



UFOP: Starbase 118 Writing Challenge

May & June 2014

Do What Is Right, Not What Is Easy

Writes our previous winner, the writer behind Tyler Kelly,

I think it would be interesting to write about a time when you have to make a choice between the greater good and simply 'going with the flow.' Maybe a superior officer gives an order that you have a moral objection to. Maybe there are people dying of a curable disease on the planet below but the Prime Directive tells you that you can't intervene.

As Starfleet officers our characters face these kind of decisions from time to time and it can be a very interesting idea to explore.

What do you think? Do any of these scenarios sound familiar to you as a writer or any of your characters? How can you take this idea and apply it beyond what you might expect? In May and June of 2014, we looked forward to finding out!

**Do What Is Right, Not What Is Easy
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Judges' Comments

Irina Pavlova

The Wind Knows a Song for the Ages

(Ren Rennyn)

Hot sand stung her face, and she pressed onward. Prohibitive gusts blowing in from the east set the whole group staggering, digging heels into loose sand, waving arms for balance, squinting desperately against searing, ancient, wind-tossed grit. The hoversleds rocked and tipped dangerously. Roupo, her timid lab assistant, looked around nervously, hoping Dr. Atell would call for them to turn back. Unless she made that call, no one else would dare. Dr. Atell pressed onward.

The eastern desert plateau on Qor'na'Krinn stored the secrets of a long-dead civilization, of that Mina Atell was certain. It was the ion storms that had, for decades, prevented a closer look. Ions meant no beam-ins from orbit, and for anyone trying to get close to the planet's secrets, no beam-ins meant a long walk across treacherous desert landscape in impossible conditions. To add trouble to trouble, the journey had to be made in a window of time when the storm broke and lifted partially from the atmosphere. Netrebkov had tried once and failed. So had Syrek years ago, and he had that heat-ready Vulcan constitution to draw on, beside the vast resources of Daystrom at his command.

Dr. Mina Atell had none of that, but she had a passion, a deep, heart-breaking desire to see what was in that desert, and decades of research that bore what she thought was a new approach. She might have been nothing more than a fool, if her colleagues were to be believed, or Gregg, who had said it to her too, and whom she always believed, when she wasn't tuning him out.

It began a career ago, before those war years with their requisite sacrifice and complication, back when she wanted nothing but a rough shelter and a good dig under the twin umbrellas of Daystrom and the Archaeological Council. Mina was a graduate researcher then, working on i'Ttwan proto samples for Syrek. It was that famed Vulcan's other project that interested her. She fought him to get on the Krinn study, but he refused her. She'd had to find her way back to it on her own, years later, after her career was made. After she'd left Daystrom for a research position on Trill, and said goodbye to Gregg one time too many, and finally did the work she wanted.

She had found the gap in the storm, the way through. She could predict it, measure it, determine the longest interval and take a team in and out before it closed. She'd already gone further than Syrek ever had. Her team of eight was following her dutifully across a brutal landscape, pressing ever on into the unknown. This time, Qor'na'Krinn's secrets would be revealed.

"They want to go back." Roupo appeared next to her, his big eyes bulging, even through the goggles.

A glance behind her confirmed that the team had stopped. Mina continued to walk, Roupo at her heels.

"No. Tell them to move."

"I've tried! Atmospheric conditions are worse than our models predicted. They've gone as far as they'll go."

She stopped and turned on them. Half a dozen students and research assistants, the best and the brightest. Cowards all. It was a little more wind than expected, a negligible deterrant. From the distance, she stared into Hul Peregrist's deep brown eyes. Hul, who had begged her to let him come along, as she

had once begged Syrek. Hul had given up a lucrative position on Alpha Centauri when she said yes. Now he was quitting. All of them were. They'd crawl out of this desert into academic obscurity, their failure widely known.

Mina tapped Roupo on the shoulder.

"You pull one hoversled, I'll pull the other. Let the rest go."

They weren't worth the withering look or the words she might waste on them. Let them all go. Roupo did as he was told, and the pair, burdened with sleds, pressed onward.

Qor'na'Krinn's surface was mostly desert now. It had once been something else, a living, breathing ecosystem of infinite variety. No living person on any modern world could attest to that fact, other than the researchers whose job it was to know the life cycles of planets. It had once been a candidate for Genesis testing. It had long been written off as useless, far from any well-worn spacelanes, out past 53 Verentis and hang a left at Alandor. Chuck the map and put the top down.

Mina Atell knew every inch of the planet, outside the ion storm. The majority of it had been scanned and sensed, charted and categorized. She'd spent years poring over every micron of data. There had been life here once. Sentience was likely. And only here, in this desert, under the shadow of the storm that hadn't lifted in recorded history, was there a chance to find some remnant of the Krinn people, or whatever they called themselves in that distant, crumbled-away time.

She walked a stretch of desert that may once have been a field, a highrise, a bathroom for all she knew. What forgotten individual had paced this same ground, shared this space with her on a distant temporal plane? She wanted to know.

Roupo stopped, and for a moment Mina thought she was going to have to go on alone. He pointed to his tricorder, barely functional under the storm.

"A chamber," he said, under his breath, under his shock, too low for her to hear. The howl of the rising desert wind was all that met her ears, but she knew in her gut what Roupo said. The Krinn chamber, that theoretical stronghold of forgotten culture, was before them, buried in the wind-whipped sand. She had found it. It was real. It was hers to uncover.

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"Confirmed. A sealed chamber, 20 meters below the surface."

They had found shelter from the wind under one of the rocky outcroppings that punctuated the landscape. Roupo carefully unpacked the hoversleds, preparing to enact Atell's plan even without the rest of the team. He pulled out the long-distance sensor rig, and the portable transporter pattern enhancers. He left the phaser cannon where it was.

"My hunch was right. It's sealed." Mina set her tricorder on a ledge and took charge of the pattern enhancers.

Roupo fumbled a bit with an amplifier, attaching it to the sensor rig. "We have less than two hours to get our readings, Doctor. We have to depart before the gap in the storm closes."

"I'm aware. The tricorder's not reading any other chambers in the vicinity. Get that scanner up. We're central enough now to scan the entire storm region." She slapped the side of the large rig. "Get going. I want those scans."

"It's scanning."

Mina wondered at the stone shelters, the only feature of the ancient landscape to survive the engulfing desert. How had they looked then? Was this the last of someone's favorite oceanside view? Was it the heart of a mountain?

"No pockets showing on sensors," Roupo reported. "As far as I can see, this is the only chamber to retain its seal."

"That's bittersweet."

She'd made it in. She'd found the way. She'd located the only source of pure archaeological data on the planet. At this age, unless they were sealed, any remnants of sentient life were gone, destroyed when exposed to the elements. One sealed chamber was a prize. More than one would have sealed her reputation for generations to come.

This something was better than the nothing Gregg had insisted she'd find. His voice was on the wind. It said "Don't go, Mina..." It commanded her to be reasonable. It pleaded with her to come home. Why she still thought of him, she couldn't say. Except when she could.

She looked Roupo up and down, the last remnant of her team. The dregs. With only the two of them, there was still enough time to get what they'd come for. She pulled open one of the transporter enhancers and planted it in the sand.

"You're going in, Roupo."

He blinked. She pulled open the second enhancer.

"It was supposed to be Hul."

She tried not to balk at his protest. Had it not occurred to Roupo that he would be the replacement? Did he imagine it would be her, transporting blind through 20 meters of rock into who knows what? She didn't have much time to convince him.

"Hul turned back. You made it here. You're the brave one, the one who didn't quit. Roupo, you'll be the first to see inside one of the most magnificent finds of the century. You'll be as famous as the discovery itself. Generations will remember you, and envy you this moment."

He didn't buy a word of it, but did what he was told. Roupo took the third and final pattern enhancer, opened it, and planted it in formation with the other two. Glancing at the storm readouts on the scanner, he moved to the center of the triangle.

“Okay. I’m ready.”

“Scan everything. Don’t touch anything. Don’t touch anything, Roupo.”

“I know.” He was terrified. This wasn’t the high-level technology billions of people trusted their atoms to every day. This was a frontier gum-and-tape job, transporting him with little advantage into the somewhat unknown. There was a reason Mina wasn’t going herself. Roupo swallowed hard. “Ready to transport.”

Mina’s last view of her assistant Roupo was mostly eye. They’d opened so wide the whites showed all the way around. He was terrified, excited, regretful of coming with her. His gaze darted to the enhancers in the last moment, wondering if they would do the job. Knowing somehow they would not.

He winked out of sight, blue glow leaving behind only darkness. Mina’s jaw tensed. Roupo was experiencing the moment she’d dreamed about for years. She gave it to him. She was here, making the discovery, but she’d handed the real moment of truth to her flake of an assistant, a shy little thing, more nerves than gumption. She’d barely bothered to learn anything about him, other than if he knew how to write grants and analyze data.

A clattering sound caught her attention. Looking down, she cursed.

One of the pattern enhancers was blown over and clattered sideways against solid rock. That foolish Roupo. It was the enhancer he’d planted, and he’d endangered his own life in getting it wrong. If it had fallen a moment before, while he transported, it would have gone badly for him.

Her hand moved to the comm on her wrist. “Roupo?”

No answer came. She grabbed the enhancer and planted it upright again, then turned to the scanner. Useless readouts. No lifesign, but nothing else either. Her calculation couldn’t have been wrong. Comm malfunction through the chamber walls? That was possible. Or too much dust blown in on the journey, or manufacturer defect.

“Roupo, come in.”

Mina fussed with the comm, trying to raise him. Nothing, nothing, only time slipping away. This was obnoxious, but there was protocol. No comms meant she pulled him out. If he was fine, he could go in again. That was the protocol. Otherwise, the surface team, now only her, would sit there risking life to the desert, while he was dead inside a wall. She brought up the transporter controls. There was his signature, alive, but in what condition she didn’t know.

She fixed a lock and engaged the beam. For the first time, a pit dropped out in her stomach. For the first time, she thought Gregg might have been right. The transporter wouldn’t function. The pattern enhancer that had blown over crackled and fizzed out, dead as any Krinn that ever lived. She spoke into her wrist comm one more time, knowing it was useless.

“Hold tight, Roupo. The amplifiers are down. I’ll try to fix them. Hang on.”

She had no hope of his survival.

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Mina had spent nearly two hours trying to fix the amplifier, all the while eyeing the weather readouts. Roupo had to be out of the chamber soon. The ion storm's jagged edge was coming for them. If they left soon, they'd make it out alive, though without the data she'd come for. She could press the time, and they could travel faster by leaving the equipment behind. If they missed the window, they'd be stuck, and Roupo, if he did make it out of the chamber without suffocating, would die of exposure alongside his mentor in the unforgiving desert. She had to get him out.

She hoped he wasn't touching anything in there.

The pattern enhancer clattered to the ground again. It was hopeless. She'd begun to think it was one of the two she'd planted, but surely not. She wouldn't have endangered him that way. She could hear Syvek's voice telling her she was untrustworthy in the field. Careless he'd called her. Overeager. She could hear Gregg telling her to be safe, as if he knew what it took to be daring. She could hear the Krinn singing the history of their race on the wind, and her failure was the final note.

There was another way to save Roupo's life. The phaser cannon was their alternative to transporters. Twenty meters was a long way to go, but she could blast through that distance fast enough, so long as the weapon's power cell held out. They'd be down to the last second ion-wise, but they could make it out alive, together.

Only, the chamber would be opened, and all would be lost to the elements, no time to study it or gather comprehensive readings before the window closed. Those dead Krinn or whoever they were would be erased from history, the last few traces of their long-ago culture gone from the record.

She began to unload the phaser from the hoversled. It was too heavy for her to lift alone. It was as heavy as genocide.

The comm broke to life on her wrist.

=/\= Please, Doc--- ---ll, don't ----- -- here. Please, don't leav- -- zzzt. =/\=

She called into it. "Roupo? Roupo, come in!"

Nothing more. That was all. The panic in his voice was as wide as his eyes had been. He knew he was trapped, abandoned, dying. Mina couldn't think of Roupo's first name. It hadn't been important so long as he turned in data analysis on time. Was he from Malaysia? Or was it Indonesia? Who was going to mourn Roupo if he died? She had no idea who she'd call. Gregg might mourn her, when it came to that. She would mourn the Krinn.

The phaser cannon clanked and groaned as she rolled it off the hoversled and into position. It activated easily, though Roupo was the one who'd studied the manual. The sensor rig was tied to it, and would automatically adjust as it dug down, down through the dead earth, tunneling through solid rock, burrowing into the chamber. Destroying her work forever.

This was her moment to prove Gregg wrong, put someone else first, choose living flesh over cold, dead bones. This was her moment to snuff out the last Krinn voice, ending their age-old song for all ages to come. She thought of them, of their long-ago deaths, of their lives, of their right to be remembered for who or what they were.

She couldn't do it. It was wrong. She shut down the machine before the phaser blast got anywhere near the chamber below.

"I'm sorry, Roupo."

She didn't bother saying it into the wrist comm. The words bounced dully off ancient stone and echoed through hot, stale air poor Roupo would never breathe again.

Mina collected her tricorder and downloaded what scans she could from the rig. She took a canteen and little else. A static sound came through the comm for a moment, but she ignored it. It was a long walk back, and time was already short, even without dragging the equipment behind her. Next one to find their way in through the ion storm would win a free phaser cannon and sensor rig. To the victor the spoils.

Gregg had told her it wasn't worth risking her life for people who had been dead too long to thank her. He was wrong. Whoever they had been, whether noble or honest or petty or cruel, scientists like her, or murderers, or failures, or sacrificers on the altar of history, they were worth remembering.

When the authorities came for her, or Hul Peregrist turned her in, founding his career on her broken back, she would tell them it wasn't easy to leave Roupo there. It wasn't easy to lay awake nights dreaming of suffocation, of Roupo's little hands scrabbling on stone, his distant, silent voice whispering horrors in her ear. They would vilify and crucify her. If she wasn't imprisoned, she'd be a pariah to the end of her days. The killer archaeologist, the murderess, splash page in every paper in two quadrants.

One day, when another archaeologist traced her path to the stronghold of Qor'na'Krinn, when the ion storm lifted just long enough for some other poor fool to attempt a claim on the chamber again, they would see how she had preserved it, left its secrets safely frozen in time, undisturbed but for Roupo's sad, dead presence. They would thank her. She had sacrificed one man. She had saved the Krinn people from oblivion.

Dr. Atell made her way out of the desert. The wind was at her back now, howling with Syvek's condescension, Gregg's disapproval, and most of all, Roupo's mournful, unheard pleas for life. Someone else could decide if she had done what was right. The Krinn still sang, quietly, in the distance. Mina held her head high against the desert before her, the open labyrinth, the barren gauntlet, the terrain of former glories, and she pressed onward.

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"The Wind Knows a Song for the Ages"

Writer's Character: Ren Rennyn

Judge's Character: Cassandra Egan Manno

"The Wind Knows a Song for the Ages," Ren Rennyn

I both admire and commend this story first for its cleanliness and its solidity, and though that might sound like faint praise, I use it very intentionally to start off this review. The writer knows what he's doing, not just with regard to his work on the level of the sentence, but also when I consider the arc of the story overall; Dr. Atell's character arc is pleasant to track and is both suited and sized for a story of this length; and the plot of the story isn't either overly simple or too ambitious, given the story's length. "The Wind Knows a Song for the Ages" -- which, by the way, is an absolutely fantastic title -- is one of those rare stories for which I can't immediately suggest a direction for revision, mostly, in this case, because it's built so well. If I had one recommendation for this writer's future stories -- because I certainly want to see more from him! -- I'd ask him to have more fun with experimentation. What would happen to the story if it wasn't wrapped up quite so neatly, or if it was first or second person, or if it was epistolary? This story shows off the writer's chops very well, so I'd encourage him to break his mold. However, I don't want to detract from the fact that this was a very good story told excellently -- very good!

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"The Wind Knows a Song for the Ages"

Writer's Character: Ren Rennyn

Judge's Character: Sal Taybrim

This story gets major kudos for keeping me engrossed and guessing to the very end.

I particularly like how you created characters for this, instead of taking already created characters. These characters were given life and personality in a very short amount of time, in a way that sucked the reader in. In many ways this feels like a piece that was created for an audience and it shines for that fact. I felt like as a writer, you were crafting a piece for others to enjoy, to chew on and think about. I greatly appreciated reading it.

In the end, the only thing I wished for was a little more insight into Atell and why she was so driven, and so focused on her scientific preservation over the life of her lab assistant. Truth be told this is a minor quibble -- something that came out on a second reading. The first reading I was simply hooked on finding out what they would find and whether Roupo would make it through.

This story makes the reader struggle with the concept of 'right' as it carefully balances in a morally grey area. I find that balance is the most intriguing part of the story in the end, the question of whether it is more right to preserve life or knowledge.

Overall a fascinating and thought provoking read!

Reality of Command (Atherton Grix)

"Yes Admiral, I did disobey two sets of direct orders and through my negligence to my duty as a Star Fleet officer I caused the deaths of three crew members as well as the destruction of my ship." Commander Arden Cain said without a trace of pride in his voice.

The truth of course was more complicated or at least more detailed but the essence of the story was correct. And while he knew that he faced court marshal and even prison for his actions, right then in the Admiral's office wasn't the time for Arden to start defending himself. In a way, as far as Arden knew, the admiral was only the messenger not to mention the one that rescued Arden and his crew off of that sorry excuse of a planet. For that Arden was deeply grateful so he showed a little extra appreciation. Although that "extra" appreciation was quickly fading in the face of an unnecessary and annoying line of questioning. It seemed as though this Admiral was taking the whole incident personally even though she had no stake in the issue as far as Arden was concerned. He, like the rest of his crew was tired so all he wanted to do was to see to his crew's well being and then get some much needed rest on the ride back to Star Base 75, even if that was to take place in a brig. After a week in a wet and overcrowded cave, the prospect of even staying in a brig felt like being in a Risian hotel.

"And yet you still disobeyed your orders. I have review the logs and I can't help but get the impression that you planned on disobeying. Is that accurate Commander Cain?" the female Trill Admiral asked pointedly.

"If I had planned anything Admiral, the rescue and subsequent escape might have gone smoother. No, planned, isn't a word I would use. I knew very well before I even heard the distress call that my career was hanging by a thread and yet that had nothing to do with my decision. I would have made the same call no matter what my personal situation was because I was in a position to help those civilians and I was able to do so, so I did." Arden said keeping irritation from his voice but not caring what else slipped through.

The Admiral simply stared at Arden but this was the part that Arden didn't care about. While he deeply regretted the fact that the Altamira was destroyed and devastated at the loss of those crewmen despite not really knowing any of them or showing his grief, Arden was absolutely proud of the fact that he and his crew had saved all the civilians that were still alive when they had arrived on site. What's more was that because of his decision; a supposedly renegade Klingon war bird had been destroyed. That too was a little regrettable to Arden but he hadn't lost any sleep over the matter.

"Out of interest commander, do you have the slightest idea why you were ordered not to engage the, at the time, unknown hostile?" The Admiral asked in what Arden was quickly seeing as her typical manner.

"Because I was ordered not to deviate from the Altamira's assignment being that of cargo hauling. The other reason, which I would be more inclined to follow, was because the 'unknown hostile's' apparent technological superiority meant that it would have the clear tactical advantaged. Statistically speaking of course." Arden replied.

Arden then paused for a moment deciding how best to continue as it was apparent that that was what the Admiral wanted. He didn't quite know what the woman opposite him expected Arden to say or which

answer she wanted to hear but it didn't matter as Arden had already had the time to think through them all. Ultimately though in that moment Arden decided to approach the matter as he had been trained and not as rashly as when he made the decision in the first place.

"Somebody at Sector Command probably looked at the stats for a Miranda class vessel and came to the conclusion, based on that alone, that any attempt would fail probably in a dozen different ways." Arden said before calmly continuing. "Tactically speaking such an assessment isn't wrong especially considering the outcome. If I did follow either of those orders, however, I would have condemned two dozen civilians to their deaths and Star Fleet would have been none the wiser about supposedly rogue Klingon activity."

"As distasteful as it is to face, being a Star Fleet command officer sometimes means having to do things that run counter to the principals that our organization represents. And by extension there are times when we must set aside personal opinions and instincts. That is the reality of command and not some fanciful notion of doing what's right. I would have expected you to have learned that lesson before now." The Admiral told him.

Even though Arden didn't take his eyes off the Admiral or say anything aloud he sighed inwardly. In a very real sense, it was that same reality that the Admiral spoke of that was the reason why the Altamira had been reassigned as a cargo freighter in light of another decision Arden had made. Another poor decision if Arden was to judge against the Admiral's "reality" of command.

"I have learned that Admiral and it's something that I have accepted because I could see the reasons why those distasteful things, as you put it, had to be done." Arden replied plainly. He could have gone into more detail or give dozens of examples on either side of the argument but there was no point. There was no need to be drawn into an ideological debate over something that couldn't be changed at that point.

"Was there anything else you wanted to know Admiral?" Arden asked reluctantly.

"Well you certainly seem eager to be done with me which is rather rude to begin with. But to want to leave before listening to my request, well that is something else." The Admiral said in a slightly playful tone. Or at least her tone wasn't as stern as it had been up until that point.

That knocked Arden off guard. He didn't understand what he was doing there in the first place or even why an Star Fleet Admiral had come to his crew's rescue, let alone what request could possibly be made of Arden at that point. Surely it went without saying that the Admiral could get whatever she wanted from people that weren't about to be court marshalled. Arden couldn't help but be intrigued if for only a few of those reasons. He wasn't foolish enough to think that the admiral represented a way to bypass the consequences faced. Just like many times before curiosity got the better of him so he stood silently and patiently.

"Before we get to that though I would like to know how you got to the surface of that planet." The Admiral stated leaving the question implied but not expressly asked. "I have read the preliminary report but I want to hear it from you."

Arden gave a sigh; he had had plenty of time to draft the report while waiting to be rescued but knew that he wouldn't escape having to retell the story. Some part of him did hope that he wouldn't have to though. Whether he was proud of certain portions of the outcome or not, this particular story wasn't one

that he wanted to dwell on more than necessary. Taking another breath he began to speak in order to describe the events in the most concise but thorough way he knew of.

"The idea was to drop out of warp in system just inside of transporter range and start beaming the civilian survivors out. We kept our distance from the civilian ships but did what we could to shift the attacker's attention to us. And all that worked until we made our escape from the system by jumping back to maximum warp." Arden said pausing for a moment to think before continuing. "The Klingon's closed the distance quickly and started taking pot shots at the Altamira's shields. They must have got in a lucky shot to because one of the EPS conduits running directly from main engineering blow out and I was told that it wouldn't be long before we'd lose stability in the warp core. Firing the last of my photons torpedoes and detonating them early to hopeful blind the enemy's sensors I had my pilot drop us out of warp, we then dumped the warp core and ran like hell before it too detonated. We weren't far from the planet when the shock wave caught up with us and we went crashing into the planet below. "

Arden paused having told the Admiral the first half of the story in order to give her a little time to process what he had said. In a way Arden also made use of that time to consider how he managed to take a string of the hairiest moments of his life and condense them into a minutes worth of dull story telling. Something in all that just didn't sit right with him.

"It goes without saying that the Altamira's landing was rough but she held together long enough to touch down on the planet's surface with quite a few minor injuries. In that regard we were extremely fortunate. That fortune however didn't last as after we recovered from the landing we couldn't have been planet side for more than twenty minutes when we spotted the war bird coming in for an emergency landing a couple kilometers away. After that we followed standard procedure: tend to our wounded, find better shelter, open lines of communication with the Klingon which was shot down almost immediately, and then activate a distress beacon as soon as it was safe to do so." Arden concluded listing each item off one by one.

"I also read that after you defeated the last of the Klingon that you investigated their crashed vessel and proceeded to destroy what was left of their communication system. It strikes me as odd that you would destroy something that could speed up the time it took for rescuers to find you." The Admiral said completely unfazed by what Arden had said before that.

"By that point we had a functional beacon and a shuttle that we could get into orbit if need be so I wasn't concerned about being found. What did concern me however was the very real possibility of more Klingon showing up and recovering what little data was left in those systems. My Klingon is a little rusty, but it wasn't hard to work out that the data that survived detailed attempts at improving the Klingon cloaking device. If I had to guess I would say that the Klingons were having a lot of success with those efforts. As much as I am sure that there are those in star fleet that would love that data, I felt it best that it didn't survive to be found. Off the top of my head I can only think of one other planet that I have been to that was as bad as that one. The last thing it needed was more Klingon." Arden said speaking honestly.

"Besides the ionic disturbances that prevented my ship from locating you initially, the planet didn't look all that bad." The Admiral commented.

"You forgot to mention the frequent and long lasting storms as well as the incredibly dense jungle. That planet certainly wasn't Risa but definitely survivable if you don't mind dark and foreboding environments." Arden commented almost in a sarcastic manner.

"It's of little consequence but since you brought it up, what planet do you think is so much worse than this one?" The Admiral asked curiously.

"It was a small mining colony known as Dusters Range. Well that was until an unidentified Borg variant appeared there. More to the point, between those Borg-things and sand storms common to that world it goes without saying that I don't have pleasant memories of my time there." Arden told her.

This time Arden didn't wait long to continue. The events of Dusters Range were long behind him but that didn't mean that Arden wanted to spend any amount of time reliving those memories after the last few days that he had had.

"My life in Star Fleet has never been dull," Arden said pausing briefly. "even when it was meant to be. I suppose that is one thing that is never really covered at the Academy."

"Yes one of those concepts that needs adding or revising but all things have a time. Perhaps it is the way it is for a reason." The Admiral said dismissively. "Speaking of time, the time has come to end this conversation which means you have a decision ahead of you. Orders from sector command are that you are to be held in custody pending a formal trail and court marshal. In light of certain facts it is highly improbable that you will be imprisoned for what happened but your career will be over. Have no illusions to that." The Admiral told him so plainly.

Arden of course had come to the realization that it probably would come to such an outcome but found it a little hard having someone else say it. Before Arden could comment the Admiral spoke again.

"That however would be an unfortunate and wasteful end in my opinion as I happen to be looking for a few good commanders for my task force. Given everything that I have learned about you, I'd say you'd fit in well." The Admiral concluded.

"And if I work for you, you make these charges disappear. As lovely as that sounds it doesn't sound legitimate." Arden replied almost instantly. As much as the offer sounded appealing and even desirable, it wasn't Star Fleet that taught Arden not to be taken in by something that sounded too good to be true.

"It is absolutely legitimate, political but legitimate none the less. It is much the same as the formal hearing that you will attend, it's all political. In that case though someone is using politics to get rid of you. I'd be interested in finding out why but that is a conversation for another day. I am not a member of Star fleet Intelligence nor is this a setup." The Admiral told him with more conviction than Arden had seen in the woman previously.

"So what would you have me do in this task force of yours?" Arden asked seriously.

"See that ship being towed out the window?" The Admiral asked to which Arden stood up to get a look at it. "That will be your ship if you accept the position."

"And get it operational by the looks of it" Arden commented.

"The USS Cressida is a ten year old nova class but has been in dry dock collecting dust for the last two. More importantly is that she is yours if you still want to be on the front lines exploring the galaxy,

making it a better place and all that." The Admiral told him but even though her words might have seemed more than a little sarcastic, her tone and face told a completely different story.

Arden certainly had more questions in mind than he possibly wanted to deal with at that moment, the least of which was whether or not he wanted to accept the offer. Whether or not he should accept considering recent events also came to mind along with why a rescue ship would be towing a Nova class vessel during a rescue mission. As he took one more look out at the USS Cressida though Arden knew that perhaps the first of those was the easiest question to answer just as it had been when he was first offered the USS Altamira. So he turned back to the Admiral and spoke knowing that at least one question had been settled.

"When do you want me to start Admiral?" Arden asked.

"My crew will be set to leave this area in six hours. You have that long to get your ship operational or to arrange for another ship to tow the Cressida back to the Star Base."

"Of course Admiral, I will get it done." Arden said simply.

&&&

"Reality of command"

Writer's Character: Atherton Grix

Judge's Character: Toni Turner

This was a well-written entry, in that it told the story of why and how Commander Cain found himself in such a predicament. It was indeed a complicated turn of events as Mr. Grix explained in detail, giving the reader a satisfactory account of the circumstances that brought Cain to the point of almost losing his career in Starfleet.

Although I liked the story, I kept waiting to find a better sense of remorse in Cain. And the fact that he chose to become a political pon, rather than face a court marshal for disobeying orders that caused fatalities, didn't say much for Cain's ethics, nor the Admiral's for offering him another ship. For those reasons, I had a difficult time equating that this was a true "Reality of command" in all cases. But that is not to say it doesn't happen in our real time, or that it won't in the future.

Overall, it was a very solid story. Well done, Mr. Grix!

&

"Reality of command"

Writer's Character: Atherton Grix

Judge's Character: Cascadia Rainier

This was an interesting take on the overall theme this month, offering a glimpse of the aftermath of an obviously difficult decision that caused the death of others and the downfall of a Starfleet command officer. Of course, as we learn as the story comes to its end, things are not always as they appear. A secondary course of action is interjected towards the end, giving the aforementioned officer another way out - a way that he takes.

Overall, the story has all of the components of a potentially good tale, with a plot that is not only alluded to having already happened, but one that is played out throughout the story itself. I enjoyed reading the story, having met Cain IC at least once. At the same time, I felt as if some of the spelling errors detracted somewhat from the overall feel of it. I also felt that the story ended on a flat note, without actually having climaxed to its potential heights. Finally, it's never made even remotely clear just why this Nova class was needed by this Admiral, or why it's important enough to wipe clean a court martial worthy offense, which might have offered a lot of depth to the story otherwise.

Still, on its own, the story was certainly intriguing and appeared to close the chapter of an officer who had been with the fleet for some time (and whose writer has moved on to a new character) which is always nice. There is the potential for a future, despite the actions leading to the current point, and we may not have seen the last of Arden Cain. This was a great addition to a very strong showing this time around. Thanks for sharing this with us and I look forward to future entries!

Orders and Consequences

(Kaitlyn Falcon)

((Robert Falcon's Ready Room; U.S.S. Yorktown – Earth Year 2385))

Captain Robert Falcon gave a long stare at the PADD he held, containing the results of *Yorktown's* latest long-range scans. He did not want to believe them true, but knew he could do nothing else. *Yorktown's* science officer, his eldest daughter Alice, knew exactly what she was looking at. This was not her first time encountering these beings, after all.

Nor was it Robert's.

Alice's report was kept very factual, nearly clinical in its objectivity.

At 0800 hours, long range sensors detected faint energy signatures with a close match to previously observed Fury patterns. Further analysis and additional scans have given us a 75% confidence of the presence of multiple Fury warships in the vicinity of the Hor'Chak system. While interspace weapons technology has not yet been detected, it cannot be ruled out.

Robert set down the PADD, leaning back in his chair. He was keeping news of this discovery as silent as he could until he figured out what to do about it. Many of his crew had fought against the Furies three years before. Those who had come to the ship the years following had all heard the stories, Robert was certain. He wasn't sure if the news would be taken well that the enemy had somehow returned.

To be honest, Robert himself wasn't taking it all that well...

Still, he knew what he had to do. While his orders did not permit him to talk to anyone else about it, they didn't prevent him informing Starfleet. He tapped the comm controls. "Jiana, open a channel to Starfleet Command, priority one secure."

A moment later, his XO/Helm Officer/Wife Jiana replied, "I'm on it. It'll take a few minutes to establish the secure connection from here."

A priority one call to Starfleet Command... He'd never thought he'd actually make one in his career.

The Furies, however... THAT was important enough.

Of all the things he had encountered in his career in Starfleet, none matched the level of fear they could inspire. He remembered the class everyone had to take back in the Academy, learning about their involvement with the peoples of the Alpha and Beta quadrants. More importantly, they learned of the two attempts made, at that point, to return, as well as the events which pushed them to a far part of the galaxy.

Robert had left that class with a bit more trepidation about what he might find when he ventured out to the unexplored regions of the galaxy.

Years later, the long lost starship *Voyager* made contact with Starfleet Command and reported a great many things. One of the reports Robert had been most excited to see was their encounter with the Furies, mostly due to its ending. For all intents and purposes, the Furies could be considered no longer a threat. Gone for good!

Others had not taken the news with quite the same optimism as he had... Admiral Kyle Colt, stationed in one of the further reaches of the Federation, felt that Starfleet should not rest on their laurels and had taken matters into his own hands. He'd led the ships under his command in an attempted coup against the Federation, with few people standing in his way. Robert's ship, with him as Executive Officer in temporary command, was in the right place at the right time to see what Admiral Colt was planning and stop his attempt cold in its tracks.

However, Colt was able to remain several steps ahead of everyone. He'd always had a backup plan in case he was stopped. Though his ship was under the guns of what few ships Robert was able to draft into an impromptu defense, Colt was able to cloak and escape, leaving behind only a message for Robert that he could hear from Colt again one day.

"Robert, I have Starfleet Command over priority one secure."

Shaken out of memory, Robert looked up and tapped the comm. "Thank you, Jiana." He took a deep breath, turning his chair to face his desk terminal and activating it. For a moment, it showed the Starfleet symbol, the words Starfleet Command written above it, Priority One Secure Transmission written below.

Then, the image changed. A gray-haired human male with sharp blue eyes and an admiral's insignia on his collar appeared at dead center. The room was dark, though Robert was not sure if it was simply night where the admiral was or if he had moved to a more secure room. "This is Admiral Vellan, Starfleet Command. Captain, what have you got for me?"

Robert straightened in his chair. "Admiral, we've picked up energy readings giving a strong possibility of Fury presence approximately 30 lightyears from the Federation border. We're too far out to get a size or disposition of the force at this time. My intention is to close the gap and gather more intel to verify what we're detected so far."

Admiral Vellan blinked hard, mentally processing the report. "You wanna run that by me again, Captain?"

Robert did so, this time slowing down and giving the admiral all the details he had. Admiral Vellan nodded as Robert spoke, taking in all the information as it came. When Robert finally finished, Admiral Vellan spoke again. "I'm going to have to call for an Admiralty meeting to go over this. I need you to stand by and stay put, got it son?"

Robert nodded. "Got it, Admiral. We'll be standing by on this channel. *Yorktown* out."

The transmission ended, Robert leaning back in his chair and taking a deep breath to keep his calm. He'd expected that a problem of this magnitude would take a bit of time to get a response. He was a patient person by default... but in this case he really hoped Admiral Vellan got an answer to him quickly...

The door chime beeped, Robert looking up toward it. "Come," he said.

The doors swished open, admitting one red-haired human. His wife looked to him, some concern on her features as her brilliant green eyes met Robert's blues. Robert figured she had seen the transmission end, with Robert not immediately returning to the bridge. The doors swished shut behind her as she started over toward him. "What's the word?"

"Stand by," he replied with a bit of theatrical tone to suggest it was their current order. "Admiral Vellan has to talk it out with the other high pubahs so they can figure out how they'll respond to it."

Jiana grabbed one of the chairs opposing him, spinning it to sit on it backwards. "Well, at least he believed you that we saw what we saw."

Robert shrugged. "Or decided to give be the benefit of the doubt. It could still bite me in the butt later on." He gave a soft sigh. "I thought we were done with this..."

"Me, too," Jiana said, reaching out to grab Robert's hand atop the desk. "If nothing else," she offered, "this time we know they're coming ahead of time, instead of getting randomly ambushed by them."

"True," Robert admitted. He sighed, shaking his head. "But last time, we also didn't get much Starfleet support... Can't believe I'm admitting it, but I wish Colt were around..."

Colt had been true to his word. About three years ago, and two years after their previous encounter, a strange transmission had come in. Admiral Colt had come to recruit Robert for his real mission, stopping the Furies at the edge of the galaxy. Robert had been skeptical at first, but Colt gave

sufficient evidence of their impending arrival, along with the tech he'd developed to allow a fleet of ships to burrow through the Galactic Barrier.

Robert, one of the few people to outthink Colt, was the one person Colt trusted to find the holes in his plan. Between the two of them, they managed to make a plan that worked.

Robert sighed once more. "I don't see much chance of him coming around this time, though. He's still a fugitive, after all."

"True," Jiana replied, "but Starfleet has to see the problem this time. It's right in our backyard, plain as day."

Robert turned to look out the viewport at the expanse of stars. "I know," he said, seemingly distant. "Yet... why do I get the feeling they won't?"

A long silence fell in the ready room, the pair passing the time with hands linked for mutual comfort. Finally, the intercom came alive. "Dad," Alice's voice spoke, "we're getting a call back from Starfleet Command, priority one secure."

"Thanks, Alice," Robert responded. "Put it through in here."

"Got it."

Jiana pulled her hand back as Robert got situated back in his chair, giving his uniform a quick tug to remove a few stubborn wrinkles. He reached out to tap his terminal. Moments later, Admiral Vellan reappeared on his screen. His expression was... neutral. "Captain Falcon," he started, "the Admiralty has decided that, for the time being, there will be no response to the alleged Fury presence."

Robert's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "Sir?"

"Furthermore," he continued, "you are not to speak of the energy readings you detected with anyone. That goes for your entire crew. Do you understand, captain?"

He was silent for a moment as he attempted to process what he'd heard. "I... I understand what you're saying, Admiral, but not the reason. Why aren't we reacting to this?"

The admiral's expression broke, betraying his own annoyance. "Most of the Admiralty want to ignore it, pretend you didn't see what you thought you saw. The overall opinion was to wait until they show their hand, if they ever do, and muster forces at that time." He shook his head. "I can't say I agree with that opinion, but the head of Starfleet herself made the final call. Those are her marching orders. Do you understand, captain?"

Robert barely contained a sigh. "Yes, admiral, I do."

The admiral looked at Robert for a moment longer. "I know it isn't what you wanted to hear, son, but it's what I've got. Get clear for now and be ready to fight another day. Command out."

The admiral's image was replaced by the logo once again, Robert slumping back in his chair and fighting to hurl the terminal across the room.

It wasn't the terminal's fault, after all. It was just the messenger.

Jiana was a bit more vocal about her frustrations. "Those... Those pig-headed morons! Do they have ANY idea what's about to happen?"

Robert looked up at her, a tired expression on his features. "Maybe. Maybe they're just scared stiff, or think that if we don't move the Furies won't see us, or figure we're too tough for them to take down." He shook his head. "And by the time they see that they're wrong, it'll be too late."

"Will it?" Jiana asked. "What if we do something about it?"

He looked to his wife, eyebrows furrowed once again. "Ji, we've got our marching orders. Get our butts out of here and back on patrol."

"Rob, you know how bad this could get," she countered. "WE know how bad this could get."

Robert's eyes closed as he thought. "Do you really want to go through that again?" he quietly asked. "You know what we went through last time, and back then we had backup. Do you really want that again?"

((Bridge; U.S.S. Yorktown – Earth Year 2382))

The bridge rocked as another volley of enemy fire impacted the shields. Jiana held on to the command seat tightly. “Damage report!”

From the left side of the station before her, Jacen Tharen spoke up from tactical. “Shields down to 54% and recharging slowly. Port-engineering hull phaser array has been knocked out by the power feedback from the wedge.”

Another report came from the engineering station. “I’ve reports of power failures on decks 18 and 19, repair teams responding.”

Jiana swore under her breath. *Yorktown’s* refits were extensive, and she was a tough ship, but she hadn’t been designed with Furies in mind. Their jury-rigged shields, reformed into a wedge shape known to deflect the interspace-based fear inducing weapons the Furies favored, had wreaked havoc with their power systems.

“Where are our escorts?” Jiana asked, looking at the science station. She could see a flurry of dots, red and blue, dancing around the console’s readouts. Admiral Colt’s ships were providing as much cover as they could to allow *Yorktown* and her crew to do their jobs.

“Chasing down other ships,” came the reply. “One’s working back to us, the other’s a little occupied.”

It was an ambitious plan. The Furies had managed to use their artificial wormhole technology to get close to the Milky Way, getting their planet in orbit of a rogue star outside the galaxy. They planned to use the tech again to move back into the Alpha Quadrant, now that they were close enough to get an actual target to jump toward. Robert and three of their grown children, James, Alice, and Rebecca, had gone to the surface to try and sabotage the system... and send the Fury’s planet into the rogue star.

It was very risky, as the team could well still be on the planet when it fell. It was also drastic, as it was highly likely none of the Furies would be able to escape.

Jiana had little sympathy. They could have taken the hint by now that they weren’t welcome in the Alpha Quadrant anymore.

“Status of ERRS dishes?” she asked.

“Dorsal dish is aimed at the strongest interspace source. Ventral’s at the ground team.”

They had found that *Yorktown’s* new sensor technology, when properly configured, could disrupt the Fury interspace weapon. One of their dishes covered the fleet as best as they could. The other gave the ground team a safe haven to work from. As an added benefit, *Yorktown* could hear their comm chatter. Robert’s voice came over the intercom. “*Rogue*, we’re at the base of a large structure. Believe it to be their command center. Door is heavily reinforced. Think you can provide a key?”

A moment later, another voice came over the intercom. “I think a spread of micro-torpedoes will do the trick,” Kaitlyn, their fourth grown child, replied from Robert’s shuttle.

“That should do nicely, thanks.”

James’s impassive voice came next. “We sure this is going to work?”

“Don’t you remember anything from the stories I told you as a kid,” Robert replied. “The plucky group of heroes is always the enemy’s greatest weakness.”

((Robert Falcon’s Ready Room; U.S.S. Yorktown – Earth Year 2385))

They had survived that day. *Yorktown* beamed the team to safety while *Rogue* fled from the Fury planet as it plunged into the forming artificial wormhole. It popped back into normal space only a few light-seconds from the surface of the star and was quickly destroyed by tidal forces, falling into the

fire. What few Fury ships remained fled, leaving *Yorktown* and Colt's remaining fleet to burrow their way back through the Galactic Barrier.

Starfleet had scarcely believed it, but in the end simply ordered them to remain silent. None liked it, but all accepted the order.

Of course, all had been certain that the battles were done, and that the Furies were defeated.

Robert looked back to his wife, his expression sober. "You realize what might happen if we do this, right? Starfleet might decide to court-martial us for disobeying orders, if we even survive long enough for them to do it. We've got only whatever supplies we can muster and no allies."

Jiana looked back, reaching out to take his hands in hers. "I never said it would be easy. Or smart. The easy, smart thing to do would be follow our orders, get out of here, and wait to see if Starfleet does something about this later... when it might be too late. What's the RIGHT thing to do?"

The right thing... Robert sighed. "To gather up whatever resources we can, get out there, and take the Furies down before they can threaten our home."

His wife nodded, squeezing his hands. "Now, whatever you want to do, I'll support you. You say no and the worst comes, I won't even say 'I told you so'. Just tell me, Rob, what do YOU want to do?"

That's what it really came down to, wasn't it? What did he want to do about it?

His orders were clear. Turn around, get back to his patrol, and forget he ever saw anything. However, if the Furies were given time to build up and attack, to make this war happen on their terms, it became more likely that it would be more than Starfleet could handle.

He hadn't built *Yorktown* for this... He hadn't put this crew together for this... He hadn't meant for HIS FAMILY to do this...

His family... There was a good chance that any who went would not return. Was he willing to sacrifice them all for this mission? Could he even make that kind of call for them?

Would they ever forgive him if he never let them have the choice to join on a hopeless mission? Could he forgive himself if anything happened to *them*?

They had been a team for a long time, forged in their years as a family on the *Freedom* and tested during their last battle with the Furies. Of anyone Robert knew who might be able to stop these... Demons... He knew that he and his family stood the best chance.

And if they couldn't do it... who could?

Robert met his wife's eyes. "I want to stop them. Here and now. Take the fight to the Furies, and stop them at the door."

Jiana nodded, giving his hands one last squeeze before releasing them. "I'll make some calls, see what kind of resources I can drum up."

"I'll figure out how to tell everyone," Robert replied. "Whatever happens from here, they need to hear about this from me."

&&&

"Orders and Consequences"

Writer's Character: Kaitlyn Falcon

Judge's Character: Toni Turner

Mr. Falcon spun a tale reminiscent of "Swiss Family Robinson," taking into account that command was more like a family decision. It was simple question of going fight the Fury without back up, or follow orders? . . . but Mr. Falcon made it much more than that with words that flowed seamlessly from on sentence to the other as he presented every provocative thought. I kept asking myself if he ever stopped to realize that Starfleet Command could have had a plan in mind for the Fury that any interference would have messed up. Regardless, the story held my interest, and was well worth the time to read.

Well done presentation, Mr. Falcon!

&

"Orders and Consequences"

Writer's Character: Kaitlyn Falcon

Judge's Character: Cassandra Egan Manno

Good work here! Many Challenge stories that center on established characters will either spend no time offering those characters origins or they'll spend too much time hashing through a character the writer has known for much longer than the audience. In this case, neither is true, even though this writer has clearly written for Robert Falcon for a long time. The story itself is paced well and has a clear arc toward its conclusion, and I applaud it for being able to juggle so much when not just Robert himself but multiple characters and the Yorktown are part of an ongoing plot. However, I'll offer one note for potential revision there: It seems to me that there aren't necessarily stakes for Robert here, and that, by the story's end, though things may change in the future, we haven't been shown and have no guarantee that the events of the story and Robert's musings will have an impact upon what happens next. I would like to see more of these stories entered in future Challenges, but I think that they'll only be stronger if they're forced to stand alone not just in terms of their characters but also in the consequences for those characters. All in all, some very good work here, and I do look forward to the next entry!

River of Time

(Irina Pavlova)

Note: This story was inspired by the song "River of Time" by Jorma Kaukonen of Jefferson Airplane fame. I've long been obsessed with stories dealing with the passage of time and my character, Major Irina Pavlova was created around that obsession. Combine that with me being a Jefferson Airplane and Hot Tuna (Kautonen's other band) fan and this practically wrote itself.

It was the same dream every night. A ragged, worn and wild-eyed Irina Pavlova walking into the sanctuary at P'Jem doing her best to look confused. The Vulcan monks always rushed to her aid and that of her 4-year-old daughter, wondering how two humans could suddenly appear at their doorstep, no starship in orbit and none on the landing pad. Just the two humans, both tired, dirty and confused, neither with any idea of how they got there.

Of course that was the dream version. The reality version involved a detailed plan, and Irina tried to have every contingency covered. The small scout ship would land on the planet only thousands of miles from the sanctuary, and then using its transporter Irina and young Katya would transport to roughly halfway up the long mountain pathway. The ship would then follow its programming and fly itself to the bottom of the ocean and power down, hopefully not to be disturbed, at least not until the 24th century from whence it will have come.

P'Jem was selected carefully. Irina needed to find a place that in the 22nd century could at least call for a ship to bring her home, while being remote enough for her to slip in unnoticed. The P'Jem of the 2170s was the perfect spot, with only a few monks and one transmitter remaining after the monitoring station was dismantled by the Andorians in the 2150s, and not yet the mining colony that would be founded there in the 2210s. In 2175 it was just an uninhabited rock, with a small sanctuary, four or five Vulcan monks and one powerful transmitter.

The plans were months in the making. Her assignment as chief of strategic operations at Duronis II made things easy. The runabout was one of many available for the embassy's senior staff to use, and as a marine major and department head Irina was in such a position that checking out the runabout for a week's leave was little more than a routine requisition. She would have a full week before anyone started looking, and unless they looked more than two centuries in the past, she would never be found.

Every night it was the same dream, and every morning the same reality. Everyone she had ever known was long dead. It didn't matter what she did, their faces haunted her every night when she closed her eyes. Her father telling her that military service was a waste of her talent. Her brother who promised that grandpa's old Mercedes would be running by the time she came back from her first tour. Most of all it was Dimitri, the boy next door. Clumsy, awkward Dimitri, her sidekick, shadow, best friend and worst enemy for as far back as she could remember. They had joined the marines together, and the night before Irina shipped out on Columbia, they had progressed from friends to lovers.

Dimitri had been dead for 150 years now, never married, never meeting his only child. Much of his life was lost to history, but Irina was able to find out that he left the marines just months after her ship was reported lost, and the only other references to him are a college degree in astronomy, a retirement ceremony from the Moscow observatory and his obituary, which had little more than the dates of his

birth and death, and that he was engaged to Irina Pavlova in April 2170 and had a daughter named Katya, born the same month.

Irina saw his face every night, imagining him working everyday at the observatory, studying stellar data, but always really looking for just one thing, the NX Class USS Columbia, missing longer and longer as he grew older and older. She could imagine him an old man, no longer working, but still always looking upward and hoping against hope that somehow she was still out there.

Of course he couldn't possibly have known that she was doing the same thing, and continued to do so long after he had breathed his last. Stranded on the planet Kjenta II and essentially immortal while there, Irina had no clue regarding the true passage of time. Days blurred into weeks, months, years and ultimately decades as over two centuries passed her relentlessly by. Lan Treng, Columbia's science officer told them that it was radiation from the planet's upper atmosphere that prevented cellular decay and kept them young, but everyone, including Irina, didn't believe it, thinking only that they had lost track of time.

Irina woke in a cold sweat as she did every morning, but today would be different. Today she was on leave, had a runabout reserved and her bags packed. She and Katya were traveling light, with just some civilian clothes, her old uniform and a few of their possessions that had come with them from the old USS Columbia. Her modern uniform, commbadge and everything else that wasn't made before 2175 would be left on the runabout, powered down and abandoned beneath the ocean of P'Jem. After a week, Starfleet would probably go looking for her, perhaps if they looked hard enough they would find a 2-year-old runabout that had spent the last two centuries at the bottom of the ocean.

As Katya woke up, they ate breakfast as usual and made their way to the docking ring. Everything was in order, the runabout was ready and Irina logged her flight plan for P'Jem. In addition to meeting her needs, P'Jem had a few other points in its favor for Irina's plan. It orbited a star of sufficient mass to make the slingshot calculations possible with a smaller ship and the radiation of that star was such that even the weak shielding of a runabout was more than adequate. Most important of all was the lack of curiosity it had as a destination for Irina and Katya in their 24th century existence as it was the place of retirement of one T'Sal, a Vulcan girl who was Irina's roommate when she went through security/tactical branch training at Starfleet Academy back in 2168. T'Sal was one of the very first Vulcans to attend the brand-new academy, and was the last surviving member of Irina's class. Irina had contact T'Sal a few days before, and nobody would possibly question her motives for visiting.

The trip to P'Jem was uneventful and accomplished in just over two days. Irina and Katya passed the time on educational activities and Irina even taught the little girl how to pilot the runabout, at least the real basics, and let her do so under close supervision. The normalness continued as they arrived at P'Jem and had a lovely dinner with T'Sal.

Irina had never liked Vulcans and she and T'Sal were not friends all those years ago, but the passage of time had changed a great deal of things for both women. The two talked about time and timelines, and it was T'Sal who introduced Irina to the concept of time being essentially a river, with people wading in, swimming to the other side as the current pushed them until finally they would emerge on the opposite bank and end their journey. The current only moving in one direction, and no matter how hard one fought, one could never swim backwards.

Irina told T'Sal about James Kirk and the slingshot maneuver, and how she was going to swim backwards to where she belonged. To her credit, T'Sal did not try and talk her out of it, but rather just asked her to be mindful of what might happen downriver.

The next morning Irina and Katya woke up on the runabout, got dressed and ate breakfast as usual, only this day Irina was back in uniform, only it was her 22nd century uniform. The old flip-open communicator and first generation phase pistol were at her belt, both clearly showing the wear and tear of 219 years on Kjenta II, while the uniform was crisp and new, preserved in Irina's closet on the Columbia in the cold of space.

The runabout was programmed for the slingshot maneuver and Katya's bag was filled with books carefully selected from the 22nd century with a science fiction theme all the better to explain the four-year-old's inevitable comments about the 24th century as mere products of an active imagination.

The runabout broke atmosphere and Irina put it on course for the P'Jem star, then engaged the slingshot program and sat back. She closed her eyes and thought of Dimitri waiting by his window. She did the calculations for an arrival date in June of 2175, 2-years after Columbia was reported missing. She had the wild-eyed look already, and figured if she just pretended ignorance, to have no clue how she ended up at P'Jem or where the Columbia was, nobody would be any the wiser for it. By the time USS Discovery found the Columbia in 2390 she would be long dead anyway, and hopefully history would just repeat itself.

To Irina's chagrin, Dimitri's face didn't remain in her mind for long. She thought about her 24th century commanding officer, Fleet Captain Toni Turner, and her mountain of an XO Lieutenant Commander Hannibal Parker. There was Colonel Tyr Waltas, who one year before as Captain Tyr Waltas was the main actor in her rescue from Kjenta. There were others, the Vulcan science officer T'Mihn who had helped Irina with the calculations, the marines and startfleet officers she had gotten to know at Duronis, and finally the little boy Bolt who had become Katya's playmate.

What would happen to all of them if Irina swam up instead of downriver? Would she disturb the waters of their lives?

"Why are you crying mommy?" Katya asked as the P'Jem star grew larger and larger in the runabout's viewer.

"Because I can't go home" Irina replied as she tearfully changed the runabout's programming for a return to Duronis II.

"Why not? I like Donis embsy."

"I know, that is why we are going back. Its your home."

"We live together?"

"Yes Printzyessa, we live together, but everyone swims in the river alone."

"What river mommy?"

"The river of time."

&&&

"River of Time"

Writer's Character: Irina Pavlova

Judge's Character: Cascadia Rainier

This story was an interesting tale involving everything we love about sci-fi; time travel, distant worlds, and impossible plans. Underneath it all was the idea of right and wrong in a quite ambiguous sense. Was it right to want to go home? How would that change time? Was it the right choice to avoid the plans that were made? We can all relate to the desire to return to a point in our past to right the wrongs made, and in this story that return is possible. The question remains, however, is it right?

As such, this story really fills in the theme of this particular writing challenge. It was easy to read and easy to follow. The biggest downfall in my eyes, and a place where potential improvement might be made next time, is near the end. The turnaround from a well planned mission to return to her home back in time to her crying and scrapping the plan was overly fast compared to the rest of the story. I feel as if this emotional part of the story had so much more potential and could have been far more impactful if given the attention other aspects of the story had been given. I really wonder where it could have gone had this climax been as deep as the rest of the story.

Aside from that, the entry was a good example of good writing challenge material. I wholly enjoyed the read and I can't wait to see what you enter next time. Time travel is a topic we all consider, being involved in science fiction. Is it right though? That is something we can only really explore here, and you've done a fine job of that and more!

&

"River of Time"

Writer's Character: Irina Pavlova

Judge's Character: Sal Taybrim

This story was very smoothly written. I felt the descriptions and dialogue flowed well, and carried the reader along at a good pace. I particularly appreciated your attention to canonical detail in this work. There are a lot of little historical facts in there that ring true from various Trek episodes. This grounds this story in a canonical reality and gives a little headnod to readers who know Trek canon well. I also appreciate you posting the song that inspired this work and your thought process behind it. I believe that having a song as inspiration helped give this story a strong narrative form.

To make this story stronger, I think you could add more emphasis and exploration of Pavlova's internal conflict. It is such a fast turn around that it leaves the reader wanting. Starting with the conversation with T'Sal the story could slow down and get fleshed out. There is the classic sci-fi debate of time travel (does one small chance cause a cascade effect that could drastically alter history, or does time flow like a raging river and one small change is but a tiny pebble thrown within) – how does T'Sal convince Pavlova that her journey will drastically alter history (after all, Kirk brought Gillian Taylor back with him on his slingshot and history seemed ok...). Perhaps most importantly exploring what about the Duronis Embassy really calls to Pavlova. What can outweigh the desire for home? What about the people mentioned has formed such a strong bond with Pavlova that she turns back?

Overall I feel that this is a very good structure and a strong idea that could use more fleshing out to make the whole narrative feel complete. This story shows good improvement and I look forward to seeing further entries!