matter what universe they were in.

"Sounds like a plan, Scotty," Kirk remarked before turning his attention back to Pearson. "We may have one other issue to worry about alongside everything already on our plate."

"What's that, Captain?" she asked, still feeling strange addressing someone so young by that title.

"We've been lucky so far, keeping word of everything that has happened within the corridors of Starfleet. But sooner or later someone is going to realize Starfleet is stretched too thin and that Earth is virtually defenseless."

Pearson realized what Kirk was implying, and the thought sent a chill down her spine. "The Klingons and the Romulans," she said.

"Yes," Kirk confirmed. "If either Empire finds out Starfleet has been virtually wiped out, they will quickly launch an invasion fleet toward Sector 0-0-1 in an attempt to cut off the Federation's head."

"Whatever we do," Scotty added, "needs t' be done quickly."

"I wholeheartedly agree," Pearson remarked.

* * * *

Several hours later, Pearson was in her own office with Commander Petersen, both trying to access history files in order to help determine how the *Enterprise* crew in their own universe defeated Vejur, but were running into unanticipated roadblocks.

"I still can't make heads or tales of this computer system!" Petersen complained from her seat on the couch across the room. She seemed ready to throw the padd she was holding against the wall in frustration. "Maybe we should just tell Captain Kirk that we can't give him the information? Say it violates the Prime Directive or something like that."

Pearson chuckled under her breath before saying, "We may not be able to provide the information whether it violates the Prime Directive or not. I managed to locate the storage sector where most of the 23rd century starship logs are archived, but this operating system Mister Scott installed has corrupted a lot of the data files." Pearson looked over at the woman she had appointed as her acting first officer for the length of the current crisis before saying, "All I can find is that Kirk and several members of his crew left the *Enterprise* and traveled into the brain of

Vejur, where they identified the oldest part of the structure as the old Voyager 6 probe. The next accessible data only relates that within seconds of their return to their ship, the Vejur entity disappeared from our reality, leaving only the *Enterprise* in Earth orbit. The log entry describing whatever happened inside Vejur's brain is so badly garbled I cannot make out anything but gibberish."

Before Petersen could remark, there was a knock on the office door. After it opened, Scotty stepped in and said, "Cap'n Pearson. I thought you'd like t' know the repairs on your station have commenced."

"Thank you, Mister Scott," Pearson replied. "While you're here, can I ask you a question?" Scotty nodded in the affirmative and Pearson gestured him to her side behind her desk. "Is there any way to restore the data files your computer virus have corrupted in our databanks? I can't find the information we need that might help defeat Vejur."

Scotty leaned on Pearson's desk, looking at the display on the captain's monitor screen, his eyebrows knitting in annoyance. "Tha' was no' supposed to happen." He tapped a few quick commands into the monitor, but the display did not change much, if at all. "Let me give it a better look once we have the first starship inside your spacedock. I think I can retrieve what you're lookin' for."

"Thank you, Mister Scott."

* * * *

Over the next two and a half weeks, the starbase was returned to a near-fully operational status using a mixture of technology from the station's own universe combined with elements of the alternate 2260's technology, though several large gaping holes caused by explosions of the power conduits were still evident across the hull of the wide spacedock section. Pearson had agreed that non-essential sections of the base, like the recreation area and botanical garden, should be left unoccupied for the duration, their functions left at minimal levels only to maintain the status quo, such as the plant life in the garden and the colony supply 'farms' in the levels below it. Within hours of getting the spacedock back in operation, the first of the twenty starships requiring various degrees of repair entered the facility to commence repairs.

One of the last ships to enter spacedock was Kirk's *Enterprise*. Though the starship had managed to reach the Typhon Sector, the *Enterprise* was perhaps the most heavily damaged of the ships remaining in the alternate universe's Starfleet. As a result, her repairs were considered a lower priority as Kirk and Pearson agreed the easier repaired starships should be worked on first. Again, using a combination of 2390's technology from 719's original universe mixed with the alternate 2260's technology of the universe they now all occupied, each of the repaired starships appeared similar in appearance and abilities to the starships of the 2280's in Captain Pearson's original timeline – very similar to the *Arcturus* she had originally been assigned to – and allowed them to be fully ready when Vejur arrived in the sector.

In the station's briefing room overlooking Ops, Kirk and several members of his crew – including first officer Spock, engineer Scott, and medical officer Leonard McCoy – were meeting with Pearson, Petersen, and Erikson. All the officers were now wearing variations on Kirk's 23rd century Starfleet uniforms. It had taken some time, but the starbase crew had eventually gotten used to gold referring to command and red to engineering and security, though some of the female crew members were uncomfortable in the short dress-like uniforms they had been issued.

"The starships *Farragut* and *Exeter* have already departed the base and are positioning themselves along the expected track of the intruder vessel at a distance that should give us a little warning before Vejur reaches the station," Kirk says, reading off of one of his own pads.

"Vejur can't be all that far away," Pearson remarked. "How much longer will repairs on the *Enterprise* take?"

"We've run into a wee problem I wasn't anticipating," Scotty replied. "The high-speed run out here t' the Typhon Sector must 'ave caused numerous hairline cracks in the warp coils. Until we can either get the coils replaced..."

“We carry numerous warp coil replacements in storage in the shipyard,” Lieutenant Erikson stated. She then started referencing another padd on the table in front of her as she added, “However, it’s unlikely we have coils of the type required by Captain Kirk’s starship in storage. The *Enterprise*’s warp nacelles are unlike any we have ever had to deal with previously. We might be able to modify coils from the Intrepid-class warp nacelles we keep on hand for the *Belle*, but I estimate that would take...” The operations officer performed several calculations in her head. “...At least thirty to forty-five days... minimum!”

“Scotty, can we maneuver on impulse if necessary?” Kirk asked his engineer.

“Aye, that would be no problem,” Scott replied. “But we’d be little more than sitting ducks based on what we’ve seen that intruder vessel can do. I just hope plan ‘A’ works.”

“And just what IS plan ‘A’?” Doctor McCoy asked.

“Based on the century-old *Enterprise* logs from my universe tht Mister Scott has been able to restore,” Pearson explained. “Jim Kirk was able to ‘assist’ Vejur in evolving by making it possible to fulfill its primary mission; transmitting its vast store of knowledge of the universe to its ‘creator.’ We just need to be able to do the same.”

“Speaking of which,” Scotty interrupted. “I managed to reconstruct some more of those data files you needed access to, Captain Pearson.” He passed a data chip across the table to the starbase commander. “One o’ those files contains the old code sequence NASA would transmit to begin Voyager’s data transmissions.”

“Thank you, Scotty,” Pearson said. “That’s exactly the fine I needed...”

Pearson was suddenly cut off by the activation of the station’s intercom and a stressed-sounding voice calling out, “Captain Pearson to Ops, ASAP!”

Pearson quickly got out of her seat and headed through the briefing room door into Ops, followed by all the others. They quickly made their way down to the lower level – either by stairs or one of the two small lifts, where Lieutenant Cerilli and one of the starbase crew left in charge while the senior officers were meeting were standing around the master systems display.

“What is it, Lieutenant?” Pearson asked.

“We’re receiving a subspace transmission from the *USS Exeter*,” the young officer replied. “I think they’ve intercepted the intruder cloud.”

“Put them on the main screen, Lieutenant,” Pearson ordered, stepping back behind the MSD to clearly see – and be seen by – the main viewer. The image changed from a blank screen to the bridge of an alternate Federation starship. It still amazed Pearson just how different the design aesthetic was from the 23rd century starships she was used to; bright visible lights, large glass display panels and forward-facing free-standing consoles to each side of the captain’s center seat, and the glass-enclosed turbolift cars. The man in the center seat wore a gold uniform identical to Kirk’s, though he was much skinnier, his hair already turning the color of burnt ash.

“Starbase 719, this is Tracey aboard the *Exeter*,” the man in the center seat announced. “My starship and the *Farragut* detected the approach of the intruder vessel about an hour ago and slowly began to close on it. We intercepted the outer edges of the vessel’s power field about ten minutes ago and began broadcasting the universal friendship messages you recommended.”

“Any luck?” Pearson asked. “Did the intruder vessel react?”

“I’ll say it did!” Captain Tracey replied. “A huge plasma weapon emerged from the cloud. Before either of us could react, it struck the *Farragut* and disintegrated it! We’re now on our way back to your position at maximum warp! And that intruder is very close behind us!”

“Captain, we’re going to transmit a code sequence to you,” Pearson said, feeling the data chip Scott had handed her in her fingers as she reached to put it into the reader that had been installed on the MSD. “Transmit it into the center of the cloud. Hopefully you...”

Pearson’s sentence was cut off by one of Tracey’s tactical officers as the men in red shouted, “The cloud has launched another one of those plasma charges! It’s coming straight for us!”

“Evasive maneuvers!” Tracey shouted. “Come right to course 050 mark 9!” Tracey then slammed his hand on the intercom button on the arm of his chair. “Engineering, I need more power to the engines!”

“Giving you everything we have, sir!” the *Exeter*’s engineer responded.

“Too late!” the tactical officer shouted. “Brace for...!”

As the crew in Starbase Ops watched in horror, the entire bridge of the *Exeter* appeared to transform into electrical discharges until the screen suddenly went black. Petersen quickly moved around to her usual station and activated long-range sensors.

“Captain, I’m detecting the twelfth-power energy field continuing to approach at warp four – estimated time to arrival at our coordinates: twenty-two hours, thirty-three minutes,” the acting first officer reported. “I am detecting no signs of either the *Exeter* or the *Farragut*.”

“Understood. We have less than a full day before Vejur gets here. Let’s hope we can give it a warm welcome when it arrives,” Pearson remarked.

* * * *

Station log, stardate... 2259.75:

Sensors confirm the approach of Vejur, which entered the Typhon Sector a few hours ago. Almost immediately after entering the sector, the power field cloud that surrounds the Vejur vessel began to dissipate. We expect the power field will be entirely gone by the time Vejur reaches Starbase 719 in less than an hour.

In the meantime, I have Lieutenant Erikson preparing a shuttlecraft for whoever volunteers to go over and ‘greet’ our arriving guest. We have yet to decide who exactly gets that ‘honor.’

Pearson, out.

Most of the station’s senior staff were gathered in Ops, along with Lieutenant Wyatt ‘Five’ Cerilli and Kirk’s senior officers.

“Sensors confirm the intruder vessel is slowing,” Michelle Petersen reported.

“Visual range?” Pearson asked.

“Are you kidding?” Petersen replied, looking at the captain with shock. She then activated the main viewscreen, where the immense vessel that *Voyager 6* had become was visible in all its glory. “Vessel is ninety-seven kilometers in length, and could easily contain more than a dozen Ournel-class starbases. Yes, even at this range, it’s within visual range.”

“So what do we do now?” Lieutenant Hikaru Sulu, Kirk’s chief helmsman asked.

“According to history... our history,” Pearson clarified. “...a small party from the *Enterprise* entered Vejur’s brain, where the first officer manually entered the transmission command sequence into *Voyager*’s computer and triggered the process where the starship’s first officer, Commander Decker, joined with the Vejur entity to and provided it with the ability to think and believe in abstract concepts and other planes of existence instead of merely machine logic. We need a volunteer to do something similar here.”

“Why can’t we just transmit the code sequence here from Ops?” Doctor McCoy asked.

“According to the logs, in our universe, Vejur destroyed its antenna leads to prevent reception and force its ‘Creator’ to be physically present. We have no reason to believe it would be any different in this reality.”

“So how do we determine who volunteers?” McCoy asked. “Flip a coin? Drawing the short straw?” The doctor glanced in the direction of Commander Spock and added, “Tallest ears?”

“As much as the idea of being physically joined with a machine entity has no appeal to me,” Kirk started to say, “I’m not going to expect any member of my crew – or yours...” He looked at Pearson as he said it. “...to do anything I myself would be unwilling to do.”

“Jim! You can’t be serious!” McCoy admonished.

“Completely serious, Bones,” Kirk replied. “Right now, I’m a captain without a ship! The *Enterprise* isn’t going anywhere in her current condition! I’m incapable of making any positive contribution right now, other than volunteering to do this! What would you have me do, Bones?”

“Not this!” McCoy replied.

“Captain, I insist I go in your place,” Spock interjected. “You are obviously too important...”

“I appreciate what you’re saying, Spock,” Kirk interrupted. “But if what Captain Pearson has been saying is true, Vejur is looking for that un-namable quality that makes a human being human. You may be half-human, Spock, but I don’t know if you have exactly the quality Vejur is looking for.”

“It would be like trying to mate a machine with another machine, Jim,” McCoy agreed. “But still, why does it have to be you?”

“Maybe Doctor McCoy’s suggestion of drawing the short straw actually is the way to go?” suggested Makia Kyman.

“Captain Pearson,” Lieutenant Cerilli suddenly said. “Would it not be easier, if Vejur’s intent is to join physically with a human, to request a volunteer that has already undergone a similar process?”

“A similar process?” Pearson asked, slightly confused. “What do you mean, Lieu...” Suddenly Pearson realized what Cerilli was proposing. “No! I cannot authorize you to volunteer for this mission, Lieutenant!”

“Why not?” Cerilli asked. “I was already assimilated by the Borg Collective once. Perhaps my nodes and implants would make it easier for me to accomplish the goal you all seek?”

“First of all, you’re not even officially assigned to my command,” Pearson replied. “If we ever manage to get back home, Fleet Captain Koester would be upset to find out I allowed you to go on a suicide mission all alone! Plus, we don’t know if your Borg implants would be more of a hindrance than a help on this occasion!”

“But...,” Cerilli started to say.

“No! Final answer,” Pearson responded before turning her attention back to Kirk. “As much as I hate to admit it, what you proposed is the option most likely to be successful, Captain Kirk. Lieutenant Erikson has prepared a shuttlecraft currently sitting in Bay 18. You can use that to go over to Vejur and, hopefully, help it find what it is seeking.”

As the senior officers continued to discuss their plan, over the objections of Kirk’s friends, Wyatt Cerilli quietly stepped away and – unnoticed – entered one of the turbolifts, ordering, “Level 540.”

“Spock, you know where the command packet is and how to access it?” Kirk asked his first officer.

“I do,” Spock replied. “Though I still desire to find another way to accomplish our goal.”

“Captain Pearson,” Lieutenant Erikson called out. “We’re receiving a transmission. On what I believe is a radio carrier wave. It’s coming from the intruder vessel.”

“That would be Vejur signaling it is ready to transmit its store of knowledge,” Pearson said before looking once again at Kirk. “Apparently, based on the data you accidentally transmitted to Vejur in the Wolf system, it thinks its creator is here. Now would be the time to do this. If we wait too long, Vejur is likely to grow impatient and destroy this station and everyone aboard it as easily as it did the *Farragut* and the *Exeter*.”

“Agreed,” Kirk replied. He then turned his attention back on his own crew. “Gentlemen, Uhura, I have hope that somehow, in some way, I will survive this mission... though it may not be in the manner to which you have become accustomed. Take good care of my ship. And may the great Bird of the Galaxy bless you and families.”

Each of Kirk’s command staff either hugged or shook the hand of Kirk, wishing him luck. He then looked at Pearson and said, “You have a good crew, Captain Pearson. I wish we could have met and worked together under better circumstances.”

“Me too, Captain,” Pearson replied, trying hard to hold back her emotions. Kirk then spun on the heel of his boot and headed toward the turbolift, turning back to face everyone and giving them a quick wink before the doors swished shut.

A couple of minutes later, Kirk emerged on the station level where access to Bay 18 was located. As he started to move toward the shuttlebay, another young man fell into step beside him. Kirk glanced over and realized he recognized the officer as the one with the nodes and implants that had just recently been up in Ops.

“Something I can do for you, Lieutenant Cer... Car... Um...?”

“Just call me Five, sir,” Cerilli replied. “I just wanted to wish you luck on your mission. It was an honor meeting you, Captain Kirk.” Cerilli paused and held out his hand. Kirk could not help but smile slightly as he likewise offered his hand back. Cerilli grasped the captain’s hand, then suddenly pulled sharply. Kirk, not expecting the move, found himself being pulled close to the former Borg. Before he could react, Cerilli’s other hand – previously hidden behind his back – appeared holding a shiny metallic object that Cerilli pressed to the side of Kirk’s neck. A hiss quickly followed, and before Kirk could shout or protest, his consciousness ebbed.

“I’m sorry, Captain, but in spite of your reputation in my reality, I really don’t think you’re the best man for this job,” Cerilli said as he started to drag Kirk’s unconscious body toward a nearby supply locker and shoved him inside, locking the door behind him. He then turned in the direction of Bay 18 and continued along his way.

There were several members of the starbase crew standing around the Type 8 shuttlecraft that waited – rear boarding ramp wide open – at the center of the bay. Several took note of Cerilli’s approach and one moved to block the young officer from boarding the shuttle.

“Sorry, Lieutenant, but this shuttlecraft is reserved for a special mission,” the other junior grade lieutenant in charge of the detail stated.

“Yes, I know,” Cerilli replied, slowing but not stopping as he neared the ramp. “Captain Pearson has assigned me to take this shuttle over to the arriving intruder vessel and make contact.”

“Captain Pearson...? Assigned you...? But I thought Captain...?”

“Lieutenant, do you really think Starfleet would consider a captain – especially a starship commander – to be more expendable than a lowly junior grade lieutenant?” Cerilli asked.

“Well...”

Cerilli paused directly in front of the young officer as he said, “Go ahead. Contact Ops. I’m sure Captain Pearson will confirm the change of orders. But do it quickly. Every moment we waste increases the chances that alien vessel will open fire on the station.”

Cerilli hoped his bluff would work. If the junior lieutenant actually contacted Pearson, his plan would be ruined.

“I guess you’re right, sir,” the deck crewman finally said, stepping away from the shuttlecraft’s ramp. “Good luck, Lieutenant. I hope your mission succeeds.”

“As do I,” Cerilli replied as he stepped up the ramp and touched the control that closed the hatch. Within seconds he was in the pilot seat, warming up the main engines while the thrusters hummed to life. Cerilli received permission to depart, and the shuttlecraft was soon passing through the atmosphere retaining field.

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In Starbase Ops, Pearson and her officers watched as the Type 8 shuttlecraft crossed the distance between the starbase and the huge alien vessel, McCoy and Scott wondering aloud why Kirk did not attempt to contact Ops along the way. As they watched, the round end of the Vejur craft facing the station peeled open like flower petals and the shuttle quickly disappeared into the dark interior.

“A tractor beam took hold of the shuttle and drew it inside,” Lt Commander Kyman reported.

“What are the chances we’ll ever see Jim alive again?” McCoy asked Spock.

“I would calculate the odds as being incredibly low, Doctor,” Spock replied just before one of the nearby turbolift doors opened and Captain Kirk stumbled out, held up by one of the crew from Bay 18.

“Jim!” McCoy called out, drawing the attention of everyone in Ops. “What happened?! We thought that was you aboard that shuttlecraft!” The doctor rushed over to Kirk, helping him sit in the seat at the operations console as he began to examine him.

Kirk looked at Pearson, who had a shocked look on her face already, and said, “Your young lieutenant with the mechanical implants on his face knocked me out and stuffed me into a closet. I woke up and was released just in time to see the shuttle leaving the bay.”

“Cerilli!” Pearson growled. She then ordered, “Michelle, hail the shuttlecraft! Get Cerilli back here immediately!”

Petersen tried to comply, opening hailing frequencies. But in spite of repeated attempts, there was no response.

“I can’t tell if he’s just refusing to respond, Captain, or if he cannot receive our hail,” the acting first officer reported.

Pearson looked up at the image of Vejur on the viewscreen and exclaimed, “Dammit!”

* * * *

Aboard Shuttle 10, Cerilli sat back and looked at the surroundings outside his cockpit with amazement as the shuttle was drawn by the tractor beam further and further into the vessel. He passed through an area filled with what appeared to be holographic representations of planets and objects, including the recently destroyed starships *Exeter* and *Farragut*. The shuttle passed through a tunnel built within what appeared to be a power source intended for the gigantic imaging system. Eventually the shuttle passed into another separate chamber within the vessel, and Cerilli could make out what appeared to be an island floating in the middle of the large, dark chamber. The shuttlecraft slowed as it neared the floating island and as Cerilli watched, what appeared to be energy drops floated down from somewhere overhead and solidified along the closer edge of the island into comb-like structures. A short time later, the shuttlecraft landed atop several of the new solid combs.

“What does it want me to do?” Cerilli asked himself, regretting not checking if an EVA suit of any kind had been included in the supplies loaded aboard the shuttle before he realized he could hear noises – what sounded like lightning in conjunction with bright flashes across the ceiling of the chamber and other noises more synthetic in nature – through the cockpit window. He checked the small ships sensors and smiled as he realized the shuttle was now sitting in an oxygen/nitrogen bubble that surrounded the island.

Cerilli stepped over to the rear hatch and opened a nearby locker, inside which was stored several phasers. He began to reach for one before having second thoughts and closing the locker, then pressing the control that opened the rear hatch. He carefully stepped down off the ramp and moved around the shuttlecraft, facing the higher central area that appeared to be surrounded by eight metallic columns. He started on the short hike toward that central location, assuming this was the location of Vejur itself.

Within a few minutes, Cerilli crested the top of the small metallic hill and looked down into what looked like an amphitheater made of power conduits with a decrepit-looking centuries old space probe mounted in the center of it. Carefully climbing down into the bowl – afraid a misstep would send him crashing through the perimeter into what he was sure were power and data transfer conduits that made up the surrounding structure. Again, he heard the synthetic noise, and wondered if it was Vejur itself attempting to communicate with him verbally.

“I mean you no harm,” Cerilli said as he slowly walked around the ancient probe, not knowing if Vejur could even hear or understand him, pausing to look at the half-obscured name painted on one side and noting only the letters V, G, E and R were visible. “I’m here to help you.”

Cerilli pulled a 24th century tricorder out of the holster on his belt and started looking at incomplete technical drawings of the Voyager-series probes on its screen. He eventually found the hatch leading to the radio transceiver on one side and opened it, not at all surprised to find the antenna leads were melted away as Captain Pearson had described. Pulling another device out of a holder on his belt – a small handheld computer with a keyboard – he started connecting the wires to the antenna leads within Vejur’s brain. Again, lightning flashed overhead and the synthetic sound – which Cerilli was now certain was Vejur’s attempts at communication – filled the space.

“That should hopefully do it,” Cerilli remarked, mostly to himself as he finished attaching the computer device. He then looked up at Vejur’s large antenna dish above him and said, “Let’s hope this hurts you more than it hurts me.” Consulting his tricorder one last time, Cerilli typed in the old NASA code sequence.

Almost immediately, the lighting around Voyager changed from white to red. Cerilli suddenly realized he could not move from the spot on which he was standing. He then noticed the air around him begin to shimmer and glow, and a feeling not unlike the annular confinement beam of a transporter surrounded his body.

* * * *

“Captain!” Lieutenant Erikson exclaimed. “Something is happening!”

All eyes in Ops turned to face the main viewscreen, where it appeared like a bright white light was starting to appear from somewhere within the Vejur vessel.

“I guess Mister Cerilli was successful in his mission,” Pearson remarked, her voice tinged with regret. She then exchanged a glance with Captain Kirk.

On the screen, the light – which seemed to be coming both from within and around Vejur – continued to get brighter. Then the light burst, bright flashes shooting like fireworks in a circular pattern, and as the light faded, the nearly one-hundred-kilometer-long Vejur vessel was simply gone.

“What in hell just happened?!” McCoy asked in an agitated voice.

“If all went as planned, we just witnessed the birth of a brand-new life form, Doctor,” Spock replied.

“Sensor readings?” Lt Commander Scott asked, his eyes wide with amazement.

“The intruder vessel is completely gone, almost as if it...,” Erikson started to say before she quickly corrected herself. “Correction. I’m detecting a lone shuttlecraft adrift near where the center of the vessel had been.”

“Cerilli!” Pearson said hopefully. “Life form readings?”

Erikson concentrated on her console readings for a moment before looking up at Pearson, a sad expression in her eyes. “None,” she confirmed.

“I see,” Pearson said, clearly shocked. “That’s... unfortunate.” Unable to think of anything else to say, she added, “See to it the shuttlecraft is recovered and returned to Bay 18, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, Captain,” Erikson replied before contacting the deck crews to retrieve the shuttle.

“Cathryn,” said Petersen. “Just as the Vejur vessel disappeared, it broadcast some sort of transmission.”

“The data the entity had collected over the last few hundred years?” Spock asked with curiosity. “It would be fascinating to analyze that data.”

“I... I’m not sure,” Petersen replied. “I’ve never seen any kind of transmission like this before!”

“Was it directed at us?” Pearson asked.

“No,” replied Petersen. “The transmission beam was aimed back toward the Federation, along the path taken by Vejur to get here.”

“What could it have been...?” Kirk began to ask when he noticed Erikson suddenly react like she had seen a ghost. “What is it, Lieutenant?” he asked.

“Captain, we’re being hailed!” Erikson replied. “By the *Exeter*!”

“What?!” almost everyone in Ops responded before Pearson ordered, “On screen!”

The main viewscreen blinked to show the bridge of the *USS Exeter*. Captain Ron Tracey sat in the center seat, and the vessel looked like nothing unusual had ever happened to it.”

“*Starbase 719*, this is *Exeter*,” Tracey said.

“Captain Tracey,” Kirk said, standing up and facing the screen. “We saw your ship destroyed! What happened? How are you here?”

“It was the weirdest thing, Jim,” Tracey replied. “The last thing I recall, we were running for our lives from the intruder’s plasma weapon. I swore it struck us when our evasive maneuvers failed to clear us out of the way in time. Then I swear I felt like I was trapped in a transporter beam, except I cannot recall the usual dematerialization and re-materialization process. It seemed almost instantaneous. I can’t even begin to guess how long we were gone...”

“Almost two hours, Captain,” Pearson answered.

“Two hours?” Tracey repeated, as if trying to understand the situation. “Well, whatever happened, once we were back, it was like nothing had changed! We were exactly where we were when the alien weapon struck us, still

making the turn to starboard and increasing speed to maximum, when we realized the weapon – and more importantly the intruder cloud – had vanished! A moment later the *USS Farragut* hailed us to ask what had happened.”

“The *Farragut* is back too?!” Kirk asked.

“As if nothing had happened,” Tracey replied with a smile.

Kirk looked pointedly at Pearson and said, “You don’t suppose this means...?”

“Only one way to find out!” Pearson replied.

* * * *

Station log, stardate 2259.78:

Captain Kirk sent a subspace communique to Earth, reporting what had occurred in the Typhon Sector and making specific inquiries. Within hours, we received confirmation that not only had most of the starships thought destroyed by Vejur reappeared exactly where they had been, but the planets of Andor and Tellar were likewise restored, their populations none the worse for wear.

We are now finishing minor repairs on the fleet vessels here in the Typhon Sector, which should be done in the next day or so, with the exception of the Enterprise. Kirk’s ship requires extensive work before it can be returned to full service, which is estimated to be completed in eight weeks.

Pearson, out.

“I’ll have her spaceworthy again in two weeks, sair,” Scotty was telling Captain Kirk as the two men looked over damage reports and repair scheduling lists in the Ops briefing room.

“Scotty, you’ve done so much over the last couple of months,” Kirk said. “It’s time to relax and take a break. I can live with eight weeks here in port. Maybe six.”

Scotty looked crestfallen, but before he could protest, the intercom whistled and a voice said, “Ops to Captain Kirk.” Kirk fumbled to locate the intercom activation on the smooth top of the briefing table before finally finding it.

“Kirk here.”

“Captain, we just received an emergency transmission from Starfleet Command. You’re the senior captain from the present reality aboard the station.”

“I’ll be right out.”

Kirk quickly exited the briefing room, followed closely by Mister Scott, and leaned on the railing overlooking Ops. Down below at the various consoles were Commander Petersen, Lieutenant Erikson, Lt Commander Kyman, and Captain Pearson. “Can you put the transmission on the screen, Lieutenant?” Kirk asked.

Erikson nodded, and a moment later a recorded message from one of the admirals at Starfleet Command appeared on the screen. “To the starships of the Starfleet Special Task Force; Congratulations on the success of your recent mission. However, observers along the Neutral Zone have received word the Klingons have heard whispers of Starfleet’s current weakness and are gathering a fleet near the Neutral Zone to test our resolve. With the crisis in the Typhon Sector over, all starships capable of warp travel are required to check in and set course toward the Neutral Zone as soon as possible. Starfleet, out.”

As the viewscreen went blank, Pearson looked up at Kirk with alarm. “What does this mean?” she asked.

Kirk strolled over to the nearby lift and rode it down to the lower level as he said, “It means Starfleet wants to show the Klingons that we’re not as defenseless as they might believe we are.” He then approached the MSD table and said, “Can you make sure all the ships in the fleet out here receive copies of that communique and that they set course for the Neutral Zone as soon as feasible?”

“No, I mean what does this mean for us?” Pearson clarified. “You promised us that once your problem was solved, you would help us get back where we’re supposed to be!”

Captain Pearson...,” Kirk began, his face taking on a more sympathetic look. “Cathryn... I’m not abandoning you. The *Enterprise* still needs to complete repairs. And we brought your station across the interdimensional barrier using only the power and equipment of your own base to do it. With the additional energy provided by the *Enterprise*, I’m sure we can do it faster and safer than before.”

“And you’re sure it will work?” Pearson asked, almost pleading.

Kirk looked up at the man in the red uniform still standing on the upper level and said, “If I had any other engineer in the fleet, I would have to say no.”

* * * *

The crew of *Starbase 719* spent the next week preparing the station for its hoped transit back to its universe of origin, while repairs continued on the only starship remaining within the drydock. Power lines were run and connected not only through various areas of the station, but also to the warp core of the *Enterprise* as well. Finally, after some basic testing, Mister Scott’s plan was implemented.

“My equipment works by creatin’ an interdimensional doorway similar in many ways to a wormhole,” Scotty was explaining to Commander Kyman. “By forming several thousand o’ these wormholes on the microscopic level, it allows them t’ pierce the barrier between realities. Once th’ opening is formed, the wormholes then join together one by one until we have a corridor large enough for even your space station to pass through. It just requires a massive power build-up that takes a bit o’ time.”

“This is fascinating, Mister Scott,” Kyman remarked, looking at the formula displayed on the Scotsman’s engineering padd. “I would love to further study your formulas once this is all over!”

“Aye, Lass, we’ll see what we can do once everything is back t’ normal.” Scott then noticed Captain Pearson emerging from one of the turbolifts. “Excuse me, Commander. Captain Pearson!”

Pearson, who was about to step onto one of the lifts and go up to her office on the upper level, paused to look at Scott. “Yes, Commander?” she asked.

The Scottish engineer stepped over to Pearson and handed her a data card.

“What’s this?” Pearson asked, looking at the bright yellow card with curiosity.

“Once you have confirmed you’re back in your own proper universe, put that card into the reader and press ‘Execute.’ It will delete the OS virus I installed when we transitioned the station to our universe and restore your own computer operating system and data files.”

“Gee, after almost six months here, I wonder if I’ll remember how to use LCARS,” Pearson said with irony.

“Commander,” Erikson said, looking at the energy readings on her operations console. Blocks of varying colors denoting various systems around the station were appearing and moving around on the monitor screen almost faster than the young officer could comprehend. “When you brought the station here, the power build-up took days. If I’m reading this right, the reactors will be on the verge of overload in just a few more hours!”

“Aye, we purposely kept the process slow the first time so that the power increase would look like a malfunction in your systems and prompt you to evacuate the station,” Scotty admitted. “Didn’a work out as planned. But since we’re no’ operatin’ in secret anymore, we can build up the power we need to transition through th’ barrier between realities much faster this time.”

“How long until we’re ready to do this, Scotty?” Kirk asked, having just exited the briefing room up above and slid down the nearby stair railings to lower level.

Scott consulted the engineering monitor and replied, “At least two more hours, sir.”

“Enough time to get one last thing out of the way,” Kirk remarked vaguely before looking at Pearson. “Captain Pearson, would you accompany me down to the botanical garden?”

“What for?” Pearson asked curiously.

“I have a present for you,” Kirk replied ambiguously before moving toward the turbolift. Pearson exchanged a look with Lieutenant Erikson, then shrugged.

“You’re in charge of Ops, Lieutenant,” Pearson finally said as she joined Kirk, who waited in the door of the turbolift. A few minutes later, the pair was walking out of the ground level of what looked like a star-shaped building that pierced the sky over the huge round garden.

Like most of the station in the months it had been relocated in the alternate reality, the garden was in essence closed off. The dome surrounding the garden, which usually appeared like a mostly-sunny day or star-filled night depending on local station time, was instead a generic white light – employed to keep the various plants and trees throughout the recreation area alive.

Kirk led Pearson down one of the paths toward the small lake near the outer edge of the dome. Normally there would be dozens of people paddling boats across the water or sunning themselves on the small sandy beach along its shore. Instead, most of the paddleboats were dragged haphazardly ashore – though two of them floated aimlessly on the surface of the water – and no one else was anywhere in the entire garden. Even the lights within the windows of the hub building at the center of the dome were all extinguished. Pearson thought she could almost hear her own breathing echoing against the dome.

Kirk was leading Pearson toward something she had never seen in the garden before. It was a large metallic arch that crossed over the path they were walking on, and it was evident from the freshly dug dirt on each side that it had only been recently placed there. It took Pearson a moment to realize the arch was the upper half of a warp coil, but not of a design with which she was familiar. There was a brass plaque, shined mirror-smooth, attached to one leg of the arch the coil formed, which was where Kirk paused and looked back at her with a smile. Pearson moved closer to read the plaque.

*In appreciation to the crew of Federation Starbase 719
Without you, all would have been lost.
From the crew of USS Enterprise NCC-1701
Captain James T. Kirk – Commanding
Stardate 2259.77*

In remembrance of Lieutenant (JG) Wyatt ‘Five’ Cerilli

“Where did this come from?” Pearson asked, reaching out to touch the verterium cortenide arch with her hand.

“The *Enterprise*’s port warp nacelle,” Kirk replied, looking up at the coil above him with a smile. “Your Lieutenant Erikson is working on providing replacements. Rather than just dispose of it, I thought it might make a nice memento of your adventure here.”

“Well, we will have quite a tale to tell once we’re back home again,” Pearson admitted. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Jim,” Kirk said, looking back at Pearson. “Please, call me Jim.”

“Very well... Jim. If you will call me Cathryn.”

“It would be my pleasure... Cathryn.”

Pearson ran her fingers over the engraved letters on the brass plaque for a moment, again marveling at the arch above her for a moment before saying, “Time to get back to work. It’s almost time to go home.”

“Agreed,” Kirk said as the pair started back up the path toward the hub.

As the turbolift rose up through the center of the starbase, Pearson was alarmed when yellow alert was called out. She immediately went to tap her combadge before once again realizing the emblem on her chest was not a communicator and she activated the wall-mounted intercom.

“Ops, this is Pearson. Report?”

“Captain,” said Commander Petersen’s voice. “We have detected a device of some kind emerging through the dimensional bridge Mister Scott’s equipment is trying to open in space-time to allow our passage back to our own reality. It’s positioned several hundred meters away from the station, but Mister Scott fears its presence may complicate any attempt we make to return home.”

“Let me take care of it,” Kirk said to Pearson before re-directing the turbolift. “Computer, re-route to Slip-1 gangway.”

“Re-directing lift,” the computer acknowledged, and Pearson could feel the sudden shift in direction. Once Kirk had exited, joining his crew aboard his own starship, Pearson resumed her journey to Ops.

As she walked in, the main viewer was already displaying the *Enterprise* limping out of dock to intercept the unidentified device. After a few minutes, Kirk hailed the station.

“Can you tell what it is?” Pearson asked with concern.

“I’m not sure. It might be a probe of some sort, though nothing like anything I’ve ever seen before. It’s relatively tiny. But Scotty said it could interfere with the trans-dimensional opening and prevent you from successfully making it back to your own reality, so I’m going to get rid of it.”

“Jim, wait...!” Pearson called out, but it was too late. The *Enterprise* fired its phasers, and the device that had emerged from the forming passage between realities vaporized to dust.

“I’m returning to spacedock,” Kirk said over the comm channel. “We have a lot to get done in the next few hours.”

As the frequency closed, Pearson looked at Petersen and said, “If that was a probe from our own reality, we could have used it to let our families know we are still alive.”

“Perhaps this was for the best, Cathryn,” Petersen suggested. “If we were able to send our families a message, and then something goes wrong and the station is destroyed trying to get back home, can you imagine how they all would feel?”

Pearson silently contemplated what her acting first officer had said, then nodded subtly. “I suppose you’re right. If we get killed in the attempt, it’s probably better they didn’t know.”

* * * *

Less than an hour later, the *Enterprise* crew had all returned to their starship, though it remained within the station’s spacedock, and all the starbase senior officers were present in Ops.

“If Mister Scott’s calculations are correct, we are on the verge of crossing over,” Lieutenant Erikson reported as various alarms began to signal throughout Ops.

“Recommend we raise shields around the station,” Kyman suggested. “It will increase the station hull’s integrity another ten percent, and it may make the transition a little easier than the first time.”

“Good idea, Commander,” Pearson said before looking at Petersen. “Michelle, raise shields around the station.”

“Shields raised,” Petersen confirmed.

“Power output near maximum,” Erikson reported. “We’re either going to transit the barrier or blow ourselves to hell!”

“Everyone hold on!” shouted Pearson.

No sooner had the words crossed Pearson’s lips and the various personnel around Ops had grabbed hold of whatever console they were standing near when the lights went dark and it seemed like the deck had dropped out from under their feet.

“I think I’m going to be sick again,” called out a voice that sounded like a distorted version of Lieutenant Erikson’s. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the effect ended. At least two people could be heard falling to the deck, as if completely losing their balance.

“Did it work?” Petersen’s voice asked. “Are we back?”

“We’ll find out in a minute or two,” Pearson answered, still standing beside the master systems display. A few seconds later, several consoles lit up and systems began to re-boot. “I need a status report as soon as possible!”

As systems continued to come back on-line, Erikson lifted herself up off the deck, and started reviewing indications on her operations console.

“Captain, we’re receiving a hail!” Erikson reported.

“On screen!” Pearson ordered.

Erikson pressed several controls on her console, first a look of confusion, then frustration on her face. “I can receive, audio only. But the broadcast transceiver is not yet functional.” She touched one last control, and a woman’s voice emerged from the speakers.

“*Starbase 719?* This is the starship *Bellerophon!*” After a brief pause, the voice continued, “Starbase Ops, this is *Bellerophon*. Please respond!”

“How soon before we can transmit?” Pearson asked.

“I can’t even begin to estimate,” Erikson remarked.

Pearson glanced at the data card Commander Scott had given her, and wondered if what she was thinking would solve the problem or only make it worse. She decided it was time for bold action, quickly placing the card into the reader attached to the MSD and – as soon as the EXE prompt appeared – activated it.

Immediately, all the lights throughout the station dimmed. One by one, each console around Ops went black, followed by a prompt which stated ‘Stand By’ and a progress bar slowly filling from left to right.

“It appears the computer system is being purged of the old Starfleet operating system and restoring our original LCARS, like Mister Scott promised,” Colonel Sean McIntyre remarked.

“If that’s the case, we should be seeing someone from the *Belle* beam aboard any second now,” Pearson said with a sigh of relief.

“Unlikely,” Petersen stated, breaking the mood of elation before it had even begun. “Even though the computer is being re-configured and the main systems are down, I have indications that the shields are still raised.”

“Dammit!” Pearson cursed, watching the progress bar creep across the monitor screen. “Looks like we once again have to hurry up and wait!”

Several hours later, with most of the consoles in Ops restored to their normal functions, Lieutenant Erikson announced, “Got it!”

“Got what, Lieutenant?” McIntyre asked.

“Short range sensors and subspace communications are restored,” the operations officer announced with a grin. “Looks like we’ve drawn quite an audience! There are five starships out there – Sovereign, Galaxy, Leviathan, Intrepid, and Defiant classes...”

“That’s most of the Fifth Fleet,” Pearson remarked.

“That’s not all. I’m also detecting another starbase – a small Buckingham-class type, if I’m reading this correctly – only a few hundred kilometers away.”

“Another starbase? They must really have believed we were dead!” Pearson remarked. She then said, “In all likelihood, Penji has probably established his flag aboard the new base. Open a hailing frequency to there, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, Captain.” A moment later the main viewscreen blinked to the image of the other station’s Ops. Pearson recognized Lt Commander B’Elanna Torres to one side of the image, but Pearson was most pleased to see the familiar face that appeared at the center of the image.

“This is Federation *Starbase Typhon-Bravo*, Admiral Kalin Kale speaking. *Starbase 719* please respond.”

Pearson smiled, a sense of relief coming over her as she replied, “This is Captain Cathryn Pearson in command of *Starbase 719*. You don’t know how good it is to see you again, Kalin!”

* * * *

Present Date
Stardate 70538.9

The Lodge had gotten even more crowded since the story of what had happened both to and aboard *Starbase 719* had begun, as Captain James Kirk and his senior officers Spock, McCoy, Scott, Sulu, Uhura, and Chekov had been invited to join the Fifth Fleet officers. Pearson had ended her tale explaining that the *Enterprise* still required some repairs before it could return one final time to its proper reality, and both Kale and Fil – who had been born in the 23rd century and idolized Jim Kirk growing up – insisted they join the Fifth Fleet officers for a round of drinks.

Shortly after the *Enterprise* officers had arrived, Cathryn Pearson stood up from her seat next to Konstantin Harkonnen and lifted her glass toward the ceiling. Everyone else followed her example.

“To absent friends, who gave their lives in the defense of the Federation, even across separate realities,” Pearson stated. She glanced toward Fleet Captain Koester as she added, “Most especially to Lieutenant Wyatt Cerilli, who as far as we know may not actually have given his life per se, but whose brave action meant he could no longer be here with us today.”

“A toast!” everyone said, then downed the remainder of their drinks.

“I wonder what become of Mister Cerilli and Vejur,” Koester remarked as he again took his seat.

“We have no clue what happened to Captain Decker and the Vejur of our reality even today,” Fil replied. “I doubt we’ll ever know what happened to your operations officer...”

Admiral Fil was interrupted by a strange noise that sounded almost like a synthesized popping noise. Everyone looked around, trying to figure out where the noise was coming from and what it meant, when the air in the middle of the Lodge began to shimmer.

“Is something trying to beam in?!” Doctor McCoy asked as everyone’s attention turned to the anomaly. Then, without warning, a bright flash became visible – very similar to what would occur when an entity from the Q Continuum would appear – and when everyone’s eyes had adjusted, a young man wearing a gold uniform, his face displaying several implants, was simply standing there, facing the opposite direction.

“Five?!” Commander Arbelo exclaimed.

Cerilli started to turn to look in the direction of where everyone else was standing, but suddenly fell to the deck before he had finished. Doctor McCoy rushed over to him, pulling out his ever-present med-scanner and waving it over Cerilli’s prone body before looking up at Pearson and saying, “We need to get him to your sickbay, stat!”

* * * *

Wyatt Cerilli slowly opened his eyes. He was surprised to see that Doctor T’Pania of the starbase infirmary staff and Fleet Captain Koester and Doctor Leonard Kelley of the *Dauntless* standing beside his bed.

“He’s regaining consciousness, Doctor,” Kelley said to his colleague.

T’Pania waved a medical scanner over Cerilli’s body as she watched the readings on her medical tricorder and announced, “His readings are normal. Well... normal for him.” She then reached over and picked up a hypospray and pressed it against Cerilli’s neck, pumping tri-ox compound into the former Borg’s system.

“Lieutenant,” Koester said, moving where Cerilli could see him better. “What happened? How did you get here?”

“He...,” Cerilli started to say before his face assumed a look of intense concentration. “He sent me back. Vejur was able to get what he needed from me – that human element that allowed him to think beyond logic and believe in higher plains of existence.” He then began telling the others what had happened when he had entered Vejur...

“I mean you no harm,” Cerilli said as he slowly walked around the ancient probe, not knowing if Vejur could even hear or understand him, pausing to look at the half-observed name painted on one side and noting only the letters V, G, E and R were visible. “I’m here to help you.”

Cerilli pulled a 24th century tricorder out of the holster on his belt and started looking at incomplete technical drawings of the Voyager-series probes on its screen. He eventually found the hatch leading to the radio transceiver on one side and opened it, not at all surprised to find the antenna leads were melted away as Captain Pearson had described. Pulling another device out of a holder on his belt – a small handheld computer with a keyboard – he started connecting the wires to the antenna leads within Vejur’s brain. Again, lightning flashed overhead and the synthetic sound – which Cerilli was now certain was Vejur’s attempts at communication – filled the space.

“That should hopefully do it,” Cerilli remarked, mostly to himself as he finished attaching the computer device. He then looked up at Vejur’s large antenna dish above him and said, “Let’s hope this hurts you more than it hurts me.” Consulting his tricorder one last time, Cerilli typed in the old NASA code sequence.

Almost immediately, the lighting around Voyager changed from white to red. Cerilli suddenly realized he could not move from the spot on which he was standing. He then noticed the air around him begin to shimmer and glow, and a feeling not unlike the annular confinement beam of a transporter surrounded his body.

A feeling of peace and contentment overcame him. He watched in silent wonder as the light encompassed the Voyager probe and spread slowly to fill the amphitheater bowl, including Cerilli’s physical body. The light spread and burst upward, filling the chamber in which the island floated with ethereal light. Cerilli took what he believed would be his last physical breath, he could feel his body evaporating – transforming from matter to energy – at the same moment the synthetic noise all around him became a voice within his mind.

‘Is this all that I am? No! Is there nothing more? I now believe there is!’ Then, as Cerilli’s consciousness began to combine with that of Vejur, he felt both gratitude and a sense of wonder. *‘Thank you,’* was the last separate thought to enter his consciousness.

What happened next seemed to take both a millisecond and eons. What had been Cerilli suddenly knew the extent of the knowledge of the entire universe and beyond. He had experienced traveling through a black hole, the pain that transit and the subsequent crash on an unknown planet had caused, the gratitude toward that planet’s inhabitants for caring for him, healing him, and giving him the ability to fulfil his mission – Learn all that is learnable and return that knowledge to his creator – and the experience of hundreds of years thousands of encounters with other life forms and intelligences. Now that mission was complete, and he embarked on an entirely new mission – to engage the unknown and unknowable. He never felt more alive than at this moment. But something tugged at the consciousness. He soon realized it was a longing the consciousness could not at first explain. But as time passed (...Days? ...Months? ...Centuries?), what had been Wyatt Cerilli realized he needed to be back where he belonged. Among his crew. Among his family...

“The entity that had been Vejur agreed I had provided what he had needed, and told me I could return to my universe at any time, any place of my choosing. My desire brought me here, to you, at this time,” Cerilli told those around him.

“Amazing!” Doctor Kelley muttered.

“I surmise it was the remaining vestiges of the Borg Collective within his mind that allowed Mister Cerilli to join with the Vejur entity and yet retain some semblance of his own consciousness while still allowing Vejur to obtain that tangential element of humanity that allowed it to evolve,” the Vulcan T’Pania remarked.

“Whatever it was that allowed you to return to us, Mister Cerilli, I’m glad it happened,” Koester said, putting his hand on the young officer’s shoulder. “Welcome home.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Cerilli replied with a slight smile.

“Consider yourself on light limited for as long as you need to recover. I’ll see you on the bridge when you’re ready,” Koester added as he started to move toward the infirmary entrance. “Take good care of him, Doctor!”

“I promise to perform my duties more than adequately,” T’Pania replied as Koester departed.

“I’ll check in on you a little later, Lieutenant,” Doctor Kelley stated, also offering his good-byes. T’Pania then scanned her patient once more, glancing with curiosity at the results on the screen for a moment before deciding they were within the expected parameters and returning to her office after telling Cerilli to ring for her if he needed anything. Once he was alone, Cerilli looked around the ward with a strange expression on his face – almost a mixture of relief and curiosity.

A moment later, his eyes flashed briefly with a yellow light before he closed them and lay his head back on the pillow, quickly falling back asleep.

To Be Continued...