

Dream a Little Dream of Me

By Scott Fack

2384. A dream, or a reality that could be.

He was gone.

After all they'd been through, their ups and downs, Ro Nevin was gone, not even in this galaxy, and the likelihood of seeing him again was pretty much nil.

Corey Aster touched his hand to the cold viewport in an empty observation lounge on Deep Space 12. He'd demonstrated extraordinary mental powers before, and, from all the readings he'd done, he'd discovered those a telepath or person with mental powers was closest too were the easiest to communicate with, no matter the distance. His head ached with the strain, but no Nevin. The tears started to blur his vision again.

His eyes refocused, seeing a vision of himself in the viewport. Hair haggard, uniform slightly askew, his eyes pink, his face pale and unshaven, the bags under his eyes had bags... was this what he'd come to? To this end, to this horrible, tragic...

"Corey?"

Her voice made him jump. He sighed, wiped his tears away with his uniform sleeve, and boxed his shoulders. "Yes?" His voice sounded strained, foreign; he couldn't bear to turn to face her. After all this, all he wanted was to be alone, to wallow in his own pity, until the pain would fade and life would become normal again. Life after Ro Nevin.

She approached anyway, her hands folded. "Corey... I'm... We're all worried about you."

The pain from his hands made him glance down to notice his knuckles were pale. He unclenched them from the viewport frame, sniffed once, and turned around, not looking at Commander Robin Lefler's gaze. He folded his arms across his chest.

Lefler continued. "I know how much losing Ro... Nevin... is hurting you right now. The pain you are going through, the feeling that you'll never be the same. But... I'm here for you. We're all here for you." She rested her hand on his forearm.

His gaze met hers; her eyes were glistening. He swallowed hard, his mouth still dry. "Thank you. I appreciate it... but it's something I need to get over myself."

Robin Lefler retracted her hand. "I.. understand. But the offer is always there." She backed off, moving slowly towards the door into the corridor. The door hissing open, her hand rested on the doorframe, and she stated over her shoulder. "I mean that, Corey."

And with that, she departed, leaving Corey Aster alone again.

I didn't understand loss until I lost my parents. Now it feels all too familiar for my liking.

I remember when I was 11 or 12, looking at Jeremy during family dinners and thinking, what must it be like? Why is he always so somber, so withdrawn, so... unlike the boy he used to be? He'd left Earth, excited about a new life, glad to see his mother snapped out of her rut after her husband's death years earlier, and returned to Earth so devoid of any emotion, a shell of his former self. Part of me was intrigued, another part frightened off by his inability to reconnect with

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others. The part where he felt like he had the plague and I should steer clear of him scared me the most.

Is that what others see in me now? After my loss of Nevin – a loss in a long line of losses – have I become that detached, unapproachable person my cousin was?

I knew they weren't coming home before Grandma told me. She'd found out from the FNN reports, the ones with the grim news the armada at Wolf 359 had failed, that rumor was, there were very few survivors, if any.

The dream was vivid, with men forged of metal and flesh attacking Mom and Dad, and it haunted me for months. As Grandma clutched our hands – Jeremy's and mine – a little too tightly for comfort as the air raid sirens sounded and we were shepherded into the civilian emergency shelters, like millions if not billions around the planet, the memory of Mom gasping for air as Dad screamed as he backed off pecked at my soul like a vulture rummaging over a dead body.

I remember wondering... is this how we will go? Will the men of metal and flesh, not quite alive but not quite dead, come and get us too? Will Earth be overrun by zombies made of computers?

Loss. I never recovered from losing my parents. Do we ever? I still find myself strangely detached from people, afraid... afraid that they will one day disappear like my parents. Like so many others.

Nevin... I finally found happily ever after with Nevin.

And that happily ever after is now gone.

2384. Robin Lefler's quarters.

The chirping alert woke her up, and she grudgingly pulled herself from her bed. *Another dream about Corey. I wonder what it means...*

As her feet shuffled across the deck and her hands pulled her white bathrobe closer around her, she called out, "Yes, yes, I'm coming. Hold your horses."

A light on the monitor blinked in time with the chirping; the monitor's face was already open and illuminated, awaiting her input. Bleary-eyed, she tapped one of the controls, and a standard Federation crest appeared. "This better be good," she muttered.

A dark image appeared on the screen, and she squinted to distinguish the items in the image. The screen flickered a few times before the image started to clear.

"*Commander Lefler?*" The man in the image was indistinguishable, appearing as a dark silhouette, in front of a dark green wall with several medical monitors with illegible marks on them. The transmission occasionally garbled and then became clear again.

"Yes," she replied, her voice quavering slightly, as she absentmindedly guided her body down to her chair. "This is she. Who's this? I can't..."

"*We don't have much time.*" The voice was strong and to-the-point. "*This channel could be compromised at any moment.*"

"But..." Lefler squinted as she pulled her robe tighter. "I don't..."

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"Corey Aster."

The name sent a shiver up her spine and she clutched her robe tighter. She'd been dreaming about him mere seconds ago. "What do you know of him? He's been missing for months..."

"He's alive: in a coma, but alive nonetheless. A... 'guest' of the Romulan Empire." The voice sounded unsettled, rushed.

"Guest? That doesn't sound promising." She planted her hands on the desk. "Who is this? What do you want?"

"I'm a mutual friend of Mr. Aster's. And I'm coming to you because someone, somewhere along the line seems to not want him coming back to the Federation." The figure stepped forward into the light...

...And Robin Lefler gasped.

He was a Romulan Tal Shiar operative.

Early 2367. Starfleet Medical (Chicago Office), Chicago, Illinois, Earth.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore." The boy-on-the-cusp-of-becoming-teenager shot up from the couch, plonking his legs on the floor as he stood.

A ray of late afternoon sunshine streamed in through the ceiling-to-floor windows in this corner office at Starfleet Medical. Several other high-rise buildings graced the Chicago skyline, with the shoreline creeping down towards the horizon in the distance in the south-facing windows.

"Corey." The counselor in the blue Starfleet uniform stood, planting his PADD on the coffee table, firmly planting his hands on the boy's arms. Counselor Scott Fack met Corey Aster's gaze. "I know this is hard for you to talk about. And I don't want to push you to talk about it. But it's so important for you to talk about how you feel."

The door chime sounded. "I think we're finished for today, but it's very important to know if you need to talk at any time that you or your grandma contacts me, okay?"

Corey shook his head in agreement as he looked down towards the ground. The door chime sounded again.

"Come in," Fack stated as he rose to his feet.

An older woman, dressed in a grey sweater and brown slacks walked in, a female Starfleet ensign behind her gesturing her in. The counselor approached her as Corey went to play the PADD he'd brought along. "Mrs. Aster. Good to see you again."

As the duo watched Corey play a game on the PADD, Corey's grandmother crossed her arms, tapping her finger against her elbow. "How's he doing?"

"We're making progress in small steps." Fack placed his hands behind his back. "We have to remember this was a traumatic experience for him, and let him come to terms with it in his own time. Twelve year olds, like other children, process loss and trauma somewhat differently than adults." He glanced over at the senior Aster. "That doesn't mean letting him repress it; that

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brings the danger of post traumatic stress syndrome. If he starts talking about it, let me know right away, and I'll try to get there as soon as possible."

Helen Aster nodded. "Thank you." She turned to him, placing one hand on his arm and leading the counselor away. Glancing over her shoulder, she continued, "He's still having the nightmares."

"That's to be expected..."

They stopped, facing each other, standing near the door. "No... they're not normal nightmares. He's..." Corey's grandmother turned her attention to her grandson, he being absorbed in his game. Her face turned an ashen color. "He... *perceives* things. In his dreams."

"Perceives?" Fack's face scrunched up as he frowned. "I don't understand."

Helen bit her lip for a few seconds before returning her attention to the counselor. "The other night, he was in my dream. Or me in his." She shook her head. "I don't know which."

"We were at home. I was cooking dinner, Corey was doing some research for his engineering project for school, and I don't know where Jeremy was, but these mechanical men – Borg -- burst through the doors, through the windows..." The senior Aster looked down at the floor.

Scott Fack rested his hand on her arm. "Go ahead, Helen. It's okay."

She looked up, her eyes full of tears. "They... there was no escape. I could... feel a Borg hand on my neck: so cold, so mechanical, so inhuman. I tried to fight them. Jeremy was screaming in the stairway as he saw them, and Corey was throwing everything he could at them as they backed him into a corner..." Her voice faded away as she looked back at Corey.

"I never told him about the dream." She glanced back at the counselor. "I didn't want to scare him. But he knew. He *knew* about the dream."

"You mean he brought it up later?" Fack folded his arms, readjusting his stance so his legs were wider apart. "As in you shared the dream?"

The senior Aster nodded in agreement. "... I admit, I was a bit tired from the nightmare, but he started talking as I made him and his cousin breakfast."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'The Borg grabbed Mom like that.'" Her eyes glistened, a tear running down her cheek. "He just kept playing his game on his PADD. It was so... nonchalant, so matter-of-fact... So..."

"Haunting." The counselor placed his hands on her forearms. "I could understand how you would feel." Grabbing a PADD from a stack of them on a sideboard, Fack tapped some information in before glancing up at her. "I'd like, with your permission, to perhaps observe Corey's dream state. I don't need to be in the same room. As you may know, I'm a telepath, and, so I'd be the stronger candidate to respond to any such events that occur."

"That sounds... reassuring, Counselor." She wiped away her tear with her handkerchief, her mouth forming a harsh line. "It feels so... unnatural to me. Any help would be appreciated."

"Good. I'll get Rose to coordinate my visit with you." He put a reassuring hand on her arm. "We'll get to the bottom of this, and make sure he's better. I promise."

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2384. Robin Lefler's quarters.

His voice continued, rushed and hushed. *"Listen closely to me, Commander. Someone... or some group... is blocking Corey's return home."*

"But who? Why?" Her face looked even paler than before, dark circles appearing slightly under her eyes. "And why should I trust you?"

"I can't get into the specifics, but I'm on your side. I'm sending encrypted information on contacts who can authenticate my identity." He looked over his shoulder, then turned back to the screen, his eyes wide. *"I need you to push for Starfleet from your end to work harder with the Romulans on his return. The medical team here are not very familiar with human physiology. They're trying to force answers from him..."*

Her heart pounded in her chest, and her mind raced at the prospect of not getting any more sleep. "And you? What are you doing about it?"

The Romulan leaned forward towards the viewscreen. *"I'm under orders to remain undercover here and ensure no harm comes to Corey. To quickly answer the why... his mental abilities, his clairvoyance... they seem to be manifesting. And, from what I've seen in the past, the answers they bring only raise more questions... Answers and questions certain groups aren't happy about."*

Lefler squinted at the screen, her crossed arms slightly relaxing. "Why me?"

"You're his friend. Others we've contacted have been... less than helpful or interested." The Romulan started to whisper, his eyes darting from side to side, his speech increasing in speed. *"From what Corey's told me in the past, he values your friendship... and I'm sure you'd do the same for him if the roles were reversed. Do we have a deal?"*

Robin Lefler bit her bottom lip and nodded an uneasy nod.

Early 2367. Starfleet Medical, Chicago, Earth.

Counselor Scott Fack's log, Stardate 44084.7: Reporting on progress of patient Corey Aster, aged 12. From all accounts, the patient has exhibited the ability to collectively dream. I'm unsure of the significance of the reoccurring dream, whether the Borg represent a deep-seated fear within Corey that the Borg killed his parents and countless others at the Battle of Wolf 359 a few weeks back or something deeper. Of all my patients, survivors and relatives of those killed at Wolf 359, most report having fleeting dreams about the Borg, about the battle, but none seems as detailed and intriguing as Corey Aster's. With his guardian's permission, his grandmother, Helen Aster, I'd like to not only explore the dream and its symbolism but also experience the collective dream. But first I need more information on the dream itself...

"Corey, I'd like you to tell me about the dream you keep having."

A clap of thunder rattled the windows slightly. Dark clouds were rolling in from the west, the edges of which could be seen approaching through the office's south-facing windows. Over Lake Michigan, outside the east-facing windows, the sky was a calm blue.

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Counselor Scott Fack uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, holding his PADD steady as he leaned on his thighs.

"The Borg come and they take my family away." The young Aster ran his finger along the couch edge beside him. "It's that simple."

"I think it's more complicated than that." Fack leaned back. "Give me more detail. How do they arrive? What are you doing when they do?"

Corey appeared uninterested, continuing to follow the cushion's edge around. "I'm doing homework at the table..."

The windows rattled slightly again as another clap of thunder sounded, the angry clouds now nearly overhead. The counselor looked to the young Aster for more.

"Yeah... researching a project." His eyes wide, the boy glanced over at Fack, who peered up at him. The latter leaned back in his chair, nonchalantly tapping notes into his PADD while keeping his full attention on his young patient.

"Good. What else do you remember?"

Corey Aster stared out the office's east-facing windows, his eyes glazing over as the storm clouds rolled on towards Lake Michigan, the lake's surface starting to rough up. "Grandma is cooking dinner. Jeremy's... upstairs."

The counselor planted the PADD between his seat cushion and the chair, clasping his hands together on his lap. His voice was lower, entrancing. "How do you feel?"

"Not right." The young Aster shook his head slowly. "The air's funny."

Another clap of thunder rattled the windows. "Funny? How was it strange?"

Corey nodded towards the angry clouds charging onwards, his eyes still unfocussed. "Like before a thunderstorm."

Fack looked away for a few moments before returning his gaze. "And then what happens?"

"They appear." His voice sounded so cold, so distant, so hollow.

"The Borg?" More a clarification than a question.

"Yes." Corey stared, beyond the thick raindrops now pounding the windows. "They appear and try to change us all."

Now we're getting somewhere, the counselor thought. "How do they change you?"

Visions of buzz saws and drills and metal zombies filled the boy's head, but the only words he could offer were, "They try to make us like them."

The latest turn made Fack lean forward, frowning. "Why do they try to make you like them?"

The windows shook with another thunder clap, water rushing down the outside. "Because that's what happened to Mom and Dad."

The counselor felt his stomach drop, and his mouth emitted a slight gasp, although he attempted to mask it by clearing his throat. "You think the Borg attacked them on their ship?"

Corey wasn't distracted; he kept his gaze beyond the rain, beyond Lake Michigan. "I know they were. I saw it in my dreams."

Fack scooted forward on his seat, leaning far enough to put his hand on his patient's wrist. "Corey. The *Melbourne* was severely crippled. All evidence points to your parents being killed in the initial blast." His hand shook Corey's wrist reassuringly. "They didn't feel any pain, okay? It was very quick, very painless. And the Borg cube is gone. The *Enterprise* crew disabled it, and the Borg ship self-destructed."

The young boy turned to the counselor, his eyes refocused but as wet as the windows. He pulled his arm away from Fack's hand. "They aren't dead. A lot of them are still alive."

Scott Fack took back his hand, clenching it into a fist, before opening it back up and planting an open palm on his chest. "Corey. I'm sorry."

The patient returned his attention to the storm outside. As another clap of thunder sounded, his voice spoke low and hollow. "You'll see."

2384. A Romulan medical facility. Unroth III.

The crash of equipment onto the floor and a low grunting was peppered by a voice stating, "Increasing to a higher bandwidth."

Corey Aster's body convulsed on the biobed, and the Romulan doctor punched another set of bandwidth numbers into the console. The convulsions slowed, Aster's leg still twitching slightly.

"We're trying to observe his mental abilities and tap into vital information, Dr. D'Mer," the Romulan Tal Shiar officer bantered as he pushed the doctor away from the machine. Adjusting the machine to lower levels, the officer smiled lightly as the human engineer's body relaxed. "Not trying to kill him."

The room was small and sparsely lit. Medical monitors of differing sizes surrounded the biobed. The device sat next to the biobed, a light above it illuminating its console clearly. An observation window stood next to the only door leading in and out of the room. Several other control panels jutted from the walls, two of which had chairs at the station.

"You seem awfully soft for a Romulan Tal Shiar agent, Major Tovath." The doctor kept his focus on arranging his implements, picking some up off the floor and planting them, precisely but with strength, back in their place.

"I am your superior, doctor; remember that." The Tal Shiar agent's eyes glared at the doctor, the latter of which dared not meet the officer's burrowing gaze. "The Romulan Empire doesn't have the luxury of starting a war with the Federation over a missing officer when we're fighting one against the Archein. And, if you haven't noticed by the Romulan body count, the Empire doesn't have the luxury of picking and choosing allies at the moment; we need the Federation. And, dare I say it, the Klingons."

D'Mer polished another implement before placing it in a medical case. "I don't need a lesson on intergalactic politics; I'm only following orders."

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"Then, follow this one: once you are finished, leave for the day." Tovath moved to the doctor's side, smiling lightly. "You're tired, and we can't afford for you to make mistakes."

Dr. D'Mer nodded his head slightly in agreement. "And you?" For the first time since the exchange, his dark brown eyes met the Tal Shiar agent's.

Tovath looked away, adjusting some readings on one of the monitors. "I'll stay here tonight and monitor the patient for any damage you might have caused." Looking over at the full medical case on the biobed then up at the slightly sweating doctor, he raised an eyebrow. "I trust you're finished?"

The doctor swallowed and closed the case, holding it with both hands in front of him as if it was his last line of defense. "Yes, Major."

"Then," Tovath said as he picked up a PADD and entered information, not looking at the doctor. He shoed him. "You're dismissed."

2384. A dream, or another reality.

The trees stood with ample space between them, the forest clearing in this area. Most trees had thin trunks, unlike some of the thick, dense forests he'd been raised a few miles from in Chicago's Green Belt. As he approached, he saw a man standing facing away from him.

Scott Fack put his hand on Corey Aster's shoulder. "Corey?"

The engineer kept looking deep into the forest. "They lied."

"Who?" The counselor looked off into the distance, scanning the area for anyone else. "Who lied?" *Where is this place? Is this some sort of manifestation of Corey's psyche?*

"They said love lasts forever, that there's a happily ever after, and I'm telling you there isn't." His eyes were glassy. Corey Aster started to walk, and Scott Fack followed, only slightly behind him.

"I keep seeing him. He's just out of reach. I run for him and by the time I arrive, he's not there." They started up over a small, steep hill, struggling to conquer it. The engineer leaned forward, clawing at the hill, pulling himself up it, while the counselor planted his hands and feet steadily, moving slowly. "That or I see him far away, and he screams but I can't hear him, and he can't hear me."

Corey reached the hill top, sighed, his shoulders drooping as he nodded his head slowly. Still climbing up the hill, Fack stopped as he saw his former patient's mood. "What? What is it?"

Aster half-heartedly pointed towards whatever was over the hill, the counselor still climbing but nearly at the top, and his hand flopped back down to his side. "See for yourself."

Scott Fack dusted himself off at the hill's top, glancing down quickly to pick some grass of his outfit, then looked up.

A large river rushed by, the water brown and angry, debris like branches and leaves emerging to the surface then bobbing. In the river's middle, a large, angry whirlpool pulled some debris in, a large tree branch swirling round the edge, spinning faster and faster as it sunk into the dark center.

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They were on a levee: a very strong levee judging by the height of the water. Water nearer the levee tended to be calmer, not so rushed.

Fack followed Aster's line-of-sight to glance at the river's opposite edge, another levee holding. On top, Ro waved his arms frantically, his mouth gaping open, his face slightly red, the veins and muscles in his neck protruding.

The counselor felt his stomach drop, his eyes wide, turning to the deflated Aster: the walls were dropping. This continuous hell was Corey's reality now.

2384. A Romulan medical facility. Unroth III.

Scott Fack, disguised as Tovath, startled awake, dropping his PADD to the floor in the process. Looking over at Aster's still body, his mind reached out, realizing a shard of his former patient was still conscious somewhere in there. *But how to bring him back out?*

Early 2367. The Asters', Shorewood, Illinois, Earth.

Counselor Scott Fack's log, Stardate 44103.1: Reporting on progress of patient Corey Aster, aged 12. Corey's given me some interesting theories into what happened to the Starfleet crews at Wolf 359, but, after reporting this to Starfleet Command, my first obligation remains to my patients and their well-being. Helen Aster has allowed me to spend time at the Aster home southwest of Chicago to experience the collective reoccurring dream. Over the past three weeks, no sign of the dream yet, but I'm holding out hope...

He scrolled down on the PADD, taking a sip from his tea before setting the mug down on the side table. Scott Fack sighed as he looked at the PADD again: 3:57 AM.

His eyelids felt heavy but he forced them open, his eyes opening widely. The words in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* started to ice-skate around the page. He blinked a few more times then closed his eyes to give them a rest.

Something wasn't right; he awoke with a jerk, the PADD dropping to the floor. His hand slid onto the mug but it was cold to the touch. Standing up, he jumped when he heard a scream and the sound of plates smashing. The counselor dashed from the living room through the dining room into the kitchen...

A Borg drone held Helen Aster off the ground, her face turning red as she swung fists wildly at the cyborg. One hand connected with an implant in its head, but it appeared unfazed.

His attention turned to Corey, the young man backing up and grabbing a salt shaker on the kitchen table and pegging another drone in the eyepiece with it; the drone kept approaching. "Corey," the counselor said, keeping his voice as calm as he possibly could as his hand grabbed the boy by the shoulder. "Corey, you are the only one who can end this dream."

Corey's grandmother emitted another shriek, cut off mid-scream by the hand tightening around her neck, her legs kicking and flailing. Two tubes shot out from the Borg drone and struck towards her like snakes striking at prey.

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Another boy, this one blond, stood motionless in the stairwell, his hands wrapped around the handrails either side, his eyes wide, his breathing shallow. His sight dashed from drone to drone as Fack held his hand out. "Stay there!"

"Corey!" Scott Fack shook the younger Aster but to no avail; his mouth open, he stared like a deer caught in the headlights. "Corey, shake out of this. You can stop it."

Not working, he thought. Squinting, the counselor imagined wrapping a large hand around the drone and attempted to shove it back that way, throwing it sideways into the other drone, but mid-throw he realized in the dream reality, his telekinetic powers were useless.

Thinking of another solution, his mind reached out to find out who in the dream was real and who wasn't. *Maybe I can shock the people awake by surfacing their consciousnesses.* In the process, though, Scott Fack turned to one of the drones and gasped. "Oh my God, they're alive. He's pulling Borg drones into his dream." *Not any Borg drones... people he knew...*

He squinted at the second drone as it backed Corey and him into a corner, the boy throwing knives and placemats and a vase at the Borg. "Lieutenant," the counselor barked at the drone.

The Borg glanced over at Fack, a small spark of recognition firing in its one human eye. The spark faded, and Scott Fack cleared his throat. "Lieutenant Lee Aster: Desist immediately! That's an order, Lieutenant!"

The drone stumbled back slightly, the glint back in the eye, but the hollow dead blackness returned and it progressed towards them again, a hand outreached towards Fack's throat as the drill on its other hand started to twirl...

Fack gasped himself awake, bolting upright in the chair, knocking the cup of tea over in the process. His breathing was fast, his heart pounding in his chest... and he cursed under his breath.

2384. A Romulan medical facility. Unroth III.

Special Operations Log, Stardate supplemental: I've made contact with some shard of Corey Aster still active deep within his mind; he's living in some sort of dream reality in his head. His treatment at the hands of the Romulans becomes more brutal by the day as they try to pry into his brain – this wasn't the way it was supposed to be – so, using my Romulan persona, I'm going to intervene...

D'Mer had his back to him almost the entire day. Fack, disguised as Tovath, sighed, tapping a dermal regenerator against his hand before taking a deep breath and speaking. "The Tal Shiar want me to take over this medical investigation."

"But..." The Romulan doctor turned around, PADD in one hand, stylus in the other, his eyes wide. "You're not a doctor."

Fack-as-Tovath paid attention to placing the implements into a case. "I have some medical and quite a bit of scientific training. It will suffice." Looking back up at D'Mer, meeting the doctor's gaze, he continued, "The order came from the Vice-Chairman himself."

He slammed the PADD and stylus on the bed, then leaned forward on it. "I protest this action. I don't believe the Tal Shiar have the ability to..."

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Fack kept his stare at the doctor, his face deadpan. "Less dramatics, more action, Doctor."

D'Mer snatched his PADD and stylus from the bed, and turned around. He sighed, his shoulders tense, and he punched at the monitor and tapped the stylus hard against the PADD's surface.

The beeping sounds of computers acknowledging requests were the only sounds breaking the silence for nearly fifteen minutes. The Romulan doctor kept his back turned to the Tal Shiar agent.

Fack took some readings from another monitor. Leaning over his shoulder: "So, how's your daughter doing in school?"

Again, the PADD and stylus slammed onto the bed, but this time, D'Mer stormed across the room, swung the Tal Shiar officer around, and started poking him in the chest. "Is that a threat?"

Mid-poke, Fack wrapped his hand around D'Mer's finger and pushed it away. "Take it in the spirit it's meant, Doctor. I'm trying to make small talk. You've ignored me all day."

The Romulan doctor stood mere millimeters from the other. "I have nothing to say to you," he spat. D'Mer spun around on one heel and marched back towards his monitor.

Fack-as-Tovath moved closer to the bed, folding his arms. "You have been stand-offish since I got here. What is your problem?"

"My problem?" D'Mer spun around, his face greener than usual, the arteries protruding from his neck, his eyes dark with rage. "My problem, Major? You should know!" He leaned on the bed, his arms shaking, in stark contrast to Corey Aster motionless, face blank. "Delve into your Tal Shiar files about me. That should tell you plenty."

The agent appeared unfazed, cocking his head slightly as he defended himself. "I try not to make a habit of spying on people I need to work with. I'd rather hear things from the horse's mouth."

D'Mer squinted. "Horse? Mouth?"

"Sorry. Human phrase." *Whoops. Have to watch the colloquialisms.* Fack dismissed it, waving his hand around. "Must've been left over from a mission to the Federation a few years back. So..."

They stood there looking at one another for what seemed like a long time. Corey Aster breathed in and out, his chest rising and settling, an unwilling and unconscious witness to the conversation.

Finally, D'Mer sighed, retracting his arms from the table, crossing them. Not looking into Tovath's face: "You honestly don't know?"

Fack-as-Tovath was exasperated. He shrugged. "I'm sorry, D'Mer. No, I seriously don't know."

The Romulan doctor scanned the floor for a few minutes, licked his lips and then began speaking in a low, rushed voice. "My father was a hard working, loyal Romulan citizen: a senator. He fought for the rights of the people within the constraints of the law, but, because he was looking after the peoples' interests and not his own, or other senators' interests, one day, he disappeared."

His eyes started to sparkle in the room's harsh lighting. "It had a devastating effect on our family. My mother, normally outgoing and willing to help people in their time of need, withdrew. For three years, we couldn't even get her out of the spare bedroom. Every morning, she would cry when

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she woke up, finding my father wasn't alive like she'd dreamt he was, thinking reality had only been a bad nightmare."

"I'm sorry. I had no idea." Fack-as-Tovath uncrossed his arms but took a deep breath, trying to remain in his Romulan persona.

D'Mer continued, nodding absent-mindedly at the other's apology. "My older sister took control of the house at the age of 15, when she should have been talking about boys and focusing on her high school education. And, we found out later from one of my father's friends, that the Tal Shiar had my father killed for doing his job too well."

His eyes were dark, hollow, far away. It sent a shiver down Fack's spine, as the Romulan doctor's eyes came back to the present, stormy like a large hurricane, focused on the human-as-Romulan. "So, in light of this," his voice continued, strong and low, "I am sure you can understand why I don't trust the Tal Shiar and certainly why I don't trust you."

I remember when I met him for the first time in Advanced Astrophysics. Well, met is such a loose term. Bumped into would be more the case.

I had a pile of PADDs in my arms – the break between classes wasn't enough for me to get back to my room to drop some off – and was chatting to Rawlins, backing up into the classroom through the open door, and someone bumped me, the PADDs clacking to the floor and scattering. Rawlins laughed and said, "Later," while the guy who collided with me dropped to a crouch like I did, pulling PADDs in in a mad attempt to clear the floor for all those other cadets piling into the lecture hall.

"Sorry. I'm so sorry." He said as I focused on picking up the PADDs.

"No, it's okay. I should have watched..." I looked up...

And straight into those eyes.

He didn't say anything; I was dumbstruck, the words rolling around my mouth like pebbles in a strong current.

Everything made sense, for one small moment. I could see my past, my present, my future, all in those eyes, all in a moment, and my stomach dropped.

It wasn't like me to be so lost for words. Normally the clown, now the love struck fool, I smiled uneasily as he put his pile of my PADDs on top of my pile, his eyes not falling away from mine.

"Hi." The words finally flowed from my mouth, the debris dislodging. "I'm Corey."

We both stood up, but our eyes still locked. He was wearing an officer's uniform. "I'm Nevin. Ro Nevin."

A laugh escaped. "You're Bajoran."

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes. Very perceptive."

Damn. Stupid, stupid, stupid thing to say! The smile faded from my face. "Well... we better get to class before we're late."

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"Yes. Especially since I'm your TA and teaching it today. Cadet."

I never plucked up the courage to talk to him much in that class. Hell, I never had enough courage to speak to him much at all. The decision tortured me, as I found myself falling deeper and deeper in love with man who, at the time, really didn't outwardly express any interest either way.

But there was the feeling, that nagging voice somewhere deep within me, that he was the one. I'd memorized the way he smiled, the way he spoke, that laugh... The way he'd look at me when teaching class and quickly turn away, stumbling for words or in explaining a concept or term.

It all fell back to that first meeting, that first feeling I can only describe as love and lust and wholeness I never felt before, and rarely felt after, that moment.

2384. A dream, or another reality.

Things were different this time.

Sure, they were back in the forest, but somehow, the shadows seemed longer, the sun seemed lower, the setting, well... *More eerie.*

He approached the other. "Where is this place?"

Corey Aster let out a slight laugh as his eyes held a fixed stare into the forest.

"Corey?" Scott Fack put his hand on Corey's shoulder, as he moved to his side. "Corey, where is this place?"

His eyes were red, his voice hoarse. "I don't know. Do you?"

"No." The counselor removed his hand from the engineer's shoulder and placed both arms behind his back. Squinting, trying to remember, planet after planet, place after place... and this forest was not familiar to him in the slightest. "Should I?"

The two suddenly rushed through the woods, not moving their feet, narrowly avoiding tree limbs and trunks. Fack felt queasy, unbalanced and unfocused, but as he opened his mouth...

The man in a Starfleet cadet's uniform who appeared suddenly in front of them let out a grunt as another punched him in the gut. Two other men held the first man back as the other threw another punch. The forest was different, full of trees native to Earth's North American continent. *Earth. That forest wasn't, but this forest is.*

The first man grunted again, his head flailing towards Corey and Scott, blood spraying from his face.

Fack gasped. "Corey?"

The now-Corey watched on, his hands trembling, his eyes filling with tears. The others seemed unaware of their presence.

"So, 'Fleet. Thought that little prank was funny, did you?" Another punch.

The then-Corey spat blood at the puncher's feet. "Yeah. Obviously you guys didn't."

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Another punch. The then-Aster groaned.

“Not so funny when we beat the crap out of you.”

Defiantly, the then-Corey raised his head, narrowing his eyes to a squint. “In case you haven’t noticed, you aren’t exactly doing a great job of it. My grandma gives a better wallop...”

Another punch, this time accompanied with a crack.

The two men holding the then-Corey grimaced, one of them slightly recoiling at the noise. The puncher stood up straight, shaking the pain out of his right hand, a smile creeping onto his face. “How was...”

A blur tackled the puncher, the latter planted head-first into the ground. The Starfleet officer jumped to his feet, pulling the attacker up by the back of his shirt, ramming him headlong into a tree trunk.

Two other cadets arrived, phasers drawn, trained on the duo holding the then-Corey. “I wouldn’t move if I were you,” the fair-haired one said. “Let him go.”

Ensign Ro Nevin dusted the leaves and dirt off his uniform as he approached. He glanced up for a few seconds, one eyebrow higher than the other. “You alright?”

The then-Corey staggered away from his two captors, towards Ro, shaking his head yes. Nevin rested his hand on Aster’s face, using his other hand to check his wounds. “Hold still.”

“He looks pretty beat up,” the dark-haired cadet added. “I think we should...”

The Bajoran grabbed the then-Corey and threw him to the ground, a phaser beam barely missing them. One of the captors switched his aim towards the cadets, but both fired their phasers first, the would-be captors crumpling to the ground, knocked unconscious.

Another cadet, a female Trill, ran onto the scene, her phaser drawn. “Is everything okay? I heard phaser fire...”

On the ground, Ro Nevin rested on the then-Corey Aster, their faces only millimeters away.

“So close, I could smell the breath mint he’d used a few moments before. Spearmint.” The now-Corey broke his silence, followed by a slight one-syllable laugh.

Nevin pushed himself up and off of the then-Aster, the former’s face turning bright red as he stumbled to his feet. His hand thrust out, towards the then-Corey. The engineering cadet coughed before he reached out, clasping Ro’s hand, allowing the ensign to pull him off the ground.

“Who were they?” The counselor crossed his arms.

“Some rednecks; they aren’t important.” Corey turned to Fack as the scene before them froze, with the then-Ro resting his hand on the then-Aster’s shoulder, the concern barely concealed by a forced non-challantness on Nevin’s face. “This is.”

“You? And Nevin?”

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"I was at the Academy; he was a TA." Aster looked down, folding his arms in tightly around him. "Distraught by my feelings for him, coupled with the really bad day I was having, I went out for a walk, and kept walking and thinking and... before I knew it, I was here."

"I was missing for a while; my cousin Jeremy, roommate Muñoz and classmate McFarlane were worried. They told Ro – he was a very popular among the students – and he led the charge to find me."

He glanced over at how he once was, the young, bloodied cadet. "He..." His voice grew lower. "Of all the people who could have saved me, it had to be him."

"A knight in shining armor." Fack smiled uneasily.

Corey nodded. "That he was. And, at that moment, that brief moment he and I were so close, I didn't care how much pain I was in, how tired and sore and angry at the world I was; it all seemed to fade away, and there was him, and me, and all I wanted to do was kiss him."

As Aster planted his face in his hands, his body shaking, Scott Fack placed his hand on his former patient's back, rubbing it. "Sounds like true love to me. And that, my friend, is a very rare thing, indeed."

Early 2367. The Asters', Earth.

Counselor Scott Fack's log, Stardate supplemental: We've made first contact. It seems Corey can pull other people into his dreams, and somehow the dream can be affected by those in it. In this case, Lee and Amy Aster – both Starfleet officers assimilated by the Borg and somehow still alive despite the Borg cube self-destructing over Earth earlier this year – appeared as Borg drones, hell-bent on assimilating us. But... and this is an awfully big but... I've made contact with some shred of the person Lee Aster used to be. I got a Borg to flinch. For a fleeting moment. And I think I've found the crux of Corey's powers...

"We have to go back," he almost shouted as he slammed open the medical case and searched through its contents for a wave inducers.

"No." Helen Aster pinched the bridge of her nose as she stared at the floor, her white dressing gown being held tightly around her with her other hand. "We can't keep doing this, night after night..."

"Something's not right." The counselor found a pack of wave inducers. "Those Borg... they're as real as you and me. And..." He turned and looked at Corey. "They're Lee and Amy."

"Nonsense." The elder Aster shoed Fack. "I saw what was left of the *Melbourne*. Most of the saucer section was missing..."

"I know." Scott Fack approached Corey's grandmother. Noticing the dark circles under her eyes and the glazed look in her eyes, he softly placed his hands on her upper arms. "I know, but something... something has happened. Can't you see? They aren't dead; they're assimilated. And Corey has some... innate ability to communicate with them."

He returned his attention to his medical case. His hands shook as he dug through it. "I think... either he or I might have the ability to cut off the Borg influence... Let their true selves emerge."

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"No. No, no, no. Not tonight." Helen Aster's voice was soft but strong. "Maybe not ever. It's not natural. They're dead, or are as good as dead. And him." She pointed at Corey. "He's a boy. He'll hit puberty soon and grow out of it."

She shuffled off, slowly but with purpose, towards the staircase leading upstairs. "I'm going to bed and getting some sleep. I suggest you all do the same."

2384. A Romulan medical facility. Unroth III.

He quickly removed his hand from Corey Aster's shoulder as D'Mer walked in, scooping up a PADD and checking readings on an adjacent monitor. "Good morning, Doctor." Fack didn't look at him.

"Morning." D'Mer laid down his satchel and other work bag on a chair.

"No improvement in the patient." The disguised Tal Shiar officer put the PADD at the foot of the bed, spinning it around and pushing it towards D'Mer. The latter picked it up, lifting his head slightly as he read it. "I think we need to arrange to have him transferred back to the Federation. We're making no progress here."

The Romulan doctor placed the PADD down on a side table. Looking at the large monitor on the wall, he commented over his shoulder, "I disagree. We need to find the right frequency so we can extract the data we need."

Fack moved around the bed and approached D'Mer. Standing behind him to his right, the disguised officer pretended to monitor the doctor's work. "Extraction won't be any good if we kill him in the process..."

D'Mer turned to face Fack. "This human has exhibited precognitive and clairvoyant abilities in the past. He could be instrumental in the Romulan Empire gaining information on the Borg, or better yet, the Archein." He pushed past the officer and stood next to the bed, resting the tips of his fingers on the bed's surface. "His Bajoran husband was aboard the Starfleet ship stranded in the Andromeda Galaxy. If he's alive – and let's face it, Starfleet are pretty resourceful no matter how much we may dislike them – his husband could be a wealth of information we could use to defeat the Archein and regain our sovereignty back." He turned back to the lost-for-words Tovath. "Or at least that's the spiel you spouted to me when you first arrived."

Fack-as-Tovath approached the other side of the bed, looking down on Aster's battered face. "Poor human. He must be having such a difficult time, somewhere deep in there. I'd say, from what his file's said, life has been pretty hard for him."

D'Mer scoffed. "What would you know about a hard life? Life's never been hard for you..."

2384, a few weeks before today. An alley, Unroth III.

He'd heard the screams and dropped his osol twist on the ground as he dashed down the narrow alleyway, drawing his disruptor from its holster.

Scott Fack, dressed as Tovath, crept carefully but swiftly along the wall, the cries growing louder.

"No, you're wrong. You're wrong!"

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"This is not a valid Romulan ID card."

"You are not who you say you are."

"Desist struggling."

He peeked around the corner to see three Tal Shiar agents roughing up Dr. Menosky, disguised as a Romulan doctor. Menosky pulled against two Tal Shiar officers holding him, while the third officer pulled out a tricorder and started to scan him.

Fack popped back around the corner, disruptor still drawn, his breathing growing shallower. *There's no way to take them all down without being caught. And that will only raise suspicion...*

He heard a clattering, like metal hitting a stone surface, and then a period of silence.

"What's this?"

"It looks like a Starfleet communications badge."

"I... I can explain. I found it at a wreck..."

"You are lying. The tricorder proves it."

"He's a spy?"

"No... No..."

"A *human* spy."

The commander huffed a few times, building up courage as he reached out with his mind, trying to ascertain the Romulans' positions. *If I could place them with my mind, firing will be...*

Another scream sounded, one of a man on a warpath, full of adrenalin and...

"He's trying to escape!"

"Fire!"

The sound of a disruptor firing echoed throughout the alleyway, peppered by a dying scream; then eerie silence, with the smell of burnt flesh wafting on the air.

Fack turned pale and stumbled away, trying not to vomit.

2384. A Romulan medical facility. Unroth III.

"No. You're right, D'Mer. Life's never been hard for me." Fack-as-Tovath returned to his station, his vision blurring. "Never."

Early 2367. The Asters', Earth.

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Standing up, he jumped when he heard a scream and the sound of plates smashing. The counselor dashed from the living room through the dining room into the kitchen...

A Borg drone held Helen Aster off the ground, her face turning red as she swung fists wildly at the cyborg. One hand connected with an implant in its head, but it appeared unfazed.

His attention turned to Corey, the young man backing up and grabbing a salt shaker on the kitchen table and pegging another drone in the eyepiece with it; the drone kept approaching. "Corey," the counselor said, keeping his voice as calm as he possibly could as his hand grabbed the boy by the shoulder. "Corey, stop. Try to cut off the Borg influence from your parents."

Corey's grandmother emitted another shriek, cut off mid scream by the hand tightening around her neck, her legs kicking and flailing. Two tubes shot out from the Borg drone and struck towards her like snakes striking at prey.

Another boy, with blond hair, stood motionless in the stairwell, his hands wrapped around the handrails either side, his eyes wide, his breathing shallow. His sight dashed from drone to drone as Fack held his hand out. "Stay there!"

"Corey!" Scott Fack shook the younger Aster but to no avail; his mouth open, he stared like a deer caught in the headlights. "Corey, shake out of this. You can stop it."

Not working, he thought. Squinting, the counselor imagined wrapping a large hand around the drone and attempted to shove it back that way, throwing it sideways into the other drone, but mid-throw he realized in the dream reality, his telekinetic powers were useless. But... his telepathic abilities could work.

Thinking of another solution, his mind reached out to find out who in the dream was real and who wasn't. He took his powers and reached out, finding more than one voice. *We are the Borg. Resistance is futile. We will add...*

That's the chorus to stop. Visualizing wisps in his mind, he moved to block the Borg consciousness, separating them from the drones who were once Asters.

He squinted at the second drone as it backed Corey and him into a corner, the young boy throwing knives and placemats and a vase at the Borg. "Lieutenant," the counselor barked at the drone.

The Borg glanced over at Fack, a small spark of recognition firing in its one human eye. The spark faded, and Scott Fack cleared his throat. "Lieutenant Lee Aster: Desist immediately! That's an order, Lieutenant!"

The drone stumbled back slightly, the glint back in the eye, and stopped. "Corey?" The voice sounded mechanical, altered electronically. "Corey..." It looked around, scanning the environment before looking at the drill on its hand. It gasped... *he* gasped. "What... what have they done to me?"

Another mechanical voice came from the kitchen, this time a more passionate female one. "Helen... Helen, please help us. Oh God, you don't know what we've been through..."

"I... I can't stand this." Lee Aster backed off, offering Fack and Corey room to move between the dining room and the kitchen. The young Aster, with his mouth semi-open, stared at the drone who was once his father as the counselor moved between the two drones for a stronger position to block the Borg voices.

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"I'm... this is not who I am." A tear dropped from Lee's human eye and meandered down his ashen grey cheek. "How... can I live like this?"

Helen Aster was uneasy, her right hand white and clutching to the breakfast bar's countertop, one foot back as if ready to escape at any moment. Amy Aster held her palms upward, tears cascading down her face. "Helen, please, someone... save us. Please!"

"I... I can't." Helen shook her head, faster and more determined. "I wish I could..." She backed off, looking towards the floor instead of her daughter-in-law. "I can't. I can't."

Amy turned away and her body convulsed as she cried, holding herself up against the doorframe into the hallway. "Oh God, no. No, no, no, no..."

Lee crouched down, various implants whirring and clicking on him, to face Corey. "Corey... Know we love you. We're very far away but we still love you..." Tears ran freely from his human eye. "You need to..."

The worried expression on Fack's face turned to dread, the color from his cheeks draining. "Oh no." He rested a hand on Corey's shoulder. "Corey. Step away."

"Corey..." The glimmer in his father's eye faded, and all expression melted away from his face. "You will be assimilated."

Corey Aster screamed, and the echo remained as Fack woke again on the couch, the screams from upstairs dying.

Dashing up the stairs, the counselor squinted as Helen Aster, in her nightgown, turned the hall light on. Her eyes were red, and she absentmindedly took Corey and Jeremy into an embrace as they wrapped their arms around her and held her tightly.

She looked Scott Fack in the eye. "This needs to stop. Now."

2384. A Romulan medical facility. Unroth III.

The console screamed as the duo rushed around Aster's convulsing body. D'Mer lifted a hypospray, pressing it to the engineer's neck.

"It's not working." Fack-as-Tovath gripped his console with one hand, his knuckles white, his other hand tapping frantically at the controls. Another alarm sounded, this one a staccatoed beeping, repeating over the other warning. "Increase the dosage."

D'Mer glanced up at the Tal Shiar operative, the hypospray clutched in his left hand. "But that could..."

"Do it!" His voice roared as his hands frantically worked the console. "I'm attempting to slowly remove him from the device. Decreasing bandwidth frequency..."

Sweat began to bead on D'Mer's forehead as he flipped open a tricorder and monitored Aster's convulsing body. "If you remove him too fast, it could severely damage his brain or worse..."

Fack-as-Tovath glared at the Romulan doctor briefly before returning his attention to his console. "I'm fully aware of the consequences, Doctor. Now at level two-point-eight and reducing."

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Corey Aster's body stopped convulsing but continued twitching, his face flush and stark. *I'm so sorry for this, Corey.* His former counselor tried reaching out for him in his mind, trying to calm his former patient down, but there was nothing to grab on to in this reality.

D'Mer let out a sigh, a small smile appearing on his face, a bead of sweat tracing his cheekbone as it headed towards his chin. "His temperature is lowering by point-six onkians per minute."

"Good." The Tal Shiar agent tapped a few inputs. "At level two-point-two and decreasing."

"All vital signs are returning to normal." D'Mer stood tall and glanced at Tovath. "For a comatose human."

"At two-point-five and decreasing. Initiating gradual decrease protocol and automatic shut down procedures." The disguised counselor worked the controls before turning around, leaning up against the console, one arm wrapped around his body, the other pinching the flesh at where his nose met his forehead. Fack-as-Tovath sighed, dropping his arms as his eyes, dark circles underneath, looked at the doctor. "This isn't working, D'Mer. I need a break."

2384. A dream, or another reality.

They were back in the forest again. Corey started up the small, steep hill, while Fack glanced around, scanning the tree tops, anything for a hint. Far above him, he swore in his mind he could see small wisps floating above them.

The engineer leaned forward, clawing at the hill, pulling himself up it. Scott Fack jumped onto the embankment's side, pushing himself uphill.

Corey reached the levee's top, cupping his hands around his face. "Nevin! Nevin!"

Scott Fack dusted himself off at the top, scanning the far shore to see Ro Nevin on top of another levee, his mouth gaping open, his face slightly red, the veins and muscles in his neck protruding. "What's he saying?"

Aster shook his head. "I'm not sure. I can't make it out. The river's too loud."

"Neither can I."

Aster looked down either side of the river. "Maybe there's a bridge close..."

With that, the two watched the remnants of a metal bridge bob past them. Ro Nevin also stopped yelling and followed the debris, watching as the whirlpool sucked it in.

"You were saying?" Fack cocked an eyebrow.

"Never mind."

A large river rushed by, the water brown and angry, debris like branches and leaves emerging to the surface then bobbing. In the river's middle, a large, angry whirlpool pulled some debris in, a large tree branch swirling round the edge, spinning faster and faster as it sunk into the dark center.

"We have to get to him somehow." Corey Aster squinted, trying to read Nevin's mouth. Holding up his hands, palms towards the Bajoran, he watched Ro stop yelling. His husband stood still as

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his hand went up to his ear, then he made an over exaggerated shake of his head. "We can't hear you." His voice became lower, more removed. "We can't hear you."

Fack glanced over at Ro Nevin, resting a hand on Corey's shoulder. "I think I might have an idea."

2384. A Romulan medical facility. Unroth III.

"I really think," he said cautiously, tracing the edge of the bed with his hand, "we need to find another way."

D'Mer held his PADD with both hands, shaking it slightly at chest-level. "I think we're close. Really close." He started to tap on the PADD. "If you look at..."

Fack-as-Tovath glanced over at Corey Aster, the latter breathing in and out slowly, rhythmically. "Doctor, I'm not sure the human can take much more of this poking and prodding." Grabbing his own PADD from the bedside table attached to the console, he punched up a few figures of his own. "From what experience I have with human biology, his body's at breaking point. If we push him too far, we may kill him."

D'Mer slapped his PADD down on a table, his eyes closing to slits as he folded his arms and squared his shoulders. "That's a really strange answer to be coming from a Tal Shiar agent." The Romulan doctor shifted his weight, bringing his legs slightly apart. "You'd normally want to extract data at any cost. Even if it killed him in the process."

The Tal Shiar agent cocked his head to one side, eyebrows going up and then down as he laid the PADD on the bed, planting his hands behind his back. "True, that is the normal Tal Shiar way. But I need to remind you his death could cause a regional destabilization. We need the Federation and Klingon Empire..."

The doctor tisked and rolled his eyes. "Same old excuses..."

"There are already questions being asked about this man." Fack-as-Tovath charged around the bed, his right arm pointing at Corey Aster. "Do you realize how difficult it is to come up with new excuses, covering your incompetence?" He got within centimeters of D'Mer's face, his breath hot on the doctor's right cheek. He dropped his voice, whispering. "Do you realize, Doctor, I'm covering for you? Now it's time to call it quits before something we both regret happens."

D'Mer exploded, sending the Tal Shiar agent backwards slightly. Raising his hands in defiance: "More threats!"

Fack-as-Tovath remained calm, following the doctor as the latter started collecting items from around the room and planting them into his satchel on a chair. "They aren't threats, Doctor. They are reality." He approached D'Mer. "If we kill this man, we might as well both kill ourselves. The Tal Shiar will have both our hides for it."

The Romulan doctor remained focused on checking PADDs and sliding the right ones into his bag. Shaking his head as he pushed another PADD into his satchel, his eyes remained focused on the contents of the PADDs, not his adversary. "You Tal Shiar and your ways."

The agent swiped at D'Mer, wrapping his hand around the doctor's wrist, causing the latter to let out a slight whimper, sending the PADD clacking to the deck. They looked squarely into each other's eyes. "Doctors are healers, not butchers. As a medical practitioner, Doctor D'Mer, you

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lack the ethical and moral boundaries to be practicing. You're nothing but a monster, no better than those who slaughtered your father. But, unlike your father, you're sacrificing your ideals to satisfy the very beasts who killed him. You're a hypocrite."

D'Mer's face went pale, his eyes filling with tears. Not taking his eyes off the Major, he flipped the satchel flap closed and hoisted the bag over his shoulder. Emitting a slight cry, the doctor turned and rushed out the door.

Mid 2367. Starfleet Medical, Chicago, Earth.

"They aren't stopping." She was at the verge of tears, her eyes welling up. "They're getting worse."

"It's okay." Myra Elbrey reached a hand out, touching Helen Aster softly on her arm. "Let it all out. It must've been traumatic for you." As Helen buried her head in her hands and her body convulsed slightly, the Betazoid counselor glanced back at the other two counselors in the room, her eyes wide.

Lead counselor Richard Whitby's knuckles turned white as he clutched her PADD. His attention turned from Elbrey to Scott Fack. "Counselor?"

Fack cleared his throat, keeping his gaze fixed on his manager. "I suggest," he said calmly, "administering a mild sedative to help temporarily inhibit the ability until Corey can be sufficiently taught to control it."

Helen Aster shook her head, looking up, her eyes red. She pulled a handkerchief from a pocket, shaking slightly. "I'm sorry. He really needs to stop this. It's not... normal for humans to exhibit this sort of... ability." Her mouth nearly gave away her true feelings.

Whitby turned back to Helen, his hard facial expression softening. "Mrs. Aster: I can sympathize. You want the shared dreams to stop? So you and Jeremy can get some rest?"

She nodded in agreement. "I... I mean, I've heard cortical inhibitors are good at doing that. Or..."

The lead counselor cocked his head slightly. "It's okay," he said, his deep voice like a purring cat. "Go ahead. We're volleying ideas around at the moment. You're as much a part of this meeting as we are."

Elbrey smiled as she rubbed Helen's arm. "That's right. There's no stupid ideas here, okay? Every idea is considered." The Betazoid counselor looked at the two others to continue.

"What was your other idea, Mrs. Aster?" Whitby's knuckles were returning to a more natural color.

"I was thinking – and I've only heard this on the grapevine, so I don't know how true it is – that a telepath could place barriers or walls in his mind..." She had Whitby and Elbrey hooked on her every word, the duo hanging on her every word. "To stop him from projecting." Helen Aster placed her hand on Elbrey's knee as she looked her in the eye. "He's far too young for these abilities to be emerging..." Turning to Whitby: "Or to be safe. I don't want to stunt his development. Not after his aunt and uncle died and now, his parents..." She started to cry again.

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Fack cleared his throat. "No disrespect to you, Helen, but I disagree." He turned to his colleagues. "I don't believe stopping him is the right solution." To Whitby: "Sir, I feel placing mental blockades in his head will, in the long run, damage his development. Once the abilities manifest themselves without training, what we're seeing now could be increased dramatically..."

Whitby placed the PADD on the end table between his and Fack's chair. "Sometimes, patients entering or in puberty exhibiting these abilities can have varying results. Some are able to be controlled through guidance and learning; others can, quite frankly, become monsters."

Corey's counselor interrupted, crossing his arms around his stomach. "I don't think Corey is a threat. He's only demonstrated the ability to pull people he's close to into his dreams."

"Two of which," Helen Aster stated as she glared at him, "are Borg drones."

"Two of which," Fack retorted, "were your son and daughter-in-law."

The lead counselor put his hands up. "We're not here to gauge the content of the dreams." Planting his hands back in his lap, Whitby continued. "I think it's important to err on the side of caution and put these blocks into Corey's head for the time being."

Scott Fack went to say something, his mouth open, but Richard Whitby raised a finger. "That's my professional assessment. We can always remove the blocks later." Turning to the Betazoid counselor, he raised his eyebrows. "Myra?"

She looked at Fack first, then Whitby, her face blushing slightly. "... I think your assessment is the best option." Turning back to Fack: "Sorry, counselor."

"Counselor Fack, your objection has been noted." Whitby picked up his PADD and started tapping information in. "On your next meeting with Corey, I want you to start placing the barriers in his head. Mrs. Aster: I'll get Rose to give you a cortical..."

"I won't do it." Fack's voice was low. His eyes burrowed into Whitby.

"Sorry, Lieutenant?" Whitby glanced up from his PADD, looking down his nose at Corey's counselor.

"I said," he said, this time a bit louder, "I'm not going to put those blocks up in his mind, sir."

"Fine. Objection noted." The lead counselor turned his attention to the Betazoid counselor. "Counselor Elbrey, you'll be in charge of placing the blocks in Corey Aster's mind. Counselor Fack will continue to be the boy's counselor and monitor the effect and integrity of the blocks." He finished tapping the information into his PADD, then looked at the three in the room. "If that's it? Dismissed."

I remember one time, in Advanced Astrophysics, Nevin spoke about temporal anomalies and wormholes. "The problem with these types of anomalies," he said, strongly, slowly and surely, "is they sometimes can amplify other types of waves. For example..."

My mind drifted, wondering, if that was how I communicated with my parents all those years ago? Was that how they were still alive? Could the Borg aboard the cube know how events would unfold and, once the situation looked grim, had some sort of emergency protocol kick in where all the drones aboard were transported through some sort of temporal gateway into a safer place?

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It explained a lot. My parents were assimilated at Wolf 359 before their ship was disabled. Once at Earth, and losing the battle against the Federation, they and other drones were rescued by some sort of emergency protocol. And, with the cube destroyed, the temporal anomaly remained, small enough not to be detectable by technology of the day, but, my mind could pick it up, use it to pull my parents back into my dreams, and... That was it. The anomaly would eventually collapse – most anomalies do – and that would cause the dreams to stop!

A huge smile crept across my face; I'd solved another...

"Mr. Aster? Is there something you'd like to add to the discussion?"

I glanced up, horrified, to see dozens of cadets glaring at me from their seats in the rows in front of me. Ro Nevin, his arms folded, scowled at me from in front of the large monitor displaying the Bajoran wormhole at the room's front. Even McFarlane, sitting next to me, planted her hand over her mouth, trying not to laugh any louder. "No, sir. I'm sorry."

It was yet another blunder on my part, and I felt hopelessly, well, hopeless. And, due to that, I took a walk down at a local forest preserve...

2384. A dream, or another reality.

"Okay, so if this is your reality, and you seem to control it at will, you can wish things into existence, right?" Fack's eyes were wide and a smile crept onto his face.

"I guess so." Aster folded his arms and cocked an eyebrow. "I'm not sure I'm following..."

The counselor took Corey by the shoulders and shook him excitedly. "You willed us to a memory in your past..."

"But that's different."

"And when you thought of that bridge, it showed up, albeit in a broken form." Scott spoke quickly, his eyes wide, his cheeks flushed. "I'm not saying float across water; I'm not sure even I could do that in the real world, but..." He let go of Corey, pacing as he spoke, planting his hands on his hips. "It would have to be something simple: a bridge or other piece of complex equipment might be too much." Fack stopped pacing and glanced at the engineer. "What if you created something like a rope?"

Corey's eyes brightened. "Yes. That's it."

The engineer closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. As he released his breath, a length of rope appeared at his feet. He opened his eyes, glancing down to find it coiled up. Looking back up at the counselor as he crouched down to pick it up, he smiled.

His hands moved quickly as he tied the rope around his midsection. Fack grabbed the other end and started towards a tree growing on the levee's far side. "We'll tether you to a tree and I'll hold it just in case."

Aster checked the rope his end, tugging on the double-knot. "Let's hope this works."

"Be positive." The counselor secured the rope to the moderately-sized tree-trunk. Dusting his hands off, he headed back to Corey's position, swooping down to grab a bit of rope and follow it back. Wrapping the rope around his left hand a few times, he continued. "I'll keep a good hold."

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As Corey Aster paddled into the shallow, stiller water, he looked at Scott, then over at Nevin on the other levee. His stomach felt the rope tighten slightly, loosen, then tighten again as his eyes focused on his husband lowering himself into the water slightly on his side.

The engineer moved slowly, up to his waist in the water, now rushing by at a moderate pace. He slipped slightly, planting his hands out at angles to attempt to balance. An undercurrent grabbed his unsure footing, slipping out the silt from underneath him, sending him onto his side and into the water.

One arm slapped the water as he tried to right himself, and a large submerged branch tangled the rope up in one of its smaller branches.

Fack pulled hard against the rope, snapping the smaller branch in the process. The leverage gave Aster the boost he needed to fight the current, floating onto his back and spitting water out from his mouth, his eyes blinking rapidly as he tried to clear the water.

"I've got you." The counselor tugged along on the rope, getting lower on the levee as he reeled Corey in. The latter pushed his arms against the water, emerging from the depths in the calmer water.

Scott Fack reached a hand out, motioning with his hand. "This isn't working. You've got to head back to shore."

A wet Corey Aster looked back towards his husband, the latter now struggling against the rapid current. Nevin slipped, splashing into the water, bobbing as he struggled to stand. The engineer turned back to the counselor, his pink eyes wide. "But Nevin..."

His arm grabbed Corey's, pulling him to the levee. "If you and he are both lost, that's it. I don't think there'd be a way of communicating with him."

They both turned their attention back to Ro Nevin, the Bajoran now unable to stand and swimming as hard as he could against the current.

Fack rubbed Corey's arms, trying to warm him up. Keeping his attention on Nevin as he attempted to calm Aster's shivering body, the words tumbled absentmindedly from his mouth. "When you thought it couldn't get worse..."

2384. A Romulan medical facility. Unroth III.

The door hissed open and D'Mer absentmindedly searched his satchel as he entered, his face flushed. "I seem to have forgotten my..."

Looking up, his hands still deep in his bag, his eyes fell upon the Tal Shiar agent sleeping in a chair next to the human's bio bed. Both twitched slightly, as if dreaming.

D'Mer let his shoulder strap slide off his arm, clutching the strap tightly to lower the satchel lightly and quietly. Tip-toeing towards a side table, he kept his sights on the agent, his hand blindly searching the table top for a tricorder. *Hypospray, no. Laser scalpel, no. Ah ha.*

He quickly flipped the tricorder open, pressing several buttons in rapid succession to silence the sounds from the device. His body moved like a panther, his hand cautiously extending the device towards Fack-as-Tovath's body.

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D'Mer tapped his tricorder a few more times, squinting at the results. Glancing back up at his Tal Shiar colleague, a small, crooked smile emerged on his face. *So, we're not all we say we are, are we?*

2384. A dream, or another reality.

Corey Aster shivered slightly as his arms stretched out, towards the water, towards Ro Nevin.

Ro struggled against the current, trying to swim away from the whirlpool, but the large spinning vortex was winning. His arms cascaded into the quick moving water, barely splashing as they entered with a moderate swimmer's ability, his hands tight in a paddle-shape as they attempted to pull him away.

Corey tried to get into the water again, but Fack kept a strong grip on his arm.

The engineer started untying the rope from his body, picking frantically at the knots and loosening the rope quickly. His eyes dashed from what he was doing to his husband's position, and a cry escaped his mouth as he saw him.

Ro Nevin waved one of his arms as he approached the whirlpool's center, spinning slightly. He pushed his head upwards, keeping his gaze on Corey as best as he could until the strong current pulled him under, his hand the last trace of him disappearing...

Mid-2367. The Asters', Earth.

He could hear voices, not raised, but clearly agitated. Corey Aster crept closer to the kitchen to have a listen, crawling along the floor until he could lean up against the hallway wall, staying low, and listening unobserved.

The man's voice was strong, reassuring but focused and driving the point home. "You can't just call me every time he has another dream and expect me to shut them off. Counselor Elbrey put the blocks in, but there's no guarantee they will work 100% all the time. These dreams? They aren't controllable. Manageable, yes, but he can't turn it on and off at will..."

"I think you're wrong," the female voice interrupted. "I think you're lying because you are one of *them*." The last word spat from her tongue.

He peeked around the corner; Counselor Fack crossed his arms, leaning against a counter, and his grandmother had her hands planted on her hips, separated from him by the island in the kitchen's middle, a look on her face like she was scolding Corey and his cousin for eating too many cookies.

"It's not like I get a free toaster for every telepath I discover." There was a patronizing tone in the counselor's voice.

She ignored his snide remark. "You can control your telepathy, right?" Her hand reached out for the island's edge, leaning against it. "So why can't..."

"Helen." His voice sounded like he was pleading. "I only mastered it through training and more training. Telepathy, any sort of mental power, doesn't come with an on/off switch..."

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"But it..."

"...He needs training. He needs to be able to focus the power, or it's going to run amuck." The counselor stepped forward, slipping his hands down to his hips. "Did you like the nightmare *you* shared with him? The realization your altered son and daughter-in-law are Borg zombies?"

"No."

"Then let me help. Or someone else who's qualified to help. Myra, for example." Fack started gesturing a lot with his hands, palms up and open. "We can train..."

"No." Corey's grandmother's voice was strong, deep, like when she'd had enough of Jeremy or him arguing with her about something. "No, he will *not* undergo training. He will *not* be spoken to about it again."

Scott Fack's mouth opened several times, closing each time in between, bobbing like a fish out of water. He folded his arms again.

"He's going to grow out of it. It's just a phase." Helen Aster rubbed the bridge of her nose with her free hand.

"So if you don't acknowledge it, pretend it's not there," the counselor said strong and low, approaching her like a panther stalking its prey, "It'll just go away. One day, poof, it'll be gone. Right?" He was extremely close to her now, her not flinching, him not giving in. "How narrow-minded."

"How dare..."

"He's your *grandson*! Let him be who he is, wholly and without conditions or restraints!" Fack backed off, returning to his previous position. "Don't you think he's been through enough already without you telling him that an essential part of him, an *unchangeable* part of him, is wrong?"

"That's it." She erupted, like the time Corey and Jeremy got caught after throwing stones at Nancy Penbrook's house one afternoon. "Please leave."

The counselor's face scrunched up as he snatched his PADDs and attaché case off the counter. "I pity you both." Looking over at Corey's position in the hallway, he nodded and said, "Good luck, Corey."

Helen Aster gasped then started to cry. Running over to Corey, she went to hug him, but he didn't want any part of her. With him klonking down the hallway and up the stairs as he ran from her, his grandmother started crying, with Scott Fack sneaking out the kitchen door.

Mid-2379. A conversation over subspace.

"Are you sure the channel's secure?"

"Of course I am. I work in Special Ops. I know how to secure a channel."

"I'm only checking. Certain... factions would be very interested in this conversation."

"I'm sure they would be." The clearing of his throat. "Is it Corey? What's wrong?"

"The walls I placed in his head... they're breaking down."

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"That was to be expected. I didn't agree with them being placed there... How did you know?"

"He asked me to see him. He had a dream, about Farpoint Station... moments before it happened."

"Do you think the link with his parents has been re-established?"

"It's only one small hole in the dike. I only have so many thumbs to plug those with, and I'm not about to stay up all day and all night trying to keep it from breaking. What should we do?"

"Let the 'dike' break. The collapse should be slow enough to give him time to adjust."

"Are you sure?"

"What do you think?"

A pause. "I think you're right. I've always thought you were right. I just wished I had the courage to stand up and be counted all those years ago..."

2384. A dream, or another reality.

"He's gone..." A frantic tone, tinged with a hint of desperation and sadness, filled his voice as he clambered down the levee towards the water.

"Corey!" Fack tried to reach out but missed the back of the engineer's outfit. "What are you doing?"

Aster dropped down, squatting, one leg planted near the water's edge with his body's weight distributed backwards to keep him on land. His hand, shaking, plunged into the water, reaching, splashing, until he removed it again with something in his closed palm.

He glanced back up at the counselor, the latter negotiating the levee downwards, trying not to topple into the water. His hand thrust toward Fack, a small sad smile appearing on Aster's face as the shaking wet palm opened slowly to reveal a Bajoran earring.

"Oh no." Scott Fack placed a hand reassuringly on Aster's back. "You aren't thinking..."

But before he finished his sentence, the engineer was in the water, splashing towards the whirlpool, forging his way through the deep, muddy water.

The counselor stood quickly, unsure whether to jump in or stay on shore. Scrambling up the levee as fast as he could, leaning forward to give his body more momentum and stability, Fack regained his position on the levee's top, turning to see Aster nearing the whirlpool.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Corey! Don't!"

The engineer drifted into the whirlpool's clutches, slowly spinning toward the center. The counselor slid down the levee's bank, falling back to avoid splashing into the water, but, before he could stand back up, Aster disappeared into the whirlpool, a smile on his face...

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2384. A Romulan medical facility. Unroth III.

He awoke with a rush to find he was not alone.

D'Mer held a Romulan tricorder in one hand and a disruptor in the other, his knuckles white, his hands shaking.

"D'Mer", Fack-as-Tovath wiped the sleep from one of his eyes, sitting up in the chair next to Aster's bed. "Really... Think about what you are doing."

"You're lying." The doctor moved slowly, like a panther prowling, around the bio bed, his disruptor still aimed at the undercover agent. "You aren't Tovath. You're not even *Romulan*." He spat the last word. "You, my friend, are a traitor. And not quite fully human. I'm still trying to figure what exactly you are..."

"I tell you what." Fack stood, slowly, confidently. "You let me take Aster back to the Federation, and I'll let you live."

"You." The slow chuckle grew to a deep laugh. "You are up to something. And you're foolish to think you could get away with a comatose patient from this fortified outpost." The hand with the disruptor waved at Aster. "You wouldn't even get past..."

The phaser beam struck the Romulan doctor squarely in the chest, and he reeled backwards. The disguised Scott Fack fired the type-1 phaser again, sending the D'Mer cascading back into the wall, dropping the disruptor and tricorder.

Klaxons sounded and a warning light strobed. "*Weapons fire detected. Lockdown underway.*"

The sound of doors sliding closed and thunking as they latched filled his head as he snatched a comm.-badge from his pocket and slapped it on Aster's chest. Tapping his own comm.-badge, Fack barked, "Shuttle: Lock on to the comm.-badge signals. Two for transport. Energize."

Sounds of agitated voices and pounding on the room's locked down door faded away as the duo disappeared from the room, his skin tingling from the beam.

2384. Romulan shuttle, Unroth III.

Scott Fack turned the monitor on, tapping it a few times before dashing to the cockpit. He threw himself into the pilot's chair, swinging around to face the helm.

"*Warning: Unauthorized vessel. You will be fired upon. Surrender or be destroyed.*"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." He tapped the helm a few times, the engines roaring to life, and the sensors started to beep. "Okay... Houston, we have a problem."

The shuttlebay doors overhead slowly began to close, but the shuttle rose from the floor, several Romulan guards rushing out, holding disruptors towards the shuttle. The shuttle jettied skyward, but the doors narrowed too quickly, providing barely enough room to escape.

Fack tapped the console quicker, his hands shaking. "Uh oh."

His eyes scanned the area for something, anything to prop the closing, heavy bay doors open. Darting from one landmark to another, inside the shuttlebay, outside the shuttlebay...

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And then he saw it.

He keyed a few more inputs, aiming the weapons systems, and fired the disruptors at a transmission tower. Another blast, and a third blast tore through the tower's closest two legs, the tower precariously resting on its two back legs. Gravity grabbed it, pulling it slowly, then quickly down as it crashed, wedging itself between the two closing doors.

"Bingo." He knew his brief exchange with Jonar, her having been a tactical officer and flight controller, would come in handy one day.

The shuttle aligned with the gap between the large bay doors and tilted upwards at a perpendicular angle. It shot up at a great rate of speed, outrunning and outmaneuvering several ground disruptor cannons aimed in the general direction, their shots going wide and firing blindly.

He glanced out the side of the cockpit window, watching the blue atmosphere quickly fade into the darkness of space. A smile crept across his face, but was disrupted by a shudder.

Turning his attention to the forward part of the cockpit window, he saw a Romulan warbird's disruptors charging for another go. A second Romulan warbird decloaked beside it.

Both approached rapidly.

Keeping his eyes trained on the ships, his hands dashed across the helm, the instincts gained from Tawana Jonar kicking in.

The warbirds quickly disappeared from the viewport as the shuttle veered sharply, the glow from the planet below the shuttle illuminating the cockpit's ceiling. The shuttle vibrated again with the disruptor fire striking near it.

The atmosphere should disperse some of the disruptor beam. Fack laid in several new courses, storing all but one in the computer. The shuttle shuddered slightly as he pushed the shuttle down into the upper atmosphere, a monitor showing the shuttle's approach deeper into the planet's atmosphere.

Switching another monitor to a rear view, he saw one of the warbirds attempting to follow him into the atmosphere, the second warbird circling in high orbit above it. The first warbird's underbelly started to glow, a stream of heated plasma streaking away from its forward section.

The shuttle protested the strange reentry angle, and Fack struggled to keep it on-course. *If I give in too early or too late, it's game over.* "C'mon, girl, hold on," he coaxed the shuttle as his hands tapped several manual corrections into the helm.

It worked. The shuttle suddenly shot away from the planet, "skipping" out of the atmosphere.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the Romulan warbird in the atmosphere struggle to follow, the second warbird turning to pursue.

But they were too late. His hand hit another three inputs and pressed a final key, and the stars turned into streaks of light.

Mid-2367. Starfleet Medical, Chicago, Earth.

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Counselor Scott Fack's log, Stardate 44408.5: After helping the survivors of the Battle of Wolf 359 get over their initial shock and mental trauma, I've decided to move on after Captain Sill invited me to join his crew aboard the Starship Prospect. I've distributed my cases amongst my peers, but some of my patients – like young Corey Aster – will remain in my thoughts as long as I live.

He sighed again as he took the items carefully out of the suitcase and started placing them in again like a jigsaw puzzle.

"Are you leaving?" He jumped; her voice startled him, breaking his concentration.

"Yes." His voice sounded flat as his hands planted a few books into the case. "I'm... I'm moving on. Got an offer too good to refuse." He looked at her, smiling weakly. "And I can't stay on solid land too long; I love space too much."

Helen Aster leaned up against the wall, her arms folded. "I wanted to say sorry for our last conversation and thank you. Corey is doing much better now. His grades have improved, his teachers say he's brighter, more outgoing..."

The counselor stopped packing, facing the elder Aster, folding his arms in the process. "And his... abilities? Have they manifested themselves again?"

"No." Her smile was beaming. "I've used a cortical inhibitor to help inhibit them, like Counselor Whitby suggested, but I don't know what you did..."

"I didn't do anything. I tried to provide an environment of acceptance, and you pushed that approach away." Fack avoided her smile, his arms tightening around his body. "Professionally... I think you need to let him develop his abilities. But he's too afraid." His gaze shifted to her face as her smile faded. "You are his guardian, and, I understand your right to exercise what you feel is the correct thing to teach your child. But..." And the counselor stepped closer to Helen Aster, his gaze steady. "In my professional opinion, Mrs. Aster, it's extremely dangerous to deny a child – any child – their inherent abilities. It's about as backwards as trying to change a person's sexual orientation or telling him the color of his skin is wrong."

"Well..." Helen Aster's mouth gaped open and closed like a fish's out of water. "I..."

"Thank you, Mrs. Aster." The counselor returned to packing his suitcase. "Give Corey my regards. Now, if you don't mind... I've got to finish packing."

2384. Romulan shuttle, somewhere inside the Neutral Zone.

"Warning: This craft is now approaching the far edge of the Neutral Zone. Crossing the Neutral Zone into Federation space may be construed as an act of war."

"Yeah, yeah." Fack-disguised-as-Tovath hit a large icon on a second, smaller panel near the helm. "Computers: you know everything."

He nervously glanced over at a third panel, observing three dots gaining on his position. Four more dots rushed from other directions. His hand tapped a few controls on the panel's side, and the Neutral Zone border appeared mere millions of kilometers in front of his position. *Not far to go now, Corey.*

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The shuttle shuttered, and Fack attempted to regain his balance by clutching at the flight control station. Another blast struck and a controls monitor behind him exploded, showering the cabin with debris.

"C'mon, girl, hold it together." His hands danced over the flight control station, the shuttle yawing and pitching as disruptor fire streamed past the viewport.

"Incoming message from Romulan warbird Tarketh."

Sweat tricked down his temple as smoke made the cockpit hazy. "Ignore it."

Another blast struck the shuttle, the warp engines groaning as several warning bells sounded and some panels flashed with warnings of systems losing power. He pushed several panels, moving swiftly as the shuttle shuddered.

"Warning: The Federation border has now been breached. This shuttle is in violation of various Federation-Romulan treaties."

He looked over at the position panel, showing various ships converging on the shuttle's position. "Let's just hope they aren't *all* Romulan..."

"Warning: Warp bubble failure imminent. Prepare for transfer to sublight speeds."

The transfer was anything but soft. Fack's side struck the helm, cracking as he doubled over the station. In the rear cabin, several items clanged to the deck. He hoped Corey was...

The shuttle shook again, with the aft viewscreen showing three Romulan warbirds approaching quickly.

He attempted to get the shuttle running as it slowed to a crawl. "Computer: Reinitialize impulse engines on my mark. Mark."

"Unable to comply. Impulse engine control is off-line."

"Switch to manual."

"Unable to comply. Impulse engine control is off-line."

The Special Ops officer pulled his phaser from its holster on his belt, changing the setting to wide dispersal, and dashed to the rear cabin to find Aster still unconscious but strapped tightly to the bed where he'd left him. His hand was hanging down, a strange wound in his palm. *Wasn't that the hand he grabbed the earring...*

"Warning: Four non-Romulan vessels approaching."

"Computer: Identify." He stepped back towards the bed, guarding Aster with his body.

"Three Federation starships, one Klingon ship. One Quasar-class, one Renaissance-class mark II, one Galaxy-class, and one Negh'Var warship."

He laughed as he relaxed slightly. "Thank God for the cavalry."

2384. Bridge, USS Cantabrian-A.

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"Romulan vessels: This is Captain Noel Turner of the *Federation Starship Cantabrian*. You are in violation of several Federation-Romulan treaties."

The commanding officer stood patiently, facing the three Romulan warbirds on the viewscreen in front of him, a small Romulan shuttle dwarfed by the large ships. He glanced back at Brendon Lawless. "Commander?"

"They are receiving the signal, Captain." The Maori officer nodded back at him.

"I think you'll find," Turner continued as he paced the bridge, "you have no jurisdiction over those in the shuttle; they are Federation citizens and Starfleet officers." Looking towards the ceiling, noting the intricacies of the bulkheads meeting hull, he sighed. "As a matter of fact, the Romulan Star Empire has a *lot* of explaining to do, especially after... holding a Starfleet officer against his will despite the help the Federation and Klingon Empire have given the Romulans after the Archein affair."

He raised an eyebrow as he looked towards Lawless. The latter shook his head in the negative.

"Sir, the *Prospect* reports movement in the farthest warbird." Lieutenant Nate Wrightson spoke up from the Operations station. "Look."

The warbirds backed off the shuttle, spinning in a 180-degree arc before jumping to warp, back into the depths of the Neutral Zone.

Noel Turner sighed in relief. As a smile spread across his face: "*Cantabrian to Helena*: they're all yours."

2384. Romulan shuttle.

He aimed his phaser at the sound of the transporter beam, but quickly put it down once he saw the Braidian in a Starfleet medical uniform clutching a med kit.

"Whoa, there, Commander." The Braidian disarmed Fack with his warm smile. "Doctor Mordan Ness, USS *Helena*."

"Boy, am I glad to see you." Fack sighed as he holstered his phaser. "Well, anyone in a Starfleet uniform."

Ness ran his tricorder over Aster's body. "He's still alive, but he needs urgent medical attention."

"Doctor... I don't know where he is."

"What do you mean?" Ness administered a hypospray, checked the dosage, and implanted more medicine.

"At the facility, there was a shred of consciousness still left, stuck somewhere between reality and dream." Fack looked down at Aster's bruised body. "He reached out; I answered. But..." His eyes glanced back up at Ness. "He's gone now. I get nothing."

"I'm sure he'll be fine." The doctor closed his med kit case and tapped his comm.-badge. "Sorry to chat and run but... Ness to *Helena*: Two for immediate transport to Sickbay."

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Scott Fack smiled weakly and nodded, his eyes red and watering slightly, as the two shimmered away.

2384. Noel Turner's and Scott Fack's quarters, USS *Cantabrian-A*.

Special Operations operative Scott Fack's log, Stardate supplemental: My mission is finished, but the greater conspiracy, for lack of a better word, still remains somewhat covered: a matter for other operatives, other ships, other missions. Corey Aster, still in a coma, is safely aboard the Starship Helena, en route to Deep Space 12. I've returned back to home, to my friends and colleagues, and to the man I love. Will Corey ever be that whole again?

For what seemed like ages, he stood there, his arms crossed uneasily, staring out the viewport at the stars towards him.

Noel Turner, commanding officer of the *Cantabrian*, approached his husband, placing his hands on his shoulders. "Penny for your thoughts."

Scott Fack still stared. "I... I'm haunted by it all." With Noel's arms wrapping themselves around his chest, Scott's hands moved upwards to hold on to something tangible. "How many others have the Romulans treated so brutally? Will that spark, that remnant of Corey ever emerge to the forefront again? Will he ever regain consciousness?"

There was a break and the counselor sighed a deep sigh. "Can he convince the others that Nevin could be alive, somewhere, and not to give up? Will he even remember his shared dreams with him? Was it even Nevin, or something more sinister masquerading as him? Or is Corey destined to search the stars, hoping one day the man he loves so much returns? Or, worse yet, will the desire to reunite with him consume him until he's a shadow of the man he once was?"

Noel rested his forehead on the back of Scott's head, his nose pressed against his partner's hair. "I don't know. I honestly wish I had the answers... but I don't know. You waited for me..."

"I was conscious."

Noel pulled his head away. "It's the same situation. You heard my thoughts..."

"Amplified by the remnants of the temporal vortex. And I'm trained to do that. I'm a telepath, remember, and a Starfleet-trained counselor." Fack turned around to continue the embrace. His head resting on Noel's shoulder, he held on tight. "It's a luxury Corey doesn't have."

He took in the familiarity of his husband and closed his eyes. "I just hope everything turns out alright. With all he's been through... he deserves it."

The two stood, holding one another, for a very long time, the only movement being the stars warping towards them in the viewports.

2384. A dream, or a reality that should be.

The evening breeze had a slight chill to it, and the water lapped at the beach's shore. Stars waxed and waned in the dark navy blue, nearly black night sky. From behind one of the mountains cradling the beach came a glow: one of Risa's moons was rising for the night.

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He walked up the soft, white sand, glancing around at the open-air restaurant. A band was setting up, the singer and guitarist flipping through different PADDs with music on them. A waiter and the bartender chatted with one another at the bar. The restaurant was empty, candles lit on each empty table.

He felt he should turn around, look down the beach, and, in doing so, he saw him. Corey Aster walked up the beach, slightly wet, the moonlight behind the mountain catching him and softly illuminating his face.

Ro Nevin's walk broke into a jog as he moved quickly down the beach. Meeting Corey, his arms swept his husband up into the air; Corey laughed. The latter's body slid back down, and the two moved closer, lips locking before they shared a passionate kiss.

"I've missed you so much," Nevin said as he slipped his hand into Corey's.

As the two started walking back to the restaurant, the fine sand running through between their toes, Corey Aster agreed. "Me too."

"Listen," Corey continued, clutching Nevin's hand even tighter. "I wanted to say sorry."

Ro Nevin stopped and faced his husband. Taking his other hand into his, he squinted. "Why? What's there to say sorry about?"

"I..." Corey looked down and took a deep breath. His eyes focused on the fine sand beneath them. "I didn't tell you I loved you before I left." Glancing into Nevin's eyes, "I didn't even say good-bye."

"Corey," Nevin took Corey into his arms, his grasp as if he was holding on as if his life depended on it. "We didn't know this would end up the way it has."

"Nevin..." Aster's head rested on Ro's chest, but Ro's hand moved to the back of his husband's head.

"Ssh. It's okay."

The two stood locked, as if they were nearly one, for what seemed like forever. Corey wanted this moment to last forever, to feel them breathing in time, sharing the same air, the same space, the same breath.

The singer took her place at the microphone, her band all ready at their instruments. She smiled, leaned forward, and breathed into the microphone, "This song is for all you lovers out there."

Corey pulled away slightly from Nevin, the latter's hands drifting down to his husband's waist.

The singer grabbed the microphone stand, pulling it closer to her as she started to sing:

"Stars shining bright above you
Night breezes seem to whisper 'I love you'
Birds singing in the sycamore tree
Dream a little dream of me"

The couple started dancing, slowly, as they gazed into each other's eyes. No words needed to be spoken, no secrets exchanged, no further expressions of anguish or regret: only the two of them, alone but surrounded, in their own private universe.

"Say nighty-night and kiss me

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Just hold me tight and tell me you'll miss me
While I'm alone and blue as can be
Dream a little dream of me"

One of Risa's moons started to rise above the mountains, the water reflecting it, the waves' crests illuminated by it. People started arriving at the restaurant, laughing, smiling.

But all Corey Aster saw was his husband, and the same held true for Nevin.

"Stars fading but I linger on dear
Still craving your kiss
I'm longing to linger till dawn dear
Just saying this"

The two could feel one of them slipping, consciousness grabbing them like a small fish nipping at his heels; it was Nevin. His eyes widened slightly, but Corey held him reassuringly, looking deep into his eyes, saying: "I love you, Ro Nevin. And I'll wait for you as long as it takes. Never forget that."

"I've crossed the river." As Nevin faded, his voice whispered on the wind. "In your dreams, I'll be waiting on the levee. Come get me."

2384. Ro Nevin's quarters, USS *Odyssey*, Andromeda Galaxy.

He was gone.

Ro Nevin touched his hand to the cold viewport in his quarters on the *Starship Odyssey*. Corey Aster had once again touched his *pagh*, his soul. Their last encounter, and only one in this galaxy, touched him, burrowed to the core of him. He felt over the moon. Ro smiled.

"Nevin?"

Her voice made him jump, and he turned to find Maya Stadi standing in the doorway. "Yes? What's on your mind?"

She approached him. "Are you okay? I overrode the controls to your door when you didn't answer." Her eyes analyzed his face while her mind couldn't help but feel the happiness he was exuding today.

"I'm fine, Stadi. Couldn't be better." Ro Nevin approached her, his smile widening. "I'm up for a challenge today. What about you?"

She looked at him oddly, but he put his hand gently on her back as they left his quarters, him saying confidently to her, "Let's get this ship home."

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