

# “Scotty”

By Chris Riker©

Dry rot. Figures, in a 74-year-old boat. He'd be spending most of the winter high and dry in the yard, ripping out Marcaill's ancient planks and beams, most of the transom, stanchions, cleats ... och! All by hand, if 'twere done right. He narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. “Right, or not at all,” Scotty ruminated to himself. What the hell else was there to do in retirement besides marry an old sloop with a half-rotted arse? Or watch the occasional new Enterprise begin her long dance in the heavens...

“You look like my Baba Vania on Sunday.” Back from the bar at last. What the hell was that little-boy grin doing on this grown man's face? Of course, it had always been there. “Sunday vas dry in Baba's house. Luckily for us, today ees Tuesday,” Pavel said, swinging two obscenely large and garishly decorated cocktails onto their table.

“Next time, let the waiter handle the order. I just asked for a wee dram o Scotch, lad.”

“Eet's in dere. Along vit wodka, jeen, and ...” Pavel squinted, as if that helped, “someting.”

“It's blue.”

Scotty sampled the outlandish concoction--not as bad as he thought. The glowing blue drink complimented the fried mozzarella sticks (definitely not McCoy-approved) on the table. When was the last time they'd been in Finnegan's? Was it just after the *A's* shakedown cruise? Or was it all the way back to *1701's* big refit? Those were long nights of drinking and arguing over specs with Will Decker. Those memories seemed clear as a morning after a storm, but he couldn't reconcile how many years had passed. Now, he shared a drink with Pavel to prepare for the launch of a new starship on a mission the two of them would only witness in Starfleet reports.

"She's got a Sulu at de veel and a good keptin on de breedge.”

Scotty grunted under his breath. “Harriman's got the numbers on paper, sure enough. But he's not skippered anything this complex.”

“No vun has. De B is de new golden child, packed vit all de new doodads, set to do every meeshun Starfleet Command can dream up.”

“With a captain who'll ne'er say no to the brass.”

“Not everyvun’s a Jeem Kirk who can break de rules to fit his ideals. Harriman lives in de real verld. Besides, de B eez not our vorry.”

“Aye, that's true. I'm just the engineering adviser. They won't even let me review the daily reports.”

“Keptin Harriman von't disappoint de Admeeral.”

“Retired,” Scotty pointed out, for no one's benefit but just to say it. “Och, tis one thing to bend a rule to please the queen, another to toss out the rule book because it cannae give ye what ye want.” His face darkened. “That’s just beggin’ the devil for a dance.” Scotty held up his right hand, forefinger, ring finger, and pinky bent down, to underscore his point. On any other human hand the gesture would be obscene.

“In thirty-someting years, I don't tink I've ever seen you do... dat.”

Pavel was staring at Scotty's right hand. He looked, too, a little surprised to see himself openly displaying the socket of his long-absent middle finger. He refused to allow a doctor to properly regenerate it. He'd worn the occasional prosthesis over the years, even been fond of one with a miniature built-in tool kit. In the end, though, he'd

grown tired of watching his native flesh age around the cybernetic digit and learned to do without.

“I suppose dere's a story dere ...”

Scotty took a long sip, then replied, “Aye, there is.”

.....

"Scotty, the Qing emperors never had a magician as talented as you!" Skipper Liu rarely smiled, but the steeping chrysanthemum tea did the trick. "I don't even want to know how you got the protein resequencers to get this just right."

Knowing how Scotty had actually pulled off this trick made Monty smile.

“Something amusing you, Engineer?”

“No, Ma'am. Sir.”

“Skipper.”

“No, Skipper.” Suddenly, Monty wished he hadn't tagged along with Scotty this morning. He'd rather be outside, checking the hull for dust scoring, a serious piece of maintenance. He'd rather be anywhere at this moment

than standing in the confined space of Skipper Liu's ornately decorated cabin, under the severe countenance of a jade phoenix staring daggers into his innards.

“Stick close to Scotty and watch. That's why you're here.”

Scratching his scalp through his wild red mane, Chief Lyle “Scotty” Bell piped up, “Oh, Monty's doing more than watching. He's already shown me Starfleet's latest methods to coax another .97% out of our dilithium matrix.”

Skipper Liu's eyes measured the young man, up and down. “Then, The Cixi is getting something out of my deal with Starfleet after all. I was afraid you were all spoiled by serving aboard ships with unlimited resources. It's a different story when you have to count every cristo-plexi patch and every erg of power.”

Montgomery Scott, “Monty,” shifted his weight and looked at the deck. “I'm not technically in Starfleet yet, Ma'am--Skipper. I'm still in the screening process, a sort of transition between the merchant marines and the fleet. Right now I'm on break, trying to gain experience out here in real space and I'm learning a lot aboard Cixi.”

“It's pronounced Cixi.” For the life of him, he couldn't hear the difference. “It employs third tone. Cixi.”

Whenever you say it, Crewman, it comes out: *sushi*. She's a ship, not a spring roll." Monty made a mental note to learn Mandarin. How hard could it be?

She refreshed her flower tea from an unglazed clay pot, a tiny pig adorning its lid. Lifting the cup in her delicate hands, she took another sip and ate a bite of reconstituted Jian Bing while clicking through several reports on her screen. Monty noticed that she kept her gooseneck monitor twisted just enough to keep him from getting a good look. "SE 19754 T: I believe that makes you Starfleet. I have you listed you as an engineer adviser for the brief time you'll be with us. We'll have to see if you learn anything worthwhile for your next captain." And then a wicked look crossed her face. "Of course, you could jump ship and turn your back on *The Cixi* and Starfleet, too."

His voice quavering like a poorly tuned hyper-spanner, he said "I don't think so, Skipper." He looked around for some place to fix his attention, quickly passing over the unsettling faces of the bubble-eyed goldfish ogling him from their small aquarium and finding a bronze lion-dog thing sporting a dour expression like its jade cousin. Scotty had told him their captain's cultural accoutrements were chosen with a purpose: the Skipper's corporate benefactor admired ancient Chinese culture, so Skipper

Liu, who grew up between worlds on freighters, mined deep into her own heritage to create a pleasing persona. To her credit, she gathered, organized, and assimilated the cultural flotsam, learning the differences between Han and Manchu aesthetics, sampling each new dish, even learning to genuinely appreciate the dizzying, dazzling productions of the Beijing Opera, so as to avoid presenting mere clichéd affectation.

Her dark eyes darted over yet another set of readouts without looking up. "In the past three years, I've lost four crewmen to the companies on Deneva Prime. Now, the leadership is breaking ground on a shining new city on the hill. They need engineers, especially talented ones." Monty silently hoped his face wasn't somehow betraying his plans. He'd been reading whatever he could find about the nascent Denevan capital. Officials were proudly playing up their vision of art-centric architecture with open sunny plazas and shady niches. Monty scoured the computer to find more details about the massive power nodes under construction there and in the planet's other major cities. Deneva Prime was the anchor planet of eight adjacent sectors, thanks to one of the richest mining operations in the Federation. It spread throughout the Deneva system's massive asteroid belt, which swung a wild 80 degrees off the plane of the ecliptic, the remains of some doomed

colossus. If these newest specs were correct, then The Great Belt could be home to a series of solar and ore-powered energy generators. Dozens of small stations would power Deneva Prime and her immediate colonies, with the potentially dangerous generators kept safely off-planet. The lambency of Deneva's golden age would only intensify, beaming prosperity to scores of worlds.

Seeing Monty appear adrift, Scotty made a polite remark and promised to keep a close eye on his protégé. Skipper Liu nodded and waved them out of her cabin. It wasn't until later that Monty realized that the skipper had been probing him to get a sense of where his loyalties lay, no mean trick since he hardly knew himself.

Life aboard Cixi quickly fell into a routine played at breakneck speed. True to her name, this fine, imperious dowager demanded constant attention. Monty was one of fourteen engineers out of a crew of twenty-seven. They worked long hours each day just keeping all the major systems operating nominally; much of that time making certain the new, state-of-the-art systems played well with the vessel's more venerable components. Monty ran through dozens of micro tapes, meticulously absorbing the

specs of each device as well as the myriad improvisations aboard this ship.

Even in a post-scarcity age, starships consumed resources. Currency was out of vogue in most parts of the Federation. But, trade had proved to be an ever-expanding universe. They could requisition basic comestibles and other essentials on Deneva Prime or at the nearest outpost, but Skipper Liu aspired to do more than just get by. She had her crew do favors whenever possible, or carry specialty items that were not strictly kosher under maritime law. The miners, who shared a handful of overworked shuttles between many installations, were grateful for the extra supply runs. Bottom line: Cixi could call in favors from nearly anyone in the system. Skipper Liu also employed some good old-fashioned horse trading to gain little extras, such as three refurbished phase cannons to ward off cheeky independent operators out of the nearby Orion systems. The Trame Incursion era relics were obsolete and required a great deal of upkeep. But they still packed a punch.

The Great Belt consisted of exactly 931,963 far-flung rocks above pebble-size. Of these, barely seventy were large enough to support a mining operation/power plant, habitat, and crew. Cixi's cargo bay six held two such habitats, each roughly twice the size of the recreational

shuttle Monty's family had used on holiday years ago. The habs had eight miners sharing one head. Almost every work stop included emergency plumbing of the sort Monty chose not to list on his curriculum vitae.

During the few hours each week they had free, Scotty inculcated Monty in the fine art of pleasing the boss. His first attempt failed miserably. Monty went to raise the overhead in the skipper's rack. He gave her another four inches, allowing her to sit up in the cramped bunk. Skipper Liu responded by dressing him down for entering her cabin without permission. Monty quickly sought to redeem himself by repairing an elaborate relief of *The Cixi* that had worked free of its mountings in the mess. For two weeks, the model sat leaning precariously on a countertop, her chambered hull resembling a highly-fecund termite queen. Monty cantilevered the heavy facsimile into the bulkhead, carefully avoiding the web of relays and conduit embedded on the other side. It cost him most of a night's sleep. He worked slowly, careful to muffle the drilling to keep from waking the day shift. The following Sunday, Skipper Liu joined her crew for lunch, as per her weekly custom. Monty watched her face for any glimmer of approbation, instead finding her as inscrutable as a Vulcan mystic. Then, as she rose to leave the mess, she paused beside the sculpture and ran a finger over the small brass plate added

by Scotty that read: MS-8178 Cixi – L. Liu, Master and Commander. Then she was gone. Scotty and Monty volleyed a grin. It was nothing, but it was everything.

“You’re doing it again, Monty.” Nthanda Chambers reached one hand behind her as she squeezed her head and shoulders into the access panel, inelegantly located waist-high in the bulkhead.

Monty handed her a newly recharged poly-bonder. After a beat, he asked, “Doing? I dinnae think I’m doin’ anythin’ but handin’ you tools.”

“And staring at my butt, Mr. Scott,” came her voice through the open hole in the bulkhead. That was followed by cursing in an African dialect he did not recognize. “That’s what happens when somebody overclocks the pattern buffer trying to input a recorded matrix... on a Mark-2 freight transporter. Tell Scotty it would be easier on the hardware if he just *grew* chrysanthemums in hydroponics.” Nthanda finished replacing the seared data chips. Monty felt his face redden as she wriggled to extricate her upper torso from the cramped space. He couldn’t help but look. There was just something about this woman’s callipygous stern section that captured his eyes like a black hole. His own sophomoric simile made him

blush deeper crimson. As her face came into view, her startlingly intelligent, earthen eyes robbed Monty of the power of speech. “It’s OK, just don’t let Skipper Liu or Scotty catch you,” she said.

He would swear she gave him a come hither look. No, that was impossible. Why would a beautiful woman set her sights on a 23-year-old Starfleet hopeful? Didn’t she usually hang out with the tall security chief... or had something happened there? Was there a chance? The deck threatened to turn to liquid beneath his feet.

Nthanda gathered up the tools, neatly slipping the poly-bonder into a loop in her vest along with a magnetic probe. The bulky ensemble could not conceal her bonnie figure as she made her way to the service tube.

“‘Scotty’ Bell and ‘Monty’ Scott: too confusing.” There was that mocking smirk again. “It’s bad enough having two Scotsmen on one ship. When you two get to talking, I can’t cut the brogue with a particle blaster.” Montgomery Scott, holder of three master’s degrees in engineering and warp theory, had a great comeback for her ... which leapt to his dry tongue about three seconds after she climbed down the ladder to deck three.

They serviced three more asteroid stations over the next two weeks, dropping off supplies and assisting the miners with maintenance. There was precious little time in the ship's schedule for Monty to try and be alone with Nthanda, though she seemed open to that possibility. He sat with her whenever their meals coincided. Then, he enjoyed a lucky break. They spent three days overhauling the main motor on the ship's grappling claw together, exchanging intimate dialogue only an engineer could love.

Their conversation drifted from work to life in general. Once, Nthanda mentioned a child, but quickly clammed up. He didn't press, nor did he find the courage to ask about other things he wanted to know. It was easier and more enjoyable to let their hours together set their own course.

She was never overt, but did manage to brush her body against Monty from time to time as they worked in cramped quarters. When her hand touched his inside the duotronic bowels of a bridge workstation, she smiled and made a cute remark. "Mind on your work, Engineer." She obviously enjoyed his awkwardness. Growing up with three older sisters hadn't really prepared him for attempting an actual relationship with an older woman. But, what was he thinking? How much of a difference did five or six years make?

The roiling emotions didn't end there. It was a small ship. His crewmates figured out the situation quickly enough and teased him mercilessly, especially Pinuoul, whose bright penny complexion and pink Ithenite-style fez distinguished the diminutive navigator, a Dayen, as one of only three non-Terrans aboard. She never said a word, but made smoochy noises whenever he turned his back. So much for maintaining professionalism in the workplace. Why did he let it get to him? Nothing had happened between him and Nthanda. At least not yet...

Skipper Liu was in engineering, checking a spike in the readings from the port warp nacelle. Suddenly, the board flashed then went dark. A second later, the whole ship juddered. More jarring was the blare of the ship's klaxon. Monty knew the situation before the instruments snapped back to life. "Someone hit us with a low-intensity, highly focused meson beam. It created a slow energy build up."

"And damn near destroyed my nacelle. Battle stations! I want blood, gentlemen. We need to send a message to these bastards that we don't screw around." Everyone knew who she meant. Orions were usually satisfied to cheat on trade deals, but lately they'd become

more aggressive, as Deneva's wealth grew to irresistible levels.

The skipper ran to the bridge trailing Mandarin curses while crewmen dashed from one compartment to the next with chaotic purpose. Monty grabbed a tool kit--he needed a damned tool vest--and headed to his action station at the aft phase cannon. The jury-rigged controls were here, rather than on the bridge, so this part of their defenses was up to him and Security Chief Paul Obasanjo. Standing beside this imposing man, Monty felt a flush of... something, but he put it out of his mind and focused on the immediate crisis. He suspected the Orions would probably go after the rear cargo sections, hoping to isolate them long enough to knock out the transporter shields and beam out everything they could get. They'd have to move in close, though, and he and the chief would be ready with a wee surprise.

This enemy captain had made an ally of guile. He had chosen a rock not much bigger than his vessel, hugged it close, and maneuvered to keep it between him and *Cixi's* sensors. He likely had mounted a small scanner on the rock's opposite side like an ancient periscope. He definitely spotted the *Cixi* first. In fact, *Cixi's* targeting scanner picked up the incoming missiles before it offered a firing resolution on the Orion vessel. The ship's computer

called out a sickening countdown to impact. "...four... three... two...one" before the missiles found their mark and rattled the ship with wild concussive force. The shields held against three of the low-yield warheads, but the fourth breached their defenses and cut into the hull. The scream of tearing metal-ceramic sent shockwaves all along *Cixi's* 238-meter length. Nthanda led the damage control party, sealing off the exposed sections, while the air filtration system worked to scrub the atmosphere of the acrid fumes.

Monty hoped these bloody brigands enjoyed their one good shot, as he and Obasanjo locked on and fired. The cannon's beam torched through the attacker's sheltering rock, sending fiery bolides in all directions. A debris cloud dispersed, revealing the Orion ship with her characteristic necklace of spinning nacelles. It appeared to have suffered only light damage, but was holding position, its captain possibly planning his next move.

The phase cannon's firing array hissed, overloaded and useless. Anticipating this on the quarter-century old refit, Monty had stashed two spares nearby. He scrambled to yank out the control assembly and install a new module. "Like changin' a fuse. You can target her engines now, Chief. I dinnae think the ugly beastie has much in the way of deflectors."

“I’ll target her bridge,” the security chief stolidly trumped his suggestion.

“One well-placed shot will lay her out like a holiday grouse.”

“I believe you heard the skipper, Engineer Scott.” He felt the chief’s anger, and not just against the Orions. A grim scowl on his ebony features, Obasanjo unleashed the second salvo directly at the ship’s bridge. This time the phase cannon’s control assembly held together long enough to turn their attackers’ brain center into slag and plasma. Bodies tumbled into the void on a lonely journey without end. Minutes later, the damaged vessel hobbled off and out of range. Monty could only imagine survivors in their engine room scrambling to make repairs while dealing with the loss of their captain. He said nothing, but couldn’t help but feel that Obasanjo’s strategy made no sense. They’d drawn blood and the Orions were not simply going to forget it. Even if one ship was out of commission, others would step in.

The truth about space battles is that winners and losers part ways in a very short time. The excitement was over. Now, the port nacelle needed about four hours’ attention, the breached cargo area about seven.

At 23:30 hours, after a final check of systems in engineering, Monty headed back towards the cabin he shared with Scotty, who promised to be along shortly. He could barely drag his feet, and could not shake the feeling that he'd been part of bloodshed that could have been avoided. He was lost in reflection walking through companionway C-2, when Nthanda's soft hand reached out from the shadows and pulled him into a storage locker. What followed surprised, terrified, enervated, and amazed him.

*“Wha first shall rise to gang awa,  
A cuckold, coward loun is he!  
Wha first beside his chair shall. fa',  
He is the King amang us three!”*

*“We are na fou, we're nae that fou,  
But just a drappie in our e'e!  
The cook may crawl, the day may daw,  
And ay we'll taste the barley-bree!”*

The melody hovered about uncertainly like a young wifey on her wedding night, the volume swelled to painful levels, and the brogue left onlookers bemused. Still and all, Scotty, Monty, and the boys and girls from the good ship

*Cixi* sang from their hearts so fervently that Rabbie Burns could hear them in far-off Dumfries.

Trading her drab duty fatigues for pearls and a hip-worshipping cinnabar qipao, Skipper Liu joined her raucous crew in a homely pub in the old fourth ward of Deneva Prime's burgeoning capital. "I can't tell if you're too drunk to sing or too sober." Some saluted, which was not a *Cixi* custom. She admonished them to be back to the sole shuttle on time or forfeit a month's credits. She drank a round with a darkly handsome Denevan wearing a finely-wrought silver bracelet of twin dragons before the two left the pub together.

"This is how we do it in Aberdeen. How are ye holdin' up, lad?"

"I thought we knew how to drink back in Linlithgow. I'll have to give Aberdeen a try," Monty answered and drained his pint of dark stout ale.

"A scion of Linlithgow, eh?" Scotty said, much too loudly, stopping nearby conversations. "I visited the great castle on a school outing once." He looked around to make certain he owned the room. "I kissed a braw raven-haired lass, then kissed her buxom ginger friend." A pause. "And rode home with one proud grin and *two* rosy red cheeks!" The crowd laughed and made rude noises.

Nthanda chimed in. “You might have gone home with more had you shown some manners.” She moved to stand with Monty, drawing a boozy “oooooh!” from their shipmates. At that point, Obasanjo, who had remained on the edge of the action, downed his drink in one gulp and left the pub.

Monty waited until they were in the next tavern to ask the obvious question. She didn’t hesitate: “Paul and I have a past. In fact... we have a daughter. But she is mine; I raise her. Paul and I are--“

“Friends?”

“History.”

She had said that too easily, somehow. “Where’s the wee lass now?”

“With my sister in Pretoria. You’d love Charlene. She’s a four-year-old charmer. And smart! She pulls her toys to pieces to get to the lithium cells--she calls them dilithium--and puts them back together perfectly.”

“Takes after her ma.”

“This is my last run for now. If I’m careful, I’ll be back to her soon... and with a lot more to offer her than a mother’s smile.” Monty wanted to ask more, but she

stopped him with a kiss. As he tried to pull her closer, she pushed back. “I’m afraid that’s all for now. I loved the other night, but it really is a small ship.”

“Aye, all ships are small.”

Monty piloted *Cixi’s* workhorse shuttle on their third and final trip to the mining camp on Asteroid D-47, affectionately dubbed “Camp Lulu” in honor of the miners’ patron saint of questionable cargo.

“My parents thought it sounded like poetry,” explained Skipper Lulu Liu, who took second chair on this trip. “The first one who smirks will find himself walking back to sector 001.”

The go team consisted of six members: the skipper, Monty, Scotty, Obasanjo, another security guard named Marks, and the cook and life-support tech Gaj, a pugnacious Tellarite who nervously dipped into a small bag for a pinch of pungent herb and sucked it up into his snout with a grunt and a sigh.

The camp’s bare-bones construction belied its potential for producing ore; it lacked even some basic features, let alone luxuries. On their last visit, “Camp

Lulu” consisted of a pressurized landing bay which held numerous work skiffs and adjoined to a small storage chamber. An interior hatch led to an enormous airless vault, a natural cavity inside the big rock formed eons ago, where the miners stored valuable mineral ore by the ton. Despite the installation of artificial gravity, the work required the use of hard suits, which consumed time and cut productivity. The crew hab provided their only shirtsleeve environment, containing communications, work stations, minimal living accommodations, and a compact but powerful PXX reactor.

The shuttle slowed to a crawl over the asteroid’s scarred and broken surface, barely 800 kph, and swung around the plant’s external superstructure. A dozen kilometers beyond, they followed an encrypted short-range beacon to the main landing bay, carefully concealed in the rockface. The enormous exterior hatch yawned back about 45-degrees from the cliff, revealing the red glow of lights inside. Monty’s instruments barely showed energy readings, even with the hatch open. He knew the miners did what they could to shield their main base from unwelcome eyes.

It took longer to unpack the shuttle than he had hoped, even with all eight of the miners and most of the *Cixi* contingent helping. Gaj and Obasanjo begged off the

duty, saying they had work to do on the waste reclamation system. No one challenged them on that, although Monty wondered just how many mission specialties Chief Obasanjo had, beyond security and ship's weapons. "Jack of all trades, master of none, if you ask me," he thought, then realized he was being jealous.

"Wait til you see our new home. We turned on the heat and made the final pressure tests eight days ago. We've been living like kings ever since." Camp Leader Cam Bennif beamed with pride, spreading his arms in a sweeping gesture as they walked past the trans-hatch lockers containing the helmeted work suits. He passed out hard hats and some basic gear, but that was all. Bennif explained that his crew had just finished super-compressing the native rock to fill in every possible gap, trapping the atmosphere. It had taken plenty of effort and ingenuity to coax air and water from the asteroid's secret depths, but, nearly three billion years after cataclysmic volcanism produced this stone, the vault held breathable air for the first time. This was only one of many such attractive vacancies hidden throughout The Great Belt. What the miners had done here, crews could replicate in hundreds of other places, providing living space for new multitudes.

As they stepped into the expanding darkness, there was one more surprise. “Would you do the honors?”

Skipper Liu gladly took the remote from Bennif and keyed in the command. In an instant, the boundless, inky-black vault flooded with brilliance. Banks of lights shone down from the ceiling, an impossible distance above them. The eye could now see that this natural cavity went on for several kilometers, with recesses stretching beyond the visible horizon. Used to life aboard the confines of *Cixi*, the visitors struggled against vertigo as their senses adjusted to the enormous scale. Mountains of ore stood ready to be used to fuel the energy production units. Vehicles and equipment looked like toys in the distance. The floor of the vault held an even grade, thanks to regolith churned out by the kiloton from the ore hoppers.

You brought dinner, right?”

“I brought the ribs you asked for,” said Skipper Liu. “I was afraid we were going to have to eat them standing up, squeezed cheek by jowl in the hab.”

Bennif grinned and pointed to one of a series of old-fashioned tents. “All the comforts. The mess hall is open. The grill is out back.”

“Ribs! Let’s sloch!” Scotty was practically drooling.

Dinner was nothing short of a banquet, as miners and spacemen exchanged news, gossip, and tall tales, while licking sticky fingers. One of the miners begged the *Cixi* crew to bring him a box of starter soil, so he could create a self-sustaining farm inside D-47. He swore that within five years, they'd turn the place into a real colony, the first thriving city in The Great Belt. No one doubted it.

Skipper Liu proposed a toast with some 120-proof baijiu she'd brought. "To boldly taking on great ventures, with all the risks and rewards that go with them."

The crowd responded with a hearty, "Hear! Hear!"

Bennif pontificated, "Many great projects can be measured in human sacrifice." Turning to the skipper, he continued, "It's said a million men lie buried beneath China's Great Wall." Then, to Monty, "Starfleet Academy itself stands in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge, whose construction claimed eleven lives - ten in a single accident. It's a grim fact of life: all our planning cannot protect us. In the end, we choose to either risk everything or to stay home." A mood-killer, the team leader's speech prompted people to drain their cups.

After the gathering finished off the last of the food, people spread out. The miners showed off their tent city, complete with workshops, multiple showers, and

surprisingly clean latrines. The miners and go team members then formed sides for football. The miners had easily improvised the goal nets from plentiful cargo webbing and tubing. The ball was originally designed for use in a sub-freezing vacuum. It came from a Mars-based company that discovered a ready market in colonists who insisted on indulging in competitive sports in the most inhospitable of places. Free to clash without hard suits, the miners whooped and howled with each bruising impact of body on body.

The young Starfleet loner proved to be a one-man assault force. Scotty tried to keep up, but lost his footing on the sandy pitch. He reclaimed his pride with a diving save, which Monty relayed into the net. Catching his breath, Scotty said, "I'm sorry your bonnie jo coudnae join us on this trip. I have her re-aligning the comm array."

"What? We did that two days ago. Anyway, she's nae me jo. I guess I dinnae ken what she is."

Scotty passed him a flask. "Now that is about as fine a description of the opposite sex as ever I heard: 'I dinnae ken.'"

"That goes both ways, me laddybucks," chimed in one of the miners, mocking their accent. "You men are as big a mystery to *us* as the heart of a magnetar," she said as

she grabbed the ball and gave it a great kick. That tied the score between Team Cixi and Team Lulu.

Scotty leaned in to Monty, “Ne’er you mind. Two hearts beating as one and all that romantic twaddle. You’ll work it--”

At that moment, a klaxon screamed into life. This was getting all too familiar. Bennif ordered his men to find out what was going on. Skipper Liu made a quick head count. “Twelve. Where the hell are Obasanjo and Gaj?”

Monty answered, “They’re working on the waste reclaimers.”

“Who the hell asked them to do that? There’s nothing wrong with ‘em,” hollered Bennif, who should know.

Skipper Liu’s communicator chirped twice as loudly and twice as fast as usual, a setting Monty had never heard before. She turned her back so that he couldn’t hear the skipper’s conversation with the ship, but he definitely heard her curse loudly. “Incoming!”

People froze, waiting, but not for long. An odd snick sound raised to earsplitting levels resounded through the multi-billion-year-old rock walls. The impact raised clouds of dust from the floor and ore piles and collapsed several of

the tents. A second impossibly loud stone-on-stone snap accompanied another major jerk that swept over the cavern's volume. Then a third. That was followed by a slowly grinding earthquake. Monty corrected himself: asterquake. Then a localized explosion hit, not far away. Then, nothing but the sound of anxious breathing.

Half-a-dozen tricorders appeared in the hands of miners and members of the go team, their sensors producing a dissonant whistling. "Report!" cried Liu and Bennif at virtually the same time.

"Meteors. Three direct hits," came the answer. Engineers on both teams got into an argument about the source of the meteors. Some suggested a magnetic rail gun. Others insisted a rail gun would have to be kilometers long and would therefore be impractical and tough to hide anywhere in the Deneva system. They felt the better method would be to use a ship's grapple to tow one or even three rocks then deftly sling them on an intercept course with D-47. That might require strapping portable attitude jets to the space bullets. In any case, it meant someone had to provide exact coordinates to aim the rocks so they could strike the asteroid's shell above Camp Lulu. One of the miners delivered more immediate news: "There are micro-fractures all through the strata. We're venting atmosphere."

“Listen up!” ordered Skipper Liu. “Miners, get to the shuttle. Scotty, Monty, find Gaj and Obasanjo and then get to either the hab or the main lock. Move!”

One of the miners came running back from the direction of the main landing bay with a distressed look on his face. After a quick conference, Bennif told the others, “The bay is open to space. Somehow, the outer hatch is open and non-functional. So is the hatch to the storage area.” Monty knew from the specs that that shouldn’t be possible. He also knew that their options were drying up. The miners’ shuttle was in use at another asteroid camp, and the work skiffs lacked an independent air supply for an operator. With the vault breached, that left them only one safe haven.

“The hab?” Skipper Liu, Monty, and two miners ran to the prefabricated unit, which stood more than one hundred meters away from the mess tent. Smoke and residual flames confirmed this was the source of the explosion, the one that had followed the impact-triggered temblors. An overpowering stench emanating from the hab confirmed that the blast had been fatal. Once inside, Monty located Gaj, or what was left of him; most of his face was missing. Obasanjo lay against the opposite wall, badly burned and moaning in a semi-lucid state.

Skipper Liu looked at her security chief and said in a flat tone, “Paul, we messed up.”

Scotty came inside. “I’ve got the miners prepping their hard suits. It’s the only way to get them to the shuttle. There’s just one hitch.”

“Let me guess,” Monty sighed.

“Ten working suits, plus a pile of non-working ones stripped for spare parts. Fourteen of us.”

“Thirteen,” Monty corrected, gesturing to the gooey, charred remains of Gaj.

The skipper attempted some gallows humor. “Next place we stop, let’s make sure they have proper air-locks.”

“I estimate we have about twenty-five minutes left before we black-out. I have one last idea, Skipper.”

“Monty, I need you on the shuttle,” Skipper Liu shot back. “I’ll stay here with Scotty and Marks.”

“Skipper, I can make this work,” Monty pleaded.

She started to object, but saw his determination and judged it to be an essential asset right now. “Fine. Scotty, *you* pilot the shuttle! And that’s enough second-guessing

on everyone's part." She had chosen the three potential sacrificial lambs. Marks looked less than enthusiastic.

For the next fifteen minutes, the two team leaders hustled their people into the suits, an agonizingly slow procedure even ignoring safety checks. They could now open the connecting hatch between the vault and the other chambers long enough to get the suited personnel through. "It'll cost us even more atmosphere, though," figured Monty. They could save ten. Three were in serious trouble. All of *Cixi's* EVA suits were currently stored onboard their shuttle, but opening the hatch a second time would negate any chance of rescue. Likewise, trying to get three unsuited people across the airless landing bay would not end well.

With everyone suited up, Scotty made sure his friend, the skipper, and Marks were well back from the hatch. The nanosecond it opened, the stone giant exhaled with hurricane force. It took nearly ninety seconds to get the ten people--two carrying Obasanjo, whom they had quickly stuffed as gently as possible into a suit--to the other side and reseal the hatch. Monty used the time to signal the ship. He rechecked the remaining pressure and calculated that they now had less than four minutes before they passed out. The camp had emergency breathers, but those were designed to aid in case of caustic leaks inside pressurized areas. Trying to breathe through a mouthpiece

while surrounded by vacuum would only provide them with an especially painful death.

“Nthanda, it’s time for a miracle.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Beam us up, lassie!”

“Uh--”

“I know. It’s a freight transporter. I need you to cross-circuit in a specific sequence to boost the resolution.”

“Monty! This thing was built to move building supplies, meat and vegetables. I mean dead meat and dead vegetables. If I so much as try to beam up a chicken, it’ll come through... wrong!” They both knew this model of transporter had limited use. It could read and reassemble molecules, but it hopelessly scrambled active brain patterns. Livestock suffered irreversible cerebral damage, materializing on the pad, flopping to the deck, writhing and dying within minutes. There had never been human trials on the Mark-2. It simply lacked the resolution found in the high-end model transporters that were standard on all Starfleet vessels.

“That’s the third time my ears have popped,” chided the skipper. “I would appreciate action soon.”

“Nthanda... listen to me. You need to cross-sequence bank-A to sub-matrix-delta. Now, that’s going to overload the buffer. But, it will hold long enough for you to be able to transfer all the data to Cixi’s main computer. You’ll want to tie-in to a good heuristic algorithm. You get that from a subspace tie-in to Starfleet Corps of Engineers main medical library computer, or Memory Alpha. Use my serial number as a password. From there, you can download the whole kit and caboodle back into the stream re-integrator. It couldnae be more simple.”

Nthanda was no coward, but Monty could hear the emotion in her voice. “Monty. I can’t do this. Maybe you can, but I am just not up to your level on transporters. I will not push the buttons that kill three people, including you and my skipper.” Monty began explaining his plan again, more slowly, but she shouted, “It’s a goddamned *freight* transporter!”

“So, ship some goddamned freight!” Skipper Liu and Monty looked at the terrified man in the red coveralls.

“Lad, if you ken some way outta this...”

“Beam down one of the habitats we have in storage,” suggested a clearly terrified Marks.

“That I can do!” shouted Nthanda’s voice over the communicator. “Locking on to cargo bay six now.”

Skipper Liu barked the order: “Energize!”

The thinning air in the ancient stone chamber rang out with the familiar carrier wave of *Cixi’s* powerful if not terribly bright transporter. They looked up as one nearby volume came alive with effervescent sparkles, trillions of infinitesimal shooting stars moving from the ship above them to--

“Crap!!”

The hab materialized about fifteen meters above the floor of the cavern. I hung in mid-air for a split-second like an ancient animated comedy, then plummeted. It crashed to the ground, splitting open like an extra large egg, throwing useless gear and debris all over the ground. Marks sat down where he was and put his face in his hands.

“What the hell happened, Engineer Chambers? Report!”

“I’m getting interference on the transporter’s targeting scanner, maybe from some magnetic ore. I can read the vault, but it’s far too indistinct. I thought I had the

coordinates right, but-- Oh, God! That's why we usually *haul* the habs into place the hard way."

Monty jumped in, "Don't quit just yet, lass. We've got one more hab onboard."

"If I guess wrong again, the same thing will happen, or else it will materialize inside a wall or the cavern floor. I need a site enhancer and we don't have any onboard."

Panting visibly now, Skipper Liu pressed Monty. "Engineer Scott, I am breathlessly awaiting your next magic trick."

"We dinnae need a site enhancer. We just need to brighten up the picture."

"How do we do--"

"Lass, are ye ready to give it another go with the second hab?"

He heard the whirs and chimes of the transporter's controls over his communicator. "Yes. Ready."

"Watch your scanner like a hawk." His own eyes were beginning to sting from the drop in air pressure and he could feel his thoughts getting fuzzy around the edges. "You'll see what you need in about five seconds." Monty

already had the back off of a tricorder and was furiously fiddling with its intricate guts in a way they were never meant to be fiddled. He simultaneously ran away from his crewmates in the direction of the football pitch. As the instrument began to issue a soaring whine, Monty wound up for a windmill pitch to throw it like a grenade. A split-second before he released it, the overloaded tricorder went off like an old-style roman candle. It painted the surrounding terrain with energy easily read by Nthanda aboard Cixi, who immediately beamed down the second hab. The blast also mangled Monty's right hand, splaying bone, flesh, and sinew in ways that exceeded critical design parameters. He dropped to the ground screaming in pain, clutching his ruined hand in his good one and feeling his consciousness slip away. The last thing he remembered was seeing the hab spring into existence on solid ground, about three centimeters from his nose.

Monty lay in his rack for two days, each heartbeat sending a painful throb through his bandaged right hand. Cixi had neither sickbay nor surgeon. As the ship's designated EMT, Pinuoul had done a fine job repairing Monty's three shattered fingers. The fourth was entombed on the asteroid below, buried somewhere under the most beautiful habitat in the universe. She assured him he'd

soon have full use of his hand. Starfleet would doubtless suggest regenerative therapy, but somehow, he knew he'd refuse. He owned this wound. This new normality would serve as a reminder.

Scotty tried to be a good roommate, but there just wasn't much to say. He dutifully fetched snacks from the galley and scrounged up technical manuals to help his friend pass the hours. Skipper Liu stopped by to check on him. After some idle conversation, Monty allowed his tortured thoughts to form the questions he did not want to ask.

“D-47 took three solid, well-aimed, ballistic hits. Someone on the ship must have found a way to signal the Orions.”

“That's right,” admitted his friend.

In his head, an insistent voice said: “Wait. You knew? But, you were in the camp. Who...?” Monty tried very, very hard to push away the rest of that thought.

So, the pirates had hoped to damage the mining operation just enough to drive out the crew, then slip in and load up on a fortune in refined ore and maybe some mining hardware. Without witnesses, the bandits could blame any of a dozen other parties for the theft. Deneva's wealth

attracted attention from very far away. Finishing the thought out loud, Monty said, “So the Orions had an agent on the go team waiting to signal them once everyone evacuated, but he never got the chance.”

Skipper Liu fielded this one. “That was Gaj, who, as it turns out, lied about his expertise with demolition equipment. He tried to set the charge onto the casing of the hab’s pergium reactor. But, he triggered it prematurely and the heat exchange unit went up right in his ugly face.”

“Gaj lied to... Obasanjo? Or to you?”

“Both. Obasanjo learned that Gaj had serious drug and gambling debts he was trying to pay off through dealings with the Orions.”

Scotty pulled up a chair and sat closer to Monty. “Lad, things got a wee bit mucked up.”

“Obasanjo was on our side?”

Scotty answered, “Still is.”

“Too many moving parts! No wonder your plan went tits up.”

“A colorful, but accurate assessment.”

“Why? Why do all this?”

Skipper Liu maintained phlegmatic patience. “To delay the power relay stations from going online. I have a... friend... on Deneva who tried to convince the leaders there of the need for a defense grid for The Great Belt, a series of drones and defensive satellites.”

“Pricey.”

“Lucrative.”

“And the Denevan leadership didn’t bite.”

“They did not. So, my... friend... decided to arrange for a demonstration, a sort of proof of concept display. He quietly maneuvered the Orions into doing what they planned to do anyway, but at a time and place where casualties could be kept to a minimum.”

“Tell that to Gaj.”

“—was an herb-addled idiot. He probably figured on there being enough suits for everyone to evacuate. Also, I didn’t count on him sabotaging the outer hatch. I had hoped to warp away in *Cixi*, then double back in time to catch the Orions as they tried to steal the ore.”

Scotty added, “All we really needed was proof of their treachery. We got more than we planned.”

Skipper Liu held up one hand to cut him off. This was her confession. “So, you’re right. We took risks we should not have. In any case, it’s done. The miners will have repairs completed in just a few months. We’ll help. Meantime, this morning, the Denevan leadership signed off on a full defense grid.”

He could feel a tone of insubordination creeping into his voice, and did not try to hide it. “You could have come to the Federation for help. Deneva has full protection.”

Scotty made an odd face. “Och, they’ll send a patrol to orbit Deneva Prime. But, safeguarding scores of flying rocks 270 million kilometers away is another story. Oh, one day... maybe when those big beautiful Connies we’ve heard so much about start rolling outta space dock, things could change. That’s in the future.” He put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Monty, I’ll tell ye no lie: I love your idealism. But the sorrowful truth is we cannae daydream about a perfect world. We have to *make* things work in the here and now. Hate it. Hate me. That’s what we do.”

Monty felt as if he’d aged a decade in a few days. He didn’t *hate* Scotty. But somehow, he didn’t look at his friend quite the same way anymore. Monty released a slow breath. “And the Cixi gets new upgrades and maybe first dibs on some new trade routes.”

“Your lessons aboard my ship went further than I had planned, Engineer. I trust those lessons include loyalty to your crewmates.”

“I take your meaning, aye.” Until that moment, Monty had not known whether he would tell Starfleet all he had learned. Having made his choice, it was as if his whole body suddenly unclenched. He actually felt relaxed for the first time in days. In fact, an insistent whimsy rose in him. “Still, it was nae here I learned loyalty, Skipper. I’ve been a loyal member of the Tartan Army since I was a lad.”

Scotty saw the blank look in Skipper Liu’s eyes, and interpolated, “Football, Skipper. A good Scotland fan.”

“Ah.”

He was writing a letter to his sisters when Nthanda came to his cabin. Their small talk faltered. Monty tried to fill the void with polite inquiries about her daughter, and about Obasanjo’s recovery.

“The skipper plans to ship him to a proper hospital planetside once he’s strong enough. He should make a good recovery.”

“So, where does that leave us?”

She took Monty’s bandaged hand and held it to her chest. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I guess I hoped this would all play out without you catching on. That was stupid. The whole plan was-- Look, I played my part. I have a daughter and a future to think about. I wish things had been different. I wish-- There are just some things you can’t fix, Monty.” She started to leave, then stopped, closed the cabin door, turned down the lights, and faced him.

“As for us... you... and I... are right here, right now. All alone together.” He knew that look. He liked that look. “Unless you’d rather not?”

“Och, lass. I’m maimed, nae dead.”

.....

Their drinks were long empty. “She sounds like qvite a lady.”

“Aye, that and more.”

“Did she stay on de Cixi? Or go to Deneva?”

“Neither. We shared a trip back to Earth on the *Iroquois*. And then we said our good-byes. We’ve stayed in touch off and on over the years. I requested her daughter for my engineering staff on the *Enterprise*.”

“Lt. Charlene Chambers. Of course!” A beep from his communicator interrupted Pavel. An old friend had run into Captain Kirk at a bar not far from there.

“I thought Jim was still observing crew training and simulations at Jupiter station. I wonder what he’s doing in town so early.”

“Looks like de rumors are true. Dey must have moved up de launch date on de *Enterprise-B*.”

Scotty’s hands whipped over the comm screen at their table. A quick check of some changes in the duty roster confirmed his fears. “Tomorrow?! When were they planning to tell us? She’s nae ready.” His voice flared and trilled. “She’ll fly arse over teakettle. Does braid *make* officers daft?” Scotty rose from his seat and started for the door. Pavel followed him into the brisk San Francisco night.

“And I know Hikaru wanted to see Demora off on dis woyage, but *Excelsior* ees still somevere around Epsilon Eendi.” Then, patting Scotty on the back, “Vell, ve can sort

eet all out ven ve meet up vit de Admeeral. Eet's a shame, though. I hate to leave Finnegan's. Eet reminds me of a leettle place een Podolsk, outside Moscow."

"Nonsense," he said calmly, his angry squall having passed as quickly as always. "You cannae spend your whole night in one bar, lad."

They decided to walk the few blocks to meet up with their former captain and friend.

After a minute, Pavel asked, "So, eef Bell vas 'Scotty,' how did *you* go from being 'Monty' to 'Scotty?'"

"That's a story for another time. Let's just say, her name was Marja and when *she* called me Scotty, I coudnae want for any other name."

"Details, Mr. Scott," demanded the Russian. "I vant details!"

"I'll trade you, Pavel," said retired Starfleet engineer and boatwright Montgomery Scott in a lilting tone.

"Vat did you have in mind?"

"One for the lasses of our youth. Jump in anywhere--"

Pavel recognized the classic tune, and the two turned heads as they spread song beneath the cool and distant stars...

*“Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;  
Ae fareweel, alas, for ever!”*

###