

The logo features a stylized, metallic-looking Starship Enterprise hull section in the background. The text "STAR TREK" is written in a gold, blocky font across the top, and "REEMERGENCE" is written in a silver, blocky font below it. The "RE" in "REEMERGENCE" is highlighted in red.

**STAR TREK**  
**REEMERGENCE**

Hugo Calvin

**Part I**

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

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STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

# **STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE**

Written by Hugo Calvin

## Prologue

Draloos V brimmed with its usual natural beauty when the Starfleet team transported to the surface; it was simply unfortunate that the team had to isolate themselves from the planet's environment, or risk death. That was no exaggeration, because Draloos V had one of the most hostile environments known to the Federation. Its beauty belied the dangers that lurked at every corner of the ecosystem. But it wasn't because of any harsh environmental or planetary condition. A significant portion of the biosphere was actually classified as tropical: warm, humid, sunny, with plenty of moisture. Draloos V, by technical definitions, was Class M: it had an atmosphere of nitrogen, oxygen, and carbon

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

dioxide similar to that of Earth, and sufficient water in its liquid state to support carbon-based life.

But the terrifying wildlife on the planet has caused the Federation to raise safety awareness and protective measures; anyone transporting to the surface of Draloos V was now required to wear a Class 3 biohazard-suit, one of the Federation's safest protective gear. The suit was designed to completely isolate the individual from its environment, much like the one used for space. But this suit was specially designed to be bioprotective; it was able to keep out virtually all viruses and invasive microorganisms, airborne or otherwise. The material that the suit was made of was anti-microbial, which could kill essentially all microorganisms that come in contact with it, even most foreign microorganisms. So the material itself, and on the surface of the suit, were sterile to 99.99 percent. It was tough, so that no stinger or sharp object in the biological world could pierce the material. And it was sealed tight, so no gases could be exchanged with the outside. But the suit was thick, the head piece had a huge, clear glass-like dome, and overall it was just difficult to move around in. All three members of the team walked around clumsily, like they were the first explorers on the Moon.

“Why are we on this freakin’ planet again?” Lieutenant Ray yelled.

“We’re here on a mission, remember? We need to find out what happened to the cargo ships. If they lose many more, they soon won’t have enough biomatter to feed everyone on

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Draloos IV,” said the senior officer. But Commander Stevens could understand Ray’s apprehension about the planet. He didn’t want to stay there any longer than he had to.

“Fine. Let’s just do this and get the hell out of here.”

“It’s an important mission, Ray. Just think about all of the families they need to feed.”

Draloos IV was the sister planet of Draloos V, home to a large human populous that numbered just over a billion. The population used the biomatter of Draloos V to feed itself through means of converting the matter into useful energy. Trees, bark, grass, weeds, insects, empty shells, and even waste products were fair game as useful biomatter. The population of Draloos IV was deeply dependent on it because the planet itself had no means of creating its own energy supply. Draloos IV, unlike V, was Class K – a barren planet.

“And remember who you’re talking to, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, SIR.”

*God, I hate coming here,* Ray was thinking as he walked through the thick vegetation. Ray was just very apprehensive about what he might run into. But the environment was beautiful. For total daylight, it was very dark, thanks to the large canopy that blocked most of the sunlight. Only beams of sunlight leaked through the cracks of the canopy. But despite the darkness, there were some bright wildlife near the ground that helped light the

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

surface. There were plenty of weeds, flowers, and even trees whose leaves fluoresced all sorts of colors, anywhere from red to bright purple. Ray noticed that blue and green were the most common. He could have sworn that he saw insects and small reptiles that fluoresced as well.

All vegetation on Draloos V was toxic. In many of the plant species, only nano-scale quantities were needed to kill a large mammal in only seconds. These potent toxins were not at all unheard of, even on Earth, although most of such toxins were from organisms that lived in the ocean. Any animal or mammal on Draloos V just passing by could suddenly collapse to its death if it had unluckily gotten pierced by a poisoned thorn from a nearby bush. But that was the least of the team's worries. On Draloos V, as competition for food and energy became fiercer throughout the planet's evolution, some of the vegetation had actually evolved to hunt mammalian prey. And they were exceedingly aggressive about it.

The Class M designation, despite being a more fitting designation from a technical standpoint, was soon changed to Class Z, or what some officers refer to as a "Demon" world. Some officers who explored Draloos V died from poisonous materials, others were eaten alive by aggressive insects, and some just disappeared altogether. You couldn't even drink out of a nearby body of water because of poisons released by the organisms that occupied the water. Needless to say there were enough incidents to deter even the bravest

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

of explorers. Only extreme exobiologists who worked for scientific glory braved the planet, and even then, some brought back nothing but more haunting stories.

“Are we close to the coordinates of the cargo ship yet? We’ve been walking for over twenty minutes,” said Ray.

“Should only be about ten more minutes.”

“You’d think the Chief could have transported us closer to our destination, rather than have us walk around this forsaken place.”

“You heard the Chief before he landed us down here, Lieutenant. The distress signal was weak and scrambled. He could only get an approximate location from orbit. Just consider yourself lucky he didn’t transport us farther away, or near the water,” said the Commander, trying to sound encouraging.

“Yeah, well, still, we shouldn’t have come here,” Ray said. “How are we doing Ensign?”

“Just doing my job, sir,” said Ensign John. It was one of his very first missions, so he was following orders to the letter. But Ray could tell that John was still very nervous. The ensign stayed very close to his commanding officer.

“Stay together, guys,” said Stevens.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Ray moved very uncomfortably in his suit. He wasn't used to wearing this kind of thing. He was always one to avoid away missions in general, let alone ones that required to put on cumbersome gear. The suit had an internal cooling unit which was supposed to keep the internal temperature at a comfortable level, but Ray was still sweating like crazy. Maybe it was just nerves.

Ray continued to walk, reluctantly getting sucked into the beauty of the plant life. As he turned, Ray suddenly noticed that he began to veer off from the rest of the group. Or they veered off from him. *Great.*

"Lieutenant, we're only about five minutes away from the crash site, so get your ass back here," said the Commander.

"Got it," said Ray, looking at his tricorder in order to triangulate their position. "Closing in on your location."

Ray heard a very light flutter behind him, as if a small flock of birds passed by him. Ray turned back, and there was nothing. *Whatever*, he thought, *just get back with the rest of the group*. At that moment, a small bright green butterfly landed on Ray's arms. *Pretty*, he thought. It flapped its wings slowly. Ray shook his arm to get rid of it, but it seemed 'sticky.' Ray swatted at it with his other arm, and it flew away. Good thing it was only a butterfly, he did not want to come across any of the aggressive ants that he had heard about.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Ray came across something. It was maybe twenty meters away, a white material, or something. It was in the opposite direction of the team, but since it was clearly not part of the environment, Ray felt it important to investigate. He ran towards it. It was a thick white material, partially buried into the ground. He proceeded to dig it out, and the overall form of it began to take shape. He also noticed something attached near the center of the piece. It was corroded, difficult to make out, but the shape was unmistakable. It was a Starfleet combadge.

In that instant, Ray realized what he was looking at. It was the very same suit he was wearing. He managed to pull out the head dome out of the ground as well. But there was no body. *Did someone from the cargo crew come down and take their biohazard-suit off?* That seemed unlikely, given Starfleet's stern warning. "Commander," Ray said, "Have our biohazard-suits been cleared by Starfleet to use on this planet?"

"Yeah, nobody who has transported here before with the Class 3 biohazard-suit had any problems. Some of them have been here for days, even weeks. Others have been to a lot harsher planets with these babies on. You could practically walk through lava in this. Believe me, we're safe," Commander Stevens said.

That made Ray feel marginally better. In addition to its bioprotective properties, their suits had numerous defenses that could withstand any number of harsh conditions. It was temperature- and pH-resistant. So the wearer could be blasted with a modern flamethrower,

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

or have concentrated sulfuric acid poured onto him, and there would be no signs of damage or corrosion on the suit. The hardest part of its design was actually trying to seal the connections properly when you put it on, because that could leave tiny gaps in the suit if the wearer was not careful. But in general, for all intents and purposes, it was indestructible. “Then I think you guys had better come down here.”

When Ray looked up, he noticed that the trees suddenly had fewer leaves on its branches. But it was hard to tell because it was so dark anyway. Maybe the leaves were just loose, and flew off from a strong breeze, but Ray didn't remember any breezes coming through. And second, there were no leaves on the ground. What was unusual also was that the trees in the distance appeared to have their leaves intact. It was only the trees around him that had lost their leaves. As Ray walked a few more steps, he began to put two and two together. Were all of those leaves on the trees the butterflies he just saw?

If that were true, that means there were a lot of them. And they were close by, too, because he heard the flutter again. Ray pulled out his tricorder to try and analyze at least one of them, and see if they were in Starfleet's database of known species. But he really couldn't see any around him when he looked for them. It would be nice to know if they were hostile. Of course, nowhere in Starfleet's database of butterflies on any planet were any species labeled as dangerous.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

He heard the light flutter yet again. And this time, two butterflies landed on his arms, one on each arm. “Guys? Do you hear me? You need to see this,” trying to get back to the subject at hand.

“Yes, we hear you, Lieutenant. We’re moving in on your location. Should be there in a couple of minutes.”

Three more butterflies landed on him. He couldn’t shake them. *Get the hell off*, he thought. How the hell did they stay on? They must have strong little legs. He swatted them right on his arm, killing them almost instantaneously, which was one way to handle them. Ordinarily, he wasn’t supposed to interfere with the life forms there, let alone kill them. *But to hell with Starfleet regulations*, he thought. The butterflies were starting to become annoying. He could hear more of them nearby. One by one he swatted them, but they were beginning to catch up. “Guys?”

“Almost there, are you in trouble?”

“Umm...well...” Ray wasn’t even sure how to answer, since they were just butterflies. And he was killing them left and right. They were beginning to pick up speed, but it was nothing that he couldn’t handle. At that very instant, however, he felt something tingling on his arms. Underneath the suit. It was causing sharp and needle-like pain on his skin that came and went, and came again. As more butterflies landed on him, he felt more tingling.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Were they biting? That was impossible. Even if they were secreting some sort of corrosive agent, it still couldn't get through the suit. And besides, as he looked at his arms, he saw no signs of any penetration anywhere.

He felt more and more pain, covering a larger area on his arms and reaching onto his torso and his legs. The tingling now felt like a burning. How? How were they getting something through the suit? He felt a strong urge to look at what was eating away at him. "I...I need to get this suit off of me..." Ray was gasping. "I need to..."

"Lieutenant! Are you alright? We're almost there!" the Commander could hear that something with Ray was not right. Ray must not take his suit off.

But Ray was too distracted. The burning was starting to become unbearable and covering a larger and larger area of his body. He could almost feel the burning reach deeper into his flesh. The butterflies were overwhelming him, and he had stopped swatting at them. He didn't know what to do, because the pain was becoming agonizing. He could feel something burning on his face now, and his eyes began to sting very badly. He couldn't even see outside, since his entire helmet was covered with the butterflies. As he stood there, gasping, he could begin to smell his own corroded flesh. He yelled.

"RAY!" the commander yelled. "This is Commander Stevens to the *U.S.S. Ion*, can you get a lock on Ray?"

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Yes, sir. But he’s flailing around too much. It’s going to take me a few seconds to...”

Ray collapsed to the ground. His body was beginning to convulse, and he was now unconscious. By now, the swarm of green butterflies had completely covered him.

“Get him out! NOW!” Commander Stevens was running as quickly as he could, but the thickness of the suit slowed him down significantly.

“I can’t, sir! His...his mass...*it’s all over the place! There’s nothing left to lock onto!*”

Commander Stevens finally arrived to the site. Though he couldn’t see Ray’s face, he was easy to spot because he was lit up brightly by the butterflies that enveloped him. Commander Stevens quickly pulled out his phaser, and instructed Ensign John to do the same. “Setting 5, wide dispersal pattern. Ready? *Fire.*” The wide phaser beams vaporized a sizeable chunk of the butterflies, but most of them fled quickly and returned to the branches of the trees, where they passed off seamlessly again as normal leaves. Commander Stevens and Ensign John ran to Ray’s body, but it was too late. Most of Ray’s body, including much of his skeleton, had already been dissolved. What remained was partially digested tissue, and the sight of it made the commander very nauseous. But Ray’s suit remained intact.

Commander Stevens stepped closer to the trees and looked closely at the ‘leaves.’ The veins were blood red, and they appeared to be pulsating.

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

It looked like they were feeding the tree.

# Chapter 1

*September 23, 2407*

*0813 hours*

*Earth, Sector 001*

*U.S.S. Rhino, Admiral's quarters*

Admiral Roth stood quietly in his quarters aboard the *U.S.S. Rhino*, one of the few remaining *Galaxy*-class starships in service. He had his arms folded behind him, quietly staring out of the ship's window into space. He was looking at Earth. Every species says that their homeworld is the most beautiful; the Admiral, being an Earth native, thought no differently of his own planet. But there was something extremely restful with the way the

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Earth looked, something that was absent from any other homeworld. Maybe it was the swirling clouds or the large ocean of water, but it was restful.

He sipped his Raktajino, a Klingon coffee. Not much has changed about it since Admiral Roth first got hooked on it. He still remembers the day, even the minute when he first tried the Klingon drink. He was a young ensign on an important mission to the Chin'toka system during the Dominion Wars. It was one of his first missions, and an extremely dangerous one. He made sure that he did his best job, because he was dead set on earning the respect of his new captain. The captain was a fierce leader, one that commanded loyalty from just about anybody, even from people that didn't even like him. But what Admiral Roth remembered most was his love for Raktajino. His teeth were near black he drank so much.

But Raktajino was more of an acquired taste, and even then, not everybody could stomach it. In fact, it was generally recommended that humans warm up with normal coffee for at least two months before trying Raktajino. He was studying the new specifications of the ship in the mess hall and noticed the captain walking in with his security officer and sat down near his table. Naturally, he had an extra large cup already in one hand, only to order more when he sat down. To impress him, and the young ensign Roth ordered a Raktajino also, never having touched a drop in his life. In fact, he never made it a habit to touch coffee *ever*. He took a giant sip of the harsh drink, but as the first

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

drop touched his tongue he nearly gagged at the foul taste. As he swallowed more of the drink, he could have sworn that he tasted blood, which actually wouldn't be have been too outrageous for a Klingon drink. He finished it, rather reluctantly, but it was that quirky, disgusted expression that he had on his face that made the captain laugh. Much to Roth's disappointment, that's how his captain always remembered him.

The year was 2407. It has now been more than thirty years since the end of the Dominion War. For most, it was just an artifact of the past, a subject of academic debate, not something really remembered first-hand by most anymore. Admiral Roth was a veteran of that war. In a way, the war united the Alpha Quadrant like nobody had seen before, but it took a heavy toll on all sides. It seemed that every race involved in the war retreated to their space to lick their wounds. For once, *space was silent*.

To add to the Alpha Quadrant's woes, just years following the war, the destruction of Romulus further disrupted the quadrant's economics. With one less major power and many other weakened ones, interspecies trade grinded to a halt. Things that the Federation needed could not be obtained, and things that the Federation had too much of couldn't be traded away. Although many of the basic necessities of life could be replicated, the Federation couldn't make everything. There were some things that just needed to be actively harvested, manually synthesized, or traded. And if fear and distrust among the major powers continued to permeate the quadrant, then there can be no trade, but it was a

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

time when trade was needed most. The intergalactic economy began to falter soon after. This was a Ferengi's nightmare. Or opportunity.

As Admiral Roth drank his Raktajino, he couldn't help but wonder, *was exploration really worth it?* Federation citizens have been asking themselves that question a lot in recent times. For as long as anyone in the Federation could remember, people began to fear space. If exploration leads us only to more powerful species bent on domination, then what was the point? What is really learned, and should it cost billions of lives for that knowledge? It had been thirty years now since the end of the last war, and the Alpha Quadrant was only beginning to recover. Distrust, starvation, crime, and poverty, which threatened to rear its ugly head once more, were finally becoming less common again. But why must it have happened in the first place?

Fortunately, the younger generation never lived through the war. They hear only stories in their childhood, some true, others embellished. They may be naïve, but at least they had a sense of eagerness that Admiral Roth once had as a young man, something that he had lost now as a seasoned officer. That was so rare for such a long time, because harsh realities set in for so many people for so long. A little youth, naiveté and eagerness just may be what the Federation needs right now.

The Admiral's door chimed. "Come in," he said, reflexively.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

The doors hissed open, and a young ensign came in. “Admiral, they’re ready.”

“The new ship is ready to be deployed?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thank you, son. Set a course for Mars,” he instructed. “Is Captain Darren Seth aboard the *Rhino*?”

“Not yet, sir. The *Chicago* has not yet arrived. They are to be here in twenty or so minutes.”

“When they get here, please tell him that I’m ready to see him.”

“Understood, sir.” The ensign made a quick bow, and quietly stepped out of the door.

*Well then, the Admiral thought. Boldly we go.*

## Chapter 2

*September 23, 2407*

*0901 hours*

*Utopia Planetia Shipyards*

*Mars, Sector 001*

People gathered from countries all over Earth to hail the new ship that was to be commissioned at the *Utopian Planetia Shipyards* orbiting Mars. It would be a new class of starship, the *Aegis*-class, that would usher in a new era for the Federation. The shipyard brightly lit up the giant letters that were etched onto the hull of the ship: *U.S.S. Dragonfly, NX-99472*. The Admiral couldn't help but wonder who picked out the name. It just didn't

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

sound right for a Federation ship, but at his age, the Admiral always understood that he was “old-school.”

The *Aegis*-class was a heavy cruiser-type starship. It was not a particularly large ship, maybe the size of an *Akira* class. The *Dragonfly* was sharp, and very shiny, due to its outer hull being made of a new material incorporated as part of its armor. It did not have a standard saucer section like most Federation ships. Rather, the saucer section was segmented into two large ‘arcs’ that were thick and pointed in the front, and tapered off on each of the sides and to the back. The two sides were connected together by a thin, but sturdy bridge that moved towards the center, and stretched towards the back, forming a ‘Y’-shape. It moved down towards the back of the ship where it also connected two warp nacelles, which were somewhat thinner and more pointed than usual and faced outwardly rather than upwardly. The new design had the overall shape of a typical Federation starship, but occupied as much as forty percent less space and required twenty-five percent less material than a standard ship of the same dimensions.

The term *Aegis* implied defense. Contrary to most ships in the Federation, the *Aegis*-class starship was not a ship meant for exploration. Fundamentally, it was meant as a defensive vehicle equipped to deal with emergencies; it was designed to quickly reach distant parts of the galaxy and deliver emergency supplies, assist in skirmishes, provide front-line support in major battles, and escort key figure leaders. Although a defensive

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

ship, it was given a sharp set of teeth, to ward off would-be attackers. Two or three of these ships, in a highly coordinated attack, could quickly incapacitate a Klingon *Vor'cha* class ship.

The movement in the Federation these days was leaner, quicker, more powerful ships. In an era that seemed bent on intergalactic war, the major advantage that they brought was that they were simply more economic. The Federation could no longer afford to crank out monster ships, one after the other. Size was not a requisite for strength. They may have made for good flagships, but not every ship in the Federation's fleet could be built this way.

The Admiral sipped his last drop of Raktijino. *Damn*. He was trying to cut back on the thing, as all men and women try to do at his age, but he thirsted for another cup. The first one just didn't take. A thousand more thoughts raced through his mind: *'I should keep it to just one cup'*, *'but I only got three hours of sleep last night'*, *'but my doctor told me to cut back.'* *To hell with it*, he thought, *I'll cut back tomorrow*. "Computer, another Raktijino. And piping hot, this time."

"Ensign Ferris to Admiral Roth," the comm system interrupted.

"Yes, what is it, ensign?"

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Captain Darren Seth apologizes for being late. He said that he still had business to take care of. There was some sort of incident on the *Chicago*.”

“What kind of incident?”

“He wouldn’t say, sir. But he’s headed towards your quarters right now.”

“Understood. Thank you, ensign.” *These youngsters*, the Admiral thought, *they have no respect for schedules*.

Then there was the Admiral’s captain of choice for the *Dragonfly*: Darren Seth. The Admiral couldn’t help but wonder if he had made the wisest decision to choose him, but he decided long ago that it wasn’t always a good idea to second guess one’s decision once it was made. Darren was a newly minted Starfleet captain at the age of only twenty-eight, and a graduate of *Red Squad*, Starfleet’s most elite cadets. His records show that he was a bit of a troublemaker aboard the *U.S.S. Chicago*. Defiant and independent, he managed to defy all expectations during his time on the ship. Roth wanted to know who could do the most, with the most little.

All of those thoughts circled through the Admiral’s mind as he drank his *Raktijino*, so much that he hadn’t noticed that the door chimed. The small panel on the side of the door showed that it was Captain Seth waiting outside the door. The door chimed again.

“Come in, Darren,” said the Admiral.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Admiral Roth. Captain Darren Seth reporting, as requested, sir.”

“Please, come in.”

Captain Seth walked into the Admiral’s quarters, in a firm, yet nervous manner. He stood about six feet tall. He had dark brown hair with a touch of golden shine when he walked under the light. It worked well with his light skin and overall facial features, which were pleasant and balanced. His eyes were a light blue, but what was most noticeable was that his eyebrows had a significant arc, almost like a Vulcan.

“I trust everything is alright aboard the *Chicago*?”

“Yes, sir. I just had...” he began, “I just had one last disagreement with my captain, that’s all.”

“And now you’ll have your own crew to disagree with you,” the Admiral told him. He took another sip of his Raktijino to clear his throat. “I called you here because I wanted to congratulate you in private, before I officially sent you on your way.”

“Thank you, sir. That’s greatly appreciated,” Seth said.

Admiral Roth was amused by his stern demeanor. “At ease, Captain.”

“Umm, thank you, sir. I look forward to taking command of the *Dragonfly*. I take extreme pride in...”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“I said *at ease*, boy.” Admiral Roth often forgot that he was assigning such a young officer to command the new starship. “So, have you gotten a peek at her, or did you just stick with your specs?”

Seth looked a little puzzled, but realized it wasn't uncommon for overly excited and clever captains to take a sneak peek at the new ship he was about to command *before* it was officially sent on its way. “No, sir. I only left the *Chicago* just now.”

“Take care of her, Captain. The *Dragonfly*, I mean. She's a special ship. She's a novelty, still very experimental. Starfleet has plans to make only eight of these ships, and you are the first to command one. Have you read up on your senior officers and crew yet?”

“Ah, not yet, sir. I prefer to meet them in person first. I think reports can cloud first impressions. Plus, I think it spoils the surprise.”

“Quite right. They do, in a way. You have a most interesting crew, I must say — of course, I'm the one who picked out most of them. You'll soon get a chance to meet them, with the exception of your first officer. He's finishing up his last duties on *Deep Space Four*, and will be joining you in a couple of weeks,” he said. “Take care of your crew, Darren, and they'll take care of you.”

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

The Admiral cautiously put down his second Raktajino, and began speaking in a more cautious, deeper tone. “The Federation and the Alpha Quadrant are still in great peril, Seth, far worse than is commonly known. We can’t assist everyone in the Quadrant, and still be able to defend ourselves against our enemies. And today, we have many more enemies, and fewer friends. Space is not for the faint of heart. It is *hostile*.”

“I told that to your Academy friend as well, Captain Alan Santiago. I’m placing you two with a great deal of trust and responsibility, I hope you realize that. I had to push to get both of you your own ships. The majority of the Federation Council felt that, despite your credentials and accomplishments, both of you were far too young. I hope you will prove them wrong.”

“With respect, sir...”

“Yes?”

“If I may ask...why did you promote me to captain so soon? I had only spent one year as first officer aboard the *Chicago*.”

“Are you saying you don’t want it?”

“No, sir, not at all...I just...”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“When the time comes...you haven’t proven yourself just yet. I can kick you back down to ensign if you don’t perform. There will be a lot riding on your first mission.”

“...I understand, sir.”

“Oh, and, before I let you on your way, I wanted to give you *this*.” The Admiral extended his hand and revealed a small gift: a new Starfleet combadge. It was in the shape of a typical Starfleet insignia, with a bright silver, asymmetrical arrowhead pointing upward. It was ‘split’ in two places, one near the middle and the other slightly to the right of the first one. And instead of any background like a golden rectangle or oval, the insignia was accompanied only by a tiny dark red sphere that sat in the pit of the arrowhead, but didn’t touch it. Seth assumed the red sphere was for command, like his uniform. It strangely looked as if there were four distinct pieces to the combadge, but it somehow magically held itself together. “I thought that you should be the first to wear one.”

“Thank you, sir,” Seth said. He removed the old combadge off the left side of his chest and replaced it with the one that the Admiral gave to him. “I will see you again soon, then, Admiral.”

“You’re dismissed, son. I’ll see you on the bridge of your ship.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Seth left the Admiral's room. The Admiral stared down at his half-finished Raktijino, and felt his stomach turn a little. *Perhaps it was time for new beginnings, in more ways than one*, he thought. He put it down on the glass table, and charged out of the room towards the bridge.

## Chapter 3

*September 23, 2407*

*0930 hours*

*U.S.S. Dragonfly, Bridge*

*Utopia Planetia Shipyards*

*Mars, Sector 001*

Captain Seth walked onto the bridge of the *Dragonfly* for the very first time. Admiral Roth was already there, in full dress uniform. The bridge was incredible. His first impressions left him with few words to describe it: *dark, sleek, Imperial*. The design harkened back to the days of the *Enterprise-D* where a large wooden arc stood in the

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

middle, where it encircled three command chairs. In the center stood the captain's chair, the highest of the three, where a bright light poured down and gave the chair an Imperialistic feel, or at least, a highly exaggerated sense of importance.

The two helm controls were literally pits in the ground: two egg-shaped holes in the ground, one on each side but both at the front of the bridge, each equipped with a console and chair. To use the controls, the helm officers literally had to jump into the chairs that stood inside the pit. The main viewer was *huge*. It wasn't huge in the vertical sense, but it was in the horizontal sense. That was mainly because it consisted essentially of three screens, put side-by-side. The two side-screens folded in slightly, creating a general curvature to the whole viewer. The wider view was put in place to take advantage of everyone's peripheral vision, which was very sensitive to movement. This allowed for faster reaction times when something unusual was happening outside the center of focus, which was usually the front. Whether that was the case or not, the wider screen just helped to really open up the view into space, which no one objected to. After all, the only thing better than one big screen, was *three of them*.

People started pouring onto the bridge. Among them were Starfleet officers, news reporters, Federation politicians. Captain Seth just wasn't used to so much attention at one time. There were so many varied people now that Seth couldn't tell if his own senior officers were among the audience or not. As he walked around the new bridge, a forward

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

young girl of Brazilian descent in full uniform came up to him to introduce herself. She couldn't have been more than twenty-two or twenty-three years of age.

“Captain, I wanted to be the first to welcome you to the *Dragonfly*. I am Ensign Ester Buiate. I'm your new helms officer.”

“Pleasure, I'm Captain Darren Seth,” he said, while shaking her hand. “It's good to finally be here.”

“I can't tell you how excited I am to be here and to serve under your command,” she said with charming, youthful enthusiasm. Her smile was girlish and flirtatious, which Seth immediately liked.

“I hear the navigations system for this ship has been completely reconfigured from standard design,” Seth said. “I hope you know how to fly this thing.”

“Absolutely,” she said. “The new system was part of my latest training at the Academy last semester.”

“You just graduated?”

“Yes, sir. This is my very first assignment.”

“You must have impressed Admiral Roth to be assigned to this ship.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“I’d like to think so. Then again, the more experienced helm officers probably wouldn’t even know where to press the gas pedal on this ship anyway.”

“Confident, too. You know how to leave the dock on my order without scratching the paint?”

“Just say the words,” she replied.

The Admiral began walking to the center of the bridge, just in front of the main viewer to begin his speech.

“May I have everyone’s attention, please. I’d like to make a few remarks before we send Captain Seth on his way. Today marks a momentous day for the Federation. It marks the end of fear, and the beginning of a new era of exploration. For too long following the great war we have cowered in fear. We have retracted our borders, we have cut resources towards our fleets, and have allowed enrollment of our young into Starfleet to dwindle. We have allowed public confidence in our great Federation to wane. This only puts us in more danger in the face of our enemies. No longer. Today, we re-discover the reason for being out here in the first place: to explore space. To learn and discover new life, so that we may learn more about our life here on Earth. With the launch of the *U.S.S. Dragonfly*, now the most advanced ship in the Federation fleet, we will again begin to test our mettle against the threats of the universe. The *Dragonfly* will be the first of

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

many new ships in our mighty fleet, including those that will carry on the names of our most beloved and accomplished ships. And with each successful mission that is carried out by the *Dragonfly* and her crew, we will be closer to restoring faith into our mighty Federation.” He turned to Captain Seth, “So don’t blow up the ship on your first day, Captain. Understood?” A chuckle rippled through the audience at his comment.

“No promises, sir...” Seth returned.

“All hands, attention to orders. From Starfleet Headquarters, Office of the Admiralty, to Captain Darren Seth: You are heretofore requested and required to command the Federation starship, *U.S.S. Dragonfly*, signed Admiral Ethan T. Roth, Stardate: 63844.8.” Darren Seth gave a nod of approval. “Computer, transfer all command codes to Captain Darren Seth.”

“Transfer of command codes complete,” the computer responded.

“I relieve you, sir.”

“I stand relieved.”

There was only one more thing for the captain to do. “Helm,” he said, looking directly to Ensign Ester as she sat eagerly at the controls, “*Take us out.*”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

An applause rippled through the entire bridge as the *Dragonfly* gracefully left the spacedock. It felt very smooth; not a single bump or rumble. It was a good feeling for Seth to get so much attention, but he was a little uncomfortable with all of the publicity. He got swept away shaking hands with reporters, officers, admirals, and weird civilians that Seth was unsure of what exactly they were doing aboard his ship.

Admiral Roth came up to congratulate Seth in person. “She’s all yours, Captain,” he said warmly. “You’ve earned it.”

“Thank you, Admiral. That was quite a speech. Better than I would have made.”

The Admiral laughed. “I’ll be sure to tell that to my ghost writer, but thank you, anyway. Go ahead, look around. Take the time to get to know your ship.”

“I will, she looks...incredible. Will you be staying for a while?”

“No, I have duties to attend to back on Earth. I’ll be heading back to the *U.S.S. Rhino* shortly, after we’ve made our way around Jupiter.”

“Are you sure? Once we leave Sector 001 we won’t be back for many months.”

“It’s alright, really. It’s yours now. Once we’re all off the ship, feel free to take her around. After a little shakedown time, you’ll soon be receiving your orders for your first mission from Admiral Kim.”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Very well then, Admiral,” he said. Seth shook his hand once more. “I look forward to it.”

“Good luck, son....”

In that moment, Seth had realized what the Admiral had really been wishing him luck for; as the Admiral turned, Seth could see a swarm of reporters moving towards him. Seth backed away cautiously, but they were moving in very fast.

*“Captain Seth, how does it feel to be the first to command a completely new Federation ship in nearly ten years?”* one asked.

*“How do you respond to calls from captains and admirals that you are too young for the job?”* asked another.

*“How do you respond to accusations that your actions as first officer on the Chicago at the last diplomatic conference caused the collapse of the—”*

“Uh...look, one question at a time...” Seth hated the press. He immediately became overwhelmed by the legion of reporters, and turned to the Admiral for a little help. But like a whisper, he had already disappeared from the bridge.

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## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

The *Dragonfly* had finished a quick trip around Jupiter and back and most of the reporters and guests had left the ship. All of the commotion of launching the new ship was now gone, and he felt free to finally get settled into his new ship. The first room he explored was his new Ready Room, which was likely going to be the captain's second home. It wasn't particularly large, but it was very comfortable. It had plenty of room to put in those model starships that all of the captains seem to do, that is, starships that the captains used to serve on. But unlike most captains, Seth only had one ship to display. He took out the one model of the *Chicago* and placed it on the counter. It looked a little lonely all by itself, but it would suffice.

The captain sat at the chair of his desk, both of which seemingly floated in mid-air. "Green tea," the captain muttered, "hot." A light on the desk lit up, and the cup and tea materialized in front of him. But it wasn't necessarily the fancy light show like in the old days. It looked more like the cup and tea 'grew' from the desk. Darren always wondered what would have happened if he stuck his fingered in the middle of the cup while it was being replicated.

Darren sipped his tea silently. Not quite the strong *matcha* flavor that he had grown used to on Earth, but it was flavorful enough and it soothed his nerves. It was a perfect alternative to coffee in the afternoon, but today, he drank it because it simply helped him to feel at ease. He decided that it was time to make himself at home.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Darren Seth was born in a small town in California, near San Diego. He was the son of a very famous and wealthy man who worked in intergalactic trade. He could remember that he would almost never see his father, who was a famous workaholic, spending sixteen or seventeen hours, seven days a week at work. His father frequently traveled, particularly to Ferenginar, which was still the center of the Alpha Quadrant for trade. At thirteen years old, Darren decided that he simply couldn't stomach his father's way of life, and saw little purpose in what he was doing. He packed his bags and moved to Tokyo, of all places. But the truth was he just wanted to get as far away from his father as he could, short of leaving Earth. His father in fact had been too busy to even notice that his own son had fled the country, which was actually perfectly fine with Darren. The less contact that he had with his father, the better, as far as he was concerned.

It was during his time in Tokyo that he developed a different taste for life, and not just by changing from drinking coffee to green tea. Rumor had it that he may in fact have been part of the underground crime syndicates, but it was a history that Seth rarely spoke of nowadays.

On Earth, or Paradise as some call it, all of one's basic needs are taken care of: food, water, shelter, medicine, education, among other needs. But for Seth, it was not enough for him to just "get by." He felt the need for more. Following his high school graduation in Tokyo, Seth decided that he wanted to enroll in Starfleet. He had moved from small

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

town to big city, and he was ready to tackle space. He moved to San Francisco, and over the next several years, studied with machine-like relentlessness to pursue his goal of commanding his own starship. He wanted to be the youngest captain in Starfleet.

Seth finished his tea, and put down the cup back on the replicator on his desk. The computer sensed that it was empty, and immediately disintegrated it, which looked like it cracked into smaller and smaller pieces until it disappeared. Seth decided that it was time to explore the rest of the ship: sickbay, engineering, Ten Forward, and even his own quarters. It would take him essentially the whole day to see them all. And then there was his senior staff that he had to meet. *How come none of them were on the bridge?*

Seth left his Ready Room, and proceeded towards the turbolift. But before he even reached it, he could already hear a beeping sound coming from one of the computer panels.

“Captain Seth,” Ensign Ester said aloud, “there’s a ship approaching us, sir. Off the starboard bow.”

“Oh? What kind of ship? Federation?” he said, moving closer towards the main viewer.

“Yes, sir. It looks like someone’s here to give us a send off.”

“Who is it?”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“It’s... the *Excelsior*.”

## Chapter 4

Seth could not have expected the *Excelsior* to show up all of a sudden on the day that the *Dragonfly* was launched. He was especially glad to see it because he was close and personal friends with the new captain, assigned to it only a month ago. It was the original *U.S.S. Excelsior*, *Excelsior*-class, commissioned over a hundred years ago. For years there was talk of decommissioning the ship and bestowing the great name to a new class of starship. But short of the failed transwarp drive, the *Excelsior* was a remarkably sturdy and reliable ship, passed on from one great captain to another. And as more captains fell in love with it, there was even greater resistance to retire it. As long as it worked, there was simply no reason to decommission it, especially at a time when the Federation was in

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

desperate need of more ships. So it stayed in service for over a hundred years, with routine upgrades and refits as it went along.

“Captain, the *Excelsior* is hailing us,” Ensign Ester announced.

“Put it on screen.” A giant image of Seth’s old friend from the Academy, Alan Santiago, appeared on the front viewer and his eyes stared down at Seth. They were partners in crime at *Red Squad*. His voice echoed through the entire bridge.

“Captain Seth,” Santiago smiled, “Good to see you finally on your own two feet. Thought I’d come back to Earth to give you a send-off.”

“Your gesture is acknowledged and appreciated. It’s certainly been a long time. Why don’t you stop over, and we’ll catch up.”

“I intend to. See you soon.” The screen flickered off.

Seth moved from the front of the bridge towards the turbolift. “Ensign Ester, tell Transporter Room Three to beam Captain Santiago over. I will meet him there.”

“Aye, sir.”

The doors of the turbolift opened silently, without the usual hissing sound of a normal ship. As he walked in, it also seemed like the doorway got bigger, as if the turbolift engorged him as he walked in.

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Deck Ten,” he ordered. And the turbolift shot off. *Sideways.*

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Seth was looking forward to see his old friend again. It was good to see a familiar face. Short of his parents, and maybe a few ex-girlfriends, there were few people other than Alan that he would have wanted to be there to send him on his way. The competitive nature of *Red Squad* made the Academy a particularly rough time for both of them, and had they not banded together to fight off the other elite cadets, they might not have made it through to graduation.

Captain Santiago materialized on the deck in Transporter Room 3. He immediately walked over to Seth, who stood there waiting for him. He looked very much the same as Seth had remembered him, with the exception of slightly longer dark hair that was spikier and messier than usual.

He shivered. “*Brrr....*Is it just me, or does transportation feel cold nowadays?”

“I think it’s just you.”

“Next time, change the environmental controls when I get here.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t take orders from subordinates,” Seth joked.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Hey, I’m a captain, too. And as I recall, I was promoted first. That makes me more of a captain than *you*.”

“Fair enough,” Seth laughed. He drew closer to give him a hug. “Nice of you to come visit my ship.”

“Hey, just glad to be here. I just completed an exhausting mission involving the Remans. Spending time back in good ol’ Sector 001 is a welcome change.” They proceeded to leave the transporter room and walked through the corridors.

“I said the same thing after my last mission on the *Chicago*,” Seth said. “I see you haven’t changed much. You look pretty much the same since you left the Academy.”

“Yeah, well, I keep in good shape. You’re looking good yourself. I saw the inauguration from the viewer of my ship. You know, I didn’t get this much attention when I was inaugurated to be the captain of *my ship*...”

“Hey, you got the *U.S.S. Excelsior*...and your first command, no less. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to congratulate you.”

“Don’t worry about it; it was almost better that you didn’t come. How the hell did you get reporters to come to your ship?”

“Lucky, I guess,” he lied.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Everyone’s talking about the new ship in the fleet. And the new captain to lead it. You should be really proud,” Santiago said. Seth couldn’t tell if there was jealousy behind those words.

“Hey, I just wanted to command. I didn’t necessarily want all of the attention.”

“You have to take the bad with the good. Just think about it: we’re only a few years out of the Academy and we’re commanding our own ships. Most officers our age are barely lieutenants,” Santiago said, almost like a school boy. It was true, Captain Santiago and Seth were already two Starfleet officers promoted to captain before the age of thirty. It was extremely unusual, but since the war ended, with casualties as high as they were, there was a shortage of good leaders and enrollment into Starfleet had dwindled. It made Seth wonder if Starfleet was starting to become desperate. But Admiral Roth seemed to make nothing of it.

“Why the hell do you want to command that old clunker? Hasn’t that ship been around since the Middle Ages? Wouldn’t you want to command something a little more modern or with a little more teeth? I think they’re about to make a new war-class starship.”

“No way, the *Excelsior*’s a classic...” Santiago said half-jokingly, with a childish smirk on his face.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“You do realize you’re driving one big failure, right?” Seth joked, referring to the failed transwarp drive.

“Oh no, I’m not letting you bring me down on this one,” Santiago said. “Still, *your* ship is impressive to say the least. A self-healing hull, mobile phaser canons, multiple defense modes...it barely feels like a Federation ship it’s so different.”

“First of its kind,” Seth said proudly.

“I can’t even recognize the computer interface.”

“Well, if you get lost, you can always ask the computer. It still talks, you know.”

“Even when I first approached the ship on the *Excelsior*, I could have sworn that I saw no windows on your hull.” Santiago was referring to the uniformly silver and reflective hull of the ship, which from the outside, made it look like the ship did not have any windows.

“No, we have windows. It’s just that the outer hull is supposedly made of one of those materials that have the property of letting visible light in, but not out.”

“*Oh*,” he answered. “Guess I need to brush up on the latest.”

“I’m sure my Chief Engineer can tell you all about it, if you’re into that sort of thing.”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“The *Excelsior* pretty much looks the same as it did for a hundred years. I think there are many in Starfleet who thinks it’s probably close to being time to decommission it.”

“You make it sound like it belongs in a museum.”

“Absolutely,” he replied. “But not before I make my mark,” he joked, patting Seth’s shoulder as he said it.

“Look, I’m glad you’re here. It’s definitely been too long.” He looked at the time on his watch, and decided that it was time for him to remove himself from the conversation. “But...I gotta run. Is the *Excelsior* still going to be around for a while?”

“Oh yeah, we haven’t received new orders yet.”

“I’d give you a tour of the ship, but I barely know her myself. Tell you what, let’s meet up later in Ten Forward, OK? Say 2000 hours. I’ll buy you a drink.”

“I’m going to hold you to that...”

“*Don’t cause trouble on my ship,*” Seth warned. He wasn’t joking.

“Why, what’s the rush? *Where are you going?*”

“What else? It’s time to meet my crew.”

## Chapter 5

Jerad threw his glass of wine on the ground in disgust, allowing the glass to shatter on the hard floors and the wine to spill everywhere. And on Draloos IV, *all* wine was expensive. Commander Stevens and his team from the *U.S.S. Ion* that were sent to the alien planet of Draloos V had not been heard from. Jerad could only presume that they were dead, like everyone else who had stepped foot onto the planet. And since there was no way that he or anybody else from Draloos IV would even get close to the alien planet, there was no way to verify it until the *U.S.S. Ion* had returned. He *had* to find a way to restore the cargo shipments. As a major political leader on Draloos IV, he had a responsibility to the people.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Jerad,” began one of his subordinates, just entering the room.

“What is it, Yavin? Do you have anything to report?”

“The *U.S.S. Ion* has sent us a transmission. Their away team is dead, and they are withdrawing from our system.”

“So they have solved *nothing*,” Jerad replied. This was not unexpected, but he was disgusted nonetheless.

“They said they were only a small scout ship with limited capabilities. They are ill-equipped to handle a situation like this; they won’t transport to the planet again. They said that they will need to return to the Federation to bring in other, more capable ships.”

Jerad grunted. *More ships. More probing.*

“We have already lost several of our cargo ships. Without more biomatter shipments from Draloos V, our food supply will run dangerously low. We estimate that we will begin to run out of food in two weeks. After that, we will have to start converting material supplies through the replicators to synthesize more food. Eventually, we may have to evacuate.”

“Understood.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Yavin stepped forward in a more forceful tone. “The people are starting to panic. They know that something is afoot. Shops are already being raided and theft is increasing. It won’t be long when the people resort to violence.”

“I know, we need to proceed carefully. That’s why we need the Federation’s help, for now. We need them to help restore the cargo shipments until we can get the situation under control.”

“But Jerad, if the Federation finds out—“

“They *won’t* find out, Yavin,” Jerad told him sternly. But even Yavin could tell that he was lying. There was no way to be sure.

Yavin nodded in reluctant agreement. “The captain of the *Ion* said that the Federation will return with more ships in several days.”

“Very well, then,” Jerad said. “We wait.”

## Chapter 6

There were four officers of Captain Seth's senior team that he needed to introduce himself to, and currently they were spread out all over the ship. Maybe he just should have called a senior staff meeting and get the whole thing over with in one swoop. Was it engineering that he was planning to go to first? He couldn't remember, there was too much going on in his head. But luckily, someone with a little more familiarity with the ship and crew just happened to come passing by. It was Ensign Ester.

"Are you looking for something, Captain? You look a little lost," she remarked.

Seth was glad to see a familiar face. "Actually, I am. I'm just trying to familiarize myself with the ship a little bit. I was hoping to meet up with my senior staff."

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Here let me help you,” she said, looking at his PADD. “The closest member of your senior staff is your Chief of Security. He’s currently on Holodeck 2.” Ester made the gesture for Seth to walk down in her direction.

“We’ve been commissioned for less than a day and he’s already on *the holodeck*?”

“Actually, he’s been with the ship for several months now. He actually helped design the tactical systems of this ship.”

“Oh.” The captain felt like he just got put in his place by his ensign.

“Is this your first time aboard?” she asked.

“Yes, I was serving as first officer aboard the *U.S.S. Chicago* just prior to getting this position. The *Chicago* only came by to drop me off just this morning. Today was really the first chance I got to really read up on the ship.”

“She’s quite something, I tell you.”

“So I keep hearing.” Seth decided to change the subject. “May I ask where you are from? I’m assuming that you’re human.” It was funny that in the twenty-fifth century, you couldn’t safely make that assumption about anyone anymore, just by their appearance alone.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“I grew up in South America. My father was African-American, but my mother was from Brazil. I spent most of my youth there with my mother.”

“Was it your mother that encouraged you to enroll in Starfleet?”

“Yes, it was. I was very lucky that she encouraged me to do what I wanted, despite what she knew about the war. She was only a child when the war happened, but she saw a lot of casualties first hand. She never talked about it openly, but I know she lost a lot of loved ones. Many parents at the time didn’t want their children enrolling in Starfleet after that.”

“Yes, we’re lucky to still have people that are still willing to explore space.”

“Amen to that,” she said. “We’re here.”

Both the captain and ensign walked in through the holodeck doors. What they saw was a single security officer fighting against a towering holographic Cardassian soldier. The officer’s uniform was the same as everyone else’s, but appeared to be made from a different material. It was thicker, and more padded. He was also wearing a helmet, which was a little unusual for a Starfleet officer. He also appeared to be using two side-handle batons as weapons, or at least batons that Seth had never seen before. It looked to be of special design; the short end was sharp and red, and looked like they caused additional pain when striking the Cardassian hologram. The long end

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

emitted a lighter blue color. When the officer found the opportunity, he whirled one of the batons around his one arm and struck down at the enemy's head with the long end of the stick. That must have done something to its head because the Cardassian was completely knocked out, ending with a large thud as he collapsed hopelessly to the ground.

“Computer: *Klingon, Level 4,*” yelled the officer. Then, a large Klingon figure appeared with a bat'leth in one hand. The Klingon was clearly powerful, but the officer had some advantage in maneuverability, and was able to use his batons quite effectively against the bat'leth. The officer was able to land in a few blows to vulnerable areas of his face and torso. As the Klingon slowed, he was able to land a few more critical hits, and finished off with a powerful kick in the face, and eventually knocked the giant over. He jumped onto the Klingon's chest, and again, struck the long blue end of the baton onto his head, and rendered it a vegetable. But apparently, the Klingon was not enough for the young officer.

“Computer: *Jem'Hadar, Level 5!*” he cried again, appearing exhausted, but eager. Another giant figure appeared behind him, and before the officer could realize it, the Jem Ha'dar had kicked him in the back and he flew several feet forward. It did not seem to faze the young soldier. It was quite impressive, actually. The captain thought of himself as quite a spirited fighter, but back in the Academy when he was up against a

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Klingon at Level 5, he was rushed to the infirmary with three broken ribs, several lacerations, and a near concussion.

“So, that’s my Chief of Security, huh?” the captain asked.

“What? No, that’s Ensign Lo,” she said. She gestured to a dark figure in the back, one that the captain had not noticed before. “*That’s* your Chief of Security.”

A towering, dark figure began to reveal himself from the shadows. He was quite tall, well over six feet. He wore a helmet with a metallic mask, and the shape of the helmet very much resembled the samurai *kabuto*, with a metallic flap that wrapped his entire head. His uniform was Federation, but more layered and draped that hung down towards his knees, almost like an overcoat. He also wore a very tall shiny belt that covered a significant portion of his mid-section, and also looked to be derived from the samurai design. Seth couldn’t see any skin on this officer. In fact, there was not a single part of his body that was uncovered. There was something about the whole outfit that was vaguely familiar to him, particularly since a single beam of bright green light radiated from the dark front of his helmet.

“*My Chief of Security is a Breen?*” the captain demanded.

The ensign just stared back. “Yes. That is Lieutenant Commander Thorn.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

The Breen were a reclusive, war-like race and were once enemies of the Federation. All Breen soldiers have been known to wear refrigeration suits, but the reason for them was never made entirely clear. They seemed to enjoy being shrouded in mystery, and will sometimes make up facts to maintain, or even encourage, that mystery. The Breen were powerful as much as they were crazy, which was certainly a most dangerous combination. Seth never would have thought in a thousand years that a Breen soldier would ever join the Federation, let alone be his Chief of Security. Somehow Seth doubted very much that he would ever let him know why he decided to sign up for Starfleet.

Ensign Lo was now beaten and cowering on the ground. Just before the Jem Ha'dar hologram had been able to land a finishing blow from his weapon, the Breen figure blocked it and knocked it away. He quickly turned and landed an elbow blow to the center of the Jem Ha'dar's chest. He stumbled momentarily, and tried to retaliate, but almost before he could make a move the Breen had swooped in, grabbed and snapped his arm, and then tripped him to the ground. He then finished him with a powerful kick to the face. From the looks of it, if the holograms had been actual people, the ship's doctor would have a bloody mess on his hands. The captain thought of advice that was given to him as a child by an established admiral: *never mess with the Breen.*

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Seth also noticed that Thorn's arms were entirely made of metal, including the fingers, as if they were synthetic limbs. It matched the color of his mask. Seth whispered to the ensign, "What's with the arms?"

She looked back at him flushed, as if embarrassed that the captain had even asked the question. She quickly replied to him. "*I wouldn't ask.*"

The Jem'Hadar laid there with blood oozing from his face. Oddly, it took a few seconds for the computer to decide to remove the image, as if waiting for it to suffer before disintegrating it away.

"Ensign Lo over there is training to be a specialized security officer," explained Ensign Ester. "He needs additional training from Lieutenant Commander Thorn."

"And those two batons that he was whirling around?"

"New weapons for the Federation security officers. They make great defenses against Klingon bat'leths and other sharp objects. But the added kick is that the ends of the batons are charged to activate the enemy's pain receptors when struck. So the pain is *three times* as intense as a normal strike. This means that if you struck it hard at your enemy's head, it wouldn't necessarily cause his skull to crack open."

"The Federation is still only interested in *defensive* weapons, I guess."

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“That’s right. But if you ask Lieutenant Commander Thorn, he would say that’s a waste of time. Most other races don’t have the same courtesy.” Seth saw Ensign Lo stand up and wipe off the dust off of himself. The batons seemed to go through a series of quick mechanical folds, and appeared to ‘integrate’ back onto his forearms. It now looked like the officers wore long, metallic arm-bracelets. It was an easy way for them to carry around the weapons, while still having defenses on their forearms, Seth guessed.

The Breen figure approached the captain. “\$%\*\$&#\*@(#@\*\$&#^@\$” he said, obviously in a language that could not be understood. It just sounded like robotic mumbo-jumbo. To this day, nobody understood why the Breen spoke this way. Maybe they just didn’t have vocal chords.

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak Breen,” the captain said. He didn’t bring his universal translator with him. But it appeared that Ester understood him.

“He’s asking if you’re the captain he’s assigned to serve and protect,” she told him.

“Yeah, that’s me. It’s, um, a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I read a lot about you in your files,” he said. Seth lied. On both accounts.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

The Breen took a good look at his captain, moving what seemed to be his “eyes” up and down. He seemed to be trying to measure him up. He turned to Ester, “@#\*\$&#, #(\$\*& @#(\*\$&#( #(@@(#&\$ (##@&^%.”

Ester giggled a little, almost embarrassed by it. “Um, he said, ‘Great, I’ve always wanted a *challenging* assignment.’”

Seth jerked his head. “What the hell did you mean by that?”

“@(#\$(@#(\$@#\$(#\*#&@#\$(@#\$&\*#.”

“He said that he’s not taking orders from, um, *you*,” Ester translated.

“Look, *Lieutenant*, if you want a different assignment, then just say so,” fired the captain. “I’d be more than happy to recommend you to another ship.”

“@#\*\$&@#\$(@\*#&\$)#\*.”

“*Sir, this isn’t the time for that*,” Ensign whispered to Thorn.

Thorn began to turn his back to him and walk away. “Hey! Just wait a minute. I am graduate of *Red Squad*, do you know what that is?...” Seth yelled, but before he could reach him, three human holograms in security uniforms appeared in between Thorn and the captain. When he tried to move around them, they just blocked

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

him. *What was this?* He looked at Ester, but she didn't say a word. She just looked to the ground.

But he understood what she was trying to say. "What is this? *He's testing me?*" The ensign didn't know what to tell him. "I'm getting out of here."

He proceeded to walk out of the holodeck doors, but soon stopped in his tracks. Seth could easily order Thorn to quit messing around, but he knew that he would not gain Thorn's respect unless he passed it. He felt like he was at some sort of Klingon right-of-passage ceremony. He knew that the Breen were crazier.

*Alright, fine*, he thought to himself. He could indulge in this little game for a while. Seth turned around to face his opponents. He quickly lunged at the center hologram, taking him down instantly, and landed a hard punch quickly to his nose. Its nose bled all over the place, its head fell back and hit the ground hard. *Wow, even the holographic blood was pretty real.* The captain knew that the other two would try to grab him, so after the first one was incapacitated, he made a quick roll to the side and stood guard for an incoming attack. But he was too slow, as soon as he looked up he saw one of the holograms coil back and thrust forward to land a powerful blow to the chest.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

The captain instantly fell backward, and for a moment, couldn't breathe. *Shit, these guys are strong. What was this? Level 3? 4? And three of them?* He quickly realized something else: *the safety features were disabled.* This meant that the captain could be seriously hurt or killed by the holograms. The captain rolled away to the side, but this time tried to further distance himself from them. One hologram tried a more arcing punch, which the captain was more easily able to block and land a counter-attack. He grabbed his arm by the wrist with his left hand, turned quickly inside of him, and landed a quick but painful jab to the face. The hologram cowered in pain, blood spewing everywhere. The captain tried to rush and finish him off. But the last of the three came literally out of nowhere and placed his arm right at the captain's throat while he was running. The captain's forward momentum caused him to fall right back to the ground.

The captain could barely see, but from what he could tell, one of the holograms was spinning around a stick, or a weapon. *Where the hell did he get that?* He couldn't exactly tell, but it didn't matter, he knew he was in trouble. He could see that the hologram was winding up to hit him. Hard. In the milliseconds that he had to decide, he felt he had no choice but to try and block it. He did, successfully, but it nearly killed his arms. *That was stupid,* he thought. *That was like saying I successfully blocked his punch with my face.*

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Adrenalin was really starting to run through his arteries now. It was time to take them down. The captain rolled away again, and quickly stood up and stood guard. “Computer! Weapon!” but he couldn’t think of an appropriate weapon to fight him with. A sword? A bat’leth? A gun? “Um, anything!” But the computer did not respond. *Wonderful*, the captain doesn’t get a weapon either. The hologram spun his weapon into him, landing quick jabs and pokes to various parts of the captain’s body, but none that were crippling. The hologram seemed to be trying to keep his distance. *Damn, I need to get inside*. The hologram was starting to become more aggressive, and trying to use his weapon to attack his legs and his knees. The captain started to keep his center of gravity lower. He was at least low enough at one point to grab the sand that was on the ground, and throw it in his face. The hologram winced, but it was just enough time for the captain to grab the weapon, and get it away from him. But the hologram quickly had a knife materialize into his hand. *Just great*, the captain thought. Ensign Ester stood by looking increasingly frightened for her captain.

The hologram made no hesitation, and resumed his attack, this time with a series of stabs and slices. Following the last stab motion made by the hologram, the captain quickly leaped to the outside, grabbed the wrist with his right arm, hit his hand with his knee to force him to drop the knife, and forced him into the ground by pushing onto his shoulder with his hand and locking his elbow. The hologram dematerialized in defeat. That’s two.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Now, the last one. This hologram appeared to have a weapon, too. He actually had two, but they were smaller than the staff the previous hologram had. They were the new Starfleet batons. “@#\$\$@^, @\*###\$^#^,” Thorn said. The captain couldn’t understand what he said, but he could tell instantly when he saw the hologram whirl his weapons with added skill. Thorn had increased the difficulty level.

*Okay*, the captain thought. How was he going to handle this one? The captain knew he needed more finesse this time. He held the staff firmly at the proper places, and began striking blows at the hologram. Not surprisingly, the hologram blocked each one of his attacks with his batons, and he was successfully able to land counter-attacks to the captain’s midsection and back. One of those blows, he couldn’t remember which, caused him to collapse onto the ground. Seth bled in his mouth. He was beginning to have enough of this.

Seth started to realize that something else was wrong. He couldn’t move his left arm. He looked over to see that his arm had come out of its socket. He must not have noticed it from the fall because of all the adrenalin. But now it was really beginning to hurt.

“*Oh my God, are you all right?*” asked Ensign Ester, realizing that this had gone far enough.

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“I’m fine...”

“Let me help you...”

“I said, I’m *fine*.”

“Computer: re-engage the safety protocols,” she yelled. “We should get you to sickbay.”

“I’ll go myself,” he ordered.

Lieutenant Commander Thorn just stared at him. Seth could have sworn that he saw Thorn shake his head. And then he walked out of the holodeck.

## Chapter 7

Captain Seth proceeded towards the doors of the holodeck. He cradled his dislocated left arm, which now hung out of its socket. The pain seemed sharper now, now that his adrenalin was subsiding. *I guess now's a time as good as any to meet the new doctor*, the captain thought to himself. He couldn't help but feel a certain sense of humiliation and anger. What right did the Security Officer have put his captain through this? He could have thrown him into the brig for that stunt. But then again, who was going to make him? No one on the ship could take him on, except, maybe himself. Maybe Darren was just angry that he had lost. Ensign Ester insisted that she come along, if only to show him where sickbay was.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Wait here, I’ll go in myself,” he instructed.

The sickbay was huge. It carried nearly fifty patient beds. It was filled with technological wonders, like mechanical arms for surgical procedures, a biochemical laboratory, a tissue and organ regeneration center, and a rehabilitation center. It certainly fit with idea that the *Aegis*-class ship was supposed to be a defense and emergency vehicle. But he was in too much pain to really notice everything that was there. One of the nurses walked up to him.

“Please, Captain, have a seat on that bed,” she said to him. “I know you’re in pain, but I’m just going to quickly take your vitals.”

“Where is the doctor?”

“Dr. Edward Min is in the other room performing surgery. Some young ensign was severely injured while on one of those holodecks. Poor guy. Turned the safety protocols off for the thrill and broke most of his rib cage as he plummeted off of a holographic cliff. Nearly permanently damaged some of his major internal organs. Unbelievable. Completely reckless.”

Seth wasn’t entirely sure if the nurse knew that he was in fact just at a holodeck. “Umm...sure. *Idiots.*”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Seth was starting to sweat a little from the pain. He tried to look strong for the nurse, but he wasn't sure why. "Here, let me give you a little something to help with the pain. The doctor will be with you shortly."

"Thank you, nurse."

From his seat Seth could actually see Dr. Min in the other room through the glass window, working on his surgical procedure. There were a number of robotic mechanical arms surrounding the surgical bed that moved gracefully around the patient as they performed the intricate surgery. Dr. Min stood by the control, tapping a large nearby console that controlled the robotic arms with all ten fingers, like a pianist on a concert grand.

Dr. Min was a tall, slender, young Korean man. Although the inner layers of what he wore appeared to be a standard blue uniform, he wore a doctor's white coat over the uniform. As he was doing the surgical procedure, he wore dark, round, blue shades that Seth could only have guessed he had on because of the extremely bright light that poured onto the naked patient. It was somewhat of an unusual sight to see Dr. Min. These days, it was a rarity to see an Asian doctor.

Dr. Min appeared to be finishing up his procedure. Although Seth couldn't hear him, it looked like Dr. Min was giving the nurses instructions on the final touch-ups on his

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

patient. Seth could see one of the nurses pointing at him while she was talking, probably to let him know that he was next in line needing attention. The doctor left the room, removed his gloves, and walked towards the captain as he sat there rather impatiently on one of the beds.

“It’s a dislocated shoulder,” Seth said.

Dr. Min gave him an unforgiving glare for having pointed out the obvious. “I can see that.” He was scanning the injury with his medical tricorder, which looked more like a small PADD. A skeletal image of his dislocated arm showed up on the tricorder. It also identified all of the specific injuries on Darren’s body, including his bruised and bleeding lip. “Is this the first time you’ve dislocated your left shoulder?”

“No, probably the third or fourth time.”

“It’s a complete dislocation, but there are no fractures. Do you want to tell me how you did this?”

“It was on the holodeck. It was just...a combat simulation.”

“Let me guess: you turned the safety protocols off. It’s a good thing that you didn’t end up like Mr. Lagndon over there.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

*Tell that to Thorn*, Seth thought. He was embarrassed to tell him that the safety protocols had nothing to do with the injury. He fell. “Yeah, lucky, I guess. So, can you fix it?”

“*Of course I can fix it*,” he snarled, not even looking at the captain once while he was talking.

Seth was a little taken aback by his attitude. In the few moments that they had exchanged words, Seth noticed a few other things about the doctor. His back was very straight and walked around with utmost professionalism. Seth could tell that Dr. Min was likely a very competent doctor, but he also carried an air of extreme arrogance. And the way he raised his eyebrow was eerily familiar. “Your calm, your sarcasm...you sound almost...*Vulcan*,” observed Seth.

“Very good, Captain,” the doctor said with a sneer, “That was quicker than the others. I am human, but I spent a good deal of my younger life on Vulcan.”

“So you were still born on Earth?”

“Seoul, actually.”

“So you’re not green-blooded, you just act like you are.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Indeed, but it didn’t take long for me to fit in. One could argue that of all of the cultures in human society, the Asian culture is most like the Vulcan one.”

“Or the Romulan one,” the captain said dryly, almost as if trying to arouse an emotional response from him.

“I take that as a compliment,” he countered.

“Makes for a lovely bedside manner,” Seth told him. Seth decided to hold back any mention that he once spent years in Japan.

“Lie back,” Min said. Seth did, slowly, and then a bright light was shining over his left arm. Min pulled out an unfamiliar medical device that stood several centimeters away from his shoulder, and lit a blue light over it. “Stay still. I’m going to initiate a series of ‘pushes’ and ‘pulls’ from the force fields around your shoulder that will put your arm back into the glenohumeral joint.”

It felt extremely odd, like an invisible spirit had come and tugged at Seth’s arm. He could hear the ‘creaking’ sound of the humerus bone being put in its place. Just a moment later, as the arm moved back into its socket, the pain dissolved away and a sigh of relief washed over him. Seth was able to move his arm again with nearly full range of motion. “Nicely done, Doctor.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“We’re not finished yet. I still need to tighten the ligaments around your shoulder.” Seth let out a sigh, almost to tell Dr. Min that he was annoyed at all of this delay. He had work to get back to.

“I’m injecting a solution of nanites that will massage your ligaments until they have been sufficiently tightened.” By ‘injection’, he didn’t mean using a needle or a hypospray. It was a type of ‘mini-transporter’ that allowed for medications to be transported through the skin to the site of injury. This gave a more targeted approach to injections so that they didn’t have to circulate around the whole body before they reached the injury site, where they might do things that were not intended.

“Wait...you’re injecting little machines inside of me?” Seth had never been comfortable with injecting foreign objects inside of his body.

“Only in a manner of speaking. You don’t have to worry. When they are finished, they will dissolve away.” Dr. Min placed the device, which looked like a small metallic pad, on his shoulder, as well as a small and flat glassy vial of the nanite solution. The solution slowly disappeared from the vial as it was transported into his shoulder. Seth swore that he could feel the little things crawling inside of his shoulder, but in reality, they were just doing some simple chemistry to his ligaments.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“What was it like growing up on Vulcan? It couldn’t have been easy, given that as humans we’re so inferior to them, as they so eloquently put it.”

“My assimilation was certainly not easy, but for a human, I was told I performed admirably. The key words there are, *‘for a human.’* It seems like they always need to add that qualification. But growing up on Vulcan did endow me with a certain discipline that I would not have gotten growing up on Earth.”

“So you embrace logic then?”

“I embrace rational and objective thinking through the vigor of the scientific process, if that’s what you’re asking. I rarely use the term ‘logic’ anymore. People once thought that the Earth being round was a silly idea, and that Einstein’s theory of relativity was ludicrous, both deemed as ‘illogical.’ What is logical to one person may not be logical to another. What differs between them is how well-informed they are about a particular subject.”

“True enough. If I remember my history, even after the development of the scientific method it us took centuries before it was properly understood and embraced by everybody.”

“For a long time, it was truly one of Earth’s great embarrassments. We as humans can be so slow to catch onto certain elements of progress, which may be in part what

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

attracted me to Vulcan. I do sympathize with the Vulcan cause, captain. If it were up to me, I would change my blood green and help them. But as fate would have it, I am to remain in this weak, red-blooded body. So be it, I have come to terms with it.”

“Nothing is stopping you from staying here. You can always go back to Vulcan.”

“I have my duties here, and I made an oath to Starfleet. Besides, Admiral Roth gave me an offer that I just couldn’t refuse.”

“Well, to me, I don’t care what you are – red-blooded, green-blooded, or no-blooded – just so long as you perform your duties,” the captain said.

“That,” he said, “we’ll have no problem with. Alright, I’m finished. I’m giving you a series of exercises to do to help with the recovery. But in the meantime, just give it some rest.”

“You’ll get no argument from me.”

“Nice try. I can tell from my scans that you haven’t been keeping up with your rehabilitation exercises from your previous injuries. That’s probably why it came out so easily this time.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“*I get it*, I’ll be sure to do it,” Seth assured him. He tested out the range of motion of his arm. “Feels good, Doctor. So what do you do outside of treating patients? It can’t be all that exciting between missions.”

“I work on projects that arouse my interests. I told Starfleet that I would accept this assignment as long as they provide me with a laboratory to do my research, with nearly limitless funding and supplies, of course. As a scientist, how could I refuse?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’m not a scientist.”

“Perhaps not, but I think you would still be interested to know what happens aboard your ship,” he said. “Like the new experimental project that I’m working on with your Chief Engineer.”

Captain Seth’s ears perked.

“You haven’t met him yet? I saw him lugging that monster around earlier this morning with about half a dozen other officers. Damn near scared the hell out of them. Right now, he needs my medical expertise for, well, *certain aspects* of the project.”

The captain looked at him slyly, with a skeptical but confused look on his face. He couldn’t help but sharpen his tone in response to the odd description that the doctor had

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

just made. He sounded like there was some monstrosity running amuck on his ship. “*What project?*”

## Chapter 8

Captain Seth entered the laboratory to meet his next crewmember: his Chief Engineer, Jean LeCroy. Of all of his senior staff, LeCroy was actually the most publicly known. He was a highly accomplished engineer, and worked on some of the most ambitious projects over his career in the Federation. He was responsible for many of the new design aspects of the *Dragonfly*, most especially the ship's engines. It was one of the major reasons why he assigned to the ship, according to Admiral Roth. His artistic flair was also legendary, as evidenced by the slick appearance of the ship that he was largely responsible for. His parents often argued that he should have been an

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

architect, but an engineer was just as good. And now, it appeared that he was also quite the scientist, as he was undertaking a major new project: creating a new android.

In the center of the laboratory stood a six-foot tall half-finished artificial humanoid. It had a skeletal structure of some hard, glassy material, but the bones were also interconnected with what seemed like artificial muscle. The muscles were clearly shaped to mimic that of human muscle, but they were silvery in color. They appeared to glisten under the light. Only half of the muscles were “installed.” Most other models of robots and androids used a complex array of pistons and joints to mimic intricate human movement. This model would use complex polymers that could respond, that is, contract and relax, to electrical stimuli, presumably from the android’s brain much in the same way the human brain transmitted nerve impulses. If the polymers were arranged precisely the way a humans were, they could allow the android to move with human grace. But, of course, it made it look like something out of a medical school textbook. From outer space.

In the center of its chest, the captain could see a beating heart. *Fascinating, if you were into that sort of thing*, Seth thought. The android just seemed to stare into nothingness, his face disturbingly still. It was a little unnerving to see a semi-transparent skull with a mass that the captain could only assume was a brain, with only

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

partial jaw muscle, but complete with very human-looking eyes. For humans, they say the eyes are the window to the soul, but for machines, *the eyes gave them a soul*.

Seth raised his hand to see what the ‘muscle’ on the android felt like.

“*DON’T TOUCH THAT!*” came a voice.

Seth looked around to see where the voice was coming from. He looked up to see his engineer sitting *upside down*. What the hell was he doing? The engineer immediately jumped down to the ground to face his captain. But when he stood up, Seth saw that he stood up only partially. He remained mostly slouched, bent at the hip. He had the oddest stare.

“Oh,” he said. “My apologies, I didn’t realize that it was you, captain.” He was not at all what the captain had expected. He looked particularly nerdy, wearing massive blue goggles that were so dark that you couldn’t see his eyes, and wild red hair that flared out in all different directions, the token characteristic of a mad scientist. He had a pointed chin, and at least a pleasant enough smile. He wore a standard engineering uniform, but he wore it sloppily, with his sleeves rolled up and his outermost layer fully unzipped. His skin was pale and a little frail. Like the rest of his crew, he seemed surprisingly young, maybe in his early thirties. He seemed like one of those fellows who was extremely passionate about his work and cared for little else. It was clear that

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

he was the type that just loved to tinker around with things. That was a good thing for an engineer. “I hope you are impressed with my work.”

“No doubt,” the captain began, ”...I take it you are my Chief Engineer?”

“At your service...” he said, in a slithery manner. Not exactly a good first impression.

“You’ve got a fascinating project here, Chief,” he began, “but I take it that it has nothing to do with my ship’s engines.”

The Chief let out a laugh. “Well, I hope someday it could be VERY useful in engineering,” he began. “But that depends more on *him*.”

The captain just stared, as if beckoning for more explanation over what this ‘thing’ was. “Him?...”

“Ahem...well, about five years ago I was assigned to the Daystrom Institute to assist scientists in the development of an ambitious and ongoing project. I was recently then assigned to this ship by Admiral Roth, but I insisted that I take this project with me so that I could finish it. We ran into a number of what seemed like insurmountable problems that most of the senior scientists decided to give up on, so I really didn’t have to twist anyone’s arm to take it.”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“What are you exactly trying to do here?” the captain asked.

“What does it look like?” he said, jovially. “I’m trying to build a robot.”

“Looks like more than that, Chief.”

“Quite right, captain,” LeCroy said enthusiastically. There was a slight European accent to his speech, although the captain couldn’t pinpoint from which area it was from. His name alone sounded French, but Seth couldn’t be certain that he was from France. Seth noticed that his fingers were quite long and slender, and he gestured a lot with his hands as he was explaining. At rest, he seemed to always have his index finger of his left hand at the base of his lips, as if deep in thought. His mannerisms almost reminded him of a bug. “Alright, it’s not just a robot, it’s a new android. At the moment, we call him by his experimental name, which is BX-12. Coming up with names, unfortunately, was never my strong point,” he admitted.

“I was about to say...”

“And quite frankly, I would prefer that he be activated first with full confidence that he will succeed, so that he may choose his own name.”

“So this is a new *sentient* android?”

“Of course! Of course!”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“The next generation of android design?”

“Well...not exactly. He’s more like *a side-step in android evolution*. He’s not necessarily better than androids of current design, but he sure is different.”

The captain was taken aback by such an ambitious undertaking. No one has been able to successfully make another sentient android for fifty years. There were simply too many complexities to contend with, both on a mechanical level and on a ‘mental’ level. Even those that were successfully made sentient went what you could describe as ‘insane,’ after they reached a certain stage in development, and it also quickly became too costly to take care of them. Research funding into this type of work had been abandoned, particularly at a time when the Federation needed to conserve resources.

The Chief took several steps, as if to think carefully as to how he would craft his next words. “Alright alright...how do I put this? *How* do I put this?” he muttered to himself. “We’ve been trying to re-think our definition of a robot. Robot, android, cyborg, even hologram, whatever term you’d like to use – we’re taking another step in what you describe as an artificial humanoid. We’ve moved from robots that were made entirely of metal, clumsy, with simple programs, to those that that look, walk, and talk like the real thing. I’m working together with Dr. Min to help me with certain issues related to its ‘human’-functions.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“As you can see, BX-12 uses a lot of synthetic materials that mimic human looks and function. Bone, blood, muscle, organs, joints, even brain, and eventually skin, all very much closely resemble that of you and me. Whenever we mention the word, ‘machine’ or ‘robot,’ we automatically think clunky metal and flashing blue and red lights. Over the years, they have gotten more sophisticated, performing tasks that are much more intricate than even you or I can do. But rather than continue in that direction, which has its limitations, we’re using almost every aspect of human physiology as a template for BX-12. His musculoskeletal system will allow him to move very much like you and me. His eyes will see like ours do, his ears will hear what we hear. When we’re finished, we will give him a face. We will add artificial skin tissue that will complete his profile.” As he explained, he used a small hand tool that appeared to ‘shock’ certain portions of his arm muscle, and he was actually able to manipulate his arms and hand quite elegantly by doing so.

“This may sound a little naïve, but if he’s just like you or me, then what’s the point?” the captain wanted to know. After all, throughout the ages machines have been created to serve the needs of the creators. They were always meant as tools to assist in the development of the civilization. To merely imitate the creator without serving any other purpose seemed, rather pointless.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Ah, good question. We’re not making him to be some sort of tool. Ultimately, we’re trying to answer a different question. Our goal is to understand how we literally ‘build a human’ from the ground up. We now know how to throw in the right laboratory chemicals together and let biology do the rest, but do we know how to build one *without* the genetic blueprints? That’s not so easy. This is the ultimate test of human understanding. What will be his role in society? Well, that will be his choosing.

“But unfortunately, the only real fully functioning, sentient artificial lifeforms in the Federation were those made from Dr. Noonian Soong. The man, of course, needs no introduction. To this day we do not fully understand exactly what made his androids tick. How they were able to develop sentience, consciousness, personality, and even ambition. Data was the culmination of Soong’s efforts and genius, the android who developed on his own, with a sense of ethics and a strong desire to become more human.

“However, by all measures, someone as simplistic as Data by design should have failed. How it was able to operate as an individual, *without* emotion, just doesn’t make sense with current understanding of human psychology. *We need emotions to make decisions, especially when information is limited.*

“But Data was ultimately destroyed,” he added, “with no chance to find out what made him who he was. And B4 never took off the ground.” He looked back at the

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

android that stood before them, standing there motionless. “The only real blueprints we had to work off of,” he said, “was Lore.”

And with the mere sound of that name, the memories of the stories the captain learned in grade school about Data and Lore came back to him. It was the classic battle of good vs. evil (android, in this case). “You’re telling me that you’ve brought an evil android aboard my ship?” the captain demanded.

“Err...,” LeCroy began, “Yes and no. ‘Yes’ in that how all of the working parts come together in an artificial being was inspired by Lore. ‘No’ in that BX-12’s brain will be synthesized totally differently. But the truth is we really don’t know what made Lore the way he was, whether it was just a flaw in the design of his positronic brain, or if it was his experiences with the colonists and Dr. Noonian Soong. On the flip side of it, we again don’t know what made Data the way he was.

“One thing we know for sure, Data had a very sophisticated ethical program, one that programmers have been trying to emulate. But from a programmer’s point of view, how do we create an ‘ethical’ program? That means clearly defining what is right and what is wrong. But even we can’t clearly define what that is. Therein lays the problem for the engineer: how do we program good? Or bad?

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“On a fundamental level, we can input simple rules: like, *do not kill a human being*. Or, *do not steal from others*. But what if killing that human being meant saving the lives of many others? It really depends. There is no calculation for that, no equation that can properly tell us what to do in that event. Again, we get back to needing emotions to make decisions. We rely on our feelings, our experiences, to tell us whether something is right or wrong. We can’t program judgment.

“This has ultimately been the limitation of the ‘top-down’ approach of programming a machine. Somewhere along the development of artificial intelligence, it became painfully aware to the scientists creating it that the ‘top-down’ approach just couldn’t work. *Some things just need experience in order to explain what it is*. It is why the most successful artificial beings incorporate the ‘bottom-up’ approach as well: *a learning computer*. BX-12 will rely on the ‘bottom-up’ approach more than previous models of artificial beings. Much of his learning will be based on experiencing the universe around him.”

“So, BX-12’s brain won’t be like Data’s? It won’t be ‘positronic’, or whatever Data was?” The captain couldn’t believe that he actually remembered that term.

“No, no, no, no, *no...*” he said agitatedly. “BX-12’s brain is a collection of artificial neurons, capable of forming dendritic-like connections as it learns. They are able to polarize and depolarize, forming action potentials, grow and divide, and affect his

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

sympathetic and asympathetic nervous system, much like real neurons in a brain behaves. They should also be able to store sensory information, so he will be able to have memory, like we do. As his dendritic connections become more complicated and the density of neurons increases, his intelligence will actually increase as well. In essence, he will be more like us than he will be like Data.” Since his skull was semi-transparent, the captain could actually see his brain floating in his cranial cavity.

“It’s important to understand that BX-12’s brain is not a computer. There is no processing unit. ‘Storage capacity’ and ‘processing speed’ have no real meaning here, in the same way they have no meaning for us. That’s key, if the goal is to mimic humans, because *our brains are also not computers*.

“The reason that we can do this now is because we can now replicate synthetic neurons at essentially no cost. That’s important, because a standard-sized brain contains about *one hundred billion* neurons. For a replicator, making a single synthetic neuron is no more complicated than making a pork chop. It’s just a single cell with a lot of chemical components. *Arranging* the neurons, having the right concentration of neurons, the right dendritic connection, the right interplay of neurotransmitters – in a way that is meaningful, like remembering the smell of your grandmother’s cooking — is the major challenge.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“When we’re creating artificial humanoids, the goal is to have it think and act the way we do. Otherwise, you might as well just make a computer. There would be no need to make a humanoid. If you try to break down the human brain, you can reduce the brain to the action of a single neuron, a tiny cell that fires action potentials at other neurons. *How* the neuron connects and interacts with other neurons form the basis of how the brain operates. What we need to understand to fully appreciate the human mind is how the density of neurons, spatial arrangement, dendritic connections, interactions with neurotransmitters, all translate to all the wonderful things we see from the human mind: our sympathetic and asympathetic nervous system, memory, human emotion, or human imagination. We still have only a fuzzy understanding of the underlying chemistry of how specific neural connections forms, say, an image of a loved one’s face.

“With this approach, we don’t necessarily have to understand it. But we can mimic it.”

Seth nodded, trying to follow each one of the Chief’s explanations. But he was becoming increasingly uneasy with each explanation made by the crazy engineer.

“Exhaustive work done in the twenty-first century led to a complete mapping of the human brain. We now know what a highly artistic mind looks like, or a highly

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

mathematical one, or even an autistic one. We know what the hippocampus or the frontal cortex looks like, or at least, what it's *not* supposed to look like.”

As the Chief was explaining, he hit a tiny switch on BX-12's head that opened its skull. The top propped open with a dozen or so tiny teeth peeling back to reveal its brain, just floating there. “What we're doing with BX-12, on a fundamental level, is *transcribing* the exact density and arrangement of neurons, the size and shape of the neurons, the dendritic connections, neurotransmitter receptors, all from a known sample onto BX-12's brain. So we take the map of a hippocampus from a healthy individual, and copy that map onto BX-12's hippocampus. In principle, if we have all of the functioning parts of the brain arranged correctly, we should have a normally-functioning brain. Much of this is based on theoretical work put forth by a Nobel-prize winner, Dr. Richie Kohman, in the late part of the twenty-second century. But we're getting close to actually putting this to actual work.”

“So based on what you've just said, how were you planning to integrate an ‘ethical program’?”

“His ethical program will be the same as the one we use...*empathy*.”

“Chief...” Captain Seth began, with his hand rubbing his forehead in a look of completed disapproval. This was too much to absorb in one evening. His head was

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

starting to spin from all of the ramifications that he was trying to consider. *Of everything...* his approach for making this android, the design his ethical program, even just the birth of a new artificial life form.

The Chief turned to the android, unaware that the captain was about to say something. “Transcribing knowledge and experiences will be tricky, since we don’t know how all of them will interact with each other. Of course, it’s not just neurons we have to think about, we have to make sure all of the neurotransmitters, brain chemicals, are carefully orchestrated...”

“*Chief!*” yelled the captain. “Are you crazy? I mean, if I understand what you’re telling me, and I think that I do, you’re talking about...‘*copying*’ and ‘*pasting*’ a *human mind*.”

LeCroy thought for a moment. “Actually, now that I think about it, I couldn’t have put it better myself. Would you mind if I used that the next time I present my research on him?” The captain was not amused. “Oh, come on, captain. I know exactly what you’re saying. But can you honestly think of a better way to explore humanity?” LeCroy asked.

*Touché*, the captain thought. It was hard to argue with an explorer on that one. It was true; it was a highly unique way of trying to understand who we are. But that’s not

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

what the captain was trying to get at. There were so many more implications that they would have to deal with before proceeding forward. “What kinds of experiments have already been done on something like this? Do we know what the...” Captain Seth searched for the right word, “‘psychological’ implications are of this?”

“Back at the Institute, it had successfully been done on artificial insects, mice, monkeys, and chimpanzees. Their intelligence was simpler, but their behavior was nearly identical. In terms of humanoid subjects, we performed dozens of successful holographic simulations.”

“Whether BX-12 makes it or not...the implications are...*profound*, to say the least.”

“Make no mistake, this is not just an academic exercise. We hope BX-12 will be useful to this crew. His muscles are three times the strength of a human, and his bones are much harder. We’ve also organized his brain to have aptitude for mathematics and engineering. Like I said, we know what a highly mathematical brain looks like. We’ve incorporated many of those aspects into his brain. He will be able to perform very complex calculations that most of you wouldn’t be able to do. That was my doing, of course.”

Seth thought carefully about his words. *Complex calculations that most of you wouldn’t be able to do*, he recited in his head. Obviously, he was referring to ‘normal’

individuals as opposed to his brilliant intellect. “I’m not talking about whether or not he’ll be useful.”

“I understand what you’re saying. He’ll be an individual, like you or me. Once he’s ‘activated’, he will have his own dreams and desires. He will have his own goals, his own ambitions. He’ll be able to make himself more than what he is in the same way you and I do, by working at it. He’ll be able to choose what purpose he wants to serve in this universe. The ultimate question, of course, is will all this transcribing of brain sections lead to what we call a soul? Only BX-12 will be able to answer that for us...”

Seth let out a sigh. “And exactly how will he be ‘activated’? Something tells me he doesn’t have an ‘on’ switch.”

“Well, actually, we haven’t finished transcribing his whole brain yet. Right now, most of his neurons are not yet capable of consistently firing action potentials, so its overall neural activity is still very low. Once we’re ready to activate him, we will make his neurons active, which will be done using cortical stimulators.”

“What are the chances that BX-12 can succeed?”

“That depends on how you define success. If he makes it out to five years, we might consider that a moderate success. He could, hypothetically, make it out the next five-hundred years, depending on how he develops himself, in which case he would be

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

a huge success. Then again he could make it out only in the first five minutes. As I've said, we've run dozens of successful holographic simulations. In real life, this will be the twelfth subject. The previous eleven subjects failed at stabilizing in the first few minutes of activation. You're absolutely right, there is no guarantee that this will work."

The captain stared into the eyes of the humanoid, unsure of whether or not 'it' could hear their conversation. "Is he... 'awake'?"

"No."

"Does he have an emergency deactivation mechanism? In case he was to malfunction?"

"Yes. I originally thought it unnecessary, and perhaps even cruel to have one, much like putting an off-switch on a human child. It wouldn't be very responsible of us to want to use it every time the child is annoying or too much to handle. Starfleet insisted that we install one, however, for safety reasons, so we did. The 'off-switch' will be like a paralytic agent, something that will render him unconscious but shouldn't damage his central nervous system or major organs. But, like any other humanoid, it's probably easier to shoot him with a phaser, which I should hope is never necessary."

With that, the captain decided that it was simply not safe to activate an entirely experimental artificial being. Even after hundreds of years of creating artificial life,

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

whether mechanical or biological, as a civilization we do not have the capability to wrap our heads around all of the ramifications of bringing artificial beings into existence. Like all catastrophes, rules and regulations are put in place to prevent prior mistakes, but rarely do they do anything to prevent future ones. The captain was not being cautious because of irrational fear, he was doing it because he understood all too well that, even after all this time of experience, as a civilization they were still not ready for the responsibilities of creating sentient life at a whim. “When do you plan on activating him?”

“Well, not until after we’ve completed his musculoskeletal structure, organs, tissues, and skin. After we’re sure that his ‘ethical program’ is functioning, we’ll be ready to activate him.”

“Listen to me carefully, Chief: I don’t want him activated until I’ve cleared it with Starfleet command and until I’ve done a thorough review of your work, is that understood?”

“But, sir, the project has already been cleared with Starfleet...I don’t need your...”

“I am not going to argue this with you, Chief. I don’t want this thing activated until I’ve gone through every aspect about him, and until I’ve deemed it safe.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Yes, SIR,” the Chief said reluctantly. “But Captain, you can’t be afraid to experiment like this. You said so yourself, this implications of this would be profound. Without risk, there is no evolution. Without evolution, we are all dead.”

The captain ignored what he said. He took one last look at the android, still standing there quietly. At that moment, the captain could have sworn that the direction of the android’s eyes turned slightly toward him. It looked very much like the android was looking directly at him, and the captain began to have the eerie sense that it indeed was awake. Never was the captain so sure about his decision.

## Chapter 9

Captain Seth was rather exhausted now, perhaps from getting pummeled by holograms, or maybe it was the extremely philosophical but dizzying conversation he had with his engineer. But in looking at his roster, he saw that he had only one more officer to meet: his counselor. The computer informed him that the counselor was located in another one of the holodecks. *What was it with all of his senior officers running to the holodecks their first day on the job?* Seth wondered. But when he entered the doors, it wasn't what he expected at all. He was at a casino.

It was bright, loud, and looked *fun*. There were just so many people laughing, drinking, and throwing around a lot of green pieces of paper, apparently. It even

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

smelled smoky, which was a sensation that he was not used to. He asked the computer which table his counselor was sitting at, and the computer led him to it. But the table that she was apparently sitting at was very unusual. The people that were sitting there looked like characters out of an old exobiology textbook. One looked like a human pirate, another a little Klingon, another a Xindi aquatic, and the last a Borg Queen. Seth trusted that they were all only holograms.

The only way he could spot the counselor was the fact that he could see a Starfleet insignia on one of the women. But the woman was entirely green. By human standards, she looked to be in her early thirties. Her hair was especially green, dark, shoulder-length, and had a nice curl. Her skin was only a light shade of green, and contrasted the dark color of her hair well. Her eyes were frosted yellow. She actually didn't look too out of place from the rest of the silly characters at the table.

The counselor wasn't wearing a standard Starfleet uniform, though her standard Starfleet combadge sat firmly above her left breast. Instead, she wore a 'body suit' similar to that of a Bajoran uniform. It was slim and outlined her womanly contours quite beautifully. The suit was split thinly down the front of her neck down to the center of her chest, which was not necessarily revealing but certainly left a lot to the male imagination. Like the rest of her, the suit was also green. Seth couldn't tell just

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

by inspection, but it looked as if her suit was made out of velvet or something. It looked *really* comfortable.

Seth stood over the table to watch the game. The dealer had just finished dealing out the cards, who glared at the next player up to bet. It was the Xindi aquatic, sitting to the left of the dealer.

“One thousand,” the Xindi said. It was just to match the big blind.

“Three thousand,” the next player said, who was a male human. *A pushy move*, Seth thought. The next two players, the pirate and the little Klingon, folded their hands.

Next to play, was the counselor. “Call,” she said calmly, throwing in her share of chips. The Borg Queen folded. Seth could see the Queen’s five mechanical fingers split into *ten*, allowing her to effortlessly shuffle three stacks of chips into one. The Xindi also called.

“Six of hearts, King of Diamonds, and Queen of Diamonds,” the holographic dealer said, as he revealed the flop.

The Xindi was first to act. Seth had never met a Xindi, but he would have suspected it to be a mean player. Instead it sat there quietly, pondering over its next move. “Check,” he said.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

The man next to him, going by the name of Tom, dressed up like a man from another generation and actually one of the more normal looking characters there. He looked carefully at the Xindi, and decided to continue with his forceful moves. “Eight thousand,” he said firmly.

The counselor stared at Tom with her large, frosted eyes. “Raise to twenty thousand,” she said. The Xindi threw in his hand in disgust. Tom pondered for a moment, and played around with his chips with his hand. He called.

“Queen of Clubs,” said the dealer, showing the Turn.

Everyone stared in anticipation of what Tom would do. But there was no hesitation, he already made his decision. “All-in.” The dealer counted his chips: forty-thousand.

The captain watched the game intently. That was a *huge* bet. It seemed like Tom was trying to represent the top hand. Or perhaps he was drawing out for something ambitious, like Kings full of Queens. It didn’t look like he was trying to bluff.

The Counselor smiled. “Call,” she replied casually, letting out a puff of smoke from her cigar. She flipped over her cards: Queen of Hearts, and a Nine of Hearts. She was the one who had Trip Queens.

The hologram “Tom” flipped over his cards: a King of Spades, and a Six of Diamonds. He already had two pair, but it wasn’t quite enough to beat the

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Counselor. He was chasing that Full House; he needed another King to win. That was not out of the realm of possibility; with two outs there was still a four percent probability that he would get one. Not great, but the possibility was there. Another Six wouldn't help him, because that would give the Counselor Queens full of Sixes.

The dealer turned over the last card, "Ten of Clubs." The counselor had won with her Trip Queens, over his dead hand of two-pair. She squealed with excitement, and collected all of her chips.

Tom was furious. That was the third time she had burned him today, and he was out of the money big time. He lost eight bars of gold-pressed latinum just today. He got up and slammed the table with his hand, let out a curse. Seth stepped in, just in case he was going to try and hurt his counselor.

"Don't think that looking like a famous poker champion would raise your chances of winning. Next time wear some sunglasses," she joked. She turned to Seth and whispered, "Commander Beil was always a poor loser."

"Oh," Seth said. *Wait...Commander Beil? Commander James Beil of the U.S.S. Valero?*

"But I appreciate your concern," she said to Seth. "It's very cute."

"I'm Captain Darren Seth." He extended his hand to shake hers.

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“I’m Jenovia. Ship’s counselor.”

“No last name?”

“What is it with you humans that think that everyone has a first and last name?”

Seth tried to change the subject. “I don’t remember this program being in the database,” he said.

“It’s my personal program, I brought it aboard with me from my previous assignment. But you’re welcome to use it if you like. Why don’t you join us? We’ve got an empty seat now. As you can probably tell, it’s five-hundred dollar, one thousand dollar, no-limit Hold-em.”

“Alright, sure. But I warn you that it’s been a little while since I last played. I’m a little out of practice...”

“It is a human game, you know.”

“That doesn’t mean I know every human game in existence,” he immediately countered. He sat down where Tom was sitting. He gestured to the dealer to hand him some chips. The dealer just looked at him oddly.

“Umm, what are you doing?” Jenovia asked Seth.

“I need some chips,” he said.

“Oh, you have to *buy* those chips.”

“Are you kidding? This is a holodeck program.”

“Yes, but it’s *my* program, and I say anyone who plays at my table has to buy in.”

Seth thought that was ridiculous. “Alright, how much? I don’t exactly have money here. This *is* the twenty-fifth century, you know.”

“Buy-in is two bars of gold-pressed latinum. Each bar buys you forty-thousand at this table. Don’t mind the conversion, I just made it that way. You can pay on credit if you like. I know you’re good for it.”

“Great, I meet you for one minute and already you have something on me.”

She seemed delighted by those words, and a smile slowly crept on her face. She puffed at her thin cigar, but he couldn’t tell if the cigar was holographic or not. “Without something at stake, captain, life’s no fun. Besides, you’d be surprised what you’d be able to get out of a Ferengi when you have enough latinum.”

Seth peaked at his cards: an Ace of clubs, and Four of diamonds. Good enough. He was the first to act after the Borg Queen and the Xindi threw in their blinds, and raised the bet. “Three thousand,” he said.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

The pirate and the Klingon folded. But when the Klingon threw in his hand, the little guy climbed aboard the table and yelled a Klingon curse that surprised even the Counselor. “*Aw baQa’!!*” he yelled.

The Counselor, the Borg Queen, and the Xindi called his raise.

The dealer turned the Flop: Four of Hearts, King of Hearts, and Two of Clubs. Not exactly the flop Seth was hoping for, but it wasn’t the worst. He knew that his pair of fours was hardly a hand to be pushing people around with, but he wanted to know if anyone had actually paired up with a King. And with only four people in the hand, it was possible that no one had one. Besides, it wouldn’t hurt to at least represent that *he* had the Kings. His suspicions were confirmed when the Borg Queen and Xindi only checked. “I bet twelve thousand.”

Jenovia stared at him, piercingly. It was easy for her to do that with her frosted yellow eyes. It was both beautiful and intimidating, like staring into Medusa. “Call,” she said calmly. The Borg Queen took another look at her cards, and a cold voice came from her lips, “I fold.” The Xindi called.

The dealer showed the Turn. Six of Hearts. Nothing. His pair of fours was looking weaker. Even if she only had a low pair, like fives or sixes, he would lose. He needed another Four or an Ace to show up on the board. “Check,” he said.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Seth immediately regretted it, because Jenovia made an aggressive move, “Twenty-thousand.”

*Damn*, he thought. The Xindi promptly folded. He knew how she was playing him, but what was she doing? What did she have? He currently had near two-to-one pot odds, and a far less probability that he would win on the River. He decided that it just wasn't worth the risk. He threw in his cards. “Take it.”

Jenovia smiled. Since Seth was new to the table, she decided to show him her cards. Two of Diamonds and an Eight of Clubs. Seth just scoffed at her. “You know, I don't think I want to play anymore.”

“Already? Oh come on, don't let your counselor intimidate you. I'll be more gentle from now on,” she joked, laughing jovially as she said it. “I promise.”

“No, it's time for me to go anyway. I have duties to attend to.”

“Here, I'll walk with you,” she said. She turned to the other players, “You guys can keep playing.” The two got up to leave the table.

“Computer, exit,” said the captain. “So should I ask if you're a telepath? Or would that be considered rude?”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“You don’t need to be a telepath at all to play Hold’em. I can tell you that I certainly am not one.”

“You’re not even an empath?”

“I’m not a telepath, or an empath, or an any-path. I can only see what you’re telling me. For instance, right now, your heart rate is slightly elevated, your pupils are dilated, your face is slightly flushed, and...”

“...And what?”

She seemed embarrassed to say. Or maybe she didn’t want to embarrass *him*. “Nothing.”

“What species are you? You don’t look familiar to me at all.”

“We’re known as the Villenes. Most people mistaken us for the Orions, but in truth we don’t associate much with them. Our similarities end with the skin.” The Orion slave girl image immediately came to Seth’s mind. He couldn’t help but look to see if Jenovia’s body frame could fit the image. It certainly could. “*And no, we don’t have slave girls on our world,*” she immediately said.

*Damn*, he thought, *how’d she keep doing that?* “I’ve never heard of your kind before.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“As a species, we have heightened senses when it comes to observation. Every time you swallow, look at the ground, bite your lip, fidget with your nose, it tells me everything I need to know. Your asympathetic nervous system is even worse for you, because you can’t consciously control it. We can detect even the most subtle changes, an increase in pulse rate, changes in the skin, even the slightest change in sweat production. I can actually smell small fluctuations in certain hormone levels. We make very good doctors.”

“I can see why.”

“At times, all of this can give us the appearance of psychic abilities, but in truth, humans give everything away without saying a word. Klingons are even easier.”

“And you play poker with holograms to hone your observation skills.”

“As I’m sure people have told you before, in poker, you play the player, not the hand. And they’re not holograms, Captain. They’re actual players from other ships who are using holographic projections on our holodeck to play, that is, if their ships are within range. Players can choose their own avatars.”

“So Tom really was...Commander Beil of the *U.S.S. Valero*?”

“That’s right. They can have any projection they want, but it has to be humanoid, so that we can see each other’s faces. No dogs or cats or inanimate objects. *There has to*

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

*be a face.* And what fun would it be to play against empty holograms? Besides, I couldn't make any real money if that were the case. Commander Beil still owes me sixteen bars of gold-pressed latinum, plus interest." She stopped for a second, as if struck by a brilliant idea. "It would be great to introduce your senior staff to the game. I'll bet playing with that Breen soldier would be *very* interesting..."

Captain Seth smiled. "I'll mention that to him when I see him next. But he doesn't seem like the poker type."

"I also insist that the physiological responses of the holograms be tied with those of the player. Your most obvious physiological responses are most evident when you are either afraid that you have something valuable to lose, or you become excited about what you might gain. It is why I insist that a player buy-in to play. The player *needs* to have something at stake, otherwise there is no point in even playing. Let's face it; such is the game of life."

"And what if players decided to put on sunglasses to cover their eyes?"

Jenovia laughed. "To me, that would be like telling a Klingon to hunt down a Ferengi with one eye closed. It just doesn't matter."

"Remind me not to play you anymore..."

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Poker is already a game that is half probability and game theory, and half gut feeling. I simply tip the scale towards a more scientific approach overall by being cognizant of humanoid physiological responses to certain events.”

Seth just kept walking. He was impressed with her approach to the whole game, which was clever and analytical. He had no idea if what she was saying was correct, but her success with the game would suggest that she did in fact know what she was talking about.

“Let’s take Commander Beil, for example. When the Flop was laid down, his eyes stared at the King of Diamonds on the flop a fraction of a second longer than he did the other two cards, and he returned to even after he looked at the third card. By itself, that may not be significant, but I know Commander Beil enough to know that his attention is sharpened when he sees a card that he likes. It wasn’t hard for me to put together that he had a King. My only concern was that he might have had pocket Kings, but his reaction didn’t warrant that assessment. My suspicions were confirmed when he had a subtle negative reaction to the second Queen that came on the Turn. And with only a four percent probability of another King turning up on the River...well, there’s nothing that I need to explain there.”

“Seems hardly fair for a human to play you. A human would never be able to detect something like that.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“I’ve been beaten by humans many times before, and not because of luck. Don’t ever underestimate the power of *instinct*, captain.” she explained.

Seth continued to be impressed with his counselor. It wasn’t every day that he would meet an alien species who could just see right through him.

“You might be interested to know that I had a chance to play Captain Santiago from the *Excelsior*.”

“You did?” Seth sounded very surprised.

“Not to worry, he wasn’t one of those people able to beat me. I cleaned him out, actually. He was *furious*,” she said, smiling as she said it. “Quite frankly, he was even easier to read than you.”

Seth couldn’t help but feel a little better after that comment, despite the hint of insult to *him*. “He’s certainly an upfront individual.”

“You guys are easy. I would normally *never* play with a hand like a Two of Diamonds and an Eight of Clubs.”

“Oh,” Seth said, now even more embarrassed.

“Santiago even tried to recruit me.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“*What?* Before I even met you? He *just* boarded my ship!” he returned, now reddened with anger. *That guy had some nerve*, Seth thought, *moving in on his crewmembers*.

The Counselor just laughed. “Yeah, well, he said that you were busy, so he stopped by here. He made me quite an offer, one of the largest quarters on his ship, with perks that would make an Admiral jealous. Again, not to worry, I declined. But, he seemed adamant that his ship and crew were more ‘capable’ than we were. That the *Excelsior* overall was a better ship.”

“He would say that. He’s an arrogant ass. Wait, how *much* did he believe in that?” Seth thought that he would immediately put Jenovia’s skills to good use.

“He believed in it a hundred and ten percent.”

“*Arrogant ass*,” Seth muttered again. There was no other way to describe him. Who else did he try to recruit from his ship? Lieutenant Commander Thorn? Dr. Min? Chief Engineer LeCroy? And what exactly did Santiago have to offer that Seth didn’t?

“I obviously objected. But I suggested one way to settle...”

*Oh shit*. He was supposed to meet with Santiago later that evening, he just remembered. “What time is it?” Seth interrupted.

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“It’s 2010 hours. Why?”

“I owe an arrogant ass a drink.”

## Chapter 10

Seth walked into Ten Forward. Like the rest of the ship, the room was dark, but was lit strategically by the tables and the counter at the bar. Like many of the desks all over the ship, the tables looked as though they floated in mid-air. Though the overall décor matched the rest of the ship, it definitely looked much more relaxing to be in. He saw Captain Santiago staring out the windows, gazing into the empty space as the little specks of distant stars flew by the ship.

“You know,” Seth began, “if you’re trying to give the impression that you’re deep in thought about something, you’re succeeding.”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“I am? Good. Every captain should look like they have something important on their minds. Even if they don’t.” Seth gestured for Santiago to sit down. “You’re late. I was getting thirsty for my beer.”

“Yeah, I could definitely use a drink myself, after all I’ve just been through.” Seth called for the waiter, “Two Quark’s draft, please. Tall glasses.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So,” Santiago started. “How are you liking it? Being captain, that is.”

“Are you kidding? It’s only been ten hours.”

“It’s never too early to start enjoying the captain’s chair,” Santiago said. “Did you get a chance to meet your senior crew?”

“*Oh yeah.*”

“You’re...*disappointed?*”

“No, not at all. They’re all incredible. But it certainly wasn’t the crew that I was expecting.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

The waiter put the two glasses of beer on the table. The two captains certainly thirsted for a strong beer. Quark's draft had a way of hitting the spot just when it was needed most.

"Well then. What should we cheer to?" Santiago asked.

"To us and our new ships. May our voyages be, um...*long and prosperous?*" he joked. Seth wasn't even sure why he said it. It just seemed to come out naturally.

Santiago rolled his eyes and tried hard to contain his outburst of laughter. "That was the worst toast in the history of the Federation. Don't ever try that on Vulcan."

"Alright, then. To...*achieving our dreams*, then."

"Now that's something to cheer to." They clinked their glasses and downed nearly half of their beer. "Until we reach Admiral, then."

"What do you think? By thirty-eight?" Seth joked. "It's taken a lot out of us, hasn't it? Just trying to be captain, that is. All I remember since we were fifteen was work, and *more* work."

"Well, plenty more of that ahead of us. But being captain of our own starships was what we wanted since we were kids."

"I know...I just hope it will all be worth it. *The universe better be damn interesting.*"

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“It is what you make it,” Santiago said. “I’m told that it all comes at a price...but there’s nothing else I’d rather be doing.”

Seth nodded. “So what’s this I hear about you trying to recruit my Counselor?”

Santiago laughed, not fazed at all that he got caught. “Yeah, well, it’s all fair-game in this universe. Especially if I can offer them something you can’t. She’s a helluvan officer. I met her for five minutes and I already owe her two bars of gold-pressed latinum. How the hell did she do that?”

Seth couldn’t help but chuckle. The exact same thing had happened to him. “Get your own Villenes. *Jenovia’s mine,*” Seth warned him. “Same goes for the rest of the crew. Don’t make my Breen security officer kick your ass.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” Santiago told him, finishing the last of his beer.

“What about your crew? How are all of the people aboard the *Excelsior*?”

“Actually, I have a great crew. Sometimes I have to exert my authority when I really would rather not. I think some of them have trouble accepting the fact that I’m so much younger than a lot of them. Make no mistake; you’ll get some attitude from your older officers, too.”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“That should be expected, I think, but that should change over time, especially once you’ve gained their trust.”

“My most amazing officer is Commander Ariele, my first officer. She’s around our age, too. Just beautiful; blonde-hair, blue-eyes, smart, accomplished, and loyal. She defended my decisions on missions even if they were unpopular with the rest of the crew. In the end, I turned out to be right.”

“Naturally. You always had a knack for that.”

“But she also has just the right amount of naiveté to make her adorable, you know?”

“Geez, Alan...your crew is there to run your ship, *not for you to find a date.*”

“What happened? We used to talk like that all of the time!”

“That was during the *Academy* days,” Seth corrected. “Things are different now.”

“*Alright, Mr. Captain, SIR,*” Santiago said sarcastically. “Speaking of which, your Counselor suggested something very interesting to me while I was in the holodeck. Something that got me thinking.”

Seth ordered a second round of beer. “Oh? And what would that be?”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“She suggested something that would pit our ships, our crew, our skills and leadership abilities against each other,” Santiago explained. “That is, if you’re up to it.” Seth was immediately intrigued. They hadn’t competed against each other since the Academy days.

“Well, don’t keep me waiting. What is it?” demanded Seth.

“What do you think? It will be a battle of you versus me. *The new ship versus the classic ship,*” he further enticed. “You’re still on shakedown time, aren’t you?”

*“Damn it, Alan, just tell me what it is.”*

Alan leaned over. “We have ourselves a race.”

## Chapter 11

It was the next morning, and Seth had gotten up early. He had accepted Santiago's challenge to pit the *Dragonfly* against the *Excelsior*. In fact, they worked out the details over several more beers that night. Santiago had clearly been thinking about this challenge a great deal in the few hours since Counselor Jenovia had suggested it to him, and most of it was already laid out by the time he even brought it up to Seth. Santiago knew very well that Seth would not be able to resist.

Seth called a senior staff meeting at 0700 hours that morning. Everyone met in the conference room, hungry for the captain's new orders. Seth walked in right on the hour. "Alright everyone, I have my first assignment for all of you. Thanks to the suggestion of a certain counselor we have aboard our ship, Captain Santiago from the

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

*U.S.S. Excelsior* has presented us with a challenge. It will be a test of strength, courage, leadership, and technical prowess. I should let all of you know that I've accepted his challenge on your behalf."

"*A challenge?*" Ensign Ester asked.

"Yes, a race, in fact. A race against the *Excelsior* and her crew. I hope you're all up to it."

The crew seemed to glow from the prospect of a challenge. That is, all except Dr. Min, who seemed to give a look like he thought that this was an utter waste of time. Seth could have sworn that he caught him rolling his eyes. Dr. Min must not have been one for early impressions.

"Of course we're up to it!" squealed Ensign Ester. "But are we ready to put the ship under this kind of stress? We haven't tested all of our systems yet. We still don't know each other very well..."

"Well, now's the perfect opportunity. This will be our test run for the ship and her crew. Think of it as our shakedown cruise," added Seth.

"But the *Excelsior* is a well-oiled ship who's been in service for a hundred years. Sure, her captain is new, but even he's been running that ship for at least a

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

month now,” said Chief LeCroy. “And, no offense, captain, but this is your second day on the job.”

“Surely, you know your engines inside and out, Chief.”

“I helped *design* those engines,” LeCroy added. “I’d be just as proficient an engineer on this ship today as I will be five years from now. I don’t need shakedown time,” he said confidently. The least he could do was to sit up properly; he sat with his feet on the chair.

“Look, these are all valid concerns,” Seth acknowledged. “I know we’re all new to the ship. We barely got the chance to know her, to know each other, *to know me*. But the *Dragonfly* is a state-of-the-art ship, and you, the most impressive crew I got to know on the first day. *There is every reason to believe we can win.*”

“I have better things to do than to participate in childish games,” Dr. Min said in his usual calm, but frustrated, manner. He got up to leave the room.

“*Doctor...*” Seth said.

“Call me when there is something important. Not before.” Before Seth even had a chance to say something, Dr. Min had left the conference room. Actually, Seth was expecting more of a fight from Lieutenant Commander Thorn. But maybe a chance for him to crush an opponent in a competition was just the thing for the crazy Breen.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“*Let him go.* If he doesn’t want to participate, then that’s fine,” the captain said, brushing him off. He did not want to look desperate in front of his crew.

“Don’t worry about him,” Jenovia said reassuringly. Jenovia was probably the most supportive, but that was probably because the idea originated from her in the first place. “Dr. Min can go back to his study of fungi. He’ll be handy when he needs to be. *The rest of us are in.*” The others nodded in full agreement.

“Good. Then let’s get to work.” The others leaned forward attentively. Seth used the conference desk to give a three-dimensional image of what the challenge would entail. “The race will be composed of three parts. First, we need to move through an asteroid field in the Herst sector. We won’t be able to fly at warp here, so it will be a test of maneuverability. From there we need to travel to Galagus III. So we’ll need to jump to maximum warp as soon as we exit the asteroid field if we want to get there in a reasonable amount of time.”

“Our engines are more energy-efficient, but we’re not as fast as the *Excelsior*. Our maximum cruising speed is 9.5. The *Excelsior* can now cruise pretty comfortably at Warp 9.9.” Chief LeCroy explained.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Ester quickly did her calculations on the conference table. “If we both leave the asteroid field at the exact same time, the *Excelsior* will arrive at Galagus III in twenty-four minutes at Warp 9.9. We will get there in thirty.”

“We can’t go any faster?” Seth asked.

“The *Aegis*-class is designed to reach maximum theoretical speeds in case we need it, for a maximum of two hours, but it draws on emergency reserves. I can’t condone using it in a race,” LeCroy said.

“Alright, fair enough. So we’ll have to make sure we come out ahead through the asteroid field,” Seth said.

“That shouldn’t be a problem. If we move through the field in *Aegis* mode, we should occupy much less space and be able to maneuver better than the *Excelsior*,” LeCroy replied.

The *Aegis* mode was a feature unique to the *Aegis*-class starship. Because the saucer was really just two sections that were split apart, they could collapse together, along with the warp nacelles tugging in behind them, into a much smaller vehicle. In this mode, additional ablative armor was also activated for even greater protection, particularly around the vulnerable warp engines. What a smaller ship allowed for was

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

greater maneuverability around tight spaces and enemy fire, and reduced cost for the armor because it covered a much smaller surface area.

“The *Excelsior* is still fitted with a standard warp drive, right?”

“Last I checked,” LeCroy said. “The transwarp drive never worked. It’s been driving on standard warp drive for the last, I don’t know, hundred years. With minor upgrades and standard refitting along the way, probably. It’s one of the fastest ships in the Federation now, but not enough to make a huge difference in the distance that we’re flying.”

“Good. Now, once we reach the planet Galagus III, Santiago and I will go to the surface at the following coordinates. It’s a frozen planet; we’ll be braving subzero temperatures but it is manageable to humans. There is life on the planet, but we’ll be in an area that should be free of any life-forms. From there, we will be climbing this iceberg.”

“An iceberg? You want to climb an iceberg?” Ester asked.

“That’s right. We’ll be climbing this one: roughly seventy-five meters high, and a hundred and twenty meters long. The problem is that on this planet ship-to-surface transport is not possible, only short site-to-site transport. So once we get there I will

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

have to fly a shuttlecraft to the surface myself. The first captain to reach the top of the iceberg and plant a Federation flag bearing their ship's name will be the victor."

"*Are we allowed to attack the other ship?*" Thorn asked.

"Yes, but the weapons will be void of actual power. The computer will register the 'damage' and react accordingly, as if it were really hit."

"What's the prize?" asked Jenovia.

"What do you mean?"

"Surely, there must be some sort of winnings for this..."

"This isn't poker, Counselor. There's no monetary award. What's at stake is ship's honor."

Jenovia smiled. "That's good enough for me."

"Needless to say, I need everyone's full support on this. Either you're in or you're out...*nobody* gives me half, are we clear?"

"We're clear, captain," Jenovia said for everyone.

"When do we start?" Ester asked.

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

Seth looked at his watch. “At 1000 hours. That’s just under three hours from now.”

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The two ships lined up side-by-side quite a distance ahead of the asteroid field in the Herst sector. The two captains stared down at each other on their main viewers.

“Computer,” Seth ordered. “Begin the countdown, starting from ten.”

“Acknowledged,” the computer responded. A countdown timer appeared on the right screen, and began ticking away. “*Ten...nine...*”

“Good luck, Darren. May the best captain win.”

“Same to you, Alan. Darren out.”

“...*Six...five...four...*” the computer announced. The voice echoed through the entire bridge.

“Alright, people, we haven’t got a moment to lose. Ensign Ester: set a course for the asteroid field, maximum warp,” ordered the captain.

“Aye, sir,” Ester said.

“...*Two...One...*”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“*Engage.*”

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“Our E.T.A. is thirty-two seconds,” the ensign reported. The little dots on the screen zoomed right passed the ship. This was the first chance that they tested the ship’s warp engines. *Smooth*, Seth thought. *Not so much as a rumble*. “Captain, we’re approaching the asteroid field.”

“Drop out of warp, slow to impulse.”

“The *Excelsior* is ahead of us, sir. They’re moving through the field.”

“Engage the *Aegis* mode. We’ll need to move swiftly if we want to get ahead.”

“Aye, sir.”

The *Dragonfly’s* hull and warp nacelles collapsed into a smaller ship, about two-thirds of its original size. It was able to swiftly navigate around the asteroids with much greater ease than in its larger mode. It was certainly much more maneuverable than the *Excelsior*. And that was the point.

“Sir, we’re catching up to the *Excelsior*. They’re having some trouble dodging all of the asteroids. Some of them are hitting the hull of the ship. They’ve slowed to one-quarter impulse. They’re starting to use phaser fire to clear the way.” They could see

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

the *Excelsior* firing away and blowing up the asteroids ahead of its path. If nothing more, the asteroids distracted them.

“Good. Try to get past them without them noticing.”

“The asteroids are tricky. They’re moving very fast and in unpredictable trajectories.”

“Keep at it, ensign. You’re doing fine.”

“Captain, they’re firing at us!”

“Keep steady...”

“They’re trying to disable our maneuvering thrusters and our impulse engines,” ensign said. “But I think I can dodge their phaser fire...”

The captain turned. “*You can?*” This was another feature that the captain learned about his ship: it can dodge enemy fire. This was a unique feature of the *Aegis*-class starship. This was possible because the warp coils of the *Aegis*-class ship were adjustable and could create a warp field *in any direction*. This could be accomplished regardless of the orientation, so the ship didn’t need to turn in order for it to go to warp. The *Dragonfly* could therefore cruise through space *backwards*, or off to an angle at warp, if that was so the captain’s desire. But because the alignment was not

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

optimal and the warp field would be very small, its absolute speed limit in this fashion was Warp 2.0.

Importantly, this ability meant that a highly responsive computer could ‘warp’ away in a direction away from danger, in short, quick bursts. Since most weapons still traveled in a linear direction, it was easy for the computer to calculate the position of a phaser blast or torpedo based on its immediate speed and trajectory as it left the enemy ship. The computer could ‘see’ the weapon’s fire and make the ship ‘jump’ away to safety in a split second, long before the blast actually reached the ship.

“Yes, sir. We can, although it’s much easier for photon and quantum torpedoes because they are so slow. Phaser blasts are more difficult,” Ester explained.

The drawback was that this maneuverability would require extreme precision, or the ship would suffer the fate of crashing into an object at high warp. The impact would be enough to destroy the ship, even with a small object. This was therefore an extremely dangerous tactic in an asteroid field.

“I’m going to leave this maneuver to the computer,” admitted Ensign Ester. “It can more quickly make the necessary calculations. If, for some reason, it cannot find a safe location in any particular instant, it won’t jump and we will be hit,” she explained. There would be absolutely no room for human error here.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Whatever, just hurry up,” ordered the captain. The *Dragonfly* was still getting rocked by the *Excelsior*, who was trying to take out their impulse engines. She quickly inputted the necessary commands.

“Got it.”

The ship then began to ‘whip’ away from the *Excelsior*’s fire. It was almost a little disorienting to look at the main viewer, since the entire scene changed every second with each phaser dodge. Some jumps seemed to be extremely close calls, but Seth trusted the judgment of the computer. Occasionally, the ship couldn’t dodge the fire because there was just no physical space to move the ship with all of the moving asteroids. Seth couldn’t help but wonder what Santiago might have been feeling at that moment. *Jealousy*, Seth hoped. There was no way the *Excelsior* had any such ability.

“Wow, we can really move like...a *dragonfly*,” the science officer remarked.

“I’m sorry, what was that Lieutenant?” the captain asked.

“A dragonfly, sir. It is an ability that is unique to the dragonfly species among flying insects: *it can fly in any direction.*”

“Isn’t that why they named the ship that way?” Ester asked.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Alright people, let’s focus,” the captain said. The ship continued to warp away from the *Excelsior*’s fire, which was starting to become much less frequent.

“We’ve distanced ourselves from the *Excelsior*, sir. They’re no longer firing.”

“Nicely done, ensign.”

“We’ve cleared the asteroid field.”

“Very well, ensign. Disengage the *Aegis* mode.”

“*OH SHIT!!*” the ensign yelled. A particularly sharp asteroid that appeared to come out of nowhere whipped by and sheared against the hull of the ship after disengaging the *Aegis* mode. It made an ugly tear across the front of the ship. The captain just openly stared at the ensign, with the look that a parent would give when child had just broken a very expensive vase. “*I’m so sorry, captain...*” she whimpered.

“Remind me to have a little conversation with you about language on the bridge, ensign...” Seth replied, trying somewhat to diffuse the situation.

“*No need to worry. The hull is composed of a self-healing material,*” Thorn interjected, “*a heavy solution of nanoparticles filled with a mix of hull composites and a polymeric mixture that will fill the tear and bind the edges, and solidify to close the tear. It won’t look like new until we visit a space dock, but it should be fine for*

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

*now.*” He put it on the left viewer and there it was: a tear that filled with a metallic liquid and solidified, much like how blood coagulated to close an open wound. This was just the latest example of biomimicry; using what was observed in biology to design mechanical devices. It made for a somewhat softer hull, but overall it stretched its life by nearly double. The ensign was a little relieved when she saw the closed wound, except that it looked like there was a big scar on this once pristine ship.

“I think it’s time to return the favor to the *Excelsior*,” Seth said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we attack the *Excelsior* and slow them down. I need ideas.”

*“The next phase will be to jump to maximum warp. They are faster, so we should target their warp engines,”* Thorn suggested.

“Alright, fair enough. How do we do that?”

*“The Dragonfly is equipped with small mines that, when come within a small range of a ship, triggers an emission of inverse graviton bursts that temporarily disrupts the ability of the ship to create a warp field. This should prevent the Excelsior from jumping into warp.”*

“How many of those do we have?”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

*“Ten. But we only need to hit them once. A single mine should be able to disrupt them for about ten to fifteen minutes. The only trouble is that we can’t be in the vicinity when the mines explode because the Dragonfly’s engines will be affected as well,”* Thorn explained.

“Hopefully we’ll be well on our way before the *Excelsior* even gets to the mines. Will they be able to detect them?”

*“That’s the problem. If they know their location, they should be easy to avoid. We’ll need to surprise them a little. We can deploy the mines right behind the last asteroids the Excelsior encounters before leaving the field. We don’t have a cloak for the mines, but we can program the mines to emit a beacon that scrambles their position.”*

“So they’ll know they’re there, but they won’t be able to detect their positions.”

*“Correct. I doubt they’ll want to spend the time figuring out exactly where each and every one of them are. Either way, they’re wasting time.”*

“Good work. Let’s do it,” Seth ordered.

*“Ensign, give me navigational control,”* Thorn ordered. *“I will deploy the mines.”*

“Yes, Lieutenant.”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

*“The mines are deployed, captain.”*

“Ensign, set a course for Galagus III. You know what speed. *Engage!*”

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“Our latest long-range readings on the *Excelsior* indicate that the ship hit the mines, sir. Their engines are out. They should be at least ten minutes behind us,” Ensign Ester explained.

“Good,” Seth smiled.

“We will be approaching Galagus III in fifteen minutes.”

Seth began sweating from the rush. Now that there was more waiting around, he found himself pacing from one side of the bridge to the other.

“Captain...” the ensign swallowed. *“They’ve already reached Galagus III!! Santiago is on a shuttle towards the surface!”*

Captain Seth choked. *“What?!”* I thought you said that we were way ahead of them. I thought you said we had a good ten minutes on them.”

“We did....sir....” she mumbled, recoiling as she said it.

“Are you telling me that they weren’t affected by the mines?”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“*They were... they must not have used their standard warp drive,*” answered Thorn.

“To get to this position this fast would mean...” the science officer started, quickly performing the calculations, “...*they had to have traveled at least Warp 13...*”

“Which isn’t even possible...” LeCroy answered, “Which means...”

“Son of a bitch got the *transwarp* drive to work...” Seth said. He couldn’t believe it himself.

“*What? How?*” cried Ester. “That’s impossible!”

“I highly doubt it,” the science officer interrupted. “Federation scientists concluded more than thirty years ago that *transwarp* speeds just weren’t feasible.”

“Maybe it’s not a *transwarp* drive, *per se,*” explained LeCroy. “Maybe they used a different way to achieve these speeds, maybe adapted from alien technology and established conduits or something. All I’m saying is that *transwarp* may have been deemed theoretically infeasible but research into ways of achieving such speeds is still underway. Who the hell knows?”

“Slipstream, maybe?” Jenovia offered.

“Maybe they did something to fool our long-range sensors. Maybe they weren’t affected by the mines at all,” added the science officer.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Well, whatever the case, Santiago must have been busy. It seems he also failed to notify Starfleet about the upgrades,” Seth observed. “It doesn’t matter. He’s here and he’s got a head start. We need to catch up.”

“Sensors show that Captain Santiago is on the surface. But he’s only beginning to climb the iceberg.”

“Are there any life-forms on this planet?”

“Yes, there are. Quite a few for this harsh an ecosystem but the vast majority of species are deep underwater. There are a few animal species and some birds on the surface, but I’m not detecting any near the iceberg.”

“Alright. I can’t transport to the surface, so get ready to launch a shuttlecraft. Counselor Jenovia, you have rank of Commander, don’t you?” he asked as he walked towards the turbolift.

“Yes, of course.”

“Then the bridge is yours,” Seth said. “From this point on, it’s up to me.”

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The captain’s shuttlecraft settled his shuttlecraft just above the chilling water of Galagus III, near the edge of the large iceberg. He could tell that the outside was

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

extremely cold, and he would need to wear a lot of warm gear. He wasn't particularly looking forward to climbing up the iceberg. But he knew that Alan was already moving up, and he needed to hurry.

Seth looked up at the iceberg. How the hell was he going to climb this thing? He placed his hand on the ice. The specialty gloves and boots he was wearing had a metallic alloy on the palms that could quickly get extremely hot on command, melting the ice on the surface. But almost as quickly, the glove would shut off, and thereby letting the water surrounding the glove re-freeze. This served as a sort of adhesive between the glove and ice, and allowed the user to climb an icy surface. It worked similarly to the way one's tongue would stick to a cold metal pole on a cold winter day, but in reverse. A specific metallic alloy was employed in this little device because of its particularly high adhesive strength with ice. Climbing icebergs, however, was not the originally intended use of these gloves. The gloves and boots were first invented so that anyone on an expedition who found themselves trapped in a hole and surrounded by nothing but walls of ice could quickly climb out of the hole. It was extremely dangerous to use them climbing long distance, because 'gripping' was not always reliable.

The captain came across something unusual. Perhaps several feet beneath the surface of the ice, he could see a dark mass. He wiped the snow off of the ice. It didn't

provide much of a clearer picture, but he could see the color more distinctly. It was a dark red mass that was frozen just beneath the surface. The color was immediately recognizable as blood, but it wasn't until Seth could make out the limbs and torso that he began to panic. It seemed like it was a large animal. But it was impossible to make out the shape of the animal, or what it looked like. *What was a large animal doing here?* The fact that he saw blood meant that the animal must have been attacked by a predator. He considered the possibility of it being humanoid. It was hard to tell, but there was no way to discount it. It certainly fit the size.

*Oh no*, he said to himself. *That couldn't be Santiago, could it?* He was under the impression that Santiago was on the other side of the iceberg. He quickly took out his tricorder and made a few scans. It was humanoid alright, but it wasn't Santiago. It looked like this body had been here frozen in ice for several months.

Seth decided to keep climbing. The fact that he saw a bloodied humanoid body in the ice was only impetus to climb even faster. There were only a hundred and fifty or so meters left to climb, but he could already feel his arms getting tired. There were few spots on the iceberg to rest.

About twenty meters or so later, he noticed a white mass beneath him. Maybe it was disc-shaped. It was maybe a half a meter below the surface of the ice, but he could still make it out. *Another humanoid*, he thought? No blood or anything though. It was

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

very plain white. It was difficult to make out the size or shape. The captain tried to shine a light on it to try and see it better.

Then it moved.

Something came to the center of the object, something round. It quickly grew, and shrank, like a lens on a camera. *Oh my God, it was a giant eyeball. There was an organism beneath the surface of the ice. I thought the sensors said there was no life on this planet,* he said to himself. The giant eye began to blink, and the captain could tell that the organism could see him. He could almost hear a deep roar as it began to swim off beneath the ice. *Wait, swim off beneath the ice? What kind of iceberg was this?*

*Time to run. Or climb, whatever. Fast.* The captain began to pick up speed, but quite frankly, he didn't know if it would even help. He began to feel a lot of heat suddenly, coming from the ice. He could almost see the ice beneath him melt before his eyes, and the ice began to buckle under his weight. *Move,* his instincts told him.

Just as he turned to the side, a large white mass emerged from the ice. It was a large tentacle, equipped even with suction cups. It looked liked it was seeking out its prey, and when it did, it slapped down on the ice with powerful force. The captain rolled out of the way just in time, but realized also that he had no clue how he was going to fight

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

this thing. He hung there with only one hand attached to the ice. He had nowhere to run, except down towards his death.

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“What the hell is that?” yelled Ester.

“Scanning...” said the science officer, who sat opposite to the helm. “It’s some type of cephalopod, large...” The lieutenant brought up files and put it on-screen. It was a giant squid.

“How is there a squid in the middle of an iceberg? And chasing the captain for that matter?” Jenovia asked.

Apparently, the creature could ‘swim’ in the ice by heating and vibrating to break the ice in front of it, such that the water in its local environment would be liquid. As it moved, the position it was previously in would ‘re-freeze’. “According to our files, this species of cephalopoda is able to live in the iceberg, and move around in it. How a creature evolved to live in an iceberg beats the hell out of me. I can only think of one reason for doing so: no predators.”

“Why didn’t our scanners detect it before?” Jenovia demanded.

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“It must have been in its resting state, so that it could evade our sensors. I think it might just sit there in the iceberg frozen, with an extremely low metabolism in the ice while it’s dormant. It must have detected the captain’s presence when he started climbing, and began its hunt.”

“Does the captain have a phaser? Can he defend himself?”

“He didn’t bring one.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Oh I’m sorry, *did we think that the captain was going to have to fight a giant squid while climbing an iceberg?*” the science officer snarled. His sarcasm was unwarranted.

Jenovia just ignored him. “Contact the captain. The contest is over, get him out of there.”

“We can’t transport him, remember?”

Jenovia let out an expression of disgust. “*Damn...* Alright, what do we know about this creature? What do we have in our files?”

“Well, for one, for the creature to be able to move around in ice like that, even with all of its mechanisms available to it, it probably moves *very slowly*.”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“How slowly?”

“I’d guess, maybe, less than half a meter a second.”

“That’s pretty much as fast as the captain can climb.”

“And that’s only an estimate. I’ve never seen this size of squid so close to the surface before. *Let alone live in ice.*”

“Alright, the captain needs our help. We can’t transport him and he’s too far from his shuttlecraft. How do we help him? I need options.”

“For something to live in subzero environments, it has to have some way of resisting cold. But to be able to move around like that, it probably uses a sophisticated mechanism of generating intense heat, but I doubt it could do that for very long. Just to get around through ice probably already requires a huge amount of energy; its metabolism must be extremely efficient.”

“Alright, alright...get to the point, Lieutenant.”

“Most organisms that survive at subzero temperatures use some sort of antifreeze protein. If that’s the case for this creature, we may be able to find a way to inhibit or deactivate the protein. In essence, we would cause the organism to freeze to death.”

“Is this something we can do in the next few minutes?”

STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“I don’t know, it depends on what we already know about the creature. Many different organisms use different ways to resist cold. We’d have to ask the doctor.”

“Jenovia to the doctor,” she said.

“Dr. Min here.”

“Doctor, have you been monitoring everything that’s been happening?”

*“I’m not playing this stupid game, remember?”* Dr. Min snapped.

“The captain’s in trouble. I mean *real* trouble. He needs your help.”

Dr. Min let out a loud sigh, one that Jenovia was able to hear over the comm system. He was still very reluctant to play along. *“Fine. What’s the problem?”*

“You’d better brush up on what’s going on.”

“I’ll call back in two minutes. Dr. Min out.”

“He’s continuing to evade the alien, sir, but he’s having difficulties,” observed the ensign.

“How are his vital signs?”

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

“Jumpy, but within a tolerable range.” The ensign put his vital signs on the right screen of the main viewer. It looked like his heart rate was very elevated. He was getting extremely tired. “I worry that he won’t be able to hang on while parrying the creature’s attacks. There’s lactic acid building up in his muscles.”

“Dr. Min to the bridge.”

“This is Jenovia. What do you have to report, Doctor?”

“This creature has been documented before by early Federation scientists, so that’s the first piece of good news. We have the structure of the antifreeze protein on file, but it could take several days to find a way to effectively inhibit the activity, if that’s what you’re going after.”

“You don’t have several days, Doctor, you have several minutes. Can you do it, yes or no?”

“It’ll be sloppy, but...”

“Do it, Doctor. We’ll try to find a way to buy you some more time. Jenovia out.”

“He’s struggling, sir...” They could in fact watch his progress from long-range sensors, and could see him struggling with trying to attack the creature all the while

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

hanging on to the edge to avoid falling all the way back to the freezing water. But what was only minutes felt like hours. They couldn't wait much longer for the doctor.

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The captain had an idea. He was wearing the gloves that heat up to enormous temperatures designed to instantly melt ice. It had to be effective against biological tissue. As he hung there only by his left hand, he saw a moment of opportunity to place his right on the giant tentacle. It sizzled and smoked, and he could tell that the creature was in pain. He kept the temperature on full. The last thing he wanted was the glove to re-freeze and have his right arm stuck on the tentacle.

But that didn't happen. The tentacle moved even more wildly, and Seth lost his grip. It was angry. Again Seth hung there for dear life by only his left arm, and he tried desperately to grip the ice with his right hand. But the creature was furious and it doubled its efforts to attack him. It made one last swing, and the sharp end managed to make contact with him and slice open his quadriceps muscle.

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*"His vitals are fluctuating! He's bleeding!"* yelled the ensign.

*"Doctor...hurry..."* The Counselor paced from one side of the bridge to the other, much like the captain did earlier.

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

The sound of the bridge doors opening was welcomed. *It had better be the doctor*, Jenovia thought. “Here it is,” Dr. Min said. “It’s a spectrum of compounds that theoretically inhibit the anti-freeze protein by computer simulation, with a dose that has been adjusted for its size, which I only estimated. I’ve also connected many of the compounds with a kind of protease. Should chew up the protein while it binds.” He handed the syringe to Thorn. “But I haven’t tested it yet. Fortunately, in this case we’re not worried about side effects. I’m hopeful that at least one of them will be effective at causing the water in its tissues to freeze,” Dr. Min said.

“Will it work?” Jenovia demanded of him.

“Hard to say. That’s what you get for giving me two minutes notice.”

“Alright, now we need to somehow go down there and get it to him. We also need to bring to him some medical supplies; he’s bleeding. Any suggestions on how we do that? Any thoughts Lieutenant Comm...?”

She turned to look behind her. Thorn was gone.

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This wasn’t part of the contest. As Seth continued to dodge the squid’s attacks, he couldn’t help but wonder if Santiago was running into a similar alien. He was beginning to worry that his left shoulder that he injured earlier in the holodeck would

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

come loose as he hung for dear life. In his daze, the captain realized he missed something in the distance. He didn't see that a shuttlecraft was approaching. *Was it his own?* The door's opened from the side and someone flew himself onto the edge of the iceberg and planted his feet firmly into the ice. He had the same gloves that Seth had on. It was Lieutenant Commander Thorn.

Before the captain could even ask, Thorn immediately stood up with his feet firmly planted. He pulled something from his belt and threw it into the water where the tentacle had reached out from. It was a chemical that immediately froze the water into ice, even with the tentacle sticking out. With the tentacle now stuck, he grabbed it with his arms and took out a large injection device, similar to the one that Dr. Min had used on his shoulder. Thorn was going to inject something. He saw the squid react in pain. It was squirming, and actually vibrating, as it was trying hard to generate enough heat. But it didn't last long. In a matter of minutes the squid's movement slowed to a halt, and Seth realized that the alien squid had actually frozen to death.

The captain braced his leg, realizing he was in significant pain. They managed to move to a ledge that allowed him to rest horizontally, rather than simply hang nearly completely vertically. The laceration in his quadriceps muscle was deep, and he was bleeding profusely. He briefly thought about calling off the contest, but brushed it aside. There was no way. Thorn pulled out a medical spray that released a foam that

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

filled and sealed the wound. He also felt the wound tighten on its own. Probably another ‘nanite’ solution or something that repaired muscle tissue; they were used for pretty much every medical application you could think of these days. The injection must have contained some anesthetics as well because Seth immediately felt the pain dissolve away. His leg was mobile again.

*“This will control the bleeding and swelling in the wound until the Doctor can heal it,”* said Thorn as he wrapped the wound with a bandage.

“Well done, Lieutenant. Thanks.”

*“You can thank me by winning.”* Thorn said.

“Deal.”

Seth found newfound energy to win the race. His leg was still extremely weak, but the medication that Thorn gave him helped with the pain. After another twenty minutes of grueling climbing, which felt more like a hundred, the end came into sight. He pulled himself to the top, and turned on his back to catch his breath. But this was no time to rest, it was time to plant the flag. But when he looked up, he realized that he already saw a flag.

It said, *“Excelsior.”*

## STAR TREK: REEMERGENCE BY HUGO CALVIN

*Damn you, Alan.* Captain Santiago had won the race. Seth lay on the ice, exhausted, and defeated. He wondered now how his failure in their first mission (well, contest) would affect the crew's overall morale. He certainly didn't feel like he deserved to be captain of the ship at this point.

"Captain Seth, you are getting a priority one message from Starfleet command," the ship called.

The captain sighed. "Very well, Lieutenant, I will be there shortly."

The captain called his Chief of Security to pick him up in his shuttlecraft. After finally reaching the *Dragonfly*, without even visiting sickbay, he went straight to his Ready Room. He sat in his chair, still shivering, and with snow peppered all over his face. He answered the call. "Admiral Kim," Seth said.

"Captain, I hope I'm not disturbing anything important," noting that his hair and uniform were in disarray, and a little wet.

"Umm, not at all, sir. We were just, um, getting to know the ship better."

"Well, I hope you two are well acquainted now. Call Captain Santiago, I need to talk to both of you," he said. "It's time for your first mission."