

OPHION
a STAR TREK fan fiction
By Paul Cargile

Part 1: *n*-Space

*“Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?”
— Freddie Mercury*

Stardate 309201.08

NEIL JOGGED AT A steady pace along the park’s well-worn path. His pale eyes tracked ahead of his feet catching the bright dapples of afternoon sunlight tumbling through the late spring leaves, until at last, he came around to the beginning of the circuitous trail. Panting out of breath with muscles burning, he stumbled to a halt, doubled over, and held himself up with sweaty palms planted above slick knees. He stared into the ink pool of his shadow as drops of sweat rolled off his face and splashed into the dust. The damp stains were like phaser wounds in concrete. He lowered himself, grunting, and pressed a questing finger into the wet grit. He lifted his encrusted finger to his eyes, rolling the fine grains between his thumb and fingertip. Hard. Sharp. As always. With a sigh, he wiped his finger across the fabric of his shorts. He heard the insects, the birds, and the gentle rustle of the leaves in the light breeze. Yet this mountainside was silent of people. He closed his eyes against the verdant world and felt the spacious room surround him. Dane’s fiery-eyed expostulation flashed across his mind like a sudden plasma breach and he shuddered. “Coffins.”

He was back in the world when he raised his eyelids. Neil pulled himself up and grabbed the pack he had left before his run. He extracted a bottle of cold water and gulped mouthfuls as he walked toward the cobblestone trail that lead up to the cottage. Lush foliage heavy with fragrance encroached upon the path and his home in slow, patient consumption.

Once inside, he showered. High-pressure hot water needled the tension out of his muscles, which felt good, but the relaxation wouldn’t last for long. The stress would return; Neil was still on command rotation thanks to a problem within the small crew that had taken a turn for the worse.

He soaped and rinsed, and stood in the ceramic-coated iron tub, water swirling down the chrome drain like his sweat into the dust. He often wondered where the water went, but such thoughts were a game he and his mind played against one another. Looking at the water splashing against his hand, he knew its truth, its design. And feeling utter solitude, he—unlike others—accepted it.

Neil. [Abby]

Her voice conducted across his mind as interference patterns and he pictured her face, concerned and apprehensive, yet thankfully not about him. He closed his eyes, wondering where she was and if he could feel her presence. He could not, as he never could before. Not any of crew. *Yes?*

We have detected a covariant subspace anomaly with interstitial transtemporal incursions, approximately five thousand, twenty-five light years away, coreward. [Abby]

A pocket of subspace bulged from a fissure in spacetime. *Understood.*

He opened his eyes and stared at his glossy reflection in the white, wet tile surrounding him. The burden of command tightened across his neck and shoulder blades. Did duty have to call now? *Ophion*, he thought, *terminate simulation, transport to Command, dry, with duty uniform.*

The wail of ghosts accompanied the violet sprites of the transporter beam. In the microseconds before he could see the illusion dissipate, he was elsewhere in the vast room, walled off in the simulation of Command, dressed in full duty uniform and dry as if he had never ran and never showered—as if his prior life had never happened. Neil pushed away his lingering doubts as he took his place at the central console. Two others sparkled in; all but nine of the ten crew were assembled, a gender pair of five different species.

Neil settled down into the focused force field that took the weight from his feet. He looked at Abby, the other human, through the shifting holograms over the console suspended over the deck. She met his questing gaze and returned her attention to the obsidian face of her workstation. The others were quiet as well, saturated in data, directing workflow. To Abby's right was Haarc, a quick-witted and wiry Orion male and Starfleet chief engineer, followed by V'Rale, a stiff figure draped in his native Vulcan robes, linked with the science console. A vacancy parted the Vulcan physicist from Chief Medical Officer Guiehin, the regal Romulan male to Neil's left. To Neil's right sat the tactical officer, Suinhr, a beguiling Romulan woman who felt his gaze and matched it with darting eyes that made him feel light headed and tight chested. Beside her, the Vulcan T'Kal performed navigation duties with a keen mind for spatial-temporal positioning. She wore her long hair pulled into a tail and tossed over her right shoulder to splay over the breast of her Starfleet uniform. Fara, the Orion woman, flew *Ophion* through space with a deft hand and a cool mind, and an ever-present smirk of confidence. Loewai sat poised as the single female Deltan in the room. She stole a quick glance at Neil, but the second engineer was not so swift for him not to notice the darkness that remained harbored in her eyes since Dane's immuration.

She could be next, Neil thought to himself.

Feeling despondent, he looked past his reflection into the sloping arc of the console and it began to whisper data into his mind. *Ophion* was with him, the presence of the ship's mind like an ocean within which he sank. The others were there like ghosts, susurrations nudging against his consciousness.

He pressed his fingers against the console's cold surface and accessed the privileged Command functions. The *Ophion* wandered through the deep galactic space of the Near Three Kiloparsec Arm far from home, far removed from anything familiar. The radiation from the heart of the galaxy in this zone of space made humanoid life difficult—if not impossible—on the worlds they had surveyed and catalogued. They had endured those duties with the rote boredom of hopeless drudgery. And now, here was

something of interest, the equivalent of a gamma ray burst from subspace gushing out into the universe. Its data matrix tumbled around in the hologram. *Ophion* was ready. Haarc confirmed propulsion status. T'Kal announced navigation lock.

Neil only had to give the order and the *Ophion* would accelerate to warp factor nine in seconds, propelled by the blade thin nacelles extruding from high up on the skewed hyperwarp ring. The energized ring would hurl them into the realm beyond warp nine, scaling the steep asymptotic energy curve until the coaxial warp drive was stabilized and the space fold commenced. However, Dane would have been on Command rotation. It would have been his order to give were he not confined. He looked over to V'Rale. *Has Dane been advised?*

The gaunt elderly figure cast eyes Neil's way. *Not as of yet.*

See that he is.

Perhaps it would be best if you gave him the courtesy of a personal briefing. The hard resolute stare from the Vulcan implied his suggestion was not a request.

Neil hesitated, not wishing to confront their imprisoned crewmember. *I suppose you're right.* The others looked to him as if puppeted by *Ophion*, each concurring, especially Abby, with unrelenting accusation burning behind her pale green eyes as if Neil held sole responsibility for the Deltan's punishment. She made him feel inadequate. He dragged his gaze away from her to a more welcome face. Suinhr gave him a subtle nod; she was next on rotation, assuming the latter half of Dane's term. Neil dipped his chin at her in return and transported away.

In an unknowable division of the extensive holodeck, within a featureless environment best described as Nowhere—not all white, nor all black, nor all gray for that matter—the mind empty of thought and deprived of sense—the color of solitude—Dane lay supine. Neil harbored secret fear of him. The crew were all physically attractive people, however, the man lying before Neil was like unto a god. There was a moment of silence, eternal as death, before Dane spoke.

"You should stop this spurious nightmare while you still can."

Worry furrowed Neil's brow. *I thought you might—*

Dane flowed into a sitting position, interrupting, "If you are to speak to me, speak with your voice, not through the *mighty* Ophion."

Neil swallowed and cleared his throat, educing the feel and mechanism of talking. "As I was saying, I thought you might be interested in something else besides...*this*." His hands swept out to encompass all of space.

The imposing Deltan stood. His loose hanging arms bolted outward from his sides, his palms flat against nothing, muscles bulged as if pushing against immovable rock. "My interest is in nothing but *this*...this prison, this damned invisible box."

The Command Duty Officer recoiled, recalling the crew's struggle to wrench Dane out from Ophion's deep layer control routines. Neil had no need to explain the crew's vote for internment; Dane had been linked when they voted. He wasn't here to rehash old arguments. There had been no arguments, only cold glares of understanding. "You had other choices." His words sounded weak in his own ears.

Dane dropped his arms. A mirthless grin stole across his lower face. "Such as what? To live in this cage of illusion?"

"We've discussed this. It's indistinguishable."

"Is it?"

Their eyes held until Neil felt himself shrinking under the other man's foreboding gaze, a look limned in insanity. He broke contact with nervous relief, looked around with a spread of his hands. "This is your doing. Not ours, not Ophion's."

Dane laughed from deep in his chest behind tight lips. "My prison is closer to the truth than all of your prisons. How do you spend your days, Neil?"

The cottage. Jogs through the park. Late evenings on the back porch overlooking the sunset lit valley while relaxing in a divan, a strong whisky in his hand. Enjoyable raucous dinners with the Vulcans. Quiet, eager dinners with Abby. Work, when there was work to do. Neil shook his head as if to clear it and lifted his hand, knuckles up. Nervous, he plunged forward through this confrontation to soon end it. "Never mind that Doctor," he said manifesting a pane of data in the cup of his hand. "We've detected an anomaly you should find intriguing." He rolled his palm upward to reveal the hologram of the subspace disturbance depicted in swirling exotic energy bands.

Dane eyed it with suspicion. "And you seek my blessing for this investigation? You amuse me, Neil, you really do. You're not here because I know subspace better than anyone. They forced you."

"I merely respect that it would be your rotation, and your command to launch the expedition."

Dane stepped scowling from the center of his invisible but impenetrable cube, bearing upon Neil, who retreated a few steps, his arm dropping and evaporating the hologram. "I'm done commanding the dead," Dane said. "You're on your own. Now leave me." He turned his back to Neil, like Klingon ostracization. Neil remained standing there, angry at his own ineptitude. After an interminable moment, Dane glanced over his broad shoulder and said in afterthought, "Try walking instead of transporting." When Neil backed away in silence, the Deltan added, "If you can."

WHY DIDN'T YOU WALK? Suinhr asked Neil, basking in the afterglow of their lovemaking. In the soft mass of pillows, she laid in the crook of his arm, nuzzling her face against his chest, the tips of her delicate fingers traced random trails along his ribs and stomach.

Neil felt drunk in her heady fragrance, his cupped hand matching the curve of her pelvis. *What does it matter? He's right about this illusion.*

"Hmm," she voiced. *That may be. But it's paradise to me...the Waithu' qiuu. Anything we want, we can have.* Suinhr tilted her head to draw her eyes to his. *Do you think all this is a prison?*

Neil shifted under her. *I don't know. I don't think it matters one way or the other.* He shrugged. *It's the ship. It's Ophion. I've been used to holodecks all my life. This is fine; I don't need substantial matter.*

Joy bloomed in Suinhr's laughter. *Liar*. She poked him under the ribs. He returned the laugh, surprised, and gripped her wrist to stop the tickling. She rolled atop him to avert his resistance with the weight of her body, enjoying the playful tussle. She won by pinning Neil's wrists into the pillows, grinning like a devil. Her eyes were burning pools of desire as dark as the shimmering black velvet hair feathered around the oval of her face and exposing the subtle V of her brow. He felt her heat below his navel.

Neil laughed softly. "You know, I *could* use some reality. Again." He lusted for her in that terrible way that could not be satisfied. "You are real, aren't you?"

She looked away with a tight impish grin before leaning down and biting his lower lip with glancing touches. Neil pulled his wrists from under her hands and held her as the bites became longing kisses. Arousing kisses. *You know it*, she thought to him. Suinhr pulled her mouth away. *We could all use some reality. The Deltans especially.*

We can't return to the Commonwealth...

No. Suinhr smiled as he ran a hand along the curve of her back toward her butt. *Some planet, perhaps....*

Neil held her pelvic arches. *Some dead world, you mean. Off-link and in vacuum suits won't be a lot of fun*. He didn't have to remind her that when they found a star system with planetary bodies, they were either frozen rocks, or molten rocks. He preferred the on-board fantasy to the abounding stellar graveyard.

Still, I need a plan. My rotation is coming up. I need to make a decision about Dane and Loewai.

Loewai will hold out a little longer, Neil said. *Ophion lets malfunctions happen to allow her an excuse to enter other parts of the ship for repairs. She gets her dose of reality*. He sighed. *It's not her I'm worried about.*

Suinhr's face clouded with jealousy as the mousy redhead invaded her mind. "Do you love me?"

Fear of loss stole into Neil's heart; how could he have steered them onto this old battlefield? "You know we all love each other." It was no answer.

The Romulan poked him in the belly and Neil let out a deserved "oof." She rested her splayed hands across his chest, shifting her weight through her arms. He felt pinned as he searched her darkening face. "Abby chose him. And I choose you."

With a sudden feeling of apprehension, Neil dropped his head into the pillows and stared up at the ceiling. His hands roamed up her back and he wanted to pull her into an embrace, yet he was terrified to do so, terrified she would leave. He thought to her, *I know*.

Then stop choosing the past.

He looked away from Suinhr's pleading face. *I just want things to be good between her and me*. He shouldn't be thinking of Abby. Why did he let his thoughts betray him, now of all times?

Then let her go. She bent down and kissed his mouth and he welcomed her warmth. *Love only me*. When his returned kisses became too hungry, Suinhr pulled away and sat up. She looked down upon him with impatience and sadness. *Love only me*. With that said, she sparkled out into the transporter beam, leaving him with only the memory of her touch, the terror of her rejection lanced through his gut.

Neil pressed a hand where Suinhr had sat upon him, his skin still warm from her heat. He felt Abby's shadow in the room of the cottage, having watched his lovemaking with displeasure and a mild species of hate.

WHEN NEIL SPARKLED BACK into the Command Center simulation, he felt time disjointed. It seemed a long stretch from when he was here last—hours ago, perhaps. It felt like days. It was a usual feeling he thought he would have gotten used to by now. They all felt it, the topic coming up in conversation. Guiehin explained it as an effect of living in a constant fantasy world. What was space and time when you could fashion it around yourself like a mantel? The passage of time wasn't all illusion; the *Ophion* paced through hyperwarp toward the coaxial energy plateau, giving them hours to idle away.

Last to arrive, Neil joined the others in the shared data output. Haarc turned his slender green head to him, *Coaxial warp systems stabilized and ready for transition.*

Quantum navigational states, within parameters. [T'Kal]

Tetryon bathyspatial sensors energized. [V'Rale]

Defensive arrays and shields charged and standing by. [Suinhr]

Helm controls at optimum. [Fara]

Regenerative damage control engaged. [Loewai]

Communication courier ready and receptive. [Abby]

Psychological states within minimum parameters. Guiehin shot a displeased look at Neil, and then settled his gaze on Abby.

"We could use Dane," Abby said, her eager voice startling in the otherwise quiet of the Command Center.

Neil blinked at her, surprised in the moment by her statement of the obvious, and feeling he was walking into her trap by having to answer her. Of course, they could use Dane and his expertise. "He's not prohibited from doing his duty." He shifted naturally into thought, *He has access to Sciences. He can manifest the Command Center simulation as well as manifest his simulation here.* Anger trickled into his blood. This she knew. Why were they talking about it?

"Not in simulation." Abby felt his anger across *Ophion's* web, and let it merge with her own, feeling it heat and tighten the small oval of her face. "Allow him access to the terminal on the engineering deck."

Neil felt enclosed in a small space, and Abby's request was tempting. He cast his eyes to Loewai, and she returned a questing gaze, dark eyes hungry and wide as saucers. Neil faced Abby again and found himself saying aloud, "Are you mad? That would mean granting him full reinstatement." He found himself trembling and held his closed hands in his lap.

Guiehin said then, almost pleading with Abby, *If Dane would submit to treatment his immuration would be terminated and he could join us once again. It's a reasonable course of action.*

Neil watched Abby glare back at the chief medical officer; a lock of red hair fell forward from behind her ear. Abby. She was so lovely, and Dane had swept her away from him. It hurt, and he hated feeling jilted. Cast away. Replaced. His jaw clenched. He thought to himself, more as an understanding of truth than with words, *it's because we are human, this connection. We Belong.*

"It's not that simple," Abby told Guiehin.

A temporary psychosis requires nothing more than a minor adjustment. [Guiehin]

Abby seemed close to exploding, yet she said through clenched teeth, "What he needs is to get out!"

Neil watched Loewai watching Abby. Rapture filled the Deltan's face.

"We all need a walk off this deck," Abby added.

Neil pulled his bottom lip under his teeth. *Nothing is stopping you.*

Fara sighed then, loud enough to be heard, and Neil understood. This very argument had happened after the vote for Dane's immurement, and rehashing it was a redundant waste of time that resolved nothing; it was Dane's decision. *If we are going to go*, Fara said from the helm station, *then we need to go soon before an acceleration loss saps the coaxial plateau.*

Neil nodded. *Agreed.* Then to Abby, *Dane stays where he is.*

With anger roiling out from her eyes, Abby looked at him, then Fara. She turned her attention to her console, her face relaxing under the spell of Ophion's dataflow. *Communications courier deployed. Subspace antenna array functioning nominal. Universal translator engaged.*

Neil nodded, and then turned to Fara.

He wondered how far away from their destination the impaired fold drive would drop them. *Go.*

SPACETIME FOLDED. DIMENSIONS UNFURLED, overlapped, knotted into intricate manifolds. Time's arrow lost its bearing, pointing out in different directions. Memories, like nets, were cast out into the void, to catch upon what they could. Neil thought the coaxial warp transition could last a nanosecond or a lifetime where dreams and memory merged into tangible experiences. Coming out of the fold always left him feeling as if he suffered a night of bad dreams. Things happened in the fold that soon vanished from the mind. Sometimes he wasn't sure if they had come out the fold at all, as if they might be trapped in the wrinkle of space and time.

He had been snared in the amber of a memory that had not been quite factual. Then the *Ophion* settled into normal space and he found himself mesmerized by Abby. She regarded him with a slack face, her previous anger softened into confusion. Her eyes were hurt yet betrayed understanding. Her lips moved, but they were soundless. *Why?*

What had happened during the fold? He recalled having nodded to Abby, and turning to Fara, the Orion's face set in disinterested boredom. *Go....*

...SPACETIME HAD FOLDED...MEMORIES and desires had been cast out like nets into the void.

In a dining room lit by tall, slender candles, Abby sat across from Neil at his table, a rustic antique covered with a white tablecloth edged in delicate embroidery. She barely touched her *madreitti*, taking small bites of the sauced meat and chopped, sweet vegetables while he devoured his. He noticed she had less of the dark red Syrah in her wine glass than he. He watched her lift the stem and nearly drain the glass. She didn't want to be here and he knew it.

He needed her here, always, but she was pulling away, caught in the gravity of Dane's neutron star. Neil watched her eat with furtive glances. Bitter anger swirled into the heavy anxiety that seemed to fill his stomach more than his meal, diminishing his appetite. She caught his glances, her face stony with ire.

"Does she know," Abby asked him.

Neil froze. He had dreaded this topic from ever entering their conversation—*our fights*, he thought to himself—however, he knew it would eventually happen. He resumed chewing, and swallowed. *I don't want to talk about this*. He stabbed more meat. He didn't feel like eating, just doing something violent with his teeth.

Slow. Each word deliberate. "Does she know?"

Neil bit the inside of his cheek and cursed.

"You don't think Suinhr has a right to know?" Abby filled her glass from the endless bottle of vintage red wine.

"No I haven't told her!" *It's not as if I'm the only one who has ever done that. I'm sure we all have, including you, so don't give me any grief over it.*

Her face darkened and her posture stiffened, causing Neil to lean back into his chair away from her. "Oh, I assure you that I have never simulated a member of the crew and *screwed* him!"

Neil gestured open palms to the ceiling. "That was a private fantasy you had no right to invade."

"We had something, Neil, and you tossed it away because you had to substantiate your lust. Do you have any idea how that made me feel?"

"Why are you doing this to me?"

Abby stabbed *madreitti* with the fork, avoided raising it to her mouth, then eyed him over the flame sparkled rim of her glass. "I'm not doing anything to you. You did it to yourself. You did this to *us*."

The rest of the meal on his plate looked repulsive, like an animal split open. He pushed it away. He gulped his wine, and then reached for the bottle. *If you spent more time with me than....*

Dane appreciates me.

He appreciates Fara, too. Neil nearly overfilled his wine glass.

"We've all appreciated Fara when we were first getting acquainted with one another."

That was certainly true in the heyday of the mission start when they were testing the envelope of the holodeck, before their liberal inhibitions subsided and the crew paired off. He wanted to lie and tell her Dane still appreciated Fara, but she would know better and it would make him appear weak. Sure, he

lusted after Suinhr, but her sim was just... a form of self-pleasure. “You’re right Abby. We did have something. Something special. But the only thing you are to man like Dane is a roll in the sheets.”

You couldn’t be more wrong about him. Abby set the wine glass down upon the table instead of throwing it at his face. *When I’m with him, we’ll sometimes just sit in the holodeck with the sim shut down, just the two of us alone in the dark, but maybe sometimes allowing ourselves a little light, and sometimes he will take me...*

Shut up... [Neil]

...with the cold, hard floor against my skin, and it’s exhilarating...

I don’t want to hear this!

...because it’s real, a real hard surface, not some forcefield, not some fakery!

Neil found himself standing, shaking a trembling extended finger at her. “You’re compromising the mission. We are supposed to use the holodeck to cope with the unique parameters of the mission. You’re not coping—the both of you, not coping!”

Abby laughed and pushed away from the table. “You need to talk to Guiehin. Seriously, you’re the one not coping.”

“I don’t have time to argue about this Abby. I’m the primary Operations Officer—”

“Ophion, end simulation,” she interrupted.

Neil’s world vanished into a void and he dropped a few inches to his feet, rocked off balance, and fell. He didn’t care that the deck was cold and unyielding. He was alone in utter darkness. His breathing sounded louder than normal. *Abby*, he called. “ABBY!” The nerve of her!

He gathered himself up and strained to hear the other nine crewmen. The holodeck was vast. They could be separated by tens of meters, beyond the horizon of the curving floor, immured in their own simulations.

“Ophion, resume my simulation.”

Abby transported beside him. “Ophion, belay. Add a light source, please.” A cone of light fell upon them, and she said to Neil, *I’m on Command rotation and have over-riding holodeck authority.*

No you don’t. Not now. This is a memory, but it didn’t end this way. You stormed out after dousing me with wine after I told you that you were nothing but a whore to him. I’m on rotation. I’m still on rotation. We’re folding space!

No matter, Abby thought back and drew in breath. “THIS IS REAL!” Her words echoed through the canyon of the spacious deck. “Don’t you get it? This is real. What kind of life is this? To live in this empty can?”

Neil lunged for her, grabbed her upper arms, and relished the sudden surprise on her face. “It’s what we damn well make it!” He held her close and the press of her body against his, soft and yielding, flooded him with primal urges. The prior memory of dining and arguing had transitioned into a lucid dream and it was whatever it was. He crushed his mouth against her. He wanted her to ravish him as if he was Dane, but she struggled, turning the open mouth kiss into a smear of spittle across her cheek. He shoved Abby

and she stumbled to the deck. She looked so vulnerable, so meek. So yielding and inviting. Somehow, so wrong. “Am I simming you?”

She blinked up at him in surprise, wiping the wetness off her face with the back of a hand. “I don’t know.”

The next moment she was standing across from Neil on the other side of the control console, mouthing a question before her inquisitive fingers reached up to examine her face. The time interval during the fold had been crushed into yoctoseconds, leaving only lingering feelings—ghosts of feeling, really—of shame and desire, and shame of desire. Abby appeared as confused as he felt, her eyes asking *why* more powerfully than her pursing and relaxing lips. He thought to himself, *I don’t know*, and felt as if Ophion was standing behind him watching and listening, not as a holographic simulation, but in the rear shadowed concavity of his mind.

Neil closed his thoughts off to everyone—they were there around him as distant as stars—and addressed the ship. *Do you remember the things that happen in the fold?* Ophion seemed to step out from around the rear of his mind, like a timid, shy creature. The mind of the ship wore a beatific face, an oval hybrid of them all.

YOU DO NOT NEED MY MEMORY

It was a worse answer than Neil had been expecting. A simple “yes” or “no” would have sufficed. Instead, Ophion cut to the core of what he wanted to know. *Something happened. Something changed us.*

SOMETHING ALWAYS HAPPENS

The ship’s manifestation whisked away, leaving Neil with T’Kal’s report that the anomaly lay ahead of them nineteen light-years away. Had the *Ophion*’s navigational precision not become hindered by a faulty energizer, they would have arrived as plotted. As it was, Neil wasn’t in a hurry to get to the subspatial oddity. *Lay in a course*, he said to Fara. *Ahead warp nine point seven*. “That should give us a couple of days.”

DANE OPENED HIS EYES and the bland nothingness around him melted into the cosmos. His vision adjusted to the sudden darkness, the field of stars—so many of them crowding together—growing bright. Veils of coal black dust wisped amongst the hard glaring pinpricks, aglow here and there in blue-whites and yellow-oranges from internal star nurseries. He looked directly at the blurred distorted gravitational lensing effect of the anomaly ahead, and reached out to cup it in his hand. He felt the strength of the subspace disruptions like changing pressure zones against his palm and fingers. He noticed a deeper, subtle pulse and rhythm to it as if he had closed his hand around a small rodent resisting its capture and squirming for release. He opened his fingers, letting his hand fall to his lap. A false sensation. A manipulation! Damn Neil and his intrusion.

“Ophion, end full simulation.”

The image around him vanished and Dane felt himself lowered to the deck on a cushion of force. He sat there for a moment in utter darkness as the coolness of the deck soaked into his buttocks and thighs. “Emergency light, please,” he asked the ship and somewhere above him the surface of an exposed conduit of the electro-plasma system shifted into transparency. Hard actinic light fell into the canyon of the holodeck.

His voice had echoed back to him. The only other sound to reach his ears was a repetitive hum of the primary power core from deep in the ship beneath his feet, building in volume and pitch and suddenly snapping off with a soft bang like released pressurized air mixed with the clang of a forger’s hammer against the anvil. No human sounds. No voices, muffled or otherwise, as if he were the only one aboard the great ship *Ophion*.

Dane stood and started walking, the light above shifting from conduit to conduit. He walked in the glow but could not see beyond it, could not see the floor curving down across the horizon’s near distance. “Full emergency lighting within the holodeck, please *Ophion*.” The canyon began to brighten. He could see the horizon where the ceiling arched to meet the deck. He walked toward it and his world never changed, remaining empty and silent of the sounds of human activity. Though he knew the answer, he still wondered aloud, curious if *Ophion* would reveal a sacred truth, “Where is the crew?”

Antipodal to your position, moved along a force-field conveyor, as per the conditions of your immurement

The Deltan stopped and looked around. The walls and ceiling were like dull metal slabs many meters away. The holo-emitters embedded within the surface of the deck were too small to be seen. Standing there was like standing in a squared canyon carved into a small world. He could make it a small world. He could ask for a rocky canyon, a gully below a sky of stars. He could ask to see the subspace anomaly in his sky. Or he could hold it again and probe its mysteries, his haptic connection sending beams and fluxes into the exotic manifolds of hyper geometry. He didn’t need Neil to explore this knotted blossom of subspace irregularity. Dane doubted he needed Fara to direct the ship toward it. “Is there a crew?”

Ophion stepped out from behind him, manifesting as a composite of all the female members of the crew, a form of aching beauty wrapped in diaphanous swathes of soft light.

A CREW IS NECESSARY TO THE MISSION

Ophion looked up at him with eager, timid eyes, moving her body in flowing, calculated motions, small graceful steps, a lowering of eyes with a languid close of the lids with a rise of the chin. The corners of the lips pulled back into the beginning of a playful smirk, but the mouth parted instead as if in a long pleasurable sigh, and then her eyes were open to his, tugging at his soul and taunting his desire.

Dane wondered what this was before him, this essence of the ship presenting itself like a goddess of sufferance. His breath drew shallow and a sudden anguish hitched in his chest. “Would you have let me destroy you?”

Ophion extended graceful arms toward him, resting them upon his shoulders and cradled the back of his head in delicate fingers. She drew his face to hers; her wet eyes brimmed with sorrow and hunger. “Perhaps.” The word exhaled from her open mouth before it pressed against his.

LOEWAI MATERIALIZED IN ONE of the transporter alcoves outboard from the holodeck. Composing herself, she took a measured step from the pad, the texture of the fabric of her duty uniform whispering casual pleasure as it pulled against her skin. She felt the hardness of the deck plate through the cushioned soles of her boots and rocked back on her heels to capture the spongy resistance. Her right hand pressed against the wall beside her, her fingers spreading across the finish of the alloy. It was cold, as cool as the air, and she felt the atmosphere's gentle current against her cheeks and hairless pate. She drew a draught into her lungs, and let it out in gay laughter, the sound reverberating down the corridor before her. There was a joyous skip in her steps as she moved forward under the warm, soft glow of recessed lights toward her destination.

As Second Engineer, it was her duty to inspect the vaults after each coaxial fold. Ophion allowed her to pass through the door into the wide circular room. In the low light, the ten vaults rose from the deck like the petals of an open flower. Or an art sculpture; one which she imaged a jet of frothy water would fountain forth from the center. Each vault was a thin box, as wide as a person, suspended over the deck at a forty-five degree angle from a support brace just as wide and thin. Their smooth surfaces shimmered like torpid liquid, throwing back distorted reflections of the room. Loewai's face was a morphing mask cast on moving waves. The Deltan knew the optical effect was caused by the exotic fields permeating the containers.

As she neared them, they called out to her, like whispers tumbling through a dark cavern. Her large, dark eyes darted from one to another as the vaults told her about the contents they contained. The deviation margins and the degradation levels of two of the fermion fluxes were in the cautionary threshold, the other eight were gradually creeping toward the zone with each fold. The aberrations grew exponentially from values unique to each vault. She stepped carefully into the center and did what she could to repair Unit 1 and Unit 2, her mind merged with Ophion to adjust the lattice vectors and calibrate the parameters of the fields where the fermions were held; all while she stood perfectly still.

The fermion waveforms were essential to the mission. Without them, there was no mission. Loewai did what she could to mend and offset the fidelity loss, but there was only so much she could do. There was only so much Ophion could do.

Before she left the room, she lingered by one of the vaults, watching the blob of her reflection break apart and reform. Loewai lifted a hand up to the angled surface but did not touch it. She held her hand centimeters away in awe and wonder of what it contained. That such things could be conceived and made, and made to work.

She stood in awe and wonder that she was alive.

That she was *alive*....

NEIL LOUNGED IN HIS well-worn deck chair to watch pinprick stars blaze anew behind ink portrait trees brushed against the silver-blue canvass of dusk. All he wanted was to relax to the soothing insect symphony while he sipped Farian whisky from a lowball glass, but Abby had intruded. He had let her, of course; he forever longed to be in her presence. He had not longed for the argument but knew he was going to get it anyway. The ice cubes clanged in the tumbler as he gestured from his chair to Abby standing pensively by the back door of the cottage in the heady musk of timber. “No, what Dane needs to do is come to his goddamned senses.” It felt appropriate to yell instead of piping thought through Ophion’s communication system. “He doesn’t need to *feel* the *real* control panel. He doesn’t need to be out of the holodeck running around with full access to the *Ophion* to do The Great Bird knows what to our detriment.” Neil craned his neck to stare at his guest to gauge her reaction. Her permanent frown hadn’t wavered. He bit at his lower lip and turned away.

“He’s not going to do anything.”

You’re damned right he’s not! Neil looked off into the trees and let the whisky warm his tongue and throat. “He has refused treatment for his condition. A reprieve from immuration would be irresponsible, and you know that. We all know that; this discussion is a waste of time.”

Abby paced the few steps to the center of the porch toward Neil. “Letting him out of the holodeck will treat his ‘condition’!”

“Why Abby?” Neil shouted. “I mean, seriously, what does it matter?” They locked eyes brimming over with angry. He chuckled. “Matter. It’s an illusion anyway. Real matter. You know it. He knows it. As I hold this glass, am I touching it? I mean really touching it? You know I’m not. The only thing coming into contact, if it can be called that, are electron fields repulsing each other. It’s all energy! Electric fields, photons, all energy. What does it matter if it comes from nature, or from all these interfering force fields and photons around us? Or even from replicated matter?” He swept his arm out, sloshing some of the whisky free from the glass, where it splashed on the floor. “For that matter?”

“Oh come on,” she said leaning in. “We *know* the difference. It doesn’t matter what our senses detect, it matters how we process it...the meta-phenomenon of understanding that all this around is not real in the sense of the natural. We are meant for the natural.”

Neil knew it. He wanted to deny it. He recalled the feel of hard, sharp grains of damp grit, and wastewater from the shower that drained into oblivion, of sweat that vanished, and of hair that dried upon being rematerialized elsewhere in the holodeck. All of it, a trick of the mind. “But the mission,” he muttered.

Abby looked down at him, arms crossed. “Damn the mission.”

The edge of the glass pressed into the corners of Neil’s mouth as he swallowed the rest of the whisky. “You sound just like Dane. We need to immure you too?” He rolled the empty glass back and forth in the arc of his hand.

Abby harrumphed derision, and held his gaze, her eyes hard and humorless. “Try it. You won’t get the votes.”

Neil sat the tumbler on a nearby circular table edged in twisted ironwork. He hove forward, swinging his legs to the side of the deck chair and leaned over, elbows pressed into knees. He looked up at Abby with a tilt of his head. "The man jeopardized the mission. He tampered with the core. He tried to kill us all...just to," he finger quoted, "'get out'. It's simple, two options: He takes the treatment, or he stays immured."

When Abby said nothing in return, he clapped his knees and leaned back. "I guess we're done here." Neil reached for the glass before remembering it was empty and withdrew his hand. "Feel free to leave." He grabbed the glass anyway, his hands needed something to touch and control. There was still ice he could gnash. And whisky on Ophion's beck and call. He felt too tired to be having this fight, too tired for the responsibility.

She didn't leave. Instead, Abby took a seat on the edge of the other deck chair behind her, intent for another round of the bout. He had to admit, she was doing a bang up job of ruining his evening. Neil ran a free hand through his short hair before raising the glass to look at the ice cubes, frozen water marred by trapped air bubbles made imperfect by a technology that could make them perfect. He tipped one into his mouth and crunched it into melting shards. But what was being crunched, and what caused the cold in his mouth?

"There's the other option." Her voice was calm and soft. Neil knew what she meant, and it was as if the ice water in his mouth sluiced down the core of his spine.

"That is certainly not going to happen," he told her. "How could you even think it?"

"Dane would be outside the link," Abby said. And free to do as he chose.

LOEWAI WATCHED DANE BUT he did not see her.

She more than anyone understood his motives; she felt it too, that deprivation of the fullness of senses gnawing at her tolerance. Dane had succumbed and let the deficiency consume him. She would hold off as long as she could. However, Loewai vowed to retire before she slipped into madness. She would not do as he had done, she would not bite at the bars of their existence.

The Deltan male sat in profile, dressed in loose white clothing, bare foot, legs crossed, and head hung low. A conflict of emotions raged through her like the liquid methane rapids from the last world the crew catalogued, threatening to sweep her away as she tried to hold her balance on the rocky shore. Walled off from essential systems, Dane choose this nowhere, this blank canvass, this absence of any sensation beyond that of his mind. He had given in to feeling nothing, and she grew cold. With the cold came the anger of what he had done to her when they tried to stop him from shutting down the core.

She shut her eyes against the memory but it avalanched against her bulwarks, smashing them to pieces. Loewai had been sleeping when Ophion woke her with a nudge. When she turned and rolled to the edge of the bed, Ophion stood beside her, a horror soaked in blood, its face holding a silent scream of terror and agony. The image froze her heart and chilled her blood, and her scream was anything but

silent. She felt as if her insides were being groped and pulled to be flung apart. She knew Dane was using his command privileges to override the core's operating systems, tearing away the safeties.

After alerting the crew, she joined many of them as they beamed outside the holodeck onto the engineering deck. Their minds were linked to the *Ophion* in effort to block Dane's attempts and repair what damage they could, while their bodies ran down the corridor toward the station Dane had commandeered. Loewai saw him when the group came around the inside curve of the hall. He stood inexorable at a manual station, his fingers tapping with acumen at the command and function icons hanging over the obsidian face of the console. Neil had shouted for him to stop.

Dane turned his head, and then swept out his hand and fired a palm phaser. In mid stride, Neil disintegrated.

Suinhr drew her weapon and ordered Dane to stand down, but the Deltan recognized that Loewai, as the second engineer, would be able to undo his attempted sabotage. Loewai also understood the threat she posed to him, and the immediate threat he posed to her. She stared large-eyed and resigned through the space Neil no longer occupied. She had no memory of her own disintegration.

Enough of Dane and his selfishness. She willed it away.

Loewai watched Suinhr and Neil but they did not see her.

The Deltan trailed behind them in the surf of some archived Romulan beach under a sunset sky of vermillion and indigo. Soft foam rushed to her toes and tugged at the sand beneath her feet. The water was cool and playful, yet it lacked a certain essential *water-ness*. The couple ahead of her laughed, their clasped hands swinging between them. Loewai skipped to catch up, to hear a snippet of their conversation.

Small talk. A stream of lovers' prattle of affection mixed with teasing jocularity. Suinhr gave a surprised hearty laugh at Neil's ribald taunt, and then pushed him away into the surf. She ran and he gave chase, and they tumbled into the sand in a tangle of laughter. A grand display of adoration commenced. Loewai thought the tussle quaint as she sat beside them unseen and waited, her mind drifting to a minor problem the *Ophion* was having with a transmodal energizer and what she and Haarc needed for a permanent fix.

Her daydream faded when the couple grew quiet and their talk took a serious tone. Neil expressed mission fatigue. He was tired of having to deal with the problem of Dane and Abby, and told Suinhr that he would "let her take the wheel"—a human idiom Loewai knew to mean to "assume command"—after they completed surveying the subspace phenomenon.

The Romulan wanted to know why the wait and Neil skirted the issue of Dane. Loewai muttered to herself, "Good enough to *conk*, not good enough to trust." Neil eyed her direction with a frown of suspicion, yet he couldn't see her. Loewai chided herself for being careless and swept Suinhr's domain away.

She watched Abby, but the fair, red haired human did not see her.

The communications officer sat on a wooden floor in a ring of candlelight, the fragrance of the scented wax rising from the flames. Abby held a Vulcan meditation posture to clear her mind of negative

emotions, carried away along the soft, droning music of a reed flute. There were many pleasant things to look upon in Abby's domain, organic sculptures that suggested union and community, and absent of conflict. Reinforcements of positivity. Loewai lingered among them, inspecting and appraising, until Abby, never moving, and never opening her eyes, told her to leave in words and tone that should have left a bitter taste on the piquant woman's tongue.

Loewai conjured her own domain, a simple place of plush carpets and walls hidden behind curtains that cycled through the color wheel at a drifting, lazy pace. She sat in her favorite overlarge chair and pulled a tray of small, smooth pebbles into her lap. They were cool and soothing as she pushed her hands through them and rolled them between her long fingers. Sensations cascaded through her being and she didn't mind if they weren't complete. She let her mind fill in the rest. Soon her eyes closed and Loewai drifted back to the problem of the energizer and the need for exotic elements not found in the replicator's library. The unit was not supposed to fail the way it had; Loewai suspected a chance chroniton event during a fold had overloaded the decoherence retransitioner, burning out the filaments of silithium cortenide. They would need to find a suitable world or nebula from which to restock.

When she opened her eyes, Ophion was standing before her, a hybrid of them all, watching her with intent curiosity before smiling as if it had a plan for her it wasn't willing to share.

OPHION HAD KISSED HIM and Dane was uncertain what the act implied or what the mind of the ship had intended. Most disturbing was that he would have taken her, manifestation of the *Ophion* or not. No matter his growing feelings for Abby—whom he always pictured wearing a joyous smile—he would have tossed the yearning human woman aside for the emotional heights Ophion intimated in the single delicate press of her lips. He would have taken her had she not slinked away with a gentle sway of hips, giving him a come-hither-if-you-dare glance over the shoulder before disappearing beyond the deck's horizon. He would have taken her, and then what? Be bound to her, to need her as much as he needed the comfort of reality? She would gorge him with desire and need that no other could satisfy. He knew this to be true for Ophion knew them all so well; he would ache, addicted to the keen sentience she would provide whenever the whim took her. It would be another prison.

Dane laughed, a bitter cold sound absorbed into flatness by the unseen walls around him. The *Ophion* was already his prison. *I tried to kill you and you would make me your slave.*

He had to admit, the prospect tugged him; he wouldn't have to exercise enervation in his passions as he did with Abby—or with any of the women aboard ship, except Loewai, who exhausted him. Yet Abby taught him restraint, which in itself, opened another realm of sensuality.

Abby.

She argued in his favor with due diligence against deaf ears and hardened hearts. Murderer! He tried to kill them. Yes. This was true. But only in the sense of what was going to happen. Even dear, sweet Abby, with her generous smile and spray of freckles, had not fully comprehended his plight. But had he been

able to explain to her what he struggled to reason with himself? Doctor Guiehin's suggested ministration would do no good. *I'm not insane*. He had become *aware*. Even that word was small against the scope of what he sensed his core being understood. Dane's awareness was merely an adumbration to a greater truth. As they often said, what happened in the fold, stayed in the fold. The multispatial realm of coaxial warp drive horded its secrets, only hints escaped.

Omens.

Transtemporal incursions. They were hurtling toward the future...and something more.

Neil was right, and Dane knew it the moment the Commanding Officer spoke of it, that he would find the subspace anomaly intriguing. On their two-day approach through a sector's width of space, he had succumbed to his curiosity and tapped into the passive sensor feeds, trying to make sense of what the particle wave-fronts the ship flew through was saying about the subspace distortion that produced them. Mesmerizing and disturbing. Spacetime within the anomaly seemed fluid, curling like waves reaching a shore, collapsing into steep curvature of immense gravity. Cosmic strings flashed into being within these events, twisting, and writhing until they annihilated with a scream of subatomic particles and plasma.

The *Ophion* slowed to impulse power a fraction the radius of a solar system away. Terrible energies fissured the normal continuum, erupting subspace lobes. The anomaly moved; undulated, pulsed like the great medusa of the sea, a contorting, wriggling, and fanning aurora of brilliant indigo, violet, and blue, colors formed as subspace radiation lost energy in its struggle to rise up through the normal-space boundary. Secondary reactions of particle annihilation and decay burst forth in hard radiation and blinding white strobes. Dane recalled how the disruption's simulation felt in his hand, squirming and pushing against him, as if with a mind of its own. Each burst of radiation, each shower of exotic fermions and hadrons, was a siren call. Through *Ophion's* link, he knew that Abby had relayed the received energies into sound, and heard whale song breaching a background of hushed, rushing water and the susurrations of leaves in brisk wind. There was also a rumble as if from a permanent earthquake, overlaid with the wailing and squelching from amplitude modulated short wave radio. An occasional boom and pop like a firework explosion punctuated the din.

The starship probed with subspace tetraon frequencies of polarized delta rays, and sweeping three hundred yotta-hertz coplanar beams.

Seemingly in response, a condensed stream of exotic baryons and mesons washed over the ship. Dane caught the glimmer of a pattern. A sequence. A repeated matrix. He felt on the brink of discovery, and felt *Ophion* somewhere with him, a ghost electric with anticipation. Dane had an idea, but was it possible? The sensors recorded another blast of quark plasma. The pattern of quarks was different, but a pattern just the same. Was there a vessel caught in the distortion? Or....

Dane grinned and laughed out loud. *Talk to it Abby. Talk to it.*

Soon the anomaly began to geyser chronitons.

ABBY CONDUCTED HER SECONDARY duties as third science officer, and felt as if she were saturated with the new energies pouring out of anomaly through her link with the ship. She was aware of the stress on the shields from the quark streams that did not pass through the scanner windows of the defensive fields. And the scanners were taking a beating too, degrading as they were overwhelmed. Enough of the subatomic particles were received for her to notice the quark/antiquark groupings: two paired mesons, triumvirates of every conceivable baryon, the exotic tetraquarks and pentaquarks, plus nonsensical groupings Commonwealth science could never hope to conjecture. *The exotics are not decaying*, she thought to herself and shifted the sensor band. Chronitons. Clocks ticked slower in the quark stream, allowing these exotic particles to live longer than they otherwise would in the much colder natural universe.

Why?

Moments earlier, V'Rale had explained that the surge of quarks could have been reflected energy caused by their own tetryon scans. *The shields are not going to take much more of this*, Neil announced to everyone. *Cease active scanning.*

"No," Abby protested, her brow knitted as she tried to make sense of her readings. "There's something here."

If we lose shields, we could get hit by enough energy to compromise the integrity of the hull. That stream is almost quark-gluon plasma, and if we get hit with that, goodbye Ophion. [Neil]

"I understand that," she spat back. "But there's a pattern. A sequence maybe." Perhaps even a signal, but she wasn't sure. "I need another scan. Maybe a broad polaron dispersal..."

Suinhr interrupted. *The shields are under a lot of strain from all the other impinging radiation. I advise we avoid inducing any further hadron plasma streams; the regenerative cycling is barely recouping as it is.*

I won't risk the ship when there are other options, Neil said looking up to Abby with a curt edge in his hard eyes. *Use a probe, instead.*

The bitter redhead shot a look at the woman Neil had wanted, and then noticed that he was allocating the deflector array sensors to other tasks. "A probe's sensors will fry out a lot sooner than our shields will fail."

Then keep it within the shields, at the deflector window, Neil offered. Abby glanced at Suinhr with a hateful look. All she needed was another burst to confirm or disprove her suspicions. But of course the Romulan bitch was siding with Neil. Abby could read the shield output and deterioration rates as well as anyone else. Hell, if she wanted she could *feel* what the deflector screens felt as if it they were her own skin. She was one against a tag-team, no need to fight a losing battle. A probe was better than nothing, and Abby began configuring a unit for a launch when Neil became distracted by the anomaly.

Keep your distance, Fara.

Abby turned her attention to the sensor data V'Rale accumulated from his post, studying the disruption's topology and subspace properties. It flared lobes of gravity gradients and would not stay put. If anchored to a bathyspatial source, that source must too be meandering. It encroached upon the *Ophion*. Fara kept it at bay. But for how long?

While the commanding officer and the pilot were discussing the finer points of not getting trapped inside the anomaly, Abby decided to forgo the probe and do what she wanted. She amplified the gain in the forward sensors and transmitted the beam of exotic energies.

Neil cursed under his breath when he realized what Abby had done. He began locking out emission elements from the hull arrays, muttering to the communications/science officer, "This insubordination; you're not coping. I should confine you to your domain." He was in the process of cycling the sensor windows when another blast of tightly packed quark groupings struck the shields. The sudden push on the gravimetric distortions fed back into the transmission array embedded in the hull and the *Ophion* shuddered, its framework groaning under the strain, and the noise adding to the quiet background sounds of the anomaly.

Suinhr barked that the shields were holding but had dropped down to forty percent and decreasing as the load persisted. The quark stream had been released at higher power and was incurring more damage. Abby did not care about the shield integrity, or the tactical officer's angry scowl.

The patterns were there. In a different arrangement, but they were there. A signal.

Then Dane was with her, filling her mind like the eye of a god, and asked her to talk to it. Not to them, but to it. His understanding poured into her and she shuddered. "Oh my," she said as the beam faded. "It's alive."

"What are you talking about," Neil growled. "What's alive?"

"The anomaly. It's a living entity. Dane's tapped into Sciences; he figured it out.

"The quark stream; it's a language."

The crew assembled around the command ring had no time to discuss the finding. A cat's paw of subspace and distressed spacetime erupted like a solar flare, enfolding the *Ophion* like a tidal wave and pulling the hapless starship into the disruption as if yanked into the rapid flow of an undertow.

Neil yelled for full reverse warp, but Haarc shouted back that space was *slippery*, that the engines own subspace fields couldn't find traction.

V'Rale's alerted thoughts ran through everyone's mind like a spike. *Chronokinetic event!*

Abby saw the surge in the sensor readings, arcing out to the ship like a lightning bolt from some angry god, its path evident. She looked up in terror at Neil who looked back at her in wonder. *Ophion* appeared near her, hand outstretched in patient waiting. The command simulation and everyone in it, including *Ophion*, redshifted and vanished in the space of a heartbeat, leaving her in such absolute sudden darkness that she shrieked before she was aware that she could exhale a scream, or that the sound bounced back to her from off the walls of the holodeck.

NEIL WATCHED ABBY GLOW white and rabidly redshift into nothingness. The reality of her vanishing hit him with the soft pop of air rushing in to fill the vacuum left in her wake. "Abby!" He trembled as he turned to Suinhr who returned his shock in wide, dark eyes. *Time shear*, she called to him. And V'Rale confirmed it,

announcing an outpouring of chroniton radiation from the space Abby left. They seemed to need to yell their thoughts to each other over the din of the groaning spaceframe from the resonate feedback in the shield transmission grid. Even the sound of the anomaly seemed to increase in volume, lending the crew a frenetic urgency. *Ophion, can we get her back?* Neil's mind raced with options and solutions. If she were dead, it would be a simple matter to—

THERE IS NO NEED

He grimaced through another round of violent rattling, holding on to the grips in the console as outside gravimetric forces tested the limits of the shields and the inertial damping fields. Alarms rang through their minds with a list of overloaded and damaged systems. Suinhr shouted, *We need to get out of here before the shields fail!* That he knew. His heart sank and his hands would not still themselves from trembling. Fear and adrenaline. *Warp drive?*

[Haarc] We should be at warp two with the field output I'm giving it, but the space we are in...the constants for the warp equations are fluctuating. They have become variable. I have no way of determining the correct values. Fear cracked the impression of his voice across Ophion's link. They're random.

Impulse is struggling, Fara added. Her eyes met Neil's for the barest of moments, and they brimmed with hopelessness.

T'Kal continued the thought, But I'm plotting a course through the weakest distortion fields. If we can avoid being dragged into the heart of the disruption, we may be able to escape.

Heart of the disruption, Neil thought. Heart of the beast. The feared Kraken. It's grabbed us with its tentacles and will crack open the Ophion with the beak of its maw. We're doomed. He half-heard Loewai mention they might be able to induce the coaxial drive, but that the faulty transmodal had failed, and watched numb as she transported away to the engineering deck.

We're doomed.

Another chronokinetic surge took him.

IN UTTER DARKNESS, ABBY caught her ragged breath, a sound competing with her pounding heart. Her chest hurt in the up swell of anxiety. She staggered backwards to escape the reality of her situation until she backed into what must have been a simulated wall or just the forcefield projection. Abby slid down to the floor, balling herself up, fighting tears and the sobs threatening to catch her throat.

No amount of academy training could truly prepare a person for time travel. Temporal displacement was a well-documented happenstance: from gateways of extinct alien technology, to superluminal gravitational slingshots, to natural rifts, and rifts caused by exotic particle beam emissions. Yet the laws of temporal mechanics were hard to pin down. Some starship crews had been lucky enough to escape or correct their time disruptions. Others perhaps were not. There were accounts of ships breaking free of causal loops, but every ship that disappeared without a trace left many wondering if they were caught in

their own cycles. Maybe the universe abhors a paradox as much as it does a vacuum, and the lucky ones were on a self-correcting course through time. And here she was hit by an active chroniton filament, jarred from her natural temporal phase, and—given the redshift she observed—plunged into the past.

Was this a paradox that would correct itself? Abby wanted to scream as frustration overcame her fear. Dane erupted in her mind and she wondered if she would ever see him again. The scream had collected at the bottom of her throat like an obstruction blocking her windpipe. She let it loose. As she reminded herself to check her internal clock, she noticed her link to Ophion was re-establishing itself.

Upon connection, her condominium domain materialized, filled with the glow of afternoon. Ophion, in female guise, stood a few meters away, solemn and concerned, and somehow expectant. Abby blinked tears at her.

*YOU WILL BE ALRIGHT ABBY
PLEASE DO NOT BE AFRAID
DON'T WORRY
THE MISSION IS BEING FULFILLED*

Ophion stepped forward, extended a hand, and helped her up onto her feet. The mission. Missions within missions. There was the mission of exploration, and then there was the other mission, the unspoken mission that ran as the undercurrent below everything else. All the crew seemed to know the prime mission, yet averted their minds from thinking about it in an almost natural repulsion. The details were immured in the crew's own cognitive spaces. "What is the mission?"

Ophion smiled a ray of sunshine.

TO ACTUALIZE

The typical non-answer answer everyone despised. Abby knew it would be a waste of her time to ask for clarification. She took another tack. "Where's the me that belongs in this time?"

DISPLACED AS WELL

When?

YOU REMEMBER

Ophion flashed her one of Loewai's puckish grins, the one the young Deltan wore when she was up to no good. But Abby never remembered experiencing a time shift like the one that brought her here, or recalled any report of chroniton build-ups or surges. Doubt clouded her mind. Her whole world was simulated, after all, why not this as well? *I don't remember any time shifts.*

*YOU SHIFTED INTO THE FUTURE DURING TRANSPORT
I WITHHELD THE LOG OF CHRONITON ANOMALIES RECORDED DURING THE MATERIALIZATION*

Abby stepped around Ophion and the sculpture that looked like suspended molten paraffin wax titled *Connective Interludes*, and glanced toward the wall where a calendar hung. She could have called up the date in her link with ship, but Abby needed to see it with her eyes. The stardate, yes she did remember. And somewhere in the future she was laying those memories down. *Is this why I'm here? To learn an*

unwanted truth? She moved with eyes locked to the calendar as if it anchored her in time, to the sofa in the living room of her high-rise condo, and sat with the ease and care of the elderly. Memories seemed to jostle out of place, and stagger into realignment.

The stardate. It was the day after she discovered her suspicions about Neil's fantasies of Suinhr were true.

She had entered his domain behind a partition and watched, hurt stabbing through her core, her world crumbling. Abby had been so devastated and angry she hadn't paid much attention to the conversation that passed between the two lovers. She never questioned herself if small talk was worth the effort to sim. Why the bother, given what it was? And she had no doubt he *was* simming the striking Romulan; he had never denied it, and as much affirmed it. However, her memory must not have been quite right. Suinhr had him pinned to the bed... "Love only me," and "She chose him, I choose you." That's what Suinhr had said, and Abby dismissed it in her confusion. Maybe she misheard it, maybe she didn't understand, but it was clear to her now; she hadn't spied Neil simming Suinhr, she spied a future Neil and Suinhr enjoying the company of one another until Neil undoubtedly ruined it and woman transported away.

And what did Abby do afterward? She ran right into Dane's arms. A chill crossed her back and hung near her kidneys. "Oh God, I made a terrible mistake." Abby's eyes traced a pattern in the tile floor. She couldn't face the calendar. She didn't want to see Ophion's expression. "I came back just to learn this?" As painful as it was, it seemed so trivial in the scheme of things. Why would the universe—the time line—be concerned? How was this supposed to help her? Abby pushed herself out of the chair and walked to the windows to seek comfort in gazing down at the fictional bay and the busy marina below. So much activity. None of it real.

Ophion avoided her question.

THE COAXIAL DRIVE IS SOON TO BE ACTIVATED

That calm no-nonsense voice shook Abby out of her reverie. She wiped her eyes, and pulled loose locks of shimmering brass from her face. *Shouldn't I be in the command sim?*

YOU ALREADY ARE

THE TIME SHIFT DOESN'T PERFECTLY ALIGN

Abby admitted to herself that she had no recollection of ever missing a fold. *What am I supposed to do?*

YOU NEED NOT DO ANYTHING

THE CHRONITON FLUX IS PEAKING

YOU WILL RETURN DURING THE FOLD

The event happened before she could prepare herself, and she supposed that was always the best way.

The next moment she felt shaken near to death and she clutched her console. The inertial dampeners and the holodeck forcefields were taking out much the violence bestowed upon the ship, but the floor still

pitched and rolled like the deck of a sailing vessel approaching a storm. It was a storm of sorts. Out there, and in her heart.

Are you alright? Dane asked, and Abby looked up and over to his station, meeting his concerned face. *When the time rift hit you, we didn't know if you were coming back.*

Yes, I'm fine. She searched his eyes for any sign his solicitude ran deeper than casual friendship. With all that was going on, she couldn't read him. *It's nothing, just a little shook up.* Neil was still a jerk for simming Suinhr, but maybe she had over-reacted. Maybe there had been something to salvage. She wasn't sure how she was supposed to feel.

Suinhr looked relieved to have her back. *We've managed to adjust scanners to detect chroniton conditions prior to the surges. Fara has been steering us clear as best she can. So far, it appears to be working.*

Abby nodded. That's one thing less to worry about. She was confused about her feelings toward the woman given what she discovered. She needed the focus of work and tried to pick up where she had left off. The quark streams... the language. Let's see if we can talk to this thing.

Dane gave her a smile across the console ring. That's what I've been working on. Hopefully we can tell it what we are, that we're living beings and that it is inadvertently harming us. All they needed was to persuade it against their destruction.

THE NIGHTMARE CRUSHED HIM IN its grip and Neil cried a wavering moan as he thrashed in the sheets of his bed. He nearly fell as he stumbled out the bed to get away from it as if it were the source of his terrors. He wiped his face. "Must end this spurious nightmare." The *Ophion* was caught in the grasp of a sea monster. "We need to get out..." He felt the dropped link re-connect. The ship was quiet, still. A status check indicated no distortions of any kind nearby. Neil felt himself calming. Of course the *Ophion* was safe now; he was caught in the time shear. His whole world had redshifted as Abby had done (poor girl, what had become of her), and....

And here he was. His heart caught in his throat when he registered the stardate.

Dane had yet attempted to kill them all.

Neil paced his room. He needed a drink. He wanted to ask *Ophion* for something strong, but he felt like an interloper, a damned intruder in his own domain. He could remember the day before Dane's act of attempted sabotage so clearly. As clearly as yesterday, the day before they arrived at the anomaly. "We need to get out," he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

Then the enormity of the situation and a possible solution hit him hard in the gut. Neil sucked down shallow gulps of air as he grew lightheaded. He trembled so violently he had to sit back down. No! He had to do something. He had to stop them. He had to stop them from stopping Dane. This was horrible; had Dane been caught in a time shear as well and knew what must be done to save the ship—the ship of the future?

What time was it? Neil called up the hour. It was almost too late to do anything. Dane was on the engineering deck right now! He struggled into his clothing, cursing as nothing seemed to go right in his rush. Neil beamed to the engineering deck. Heart pounding in his ears, he crept up to the console Dane would be using, working out what he would say, remembering the disastrous *first* encounter.

He came around the curve in the corridor and Dane was nowhere to be seen. Neil halted transfixed and confused. Dane was supposed to be here shut to down the core processor to the vaults and end them all. Thus ending the discovery of the anomaly, thus....

He had to do it. If Dane was not here, he had to do it.

Neil made careful, unhurried steps to the console. Evil talismanic power seemed to radiate from the thin leaf of the control station extruding from the wall. He didn't have a palm phaser to protect himself and wondered if he could go off-link. Reconstituted, they wouldn't be able to stop him. Unless Ophion denied him an atmosphere to breathe. He would have to work quick...but any of them could also go off-link and stop him...Oh! It was all too complicated!

No. Stick with the plan. He could end them all from here, nice and cleanly. And then...

Then what? They might still discover the anomaly. They might still be trapped! Neil wiped sweat from his brow, panting and shivering in anxiety. Were they trapped in an infinite number of causal loops? *Me then Dane then me then Dane then me then Dane...*

Maybe. Maybe not. He couldn't just stand there doing nothing but looking at his crazed reflection in the obsidian face of the console.

It was Dane's command rotation and he would need the man's key-set to access the vault core processor control systems. Neil just so happened to have the key-sets he needed, because, in his wisdom—and in assuming command—the investigation into Dane's sabotage attempt had revealed the codes he had used to do what he had done. Neil prompted the console and fingered the holographic function icons. Soon the core lay vulnerable before him.

He set to work.

But it was as if Ophion had suspected his access was unauthorized. Every safety he tried to bring offline came back up. "No," he moaned as his attempts failed. "I'm the human. You do as I say!" Then nothing responded and the console locked him out. "I have the authority" he whimpered, raising his fist to pound the control panel. Was there time to go off-link?

No.

He heard running footfalls from the crew, and then Dane was shouting for him to step away from the console, a palm phaser in his hand.

Neil spun around, eyes wide and wild. "You don't understand! I must end this spurious nightmare! We need to get out." There was more to say, more to explain, but his mind and throat seemed unable to engage. The ship was trapped, "We need to get out!" He looked at those assembled. Dane stood stern, Abby fearful and saddened, Suinhr ready to shoot him with her weapon. Loewai wore weird excitement, as if she were watching a prank come to fruition.

Defeat was upon him and it carried physical agony. Neil wanted to die of a burst heart right there and then. He screamed his new mantra as they closed in, and whimpered it in sobs and they restrained him. Guiehin entered the fray from a transporter beam and pressed the cold nozzle of the hypospray against his neck.

LOEWAI WAS ALWAYS AMUSED WHEN she materialized in quadruplicate. *Which one is me*, she wondered as if conspiring in a prank, while standing in the engineering deck at the heart of the *Ophion*. She shared sly smiles with her three other selves before they went to their separate tasks of presetting systems for a forced coaxial induction into subspace. With such a small crew, copies of engineers were often necessary. *We're all me*, she thought, knowing she would have four sets of new memories when she materialized back onto the holodeck. The Deltan moved with a child's playful gait and approached the faulty transmodal energizer. It was an upright cylinder of various widths that she could just see over its top, and could wrap her arms around to touch her fingers. Its status reported that it no longer functioned, a fact confirmed by the absence of the green-white glow from the thin ring of transparent crystal that circled the unit. With only four fully operational units, they would not be able to lock in calculated navigational coordinates. If the safety systems were bypassed, they might not ever come out the space fold if forced to engage.

As the *Ophion* shuddered around her, Loewai knew the only fix to get the unit working at reduced capacity was to cannibalize the silithium cortenide filaments from the other units. All the transmodal energizers would be degraded but they might be able to drop the ship close to their calculated position. It was better than nothing. She directed her other selves to the laborious task before them, hoping the ship would survive long enough for her efforts to be worth the time.

If I'm reading this right, Abby said, looking over the record of the quantum stream data flow, *this is a base four number system*. The repeating pattern of negative and positive charged pions and kaons respectively had to mean something.

The ship shuddered in a sudden gravity shear; Fara cursed, her face tight in grim determination as she pulled the ship away. Dane said to Abby, *Yes, I see that now*. His finger flew through the holographic control icons over his board, *We can't generate particle streams as specific as the mesons we're receiving, so I've encoded tetryon transmissions as a substitute*. He looked across the control ring at Abby and her heart leapt. She should have stuck by Neil after his immuration, but Dane had made that impossible—always kind, always close. She was captivated by his penetrating and joyous eyes, and almost confused when he said aloud, “Let's hope that works.”

She recalled a Vulcan mantra to get her swirling emotions under control, “Let's do,” and allowed herself a smile. She felt everything was going to be alright. She immersed her mind into the data the *Ophion's* sensors were collecting. A burst of negative pions, a burst of positive, and so on. A continuous

counting to four. What was next? What was it waiting on? An answer? The next sequence? Was there a doubling of mesons, a different class meson, or a baryon that acted as a marker for the number five? Abby ran a search through the sensor log data until she found a likely candidate. To her surprise, it was something as simple as a proton. A proton and a negative pion represented five. *Try this sequence*, she sent numbers five through eight to Dane.

Dane transmitted the corresponding tetryon pulse.

The crew waited. Nothing. Perhaps the anomaly did not understand their attempts at translating. Yet the lack of communication was the least of their worries. They couldn't engage warp drive, except as one defensive buffer against the twisted subspace and spacetime surrounding them. On impulse alone, Fara could do nothing but steer them through the whitewater rapids of gravitational rivers and swells. The *Ophion* was being swept farther from the edge of the disruption toward a tangled net of brilliance in what must be the core.

Abby was about to surrender in despair when a new quark stream struck. Instead of a large beam washing over the entire ship, it was more coherent, focused through the shield window ahead of the hull-flush surface of the navigational deflector, it came in a tight burst of pions, kaons, and protons. "Send the same sequence back," Abby shouted, joy layering over her fear.

Transmitting. [Dane]

Immediately they received a different sequence, and transmitted their own alternate tetryon pulses. They did this for a few minutes, climbing through higher number values. The sequential numbers were soon stopped, replaced by a nonsquential list.

Primes, Dane remarked, grinning at the first six prime numbers and adding the next six to the sequence. The next run of primes were six digits long and Ophion contributed to the reply. From primes, they moved to Fibonacci numbers, and then Cauchy sequences. And Abby and Dane were back to simple low value numbers separated by hadrons that did not correspond to any of the numbers they had translated thus far. A one, a one, and a two. Dane and Abby looked up at each other, saying at the same time, "Operators."

Simple addition, Dane said, putting together his own addition expression, and transmitting it. The signals moved through complex addition and subtractions into multiplication and division. Outside the ship, the brilliant net loomed closer.

Abby asked, "What is that thing we are approaching?"

Gravitational folds, V'Rale answered. *Similar to cosmic strings. Some of the gravity is repulsive, forming a local inflaton field that creates particles upon collapsing, hence the intense radiation. If we enter it, we will be destroyed.*

After a moment of dreadful silence, Fara added, "Then we shall not enter it." Abby caught a look of doubt in the Orion's hopeful defiance. She would try her best. It was all any of them could do.

It's more than that, Dane said, *the strings are connected...it's its mind*. Abby thought it was a fascinating thing to ponder. If the distortion was alive, it had to have a brain of some sort. And they were

headed right for it, toward thoughts that could overload the shields and leave them at the mercy of incredible gravitational forces.

That may be, Haarc said. Loewai's nearly finished with the transmodals. We may be able to fold out of here.

"There's still time to talk to it," Abby told the engineer. She noticed the next message was a polynomial equation. If only they could move beyond mathematics and into some actual language. While Dane solved the stream of algebra problems, Abby worked with the universal translator, but try as she might, there was no grammar as of yet for the program to analyze. The presence of Ophion in her mind seemed to give her a carefree shrug. She guessed superintelligence had its limits as well. Turning her attention back to Dane's tasks, the Deltan and Ophion both were solving calculus problems. After a few of those, something close to gibberish appeared in the hologram in the center on the console ring.

I don't know what that is, Dane said, turning hopeful eyes toward V'Rale.

The astute Vulcan studied the mathematical form before shaking his head. *It is either nonsense or mathematics beyond our comprehension.*

When it wasn't answered, another appeared.

Abby's heart raced as communicating with the living subspace anomaly took a turn for the worse. They drew ever closer to its mind, spacetime had become a narrow river with jutting boulders that they smashed upon, only to be thrown back into the raging waters of contorted geometry. A few hard hits were now making them grab handholds for their balance and causing the ship's power to flicker. Abby thought it was like being in a houseboat carried away along a canyon river during a thunderstorm.

Another incomprehensible equation appeared. Dane could only transmit back to the anomaly what they assumed was a symbol for a question. Another. And then another. And then they came one after the other in a blur, too fast to read, as if the being had become irate and impatient.

It seemed to pound on them with the hammer of some Norse god from out of Abby's childhood bedtime stories. The feedback from the forces against the shields had overloaded the dampeners and set a vibration in the ship's framework. The noise was like a din of stones falling onto tin sheets. "We're losing shields," Suinhr yelled. Abby thought that at least it would be quieter. Her ears suffered another onslaught, a wailing moan of choristers being murdered in song accompanied with the piercing drone of tinnitus. V'Rale shouted that they were being scanned.

They hit another pocket of gravitational turbulence and it felt as if the ship were spinning. *We need to get out,* Abby thought to herself, and caught a glimmer of Ophion in the room. "*The mission is being fulfilled*" had been the avatar's words. Looking around the room, she couldn't find the ship's persona, and felt a sudden deep hatred for it. She wanted to scream rage, and maybe she was screaming. Abby could feel the contraction of her diaphragm and the tight vibration in her throat, but she couldn't hear it over the din. She thought her eardrums would burst, as did everyone else as they covered their ears with flat palms, just as she was doing.

And then utter silence, the silence of being sucked into the vacuum of space, leaving only the sounds of a heartbeat and panicked breathing. Abby felt the gravity field diminish and looked over at Dane

through a curtain of sweaty red hair. She sensed sensor readings at the same time the Vulcan science officer spoke.

“There’s an intense energy build up, nearby, in the ship. In the holodeck.”

The power went out, plunging the crew into abysmal darkness.

LOEWAI AND HER STEADFAST team of Loewais—(*which one is me? We are all me!*)—had managed to swap around the braided rings of silithium cortenide filaments between each of the five transmodal energizers while the *Ophion* convulsed and shuddered around them. She and her replicates had been knocked around and bruised up, yet they had troopered on. Her friends depended on her, and she would not let them down. They had secured the panels, and ran diagnostic self-checks, and, other than the expected errors for the missing filaments, there were no other problems. Each energizer registered as being sixty-two percent functional. A hair within parameters.

Violent spasms threatened to shatter the *Ophion*, and the ship seemed to scream its agony and distress at her before the horrific din abruptly stopped.

Aware of the situation in the command simulation, Loewai was starting to bring the transmodals online when the power failed. The emergency systems hadn’t kicked on, and she hoped the all-important vaults had switched over to back-up battery power. As the women floated and huddled in microgravity, one of her selves had produced a penlight and shone its eerie circle of light into the room. The duplicated woman’s voice struggled from an atrophied throat and tongue, “I’ll reset the emergency reactor.” Loewai told her, “We’ll stay here and attempt to restart the main core.” The rest of them had their own activated penlights, the beams sweeping and swooping around the room as the copies made inspections.

The Loewai that left to check the back-up reactor considered herself to be the Prime Loewai; she imaged they all thought the same. In the weird way that they were prime, they were not. She pushed off to the door, slid it open, and swam into the corridor. She took a ladderway down to the next two decks, whereupon she entered the reactor room. Battery powered lamps cast feeble light with a sickly green pallor across the surfaces of the equipment and components, leaving inky shadows in the nooks and crannies. After surveying the system, Loewai reset electroplasma constrictors, and used a hand crank on a generator to supply power to the starter that built up a whine and thrum as it prodded the reactor. The reactor came alive with the whoosh and rumble of a blast furnace, and soon plasma was coursing through magnetic confined waveguides, feeding limited energy to the *Ophion*’s thirsty systems.

Gravity tugged at her feet, and Loewai drifted down until one gee held her firmly to the deck. She was about to leave when *Ophion* whispered something to her, something she could not quite make out. A flickering caught her eye as the emergency lighting gave way to the standard illumination. A control station had become active—from a short circuit, or from *Ophion* itself, she didn’t know.

Curious, Loewai approached. As she neared, she could make out the outline of starship. It was too flat and slender to be the *Ophion* of much thicker and rounder shape. No, this craft had a spearhead

primary hull attached to a low-slung engineering section, outfitted with a pair of blade-thin warp nacelles; an ideal planform for slipstream cruising. She stopped at the console, reading the name and registry. *U.S.S. Hyperion*. Was there a hiccup in the library database that called up this Federation Starfleet warship from nearly two hundred-forty years ago?

The Hyperion....

The very name of it made her feel ill. Dizziness overtook Loewai. She thought she would faint as she reached for the console with arms and hands that felt heavy and sluggish. Sprites danced in her vision. Chills coursed down her spine.

The Hyperion....

A memory unhinged, releasing a deluge within her. *The mission is being fulfilled*. Not a memory per se, but a flash from within the fold. Something from out of coaxial warp where time and space had no comprehensive meaning. An M-class planet...warm...lush...reminding her of home...a yellow-orange sun in the sky...There is soil under her feet, her bare feet, and the soil is cool, and she stands in its nitrate perfume, and kneeling down, she takes a handful of rich, black loam, and it is real, and tears stream down her face, because it is real matter, natural matter, not replicated matter that loses its analogue quiddity. Real matter and she is sobbing as she holds the earth to her face breathing in its heady aroma feeling its coolness against her wet cheek...sitting in the dirt, running her hands through the soft soil, and the scratchy brown leaves and needles, disturbing tiny insects and worms...crying her thanksgiving and joy as she looks up toward the sun-spangled trees into the frowning countenance of Lieutenant Katarzyna Sokoloff, whose hair, caught in the sunlight, is like spun molten gold.

The Hyperion....

Loewai fought through the light-headedness and heard her other selves approach, calling to her through the shared link. She felt them crowd around her. They all gasped as the unlocked memory erupted. The holographic icon for the *Hyperion* presented itself and she drew in a sharp breath. Touching the icon would let relevant data of the old starship flow into her mind through the link with *Ophion*. She did not want to put her finger in that nest of photons, she didn't want to know its history and discover what she was beginning to suspect, but the mission was being fulfilled and she had to, and she did it with apprehension that strangled her breath.

The revelation sapped Loewai of strength. Her duplicates caught her, holding her to them with watering eyes. Linked they all knew. And they all knew the demands of the mission. Loewai will have to go beyond the link to the *Ophion*, into that—*naked* space. So much time had passed since the crew first linked, she wasn't sure she wanted to be away from everyone else. Nevertheless, Loewai knew she would have too. With the status of the vaults telling her the units were unharmed, she had no other choice. Given the events in the holodeck, acting on that choice was now or never. There wasn't sufficient time for her to assist Haarc in hot starting the main core to supply all the power needs of the *Ophion*. Thus, if she were going to induce a coaxial fold, she would have to do it unlinked, with manual controls from within the upper deck engineering command center, beyond the purview of the crew or the authority of the

commanding officer. The fold was essential to bringing them to the planet. She didn't know the details, but that much she did know, like a persistent article of faith.

The Loewais gathered themselves and clasped hands, dark, tear brimming eyes looking into dark, tear brimming eyes as if saying farewell until next time, yet knowing there would never be another multiple bifurcation. Their hands squeezed as they dematerialized into the transporter beam.

At least unlinked, she would be more...*true*.

THE EMERGENCY GENERATOR KICKED online, gravity resumed, and the manifested command simulation had been reduced to the open ring of control stations standing on the bare floor of the otherwise empty holodeck. Dane watched the disquieted crew return to their stations and strap down into acceleration couches as the ship rolled and heaved, their eyes darting from the glowing, growing mass of light and heat in the space between them and the man partitioned away by a thick glass wall at the deck's nearby horizon. Dane found himself captivated by Neil's haunted face as the man yelled and struck his fists against the soundproof transparent wall. He bore watching still, and if Loewai had not been quick enough with getting power restored, their security agents Suinhr and T'Kal would have had their hands full restraining him if he had bounded into this area of the holodeck.

And if Neil came around to the other side, well, there was another partition. *Who was really imprisoned*, Dane thought, the irony of the situation not lost to him. He returned to his station, casting Neil from his thoughts as firm restraints pulled him into the seat, and focused his attention to the energy source hovering in the air.

The radiant form had begun as a white-hot filament that had looped around on itself and widened into a wavering band. More loops were growing out of it, creating a glaring mass that looked made from horizontal brush strokes of unequal length. It continued to grow, spitting off dangerous levels of ionizing gamma rays, along with alpha particles and delta radiation. Dane was already beginning to feel the effects of the particle emission. He addressed the medical officer, "How are we on regeneration?"

Guiehin studied his control board, fingers tapping icons. "We shouldn't have a problem, but we want to keep our recycling to a minimum of about three."

Suinhr cleared her throat to get her larynx in better working order. "I'm trying to erect a force field around it, but the local subspace is tightly manifolded. I'll keep trying different matrix patterns, but we may have to relocate to a greater distance if the radiation does not subside."

Dane acknowledged her. T'Kal looked up at him in concern, "We appear to be moving in reference to our navigational pulsar. The quantum accelerometers are not indicating rates of inertial change congruent to the pulsar's Doppler shift, taking into account, of course, the lensing effects caused by the anomaly."

"The whole thing is moving and taking us with it." Dane squinted at the form that had begun to elongate in the vertical, becoming anthropomorphic. A cloud of particles hung around it like miniature firework displays, motes corkscrewing and spiraling away, brighter specks arcing like electrons depicted

in the graphics of atoms. And it emitted a droning susurrations like a chorus holding a note for too long, members slipping off key and regaining their harmony. He thought of Neil screaming that they had “to get out.”

V’Rale suggested, “It could be a higher dimensional construct immersing into our four dimensional spacetime. Sensors have failed to indicate a point of origin other than itself.”

Abby asked, “How are supposed to talk to it?”

Dane did not know. His own sensor readings made little sense. He, like the rest of the small gathering, watched the anomaly with rapt eyes, wondering if this thing was going to kill them as if they were nothing more than bacteria. Wondering if Neil had been right the whole time, that they would have been better off if the crazed man had ended them all and diverted this timeline. The transporter beam added its atonal moan to the rising and falling chorus, and he noticed Fara and T’Kal regenerate in a rapid materialization sequence. They were closer to the onslaught of radiation. They had two more regenerations left before they would be deposited into a safer area of the *Ophion*. An alert flashed on Dane’s board. Loewai. She had the hyperwarp ring engaged to build up proper field strength for the coaxial drive—he could feel the vibrations rippling across the deck. A fold might get them out of this, if it worked. If not, they would never know. He thought of death in a detached way.

The brilliant, singing mass of energy assumed a vague humanoid form and stopped growing. The particle cloud calmed down to a light fizzing, and the choral sighing and moaning dropped in volume. The turbulence that held the ship prisoner subsided as well, the storm had calmed. There was motion in the head nub, some form therein taking refined shape. The forms were eyes that peered at the crew with immense age. Curious eyes with irises of a blue so faded they were almost white. Eager eyes. It blinked and seemed to cringe when the security force field fell into place around it.

“No, no,” Dane beseeched, climbing out of his harness and making his way around the consoles while fighting the onset of nausea. “Drop the shields. I doubt its intent is to harm.” Suinhr complied, and the being’s eyes tracked Dane until he stopped in front of it. The Deltan thought he had more to say— some greeting perhaps— but the chorus of a million voices grew louder, and he felt the hazy burn of particles destroying his cells, his stomach twisting in pain—hot and loose—and all his thoughts flew from his mind. Dane stumbled, watching the staggered, layered blur of energy break free a piece of its side and extend what could only be something like a hand, a claw of light. He didn’t feel it touch his head.

Dane convulsed, galvanized by overwhelming sensation. He didn’t hear the cracking of his back from the tension of his own muscles, or hear the chaos erupting all around him. He heard nothing but the void, and felt great depth and great expanse as if he were encompassing and experiencing the totality of the cosmos. He felt he filled it. And he felt he was nothing, insubstantial, matter-less, a mere idea, and not a fully formed one at that. Every nerve in his body was alive, blazing with input. Dane felt every emotion possible all at the same time, and he thought he must surely burst. Pleasure coursed through him, immense, terrible pleasure far beyond anything he experienced in communal union. It was unbearable, edging toward pain, and his release was no release at all.

When he thought his stamina had exhausted and that he would certainly die, calm washed over him, the sensations dropping out into a background noise of sorts. The Being was with Dane, as Ophion had been, somewhere lurking in the shallows of his mind. A haunt. And Dane knew where it had been; it wandered across space and time, visiting galaxies, drifting through subspace and its many domains, pulling itself away from the brane and crossing the bulk to other branes, other universes, and other realities. But from whence it came, or what process birthed it, of that there was nothing. It just seemed to *be*.

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Its querying thought clamored through Dane's mind. What did he want? What did any of them want? Neil had voiced it so succinctly, to get out. With each fold Dane had felt a little more worn away, eroded. What Ophion provided in the holodeck, that which had once been vibrant and new, had turned stale, spoiled, ersatz experiences for ersatz people. He had wiped clear his domain in despair and defiance. He made it nowhere, and filled it with nothingness. Everything was a lie. The mission was an abject failure. Death was the only recourse. Dane had made a decision.

Until Neil had made the same one, for a different reason. Dane would have been at that control station if not for the inexplicable chroniton detection he chanced upon while planning murder. Chronitons; he had to stop Neil from doing exactly what he had planned. Dane had to get out, and apparently so did Neil, whose ramblings made no sense to any of the crew. But Dane knew a secret truth. And so did Ophion, who erased the chroniton sensor evidence. Dane knew Neil was not clinically insane, but he could not side with the man. His curiosity about what they approached in the future, in Neil's past as it were, was too great an experience and opportunity to pass up.

And here they were.

What do you want?

What did any of them want?

Writhing in new found pain upon the deck, Dane blinked his eyes open and met the penetrating gaze of the Being, whose own eyes seemed to pour into his, filling his soul. Dane told it what he wanted.

THAT NEIL HAD TO LIVE through events twice was a sick cruelty of fate. Undeserved, and one might even say, an unusual punishment. They had found the anomaly, and they had arrived. His warnings went unheeded, and because the crew voted to immure him, there was no chronokinetic surge that caught him this time around and repaired the timeline. He was in new temporal territory. They were in the belly of the beast, the *Ophion* on the verge of thrashing itself to pieces, its framework screaming its agony. He sought the only shelter he could, huddled in the corner of his small domain, shut off from everyone and everything, as he endured the worst of earthquakes.

Neil's immuration was a stark contrast to what he remembered of Dane's—and he did remember; the new timeline had not erased it. He had needed to be *somewhere*, and so he had found himself on a small plot of ground, an earthy tooth of rock and soil that seemed to have been pulled from the gum of the land and set aloft in the dark void. Edging the rear of the plot, the corner of two walls reached up unmarred to an unseen ceiling, but crumbled to nothing as they reached the plot's broken edge, forming two jagged triangles that enclosed an open space. In the loose dirt of that yard, Neil had spent his time scrawling mad screeds, and his mantra, "I see. I know." He doubted anyone of the crew saw or read them. Sometimes he thought they might be watching him, and he imaged them as just heads, large, grotesque heads, ethereal and transparent as reflections in dark glass.

The ship shook to its foundations, and he had hugged himself into a ball, lodged in the corner. Neil waited for the end, for surely the end must come. Was there any way to escape now? The warp fields couldn't find purchase. Geodesics across this distorted space was a convoluted maze that might lead them out, or lead them further in, or lead them in maddening circles. They were going to die and he snickered because Dane was supposed to try to kill them, and then he tried to kill them. But would that have solved anything? Neil had no idea. He hoped the induced paradox would bullwhip the timeline along a path where he and Abby were together, and the anomaly was never discovered, or its danger was evident and they never approached it. *But it was always my decision.* His gut clenched in guilt. He decided to investigate, explorers explored. Here was something to explore. *We certainly explored it. Hoy boy did we ever!* Another voice in Neil's mind attempted to gain some semblance of sanity by arguing that Dane had made the call this time around. *Yeah, but only because of my actions.*

Guilty. Guilty. Guilty. Of all charges. Sentenced to immuration by a jury of your peers.

When blackness swallowed the holodeck and left him in free-fall, he thought it was the end. He had shouted for Abby, and heard her distance reply. Neil found hope in the tone of her voice, a shared panic, and to his surprise, and equal longing. He flailed his arms and legs to try to get down to the deck to rebound toward the archway at the fore of the *Ophion*, where the command simulation was projected. He swam down and launched himself toward the crew, feeling a primal urge to protect Abby from the dangers they faced, from death itself.

"I tried to warn you," Neil shouted. "You should have listened to me!" He approached the ceiling, caught himself there, and sprang away in the absolute blackness. "I remember what you said Dane, though you never said it here! We immured *you* instead! You said we were nothing but ghosts in animated flesh! Living in a prison of lies!" A glow seeped over the holodeck's horizon when he made contact with the floor and rebounded. Neil continued, "As if we don't know the special requirements for *the mission*!" He could see them as he touched off the ceiling, standing out against the dark background like smudges of paint from a source of light hovering above the deck between him and the crew. "You said that if you couldn't walk a world in your own body, you might as well be dead. We all might as well be dead! You said the vaults were nothing more than coffins!"

"You accept death and you do nothing to get us out of here! We have to get out!"

Without warning, the holodeck filled with emergency lighting and gravity pulled him like a hand reaching out from the grave clutching his ankle. The crew descended, watching him. His eyes locked to Abby, whose face betrayed a storm of emotions. Neil got his feet on the deck. “Abby!” He raced forward, ignoring the part of his mind that reasoned that a portion of the anomaly had penetrated the ship. He wanted nothing more than to embrace her, animated flesh or not, he wanted to feel her against him. Contact.

The crew stood immobile in growing harsh light. None of that mattered to him.
Ophion intervened.

YOU ARE IMMURED

It came as a shout that rang his skull, and Neil saw the glass wall materialize before he could slow down from his sprint. He collided with the solid partition. Yelling his misery, Neil pounded on the unyielding glass, not stopping even as the new bruises on the sides of his hands burst, smearing his blood across the smooth surface of the wall.

The pain of his self-inflicted injuries did not matter. Nor did the brilliant, growing hernia of the anomaly in the command simulation matter. It only mattered that he and Abby reunite. What stopped his futile attempts of breaking through the impenetrable wall was Ophion’s reflection in the glass.

Neil stepped back, hunched in fatigue, throat raw, and voice hoarse. He had to urinate. He drew in deep draughts of air and turned to Ophion’s androgynous form. Danger abounded and no one seemed to care. “Are we going to just stand around and do nothing, and let this thing kill us?”

Ophion cocked its head.

THE MISSION IS BEING FULFILLED

“The mission?” Neil glared at the avatar in disgust. “What the hell are you taking about!” It was a matter of fact that some of them had died during away missions, including him more than once, but they were regenerated each time, and the *Ophion* was never in danger as it was now. Now the vaults were in danger. They faced permanent death.

Neil realized Ophion spoke of another mission, the unspoken mission that haunted their souls. He turned sideways to watch Dane approach the intense light that had assumed a humanoid form. “What’s going on?” He felt a hand slip into his, and looked around to see Ophion standing near, drawing closer to him. More feminine now, her eyes searched his, and they were Abby’s eyes, yet they were also Suinhr’s eyes from back when cautious love sparked between them before the chroniton surge ended that relationship.

WE ARE ABOUT TO FOLD

Neil caught a sudden flurry of activity in the command center and turned his head in time to see the human shaped thing release Dane. The crew scrambled out of seats to tend to their leader.

Ophion pulled Neil into a tight embrace, like a mother soothing her child.

DO NOT BE AFRAID

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT
LOEWAI REMEMBERS

Neil realized he did not see Loewai among the crew when the whole world was suddenly swallowed in blinding whiteness.

Stardate 70359.93, 12 May 2393 UTC

THE FRANTIC VOICE TRIED to push through the muffling barrier of constant ringing that filled her head. There were other voices behind it, shouts laying over one other, muted as if her ears were stuffed with cotton. They felt like it. And they hurt. Her cheek was cool from the deck plate, and Tsai Xiùyīng felt the residual static charge and nausea of a recent transport done in haste. The persistent voice addressed her as lieutenant commander with the tone of a question. She didn’t want to answer questions; she wanted to drift back to sleep and wake from this terrible dream. Yet the phantoms around her were not content to leave her alone.

A new voice ebbed through the barrier, carrying with it the spike of a headache, “...get out the way...” and “...concussion....” Xiùyīng would have waved the phantoms away if she had the strength to move her arms.

A coin of cold metal pressed against her neck, leaving a sting before it vanished. She gasped as a surge of jitters rushed through her body, propelling her into the vertigo of unidirectional motion. In a handful of seconds, the tide of the drug swept away the discomfort and fog of memory, leaving behind the clarity of immediate events. She blinked her eyes open and looked askew across the deck of the auxiliary bridge, at hurrying feet and officers collecting at their stations arrayed along the alcove wall. Strokes of red ambient light and the soft wail of the alert status prompted everyone into urgency. Anguish and sorrow squeezed her heart and Xiùyīng blinked back the tears welling in her eyes. No time for that now.

A hand pressed against her right shoulder, gripping more to comfort its owner than to assuage her. “Commander,” the owner of the hand beseeched. She turned her head—the sudden, sloshing headache causing her to grimace—to look upon lieutenant Tok. The young Ferengi’s eyes were wide with contagious fear and uncertainty. He needed an anchor from the chaos swelling around him, and he had chosen her, and she understood why. “What are we going to do,” he asked.

The lieutenant commander allowed him to help her to her feet. She surveyed the bustling command center from the area of the forward port side turboshaft, which whispered open to disgorge three other officers who moved around her like water passing a stone. Xiùyīng’s eyes tracked beyond the flight control stations in the center of the bridge to the raised platform at the back wall flanked by security stations—one of which was her post—to the authoritative seat cast in a cone of light. She trembled at the sight of it; an empty seat. A seat now reserved for her.

Tok hovered with expectation, and Tsai found him extending her PADD. She took it from his dusky fingers and forced cool steel into her spine. Taking an apprehensive step toward the center seat, she called out, “Situation Report!” Her thoughts, however, drifted back.