



UFOP: Starbase 118 Writing Challenge

**September & October 2014**

**Run Shivers Down My Spine!**

It seems appropriate that our Challenge for September and October so intimately considers the spirit of Halloween – and, perhaps, it’s even more appropriate that Challenge winners were announced on All Hallows' Eve itself! However, before we can get into the winners, let’s talk about the contest itself. According to the last round’s winner, Jess, the writer behind Lieutenant Commander Akeelah D’Sena (and, previously, Jalana Laxyn),

*For the next challenge I would like to see something that would run shivers down our spines. Be it something unbelievable, something so touching one gets goosebumps, something so cruel you want to scream, or is it something spooky? What causes shivers for you?*

Surely there are no shortage of things to trigger your fears from *Trek*, whether you tend toward the bombastic villains of *TOS*, the body horror and loss of freedom that the Borg bring, or the frightening clash of political ideology in *DS9*. But what else might you write? What other fears lurk in the shadows of *Trek*? As Jess asks, what makes *you* shiver? In this Challenge, our entrants showed us exactly what those fears might be!

Without further ado, the “Run Shivers Down My Spine” Challenge!

**Run Shivers Down My Spine  
Story Collection**

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## Heritage of the Lost

(Round Winner)

(Nathaniel Wilmer)

**((Forsythe Manor, Oxford, Earth))**

### **Halloween - 2391**

Time had passed since the USS Excalibur had been decommissioned and Charlotte Farnsworth had lost her position as proprietor of the Round Table lounge. It had, in truth, been the shortest job she had ever had. Suffice it to say, it had been ultimately unfulfilling, and understandably so.

After all, there had been very little time to acclimate to her new civilian position aboard that vessel. Her entire time spent there; a ruse, meant to further her personal gain and expand her profit margin. For a human raised on Earth in the latter half of the 24th century, Charlotte was remarkably capitalistic and selfish, much like a Ferengi.

However, with that deception over before it began. Now destitute with nowhere else left to go, she found herself on the first transport back to Earth; to the home she had grown up in. Once arriving in Oxford, she had decided to walk, and took a rather circuitous route to get home.

The air was still as she walked there; the night dark and perfect, full of no disturbances, or nasty meteorological surprises. Earth's weather modification network saw to that.

Charlotte had remembered one time, when she was a very young girl that the network had gone down, and she had the fortune, the delight and the fear of observing her first uncontrolled thunderstorm. Her deep chestnut colored eyes had widened at the sight of violent tempestuous winds, and peculiarly purple green skies.

Lightning had struck the old oak tree just outside her bedroom window, splitting it in two, sending wooden shards through the air, across the lawn.

She stood still, all those years ago, paralyzed by fear, neither moving, nor breathing, until her father had come, spiriting her away in his arms, to safety—deeper into the manor.

Now she stood before the entrance to her home, paralyzed by a different kind of fear. Many years had passed since that night, she was an adult now, and yet she felt herself frozen and unmoving, staring up at the great and dark manor house, wishing that someone would spirit her away again; take her to a place of safety.

She wanted someone to hold her. She wanted Nate to hold her, not that he ever would again, she reasoned.

Taking a deep breath, she gathered herself and placed one hand on the old wooden front door. The latch was an antiquated one. Her mother and father believed in preserving the old ways.

A manor house should resemble a true English manor house, her father had once said.

No automatic separating doors, no replicators, no electricity would ever enter their 600 year old ancestral

family home; though her father eventually relented on the electricity. It was nearly impossible being an architect without designing your drafts on some sort of holographical interface computer.

Still, once her parents had died, Forsythe manor had been removed from Oxford's power grid, and remained dark, and cold.

Charlotte clutched the brass handle latch and opened it. With no crime, it was not necessary to lock the front door, and it opened freely without incident.

This astonished Charlotte greatly. Though she was only twenty four years old, she was remarkably jaded, having spent so much time onboard space stations, surrounded by aliens with a cornucopia of different philosophical veins. Not everyone believed in benevolent vision of the Federation.

Some people pilfered the things they wanted....

Charlotte's mouth crooked to one side, giving a snarky smile.

"Small towns..." She said quietly to herself.

The door creaked slowly open, allowing the all too familiar cracks and groans of expanding wood to fill her ears. Walking inside, Charlotte looked around the baronial old manor. An old fashioned longcase clock stood silently in the foyer, neither giving accurate time, nor ticking in the way she had remembered as a child.

Carved into its old weathered case door, were the words: Imperious Rex.

It was the Latin motto of their family crest of arms. She'd never really thought about its implied meaning until now, but there was something blatantly arrogant about it; like her. Long ago, families with supposedly royal blood claimed much for themselves, including the right to rule others.

Charlotte did not wish to rule. She simply wanted to prevent others from having such complete control over her life. She would never allow such control to be given to another again. Not as long as she lived.

Fumbling about in the darkness, she got to the matter of why she had come home in the first place. Reaching into the leather satchel she carried on her shoulder, she pulled out a plasma torch, and walked up the grand staircase, to the upstairs bedroom, at the end of the grand hall.

This place was her room, this place, to some degree, still registered as home...

Charlotte pulled the old door open and stepped inside. The room was completely empty, devoid of furniture. Upon the sudden and accidental death of her parents, the first thing the magistrate had done was to ask her permission to donate the pieces inside some of the rooms, to one of the local museums. Charlotte had reluctantly agreed and discovered that her bedroom was one such room that had been cannibalized.

This made sense to her, since it was at one point, full of old Louis the 14th furniture, works of art, and unusual objet d'art.

Charlotte panicked for a moment, fearing that it too, the reason she was here, might have also been discovered, and claimed by the Federation magistrate.

However, that could not be. Had a Federation official discovered what was hidden in this house, it would have immediately come to her attention. Starfleet security might have been involved, and almost

certainly she would have been detained onboard the Excalibur, until such time as an inquiry could be held.

No, she told herself, it was here. It just had to be...

Sweeping her long, brown hair from her eyes, and over her shoulder, she knelt to the floor, where her bed had once been.

Taking the plasma torch, she cut a hole in the floorboards and separated them. The wood cut easily, like the old Earth metaphor of a hot knife through butter.

She deactivated the plasma tool and took a moment, peering into the blackness of the empty void between the floor boards. A jewelry box sized hole stared back at her, daring her to explore its emptiness with her hands.

With no reluctance, or fearful hesitation, she plunged her right hand into the floor space, without thinking. Would that her hands might brush a furry, living creature, or perhaps be bitten by the large and angry teeth of a rat, the empty, silent Oxford air would be filled with her sudden and unplanned bloodcurdling scream.

Though rabies had been eradicated on Earth centuries ago, she had no desire to be bitten by vermin.

Still, her hands found nothing, short of the object she had been looking for. She smiled, and her hands quickly returned from the hole, with the hidden treasure.

It was an ancient dueling pistols case, covered in dust, but retaining every bit of its old charm, and regal elegance. It's surface felt smooth to her touch, and it showed no signs of significant wear.

Charlotte bit her lower lip and played with the metallic clasp, which held its ornate lid closed. Her grandfather, a midshipman in Starfleet, had claimed to have stolen this object from a high security Federation storage locker. He had told her stories of how it had been found on a rogue planetoid, near the star desert close to the Beta colonies.

How such an antique of earth origins had found its way so far out into space, had been a mystery to her grandfather, and so he had held onto the curiosity, and passed it from one generation to the next.

Once, when she was six years old, her grandfather had taken her aside. He told her the story of how "the find" as he called it, how it had spoken to him, and shown him visions of the future. He claimed the "find" was magic, and held special properties. Grandfather had told her that it was her destiny to keep the find hidden safe, to never show it to her father, who would, as she remembered it, "never understand the importance of it."

And so, she had done just that, whisking the case away, and hiding it in the floor beneath her bed.

Years afterward, her grandfather had gone mad. The doctors at Starfleet medical had diagnosed it as a rare form of transporter psychosis. However, there was ultimately nothing that could be done for him, and he died alone, incredibly medicated and sedated, restrained by a forcefield, and rambling about the darkness that would one-day consume the Alpha Quadrant.

Charlotte felt a tear come to her eye as she held the box. That would never happen to her, she told herself.

She would escape the madness, even if she had to run all the way to the edge of the galaxy.

Closing her eyes, she opened the box instinctively, and removed the find. It fit perfectly into her hand, as if it was always meant to be there. Its weight was real, and yet somehow, insubstantial at the same time; its textures both tangible and intangible.

She felt lightheaded a moment, but then calm, and powerful.

And then the thing happened, the thing her mind told her she had imagined, but yet was too real to ignore...

A man's voice spoke to her.

The voice was light and yet aristocratic, commanding, and yet filled with the playful arrogance of a bullying child.

*Ah yes, my fair maiden child. A powerful set of dueling pistols. My most favorite pair, I will admit...*

Her eyes shot open, as the voice was loud and thundering and was heard not only by her mind, but by her ears as well.

Charlotte's eyes darted about the room, looking for the source of the voice, and realized that it was coming from the dueling pistol in her hand. As impossible as it seemed, the weapon vibrated with the rolling vibrato of a man's voice.

She startled and dropped the weapon back into the green velvet lined box. The voice in her mind was not pleased with her sudden start and chastised her.

*Now, now, Maiden-fair, is that any way to treat such noble and honorable trappings of the aristocracy true? You and I are not so different, you must know. Your family from such a long and noble history and I being who I am...*

Charlotte had no choice but to address the madness in the dark, and so hoped to steady herself by the sound of her own voice.

The weak and trembling timidity that came from her throat embarrassed her, as she had never heard that kind of warble in her own tone before. She attempted to maintain a stiff upper lip and spoke with firm British resolve in her voice.

...But the tremolo was still there.

"Who... who are you?" She swallowed hard, "Where... are you?"

The empty English bedroom filled with maniacal and echoing laughter, which came from everywhere and nowhere all at once, bouncing off the darkened, Victorian wainscoting.

*I, my young child, am everywhere...*

The laughter continued.

*And would that you not yet recognize the nobility in my name, should look only to your hands, to learn my heritage true.*

Charlotte's eyes immediately shot down to her hands. The pistol, now fully [...]ed and loaded, rested firmly in her grip. An inscribed plaque, covered with centuries of old, smudged powder, was detected by

the dim light cast to her eyes.

Though in the dead of midnight, her eyes could still see a touch of moonlight gleam about its filthy inscription. The voice continued to speak...

*Yes, I have become quite bored over the centuries, my little dear, so you will act as my ears and eyes to this new time. Though I am forbidden from playing outside, I was never told that I could not have my playthings outside.*

Charlotte broke into a cold sweat at the disembodied voices use of the word plaything. What had turned into a selfish attempt on her part to sell a valuable antique to book passage back into deep space, had turned into a manifestation of the phantasma diabolique.

Charlotte spoke in fear again...

"What do you want from me?"

The laughter continued.

*You and I will do great things together, fair maiden. But such planning will come in time. For now, the General's pistols require cleaning. Oh the humanity of storing such weapons of power beneath ones floorboards. For shame! For shame!*

Charlotte's cold, and sweating hands worked furiously at the inscription, cleaning it, wearing away at it, removing layers of ancient grime. She had to read the plaque, had to learn what this was about. She had to discover the truth, even it killed her.

She was a woman possessed. Her hands moved with such intention, and seem propelled by invisible forces beyond her understanding.

The reward for her obedience and sudden insanity, became clear. The golden plaque, now clean enough to be read, danced in the dim light of her bedroom.

It was a single word, a single name.

The voice continued to laugh as she read the word aloud. The laughter vibrated her hands, trembling her arms in fear, as her face grimaced in terror, and her heart froze inside her chest.

Charlotte struggled on the word, as it formed in her brain, and then left her mouth, with portents that could not be described.

"Trelane." Charlotte choked on the name. "Your name... is... Trelane...."

"Heritage of the Lost"

Writer's Character: Nathaniel Wilmer

Judge's Character: Toni Turner

Mr. Wilmer's story was one full of sentences that kept the reader anticipating what would be in the next. Dropping the descriptions of Charlotte Farnsworth's life in between the the status of the antiquated house played well throughout the story, and made the reader want to know more about her, and of her mad grandfather.

Wilmer's strong command of the English language, grabbed this reader's attention and never failed to deliver the unwritten promise of the drama and suspense of Charlotte's heritage, and when the end came, all he had written came to life all over again. "Trelane." Charlotte choked on the name. "Your name... is... Trelane...." And there was no question (or question mark) or doubt as to the identity of the specter who dwell within the pistol.

Very well played! An excellent read.

## The Last Night on Lookout

(Round Co-Runner-Up)

(Leland Bishop)

(( A Memory ))

He had no memories before the age of five, and those memories were of smoke, rock dust, and blood. All of his memories of his early childhood were gone. For the boy, his memories began that dark, choking night on Lookout.

He didn't remember birthdays, or the wonder of leaving Earth for a distant world. He didn't recall the pride he knew he must have felt in his parents for leaving everything that was familiar behind and making their destinies in the far reaches of space. He didn't even have a sense of what his parents looked like – other than the last picture that was burned into his right eye before the murderers brought a sharp rock down on it. The picture of his parents bodies mutilated beyond any description a five year old boy could ascribe to it.

He did remember the last words he would ever hear his mother say to him. The words she screamed to him as she stood silhouetted in the doorway of their home, back lit by flames and underscored by the screams of the dying...

“Lee! Stay here! Hide, Lee! I need you to hide! You are not to come out of this house, do you hear me? No matter what... Whatever you hear outside... Stay here, sweetheart... I love...”

His fathers arm had pulled her through the door before she could finish. Into the night and into death.

The killers came to Ceres IX shortly after the sun had set. The long shadows of their hulking forms blotting out the faces of their victims as their long blades closed in. The shadows... and then the wet sounds and screams cut short. Little Lee could not know why his parents had gone out into that dusky Hell. Only later could he speculate that were trying to lead them away from him. At that moment however, and forever in his memory... His parents left him alone with monsters at the door.

He hid in a small dark space between his bed and the wall and listened as Ceres IX – Called Lookout – became a slaughterhouse.

He wouldn't know until later that the monsters were Klingons, they very people who his father had come to negotiate with on that barren rock. In the fading light, they had become nightmare shapes barking in their strange language as they moved among the huddled homes of the colony. He saw them moving past the doorway... Past the window... Moving with their cruel knives and hunting down the people who's only crime was to be living on a planet that had suddenly become valuable overnight.

He vaguely recalled a discovery... Or the talk of a discovery... In the mines. The adults had talked about it only a few nights before. It was something exciting... He remembered that. His parents friends were celebrating it... They thought that all their hard work would be rewarded.

It was rewarded. With pain.

Only later would he learn that these particular demons weren't the gruff, swarthy people his father had traded with for months. They were outlaws. Pirates who had intercepted a stray communication about the mineral strike and were looking to make a quick profit. He only learned it later, after years of studying their harsh and brutal language and reading Starfleet after-action reports. Reports that made what happened that night seem so... clinical.

Lee had been a quiet little boy who loved his books and played games in his own imagination. Now he saw the children he would never get to know being pulled behind their captors. By their hair... By their legs. Sometimes to a dark corner, but more often simply to the center of the main road. He watched them being cut down and left in a growing pile. Children he would never know or laugh with.

If he ever laughed again.

The crashing, breaking, and screaming night seemed to last forever. More likely only an hour or more. An hour that ruined the innocence of little Leland Bishop (he would never be called Lee again) and set him on a bitter course that would twist him and tear at him for the rest of his life.

His mother came to the door one last time, but he would never be sure if she could see his face in those final moments. Her face was a mask of blood. One side almost completely burned away by the green flame of a disruptor beam. For the last time in his life Lee allowed himself the luxury of tears, the luxury of screaming...

He crept to the door with one last desperate hope that his mother might hold him again. But his movement caught the eye of one of the monsters. His hand had only brushed her hair when a grip like iron came down on his neck. All he wanted was to die in that moment. To be free of all this horror.

His captor tried to oblige him. His feet scraped the gray rock as he was pulled by his hair to the pile of bodies in the center of town. When he was hurled atop them he landed cheek to stubbled cheek with the body of a burly man his father had known well... One of the geologists... Leland lay there screaming against the dead man watching as the dark creature above him put its knife away. He could not see its eyes but he could still feel their gaze. The beast had put its knife away because it didn't feel Leland was worth the stroke... Somehow he knew that. The shadow picked up a jagged rock and raised it over the little boy's head.

As it came down on his right eye to blot out the world, Leland Bishop thought: How sad it was that the poor man beneath him hadn't had time to shave.

"The Last Night on Lookout"

Writer's Character: Leland Bishop

Judge's Character: Cassandra Egan Manno

Though its style is strong and it's exactly as long as it needs to be -- those qualities by which I usually form my first judgments regarding a story -- "The Last Night on Lookout" refuses to be so relegated. The morbid images, crafted so subtly by the author, are what stuck with me: Whether it's the final sentence of the opening paragraph that so wonderfully plays with language and image ("choking ... on Lookout") or it's the final line ("How sad it was that the poor man beneath him hadn't had time to shave"), this story refuses to sit down quietly and instead forces the reader to consider it head-on. That's really a fancy way of saying that I was hooked, so kudos there!

I expected this Challenge to be ripe with grit and horror, "The Last Night on Lookout" puts an especially terrible spin on things by showing them through the POV of a young Leland Bishop. There's a loss-of-innocence quality to the story, directly addressed within ("...he would never be called Lee again..."), though I don't think that's the story's primary throughline. Rather, this is a story about bearing witness: How does one see the truly awful and ever come away from it? It's a wonderful area to explore via writing, and given that this event is part of Leland's past, I would be very interested to see how he develops, both through sims and, hopefully, in future Writing Challenges! Show us, here and again (and again and again), how his life has been shaped by these events and the sort of daily witness he brings to bear upon his current life, and I think the result will be quite satisfying.

I would caution the author to dig more deeply into the story's statements of large, ephemeral concepts like "pain," "dark," and "forever." They're such absolute terms that they can often (though not always, of course) be hard to qualify, and I think this story is done a disservice by relying upon lines like "It was rewarded. With pain." I know -- I know, because the story has demonstrated it already! -- that it's capable of more, and while this particular instance of pain won't stick with me, that image of the unshaven man certainly will. Show me the specifics and I'll be with you all the way!

In the end, I'd call this a strong story that fixed its gaze on a terrible memory and refused to look away. Great, great work from someone who promises to be a new talent in the Writing Challenges!

## The Touch of the Sleeper

(Round Co-Runner-Up)

(Della Vetri)

"So this thing was found in a lab?"

The question was asked plainly enough, but something about the wording had Professor Yuri Malenkov shooting a frown at the woman stood beside him. Like himself, Doctor Helena Kerr was one of the Daystrom Institute's resident archaeotechnology specialists, and she'd leapt at the chance to get in on a project like this one the very moment she'd returned from her extended holiday on Risa. It wasn't often that they were called upon to exercise their particular field of expertise, but when they did the reason was usually pretty compelling - and the humanoid figure laid out before them definitely ticked that particular box.

"The *artefact*," he replied, stressing the way he preferred to think of it, "was indeed discovered in the remains of what appeared to be a cybernetics lab of some kind. It's hard to be certain, of course, given the age of the ruins, but the survey team made a reasonably educated assessment."

"If that age is as big a number as I'd heard, I'm happy to cut them a little slack."

Shoving her hands in the pockets of the lab coat she habitually wore, the Alpha Centauran red-head began prowling around the work table the artefact on question lay on, studying it from every angle as her brow furrowed in thought. Whatever it was, it was the right size and shape to be able to pass as most humanoids - if it weren't for the fact that it's exterior shell was nothing but a layer of smooth, featureless sliver. Internal scans had told them that it was more than the inert statue it seemed at first glance, and the sheer complexity of some of what those scans had revealed had led to the archaeological team that had discovered it shipping it off to the Institute as fast as they could arrange for it to happen.

Which was where Yuri and his team had come in. For almost a week, they'd studied the figure as closely as they could without getting invasive, and they were starting to get a little frustrated with the limits of what they'd been able to establish. Quantum dating had confirmed the age, and from the data the discovery team had sent there was a good chance that where it had been found was where it had been built. Unfortunately, there'd been no hints at all as to what it had been built *for*, and if the theories about the last inhabitants of those ruins were right, there was no way at all anyone was going to be able to ask them.

"You tried a HiMRI scan to get a look?"

Given that Helena hadn't taken her eyes off of the subject of her scrutiny, Yuri's nod went unnoticed. With a wry little smile, he opted for a more obvious response.

"High resolution MRI, quantum imaging, EM pattern analysis, even an old-fashioned radar scan. Everything comes back the same, and tells us that what we have here is the body of some form of synthetic life-form."

Helena grunted and straightened up from where she'd been studying the artefact's 'face'. "Never seen anything like this one before, though."

"Oh, it gets better."

Lifting a padd from one of the workbenches nearby, Yuri handed it over before standing back to watch the reaction that he was pretty sure was going to be coming. One of the biggest puzzles they had faced was on the materials side of things, and what Helena had just been handed was a breakdown of the scan results gathered from tests on that silvery coating. Metallic, it might look, but...

"It's *organic*?" And there it was, just as surprised as \*they'd\* been when the results had first come back. "You're telling me that shiny crap all over the thing is-"

"Possibly," Yuri interrupted smoothly, heading off a singularly Kerr-esque head of steam, "the most advanced synthetic organic polymer matrix anyone has ever seen. The hardware underneath it is impressive enough, but that shell..."

He shook his head, lips twitching in another wry smile, and leant up against the workbench.

"Terk nearly wet himself when he saw that data, and we almost had to threaten to nail his lobes to the ceiling to keep him from trying to find some way to sell it."

"What do you expect, letting a [...]ed Ferengi anywhere near something like this?"

"Oh, it wasn't that bad. We just reminded him of the pile of latinum he put up as security for keeping to the confidentiality agreement he signed."

"Ha. Yeah, that'll do it."

The two of them fell into silence again, both looking at the recumbent form that was the focus of this project's work. The vagaries of the Ferengi lust for profit aside, neither of them were ignorant of the potential secrets hidden within something like what they had on their hands, and the sheer scientific drive to *know* was tempered by an awareness of what that sort of curiosity could lead to.

After all, Yrui mused to himself, it was curiosity about what was inside that led to Pandora's Box being opened and the story was quite clear on what had happened because of *that* little slip.

"I could have taken another two weeks vacation, you know." This time, Yuri's frown was one of puzzlement at Helena's comment, apparently unrelated to anything else he could think of right now. "Sun, surf, little [...]tails with umbrellas in them... plus all the exceptionally friendly men with very big-"

"*Thank* you, Helena. I am quite happy to live without that mental image."

"Wimp. What I was going to say was that if I had, I'd probably have kicked myself for missing out on *this*."

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There wasn't enough to be called consciousness. Not yet. What did exist was little more than a reaction to the modulated emissions that had been detected by a collection of specialised nodes. Once that signal had

been received, a cascade of instructions had flowed out of those nodes and into others. Induction charging systems tapped into the local power, building up energy within other components at a painfully slow rate. There had been no need predicted for them to have to work faster, and the idea that the cells they were feeding would be so utterly drained had been similarly unanticipated.

It was working though, and as power became available it was used. Sounds were detected and analysed, hardwired coding assembling meaning from what was being heard whilst others identified what seemed like hard data and filed it away for future use.

None of what was happening was running at the speed it had been designed to, but the tiny node who's sole job was to keep track of time gave an explanation why - once it had checked it's own calculations over thirty thousand times just to make *absolutely* sure it's count was right. A wait for deployment that ran into millennia had stretched even this mechanism's capacity to hold itself ready.

Eventually, everything the system was ordered to do was done and it slipped into a holding pattern, settling in to wait with the infinite patience of a machine for the rest of the signal. Then, and *only* then, would the second layer of commands be brought into play...

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"Pass me that scanner, will you?"

The hand being waved vaguely in Yuri's direction went well with the distracted tone of the question, and he had to smile - at least a little. Picking the device up from the worktop, he handed it over, then went back to looking at the results from the one he'd already been holding.

"So you've gotten somewhere on those resolution enhancements?"

Helena shrugged, most of her attention on the computer screen she was studying whilst she toyed absently with the scanner she'd just received. "Maybe. A more coherent scan pattern, adapting itself to the general level of... whatever it is that's going on in there, should - hopefully - give us a better picture of how things are set up to work in our little statue's head."

"Which," Yuri agreed, "would be nice. The level of activity in there might be almost undetectably low, but it's certainly making things harder when it comes to tracking what's actually going on."

And that had been a bit of a running theme over the last little while. It had taken some searching, but once they'd established that the artefact wasn't *quite* as inert as it had first seemed, they'd ridden the wave of enthusiasm that had provoked straight into a metaphorical brick wall. Now, three days later, it seemed like they might just have a way to get somewhere.

"Here."

Yuri dragged his frowning attention from the silvery figure and turned it toward Helena, who'd turned on her little stool to face him. Apparently done with whatever modifications she was planning to make to the scanner, she held it out to him and he took it with a murmur of thanks. A quick look at it's readouts showed him nothing new at all, but then there wouldn't have been... until and unless it worked.

There was only one way to find out if *that* was going to happen...

At first, there was no change from normal as he began his scan using the newly modified tool, but after a few seconds that changed *fast*.

"Woah!"

His startled exclamation had Helena surging to her feet and hurrying to stand beside him, craning her neck to get a look at what might have provoked it. Once he tilted the scanner to give her a better view of the readings, she let out a low whistle of appreciation - and managed to avoid looking even remotely smug.

"Okay..." she muttered. "That's quite a result."

"Right. But I think you're missing the point..." Which, by playing about with the scanner's controls a little, Yuri endeavoured to correct. Scrolling back through the data the device had gathered, he paused it when he found what he was looking for, then handed the whole thing over to his colleague.

"Umm... Yrui? Am I reading this right? From what I'm looking at here, this spike in activity didn't happen until *after* you started the scan. In fact, the things had been cycling through frequency modulations for nearly thirty seconds before-"

This time, Yrui's exclamation wasn't due to surprise at what he was seeing on a little screen. Instead, it was a quite understandable response to the fact that the silvery figure on the work table, totally unmoving and unresponsive for all this time, had just grabbed him. After a second or so, he managed to get enough of a grip on himself again to notice that the only part of the artefact that had moved at all was the hand - and arm it was attached to - that now held his wrist.

"Yuri! Are you-"

"I'm fine," he replied, somehow a lot more calmly than he felt he had any right to be. "It's not holding me tight enough to hurt, just... I don't know, keeping me here, I guess."

"You *guess*? To hell with that, I'm calling security."

There was little hope he could convince her not to do that, even if he felt any urge to try. The Institute's security set-up wasn't as comprehensive as, say, a Starfleet facility's might be, but that wouldn't stop them from reacting to something like *this*.

Helena's voice making the call sounded far more agitated than the woman usually acted, and Yuri knew that someone would be coming through that door within only a few more moments. Which, if this turned nasty, was most likely not going to be soon enough to make any appreciable difference to *him*.

He was considering whether to try and break the hold on his wrist when the decision was made redundant, the metallic-looking hand releasing its grip and returning to where it had started with just as little warning or ceremony as it had moved to begin with. Absently rubbing his wrist, Yuri backed off well out of reach, eyes firmly fixed on the core of their project, and wondering just what the heck had just happened - and why.

\*\*\*

The signal had come, modulated just as it was meant to be, and when it reached the node that had been patiently awaiting it the results were precisely as designed. Power was routed to higher-order nexus groups, the command routines coded into their fabric coming to life and reaching out to each other. Within moments more, the basis of a command architecture had taken form, building itself further as it confirmed that everything that was meant to be at it's disposal, was.

At that stage, there was nothing capable of appreciating the serendipity of having one of the external things it sought detectable literally within arm's reach - but this in no way impaired the system from acting on that proximity. As soon as the required physical contact was achieved, and the subject was prevented from immediate escape, data began to be gathered and analysed, projections of what would and would not be of use forming and being analysed in turn.

Finally, a model was assembled and the proper coding assembled for use. One last check for errors, then that self-same coding was sent to the receptors that had waited for it since their creation.

There was only enough raw material - and power - for a single activation, but that was part of the design. After all, done right, it only *needed* to happen once... Suspended throughout the dormant biopolymer matrix of the external shell in their little hives, nano-scale mechanisms came to life, surging out to latch onto the materials they needed to do their jobs. It was a laborious process, with endless repetition of the tiniest pieces of the whole essential to the desired result, but there was no hint of anything but almost mindless dedication to the task at hand and a total disregard of the fact that simply fulfilling their assigned role was going to leave almost the entire population extinct.

\*\*\*

The security guards that had responded to Helena's call had done it fast, and under other circumstances Yuri might have found their adrenaline-fuelled jumpiness amusing. As it was, he was more concerned that they were going to do something... unfortunate to his project.

"Gentlemen, do I need to remind you that nothing harmful has actually happened?"

That got him a disparaging look from Helena, not that he'd expected anything else, but he was more interested in the reactions of the people with weapons. Luckily, the man in charge of the team was someone who's judgement he respected - and the fact that he was a Betazoid and thus quite able to tell that Yuri was quite sincere in what he was saying - and after a few moments there was a curt nod to the other two officers and a definite, if slight, reduction in tension.

Quite what was happening in the lab itself, none of them were particularly sure. Something had disrupted the sensors that might have told them, and there wasn't even a hint of sound to give a clue. This, of course, was not helping everyone stay calm.

"Nothing," Helena put in sharply, "may have happened *yet*, but we have no idea what is going on in there. Tenna's not going to take any chances, and you know it."

Tenna, the security chief, looked less than happy to be reminded that he was going to be held at least

partly responsible for anything that happened, but since that was part of his job he limited his response to that. Or at least he did until the sound of a heavy thud made it through the lab door. Every hint of relaxation that might have slipped into the atmosphere vanished in an instant, with the trio of security guards immediately moving to take up positions by the door.

"Umm... What are you going to do?"

Yuri's somewhat hesitant query was ignored. Instead, Tenna gestured to his people to stand ready then, with his weapon in hand, touched the door control. The amount of tension in the air was enough to be almost palpable, and somehow managed to spike even higher as the door slid open.

For seconds that seemed to feel like hours, nothing at all seemed to happen, until finally, weapon held ready in a white-knuckled grip, Tenna stepped cautiously through the portal. Yuri was pretty sure he wasn't the only one holding his breath as he watched the Betazoid's slow, wary advance into the lab, but he *knew* he jumped when Tenna's voice came back through the doorway at them.

"Professor, Doctor... Remind me, would you, what you were working on in here?"

Yuri and Helena shared a puzzled look, noting the fact that the Betazoid's tone had more than a hint of confusion in it. Carefully, and not totally certain it was a smart idea, the pair edged closer to the door, moving to get a peek at whatever it was that was waiting on the other side...

"The Touch of the Sleeper"

Writer's Character: Della Vetri

Judge's Character: Cassandra Egan Manno

This is a solid story, a double-braid that considers two archaeotechnology specialists on the one hand and their subject on the other. Perhaps it's the theme or the time of year, but I saw this as a nice riff on Frankenstein's basic territory, and it was a pleasant little riff! There's a good escalation of tension throughout the piece, and it's handled well: I felt the sort of full-body realization of my heartbeat that means that what I'm reading is doing a good job of scaring me -- or at least signaling to me that it's about to do so. The exposition was handled well, and the proportions of the braids seemed appropriate: It was much easier for me to get into the heads of Helena and Yuri than to connect with their subject (who I shall call, as in the title, "the Sleeper"), though I also applaud the choice of the braid, as knowing the Sleeper intimately was something I was privileged to know as a reader and it helped round out a story that might otherwise have otherwise revolved around the scans of the two scientists. By the end, I'm ready for the Sleeper's revelation in the final section, and I was pleased with that end.

My major quibble with this story is that it didn't end there! The last part of that final line -- "...but there was no hint of anything but almost mindless dedication to the task at hand and a total disregard of the fact that simply fulfilling their assigned role was going to leave almost the entire population extinct" -- is the sort of existentially terrifying (literally!) line that I thought this story was going to end with, but then we came back to Yuri and Helena one more time. In my mind, the story really belonged to the Sleeper; Yuri and Helena were really devices by which the story explored it, and even though we spent less time in the POV of the Sleeper (which, as above, is a choice I applaud), I was certain that this story was going to end me with the Sleeper. For future stories, I'd challenge this author to consider what the story's accomplishment and focus would like to be by its end. If, here, those were answered by the story of Yuri and Helena and the Sleeper was secondary, then the return to their braid was a good choice -- but if the Sleeper was the stronger presence and its awakening was more central, then I would abstract that into a general guideline to end with the strongest character.

One more small note: Yikes! Science fiction racism! I'm always a little uncomfortable when Federation members (especially leading Daystrom scientists!) begin speaking in this way (with regard to the Ferengi), as it strikes me as something that would have been left far behind us. My advice here: Don't do it.

Again, I thought this was a really solid story with some excellent tension, a strong choice for its structure, and a compelling throughline that kept me fully present in its world. Excellent work, and I look forward to reading more!

## Adsit Anglis Sanctus Georgius

(Idril Mar)

Being an engineer and warp field specialist by training, I find myself needing to know why and how things happen. That is why ghost stories, especially ones that can't be logically explained, are what send shivers up my spine.

There is a legend among my husband's countrymen, those humans that come from the little island that calls itself England, of their island's patron saint, St. George the Dragonslayer, and how he, in his benevolence, comes to the aid of brave bands of true Englishmen when in battle against overwhelming odds and facing certain death.

I'm not so sure about this legend myself but I have heard a story that sometimes makes me wonder, when I think about it, if St. George really doesn't protect people from the little island of England. Across it when I was wandering through old intel files of a little-known battle on the edge of nowhere during the Dominion War. It was really a meaningless battle far from any lines that mattered in the true heart of the war, completely unremarkable except for one small fact: there was a battalion of Starfleet Infantry that hailed almost exclusively from a small island in the northern hemisphere of Earth.

The battle was for listening station on the planet Archos VII. A small infantry battalion had been assigned to hold a mountain pass that was the main approach to the post. The battalion, a thousand strong and each with a small Union Jack on their shoulder, traced its lineage proudly back to His Majesty's Blues and Royals, in the days before Earth was united by a single government. This battle was one of inches, fought with the modern equivalent of sticks and stones. The Archosian atmosphere had been so saturated with energy disrupting aerosols that old fashioned firearms and rail-gun artillery had been resurrected to battle across the rocky terrain.

The listening post in question had been obsolete for nearly a decade and neglected for longer than that but, as many times happens in war and peace both, people misplace significance onto objects and places that someone else shows a desire for, even when they themselves know their worthlessness. It was into this meaningless battle for a meaningless piece of technology on a meaningless rock that the infantry was dropped. A thousand strong, they dug trenches, built strong walls and had made themselves a fortress the envy of any castle of old. This was fortunate, as unknown to them, the Dominion had secretly dropped nearly 100,000 Jem'Hadar warriors nearby with orders to destroy the listening post. Their first notice of their new guests was when the artillery smashed into their newly finished salient. For two days and nights without stop, the thump-whistle-crash of the shells targeting them drained them somewhat of their usual upbeat cheeriness, tearing stone from stone... limb from limb. After the days of punishment, only half the original number remained. That is when the ground assault started. The sight of the wave upon wave of grey clad Jem'Hadar bearing down on them made even the bravest of those left realize that this was their time, their place and likely the end of their story.

Among them was a young lieutenant, one who had graduated college only a few months before as a scholar of ancient languages. As he and his platoon opened fire in what they all knew was likely a vain effort, he began muttering an old Latin invocation:

Adsit Anglis Sanctus Georgius - May St. George be a present help to the English.

Over and over he said it as he fired his rifle into advancing grey horde. The Jem'Hadar were nothing if they were not loyal and determined. Up the hill they ran towards the Federation lines and by the hundreds the infantry cut them down. By the thousands, though, they kept coming, slowly gaining. There was no hope in the defenders, but they would do their duty as well.

Suddenly, the young lieutenant heard a voice above and behind him, loud and sharp as a peal of thunder: "Array, array, array!"

Over the din of the battle, he began to hear other voices calling from behind the lines.

"Saint George! Saint George!"

He rolled over to look behind his men. With what seemed like a soft white glow, he began to see shapes of men, standing behind the Federation trenches, indistinct, but he could see them wearing what seemed to be ancient armor and clothes.

"Sweet saint preserve us!"

"Heaven's knight, come to our aid!"

The voices were deeply English, but no one else seemed to hear them or see the shadowy shapes arrayed behind their lines. As he watched, they drew their shadowy bows and with a shout there was a deep hum, as if by a thousand violin strings. The sky filled for a moment with pale arrows, then they smashed into the Dominion lines and the Jem'Hadar began falling by the thousands.

"England! England and St. George!"

The men of the infantry kept firing, dutiful though all their hope was gone.

"St. George, succour us!"

"Holy chevalier, defend us!"

The arrows came so fast and in such numbers that the light from the dim star above darkened and the alien horde melted before them, finally breaking and leaving tens of thousands of dead on the field.

The Vorta wrote the failure and losses down that the Federation had managed somehow to overcome the impediments to the use of technology. Most of the men of the infantry assumed that Starfleet had managed to get air support into place.

Only that young lieutenant knew the truth:

St. George had once more brought the bowmen of Agincourt to the aid of the English.

"Adsit Anglis Sanctus Georgius"

Writer's Character: Idril Mar

Judge's Character: Sal Taybrim

This was a moody little piece; full of great imagery and a neat little folk tale tie in. I like the language in the piece. It had a nice, readable cadence and the easygoing style of a folk tale or a ghost story told around the campfire. Full of little details like the union jack on the uniforms, this was a fun piece that I enjoyed reading.

In the end I found myself wanting this story to be longer. While it was a solid entry, it did not put shivers down my spine because it didn't have much suspense or build up. As a folk tale it works well, but as a scary story it needs to slow down and indulge in the fear of a massive battle against a vicious enemy. I also think this story could use more characterization. We know enough about the main character to like him – the little details draw us in and make him seem realistic. But he needs to face more conflict, get pushed to the edge of fear and still persevere. Make your reader's heart pound a little, make them wonder if the protagonist will survive before the tale wraps up.

Again, a nicely readable little piece that could be expanded with just a little effort into an excellent stand alone tale. This one has a lot of potential and strength!

## Dawn's Early Light

(Hannibal Parker)

(( Late 2373, Fire Base Sierra, Planet TR 144, Tyra System ))

::The planet wasn't much... Class M, smaller than Earth, similar gravity...unremarkable in its natural resources or of much importance other than a beachhead against the Dominion. It was here the 282nd of the Starfleet Marines had engaged Dominion forces for the previous two weeks. Time after time, they drove off the drug-addled monsters, managing to keep their base camp from being overrun. Neither side had managed a clear advantage over the other, and in the skies above, Starfleet and Dominion forces engaged in a deadly cat and mouse game of survival. There had been talk of a major engagement by the fleet, but as far as Sargent Hannibal Parker was concerned, it was all talk. They had supplies, comms, and ammo. Power for the base camp kept the Jem'Haddar out due to the force fields they had put up...but they had to go outside the force fields to engage the enemy::

::The Marines held the high ground, with the Jem'Haddar camp three clicks away. The land between them was a rabbit warren of scorched earth, craters, and destroyed foliage. Smoke rose from the gulf between the two camps, and from their vantage point, Hannibal and his men could see the beginnings of some sort of structure. Intelligence told them it was a ketracel white facility, and their job was to eliminate it::

::Going into the communications bunker, Hannibal went to speak to the commanding officer, Colonel Sampson. The look on his face never seemed to change...he would have been a good poker player, his grey eyes set into his head with a way that would look right through you. They had been on this rock for three weeks, and he had not ever seen the man smile...but there was not a great deal to smile about. There were once two hundred and fifty Marines here..they were down to one hundred and twenty five. Looking down on the much smaller man, the Colonel spoke, raising his voice over the whine of a fighter squadron swooping down on the Jem'Haddar...:

Sampson: Looks like those fighters are going to do the job for us, Sargent...

::A thunderous explosion, felt more than seen, rumbled through the bunker. Looking outside, four mushroom clouds, flecked with flame and smoke, rode their way ominously skyward, the booms from sympathetic explosions rocking the void between them....:

Parker: We'll see, Sir...those [...]s are proving to be quite hard to kill.

Sampson: That should take care of them.

Indeed it should. Starfleet at the moment ruled the skies and the space above it, which could only mean one of two things...the Dominion was busy elsewhere, and losing the facility was the cost of doing business, or they really were going to keep a grip on the sector...which meant the Sovereign Class USS Charleston would be back to pick them up in short order. No doubt he could use a shower, as could everyone else in the unit by then.

::Sitting at the Communications console, a Starfleet Lieutenant... Carlson? turned to speak to the

General...his flushed face told Hannibal that whatever it was, had to be important....::

Carlson: Sir..this just came in from Admiral Ross. The fleet is engaging the Dominion. The Charleston is recovering their fighters and going to join the fleet.

::Hannibal didn't like that one bit. Sure, the Jem'Haddar had been dealt with for now, but there was always a chance there were survivors, or something would put them back in the fight. Without air cover. Looking back at the Colonel, he spoke...::

Sampson: All we have to do is sit tight till this thing is over, Sargent.

::Turning to a subordinate, Colonel Sampson issued another set of orders.....::

Sampson: Stand down from alert status, and lower the shields. Save the power for when we need it.

::The subordinate nodded, and the hum from the shield went away. Something in the back of Hannibals' mind told him it was a very bad idea, and that feeling of dread only increased as the hours passed..::

:: Eating chow in the mess tent four hours later, Hannibals' worst fears were realized as the Starfleet Lieutenant raced out of the command bunker, his face white with fear and shock. The Colonel, sitting at the head of one of the mess tables, stood up as the man approached...::

Carlson: Colonel! The fleets' gone!

:: All conversation stopped dead with the news. If what he was saying was true, they were marooned, behind enemy lines....::

Sampson: What the hell are you talking about? There were over a hundred ships in that fleet! Confirm that last report..

Carlson: I did Sir...I'm only getting ID's from ten ships. Ten out of 112.....

:: Their worst nightmare was coming true. They were trapped, behind enemy lines, and it was only just beginning. One hundred and twenty five Marines on the verge of being slaughtered by a relentless enemy. The Jem'Haddar were not interested in taking Marines as prisoners, and everyone in that tent knew it. Colonel Sampson stood up, his face resolute, his voice calm...::

Sampson: Hannibal, get your men ready to fight. Set the perimeter. Carlson, get those shields back up and get an inventory of our supplies. Make sure our sensors can track incoming ships, friend or foe.

::Before Hannibal could answer, Carlson spoke again, his voice tinged with fear....::

Carlson: General...should I send a distress signal?

:: With a finality as solid as permacrete, he spoke...::

Sampson: The only one who will hear it will be the Jem'Haddar, Lieutenant....on your way...Hannibal, you too. Lock this place down.

Parker: Aye, Sir...

Carlson: Will do, Colonel.

:: Picking up his rifle, making sure it had a fresh power cell, he spoke to the Marines in the room....::

Parker: Get all the water, ammo, rations and grenades you can carry. You know the drill. We got company coming. Pass the word. Move it!

:: The scraping of boots and clang of weapons as the Marines gathered their weapons and made their way over to the makeshift armory, all the while passing the word to the other Marines on watch. Marines took extra ammo, food and water to their compatriots on the line. Hannibal took his position forward, looking out over the now burned out Jem'Haddar position. The waiting game had now begun....::

:: Day turned to night, and with no moon and no lighting, the Marine camp was black as a tomb. The occasional shimmering from the shields was the only light, its brief illumination just enough to temporarily ruin his night vision. A light on the horizon, too low to be a ship, arched high into the sky, followed by a shriek that sounded like ripping heavy burlap....::

Parker: INCOMING!!!!

:: The warhead slammed into the shields, the sound of the explosion cracking against his ears. Another. Then another. Screams from the Marines, holding their ears as those closest to the impact point had their eardrums shattered by the impacts. With each succeeding blast, the shields flared less and less blue, and began to flare red. The shields were failing, until one final fusillade took them down for good. The sounds of explosions now replaced by darkness and calls for medics, who rushed from the command bunker to treat the injured. Hannibal could hear the Colonel calling for status reports, wanting to know how fast they could get the shields back up. The reply was cut off as the assault began anew, this time the first shell slammed into the command bunker, the concussion knocking Hannibal off his feet, debris raining down upon the besieged Marines.::

:: Hannibal was furious. They were being methodically chewed to pieces by long range artillery they somehow managed to get to the surface. The command bunker, along with Colonel Sampson, was gone, consumed in the fire started by the artillery barrage. The power supply was gone. So far, their stocks of food and water were unscathed. They still had plenty of ammo, but no one to shoot at. The surviving medics did what they could, patching up the wounded, and those who could not be saved were given a lethal dose of painkiller. Fortunately, they still had medical supplies, so they could at least survive until the bitter end, which Hannibal knew was coming.::

:: A quick survey of the medics and surviving Marines told the tale. Hannibal and one other Sergeant, Thompson, were the only surviving officers. Twenty nine Marines, including the Colonel, were dead, with another nineteen wounded. That left only seventy seven fully whole Marines out of two hundred and fifty they hit the rock with. He didn't know if any would be left by morning.::

:: There was no place to hide, no place for cover. Those who could fight stayed on the line, phaser rifles at the ready. Others were collecting weapons and supplies from the dead, and placing the dead in body bags. They worked quickly, never knowing when incoming fire would interrupt the process of collecting

the dead. Hannibal knew only one thing...if he was going to die on this rock, he was going to die like a Marine. He didn't fear it...he embraced it...The only possible good news was that they knew that they were facing Cardassian artillery, thanks to a few fragments they found...which meant that this part of the system the Dominion allowed the Cardassians to control. Now, if they would only come out and fight. Cardassians were brutal, but at least you could see them coming and they stayed down when shot.::

:: Working his way around the camp, Hannibal found one man, a Starfleet Ensign. He had dove into a shell crater to escape the bombardment. Curled into a fetal position, he was almost hysterical, shaking as though he was being electrocuted. Babbling to himself, Hannibal first felt pity for the man...then anger. Kneeling down into the crater, Hannibal jerked the man up, the Ensigns' eyes filled with terror.::

Parker: Ensign...ENSIGN! PULL IT TOGETHER!

:: The young man tried to pull away, but Hannibals' grip only tightened on the mans' uniform.:::

Ensign: THE FLEETS' GONE! WE'RE GOING TO DIE HERE! THEY ARE GOING TO COME IN HERE AND KILL US ALL! WE GOTTA...

:: Before he knew it, Hannibal backhanded the Ensign, then slapped him again, splitting his lip. Drawing his Bowie knife and placing it under his chin, Hannibal spoke to him in a voice more chilling than the enemy itself....::

Parker: WE are going to fight until we can't. To the last man. WE are going to stay here and DO OUR JOB! If you try to run, I will kill you myself. IS THAT CLEAR!!!

:: The young man was still shaking, but the haunted look in his eyes began to fade. Hannibals' lip was quivering in anger, and only then did he realize his outburst had drawn a crowd. With Sergeant Thompson watching him from a distance, Hannibal continued....:::

Parker: Fear is a choice, Ensign. Choose to live. Choose to fight. Choose to die. Now.

:: Hannibal had no use for cowards, and he had decided if the young man wanted to die, his knife would make quick work of him right here and right now. Slightly moving the knife away from his chin, the man nodded.:::

Parker: Good. Now get your [...] on the line. When they come over that hill, just keep pulling that trigger until you're dry, then snap in a new clip. Can you do that?

Ensign::nodding:: Yes sir.....

:: Watching the young man take his place, Hannibal took his, and waited for daybreak. It wasn't long before the sounds of incoming fire drew their attention....::

Parker: HERE WE GO MARINES!!!!!!

:: Checking his combat tricorder, he could see it was being jammed. As the rounds began to fall around the compound, the explosions were smaller,which meant mortars..which meant a ground assault was imminent. They still had mortars, but because they could not see exactly where their enemy was, they

could only guess in the darkness before dawn. The Marines lit the sky with their mortars, pounding the positions they thought the enemy was located. A bright flash from the former hilltop held by the Jem'Haddar told them they had hit paydirt. Round after round dropped on the enemy position, fanning out from that position, until enemy fire stopped falling. Lighting off a tracer round, they found what they were looking for as dawn broke above the embattled forces. Cardassian soldiers were moving through the no mans land between the two positions. This was the moment of truth. There were at least three hundred Cardassians moving towards them, spreading out so they were not such easy targets. Surprised by being lit up, they began to run towards the Marines. Thompsons' voice rang out...::

Thompson: Wait for my signal. Make every shot count! Grenades at the ready! Let 'em have it!

:: The thump of grenade launchers put up a wall of shrapnel, slicing into the Cardassians, but they were not enough against them. Inside phaser range, Thompson sang out again...::

Thompson: It's been an honor...FIRE AT WILL!!!!

Parker: YES SIR!

:: From behind their sandbag barricades, the Marines cut loose, the blue beams from their rifles contrasting the the red beams from Cardassian weaponry. It seemed like the more they dropped, more took their place. Shots hit the sandbags around Hannibal, one slicing through and catching him in the hip. He was grazed pretty deeply, but he ignored the pain and fought on. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Ensign who had been cowering in a shell crater, drop his rifle and began to run away...::

Parker: ENSIGN! GET YOUR...

:: It was too late. A disruptor blast caught him in the back, and as he spun around, another caught him in the head. He was finished...::

:: Only seventy five yards separated the Cardassians from the Marines. Most of the Marines had grenade launchers attached to their rifles, but once they had expended them, the fire was too intense to reload them. Throwing them from behind the wall blind was their only option as the enemy crept even closer. A Marine next to Hannibal went down, a perfect hole blown in his chest. Running between positions, Thompson was cut down. It was now only a matter of time before the Cardassians would move to outflank them...they still had superior numbers, and if they managed to accomplish it, game over. The Cardassians would pay dearly, but the Marines would lose the battle. Slapping another clip into his rifle, Hannibal was making his superior marksmanship work for him, cutting down the reptilian troops with abandon. Above the din of dead and dying men and women, a flash of light and heat blew Hannibal back off the line...::

Parker:Oo This is it..Oo

:: Hannibals' greatest fear was to die a dishonorable death. When he was younger, his father told him the greatest thing a warrior could do was to die with honor. There was nothing more honorable than dying in a last stand against innumerable odds , and he only wished that his day to honor his father would come a little later than today. If anyone found his body, there would be no doubt about how he died, facing his enemies, gun or knife in hand...::

:: Another blast..then another. Either the rounds were falling short and the Cardassians were cutting down their own men, or...hope beyond hope, there was a Federation starship up there providing fire support. Whatever it was, the rate of fire from the Cardassians was easing, and the Marines poured it on between the blasts. In another ten seconds, all firing had stopped coming from the Cardassians... the battle for Fire Base Sierra was over. An eerie quiet settled over the battlefield, and as the smoke cleared, it revealed a sea of dead Cardassians mingled with the previously killed Jem' Haddar. Out of that quiet, a voice Hannibal thought he would never hear again came over his commbadge..it was Captain Taylor of the USS Charleston.::

Taylor: =/\= This is Captain Taylor of the USS Charleston. Any commanding officer please respond.=/\=

:: Thinking it was a trap, Hannibal responded, and asked a question only the captain would know....::

Parker: =/\= This is Sargeant Parker, Captain. How many days did I get in the brig for drunk and disorderly at Starbase One?=/\=

Taylor: =/\= None. The charges were dropped. You've got ten minutes to get your people together and get off that rock before we need to bug out. We'll destroy what you can't take from orbit.=/\=

Parker: =/\ Copy that, Captain, and thanks for the air strike. Parker out.=/\=

:: It was indeed Captain Taylor all right. Looking around at his spent Marines, he yelled out to them...::

Parker: We're bugging out! Get the wounded ready to travel!

:: In short order, the wounded, the dead, and the surviving Marines were back on board the Charleston. His first stop was Sick Bay, where he could get his hip tended to. They still had to make it out of the occupied area and into Federation space, but he felt confident that if Captain Taylor could escape the carnage of the battle, he could certainly get them home....::

"Dawn's Early Light"

Writer's Character: Hannibal Parker

Judge's Character: Sal Taybrim

This story is highly evocative in its scenic portrayal of war. The description is tight and the story flows smoothly. The writer displays a solid command of military knowledge and it reads like watching a documentary of a historical battle.

Unfortunately the greatest strength of this story also reveals its greatest weakness. The 'documentary' feeling allows an excellent overview of a battle, and a strong plotline, but along the way we develop no empathy for any of the characters. Usually the death of a struggling young Ensign would be a minor tragedy, and the heroic wishes of an up and coming Sergeant would be a building character draw. But both of these feel like footnotes to a history book rather than character revelations that draw a reader in.

This story displays a common problem with posts-submitted-as-stories: the reader is not given enough reason to care about the characters. I understand that players in sims care deeply about the characters they sim with because they have had months, sometimes years to form bonds with those characters. But as a stand alone story your characters are what will drive your readers' interest. You must build empathy for your characters or you will quickly lose the reader's interest no matter how evocative your settings are or how well constructed the plot is.

Strong characterization builds suspense and desire to keep reading – that feeling that the reader 'has to keep turning the page.' I found myself wanting a reason to root for the marines, other than the fact that 'they were humans.'

This was cleanly written and the language was easy to read. I can see how it would make a strong game post for readers who were already deeply committed to the main character, but as a stand alone piece you need to reveal the thoughts, feelings, goals, desires and narrative of your main character so the audience has a reason to really be invested in whether or not he lives or dies.

## Her Greatest Fear

(Rune Jolara)

"It started as flashes. At the time I wasn't what they really were. Perhaps it was just my imagination running wild, filling in gaps I hadn't been able to fill since I was a child. But as time passed, the flashes morphed into more in depth, clearer images. Whispers became voices," Rune said, her voice soft and quiet. She drew in a slow, steady breath. "The panic attacks began soon after the memories began to surface."

She swallowed hard, not able to make eye contact. "Fits of sudden nausea, cold sweats, shaking hands, blurred vision, heart racing so fast I thought it would burst through my chest. I couldn't breath. I couldn't move. I became utterly paralyzed by fear."

((10 Years Ago - Sabahnuor Attitude Readjustment Center, Leya-I))

16 year old Rune's heart began racing as soon as they stepped through the doorway. A few more steps and she got a sudden sick feeling deep inside her stomach. A few more steps and she stopped. Her mentor, Dura Refa, stopped a step ahead of her and turned to look at her.

Looking up at the older woman, "I changed my mind," Rune said.

"Runica..."

Rune shook her head. "I don't need this," she said, forcing a nervous smile. "Really... I will try harder. I promise."

Dura gave her a saddened look, her eyes scrunching into a frown. "Runica, you've tried. No one faults you for needing help." The woman's voice was gentle, yet firm.

The doors at the end of the corridor opened. Rune's heart nearly stopped when she saw the two attendants emerge. One male, one female. Both dressed in standard white uniforms. The closer they got, the more panicked she became. She started to back up but Dura grabbed her arm.

"Please, Dura..." Rune said, pleadingly as she tried to pull free. Dura's fingers dug into the girl's arm, holding tight. Her heart was racing, pounding deafeningly inside her chest. She struggled harder to pull away but it wasn't enough. Before she knew it, the two attendants were there. They grabbed her arms, one on each side.

"I'm sorry, Runica. This is for the best," her mentor said, showing none of her earlier compassion.

Rune kicked and screamed and pleaded but it was all for nothing. Two sets of hands held fast, their fingers digging deep into her arms. She couldn't break free. They dragged her towards the doors. Her screams and pleas completely ignored. Once beyond the threshold, the entire atmosphere changed. It was colder and her screams echoed off the metallic walls.

She was taken into a small brightly lit room and stripped down to nothing, all the while fighting them. An elbow caught her in the mouth sending her head slamming back into the wall. Her vision exploded

into a kaleidoscope of colors and confusion. She could taste the blood in her mouth as hands grabbed her again and slammed her onto a cold, steel table.

The lights overhead were blinding. Of course that was all part of the process to wear down the "patient". Her head, arms and legs were strapped to the table, making it impossible for her to turn her head away from them and it didn't matter how tightly she clenched her eyes shut. The light still penetrated her eyelids and the nectating membrane beneath.

She was cold... freezing actually. Her heart was racing again and in spite of freezing, she was sweating. She could feel the tiny beads of sweat roll down the side of her face, mingling with the tears that escaped her eyes. She struggled against her bonds but she couldn't move.

Her muscles tensed as she heard a ripping sound and then something damp brushed against her forehead. She tried to jerk away but it was pointless. All of this fighting was pointless.

Then she felt it. Needles pierced her skin at various points around her body, along her spine, back of her neck and forehead. Pin [...]s turned into stinging, then burning and then excruciating pain engulfed her entire body. She tried to scream but the sound caught in her already raw throat.

((Present-time))

"Fear of what?" Nikki Ryan asked, her voice calm and soothing.

Tears rolled down her face as her head rested against Nikki's shoulder. She took comfort from the arms wrapped around her as they lay in the dark. Rune's softly glowing eyes flicked up to meet the other woman's crystal blues. Her question hanging between them. "Of being taken back and having my memories ripped out of me again," she said, her own lightly accented voice trembling slightly. "Of not being allowed to be here with you, to feel what I feel and to love who I love."

"Her Greatest Fear"

Writer's Character: Rune Jolara

Judge's Character: Ren Rennyn

Rune Jolara's flashback to a horrible experience of her youth is a feast of horror for the senses.

The story makes no attempt to define its character or present location at the beginning. That became an asset. The language of the opening speech sets up the coming flashback and gives just a glimpse of how Rune feels about what she is remembering. The sense of dread felt by her 16-year-old self was obviously still felt years later, and as a reader, I felt it too.

That feeling continued to grow as Rune was subjected to shockingly extreme treatment. Every sense was engaged. As she felt, saw, heard and even tasted one awful thing after another, I felt it too. The entire experience of the attendants' attempt to break Rune down, to numb her, was described in one sensory image after another. It is beautifully described, and leaves a tangible impression of what she went through.

"Her vision exploded into a kaleidoscope of colors and confusion." - That phrase in particular jumped off the page at me.

The reasons for Rune's rough treatment at the Attitude Readjustment Center become apparent when, at the end, we learn where she is in the present, and to whom she is relating this disturbing memory. This was a perfect bookend to the suspense of not knowing who she was talking to at the beginning of the story.

As a self-contained unit, the story might have been improved by spending a little more time describing the reason for Rune's "adjustment," how she feels about it now, and perhaps giving a little more explanation of Rune's relationship with Dura Refa, and Refa's motivations for turning on Rune.

As a feast for the senses, the story touched on every nerve, and succeeded admirably in conveying the feelings of pain, panic and more.

## A smile is full of teeth

(Marcus Dickens)

( USS AMAZON )

( IC )

-Captain's log, stardate 240108.7, we've arrived at Romu'in space and we've detected one of their ships waiting for us. Starfleet had just a dozen of contacts with this species, they're still a mystery to us, but other sources catalog them as strange creatures with even more strange ways of being. We just know that they're bipedal reptiles whose population is mostly composed of male adults and most of them are dedicated to the military branch. The Columbus will be the first ship to be allowed to get to their home planet so I'll need all my diplomatic skills to cause a good first impression.-

:: Captain Rashuu stood from the captain's chair and moved to the center of the bridge ::

Rashuu: Open a channel :: The audio signal indicated that the channel was open. :: This is captain Rashuu from the Starfleet vessel Columbus to the Romu'in ship in front of us. Do you receive us?

Romu'inan: Starfleet vessel Columbus, this is the vessel Krillari, we're here to provide escort to our home planet. You'll follow us and abstain to do any active scans as we progress in our territory.

Rashuu: Understood Krillari, we'll follow your lead. :: The channel closed and Rashuu returned to his seat. :: The probe is in place, right?

Sheridan: :: The FO turned to his captain:: Yes sir, half light year away, ready to be activated upon need.

:: The Saurian has always been one to be bold to get to combat but years of experience showed him that it's better to have an ace up his sleeve, just in case. For about twelve hours they get inside the Romu'in territory at warp three. In the way, ships were gradually adding themselves as escort, first two, then two more, this way until there were ten ships enveloping them at a distance of about two hundred thousand kilometers. The Saurian didn't like it, but he can't do anything that would jeopardize the talks.::

:: Finally they get to their destination. The escorts left and remained on the outskirts of the system and the Krillari was the only one left. They guided them to a low orbit where they waited. Finally they're given the transport coordinates. Rashuu moved towards the lift and was met on the transporter with his team and then beamed down. ::

:: The reception hall was a bit somber, but enough to see clearly the group that was waiting for them. The place has a lot of holes on the ceiling and walls and some trees passed through those holes, he wasn't sure if this could be an issue if a storm arrives at the place, but the place was humid enough for the Saurian to feel comfortable, unlike the standard Starfleet environments that were a bit dry for his taste. His gaze fell then on the group waiting them. There were four of them, Rashuu made a step forward. ::

Rashuu: I'm captain Rashuu.

Torka: I'm primer Torka, I've been assigned as your liaison with our people. Those are my assistants, Saruin minister of medicine and Lel'otep minister of external affairs.

Rashuu: My pleasure. This is my Chief medical officer Dr. Scott , my Chief science officer Baldwin and the Lieutenant Shar'wyn. :: Rashuu avoided saying that it was a security officer, the woman nodded politely with his right arm just in front of the weapon holster, hiding discretely the weapon.::

Torka: I must say that I'm surprised that you're the captain of a ship of this Federation.

Rashuu: Really? I hope it's a good surprise.

Torka: You must say that. So far the only contact we had with Federation Vessels was with the ones called humans and two called Vulcans. Seeing that there's someone with... a reptile ascendance... is good. At least you're more... easy to see than those mammals.

Rashuu: :: he looked at his companions :: I used to think the same when I first saw them after leaving my home planet, but what they may lack in that field, they compensate with a wide variety of attributes.

Torka: I see... You may follow me, I'll give you a tour of the province. I'm sorry but I'm not allowed to guide you to the main province, but the Master Leader believes that my province can show you how we are and teach you what you might want to know.

Rashuu: I'm sure that your province is perfect for us. Given that we have never been here, I'm honored that you accepted to receive us.

Torka: It's not that I asked for it, I just follow the Master Leader instructions. This is how things work here.

Rashuu: Similar to Starfleet. Being the military branch of the Federation we follow a chain of command. For example, they follow my orders as I follow those of my commanding officers. I understand that your people follow a military life. Is that for everyone or just the males?

:: They walked through the building to an open street ::

Torka: We all do military service and train for that since we are a child. Our jungles are dangerous so everyone must be ready to fight for their life's. That's how we live since we are born.

Scott: You mean that since birth you're ready to take some military training?

Torka: :: The primer looked at the human that slowed its pace as it was being looked :: Kind of... our newborns fight for food since they hatch the eggs. The weaker ones either die on the fight or if they manage to survive and get food are relegated to simpler tasks. That's how we become strong.

Scott: I see... :: The doctor looked at the group with a different look. Obviously if they've reached those important positions, others may have suffered a worse destiny. It could seem cruel, but obviously it depends on the crystal you look through.

Saruin: Maybe the good doctor would like to have a look at our medical station. We have a hatchling about to 'bloom'. It should be interesting for him to see. :: The female looked at the doctor, to whom she was about a quarter of a feet taller. ::

Torka: Are you interested? :: said the primer with a grin drawn in his smile::

Scott : :: gulping a bit :: I will, as long as my captain agrees.

Rashuu: :: He looked at the good doctor and understood what was between lines. :: Yes, I have no objection, but I'm sure that Lieutenant Shar'wyn is also interested in that.

Shar'wyn: :: she grinned at the comment but the look and years of serving with Rashuu allowed her to understand his statement :: Of course, they are an awesome species and I'd like to know more about them.

Rashuu: Good, Baldwin, you're with me.

:: The good doctor along with the Security officer moved away with the female Minister of medicine while Rashuu accompanied the primer to a tourist visit and Baldwin tried to know more about their technology, given that they seem to be quite integrated in their environment. ::

:: On their way towards another complex they could see the vast vegetation of the planet and how the Romu'ians developed their infrastructures bordering the natural ways of it, using the trees as part of them. They saw a clear in the forest that was used as instruction site, but only as a starting point. ::

Saruin: We start learning to live in the jungle since we are very young. There you can see some kids, they are about seven rotations, but they already know how to survive in our jungles.

Scott: What's that? Is that a monkey tied up there?

Saruin: Yes,... an anatomy lesson. They must learn how to hunt them and how to quicken up the resistance. It's what makes us the greatest of this planet.

Scott: But,.. It's still alive...

Saruin: Of course... :: She looked at the mammal surprised that such a fearsome creature was in the military of the Federation ::

Shar'wyn: Nothing like a live prey to teach the youngling, right?

Saruin: Exactly. It's the fastest way to teach them.

Shar'wyn: I see your point. We use holodecks for that kind of training.

Saruin: Holodecks?

Shar'wyn: Yes, holographic representations with physical form. Allows you to study whatever you want. You can see a body and pay attention to details. In your case you could have one of that augmented to show them clearly how their bodies work and then make a moving one or a hundred for them to practice.

Saruin: mmm... interesting. Unlimited numbers of test subjects... I... doubt that the training could be the same, but we'll have to see. Now come, they're starting to pay attention to us, and they don't like to be observed by outsiders.

:: The group moved along but the instructor along with the kids followed them with their eyes and the gestures of the instructor weren't exactly the most pleasing ones, and even less when he signaled the monkey-like creature and used his nails to open up wounds on major arteries... blood splitting the floor and then throw it to the kids to watch and... who knows, maybe have a little snack::

:: Doctor Scott was amazed by the birthing bay, underground, with metal structures holding the place but with the humid soil being the resting place of the eggs. Some of the workers looked at them and hissed between them words that he didn't understand, but soon he saw something that called his attention. ::

Scott: What's this man doing in there?

:: It was a man, sitting on the ground inside a kind of cell, with only one door. He seemed to be waiting, barely dressed with some kind of pants and a light T-shirt. ::

Saruin: Oh, this one comes to make a final service to our community.

Shar'wyn: Final service? What do you mean?

Saruin: Well, it's a tradition of our legal system. This man was found guilty of continuously having diverted food and materials to his own benefit and of others around him. That made part of this province to have to endure hard times during the winter and some of our youngers died because of that. His sentence was to make a final act or repairing to the society.

Shar'wyn: What does have to do with this place?

Saruin: He... serves to two purposes. You'll see... it's about to start. I... hope that you're not easily impressionable as we're told that you are.

:: Then a sound was heard and almost all the workers surrounded the cage where the man was waiting. He stood and looked at the door that started to open from downwards, there were a few moments of silence when the presents started to say something in their own language. It was repetitive and escalated in sound. A few moments later, a young Romu'inan appeared from the dark and looked at the man. A second later it let out a shriek sound and dozens of the little creatures appeared behind and all of them launched towards the man. They were ferocious and despite that the male started by kicking one, two, three of them, soon about four of them jumped over him and he started to grab them, but then three more jumped on his back and others on his legs. They started to bit him and despite that their fangs weren't large, they were sharp and bits of blood started to taint the male's body. He continued to spin around trying to get rid of them, but simply there were too much of them. Soon a pair of them crawled to the head and the man get rid of them, but not before one of them bites him in one eye, what made the man yell. The public began to chorus another word and the little Romu'inans overwhelmed the man's legs, making him put one knee on the ground. Scott ceased to look at the scene and looked at the others presents in the room, almost making a step back, but Shar'wyn put his arm on his back to make him stay. ::

Shar'wyn: Doctor, if you leave now, you'll look weak to those people. This is not the time for that.

Scott: But that's... a carnage.

Shar'wyn: Look anywhere else, but don't leave.

:: Shar'wyn knew that looking weak in front of predators was the last thing to do, less when you're surrounded and in number inferiority. His gaze returned to the place where the man knelt the second leg and all the little ones started to cover him. It was a classical example of Death from a thousand cuts. Soon the shouts and yellings and shrieks muted to just a mumbling of the flesh being devoured of a corpse with no life. ::

Saruin: Mm... :: she said finally looking at them. :: You were lucky, those cases are rare lately. As I told you this is a last service for the dishonored and punished for big crimes. They serve as food for our little ones, showing them to fight for their food if needed and second, it shows the little ones that a group is stronger than an individual, no matter how big and strong it might seem. This unity is what forges our strong community. Does your Federation have a similar ritual?

Scott: I think... I don't... :: Without being able to avoid it the good doctor vomit poured out of him. Saruin made a step back and Shar'wyn moved to help the good doctor not to fall on the ground. ::

Shar'wyn: :: Trying to appear to be in one piece after the show :: I told him not to come. He wasn't feeling well, but he wanted to do his duty nonetheless... Sorry for that.

Saruin: Oh...:: suspiciously :: I see... very.. dedicated to be coming in that state. Don't worry about that,... We always try to see the good point of everything. In this case, we'll clean it and will help us to know the... human physiology. Specially their digestive system.

:: She made a gesture with her fingers and a group of workers collected the contents of the vomit the doctor had just spilled around him in a container and cleaned the residual remainings as the doctor and the security officer moved away. ::

Saruin: Perhaps this will be a good moment to get back with your captain...

Shar'wyn: Sure.

Saruin: Please this way...

:: The two followed the female minister of medicine and entered a darker corridor of the underground very humid and with the roots of some trees showing up through the walls. Shar'wyn was not all relaxed as she didn't like those corridors. Too dark, becoming narrower each corner, his sixth sense calling him to grab his phaser but his rational side telling him not to do it yet. ::

Saruin: Take care of the roots. We try to co-exist with the fauna and respect them the most we can. You can easily trip over some of them.

:: Then she turned a corner and when the two officers did something hit them in the back of the head and fell unconscious to the ground. ::

:: Saruin turned and approached the two humanoids and drew a smile in her big toothy mouth. Calling up two other Romu'inans instructed them on how to proceed. ::

Saruin: You know what to do. And make it quick!

:: Meanwhile Rashuu and Baldwin were talking with Primer Torka and enjoying some delicacies freshly made for them. ::

To be continued?

"A smile is full of teeth"

Writer's Character: Marcus Dickens

Judge's Character: Toni Turner

"A smile is full of teeth" is a fast paced, well-written story chronicling the study of a new reptilian species as it teaches its offspring the finer points of survival. (I'm putting that very mildly.)

Marcus draws the reader in on the premise that his Captain Rashuu is taking a team to make a diplomatic call on the species, but when he fails to introduce his security officer as such, he tips the reader off that something is amiss. And with that now firmly in mind the reader is reminded of the theme and anticipates the "chill" that they are supposed to feel when the punch line is delivered. For impact on the punch line, it may have been better to make the readers forget the theme, than to remind them.

As the team separates, the doctor and security officer go to view the offspring. The descriptions of the bloodthirsty varmints were vivid enough, and somewhat frightening. At least enough to make the medical officer heave the contents of his stomach onto the floor, and graphic enough to believe the host cleaned it up to study their guests which was another tip off to their fate.

When Marcus cut back to the Captain and the science officer who had gone with their hosts for refreshment, chills didn't run up my spine, but rather I had an overwhelming urge to burst into laughter.

Well done, Marcus! Very... um ... very entertaining story.

## **Blunt Forces**

(Atherton Grix)

She felt herself falling backward more than what she stumbled on. As she fell her mind seemed to be processing information at warp speeds which made time seem to stand still but in reality it only took seconds for her to hit the ground. Adrenal coursed through her body, training raged in her mind attempting to dictate her actions and fear fought to quash both of those survival mechanisms and more.

As she touched the ground she immediately rolled to her left amazed she hadn't broken either of her arms in her descent but in truth all she cared about was avoiding the black blade that landed where her head had just been a second earlier. Her eyes went wide in a terror that surpassed every feeling she had had since arriving in that ancient supposedly abandoned monastery. She felt like screaming but couldn't get a peep out as she watched a second blade plunging toward her with unquestionably lethal intent. Though the monster, or automated weapon system drone, before her knew no other way.

She didn't want to think of that though just as the bladed weapon that was about to kill her seemed to be as black as the void of space and being swung with a force that would make even the most brutal of Klingon warriors fearful. No, if that was to be her last moment she wanted something else, anything else. She knew after everything that she had seen on that training mission that a pleasant thought wasn't something that was so easily conjured to the point that she would have had an easier time reciting the temporal prime directive word for word.

Despite her desire to defy the mental images plaguing her it seemed rather pointless as the blade was still being thrust toward her and it was too late to move again even if she could think of a direction or better yet a plan of attack. Time seemed to slow again dragging out the inevitable. But at the last second a brilliant flash of red light struck the beastly attacker pushing it back. Then another blast hit it and she found herself thinking more and succumbing to the terror less as if suddenly things weren't so bleak. So without another second of hesitation she rolled to her belly and crawled away before getting to her feet turning to the newcomer feeling slightly relieved once the monster that had attacked her was rendered to a pile of incinerated flesh.

That relief barely lasted a second though as her savior, who took the form of her commanding officer, spoke and not to kindly at that but she knew this wasn't the time stand on formalities or niceties.

"If you're done sitting around waiting to be killed, grab your phaser cadet. We are still far from the objective and I don't have the time to continually save your rear end." her CO said sternly.

Looking around she saw the charred remains of several of those monstrosities and about a meter from where she was standing she saw her borrowed hand phaser. As she quickly knelt down to pick it up she found herself remembering the events of several hours before that when she had been given the weapon. As she grasped the weapon to stop her hands from shaking or at least hide the fact she found herself allowing the memories from when she had first been given that particular phaser to overcome her for the moment.

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Cadet Ellen Cain sat in the field laboratory tent feeling, well; she was trying not to feel at that point. In the wake of the first attack and the realisation that she, Commander Melitta Herodion and several civilian scientists had become trapped and besieged by creatures that Ellen could barely identify was becoming too much for her. In fact it was the first time since leaving the Academy on her "cadet cruise" that she wondered if her decision to accept the real world posting, instead of a standard placement on one of SB118's holo-ships, was the right choice. For the first time she found herself without any answers and struggling to know what path to take as she stared at the analysis on the computer terminal in front of her.

Despite that though Ellen jumped to her feet as she heard Commander Herodion approach who almost instantly said "at ease" then in her customary way requested a status update.

"This equipment is designed more for imaging and text translation so I haven't been able to do a full medical analysis." Ellen said regretfully. Even though the work terminals offered more processing power over that of her tricorder which she patched into the terminal to gain access to its programming and functionality, what she could achieve was still extremely limited. She continued on anyway. "That said I haven't found a match for the species in my medical tricorder. I would assume they have been genetically engineered based on observations during the attack. Also I have detected extremely high levels of nanites and the remains of other cybernetics."

"And the purpose of that would be?" Commander Herodion probed.

"Control over the individual creature, self repair when injured and if I had to guess the limited shape shifting that we witnessed. Hands that turn into swords and the like. It would also explain why phasers had such little effect Sir." Ellen replied.

"I ask this because you are the most competent individual I have at hand, would you be able to form a counter measure to this nanotechnology?" Commander Herodion said simply obviously without a thought as to how Ellen would respond to such a comment. Ellen knew exactly where the Commander was coming from and accepted that but somehow it still felt like an insult.

"This really is my brother's area of expertise, not mine unfortunately. That said though we don't have the resources on hand or the time to develop a solution even if I did possess the knowledge Commander." Ellen replied somberly.

"I have already reconfigured all available phasers so they should be more effective based on your preliminary data. While the scientists seek shelter in a nearby cave that is still accessible, we are going to find the source of the force field trapping us and destroy it." Commander Herodion told Ellen. "Once the shield is down we will be able to call for help but it stands to reason that whoever is behind this scheme is also at that location."

Something must have been showing on Ellen's face because Herodion leaned against another nearby workstation and started to talk again but this time without that ice cold edge of detachment that she prided herself on carrying around. Ellen had never seen the woman like that and rarely heard of it either so she didn't know what to expect next.

"You know when I was still a marine I went on a training mission which turned out very much similar to this one." Herodion started to say.

"My CO hated the idea of using holodecks for training so I lead my squadron on what should have been standard practice manoeuvres inside an asteroid belt. On our way back to our ship, the USS Hornet, however we discovered that our ship had been boarded by pirates." Herodion told Ellen. "Star Fleet command decided that the Hornet could not remain in enemy hands and ordered all nearby forces to intercept which included my squadron. I lost more than half my fighter squadron before we regained control of the ship and it was hours later that additional reinforcements arrived to assist. Most would say that the Galaxy and Sovereign classes are the titans of the fleet but I don't having seen the far outdated Akira class shred a squadron of Star Fleets best star fighters."

The older woman paused to allow her words to sink in. Ellen saw at least on the surface where the Commander had been going with the speech. It was a stereotypical and dearly needed "nothing is impossible" speech. Though Ellen still wasn't encouraged because in the simplest terms she wasn't a super soldier like her commanding officer, or at least that was the perception she got from her CO. Ellen was simply a star fleet cadet who happened to be gifted with a photographic memory.

"I am not telling you this story to encourage you." Herodion said which caught Ellen off guard. "I am telling you this because we both have a job to do. You may be a cadet but this is what it means to be an officer in star fleet. If you can't hack it then stay here with the civies but I am not going to pretend that I don't need your help today."

"So you're saying that the needs of the many...." Ellen started to say only to be cut off by Herodion.

"Never ever quote Vulcan logic to me unless you are a Vulcan. We might put our lives on the line, sometimes futilely, for others but that is never a reason to pretend that you can approach these situations without emotion, the gods know I can't." Herodion said sharply, her hand dropping to her waist holster where she withdrew her type II-D phaser pistol and offered it to Ellen.

Ellen stared at the pistol for but a second before taking it. As a cadet she may have been in her rights to turn her CO down but despite everything Commander Herodion struck a chord in Ellen making her realize that she needed and wanted even more to help even if that meant traveling to the belly of the beast where she would probably die.

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A creaking sound was what brought Ellen back to the present as if a new wave of fear overrode her flashback. The sound while faint and coming from a far distance away was probably caused by a rodent or insect or maybe even the wind but in that near pitch black corridor sneaking behind Commander Herodion every sound seemed to set alarm bells off in Ellen's head. As the pair moved as silently as possible through the narrow corridor Ellen couldn't help but feel that another one of those monsters would leap out of the next alcove of which there were many. Her senses were going into overdrive again and it wasn't helping.

Knowing this, Ellen tried her best to focus on one thing so she chose to focus on her movement lest she bump into Commander Herodion or stub her foot and give away their position. In any other situation she might have allowed herself to joke that she was focusing so very hard on putting one foot in front of the other. It wasn't the time or place for that though even if she could bring herself to make that joke. Thankfully that technique helped just as Ellen and Commander Herodion reached a T-juncture. Peering

down one side of the new corridor Ellen saw natural light in what appeared to be a courtyard but in the other direction she saw several shadowy figures. Looking to her CO Ellen knew that Commander Herodion also saw them too.

Herodion flipped closed her tricorder and returned it to her belt then readied her rifle before turning to Ellen. In the quietest of whispers Herodion spoke to Ellen. Despite the volume of her words Commander Herodion's tone was dead serious.

"Power readings suggest the generator for the force field is in that courtyard. On my signal run to it and disable it by any means Cadet." Commander Herodion said firmly ensuring that there would be no confusion over her orders.

Ellen's mind was screaming to fight that order. Perhaps it was the safer role to take, or on the other hand what if there were more of those things out in the courtyard or maybe the better plan was to stick with Commander Herodion. Ellen liked that last one the most as she figured her CO would be able to watch out for Ellen. And there is truth to the adage that there is strength in numbers. Instead though Ellen nodded to Herodion signalling her agreement and readiness to Herodion's plan. They each had a job to do and Ellen was going to play her part. She figured she came that far so she might as well see the job through. It wasn't as if she was in the best location to argue with her CO anyway.

Herodion was the first to move to a standing position in the middle of the juncture already firing her weapon. Ellen ducked past her, getting to her feet she started to run and didn't stop until she had left the confines of the corridor and entered the courtyard. Raising the phaser pistol she scanned the courtyard waiting, expecting someone or worse to jump out at her. When it didn't immediately happen and she eyed the power generator, she ran to it. Maybe it was rather convenient that the generator was there unguarded but Ellen didn't care and didn't think of the possibilities of an ambush.

Kneeling by the inbuilt control console Ellen dropped her weapon as she furiously tapped commands into the generator but no matter what she tried she was unable to power the [...]ed machine down. Panicking she struggled to remember what Herodion had told her, she said to do the job by any means necessary. So taking a page from her CO's book Ellen's hand dropped down to the ground where the phaser pistol laid and picked it up as she moved back toward the corridor entrance. Ellen was a fraction over two meters from the corridor archway but she saw the red flash streak straight toward her. Her eyes went wide in terror but the instant later when she was still alive and a second shot again narrowly missed her, going an inch over her right shoulder, she turned to see another one of those things with a gaping hole in its abdomen. Even with that hole the drone didn't look like it was going to fall over and die, they never did.

Ducking behind what must have been the remains of a pillar; Ellen took aim and fired her phaser at the power generator which the humanoid monster was standing next to. Even though she shielded herself, as much as she could, as the power generator exploded she was still knocked backward into a wall ringing the outside of the courtyard. With her ears ringing and vision slightly blurred she noticed a human figure stalking toward her with great speed. Ellen shakily raised the phaser again trying to steady her aim fully intending to pull the trigger.

"Careful with that Cadet," Herodion said outstretching her hand to help Ellen to her feet. "Getting shot with my favorite phaser is not on my agenda tonight."

Taking Commander Herodion's hand Ellen pulled herself rather shakily to her feet feeling her vision and hearing returning to normal levels or normal for her current condition.

"You're not usually one to act so bluntly Cadet." Commander Herodion said, a faint smile could be seen on her face.

"Finding the off switch was taking too long!" Ellen replied also smiling despite feeling as if the battle was far from over.

The pair had done what they had set out to do, they might not have found the master mind yet but the shield was disabled and no more of those things appeared to be near. And yet Ellen eyes darted out into the darkness, expecting the worst.

"Blunt Forces"

Writer's Character: Atherton Grix

Judge's Character: Akeelah D'Sena

This story evolving around Cadet Ellen Cain is something most Starfleet Officers have been through: the question if one is ready for this 'real world' out there on a ship or not. The doubt and struggle with the things that still have to be learned is easy to identify with. In addition, also picturing a scene that everyone, be it officer or not, will have to face: an obstacle that feels impossible to overcome and having no choice but face it.

Atherton Grix has done a good job trying to bring the main character of Ellen closer to the reader and sympathize with the cadet when she fights the overpowering enemy, gets thrown into duty to find a solution, while she is not sure she is ready for the task and to overcome her fears and set habits of action.

Commander Herodion on the other hand is more of a supporting actor. We do not hear much of her back-story other than she is an ex Marine Captain who constantly seems to save Ellen from being killed. It would have been nice to see a little more characterization of this character, to make her appear less like a holodeck character that only is there to give the story a frame.

I did enjoy the flashback in between to give us a little more background about what happened in the first part of the story, and will happen in the third. It gives the story a little more depths and gave Atherton the chance to describe the character, thoughts and feelings of Ellen a little more than it would have been possible in the action scenes.

I did have to read several parts a few times, because of very long sentences and very little punctuations. That made it difficult for me to really get into the story, because I had to think about the meaning of things depending on where I'd put a (missing) comma. Also the one or other word seemed to not be fitting, though could be guessed in context. Maybe with a little more experience in both of these areas it will be much easier to read and to follow without interruptions, which will make the story flow better.

While the story was set in a scenario every one of us might experience in either Roleplay or in the figurative sense in Real Life, it was more of an action and experience piece to me, than a chill causing one. But for the felt genre it has been a good story, that would make me curious what became of Ellen after she has jumped head on into her new experience. Especially the open end of the possible dangers still lurking in the dark invites a second part to be written.

I have finished the piece with a smile, reading the little bantering between cadet and commander, showing that even in the fearful atmosphere we can find something to smile about.

## Dust in the Wind

(Irina Pavlova)

"What's wrong mommy?" Katya asked as Irina sat on the edge of the bed unmoving.

"I'm scared" Irina replied.

"But you aren't afraid of anything. You said you are stronger than the monsters and bad people."

"I am Printzyessa, but it isn't monsters or bad people I'm afraid of."

"Then..."

Irina placed her finger to the child's lips and then reached down and picked up her daughter.

"Come on Printzyessa, we'll be late. You want to go down to Ba'ku with the other kids, right?"

"Don't you want to go down to Ba'ku? mommy?"

"Yes, very much."

Irina walked out of her quarters on the Thunder and made her way to the transporter room. Like her daughter, she wore civilian clothes, though rather than the pretty dress and the correctly matched red socks (Katya matched them), Irina wore a pair of faded bluejeans, a black sleeveless shirt and the same brown leather marine bomber jacket that had survived over two centuries on the harsh planet of Kjenta II with her, patched bullet holes, road rash and all. Black leather boots and dark sunglasses completed her visible outfit, with nobody having a need to know about the 500+ year old Walther PP pistol its holster concealed within the jacket's lining. She didn't expect to need it, didn't expect anything or anyone to remotely care about or even think about her on Ba'ku, but she was still convinced that this was, perhaps, the most dangerous place for her in the known universe.

As she stepped onto the transporter pad her eyes caught those of Colonel Tyr Waltas, and right away his words from just over a year ago echoed in her head.

The regenerative effects of Ba'ku were very well known to Irina Pavlova despite the fact that she'd never stepped foot on the planet. Ba'ku was a word that just about everyone brought up when they learned Irina's true age. At 247-years-old, the only frames of reference anyone had was either stasis, or Ba'ku. Ba'ku was an idyllic fantasy to most humans. Eternal life in a place that they imagined as paradise. Gentle climate, lush vegetation and a rustic, peaceful society focused on the arts, philosophy and a simpler way of living.

Of course, nobody who thought about Ba'ku could imagine that there were other worlds with similar regenerative effects that didn't also have similarly paradisiacal climate, vegetation and lifestyle. Kjenta II shared Ba'ku's regenerative qualities, but that was where the similarities ended. Unlike Ba'ku, Kjenta II was a post-apocalyptic wasteland, barely L class on a good day. 2.8G gravity, frigid winters and merely freezing summers along the equatorial belt, with anything North or South so cold as to be

inhospitable. Then there was the near infrared radiation of the Kjenta star, so powerful as to fuse the cones in the eyes of most humanoid species in a matter of weeks, irreparably within a year.

To the environmental pleasures of Kjenta II are added the joys of a sentient humanoid species that, five centuries before the arrival of the NX-class USS Columbia in 2171 had blasted themselves back to the stone age in an ionic and nuclear war, the residual ionization of the atmosphere, much like Ba'ku's Briar Patch, made the planet both impossible to scan and extremely difficult to approach or depart, with the upper ionosphere serving to suck all power from anything and everything that passed through it. No communications, no sensors, and most importantly, no transporters could penetrate that ionization layer, which is why Irina Pavlova and the other 31 members of Columbia's away team couldn't leave for 219 years.

No, the regenerative properties of Ba'ku didn't scare Irina Pavlova, nor did the idyllic lifestyle and temperate climate, which she quite looked forward to. Not even the nefarious plans of Starfleet some 40 some odd years ago to claim the planet. No, it was the words of Tyr Waltas, former captain of the USS Discovery, just over a year ago after he had successfully rescued Irina and far too few of her shipmates from Kjenta II that scared her to her core.

"My sons are mixed race" Waltas had said, "and somehow the radiation that normally regenerates the cell structures accelerated theirs. They went from infants to teenagers in several weeks' time. My daughter removed them from the planet when she learned that a Federation Doctor was intent on studying them as they aged. I fully intend on bringing this to Starfleet's attention as well. My point is, with as much outcry as the Ba'ku, my sons, and now you will create, the Federation will have little choice but to leave you alone. And if they don't, then I will make sure no one can find you. You have my word."

It wasn't Waltas' promise or anyone messing with her that concerned Irina now. The other three survivors from Kjenta II were already dead and at least one attempt had already been made to grab Irina, but she doubted anything like that awaited her on Ba'ku. No, it was his words. "The radiation that normally regenerates the cell structures accelerated theirs" Waltas had said of his sons, aging them from infants to teenagers in several weeks. Irina was 247-years-old, and had lived that long due to the metaphasic radiation of the Kjenta star, as filtered through the second planet's heavily ionized atmosphere. Would Ba'ku regenerate Irina's cells like it did almost everyone else's, or would it rapidly correct her cells to their correct biological age, which would most likely be a quite unpleasant, not to mention instantly fatal experience.

"Energize" Fleet Captain Turner said clearly, and then Irina felt the transporter beam take hold.

The sensations were very familiar, but somehow far slower, as though she could feel each and every molecule disassembled, separated to the atomic and then the sub-atomic level. Then there was a strange stillness that seemed to last hours as the atomic particles moved between the transporter pad of the USS Thunder and the surface of Ba'ku. Then came the familiar feeling of recombination, but something was wrong.

She could feel, and then see the outline of her body appear and was happy that Katya had a big grin on her face as Irina held her in her arms. The tingling subsided, but the five-year-old was getting heavy. That wasn't supposed to happen as she only weighed 40 lbs and Irina had the strength of a strong Klingon after 219 years in high gravity. Still, it was unmistakable, the little girl was getting heavier by the second and Irina was forced to put her down as the last of the transporter's tingles faded.

Katya looked up at her mother first with concern, but then screamed when their eyes met. Irina was briefly shocked, but as she looked down at her own hands, hands that were withered, spotted and frail, she knew instantly what her daughter must be looking at and quickly turned away.

“Take her” Irina said pleadingly to anyone who would listen as she turned away, and saw Tyr Waltas quickly move in and take her child. Looking back to her hands, she saw the skin was cracking now, taught and brittle against aged bones.

She felt someone take hold of her and heard shouting, but couldn’t understand the words. Her sight faded, the lush vegetation replaced by the void of the transporter and then the sterility of sickbay, but even that was fading as the damage had been done.

She could only see shadow now, her eyes completely clouded, and couldn’t hear anything. She tried to speak, to call her daughter’s name, but even her tongue felt dryer than dust, and as her mouth opened to speak the name, that was the last thing she felt, her tongue crumbling to dust as her conscious did the same. The last thought in her mind was that there was no light, no tunnel. Her lips cracked as she forced them into a smile, satisfied that at least Katya would be taken care, and secure in the knowledge that the struggle was finally over. It was time to rest. She felt a soft breeze across her face and could literally feel the dry and dead skin blowing away from her skeletal remains, just dust in the wind.

"Dust in the Wind"

Writer's Character: Irina Pavlova

Judge's Character: Ren Rennyn

I always thought I wanted to go to Ba'ku. This story may have changed my mind.

Pleasantly disturbing imagery runs through this tale of dashed hopes and spoiled plans. The descriptions - those descriptions! - of Irina's body decaying around her certainly Ran Shivers Down My Spine. This month's contest theme was certainly exemplified in this story.

Body horror is the use of graphic images to describe anatomical decay. The idea is to make the audience imagine what it would be like if that happened to them. This story succeeds by showing the destruction of Irina's body from her perspective, right down to the bones. Instead of watching this process from an external vantage point, the reader is part of Irina's terrible experience.

Another benefit of this story is its setting. This horrifying event takes place in a well-known paradise. The inclusion of Irina's young daughter as a witness clinches the terror. The story was chilling.

There are a few typographical errors that could have been corrected before submission. These are minor. The story itself is a strong example of using an established character to tell a stand-alone story. All elements of Irina's past that needed to be understood for context were explained within the story.

The science fiction elements at work here really cemented this as a Star Trek story, much to my delight. The events of Irina's life are inextricable from the universe we write in, and the story derives from elements - transporters, Ba'ku - that are unique to Star Trek. This is a strength I would look forward to seeing more of in future entries.

I will add that I leave this story with a slight fear that the cones in my eyes will be fused by radiation. That is another shiver down my spine. Well done!

## Dressed to Kill, Part Two

(Hannibal Parker)

(( Club Emporium, Capital City, Orion))

It was a short walk from the hotel to the establishment known as the "Emporium", a combination night club and pleasure palace known in unofficial circles as "The Tenderloin." It was known as the place in the nearly spotless part of town where the locals didn't go...it was a place for outworlders, mostly those who traded in illicit goods and information. The alcohol was real, the women beautiful, and the clientele deadly. It was this environment Kamela Allison was walking into with the express purpose of killing one particular man, Phineas Tredeau, a particularly dangerous weapons dealer.

Her choice of outfits was designed to attract his attention, and as she walked along the street towards the club, she noted it had the desired effect on several non- Orion males who saw her walking by...one nearly slammed into a light pole trying to look at her instead of where he was going. It satisfied her that her look was catching...it helped to slow her thumping heart as she approached the front doors of the establishment, marked with two massive wooden doors, muted thumping base pounding through them. The building itself was fairly large in scope, taking up an entire block and reminding her of the warehouses along the old wharves in her native San Francisco. The bottom story was the actual club, which was divided into two halves. One half was devoted to actual dancing and set up like a normal club reminiscent of Risa. The other half was where naked and semi-naked women danced for cash, or walked among the patrons soliciting for more intimate favors which were consummated. This is where her quarry would be.

Kamela calmed her breathing as she walked up to the two large two wooden doors. Two massive Orions stood sentry outside, both of them armed with purloined Starfleet hand phasers. Stepping up to them, one of them moved, effectively forming a flesh and blood roadblock. Smiling as sweetly as she could, she looked up at the towering green menace as he spoke to her...

" Your purse. I must search it."

" Go ahead. Nothing there that would interest you."

Kamela gave him her purse, while the other one moved in a little too close for comfort...

"Now, I must search you."

As degrading and repulsive as it was, she had no choice. Taking out the two of them would be a tidy handful, and it would get her no closer to her mission...in fact, it would end right then and there. As one pawed over her body, the other one ran a scanner over her. She knew better than to be armed. Places like this tended to be heavy on security to keep the real outlaws reasonably secure. From her briefing, she knew Tredeaus' guards were armed, and went through no such scrutiny. She also knew "outlaw" working girls could ply their trade here, and could only be invited to the upper floors after paying a fee, which was sometimes greater than the amount for services...unless it was at the behest of a treasured client, such as Tredeau. Satisfied the only thing Kamela was armed with was a beautiful body, the two guards moved aside, the one who had personally searched her speaking again...

"Enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, gentlemen. I will."

The Orion to her left opened the door, which opened outward towards the street, the music now pounding into her as she walked into the dimly lit club. Strobe lights distorted her vision as she pushed her way through the crowd and headed to the bar. She knew from her briefings that the doors to the other part of the bar were off to one side, at the wall which split the two bars. Eyeballing the crowd, she wanted to see if anyone was paying inordinate attention to her..undercover work was risky enough but she knew it paid to be paranoid. She was alone, with no backup, no weapons, no way to call for help. Her only solace was her pickup to take her back to the Federation Embassy would be outside, a local Orion who had been a good source of information over the years.

Kamela, still playing the part of an "outlaw" working girl, walked towards the doors which led to the less savory part of the bar. She knew once she crossed that threshold, there would be no going back, no chance to abort the mission. She was committed, and that sobering thought pounded into her chest like the booming music. Taking a deep breath, she entered the world of the [...].

Phineas Trudeau was not a handsome man, with a large Roman nose, bulbous eyes and thinning hair. His clothing was tailor made and he was adorned in only the finest fabrics money could buy. He wore dark green pants with matching shirt, and his feet were adorned with a pair of ornate boots, rumored to be made from the skin of a Gorn who had tried to back out of a deal. He had made a fortune by selling weapons to those who could not easily buy them...pirates, smugglers, the Orion Syndicate. He enjoyed the fact that he could buy anything he wanted, or kill anyone he wanted, or have them killed. Here, on Orion, he could recline in relative safety, away from the Federation and their pesky Starfleet. Sitting on a couch flanked by bodyguards, he sat before a table with enough food fit for a king. Several people were also at the table with him, celebrating another successful deal of selling procured Starfleet photon torpedoes. He didn't care who bought them, as long as they paid his price.

Trudeau had only one weakness...beautiful women. By virtue of his money and notoriety, he could have any woman he wanted, and this place allowed him to indulge himself with women from a dozen worlds...but his eyes were drawn to the tall blonde who had just entered.. Dressed in Aqua blue, with a pleasing body and exceptionally long legs, the woman was one whom he had not seen before, and therefore, one he must have. He watched her at the bar, her moves as graceful as a gazelle. Now this...this was a woman! He looked at the women he currently had around him, all bought and paid for. Beautiful they were, but the curly headed blonde was on a completely different level. He watched her have a drink at the bar, demurely sipping it if she had been there a thousand times before, but he knew she had not been...he would have noticed HER. Discreetly, he whispered to one of his guards to bring her over. This woman, he had to have...

Kamela stood at the bar, drinking her Centauri Sunrise and trying hard to be not initially noticed. Thanks to the alcohol inhibitor she had taken, she could pretty much drink as much as she wanted without getting intoxicated...she needed a level head to do what she needed to do. The Ferengi bartender was doing his best to make conversation, but his words were meaningless to her. She was sure if she rubbed his ears a bit he would be in heaven.

From her vantage point, she could easily see her quarry, sitting behind a table flanked by several women and two very serious looking guards. Kamela noted they were both armed, and when he leaned down

and her target whispered in his ear, she discreetly paid attention as the guard moved from where he stood over to where she was standing...the mark had taken the bait...

The guard moved quickly, but easily, his huge size making it seem like he floated instead of walked. As he approached, Kamela focused on breathing, calming herself before the next part of the operation began. Over the cascading boom of music, the guard was standing next to her, but it was she who said the first words...

"Hello sailor. What can I do for you?"

The guard hesitated for a second, perhaps unfamiliar with one of the galaxies' oldest pickup lines. The Orion was huge, approaching seven feet tall, but he quickly shook it off. His voice gruff, he spoke...

"My boss wishes for you to join him."

"Really?", she replied coyly. "And just who would this boss be?"

"That gentleman over there. He insists."

Kamela knew she could not say yes instantly. She had to maintain the illusion of distance, of not wanting to go over until she was ready. Her resistance would make him want her more, and allow the arrogant pe'taq to begin to drop his guard. Looking up at the guard, she shook her head...

"What if I do not wish to join him?"

Clearly, this was something the guard had not anticipated, but as the guard looked over at her, she could see him beckoning towards her with a large, inviting hand, his pig face smiling while doing so. Kamela smiled back, but not in the manner of a working girl gaining an expensive client, but as a predator summoned by prey. Her heart thumped in her chest, duty overtaking her fear as she held out her arm and the guard gently took it...

"Well, it seems like your boss does not wish to take no for an answer, so, my big friend, let's go."

Treudeau watched the dialogue taking place between the stunning blonde and his trusted bodyguard. He was the gentler of the two when it concerned women, and he wanted to make sure she didn't spook...which meant that sometime during the night if she refused him, his other guard would make sure she and whoever she was with would be dead before sunup. No one refused his offers of companionship, especially an off worlder outlaw whore. As the two approached arm in arm, the weapons dealer stood up and embraced his would be assassin, his hands traveling down to her rear end, offering a slight squeeze as he did so.

Kamela almost retched as he hugged, his breath smelling of garlic and other sharp spices, his uninvited hand on her rear. She deftly removed it and broke the unwanted embrace, disarming him with a smile...

"Slow down, cowboy. I don't even know your name."

"I am Phineas Trudeau. And you are?"

" I am (remembering her cover name) Tara Matthews. Pleased to meet you."

" Sit Miss Matthews, and let us eat, drink, and talk."

Making space on the couch next to him, Kamela sat down. Making small talk for the next hour, Treudeaus' eyes roamed all over Kamela, clearly only interested in bedding her. He was free with his money, and had pressed several strips of latinum in her hands...clearly a signal to go upstairs. From her files, she knew that once he made his choice, he would take her upstairs, dismiss his guards and would spend the night in one of the opulent suites upstairs. Ruthless as Treudeau was, his guards would have the pick of the girls he didn't want, all bought and paid for. The feared weapons dealer would be alone, drunk, and ripe for his own demise...

Making their way upstairs, Kamela played along, laughing at his jokes, allowing his hands more freedom on her body. Kamelas' fear had been turned to focus, remembering every detail of the room in which she now stood. A balcony ran around the back of the suite, with a door opening onto it. It was a short drop to the fire escape, then down to a side street. Waiting on that side street was her getaway driver, an Orion in the employ of Starfleet Intelligence. His vehicle on the street would not be suspicious...he was a day driver for the hotel and it was not uncommon for him to be parked there. Kamela casually looked out the window, and indeed, the vehicle was there in its usual spot.

Treudeau watched as Tara took in the suite. It was opulent, with deep carpeting and ornate furnishings, just the way he wanted it. He truly wanted this woman, and he was glad that she decided to join him. A woman as beautiful as this should not have to end up dead, and he would have regretted killing her...at least until the next one came along. Sitting on the bed, he watched as the woman in aqua blue seductively came over to him, her navel ring just about eye height, her perfume intoxicating in its closeness...it only made him want her more, and his thoughts were of bedding her. His initial caution gone, now replaced by lust, he moved in to kiss her exposed stomach...

Sensing her opportunity, Kamela ran her hands seductively over his head, then quickly moved her hands...her right hand on the left side of his head, her left hand moving down to deftly grab his jaw and she twisted upward, hearing the snap of bone. The feared weapons dealer slumped forward, then Kamela pushed him back on the bed, his lifeless eyes staring at the ceiling.

Making sure he was indeed very dead, Kamela left him where he lay on the bed and looked around the suite, looking for any files, data rods, or computer interfaces which might have been there. Finding none during her quick search, she was on her way to the balcony and escape when a thunderous knock at the door almost made her jump out of her shoes. She knew from its insistence that somehow, her mission was now on borrowed time, and she needed to get out of there now...

Kamela knew it would not be long before whomever was knocking would either have a key or knock the door off its hinges, and as the shouting and banging increased, Kamela was out onto the balcony, just as the two Orion guards burst in...

Out of time, Kamela did her best to measure her leap to the fire escape, and she hit it with a solid thump...she knew from the sound she would not be able to wear an outfit like this for awhile....too much bruising on her ribs. Fueled by fear, adrenaline, and the sound of crashing wood, she made her way down to the fire escape and to her getaway car.

Opening the passenger door, Kamela spoke...

"Gatta, we need to go, NOW!"

The Orion didn't move. Gatta was not known as a sleeper, so Kamela shook him. The Orion slumped backwards, his throat cut from ear to ear. Fear almost turned to panic as the whine of disruptors and their impact on the street around the vehicle filled his ears. Reaching over the dead man, Kamela popped the door open and shoved the dead man out onto the street, the guards now seeing the door open, peppering the dead man with disruptor blasts and concentrating their fire on the groundcar. One shot shattered the side window, another, the windshield. Another shot came perilously close to her head, spending itself against the door frame.

Kamela was now in the drivers' seat, and she fired up the groundcar. Driving it out into the crowded street, Kamela went the wrong way in traffic and quickly darted down a side street. She made sure her headlights were off as she traced a roundabout path back towards the Federation Embassy. She knew she could not take the groundcar there...doing so would point right at the Federation and Starfleet. She had no way to call for extraction, and really no way to be extracted...her navel ring doubled as a transporter/video scrambler so she could not clearly be seen on the many security cameras dotting the streets, or transported against her will.

Knowing there was a lake near the Embassy, Kamela headed for it, determined to ditch the car in the water and destroy it. Hopefully, they would think she panicked and drowned...at least long enough for her to get off Orion. It would be a half kilometer swim in the dark before emerging two blocks from the Embassy. She told herself it was going to work...hell, it had to work. Aiming the vehicle at the water, Kamela set the controls and opened the door as the car sped into the water, with Kamela bailing out as the machine hit the lake. Kicking away from it furiously, the car sank, its power cell detonating itself one hundred yards behind and one hundred feet below her, the concussion nauseating her. She swam hard, her fear of capture powering her strokes towards relative safety.

Half a click and twenty minutes later, Kamela emerged from the water, barefoot, bedraggled and exhausted. Looking along the shore, she could clearly see the lights of the Embassy two blocks away...and its back door which would give her sanctuary. Guarded by two Marine sentries, they had been told to expect a "delivery" and given the requisite passwords. Picking her way carefully, concealing herself as much as possible, Kamela arrived at the back door of the Embassy. Modesty was not a concern for her at the moment, and it took a moment for the guards to stop staring at her now see through outfit and ask for the password. Once Kamela replied, the two guards quickly let her in, and she slipped down the back stairs to her quarters. Locking her door, placing her phaser on the table next to her bed and contacting her handler. Only then could she stop shaking.

"Dressed to Kill...Part Two"

Writer's Character: Hannibal Parker

Judge's Character: Akeelah D'Sena

This story reminded me of a female version of a bigger and badder version of James Bond, from the get go. Kamela is sexy, confident, focused on her job and deadly. She has a plan set in mind, and did not bat an eye to go through with it, after all it was her job.

It was an easy read and did flow from start to end. The choice of words and structure made it easy enough to follow the story and dive in without the need to stop and wonder or sort out things oneself.

Hannibal did a great job with describing the scene, locations and atmosphere. I could see it all in my mind, imagine the details, the loud music and lights, even the ugly pig like face of Treudeau, who is the archetype of the disgusting dealer, from his attire, over the women surrounding him to the bad breath and his believe he gets whatever he wants, because he has the money to buy it. The story succeeded to activate the mind-cinema and pull me along the story-line.

That being said, I did not have any chills reading the story, apart from the thought of being in that cold water in the night. To me this story reads more like an action flick. The perfect secret agent movie with a little twist of a rarely seen female action hero.

I would have wished to see a big longer part about Kamela finishing her actual job, which to me looked more like a side note than the highlight of her task. Though just when I thought that this had been too easy, and that she was being too sure of herself with too little problems in the execution of her plan, Hannibal threw a curveball, and the well laid out plan of escape was destroyed.

I did enjoy the twist, when Kamela suddenly had to cope on her own fearing for her life. I would have enjoyed feeling a bit more of her fears, though. She obviously had those, but were a little too superficial for my taste. Exploring on those a little more through the whole story would have helped to be pulled into the story a little more.

## Horrible Flashback

(Gwen Gardener)

((Flashback, Stardate 238301.13))

(New York University, New York, Earth)

:: A cold, bitter wind whipped around her, lashing itself against AJ's exposed skin as she sat on the bench gazing idly up at the stars. It'd been a long day and a long night, and AJ realized how seriously underdressed she was given the weather and the time of year. AJ was sporting a pink tanktop and a blue denim skirt despite the cold and the snow. A man came out of nowhere from the shadows behind her, scaring her half to death as he clasped a cloth around her nose and mouth, instantly knocking her out. This man was large, muscular, and strong. He hoisted AJ up and carried her to his lair...a small underground fortress beneath the school. It wasn't much, but it was his home.

When Aurora woke up she was in what looked to be a locked prison cell. The small cage had iron bars and her wrists were shackled to the wall. The cold room smelled of dirt, grime, and sweat. The man smirked as he came near, he opened the door... he force fed her some bread and cheese with water.... it was all she could do not to choke on it. Then he gagged her. He had no remorse, almost no conscience it would seem, but he was enjoying it. He used whips, chains, and a myriad of other things that led to bruises, broken bones, and cuts all over her torso and inner thighs. He raped her...he tortured her....for seven days and seven nights she endured the same patterns of his malicious intent...then on that eighth day she caught him in his own mistake. He made the mistake of uncuffing her, what he had planned for her, she didn't know and she didn't stick around to find out. Aurora in the heat of the moment grabbed the man's holstered phaser off his hip and shot him with it. It was self defense. She was hurt, violated and hungry, but she made it out alive. That was all that mattered. ::

((End Flashback))

## "Horrifying Flashback"

Writer's Character: Gwen Gardener

Judge's Character: Cassandra Egan Manno

This story is a good example of flash fiction, which some might define (rigidly) as a story of less than 300 words. Though "Horrifying Flashback" clocks in at just over that (343 words), I'd still call its intent that of a piece of flash fiction: It's attempting to tell a full story in a very limited space. It succeeds there, because it packs a whole lot of time, action, and events into its 343 words. However, in this case, I would have recommended a longer story to give this narrative the space it would seem to deserve.

"Flashback," as a term, does connote something brief, perhaps instantaneous, and I congratulate the author for extending that idea into the story's brevity. I wasn't convinced that there was anything more flashback-like about the story, though, and I would challenge the author to especially consider the senses: What did Aurora see? What could she touch? What did she hear, taste, smell? Then, move beyond that: Does she remember a particular flash of a pain (and if so, describe that moment!), or perhaps a scent that seems incongruous given her incarceration and reminds her of something beyond the cage (and if so, what is it? What does it remind her of?). Put me more in those moments, and the experience of the story will ultimately be more gratifying.

The good news for "Horrifying Flashback" is that, as it's presented, it's a good summary or outline for the true story. Expanding upon what's here, engaging the senses, and really capturing the reader on a visceral, emotional level will be what really make things work here -- and I think that a retelling of these events, greatly expanded in those ways, would be a fine entrant in a future Writing Challenge!