



UFOP: Starbase 118 Writing Challenge

November & December 2014

For our final Challenge of the year, the writer behind Nathaniel Wilmer and our previous Challenge's winner asks you to consider a theme as old as writing itself. With clear roots back to the first recorded epics, including The Epic of Gilgamesh -- so famously used by Jean-Luc Picard in the TNG episode "Darmok" -- there's no more mythic or archetypal way to close out 2014!

Is what ways will your characters access this theme? Will they be the lovers or the beloved, love unrequitedly or reciprocally, love from far or near; or will they be the betrayer or the betrayed, the watcher or the enactor or the friend? There are endless ways to interpret this theme, and the judges look forward to seeing what your take on it might be.

Love & Betrayal

Story Collection

Round Winner: [“The Ties That Bind”](#)

Sinda Essen

Judge’s Comments

Round Runner-Up: [“Chocolate”](#)

Maxwell Traenor

Judge’s Comments

[“Out There”](#)

Irina Pavlova

Judge’s Comments

[“A Vulcan Scorned”](#)

Sivah

Judge’s Comments

[“Birthdays”](#)

Talia Kaji

Judge’s Comments

[“Stargazer”](#)

Irina Pavlova

Judge’s Comments

[“Betrayal of Love”](#)

Nugra

Judge’s Comments

[“Can I Help You?”](#)

Avaris Torrin

Judge’s Comments

[“Blunt Forces 2: Debrief”](#)

Clayas Vell

Judge’s Comments

[“You Will Not Take This, Too”](#)

Akeelah D’Sena

Judge’s Comments

The Ties That Bind

(Round Winner)

(Sinda Essen)

Under the spreading chestnut tree

I sold you and you sold me.

There lie they, and here lie we

Under the spreading chestnut tree.”

- George Orwell, 1984

Marsha Peel ran a finger down the cave wall with a disgruntled frown. Caves had been home to the resistance for, well, forever, and they usually ranged from hot and dry, to cold and damp. Unfortunately this was a fine example of the latter.

Sighing, Marsha absently wiped her finger on her dusty trousers and pulled the jacket more tightly around her shoulders, suppressing a shiver.

She was used to moving home. The Alliance forces were constantly hounding them just as they had when the Terran Resistance had first formed. Her father had been among the first to offer help to the fledgling rebellion, only a little at first but then more and more until one day the Alliance came calling. Cardassian police had dragged her parents away and Marsha had been placed in care with a family more agreeable to the Alliance. Until she'd eventually managed to run away and find a rebel cell.

And now here she was, in a damp cavern on who knew what planet.

“You’re thinking about them again, aren’t you? Your parents I mean. You’ve got that vague look about you.”

Marsha looked up as her friend approached. She and Zill had been through a lot together and Marsha trusted the Bolian woman with her life.

“I’m just wondering how we came to this, Zill. Me and you, fighting Klingons and Cardassians.”

“Because we’re so good at it.” The blue woman smiled. “We all have our reasons.”

“I know, I know. I just wish there was an easier way.”

Zill gave a bark of laughter. “Ha! Of course you do, Marsha. We all do. None of us here was born to fighting, but we do it anyway. Not to make things better for us, but to make them better for our children.” She paused and her voice softened. “Your father knew that.”

Marsha nodded and swallowed.

“Yeah, I know. Kind of ironic, really. If he hadn’t been arrested I doubt I’d have ever have taken up arms. Like you said, we all have our reasons, but are they good enough?”

“Just look around you, girl! You’re at the centre of the resistance here. This place is full of equipment and people just like us. Your parents helped make this, and they’d be proud of you.”

“My father maybe,” Marsha shrugged. “I think my mother would have preferred a quiet life.”

Zill was about to say more, but a bleep from the communicator at her belt interrupted her. She glanced at it with a frown before patting Marsha tenderly on the shoulder.

“Who wouldn’t prefer a quiet life? Look, I’ve got to go. There’s a shuttle inbound, some refugees or something, and they need medical attention. Just…” She sighed. “Just don’t get too introspective, okay? I’ll come and find you as soon as I can.”

Marsha merely nodded as the Bolian hurried away down the tunnel in the direction of the outside world. She let her feet take her the same way, lost in her thoughts. Marsha tried to muster up some memories of her parents; she always remembered her father as a determined, yet sensitive man. It was probably an idealised image she held of him now, but he always cared for others, and that’s what had got him involved with the rebels in the first place.

Her mother, on the other hand, had seemed permanently frightened and quiet. Marsha realised now it was because she knew the risks her husband was taking and what it might, did, lead to. They’d been a close family, the three of them, working in the fields together, and…

Marsha’s thoughts trailed off as she became aware of her surroundings again. She’d stepped out into the main cavern and it was rapidly filling up with people. In pairs and trios they rushed past her, all heading in the same direction. She caught a few words from excited conversations as they went by, “escaped prisoners”, “first rebels”, “freedom.” Frowning, she started to walk quicker.

“Marsha? Marsha!”

It was Zill again, her voice cutting through the crowd. Marsha craned her neck and eventually spotted the other woman, her blue arms waving.

“Marsha! It’s your father!”

Marsha frowned. Her father? At the back of her mind, although she’d never consciously admit it to herself, she’d given up her parents for dead long ago. It had been eight years since their arrest, and people usually didn’t last that long in Alliance prisons. But to think that her father was now free, here! She started to push through the crowd, politely at first but then with more and more urgency. But something else was happening, people around her were pointing and starting to shout. She’d lost sight of her friend in the throng.

“Zill?!”

And then the world exploded. An immense burst of light and sound and pressure filled the chamber and Marsha staggered backwards, feeling like she’d been punched in the ears. The press of people in front of her had shielded her from the blast, but many hadn’t been so lucky. Someone screamed nearby.

Marsha dragged herself to her feet, leaning on the damp wall for support, and blinked through the dust and smoke. And then she saw them – Klingon assault troops stalking through the chaos, shooting and slashing anything that moved. Her breath caught in her throat as one of them levelled his disruptor pistol at her. She stood paralysed, staring down the barrel, as there was a blinding flash of green light, and then nothing.

* * *

The walls were damp. That was the first thing she noticed. Rivulets of water ran down the dark walls and formed small pools on the cell floor. The damp had seeped into her clothes and now she shivered in the cold.

Marsha sneezed and winced at the eruption of pain it caused in her head. She’d found out a couple of years ago, much to her misfortune, that the stun setting on a disruptor left her with terrible headaches, so it was not hard to surmise what had happened back at the resistance base.

Groaning, she pulled herself to her knees and looked around. The light was very dim, but just enough to see by, not that there was much to see. The room was barely six feet across and the only entrance was blocked not by a force field but by a gate of metal bars.

Marsha reached out and touched them tentatively. Nothing. She wrapped her hands around them and pushed and pulled with what little strength she had left. Still nothing, not that she’d really expected anything else. With a long sigh she rested her head against the cold metal.

“So this is how it ends.” She asked the questions to the grim darkness beyond her cell. To her surprise, it answered.

“Marsha?”

She held her breath. Silence. Marsha was just about to convince herself that she’d imagined it when the voice, the aching familiar voice, spoke again.

“M... Marsha? Is that you?”

It was an old man’s voice. Aged and cracked, rasping through dry lips. But she knew it all the same.

“Father?” She gasped. “I can’t believe it! How..?” Marsha shook her head. “How can this be happening? I thought you were dead.”

“No, Marsha.” The voice drifted through the darkness. “Though I wish I was. It would be easier that way.” Her father gave a bitter laugh. “And now they put you in here with me to taunt me further.”

“And Mother?” She was afraid to ask.

“Alive, Marsha. She’s alive.”

“Where? Have you seen her?”

There was a moment of silence. “I’ve not seen her for six years. But I know she’s alive.”

“How?” Marsha choked. “How can you know? Please tell me you’ve spoken to her, or had a message from her, something!”

“I just know she must be alive. Because if she’s not then my betrayal would have no meaning and I would be truly damned.”

“Betrayal?” Marsha was confused. Her thoughts went back to her last memories, Zill shouting something about her father, then the Klingon attack. And now here she was in a cell next to his. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

“What happened?” Fear made her voice tremble. “What did you do? Tell me you weren’t at the base, please.”

“Marsha, I…”

“No! You couldn’t have had anything to do with that! Not you, anyone but you.” Anger replaced the fear in her voice. “I only joined the resistance after the Alliance took you away. You’d never betray us, you’d never betray me like that!”

“Marsha, there was no choice. You don’t understand. My wife, they’d have killed her if I didn’t do what they said.”

Marsha tightened her fists around the bars, gripping them so tight she could feel flecks of rust dig into her palms.

“She’s probably already dead, Father, just like the people you helped kill. My friends, very nearly me!” She gasped again as another realisation dawned. “Did you know I was there?”

“I…” There was a long pause. “I knew. I saw you, just before the attack.”

“So it’s all true then?” Marsha’s voice was bitter. “You really were at the base, and you betrayed the resistance, betrayed me, and for what?”

“For love, Marsha. I betrayed you for the woman I love. Nobody should have to face that choice, that impossible choice.”

“What about me, Father? Do you not love me?”

“Of course I do!” Her father sighed. “You were twelve when I last saw you, just a girl. I loved you with all my heart, but your mother… I love her more. She’s my wife, my soul mate. And that’s why I have to believe she’s alive, because if not then I’ve made a mistake more terrible than I could ever comprehend.”

Marsha sobbed, tears were running down her face now, falling to the floor and joining with the puddles already there.

“They broke you, father. The man I knew would never had done this.”

“They did, Marsha, they did.” His old voice was full of pain. “I’ve been here so long, alone in the dark. The thought that she was still alive was the only thing that kept me going, kept me sane. And they were going to take that away from me. I... couldn’t live without that hope.”

Marsha wiped her tears away with the back of her hand.

“Then you should have died.” She spat.

The silence rolled on for a long time, long enough for her anger to turn to regret. Finally, though, her father’s quiet voice returned.

“I should have, Marsha. In a way I did. They killed my hope, I know that now. Your mother may well already be dead, and now you are here with me to remind me every second of what I did for love.”

“For love? That’s not enough, Father. Not enough for what you’ve done.”

“Isn’t it? Then what is?”

His voice fell silent, leaving the question hanging in the air. The guilt and remorse contained in the words terrified Marsha. She pushed herself away from the bars as quickly as she could, far back into the darkest corner of her cell, hoping to escape those ties that bound her to the people she loved the most, fearful of what actions she may be forced to do because of them.

"The Ties that Bind"

Writer's Character: Sinda Essen

Judge's Character: Sal Taybrim

Let me start off by saying that this is a well thought out story. I think the plot and the twist was well developed and delivered. The whole idea behind the piece was one of the best of the round. I particularly liked how you sprung the Klingon attack with very little preamble. Marsha was surprised, the audience was surprised, it pushed the action forward in a big burst – a very nice effect!

One thing that struck me was that this story looks so polished. The title with the quote is a nice opening. But within the first few paragraphs there are some spacing problems and some sentences that do not read smoothly. I found this was a jarring transition and I had to go back and keep re-reading parts to see if they were grammatically incorrect or just rough to read. I will note that I am a big fan of a 'well groomed' story, visually as well as proof-reading wise. I read pauses, breaks and emphasis into the spacing and layout of the page. At the very beginning it looks like there should be more spacing in the second paragraph, but instead it gets all lumped together like a run-on paragraph.

Another thing I struggled with in this story was the strength of the plot vs. the strength of the characters. The conversation at the end of the story is well written and powerful, but it did not grip me as it should have. And I realized on a second (and third) read though that was because I had very little reason to care about the characters. Marsha strikes me as a human rebel every-woman, with a father who cares more for his wife than his daughter... why? I know you touched upon this with the whole 'she's the one who keeps me sane' but I didn't really get to see enough of the father character to feel for either one of them. I wanted you as an author to dig into that mindset and really let me know how a man could be driven to betray his daughter.

I am wondering how this story would have read if it was written from the POV of the father. Or, delving into Marsha's family and past would have also brought a stronger sense of connection. Maybe starting the story with a flashback of their happy family, or giving some personal details to the main characters. Zill gets a stronger personality in the opening scene than Marsha does, so it is difficult to connect with Marsha when it flashes over to such a personal scene in the second half.

I think more background – in both characters and setting would have really made this story shine. I found myself wondering things like 'when is this in the Alliance timeline?' and on the first read though I stopped and went 'wait, did I read that right? We're in the mirror universe?' I felt like I was just thrown willy-nilly in to a point of time just before the action starts, making it hard for me to 'get into' this story and the characters. That is a shame since the plot is very solid and the ending dialogue is a great piece of interaction! The whole story would benefit from more set-up.

I think this was well written; it had good language and a great idea that just needed a bit of extra polish to really stand out. I'm glad to be able to read one of your stories!

Chocolate

(Round Runner-Up)

(Maxwell Traenor)

On the sixth day in orbit around Coralla Prime, it was decided that first contact with the Corallans had progressed so excellently that the crew of the Apollo would be given restricted shore leave. A draw had been made, among the officers of the ship who were off duty, to participate in a cultural exchange on the surface and Ensign Maxwell Traenor had been lucky enough to draw a slot.

Once on the surface, the ensign had been drawn in to an establishment where he joined at a table with a Corallan, and polite conversation ensued. Maxwell, being a physicist and not at all a xenanthropologist, had been initially concerned, but fell into comfort fairly quickly. The Corallans were an amphibious race, but despite their cultural and physical differences, Maxwell and Siath, as his counterpart was named, found much to talk about. The only issue was the universal translator, which infrequently stumbled upon deciphering the odd word in either language.

Tilting her head, Siath addressed Maxwell. "Would you like to try our food?"

It had been noted that the Corallans tilted their heads quite frequently in conversation. The cultural debrief had stated that it was a physical quirk of the species, with both physiological and social implications. It either depicted deep thought processes or an emotional entreaty, depending on the situational context. Maxwell found it endearing, possibly because of the resemblance to an iconic gesture of domesticated dogs back on Earth. In this context, he assumed it to mean that she felt strongly about him trying the local cuisine, and felt loath to decline. In truth, he was nervous; an adventurous diner he was not, but it was expected of him as part of his involvement in the cultural exchange.

"Thank you, Siath, I would really like to try your cuisine."

Siath tilted her head again, the nictitating membrane of her eyes rapidly moving back and forth. This as well was covered in the cultural debrief, as a signal of confusion or fear. It was not nearly as endearing as the head tilt, but Maxwell had seen it before. It most likely meant he had said something that the universal translator couldn't decipher into the Corallan tongue.

"Please say again, Tray-e-nor, I do not understand."

"Um... I would like to try your food?"

That seemed to work, because Siath perked right up. Apparently 'cuisine' had no analog in her language. "Excellent, Tray-e-nor! There is a food that we are proud of, I will serve you. It is called *ktckkk*."

It was now Maxwell's turn to sport a look of confusion, for the universal translator commonly stumbled over proper nouns in the Corallan language. The species' gravelly, guttural vocal intonation was hard enough to follow when the translator worked, but when it didn't, the sound was especially jarring to Traenor's ears. "I'm sorry, Siath, can you try again?"

"Our food, it is called *ktckkk*. I cannot explain, it is *tchrrkl*... It is sweet after meal food."

"Oh! What we call dessert, perhaps?"

Again with the look, and if she had lips, Maxwell would assume she would be sporting a bemused smile. "I do not understand your word. But no concern. I bring now."

Maxwell Traenor waited patiently while Siath went into an adjacent room. After only a few moments, she returned with a plate. The scientist watched her approach with morbid fascination, worried about what he might see. What if it was live grubs, not unlike Klingon gagh? Cultural sensitivity or not, he was unsure if he would be able to stomach such a dish. As the deep bowl was placed before him, he peered over the lip of the dish.

It was chocolate!

The smell that permeated the air above the bowl was heavenly. Floral and berry notes wafted forth on a strong undercurrent of an earthy vegetal scent, sweetly caressing his senses with its sugary headiness. The more he drew the perfumed air deep into his lungs, the more it enticed and intoxicated him.

"This looks wonderful, Siath!"

His spoon crackled through the sharp brulee crust, leaving slivery shards of caramelized sugar spidered across the top. Inside, the utensil swam through a creamy mousse, interlaced with ribbons of viscous fudge. Maxwell drew a spoonful of the delightful confection up to his lips, and let the taste tingle on his lips and tongue. The wonderful nutty, woody base flavor carried an exotic song of spice, citrus and vine fruit across his palate. It was like the best chocolate he had ever eaten, except more vibrant and intense than any that had come before. He blocked out all else, letting his being immerse in the experience of that dessert. It sang in his brain, it swam in his veins, it lifted him to the heights of euphoria. He absently scratched at his face as he devoured another spoonful of the manna in his bowl.

"Siath, this is the most wonderful food I have ever eaten. It... it completes me... it's fantastic... The spice in it is heavenly, though a bit strong. It makes my lips and tongue tingle so much that they almost feel numb..."

Yet another spoonful, though it was thicker than he had originally thought. It stuck in his throat and was hard to swallow, but worth every morsel. He knew he should slow down, not eat so quickly. He was shoveling it in so fast that he could barely catch his breath between bites. He scratched more insistently at the persistent itch on his neck and throat.

"Tray-e-nor, you are happy, yes? You bloat with joy and change color because you are pleased?"

Bloat with joy? What a strange comment, thought Maxwell. But that thought was hard to grasp, as was any thought. His mind was hazy and unfocused, difficult to grab onto any one topic. He wheezed with difficulty, trying to put but one more taste of that creamy, sugary wonderfulness between rubbery unfeeling lips that could not part...

...

...

"...has been treated with adrenaline. I mean, a chemical that reverses the effect of his immune system from overreacting. That is why he couldn't breathe."

Coming to and looking up through squinted eyes, Maxwell could discern the comforting blue collar of a Starfleet medical uniform. Beside the doctor was Siath, the membrane over her eyes fluctuating rapidly. He felt bad for putting her through so much distress.

"I did not know! Our cultural document stated that flushing of the skin of the species of Tray-e-nor indicated arousal. I only assumed that he was enjoying the *ktckkk*!"

O foul temptress! O what terrible fate! The divine dessert had turned on him? He had suffered an allergic reaction to the wondrous treat? How could life be so cruel as to deprive him of a love of which he had just experienced but once? Nothing short of perfection had been introduced to him, and it had tried to kill him? And why was his oxygen-starved brain spinning in addled Shakespearean soliloquies?

"Not to worry, he will be fine. See, he is already rising again to his feet. We will mark this reaction in our medical documents, so hopefully this unpleasantness can be avoided in the future." Suddenly, the medic reached out and swatted Traenor's hand. "For goodness' sake, Ensign, drop the dammed spoon already! And don't look so petulant."

But it was so good...

"Chocolate"

Writer's Character: Maxwell Traenor

Judge's Character: Cassandra Egan Manno

I struggled to find the best word to encapsulate this story, but after another read-through, I think that "delightful" is the way to go. It's as stilted and awkward as I'd expect a first contact between a physicist and an alien over food and drinks to be. What really makes that atmosphere work, though, is that it revels in its minutiae -- the untranslatable "cuisine" and "dessert," the description and delight involved when Maxwell eats that desert. In my experience, it's very difficult to write an awkward story that isn't constantly tripping over itself to prove its awkwardness, but "Chocolate" pulls it off: We've already seen, by the time the dessert arrives, how uncomfortable Maxwell is feeling, so that provides a whole different perspective with which to view his sudden obsession with the dessert. Also, the phrase "bloat with joy" is definitely one I'll be using again. The twist, such as it is, is both funny and oddly touching, as Maxwell's companion protests ignorance and Maxwell himself doesn't ever want to stop eating. "Delightful," in retrospect, is definitely the right word to describe "Chocolate."

I'm quite happy with the story as presented, but if I had some advice for its writer, it would be to think more deeply about what's going beyond the first layer of the story. As above, I read here an essential awkwardness that may not have been intended to be present throughout the story, but which I found quite pleasingly present in all of what I read. Could there have been more, though? Perhaps, in the midst of the humor, some subtle comments about the terror of food allergies and unconscious body reactions, or perhaps something about unintended addiction (if Maxwell really couldn't stop eating)? I've found that comedy is often the best medium to express both the terrible and the terrifying, and given what had been built up by the story's end, I would have absolutely followed it into some darker territory. Not every story needs a dozen layers, of course, but given that this story was so strong on its surface, I'd challenge the writer to try for more!

All in all, this was an excellent story from a first-time entrant who has some real chops to show off with vivid description and some nice humor. I'll be looking for more great writing from this writer in the future!

Out There

(Irina Pavlova)

July 20, 2169

Dimitri was a very happy man. He woke up more content than ever. He and Irina had been friends as long as he could remember, which made sense as they were born only 4 months apart and lived right next door to one another all their lives. This morning was different though, for after 23 years of sharing everything from babysitters and playpens, the barracks at Marine Corps Officer Candidate School and everything in between, the one thing they had never shared was a bed.

Dimitri had been in love with Irina ever since the first hints of puberty hit, but he had never said or done anything out of fear of losing the girl who was as more of a sister than his real sister was. Irina likely felt the same, as she never hinted at any romantic interest even though she didn't date much. She was also always locked away in her apartment practicing that violin of hers. It was only the sudden attack by the Romulans that ended her plans for a life of music and found both of them joining the marines together to defend their planet.

Even through four years at the academy and the end to the Earth-Romulan war the two had remained the strongest of friends, but neither had had the courage to move things to the next level. It was only when Irina was selected for the USS Columbia and her five-year-mission that she had finally told him how she really felt. Of course Dimitri hated the fact that she had been in love with him all of those years that he had been in love with her, and neither had said or done anything about it.

But now, on the morning she was set to depart with the Columbia for parts uncharted, he woke up with a smile, not to mention her face nuzzled on his naked chest. It had been a long and wonderful night, far better than he had ever imagined it could be.

November 18, 2169

Dimitri had moved mountains, or at least starships, freighters, lots of red tape and even the Vulcan high command to make this possible. The string of relays was extremely complex. The powerful Luna base transmitter's signal was the longest-ranged system available to Earth, but Columbia was so far out that the signal needed to relay off the Centauri gateway station, a Bolian freighter, Columbia's sister ship Enterprise and even a Vulcan battleship to finally reach the USS Columbia's communications range. It was worth the effort, however, and Dimitri would have even reached out to the hostile Klingons and their vanquished Romulan adversaries if necessary after learning in her last letter that Irina was pregnant with their child. Two more letters back and forth, one for him to propose and the other for her to accept and the plan was in motion.

It wasn't a legal ceremony, but that didn't stop him. Both the communications room on the Columbia and the one at Luna base were decorated for a traditional Russian wedding or at least a miniature version thereof. The Russian Orthodox chaplain was standing just behind him and both sets of parents were all crammed into the tiny communications hub. It was only the physical placement of the ring and final kiss that stood in the way of the ceremony's legality as both had digitally signed all of the required documents. It would be good enough for now. Columbia was due to rendezvous with a Vulcan ship for crew rotation, and the now 4-months-pregnant Irina was at the top of the list of reassignment. They could make it legal then, but at least in the eyes of god and their family, baby Katya would be born inside of wedlock.

“The link is established Lieutenant” Luna’s communications tech announced and immediately everyone moved into their respective places.

May 7, 2172

Dimitri read the headline again. He just couldn’t believe it. Hadn’t the Romulans surrendered over a decade ago? He didn’t care if this meant a return to war, he just focused on the single word “Columbia”.

Irina was supposed to be transferred off that ship two-years-ago, but the rendezvous with the Vulcan ship never happened and the decision was made to not make another crew rotation attempt. Katya was born on a starship and was probably talking by now, or would be if the Columbia was not lost with all hands after an attack by three unidentified vessels that everyone knew were Romulan.

Dimitri just didn’t believe it. There had to be something else going on. Were they on some sort of secret mission? Had they found something that fleet didn’t want public? He just could not accept that his wife and the daughter he had never met were dead. It was not possible. He’d already closed escrow on the little house outside of St. Petersburg and had put in his separation papers to take effect immediately on expiration of his service obligation in late August.

November 18, 2199

As the sun went down Dimitri lit two candles in the window as he did every year on the anniversary of his wedding, and again every year on Katya’s birthday. It was the same routine these last thirty years. Light the candles, pour a very tall and strong drink and then sit out on the porch and look up at the stars until he either fell asleep or the sun came up and overpowered the stars.

He knew she was still out there somewhere. No debris had ever been recovered, no acknowledgment of any attack by the Romulans or the Klingons, and never a detailed report from Earth Defense or later Starfleet.

Dimitri had never married, never moved from the little house outside of St. Petersburg, and never stopped waiting for the love of his life to return home. He took and left jobs, stayed in touch with Irina’s family, but every night he cried himself to sleep and woke every morning to an empty bed and an empty soul.

March 10, 2274

Irina’s grand-nephew Igor stood at the head of Dimitri’s grave as he read the eulogy. Most of it was the usual stuff, descriptions of his accomplishments, his education, his record in the Romulan war and his decades of service at the observatory.

It was only when he got to the last sentence that his voice broke. “Dimitri is survived by his wife Irina and daughter Katya, who are out there, somewhere in the endless nothing of space.”

"Out There"

Writer's Character: Irina Pavlova

Judge's Character: Sal Taybrim

I like how you are exploring and fleshing out your character with every successive story. Focusing on Irina's Terran past is a great way to make a more believable and empathetic character.

I found this was a clean, well written story, but it was a bit underdeveloped. When I read "Stargazer" I thought that instead of two companion stories, you could have combined them both to make one story that was better than the sum of its parts. Both stories taken as separate pieces were interesting little tidbits, but left the reader wanting more. If you blend these stories in a dramatic fashion (think of your favorite movie tricks – like split screening or flashbacks or scenes that 'ping pong' between two related characters in different situations) you can come up with a cohesive whole that really tells the story of love from both perspectives at once.

This feels like an often told tale – one that you have thought about so much that it seems ingrained. The trap of an often told tale is that it can seem stale with multiple retellings. But the opportunity in an often told tale is to the ability to really play around with literary devices and experiment. As I mentioned before, draw from your favorite narrative tricks from the movies and see what happens. What if you wrote a story that flashed between Irina in the future and Dmitri in the past, melding the story so each one's thoughts and actions seemed to play off the other one's even though they were decades and light years apart. Or try different focuses. What would the story sound like it written strictly from Katya's perspective? Or if told from the perspective of Dmitri as a ghost watching Irina and Katya finally come home? Exercises like these will not only help you grow as a writer, but will help you develop an even better understanding of your characters and how they react to things.

A Vulcan Scorned

(Sivah)

Pon Farr ... It is a time of chaos and madness in a Vulcan's life when Logic and clear thought are as foreign as cowardice is to a Klingon. Every seventh year of a Vulcan's adult life, a pilgrimage is made home to participate in the Vulcan mating cycle, or die trying. Today is that day for Seltuur. This is the day that he would finally be married to his betrothed, Sivah.

The burning fever of his Vulcan blood was rising. He had been meditating constantly to stave off the effects of the Pon Farr. Regardless of his efforts, the chaos would always win over, and logic would fail him. Making matters worse was the lateness of his betrothed. Illogically, she had chosen to join Starfleet. He would change that once he was her husband and could dictate her role in their lives. His views were traditional, and her place was at home. It was logical.

He screamed out in brash anger as he grabbed a dresser and flung it easily across the room as if he had tossed a pillow. Grabbing a chair, he tore it apart and began to pound furiously onto the bed with one leg from the chair. His grip on reality was rapidly fading. He needed his betrothed. He needed her now!!

"WHERE IS SHE?!?!" he yelled.

The priestess who had been tending to him during his time of Pon Farr rushed inside with the crashing sound. She rushed forward to touch his forehead in order to relay calming thoughts. He resisted at first, but she managed to wrestle through enough to get him to listen.

"Peace, Seltuur," she replied, "Peace and Calm ... She has arrived. The ceremony will begin within the hour."

It was more her gentle touch, sweet fragrance, and soft voice that calmed him down than her calming thoughts. He steepled his fingers together and nodded quickly as he tried to focus and bottle his rage inside. She helped him into his ceremonial robes and escorted him to the arena where the starting ritual would take place. In the center of the arena, a silvery gong hung. He walked over, picked up the hammer, and struck the gong rhythmically a couple times to begin. The Priestess walked over to the edge and waited for the Betrothed and the rest who would be involved. Within a couple minutes, the entourage had arrived and the ceremony was to begin.

Dressed in similar, but more feminine, robes was his betrothed: Sivah. She was strikingly beautiful with brilliant brown eyes, dark shiny black hair, and the figure of a Greek goddess from Earth Mythology. She seemed perfectly calm, however. Not at all like Seltuur, who was deep into his Pon Farr. How she could be so perfectly calm was a mystery to him. Another mystery was the other woman with her. This strange guest was clearly an off-worlder, and a member of Starfleet by the uniform. She was pretty as humans go, blond, with pretty green eyes, and a good figure. Her identity was revealed when the High Priestess addressed Sivah.

“Sivah? Thee brings off worlders to thy sacred rite?”

Sivah gave a nod to the blond with her, “She is my friend, Angelica Bishop. It is my right to have her here.”

The High Priestess nodded and looked to Angelica, “Since thee is an off worlder, we do not expect thee to understand. If thee has any questions, they will be answered after.”

Angelica gave a respectful bow, “Thank you, my lady.”

The High Priestess bowed her head in return, seeming to appreciate the gesture of respect. She motioned with her hand to begin the Koon-ut-kal-if-fee. Seltuor lifted the hammer to strike the gong and begin the marriage when Sivah marched over, and placed her hand in the way and shouted her choice.

“Kal-if-fee!!”

Seltuor dropped the hammer and looked to the High Priestess, who raised an eyebrow to Sivah, “who will be thy champion?”

Sivah closed her eyes, and silently went over her plan again. Deep down, she didn’t like Seltuor. She barely knew him, but knew his family. As the days of their marriage approached, she kept getting letters from him, dictating his dissatisfaction with her being in Starfleet. She knew this would be the one and only time to finally be away from him. She had to choose her champion carefully. There was only one thing she wanted, but she had to be careful in order to not reveal her plan too soon. When she made her choice, the silent gasps of those present filled the arena.

She stood before the Priestess who had been tending to Seltuor, and pointed, “I choose her!”

“This is highly unusual,” remarked the High Priestess as she nodded to the chosen Champion.

The Priestess stepped forward as she was given the Lirpa by one of the guards. Seltuor was given the other. With a shout from the High Priestess, the challenge began with the collision of both of the lirpa. The Priestess was outmatched and hesitant, but her grace and dexterity gave her an advantage. She was able to dodge and weave Seltuor’s furious blows. Normally, women don’t fight in the challenges. Why was she chosen? What would Sivah see in her as a potential mate? Why would Sivah want a woman as her mate? It was illogical.

Sivah watched coldly as the challenge went forward. Seltuor was fast and hit hard. The Priestess she chose as her champion was rapidly losing ground. She gave a subtle glance around to see the looks of confusion on their faces as to why she selected a woman instead of a man. She knew it was illogical, but her reasons would be revealed soon. It was an illogical decision made at the most illogical moment of her life. However, as the saying goes, there was logic behind her madness.

The challenge ended as expected. Seltuor bested the champion. It was a brilliant flurry of attacks that started with a blocked downward slash, which was followed through with an upward strike from the blunt end that became a hard smack to the Priestess's stomach. She dropped her lirpa and grabbed her stomach from the hard blow. This opened up for the perfect finisher, which was a slash across the throat that nearly beheaded the Priestess.

The blood fever was over with the winning of the challenge. Seltuor was regaining his logic and his senses, and the consequences of what he had done was hitting him. He hid his feelings well. Now it was time for some answers. Carefully, he approached his betrothed, and took a moment to study her. Sivah stared back with coldness in her eyes.

"Explain," he demanded. "Why choose the challenge? Why choose the Priestess? Why did you not want me?"

She raised an eyebrow, "You are not the same man I had been betrothed to, Seltuor. You have become arrogant, traditional, and a dictator. Furthermore, you have betrayed our betrothal."

"Explain," he demanded.

She held out copies of his letters on a datapad. The most recent was a letter she received a few days ago at the start of the Pon Farr. The look in his eyes shows that he recognized it. She handed it to the High Priestess. Sivah went on to explain, "You did not want me, Seltuor. You wanted the Priestess, but she could not be yours because of her oath. In the illogic of your Pon Farr, you sent me the love letter you meant for her. Angelica helped me to come to my senses and see reason. When the time came, I chose the Kal-if-fee, and chose the woman you truly wanted as your bride."

The High Priestess spoke up as she glared at Seltuor, "Thee has disgraced thyself." She waved a hand to have the guard escort Seltuor from the arena, and then turned to Sivah, "Thee is free from betrothal. Return to thy career."

Sivah bowed respectfully, "Thank you, High Priestess."

Sivah and Angelica quietly walked to the shuttle they used to get there to Vulcan. Sivah stepped in first, followed by Angelica. Once the door was closed and they were alone, Sivah grabbed Angelica and pulled her close. Their lips met in a deep kiss with their fingers caressing together in the Vulcan sign of intimacy and marriage.

"A Vulcan Scorned"

Writer's Character: Sivah

Judge's Character: Toni Turner

"A Vulcan Scorned" is a provocative, but short, story dwelling into the age old question sparked by "He loves me, he loves me not." Only in this case the one scorned, ended up asking, "Why did you not want me?" While it is true that Ensign Sivah painted a perfect picture of Seltuor's arrogance, and the unreasonable demands he wanted to force upon her, he was willing to honor their betrothal, if she so willed it.

Both clearly loved someone else, but Seltuor paid the price for his betrayal, especially since Sivah contrived such a vicious fate for him and his true love, while she was set free to marry Angelica.

I liked the story because it was different, but in places it seemed a bit choppy and words forced. However, in its entirety, the composition was quite understandable and well-developed. I like to see new members enter the challenges as they bring new ideas to the front. Well done, Ensign Sivah.

Birthdays

(Talia Kaji)

It was her birthday. The ship's club was closed now, it was dim and empty. Mariannette, the young human bartender, leaned her hip against the bar where a row of glasses stood, each unique in both style and contents. Looking over them, she traced her finger across the rim of each, her face clouded as she sunk deep into her thoughts.

She picked up a stemmed snifter of wine, swirling it gently, watching the red liquid beat against the fragile glass. Red like lipstick and blood. Red like her mother's hair. She studied the wine, mesmerized by the motion. For the most part, Mariannette kept her memories locked in a tight box in her mind. A strong, solid box that she only opened once a year. She made a tradition to let herself feel and wonder and remember for this one night. Then she would lock it away and forget for another year.

Mariannette rested her arms on the bar and closed her eyes, letting the memories lap over her mind like splashing wine.

It was her birthday. Her blond hair hung down her back in unwashed, tangled knots. Mariannette tried to smooth out her wrinkled dress as she approached the large door. She pressed the worn door panel, and it opened with a choking hiss. Mama sat at her vanity, painting her lips with deep red color. She spotted the child and turned, beckoning with a slender hand. Mariannette loved her mother, that distant ethereal creature, always sitting in her bedroom. The child approached and the mother bent over her, bloodshot eyes scanning the scrawny form.

"Hello, baby. I've missed you." Her voice croaked through scarred lungs. "It's your birthday right?"

"Yes, Mama. Madam said so. She said I could come see you today." Mariannette clung to the trembling hands. She thought her mother was beautiful. Her young eyes didn't see the desperation in her mother's eyes or the way they kept glancing towards the door.

"Yes, yes, five years old. I remember the day..." She trailed off, her eyes far away, then focused again. "Oh, but I have a gift for you." She reached up and unclasped her necklace. Mariannette recognized it immediately. Her mother never took it off, a silver chain with a conch shell pendant. Mama held it up, watching it spin for a moment.

"You know, my mother used to say you could hear the whole ocean in a shell." Her eyes and voice trailed away again. "I've never seen the ocean. I've heard it's limitless."

Mariannette didn't understand the words, but her heart swelled with joy as her mother put the necklace around her small neck. The pendant hung almost to her belly, and her small hands cradled it gently. Mama touched her own throat, already missing the feel of her treasure.

“You keep that, child. It means freedom, and I hope that you will have that. I never have...” Her eyes drifted off to stare at the wall. Mariannette heard a sound and turned to see a large woman with green skin and black hair standing behind her. “Alright, Natla. I'm ready.”

Mariannette cried out as the woman came and picked her up. She reached for Mama, but Mama had turned back to the mirror. As Natla took her, screaming from the room, she saw her mother lift her hand and touch her red lips as tears coursed down her face.

It was her birthday. Mariannette squeezed her eyes tight, then opened them again to see the ship's club surrounding her. The memory faded away slowly, but her mother's face stared back at her from the mirror behind the bar. She raised her glass and called out a toast to her ghosts.

“To you, Mama. I hope you're free now.” She tossed back the wine and threw the glass against the wall, shattering it. The pain in her heart eased a little with the sound.

Turning back to the bar, she considered the next drink. A shot glass full of amber whiskey. She picked it up and stared into it, letting more memories flood her mind.

It was her birthday. Twin moons shone through the window as the young girl wrapped a silk robe tightly around herself. The door behind her opened and the client left without a word. Mariannette sat down at her computer and scrolled idly through her personal messages. She brushed her long hair slowly, letting it flow down her back. A soft knock at the door caught her attention, and Mariannette hurried to open it. The man kissed her roughly and then sat on the bed, patting his knee for her to sit.

"Dreven! Where have you been? Did I tell you it's my birthday?" She grinned at him, but he seemed distracted. He kissed her again and she soaked him in. He was her drug, her life. He made her feel alive. She declared her love for him repeatedly and pretended not to notice that he never responded.

Later, as he tied his shoelaces, she spoke to him in hushed tones. “So, have you talked to Natla yet? If she doesn't agree to let you buy me, I'll run away with you! We can be together!”

“Baby, I don't think we can. The Syndicate can find you anywhere. And I don't have the money to buy you. Natla says you're worth a fortune. Can't we just leave things as they are?”

Mariannette looked at her hands and murmured softly. "I-I have to leave. And it has to be now, because...I think I'm pregnant.”

Dreven stood sharply, and glared at her. “What? I thought you were taking pills. Natla can't have her precious little trinket going all mommy on her. You can't be seriously thinking about having this...baby?” He sneered the word as if it were dirty.

Marianette felt cut by his words. “I-I-I don't k-know what happened. I think I must have thrown up my pills when I was so sick last month. I haven't told anyone yet, but I'm not getting rid of it. That's why I have to leave now. We're going to be free!”

“You are a slave, Marianette. Just accept that. You're good at what you do, and they're not going to let you go. You'll never be free. Get rid of it or I'm gone.” He stormed out without another look at her. She sat on her bed staring after him, staring at the wasteland of her future. Was there really no hope of freedom?

It was her birthday. Tears stung her eyes as Marianette tossed the drink back. The amber liquid burned her throat as she had burned for him. As he had burned her heart. She looked at her empty glass and sent it flying into the wall after the first one. The shattered pieces glittered on the floor, ready to cut, to draw blood.

“That's to you, Dreven. May you rot in hell.”

She slowly turned back to the bar. The third and last glass stood on the table. This one harder than either of the others, but Marianette forced herself to let the memories come. This was the reason she made herself remember, why she couldn't ever let the past go completely. Marianette touched the flute gently, raised it up to the light. The light champagne bubbled and sparkled like stars. Her eyes burned with tears, and she let them fall. This one day she could cry. It was her birthday.

It was her birth day. Her first birth day, and the only birthday Marianette would ever see. The nurse placed the tiny infant on her sweat-soaked chest, and the blinding pain faded away as she stared at the perfect little girl in her arms. Tiny lips tried to suckle, and blue eyes blinked in wonder at the lights. A tiny cry split the silence, but Marianette felt peace for the first time in her young life.

A whimper crossed the infant's face and Marianette nursed her. She touched the downy head reverently, and counted each perfect toe. She kissed each tiny finger. She whispered a prayer and crooned a lullaby. A lifetime of love was poured into a tiny sliver of time.

The nurse came back, and looked at the new mother with pity. Then she held out her arms.

“It's time. Give her to me.”

It was the most agonizing choice in her life, but slowly, Marianette wrapped the blanket around her perfect baby girl and gave her away.

“I have something I want her to have. Can she keep it?” The nurse nodded, and Marianette took off her shell necklace and tucked it into the blanket. The nurse smiled gently, filled with compassion.

“Do you want to give her a name?”

Marianette looked up, startled. “Can I?” At the nod, Marianette stood painfully to stare into the tiny face, sleeping now. “Then her name is Lottie.” She looked back at the nurse. “It means free.” The nurse nodded and left, taking the young girl's hear away with her. The door slid shut, Marianette crumpled to the floor, her strings cut. Her heart tore into shreds, and tears streamed silently down her face. It had cost her soul and her future, but her child was free.

It was her birthday. Marianette raised her last glass and toasted the little girl who lived somewhere far away. “To you, Lottie. My perfect baby girl.” Marianette drank the champagne slowly, letting it sparkle against her tongue. When it was empty, she set it down on the bar. Later she would wash it and put it in its special box. This one never got shattered. It was her reminder of the one thing she never truly forgot.

The computer chirped the hour and Marianette shook herself mentally. She picked up a broom to clean up the mess she'd made drinking to long lost love. It was her birthday, but it was almost over. The next day would come soon, with its own work and duties. The ship's crew liked to get coffee early, so she would need to be ready.

It was her birthday. 21 years old now, with a bright future ahead of her. Working a nice bar on a nicer Federation ship, it was a good setup.

“At least I'm free.” She lied.

"Birthdays"

Writer's Character: Talia Kaji

Judge's Character: Cassandra Egan Manno

Oh, wow, does this story have a gift for scene-setting! I could easily see the frantic pace and the quick rotation through memory and scene being disruptive and off-putting, but "Birthdays" presents that movement very well. Each flashback begins with an evocative, vivid description to place its reader, always before any dialogue, and each of those descriptions is awash with color, shape, and sensory information. I would've followed this story into another ten scenes if it asked me to -- it was that deft with its movements. Of course, including more scenes would mean risking the story's overall structure, which I wouldn't advise -- but "Birthdays," as written, never does that. Each flashback returns to Mariannette in the present, and the repetition of "it was her birthday" never lets the reader forget why.

"Birthdays" is ambitious with its descriptions and the overarching story it tells, but it's even more ambitious with the range of emotions it asks its readers to feel -- and that's where it faltered a bit for me. Each of the flashbacks was to such a pivotal, life-changing moment, and each happened so quickly, that I never really felt strongly invested in any of them. I felt more connected to the Mariannette in the present, and I think that this may have been the goal: This present Mariannette has (albeit only on her birthday!) reviewed these memories so often that she's become a little deadened to them. If that is the case, then I would've liked to have felt a little more of that, because it seemed that every memory was, for her, still sharp and painful. It may be that they were! But if so, then many such memories may have been too much for one short story. My advice for this writer, then, would be to let such emotionally charged flashbacks breathe a little. Give them more space, use your wonderful abilities to illustrate them with sensory information, and trust your readers to feel along with your characters.

All things considered, this was a wonderful, strong story from a first-time entrant, and I fully expect to see more of your great writing in the future!

Stargazer

(Irina Pavlova)

The woman and the little girl stood in silence as the snow blew all around them. The girl was bundled from head-to-toe and looked more like a bright blue marshmallow than a human being. The woman on the other hand could have fit any era in this place wearing as she was a grey wool long coat with an upturned fur collar, tall black leather boots and thin leather gloves. Her light brown hair was capped with a traditional Russian fur hat.

The two of them just stood there looking down at the old grave marker.

Dimitri Popov
Born October 10, 2144
Died March 7, 2156
Stargazer

The stone was old now, worn and weathered by 150 harsh Russian winters, but the words could still be read. That one word told the man's story. Stargazer, it was who and what Dimitri was, on all levels, and in all ways.

The story began centuries ago in a humble mid-20th century Soviet-era apartment building that 100 years after construction remained as working-class accommodations for ordinary Russian families who couldn't afford the nicer parts of St. Petersburg, but weren't so poor as to live in the slums. The building was clean, spacious and while old, had a certain charm. In addition to it, specifically apartment 212 being the boyhood home of Dimitri Popov, it, as in apartment 209, was the home of Irina Pavlova, four-months-older than Dimitri, and the very same woman who would, 247 years later, stand out in the blowing snow holding her daughter's hand looking down at Dimitri's grave.

Dimitri and Irina, Irina and Dimitri. The pair were inseparable for the first 22 years of their lives. They did everything together, from Dimitri staying in the care of Irina's Aunt every day while both sets of parents went to work, to being in the same classes at the same schools and even playing on the same sports teams. Irina was always the star athlete, captain of the football (soccer) team, ballet, swimming, every sport she touched, she dominated. Dimitri was nowhere near her league and usually played third string if not just warming the bench, but they were still closer than siblings.

Neither one of them dated, as somehow they just knew that they would always be together. They graduated from high school together, and even joined the Marines together, though as with sports before, Irina was always on a whole other level when it came to fitness and military skills. From the first time on the shooting range even the drill sergeants knew they were in the presence of greatness, and somehow, Dimitri was always there at her side. They went to Recon Sniper school as a team, she the shooter and he the support, carrying the tripod, ammunition and spotting her shots, though never needing to call position as she simply never missed.

It was only when the newly formed Starfleet launched the first of its ambitious five-year-missions that finally separated Dimitri and Irina, with Commodore Moretti asking for Irina's assignment as his armory officer by name; unheard of for a brand new officer, especially a marine. Strings were pulled, arrangements made, and Irina Pavlova became the only marine assigned to USS Columbia, NX-03. The night before she left, she told him she loved him. He proposed, and they spent their first night together as lovers, and their last night together period. That morning she made him promise to wait, to which he replied that five years was nothing, that he would one hundred.

Stargazer. Every night after Columbia set sail Dimitri looked up into the stars. He bought and later built greater and greater telescopes, hoping to see the same stars Irina was visiting. He learned of the birth of their daughter nine months after Columbia's departure, and a year later when he mustered out of the Marines, he took a job at the most desolate outpost in Antarctica because it had the clearest skies and Earth's best observatory. He started as just a janitor, but eventually became recognized by the scientists for his knowledge of astronomy and was elevated to lab assistant and eventually staff astronomer.

Three years into Columbia's mission the ship was listed as missing in action, but Dimitri knew that the love of his life and the daughter he had never met were still out there, and he kept looking for them. A year later the ship was listed as missing, presumed lost with all hands, but Dimitri never gave up hope. He knew that if he just looked hard enough, somehow he would find them despite the knowledge that the light he was looking at was millions, if not billions of years old. He knew one day he would be notified of her return, pack his bags and return to Russia to be reunited with his love. They would share stories of the many worlds she had visited in person, and he, the Stargazer, had seen through the great observatory telescope. He died waiting for that call, always gazing at the stars.

Of course Irina thought about him constantly at first. She learned of her pregnancy a few weeks into Columbia's voyage, and wrote to him constantly those first three years. When the Columbia was attacked by three smaller, though more powerful ships and barely escaped in one piece, the writing stopped and the missing in action report went out. Columbia did in fact survive, traveled tremendous distances through what is now known as the Aurix II wormhole and emerged on the other side with failed life support and one damaged and one obliterated warp nacelle, though through blind luck a fully functioning warp drive.

With no life support, the USS Columbia took up a stable orbit around the only remotely habitable planet within their 72 hour travel range, the second planet of an unidentified system now known as Kjenta. Kjenta II was a post-apocalyptic wasteland with extremely high gravity, harsh weather and an atmosphere impenetrable by scanners and worse yet, it drained all electricity from anything that passed through it. Columbia's first evacuation wave crashed rather than landed on Kjenta II, and the rest of the survivors including young Katya Pavlova were put into cryogenic stasis before the breathable oxygen was entirely consumed.

Irina's story didn't end, and every night she would look up at the night sky and think of Dimitri back home, at first hoping he kept his promise, and later praying he had not. Kjenta II, harsh as it was, had a strange type of solar radiation that prevented organic cellular decay. Much like the metaphysic radiation found on the planet Ba'ku, the multi-phasic radiation of the Kjenta star rejuvenated all life on the planet's barren surface. Irina stayed on that miserable rock for 219 years because her eventual rescue.

At the end of those 219 years she had long since lost all hope that Dimitri was still alive, but she still had hope. Hope that their daughter was somehow still alive in stasis on the Columbia, and perhaps even more than that, hope that Dimitri had not kept his promise, that he had not waited.

"Why are you crying mommy?" the little blue marshmallow girl asked her mother.

"Stargazer" Irina replied.

"What does that mean?" Katya persisted.

"It means that he liked to look at the stars."

"I like looking at stars too" Katya replied proudly.

"Even when I'm gone, if you look up at the stars, you'll know I'm looking at them too."

"Did that man look for you?"

"He looked for both of us. All his life he looked up at the stars, waiting for us to come back to him."

Even at age 6, Katya understood how long they were away. She knew the story well, had read her mother's diaries and saw the pictures of her and Dimitri together. "Do you still love him?" she asked, strangely sounding far older than her age.

"I'll always love your father Printzyess, and I'll always love you."

"So why didn't you stay with him if you loved him?"

“I was so eager to explore the stars, and he had always been at my side. I knew he would wait for me. I made him promise to wait for me.

“What did he say?”

“He said “Five years is nothing, I’ll wait 100 years for you. And every night I’ll look at the stars and know that you are looking at the same stars as I am.”

“Did he wait 100 years?”

“Almost. He died before the time was up. He never broke his promise, a promise I should never have asked him to make.”

The woman and the girl just stood there for almost an hour despite the setting sun and the blowing snow. After a while the stars came out in the night sky and Irina squeezed katya’s hand. “Come Printzyessa, its time to go.”

“Are you still waiting for him mommy?”

Irina looked up at the stars briefly as another tear slid down her cheek. “I’m finished waiting Printzyessa. I ruined his life, I won’t ruin what’s left of yours and mine.”

They stood and looked up for another moment, then both turned and walked back toward the waiting shuttle.

"Stargazer"

Writer's Character: Irina Pavlova

Judge's Character: Cassandra Egan Manno

In a round of such a large, operatic theme, many of the stories seemed to be like-minded -- and maybe that's why I appreciated "Stargazer" so much. As with many of this author's entries, "Stargazer" was a quiet, personal story. Many times, these entries have felt like one serialized story about Irina Pavlova's background, unfolded and expounded in different ways depending upon the specific Challenge theme, and given that Irina's story is literally one of love across time and space, I was pleased to see that this story focused most intently upon those moments of quiet reflection. In many ways, this story is a call back to the first golden age of science fiction: It's a story that could only be told with such a backdrop, and I appreciate it all the more for the history -- both personal and with respect to the genre -- that "Stargazer" appears to hold closely.

I'm very pleased with the story's length, too; any longer and it would have ruined the meditative quality that this entry possesses. However, I would've encouraged some mixing of structural elements for this one: All of the dialogue in this story comes in its second half, which is not incidentally the here and now of the story, and all of the history/reflection/description comes earlier in the story. Given that I think Irina's conversation with Katya follows well from what came earlier, I wouldn't have advocated mixing the two halves necessarily. Rather, I would've liked to see Irina's reflections after that conversation, after they were aboard the shuttle. Would the style that followed be similar to the first half? Would it have been even more personal? I'm not sure, but I would've liked to see? All in all, though, this was a strong entry from this year's Data Artistic Award winner, and I am, as always, glad to read more of Irina's ongoing story!

Betrayal of Love

(Nugra)

The rain pattered down gently on the Iraxan trees that spread their long, wide green leaves over the ground below. Nugra leaned up against the soft blond bark watching as his young girl danced and swayed through the rain swinging her stick at imaginary foes. Unlike most children her age, she had skill and grace that was unmatched by many; her body honed and eyes fierce with controlled fury. The tired Gorn allowed his eyes to roam around the dirt road that stretched from one side of the forest to the other, with only the small field carved out of the endless trees. In the north of this open plain a large monastery stood in stony splendor. its ancient carvings still standing out even from years of weathering.

"Father, are we going to head back to the village?" Iria's voice called to his conscience. Nugra shook the tiredness from his mind and straightened up.

"No, dear. There are Tova berry bushes all around. Help yourself."

The young girl did not even question how her father knew what was edible on Peska Alora, but with implicit trust, she dove into the thicket to gorge herself on the berries. How could he have taken all that exuberance and turned her into a killer?

The shuttle closed slowly under the guise of floating wreckage. Much of the orbit around the green-blue planet below was filled with dead ships of the Gorn Confederation and the rebel faction. For one hundred and ninety-six years that had tried to kill each other with a few short years in the middle filled with an uneasy peace. Nugra and eight other Gorns were crammed into a shuttle and they stared at the hatch in a mixture of anticipation and exhaustion. What he did not see was fear or regret. Too long the factions had been at each others throats to allow the hatred fade.

Nestled up against him, wearing a loincloth and a piece of fabric around her chest made of old military uniforms, his daughter Iria waited. Her bright sixteen year old eyes watching and waiting. He could feel the tension in her body, but it was not of fear, but of excitement.

"Standard exit pattern," Nugra said in a low voice. The shuttle was barely running on any power so it could hide among the ambient radiation of the vessel graveyard. "We hit them hard and go for the throat. Team 1 and 2 have auxiliary control and the engine room. We have the bridge."

The other Gorns growled acknowledging and one took a peek out the nearby window.

"What do you see Krutak?" Nugra asked. The scarred Gorn quickly got down.

"The Dragon's Claw is right where we thought she would be, sir. I see they have shuttles out scavenging for parts. Senior Commander Mrr'Sak did hurt them terrible in the last engagement."

Nugra nodded silently. Mrr'Sak had sacrificed his frigate to cripple the GSN Dragon's Claw. The Dragon's Claw had become the command vessel of the insurrectionist fleet and though it made him sick to think of the lost lives and ship, it had hurt the only plasma torpedo armed vessel still in service to the point of hiding. Hundreds of years of fighting had pretty much decimated their energy reserves and weapons. Now, most of their plasma beam weapons were given one charge for one shot like ancient human gunpowder weapons called muskets. Everything was now hand to hand.

"Breaking through the wreckage." his helmsman called.

"Go to dead power now!"

The last of the computers shut down and went in to a fast reboot mode. The shuttle immediately darkened and went silent. Only the light of the stars coming through the window and the singular red button blinking of the shuttle dashboard gave them an light to see by. The shuttle began to tumble and drift looking just like the other debris around. Nugra waited for Krutak's command. He was still watching out the window.

"Now, Senior Master!"

Nugra immediately tapped his commbadge three times and the helmsman slammed his scaly fist on the reboot button. The shuttle came alive and the burst of acceleration caught them all. It was now a race to connect the grapple and cutters before the insurrectionists realized they were under attack. The attack team held their collective breath until they felt the ship connect to the hull and the cutters fire.

The giggles and laughter woke Nugra up from his idle nightmare and he quickly located Iria. She was running around with a couple village children wielding sticks. He relaxed and watched them play happily. The taking of the Dragon's Claw had been hell, the teams had been originally pinned down, but it only succeeded because of the young girl running about and playing. Iria had developed a method of hamstringing attacking Gorn troops by racing and bobbing around them while strike at their heels with her knives. She had gotten to good. The sound of her laughter as she cut them made him shiver. Though she was seventeen in age, her mental age was much younger. All she had known was war and blood.

‘What have I done?’

Coming back had put in to light how much of a monster he had become. How could he have done so much to such an innocent girl whose world was caught in the crossfire? Iria had become an excellent killing machine. A little murderess that delighted in destroying the enemy.

The doors of the monastery creaked open and immediately the kids took off running. Iria instead turned, brandishing her stick ready for a fight.

“Iria, come.” Nugra said softly. Immediately, the girl was by his side ready to strike.

Four women wearing elaborate dresses of scarlet with violet trimming, their faces were obscured from the veils across their faces. They approached with a graceful, but a walk full of purpose. The exquisite decoration spoke of their years of tradition and dedication to their creed. The people of Peska Alora were used to them, but to strangers unfamiliar with the outer rim of the galaxy, they would have found them strange and obsolete.

“Father. They are trained,” Iria said not removing her eyes. “How do we proceed?”

“We don’t. Stand down, daughter.”

His words caught her by surprise and she broke her gaze to look at him for some sign of his meaning. She obeyed though without hesitation.

“The celestial mother sends you her greetings, Nugra son of Moong.”

Nugra bowed his head to the leader and placed his left hand on his heart. “and I accept them with open heart, sister.”

The Gorn could not see the expression from under her veil, but even if he could see her face, their thoughts and decisions were enigmatic.

“The celestial mother has reviewed your request and has accepted. She has also accepted your offer in trade. We shall take her now.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Nugra watched Iria’s expression and to her credit, she understood what they meant.

Her curiosity changed to hatred and she dashed forward with a battle shriek. From under her tunic, she drew a short sword and it flashed out towards the throat of the lead sister in a blur of silver. It was met by a small, decorative blade and easily deflected. Two of the other sisters stepped forward and intercepted Iria’s erratic and ferocious

blade. Together they cornered her, batted her weapon from her hand and subdued her. Iria found herself caught in an interlocking hold that pinned her arms behind her back and placed pressure on her spin.

“Father! Help me!” Iria shrieked.

A darkness descended on Nugra’s heart as he did something he knew would [...] him for the rest of his life. He turned and began to walk away.

“Father? FATHER!” he heard the agonized screams of his daughter as the Sisters of Conscience and Fidelity began to drag her to the monastery doors.

“DADDY!” the sobs called. “Daddy! Please save me!”

Tears welled up in Nugra’s eyes as his continued to walk down the path away from the estate. The doors thundered shut and silence descended on his walk.

He had just betrayed the one he loved to those who could help her become a proper member of society. His love for her had burned any chance of being loved back ever again. The betrayal was complete. He had become a monster.

"Betrayal of Love"

Writer's Character: Nugra

Judge's Character: Ren Rennyn

Nugra's tale of love and betrayal proves that every theme has an unpredictable amount of variations. The story kept me guessing as to how it would fulfill the contest's theme, but in the end, the overall effect was spot on in making its point. To save Iria from being the monster he has made her, Nugra has to become a monster himself by betraying her.

Details that seemed minor at first later proved important. The picturesque monastery was revealed to be part of Nugra's plan. The reason he knew which berries were safe illustrated his premeditated intentions. I enjoyed the teasing out of information about Iria, how the damage done to her by her father becomes more clear as the story progresses. The way this is revealed piece by piece in both images of Iria's actions and information in Nugra's thoughts, makes the story enticing all the way through.

The action sequence showing that Iria was at her father's side in battle was told in exciting language that made it fun to read. This part of the story might have been improved by showing Iria's participation in battle, illustrating what is described about her battle tactics in the next section. The imagery of Iria gleefully taking down enemies would be interesting to see in more detail.

A number of minor grammatical and spelling errors disrupt the flow of the story, and these could be easily fixed.

Nugra's story illustrates that betrayal can be one of the strongest forms of love, if as difficult for the betrayer as for the betrayed.

Can I Help You?

(Avaris Torrin)

((Bay Front Park - Vrans, Trillus Prime))

Aelya: Nearly a month ago, we all suffered a devastating loss. He was a devoted brother, a beloved friend, a loving partner...

::The middle aged Trill woman waved a strand of dark red hair out of her face, and tucked it behind her left ear, leaving a small smudge in her running makeup. Her voice started to falter, and she continued, in almost a whisper ::

Aelya: ... and my beautiful boy, my oldest son.

::Avaris was seated on the grass, amethyst waves lapping against the rocky beach, the sound of seabirds occasionally punctuating the calming rhythm. He was watching a mother on the verge of breakdown, delivering a belated eulogy, on the day that should have been Jaheeran's 20th birthday. His brother Jazren stood next to her as she leaned on his muscular arm for support. ::

:: There was more of a crowd than Avaris had expected, enough to attract the attention of the police, who stood at a respectful distance, but seemed tensely aware that the situation could become volatile at any moment. There were no Starfleet uniforms amongst them. Too bad. One of those pigs showing up would have ensured things got interesting.::

::Aelya allowed herself a momentary loss of composure, before her expression hardened. She transitioned from grieving mother to revolutionary general, and began an emotionally charged tirade. ::

Aelya: My son, who would legally be a man today, but who was always more of a man than anybody. My sweet gentle Jeheeran, who joined a crew of volunteer medics to go and support our the brave men and woman who stood against the Cardassian Fascists, even when our own weak and illegitimate government and their dogs chased them down for it. My son put his life on the line to stand up for justice, for those that the so-called Federation abandoned when they needed them most. And he made the ultimate sacrifice, doing what was right.

::She surveyed the silent crowd. Avaris and Andressa Castyr consolingly held each-other, her having lost an adored older brother, Avaris having lost the love of his life. She had been quietly sobbing throughout the first part of her mothers speech, but was now paying rapt attention, her own expression a hardened mirror of the Castyr matriarch. ::

Aelya: And comrades, let us not ever forget who took him from us. Death came too soon, not by the scaled hands of a Gul or a Leggat. Jeheeran Castyrs murderer wore a red collar, held the rank of captain. The war criminal Benjamin Sisko poisoned a world to strike at Federation Citizens who refused to leave their homes, refused to bend to them or their Fascist allies. And where is this monster now?

::She paused, and then raised her voice, roaring so that the cops in the back could hear her clearly ::

Aelya: He still commands DS9 and his experimental warship! Starfleet has shown its true face, not even dressing up as explorers anymore, attacking dissenting Humans, Vulcans, Betazoids, Boliars, Andorians and us, Trill who are proud of our single lives, and who refuse to be their pets! We are at war now, their friendship with the genocidal expansionists culminating predictably in betrayal, but we must not EVER let that make us forget who the real enemy is. The Dominion wants to destroy our civilization, but our leaders might beat them to it if they are not forced into accountability!

:: The crowd roared furiously, the mothers rage spread through them like flames through a dead standing forest. But for Avaris, the death of his lover had sapped away any spark of furious desire for action. He had once been first to the fight, at the front lines of any demonstration, putting himself in the line of fire with reckless abandon, but he had always done it with Jeheeran at his side. Without him, it all seemed gray and pointless. He knew that many of the assembled crowd were preparing to march, but all he wanted was to drink himself into a stupor. ::

((Later - The Commissioners Daughter Tavern))

:: Avaris was several drinks in, and dreamily staring off. The group was reminiscing, Jeheran had been larger than life, and everyone seemed to have a story. He had been a joker and had tormented his younger siblings. He had played matchmaker for Nyta and Baxin. He had organized some of their most triumphant actions, being at once jovial and kind while also deathly serious about challenging the ruling institutions of their planet. He had treated friends injuries on the battlefield of violent, riotous demonstrations, practicing the medical skills he had planned to see through to becoming a doctor.::

:: Avaris hadn't said anything, and nobody had pressured him to. He was not ready. The Jeheran they all knew was a great man, but the part of Jeheran that Avaris pined for the most, was the part of him that had been for Avaris alone.::

:: It was a vague collection of sensations, hardly even something he could put into words anyways. Avaris stroking his long red hair and gazing into his soulful, hazel eyes. The moments they would sneak away for a kiss during gatherings. The feeling of lying awake, ready to get out of bed and start the day, but lingering there so that he could hold him a bit longer. ::

Andressa: Avaris my dear, I think you have an admirer.

::The group laughed a bit mean-spiritedly, the idea of Avaris with anybody so soon, let alone a Terran was beyond ludicrous. But there he was, in a small cluster of aliens. The one that was looking at him had fair skin, light hair, and eyes the colour of ice. He was admittedly handsome, but Avaris was having none of it. Raw from loss and embarrassment at being leered at by a human at what was essentially his lovers wake, he snapped at the boy. ::

Torrin: Can I help you?

:: He flushed with embarrassment, looking away from the furious Avaris. His friends giggled.::

Andressa: What... you wouldn't go there? Some of them have enough freckles that they almost look normal.

Torrin: Andressa, please!

Jazren: ::sarcastically:: Yeah why not Avaris, you look like you could use some unwinding.

Torrin: Is that an offer Jazren? I had no idea you and your brothers tastes were so similar ...

::Avaris jokingly put his arm around Jazren, who had just taken a sip of his drink and now sprayed it out, the others laughing and banging on their table like a bunch of Klingons. ::

:: While they were laughing, Avaris looked back to the aliens, and felt a rush of anger, the Terran was stealing sidelong looks at him still. It was flattering, but right now he wanted nothing more than to punch every human man woman and child squarely in the face, not even remotely in the mood for flirting ::

Andressa: Your drink is gone Avaris, why don't you go get another one? The Human might even buy.

::Avaris rolled his eyes... this was getting old fast ::

Torrin: Don't be stupid... you know how humans are above money, he is probably mooching off the Bolian.

::He stood and approached the bar, and by necessity, the group of aliens, scowling in a way he hoped seemed unapproachable. One of the human girls was giggled, her eyes darting up to Avaris, whispering to the fair one. Avaris rolled his eyes, and stood at the bar waiting for the single elderly bartender who always seemed to be the only one working at the grimy dive. ::

:: As he waited , the whispering to his left reached a fever pitch, culminating in the girl actually shoving the boy up to the bar, who was clearly mustering up his bravery. ::

:: Avaris wanted to end it. ::

Torrin: You keep looking at me.

::It was a statement, and was meant to be curt. The human fidgeted, stuttering his reply. ::

Dragumov: Do you guys live around here?

Torrin: Of course we do, why else would we be drinking here?

Dragumov: ... well I am here, and I am not from around here.

::Torrin snorted::

Torrin: Look I don't actually care. You seem like a nice guy but I am not in the mood for this right now okay?

::The human looked crushed, but possessed surprising determination. Instead of giving up, he for some reason continued talking. ::

Dragumov: We just arrived, we are staying in the dorms at the school waiting to get picked up by the USS Gloriana.

::He beamed with mistaken pride in his own impressiveness ::

Dragumov: We have enlisted to go fight the Dominion.

::Avaris' eyes narrowed. ::

Torrin: Oh. Have you now.

::The human blithely unaware, continued on. ::

Dragumov: We are here for two weeks before she arrives, and were hoping to meet some interesting locals... you guys seem pretty interesting.

::Torrin looked back to his table. Jazren was making a lewd gesture at him, delighting in his discomfort. Nyta was showing off by throwing bar nuts in the air, and not managing to catch almost any. Andressa had drank so much that she was unknowingly spilling liquid all down her front, almost completely avoiding her mouth. He wasn't wrong, they were interesting. ::

Torrin: Look I am going to be honest with you. We are here celebrating the birthday of a very close friend, he was killed about a month ago... he was collateral damage in a Starfleet attack on the Maquis. Now might not be the right time to try and make friends with us.

::The humans eyes widened. ::

Dragumov: Thats horrible... I am so sorry! Here, let me buy you guys a round!

::Torrin was a bit taken aback by the offer::

Torrin: But...you are human... you have money?

::The blonde haired man smiled at him, but confusion was plain in his voice ::

Dragumov: um.. yes? You don't think humans aren't allowed to have money do you?

::Avaris was so embarrassed that he forgot to tell the human not to buy his friends drinks. And so he did, and before he knew it, he was taking a bottle over to the table of shocked Trill anarchists. When they arrived, he addressed the scruffy, tattooed assembly of Unjoined Majority. ::

Dragumov: I am so sorry, I heard about your friend, here, this is on me.

::He smiled kindly, either totally unaware of the tension he was causing, or simply not bothered by it. He turned back to Avaris, being much shorter, his head tilted upward to meet his eyes. ::

Dragumov: Its Artem Dragumov by the way. Ill leave you alone now, but it was nice to meet you. If you want to show me around sometime, we are at Raxan Hall for two weeks.

::Avaris felt the need to decline right then and there, especially with the present audience. But before he had a chance, he heard Andressa snarl. She shouted towards a group entering the bar ::

Andressa: I was wondering when you were going to show up, you never missed any of Jeherans other birthdays, beating your faces in was his favorite present every year.

::Avaris looked to the door, and his heart sank. Five familiar faces, matching shaved heads, and decked out in their ridiculous matching leather outfits, with haphazardly stitched angular red patches, almost a parody of Starfleet uniforms. They called themselves the Essentialist Militia, a violent branch of the conservative movement within the Federation. They were the polar opposite of the Unjoined Majority anarchists, and brawls were common, particularly at the Commissioners Daughter, a haunt frequented by outcasts of all stripes. The militiaman at the front laughed cruelly. ::

Taxal: We just wanted to come and drink a toast to Captain Benjamin Sisko, who not only captured the traitor Eddington, but exterminated one of Vrans' most persistent vermin in the process. Maybe the rest of you Castyrs and your Unwashed Majority will follow his example, I hear the Maquis numbers have been dwindling lately, I'm sure they would welcome some additional disruptor-fodder.

::Avaris friends all stood, fists clenched and with stony expressions. He bent down slightly to whisper to Artem.::

Torrin: Get your friends and get out of here buddy... you aren't going to want to see this.

::But Taxal saw Avaris talking to the human, and called out to him ::

Taxal: Well isn't that cute Avaris, its nice to see you moving on so quickly. I was afraid you would never get over that scumbag, but look at you go! And on his birthday too, good for you for living your life.

Andressa: Today's not the day Taxal, leave it alone.

Avaris: ::To Taxal:: Why, you jealous?

Taxal: Never, you always save me a dance Avaris.

::The bar erupted into a flurry of chaos. Avaris and his friends launched themselves over their table and crashed into the leather-clad militiamen. Glass shattered, chairs were thrown, tables overturned. The alien soldiers-in-training stood their ground admirably, a few of them even tried to break up the fight. Avaris was swinging at Taxal when he looked up and saw the broken glass slash across Artem's face.

He kicked Taxal out of the way and ran to the annoying human, who had crumpled like paper, holding his face which was bleeding horribly through his fingers.

Avaris crouched down beside him and dragged him behind an overturned table, shielding them from the melee.

Torrin: Okay! You are okay! Let me just take a look

::He pried the boys hands away from his face, and his stomach cartwheeled at the sight of so much blood. Shaking off the oncoming nausea, he took the smaller man by the arm, and pulled him up. ::

Torrin: Come on, this way!

::Torrin burst through the doors to the small dirty kitchen, where he knew the delivery door to be, and together they escaped through a back alley, and ran a block.

When they were safely out of the range of danger, they both started laughing. Torrin convinced him to let him have another look at his battle wound, and upon second inspection, was less concerned. It was nothing a dermal regenerator could not easily repair, and he had one stashed away back at his apartment. ::

Torrin: Come on, Ill get you fixed up. I'm not far, you okay to walk?

Dragumov: Yeah, its just a scratch.... thank you....

Torrin: Its Avaris.

Dragumov: Avaris... you Trill have such ... flowing names.

Torrin: Dont make this weird soldier. Come on.

::As they continued walking, Torrin joked meanly ::

Torrin: I shouldn't get attached to you, based on tonight I don't know how well you'll do at the front buddy.

((Avaris and Jeheran's Apartment))

:: Avaris was nearly finished with the dermal regenerator. Artem was lucky, the swipe of broken glass had missed everywhere it could have done real damage. ::

Torrin: Do you want me to keep going? Or should I leave a sexy scar?

::The human blushed crimson. Torrin giggled to himself, his hand lingering on the human mans face. ::

Torrin: I think it would make you look rugged, but suit yourself.

Dragumov: Is this place yours? Do you live here alone?

Torrin: ... yeah, I do I guess.

::Artem winced ::

Dragumov: Right, what that guy said... your friend who died. ...

Torrin: Don't worry about it. There. All done.

::He stood up. Eager to put some space between himself and the human, he had begrudgingly felt a spark or two pass between them, and he wanted to avoid that... it was too soon, and too weird. ::

Torrin: Can I get you anything?

Dragumov: No thanks, I should really be going I think...

Torrin: Yeah. Well, sorry things got so...

Dragumov: Yeah.

::They stood in silence for a minute. ::

Torrin: Do you know how to get back to the school buddy?

Dragumov: I ... er.. not really. I can find it though I'm sure.

::Avaris sighed dramatically ::

Torrin: Ugh why don't you just sleep on the couch, I am a Teachers Assistant there so I can take you back with me in the morning.

Dragumov: Um, thanks... you sure?

Torrin: ::tersely:: I wouldn't offer if it was putting me out. Let me get you something to sleep in.

:: He withdrew to his room and rifled around in the piles of laundry for something passably clean. Finally finding a cotton tunic that smelled fresh enough, he went back into the living room, and tossed it to his guest. ::

Dragumov: Thanks,

::The human started to undress without any ceremony or embarrassment. Avaris found himself paralyzed as his incredibly attractive, incredibly human, and incredibly wanting-to-be-a-Starfleet-soldier guest disrobed to his underwear, and went to put on the tunic. ::

:: He stopped, with his arms partway through it, noticing Avaris staring.::

Dragumov: Can I help you?

::He said it in an exactly perfect impression of Avaris. ::

Torrin: ... I doubt it very much.

::Artem smirked, shy, but intent. ::

Dragumov: ... could I try?

::They stared into each-others eyes. He dropped the tunic on the floor. Avaris broke eye contact for a fraction of a second, his gaze darting to a holoframe containing an image of Jeheran and himself, surrounded by a crowd carrying banners and angrily shouting, a line of police in riot gear blurred in the background. The world burned around them, and they were kissing as though they were the only two people alive. Andressa had taken the picture a year ago, when they had marched in solidarity with the Maquis through the streets of Leran Manev, it was by far Avaris' favorite picture of the two of them. ::

oO Forgive me. Oo

:: He looked back to Artem, and in that moment, abandoned everything ::

"Can I help you?"

Writer's Character: Avaris Torrin

Judge's Character: Cassandra Egan Manno

The conceit of this story was absolutely fascinating: True to the Challenge guidelines, the story doesn't focus upon canon characters, but Benjamin Sisko and his actions during DS9's series run are integral to "Can I help you?" It's an approach I haven't seen often in the Challenges and was a welcome take on the theme, as it accomplished what, for example, the TNG episode "Lower Decks" did so well: We often see what becomes of the great leaders and their officers, but what about the normal people? There's something quite subversive in the thematic approach of this story, as expressed (or, rather, oppositely expressed) by the bereaved Aelya -- is it inflammatory to care about those who died under great leaders, and to question those qualities that seem to make the leaders great?

I did find "Can I help you?" to work better as a story of themes and large concepts, however, and it broke down a little bit when I considered its scenes and individual lines. At that small level, it didn't seem to be a Star Trek story, really, which are characterized for me as both thoughtful and thought-provoking (and I do think there is a difference!), and I would have liked to see more thinking on the page. For example, phrases like "the ultimate sacrifice, doing what was right" are very much in twenty-first century political vogue, but "Can I help you?" doesn't appear to update them or think about what they mean, and that follows for a lot of its rhetoric, too. I found myself frequently distracted by errors in spelling, grammar, and usage -- and while I usually tend to read past such things, misspellings and incorrect grammar kept me from understanding what the story was trying to say in a few places. I would certainly encourage this author to use checkers for spelling and grammar in the future, as well as to think deeply about what makes a Star Trek story -- and why such stories are still important to tell. Overall, though, I did appreciate the large ideas contained herein, and I'd like to see more of this type of thinking in the future!

Blunt Forces 2: The Debriefing

(Clayas Vell)

Cadet Ellen Cain found herself sitting in the crew lounge of the Tarisa's Jewel, her CO's Argonaut Class Runabout. Perhaps it was a well-known exaggeration to call it a crew lounge considering the size of the compartment but it provided enough space for Ellen to sit and think. In this case she was thinking about the contents of the padd she held in her hands. She needn't look at the contents of the padd again as she wrote and submitted the report it held mere hours beforehand. And yet it still weighed heavily on her mind.

Hearing footsteps Ellen didn't leap to her feet as she normally would because she was off-duty. What Ellen did do on the other hand was look up toward to source of the noise. Whether conscious of the decision or not, Ellen's left hand had also dropped toward her belt to her holstered type II phaser.

She didn't have time to draw the weapon, if that was her intention, as a young looking female human in a teal Star Fleet uniform stepped into the lounge compartment. Ellen didn't recognise the counselor but she saw that the counselor's hands were raised above her head, clearly having seen what Ellen had been readying herself to do.

"Sorry," Ellen said. "I've been jumping at shadows ever since I got back from a training mission."

"It was a lot more than that if you're CO's report is any indication." The woman replied as she gestured to a seat across from Ellen.

Ellen nodded as if to give permission for the woman to be there though Ellen had a feeling that it would make little difference. Anyway it would be good for her to talk to someone about what happened or perhaps how Ellen felt about it now.

"Did Commander Herodion send you here, Commander?" Ellen asked seeing Lieutenant Commander pips on the woman's collar.

"She mentioned that you might need to talk about what happened but I have been meaning to catch up with you for a while. And please, call me Maggie." Maggie told Ellen.

"For what reason, I wasn't aware of any scheduled counselling sessions?" Ellen asked as she got up and approached the food replicator. Once a soothing herbal tea was produced Ellen removed the beverage from the replicator's alcove and silently gestured to replicator as if to ask Maggie if she wanted anything. Maggie in response shook her head so Ellen returned to her seat with the cup in hand.

"That isn't really important right now." The older woman replied. "Perhaps you would like to tell me what happened to rattle you so much."

"It's all in my report." Ellen said plainly, not trying to be evasive. Once seated and having taken a sip of the tea she handed over the padd that she had been holding a moment before to Maggie.

Maggie switched the padd on and quickly scrolled through the contents.

"Ah yes, I just finished reading this a little while ago. Very thorough," Maggie said thoughtfully before continuing. "Although, it's also very clinical. I would have expected this sort of outlook from a senior officer that is perhaps more jaded to these sorts of experiences, such as Commander Herodion but not you."

"Your implying that it lacked spirit, creativity or excitement and in truth, your right it did however that is how I have been taught to write reports." Ellen rebutted. "Anyway I don't feel or didn't feel in high spirits when I wrote that report compared to when I set out on the mission to begin with."

That most certainly was true Ellen commented to herself. During the mission she had found herself feeling lost, confused and even out of her depth. Even though the mission was over, and had been for quite some time, she still found herself feeling as if she was still struggling to stay afloat emotionally speaking.

"There is no doubt that a lot happened and there is no shortages of instances in the reports I read that would cause most people to develop long term trauma or phobias." Maggie said with a genuinely sincere tone. It was a tone that Ellen associated more with that of a caring mother rather than a Star Fleet Counselor. "So I guess what I'm asking is, is there anything in particular you're struggling with?"

"The initial attack and infiltrating the monastery were terrifying enough. I have even had a few nightmares since then about those drones." Ellen said truthfully. "In spite of being inches away from death more times than I could count not to mention coming face to face with monsters just as horrific as Borg drones, I understood the rules of that game. Proverbially speaking of course."

"Most wouldn't see it that way. I for instance can't even comprehend what those monsters you mentioned are, let alone think of facing them so calmly." Maggie commented.

"The monsters, for lack of a better name, are non-sentient cybernetically enhanced genetically engineered humanoid super soldiers. Since the individual drone wasn't sentient, the closest comparison is to an automated weapon system." Ellen explained. "And I was afraid. I ran out of words to describe just how afraid I was but compared to the mastermind of it all. I mean that once the shock factor wears off and adrenaline starts pumping, it becomes rather

simple. The drones mindlessly try to kill us, and we fight to survive. In my case I didn't do all that well at that last part."

"According to the reports, you preformed better than a cadet with your level of combat training would be expected to." Maggie offered.

"You can understand that, that is of little comfort." Ellen told the counselor before taking another sip of the drink in order to avoid saying something worse.

Once Ellen had calmed down she put the half empty cup on the table in front of her. It was only as Ellen sat back in the seat that she spoke again in a softer tone then before.

"If it wasn't for Commander Herodion I know I wouldn't be here now." Ellen confessed.

"Team mates look after each other." Maggie said simply as if that explained it all.

"Maybe, it's just that I'm not use to being so tragically out of my depth." Ellen said quietly giving a voice to something that had been gnawing at her for so long.

The older woman gave a kind smile as she soaked in Ellen's words however when she spoke next it wasn't what Ellen expected her to say.

"Tell me about this mastermind. When did you meet him and what happened between you?" Maggie asked curiously continuing the conversation.

Ellen didn't sit in silence long before answering but of what little time she took; she tried to think of a less clinical way to describe the events than that used in her report.

"I suppose it started the moment we beamed down to the research colony. I just didn't know it at the time." Ellen told her. "We went to the colony to deliver vital research material so on arrival Commander Herodion and I met with the chief of science who was a middle aged human male. I didn't give it much thought that the colony's administrator wasn't there."

Ellen paused remembering how Commander Herodion had Ellen take the lead throughout the entire mission, from gathering and loading the supplies, to dealing with the research colony personnel on approach to the planet and during the hand off. Ellen had been so proud of herself for performing so well though she made efforts not to seem to overconfident. The fact was that she loved every second of the job and it wasn't just because of the authority she had been given to do it, but then she had been thrown a curve ball.

"Just as I was wrapping up the hand off, the chief scientist asked if the Commander and I could help out with another situation they were having at one of their outposts." Ellen said retelling the story. "Apparently that region is known for having problems with large jungle predators. So after checking with the Commander we set off for the outpost to do some hunting. I didn't realise it at the time, of course, but that was the mastermind of the whole plot and I unwittingly allowed Commander Herodion and I to be used as pawns so that the scientist could play the heroic leader or whatever else to his employers."

Ellen sat in silence for a moment, retaking her tea which had cooled considerably by that point. Thankfully it was Maggie that broke the silence.

"So, soon after you arrived at the outpost the initial attack occurred leading you to realise that you were trapped there and the infiltration of the monastery was the best possible course of action. What happened next?" Maggie asked curiously even though she clearly knew the story already.

"Once the shield was down, we beamed up to the Tarisa's Jewel which was in orbit which made it the only real safe haven that we could think of. After beaming the surviving outpost personnel up as well, I tended to any injuries including my own while Commander Herodion tried to make contact with the main colony on the comms. Commander Herodion however couldn't raise the colony and noted that the area surrounding the colony was being jammed to prevent sensor scans. It was reasonable to assume that the colony was under attack so we proceeded on that premise." Ellen told Maggie. Maggie simply nodded for Ellen to continue.

"So Commander Herodion and I modified some extra weapons and gathered replacement energy cells for the weapons we already had in order to prepare us for any opposition. Once we were ready to fight a small army we beamed down to the colony." Ellen explained.

Ellen looked down at the tea cup before deciding against taking another sip and put it back on the table for the time being.

"The situation was urgent and I didn't need to be told the stakes so perhaps that was motivation to make sure I didn't slip up again." Ellen said critically of herself. "Hell, I still wasn't as good as the Commander or a security cadet but that time I knew what to expect and did my best to not let any of those things get the upper hand. After a fire fight Commander Herodion and I located the chief scientist, the colony staff or at least those that were alive at that point and six drones in what looked like a hostage situation."

"What gave it away that the chief scientist was responsible?" Maggie asked.

"Well the fact that he wasn't face down on the ground like any of the other hostages was a big hint as was him monitoring the computer terminal being used to control the drones." Ellen told Maggie with an edge of bitterness in her voice. "Because we didn't know how many drones remained in addition to the ones we saw Commander Herodion acted as a decoy while I circled around in order to stun the chief scientist and then deactivate the drones."

"A task that you had less trouble with, that time around." Maggie commented.

"Thankfully yes," Ellen agreed. "And with the scientist captured and the drones deactivated everything that followed was rather routine. Provide medical treatment as needed, help repair communications and finally take the scientist to the nearest starbase for further questioning and detainment."

While Ellen didn't say it she didn't go to any lengths to hide the fact that she would have preferred to see that man spaced than face a life in a federation prison colony. As hard as that life would be, it would never be hard enough. Just as Ellen would never truly forget the aftermath of the slaughter of the scientist's co workers. The drones themselves might have been truly horrifying yet to see the carnage they perpetrated was bone chilling.

"I can tell that you feel that you're to blame for what happened." Maggie said sounding much more like a counselor. "Not to mention that you feel betrayed."

"You're right on both counts just as I know that I am the last person in the galaxy that has the right to feel betrayed at the end of all this." Ellen said with a sigh.

As much as the rational part of Ellen's mind tried to reinforce the messages that Maggie was preaching the before mentioned doubt and uncertainty still lingered.

"Statistically speaking, in situations like the one you faced, star fleet or any other good Samaritan will always get played for the fool. You were trusting and helpful as any good member of star fleet would be when asked to render assistance. Those qualities are just too easy to take advantage of." Maggie told Ellen with a straight face. "It's also a dangerous and rarely successful gambit for the criminal in question, as you helped prove."

"I can't speak for Commander Herodion but I'd say I got lucky with the outcome as it was let alone to prove anything." Ellen rebutted.

"Perhaps but what is of more interest, to me, is that you survived an experience that everyone in Star Fleet goes through. A trial by fire as it were, though typically such defining moments happen once a cadet graduates." Maggie said with a conviction that seemed to surpass that of a mere counselor or her concerned motherly attitude. "I have seen many promising officers turn in their commissions, or let themselves fade into obscurity after their own moments. Neither of those prospects is anything to be ashamed of and yet your still here, in uniform no less. So

perhaps instead of focussing on what you can't do, for all your talents, right this moment. Or how you got conned as any good officer would, ask yourself this; why are you still here?"

Ellen went to speak but ended up staying silent for the simple reason that she didn't have a straight forward answer in mind.

"You know," Maggie said as she got to her feet and straightened her uniform. "The thing about trials by fire or whatever you prefer to call them, is that just because you pass doesn't mean that no more challenges lay ahead nor does it mean that you will always pass. Rather they show us who we are and what we are capable of."

Ellen pondered that thought for a moment but when she was ready to reply she looked up to find that she was alone once again.

In the several hours that followed Ellen wandered through the Tarisa's Jewel pondering all that Maggie had suggested to Ellen. Ellen had even watched a number of technicians and operations personnel from the starbase come and go which was why Ellen decided to sit at the helm console as the [...]pit had received the least attention of those that come aboard.

The view from the helm position might have been great in space but it currently gave the worst view possible of several of the docked vessels in the space dock. But that mattered little to Ellen as she had felt a change occurring. As time went on the lingering doubts that had been plaguing her had began to fade giving way to career aspirations and the reason why she was still aboard the runabout instead of running her resignation or transfer papers to the personnel office on the starbase.

With a smile on her face, one which Ellen didn't realise that she was wearing, she turned to see Commander Herodion, two other cadets and a blue shirted officer board the runabout. Ellen immediately got to her feet but as normal Ellen didn't get a word in before Commander Herodion began speaking.

"As you were cadet. I hope you enjoyed your down time because you and your fellow cadets are about to earn every second of it." Herodion stated in her typical fashion pausing only slightly. "Unless you wanted to jump ship, while you have the chance. If you thought your last training mission was tough, this one will be even tougher."

Ellen had never been shy about telling people that she joined Star Fleet to be challenged and yet she hadn't truly appreciated what that meant until that moment. Maybe some part of her still harboured doubts about herself and her future but in that slither of a moment Ellen realised just how much she loved being a cadet in star fleet and how much more she would love being an officer. It was hard and the unexpected did happen at all the wrong times, but that was why she loved it.

Sitting at the helm console once more Ellen didn't care who noticed the ridiculously large smile on her face.

"I'm not going anywhere Commander because if last time was any indication, this will be a blast." Ellen replied not meaning to make the pun. "Your orders Sir?"

While Ellen might have added that last part with a straighter face because she knew that was what Commander Herodion expected from her while on duty, it was light years from how Ellen felt inside.

"Blunt Forces 2: Debriefing"

Writer's Character: Clayas Vell

Judge's Character: Della Vetri

This story was something that we tend not to see all that often: a dip into looking at what happens *after* all the big action that tends to be many writers' focus. It was made especially interesting since the main character of this story, Ellen, is a long way from as experienced as she might wish she was. Indeed, that forms a sizeable part of what is explored during the story, as well as her thoughts and feelings about what she has endured.

Whilst it might help to have read what went before, the important details are not only recapped in this one, but it's done in a way that makes them important elements of the story itself instead of simply a quick info dump. In fact, I actually found myself drawn to go read the preceding story just to give this one the extra context - not that it needed it, but it did help.

I did find it perhaps a little cumbersome in terms of structure, however, with sentences needing to be broken up a bit more to help the flow. That said, it was still quite readable and engaging, and I had no problem following things. Overall, I can comfortably say I look forward to seeing more of Cadet Cain's adventures in the future.

You will Not Take this, Too

(Akeelah D'Sena)

((**Trillus Prime - Laxyn Estate 2379**))

:: It was a big day in house Laxyn, the eerie silence, where Jalana the eldest child would usually hurry around, not to be too late for her lessons, for dinner or anything else one could be possibly late for, was deafening. What her parents, the master and mistress of the house, did not know what she had been so busy with, that the time got away from her. Jalana had studied, for something she was not supposed to learn. ::

:: The Trill's career had been decided when she had been old enough to be taught her first words. She had been taught her whole life the ways of Diplomacy, the rules, the history, the gestures and unspoken agreements between those carrying the responsibility of their people. She did not have the pleasure of being taught all the lovely things that kids raved around when coming home from school; gold stars and smiley stickers were strangers to her, just as those other kids were. For the last 18 years her companions were lists of politicians and rules of conduct, her reward was to hear that she had done well for once, her teacher the strictest man she could ever imagine: her father. ::

:: Her fate was to be his successor, Ambassador in the Diplomatic Corps. She would meet the big names of politics, the leaders of yet unknown species, accompany those who made first contacts to ensure peaceful and fruitful conversations and contracts. To be a figurehead of her people, was not something Jalana had ever wanted to be, but her father already saw her statue in the hall of history, in his imagination. And she knew, that she would have to break his heart, to avoid breaking her own soul. ::

:: This was indeed a big day, for Jalana Laxyn because of a different reason than it was for Vivan Laxyn, the head of the house. And the younger Trill was afraid to share her reason with him, but she had to. If she'd not she would burst at the banquet, in front of everyone assembled and she could not do that to her father, her teacher, the man who did all of this out of love.::

:: Jalana had gotten the good news an hour ago and now walked to his room, trying to muster up the courage, that she would need right now, before it was too late. Inside the door-frame though she hesitated, stopped in her tracks and watched him. A tall distinguished man, in his late forties, his light brown hair decorated with fine hairs of silver, that seemed to shine when the light just hit them right. Leaning against the door-frame, her head tilted slightly, watching him with a fond smile on her lips that reached her sparkling green eyes. He was a handsome man and while she saw him as the strict teacher every day, she had also seen as the loving husband, whenever he gazed at his wife, thinking that nobody could see him. ::

:: He wore a calf long brown tunic, made from heavy fabrics, that had a little shine when moving, off-set with a decorative trim of ancient Trill symbols, over loose black pants and dress shoes. His special attire for tonight's banquet. He had been awarded a medal of peace, a great honour and a very important day for him. It brimmed over with status and influence, giving him almost something royal; if it was not for his arms being raised in a folded T, tearing and pulling at the closing mechanism of his collar. ::

Vivan Laxyn: For how long do you want to watch me fight with this collar, before you offer your help?

:: The young Trill pushed herself from the frame and crossed the room, coming to a halt in front of him. Gently, as if they could burst at the touch, she laid her hands on his and moved them away. The proud chin of the man remained in the air, exposing his throat to let her do her magic. Her slender fingers had no trouble, to join the hooks with the hoops, linking the sides of the collar. But she did it slow, trying to find the words. But he noticed something else faster, than she could get her words out. ::

Vivan: You are not dressed yet, we will be late.

:: The daughter swallowed, now there was her way in, if she ever saw one. But how could she do all that without hurting him? Maybe there was no way. ::

Jalana Laxyn: I am not coming with you this time.

:: She could feel him stiffen under her fingers and she almost closed her eyes to let the storm wash over, but kept them on the closing of his collar instead. Her heart beat faster, afraid of what would happen now. There was no way back. ::

Vivan: What do you mean? Of course you will. You need the training.

:: The training, that he had put all of his free time in, to teach her everything she would need to know, and that she had dreaded so much. What if there was nothing that would bind them together, without this training? This career? She took a deep breath and forced herself to keep her voice soft. ::

Jalana: I need to talk with you about that.

:: He shook his hand and deciding that she was done, took a step to the side, checking the collar in the mirror, before he reached out to the panel next to it, on which his sash hung neatly and ready to be worn. ::

Vivan: Jalana, we really do not have time for that right now. Go and get dressed, we talk later.

:: She could not wait, knowing that while she was afraid, she also almost burst, wanting her family to know the news. Her brother would possibly be the only one who would be happy for her, but he was 9 and happy about everything. It bubbled under her surface, threatened to just burst out, to blurt from her lips without a filter, and exactly that treat was made true, when she did not speak up fast enough.

Jalana: I'll be going to Medical school.

:: The silence in the room was eardrum bursting loud. She could hear them, the gears in his mind, working, processing and immediately denying. Not with words, but his thoughts. Jalana saw the fine lines and wrinkles around his eyes deepen, his lips whiten as he pressed them together, the blue eyes, that had shown a tiny hint of warmth, turned cold. He had stood there, frozen for a long unbearable moment, before going on as if nothing had happened. ::

Vivan: You won't.

:: The bitterness in his voice send chills down the young woman's spine. She knew what it was, he did think that she really would not do it, if he told her so. But she could not deny herself her dream, her passion. Since she had been eight years old, Jalana had known that she wanted to be a doctor, help people, find solutions for illnesses that did not have one yet. Like her grandmother who had died from a sickness that had no survival rate. Her loss had left a hole in Jalana's life, a wish and desire, that had always been there, but had longed for something to bring it to the surface. ::

Jalana: I will, father. I know you want me to follow your footsteps, but I want.. I need to become a doctor. I have been thinking about this for a long time, and I passed the tests and...

:: The man suddenly swirled around, facing her with that stone like expression, his eyes had never been that piercing and cold as they were now. His daughter stood there, in front of him, trembling. He was not the kind of man to become loud. His rage was silent, dangerous like magma under the surface, just that his volcano never erupted. He was like the tiny piece of glass, that had accidentally fallen into food, noticed when it was too late and secretly doing its damage. ::

Vivan: You went behind my back, without my permission and have the nerve to come to me after the harm is done?

:: It was a whisper, and it still thundered in Jalana's ears. Yes, that was exactly what she had done, because she had known, that he would have never agreed. He would have locked her into her room and taken her communication rights, if he had known. She would not give up, not now, not after how far she had come. ::

Jalana: You would have never allowed it.

Vivan: And you know why. You were raised to become an Ambassador.

:: That was the problem. She had been raised to become something she did not want. Something she wasn't and never would be. And she was angry about that, about everything she had never experienced. The joy to be a child, playing with other children, learning in a public school, bruising her knees when she'd fallen off a tree, getting the reassurance that she'd be doing better next time when she had not done well... and most of all, a father who would show her that he loved her, not only when she did the right step into a world that was not her own. She straightened her back, he would not take this from her, too. ::

Jalana: And nobody ever asked me if I want that. I don't. I thought that once you see that I meet the qualifications and would be accepted, that you would see that diplomacy is not the only thing I can do.

Vivan: ::He scoffed, shaking his head and returned his gaze back to the mirror.: You will never get through with it. You know that you are not cut out to be a Doctor.

:: His words felt like a slap into her face. The one person that she would have thought, could believe in her. Why couldn't he be happy for her, for finding something that she loved? For something she knew was her calling? ::

Jalana: :: whispering :: I will... get through with it. I will become a doctor.

:: Her father turned his head to the side, meeting her gaze. She almost stepped back, the look in his eyes took her breath away, cut off the way to her lungs. It was like a wall of disgust and disdain, but there was more, lurking in the background of his steel, she would not have the chance to melt again: pain, hurt and betrayal. He had given her everything, taught her everything, and she denied it after all these years. ::

:: His voice was barely audible, but she could see the words not only on his lips but also in his eyes. ::

Vivan: Leave, and don't come back. You will be gone when we return from the banquet.

:: Her mouth fell open, trying to form words, but nothing came out, the words choked before they were even born. Did he just kick her out? Completely? He could not mean that! Her throat was closed up, the only sound that came through the squeezed shut opening was a squeak, words did not find their way. But Vivan remained silent, staring at himself in the mirror, making sure that his sash sat right, brushing over the thick fabric of his tunic. ::

:: She knew, he had said his last word. No matter for how long she would stand here. She had never seen him so angry, so hurt because of her. And it broke her heart, tore her soul into pieces, like nothing else had ever done. Because she knew that she could not make it better, because she had to follow her heart, her calling. She could not live his life. ::

:: And still, as she left her father at the mirror, finding her dragging steps to her room, she wished, as she had never wished before, that she could. ::

"You will not take this, too"

Writer's Character: Akeelah D'Sena

Judge's Character: Della Vetri

An interesting tale of the conflict between family expectation and personal desire, and how the two can come into rather serious conflict. One thing that definitely came across to me was a sense of inevitability, with the ultimate outcome not really in any sort of doubt - but just how we *get* there is the interesting bit.

The writer made good use of some very evocative language, doing a great job of setting the scene. This gives the reader a solid basis to build their mental image of what is going on, and also gives them a bit more of a handle on the characters themselves. It's also very easy to get behind the main character of the story, Jalana, and be on her side throughout it all... though that is also, in part, due to how utterly unsympathetic her father comes across.

If I have any real issue with how the characters and such are portrayed, it is how black and white things are portrayed. Given the limits of how long these works can be, however, that is quite understandable, and I'd be surprised if more room to work in didn't lead to much more nuanced characterisations.

That said, there is no mistaking the agendas of the characters, and that clarity serves the story well. I also liked the little touches here and there, details that hint to the history behind what is going on. For example, the whole deal with the collar shines a quick light on what is obviously a routine the two characters had fallen into a long time before.

All in all, a good piece of work, and an interesting read. I'd be happy to see more!