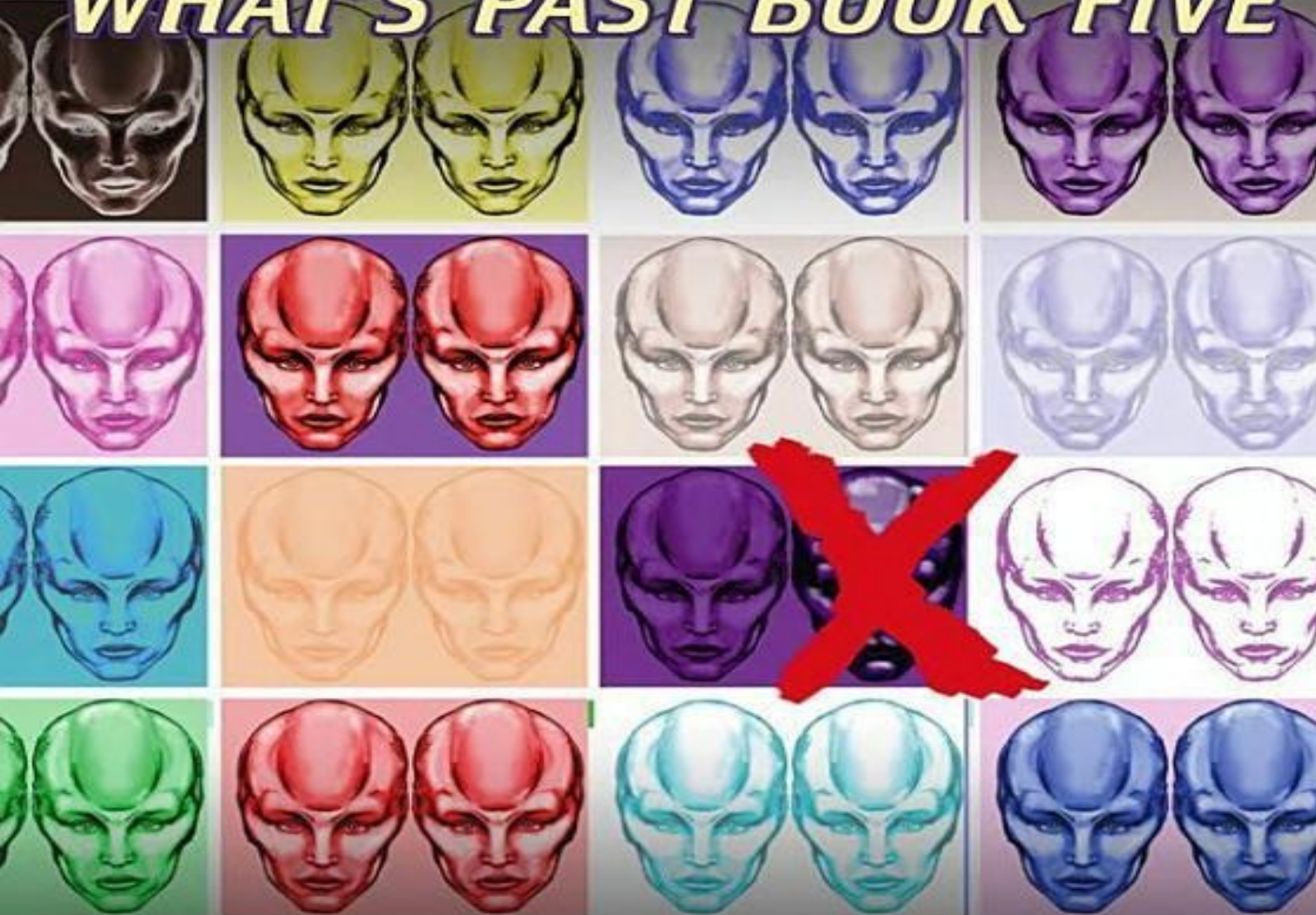


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S.C.E.

#65

**10 IS BETTER THAN 01
WHAT'S PAST BOOK FIVE**



Heather Jarman

S.C.E. concept by John J. Ordover and Keith R.A. DeCandido

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10 IS BETTER THAN 01
(*What's Past Book 5*)

Heather Jarman



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The present...

“Stop.” The request came out as a mixture of grunt and plea. Henry Winter could barely find his voice, what with the cramp in his side and his lungs smothering from the thick, acidic humidity down here in the tunnels. The master computer, he’d been told, required these atmospheric conditions. Though how the Bynars survived long enough to build and reboot a second master computer down here without suffocating was anyone’s guess. Especially since it had taken them ten years. “I cannot take—” A cough. “—another step.”

The Bynar pair paused mid-scurry, their heads swiveling back to look at him in unnerving unison. Henry had yet to determine whether 110 was the shorter one or 111. And what minimal empathic abilities he had did him little good with figuring out who was who since the emotional makeup of Bynars tended to resemble a series of branching either/or questions.

“You had said, Commander, that—”

“—time was of the essence.”

“She may elude us if—”

“—we wait. There is danger—”

Henry held up a hand to silence them. “Let’s not assume facts not in evidence—” Another coughing spasm overtook him; he spat a clot of phlegm onto the ground. “Besides—I appear to be having difficulty breathing.”

“We will stop—”

“—since you cannot—”

“—walk unless you breathe.”

“We suppose that we can—”

“—slow down for a time.”

Bracing his hands against his thighs, Henry nodded, grateful he wouldn’t have to waste any more breath persuading them. Bynar pragmatism served them well in crisis situations, such as the present one. He leaned back against the smooth gunmetal-gray plating with a dull *thwap*. “We’ll go soon. It’ll be fine.” He took a deep, wheezy, breath followed by a quick exhalation. Flecks of light orbited before

his eyes; lightheadedness swamped him. His middle-aged body wasn't cut out for this pace. "Let's talk five."

The Bynar pair exchanged looks.

Before they could ask, he answered. "Five minutes. A break. I need to get my blood sugar up." He unfastened his pack and began rooting around for a ration bar. The bars tasted like sawdust glued together with *weloo* tree sap, but he couldn't afford to be picky this far underground. He ripped open the wrapper and took the first, pleasure-free bite. The Bynars watched him intently. He might not like this particular meal, but he wasn't going to let them rush him. Henry gulped the gritty, saliva-softened glob, then took his next bite.

The Bynars, he figured, would keep track of time; they'd let him know the millisecond his five minutes expired. Of the thirty-five kilometers they needed to cover to search for their missing person, they'd covered twenty, at a brisk pace to Henry's mind. While he'd been prepared to turn around and send someone else to complete the job after every kilometer, his Bynar associates never wavered from their mission. The Bynars' uncanny ability to stay on task both impressed and irritated him. When they removed tricorders from their utility belts, ostensibly to collect data from their surroundings, Henry sighed with relief. Obviously they felt they had enough time to investigate their surroundings more carefully. Time equaled rest, and Henry could certainly use more rest.

At his annual physical last month, the doc had warned him that Marietta's homemade *lupa-lupa* pies might taste like a slice of heaven going down, but the increasing width of his middle placed strain on the natural arteries grafted onto his *second* synthetic heart. Henry wasn't faithful enough with his meds to make a difference in his health. If the arteries blew where he didn't have access to a top-flight medical team (like down here in the bowels of Bynaas), he'd bleed out before he hit the ground. A natural optimist, Henry brushed the doc's concerns aside like so much white noise; those pies brought back sweet memories of his childhood on Betazed, and he wasn't about to give them up. Besides, as a Starfleet JAG, one rarely found the need to maintain his fitness level at a three-point-five-minute-per-kilometer pace. Doctors worried too much. Forty years in Starfleet had earned him the right to eat for pleasure, not merely well-being.

Besides, this trip to Bynaas was supposed to be a routine criminal defense. He was to meet his client, figure out the nature of the misbehavior, and make sure the rights of a Federation citizen were protected. How was he to know he'd be called on to pursue his runaway client through the innards of the planet Bynaas! Talk about feeling like he'd fallen into a second-rate, late-nineteenth-century Earth pulp novel—*Digging to the Core of Earth* was it? What kind of computer was so important and delicate that they didn't allow transporter beams within its underground access tunnels anyway?

The Bynars took a few steps in his direction, using hand motions to wave him up off the floor. Excited chatter passed back and forth between them before one of the Bynars tried to press the tricorder into his hand.

His five minutes couldn't be up, he thought grumpily. Henry pushed himself off the floor with a grunt, brushed some *schmutz* off his uniform, and took the proffered tricorder. His eyes widened. "So this means—?"

"The missing person has been—"

“—in the vicinity sometime in the last—”

“—two hours. We are—”

“—on the right track,” Henry said, getting the hang of this Bynar speak. He was pleased. The Bynars’ efficient use of time and resources definitely had an upside. The three of them might have wandered through kilometer after kilometer of tunnels for days if they’d hadn’t caught this break. At least now they knew that his client had passed this way and they stood a chance of finding her. Maybe he could convince a pack of the Bynars to emigrate offworld and become JAG investigators.

“It is blood—”

“—however. There could be—”

“—injuries.”

Damn. Henry closed his eyes, squeezing out the image of his client dying slowly so far away from home. A new resolve filled him. “Let’s get going, shall we?” Reenergized, Henry increased the length of his stride until he outpaced the Bynars; with his longer legs, he should have been leading the way from the start. Thanks to this latest lead, he might be home on Starbase 620 for Marietta’s home cooking within a day or so if he could get this case wrapped up. Assuming the case was straightforward. He sighed. Too bad it was murder. And murder was rarely simple.

Before...

Personal Log, Lieutenant Temperance Brewster, Starfleet Personnel Organization

You'll never guess where I am. I even have an attaché—Ensign Alban—assigned to help me, a newly promoted junior-grade lieutenant. I can hardly believe what's happened myself considering what it took to get me here.

But wait. I'll start from the beginning. I haven't talked about this for a while because there didn't seem to be a point. The more I thought about the situation, the more irrational it seemed that the higher-ups in my organization seemed unwilling to see what was right in front of their faces! Over the last four months, the stress drove me to gnaw my fingernails down to their nubs. When they started bleeding, I decided to shove my frustration to the back of my mind where it wouldn't irritate me so much.

I'm an Academy grad. I know how to handle competition and difficult circumstances. I know this is my first posting, but it's not like I've been a civilian desk jockey for the last ten years and don't have a clue about life outside my cubicle. There's a war on, and dammit, I want to be useful. I've been bucking for a chance to do some planet-based recruiting—anything that will get help for my friends out there flying around the stars. Nothing like a in-person, face-to-face appeal, I always say, to light a fire under people. We need to be more assertive, get in their faces a bit, appeal to their patriotism. If you don't give them a reason, no one in their right mind is going to sign up willingly to face the Dominion.

Too bad it took the destruction of the *DiNovia* to finally wake this organization up and solve my problem for me. Not my problem—Starfleet's problem. You'd think that having personnel stretched from one end of the quadrant to the other trying to keep our fleet glued together with spit and good intentions would have been enough to justify stepping up recruiting efforts. But no. Tragedy finally won out over common sense. Too bad that's what it took to wake up the big brass.

It's not like I'm not pragmatic. In every war there are accidents and mistakes. Every time I see a list of friendly fire incidents, it's all I can do to keep from crawling under my desk and crying until I collapse. Those are my friends out there. The calculations and stats we've spent decades perfecting figure in "loss of life" due to error, especially during a war. What can't get past is when those errors are preventable.

The military side, though, covering artillery and weapons—that's not my job. I help staff science and engineering departments. Whether my people (I think of them as "my people")

since I'm the one that aided in assigning them) survive a sneak attack is often dependent on what kind of fancy flying the conn officer can pull off and how accurate the operations and security officers are with their targeting. I feel protective toward my people—I want to do whatever I can to make sure they can do their jobs.

When I put off my counselor training to join the office of personnel, I assumed the biggest problem I'd have would be convincing the top guys at Daystrom to give up lucrative research positions to join Starfleet's deep-space recon programs. That assumption was wrong. We've finally reached a point in the Dominion War when I've had to add variables to my personnel equations to account for having too few people doing too much work. The most common complaint I hear these days is exhaustion. Who isn't tired during a war? But when my people get tired, big consequences can follow.

Which brings me back to the destruction of the *DiNovia*. Captain Met'gi added an additional S.C.E. team to Starbase 511 when it became obvious the existing staff couldn't handle the nonstop repairs coming in from the front. This poor S.C.E. team was pulled from the frontlines in the Bajoran sector and put straight to work repairing starships whose insides looked like bowls of tangled pasta. After working five straight shifts, the S.C.E. computer specialist miscalculated the calibrations for the *DiNovia*'s coolant fuel ratios by 0.2 percent. The cascading warp core failure happened so quickly, the ship's chief engineer didn't have time to react. We lost a hundred and twenty good people in the explosion. Not because of the damnable Dominion, but because we have too few people to handle too much work.

My superiors finally took me up on my suggestion to look for new places to recruit personnel. Though a few individuals expressed reluctance (paranoia still lurks even ten years after the incident with the *Enterprise*), the board was persuaded by the *DiNovia* problem that they needed to exhaust more possibilities. Bynaus was an obvious example of an underutilized population.

Of course Bynars have served in Starfleet since the "appropriation" of the *Enterprise* from Starbase 74, but we haven't aggressively sought them out. If a pair wanted to join or serve as civilian advisors, assuming they passed the requirements and were willing to live by the rules, we accepted them the way we'd accept any Federation citizen. The Bynars' efficiency and skill in working on computers is unparalleled in the Federation. A Bynar pair can diagnose, repair, and upgrade a malfunctioning computer system in a fourth of the time that it takes engineers of other species. That being said, the Bynars aren't well-known or understood in the Federation because they keep to themselves. Only a small number of them leave Bynaus at any given time, so most Federation citizens can go a lifetime without even meeting a Bynar pair. No one I know will ever say, aloud, that they think the Bynars are conspiring against the government, or that they present a danger to any of its citizens. But the old-timers around the office, if you get them to talk "unofficially," will confess that it scares them how easy it was for the Bynars to take the mighty *Enterprise*, without resistance, right under the noses of the starbase and the *Enterprise* crew. They deceived Commander Data and Commander La Forge, for Pete's sake—no small accomplishment. For that reason, there's always a bit of wariness when dealing with the Bynars. These days, though, circumstances don't allow us to be so cautious.

With the number of damaged ships Starfleet faces these days, time is of the essence. Even ~~the shipyards are stretched to beyond their limits. The recruiting board is finally willing to~~ move past their previous misgivings and actively search for Bynars who could help ease the workload of our stressed and strained S.C.E.

Which brings me to my current location: dada—I'm on the *Watson* on my way to Bynaus. I've never traveled for work before, so I have to confess a bit of a thrill at being able to see more of the Alpha Quadrant. Sure, I've done the Mars caverns and made the occasional jaunt to the standard recreation spots around my home colony on Centauri. But this—going on official Starfleet business, with an *attaché* even, to a place that almost no one goes. It's so exotic!

I know, in my gut, that bringing the Bynars into S.C.E. has the potential to shift the momentum in our favor. No one questions their ability to repair computers. My personal belief is that their capacity to build or design new computers could tip the balance of the conflict in the Federation's favor. I don't have any hard proof—just a feeling that we need these folks to help us out.

Or maybe the truth is that I have to believe that the Bynars can make a difference, because if they don't, I'm out of ideas. And I can't give up yet. I just can't. We can't afford to lose this war. Nothing I know of the Dominion leads me to believe that they would be benevolent occupiers. Who we are, our way of life—our very existence—is at stake here. The personal cost begins to rise too. So many of my friends from the Academy have gone into the grind of the war machine and have never come out again. The loss of their lives has to have meaning. If we lose because of stupid mistakes, I'll never forgive myself for not doing my part to prevent those mistakes.

Captain Quinteros, the Starfleet liaison on Bynaus, transmitted to me some orientation materials that he requested I study before I arrive. "*Read it,*" he said during our conversation, stroking his salt-and-pepper beard thoughtfully. "*And then we'll talk when you get here.*"

Even across the millions of kilometers that separated us, the tone in his voice and his body language told me that he doubted my proposal. I'm used to senior officers, particularly those who have been in Starfleet for longer than I've been alive, giving me those kinds of looks. The "she's a sweet young thing who will know better soon enough" look.

Quinteros is wrong. I know it. He has to be.

From *On Bynaus: A Starfleet Orientation Guide* by Captain Orfil Quinteros

To understand the Bynars, a familiarity with their origins is critical. Unlike many species who attribute their existence to a higher being or those who can trace their evolution through millions of years, the Bynars were the creations of an AI civilization based on the world we now know as Bynaus. Approximately a million years ago, these AIs (whose name has long since vanished from history) conquered the original inhabitants of the planet. Whether the AIs were created by the planet's inhabitants or came as invaders is unknown.

As the AI civilization grew and prospered, they discovered the need for organic slaves to perform functions that they didn't want to or that were better suited to creatures of flesh. The forebears of what became the modern-day Bynars were created. Thousands of millennia passed. The organics became more sophisticated, evolving to meet the needs of their environment. The AIs became complacent—some even began to see the organics as having worth beyond their servile functions. A small group of AIs believed the organics deserved rights and campaigned for those rights. The nucleus of a revolution was born. What started off peacefully became violent. The organics and AIs struggled for dominance. Ultimately, the organics prevailed. But the organics inherited a technologically sophisticated world from their AI masters. Gaining independence was only the first obstacle facing the organics.

The AIs had artificially engineered the planet's environment, from maintaining the gas ratios in the atmosphere and the gravity and providing nutrition to shielding planet-based technology from Beta Magellan's more damaging radiation. While the organics could learn the technology, they lacked the time to gain a comprehensive understanding of how to maintain and operate the systems before the systems began breaking down. The organics organized teams to study and master the technology so as to assure survival. Over time, as they gained control over the planetary infrastructure, they gradually reduced their group size from as many as a dozen to a pair. This model provided the template for the modern-day Bynar civilization.

The organics were not “designed” to function in pairs by their AI creators, but the modern-day Bynars continue to do so as it is a long-standing societal norm that exists as a survival mechanism for the species. The belief is that, should catastrophe strike, the demands of keeping Bynaus functioning are better met by groups. This social structure is enforced by powerful cultural taboos that promise that noncompliant will be cut off from Bynar society and banned from returning to Bynaus. In my time on Bynaus, and knowing Bynars, I have never known a Bynar who has chosen to remain a singleton.

The Bynars Today

Contrary to the perceptions of outsiders, the Bynars are neither genetically engineered to interact with

computers nor biologically codependent on their mates. Almost immediately after a Bynar emerges from the birthing chamber, it is placed with another Bynar who has complementary biology. Each pair is made up of a Bynar who has the identity/function “one” and one who has the identity/function “zero”; there are no genders. Binary language defines their identity, their thought processes, and their interactions with each other and with technology. Each pair can work independently with virtually any technology. Should a massive loss of life occur, Bynar pairs can maintain their assigned technological functions, as well as take on the functions of others, with minimal outside assistance. Their facilities with computers are why Bynars can thoroughly learn virtually any technology at a pace that appears to defy natural organic abilities. The Bynars devised a mechanical data buffer that is worn on an individual’s hip. It enables rapid communication and comes close to approximating the rate of data transfer within computer circuits.

For an obvious example of their skills, one need only look at the astonishing pace at which two Bynar pairs stationed on Starbase 74 transferred Bynaus’s master computer database into the *Enterprise*’s computer systems. Naturally, the more working pairs, the more efficiency and speed that can be expected.

The Starbase 74 incident exposed vulnerability in the Bynar methodology: too much interdependence between the organic Bynars and the homeworld’s master computer. The threatened demise of the main computer endangered every living Bynar. Such a weakness could not be allowed to continue unexamined.

Over the decade since the Starbase 74 incident, much of Bynar civilization has focused on the question of how much the Bynars can separate their existence from their world’s technology. While survival in ancient times may have hinged on the uncontested embrace of technology, the modern-day necessity of maintaining this rigidly defined paradigm is being studied and debated among the Bynars. The discussion proceeds at a slow pace, however, because of how Bynar society makes changes.

Bynaus has one of the few pure democracies in the Federation. The absolute nature of the Bynar psyche allows them to examine problems objectively. One might conclude that linear, logic-based minds might reach the same conclusions. Surprisingly, the results of their political and procedural discussions are hardly monolithic. Diversity of thought exists on Bynaus, though it is often subtle and appears incrementally. The great Vulcan sociologist Tuparak, who was the first nonnative scientist to study the Bynars after they had joined the Federation, compared the shifts in Bynar society to the changes wrought by wind erosion. “The process is so gradual, so subtle,” Tuparak said, “that it can barely be noticed in a lifetime. But when one has the perspective of time, one can see how monumental change has been.”

Individual Bynars reach different conclusions based on their knowledge and experience, gained from both work and their relationships with their mates. There is so little ambiguity in their thought processes that a simple up or down vote is possible on virtually every subject. The idea of each citizen having a vote or a say in their planet’s global issues is not unreasonable. Every day at the same time the Bynars participate in a virtual planetary meeting where referenda are voted on and announcements are made. To outsiders, it may appear that every citizen is required to be bogged down in minutiae, but the Bynars see the ability to choose as the ultimate expression of the liberty they fought to claim from their AI creators. No one is compelled to decide in a certain way. There is no “campaigning” or persuasion based on emotion. Bynars are utilitarian and pragmatic in the extreme. Logic and desire

outcome have been key motivators—until the present day.

The subtle undercurrents of doubt brought on by the collective near-death experience previously referred to may slowly erode the Bynars' unquestioning acceptance of majority will. Citizen Services, the organization that oversees functions relating to Bynars' citizenry, reports a gradual trend toward more issues dealing with individual rights. For example, before five years ago, it was unheard of for a member of a Bynar pair to call into question a mate's behavior. Now, while it is rare, and Citizen Services will not comment publicly on such instances, unsubstantiated reports indicate that it does happen in present times. Such a trend may indicate a shift in Bynar society that calls into doubt whether a system of pure democratic government will continue. The concept of individuality runs contrary to all of Bynar civilization's social and cultural norms. Such a notion, to refer back to Tuparak, exists now only as the wind does: as an unseen force that has the potential to remake the face of this society.

Citizen Services Employee Report

Agent Unit 110/111

Assignment: Starfleet Recruiting Visit on Behalf of Starfleet Corps of Engineers

As requested by Captain Quinteros, Citizen Services will oversee the interaction of Starfleet representatives Lieutenant Temperance Brewster (female, junior-grade lieutenant, human, Centauri colonist, thirty Earth years, five months, two days) and Ensign Alban Topar (male, ensign, Bajoran, twenty-five years, three months, eight days). 110/111 accept this assignment from 10110/10100 and will facilitate any communications between Bynaus's citizens and the visitors. This unit will apply all rules and regulations governing interaction between Bynaus citizens and offworld visitors pursuant to section 5920 paragraph 7 of the Bynaus Policy Statement on Federation Membership, with reference to the special circumstance proscribed by Starfleet-Bynaus protocols. Official request for announcement to be made on the median planetary meeting regarding Starfleet Business has been submitted. Awaiting announcement details from Lieutenant Brewster. Captain Quinteros indicates that announcement will invite Bynars to volunteer for service in the Starfleet Corps of Engineers. Will update before 23:15:00.

Personal Log, Lieutenant Temperance Brewster

If a planet-sized machine made of organic, living material could be constructed, I imagine it would look and feel a lot like Bynaus. It isn't that this world isn't beautiful—it is. Sort of. In the way that the symmetry and precision of geometric figures are beautiful. The kind of minds that can conceive of and create such exquisite, meticulous designs are nothing short of astonishing, but I can't help but feel unnerved by the cold, calculating process behind all. As if there is no tolerance for deviation from what is expected. I'm not sure how comfortable I am in an environment where everywhere I look, I feel like I'm living in the heart of a sterile machine. I never thought I'd appreciate litter on the streets or dust on the window ledges!

As I stepped off the transporter pad into the central transportation center, my first thought was that the inside of their buildings didn't look a lot different from any other Federation building I'd been in: metal paneling, transparent aluminum windows, chairs with stiff cushions in bland neutral colors. But then, when I reached down to pick up my satchel, I caught a glimpse outside.

My first impression of Bynaus dragged me back to my engineering classes at the Academy. This reaction surprised me: every fact I stuffed into my brain for the required engineering units promptly fell out as soon as I passed the exams. I still couldn't tell a converter coil from a plasma modulator. I'm still amazed—and yes, a little intimidated—by those who glory in the architecture of circuitry or the thrill of a machine that's efficient within point zero two. To me, the insides of a console look like hieroglyphics must have appeared to Napoleon's soldiers hundreds of years ago. It was all so much metallurgy, chemistry, electronics...streams of lights flashing and writhing like worms through coils. *Why* a person would want to become an engineer and design technology was more interesting to me than the technology itself. But when I glanced out at the surrounding city, I caught a glimpse, for the first time, of how one might perceive poetry in technology. I didn't greet the Starfleet liaison who had met us nor did I look to see what Alban's reaction was. Instead, I took several unthinking steps toward the windows where I could get a more complete view. Resting my hands on the cold gray metal ledge, I stared at the hum of activity outside.

In the two-dimensional perspective from above, looking down from a shuttle or an orbital platform, the Bynar complexes must have looked like intricate, thousand-year-old Moorish mosaics with their domes, conduits, cables, and flashing lights. Up close, these structures formed seamless, planar tessellations—dodecahedral spheres and pyramids. I swear I might have seen a trio of interlocking loop tunnels that formed Borromean rings, even though

theoretically I didn't believe such a structure was possible. Even the buildings that had seemingly organic design, when examined more closely, appeared to be fractals.

Metal, clear polymer, soothing colored lights, and patches of muted primary color defined the city's aesthetics; even the splashes of color that appeared at regular intervals created a powerful sense of visual balance. Strips of shimmering metals running parallel to each other or lights outlined the edges of buildings. If I stared out the window long enough, the lines, lights and colors blurred into a figure resembling a highly complex game of Vulcan *kal-toh*. The Bynars appeared to live and work in a methodically plotted out design governed by theoretical mathematics.

Only the gray-violet-skinned Bynars in their silver and black uniforms, sticking out in stark relief against the pebbled surfaces of the buildings' exteriors, provided a random component. Their oversized, smooth skulls aren't attractive by most humanoid standards, particularly the pink, scarred suture in the back of their heads. I learned from Captain Quinteros's writing that the "scar" on the skull is where the Bynars are attached to the birthing chambers. Their movements lacked the rhythmic uniformity one might expect from androids, but there was such obvious purpose in their movements—like bundles of information zinging through a computer from one place to another—to exclude any sense of spontaneity. Even the living elements in the open spaces followed a grid pattern: rows of impeccably pruned trees surrounded by what appeared to be garden boxes, though I couldn't discern any details from such a distance. Wherever I looked, no Bynars lingered in what I thought of as the park, nor did I see the Bynars stopping to talk with other Bynars or even pause to study their surroundings. I shivered involuntarily, discomfited by the utilitarian nature of it all, feeling like I had stepped into a world of relentless efficiency—like the Borg, but without the compulsion. Perhaps on some subconscious level, I wondered if I would be assimilated into the sea of sameness, fit like a spare part into the machine of this world.

Captain Quinteros, who had met us at the transporter pad, stepped up behind me. "I find the rhythms and patterns very soothing. Like the rattle of rain against my roof, which puts me right to sleep. The stability, the constancy, makes this place feel dependable. I know what to expect and it puts my mind at ease. The Bynars have little tolerance for chaos and confusion, and that suits me just fine."

I flushed, embarrassed to be caught. "I don't—I mean—I believe this to be—um—"

"At ease, Lieutenant," Quinteros said kindly. "Most visitors to Bynaas react the way you do. There's a reason why it's not on the Alpha Quadrant's list of favorite travel destinations."

I managed to muster a comment on how unexpectedly beautiful Bynaas was.

"Most visitors don't expect it," he said. "They assume a species that has a symbiotic relationship with machines lacks a sense of aesthetics. They expect the place to look like the inside of a Borg cube."

Warmth again spread through my cheeks at Quinteros's uncanny ability to speak my private thoughts aloud.

“All they need to disabuse themselves of that false notion is to take in the view from the transporter room,” he concluded, opening his arms expansively.

“What’s this place called?” I asked, stepping away from the window and toward the turbolift.

“Bynars don’t name their cities—or any geographical location, for that matter,” Quinteros explained as we walked. “For planning purposes, the surface is mapped on a grid capable of defining each spot of land on this planet down to the meter.” He reached for a thin, rectangular object about the size of a tricorder hanging from his belt and handed it to me. “It’s a planetary positioning guide. Voice activated. You tell it where you want to go, the guide finds the coordinates and provides you with directions. If you like, it will store instructions to places you want to go later. You can also back up data from any place onto its memory modules.”

“This has more in common with navigating a starship than visiting a planet,” I said, hoping my puzzlement over all things technical wasn’t obvious.

“In a way,” Quinteros said, “you’re right. But the Bynars have engineered this device to be friendly to any species, regardless of their level of technological literacy.”

“Does my discomfort with the mechanical show?” I asked, wondering if Quinteros had been a counselor in a previous assignment. One of the tenets of being a Starfleet recruiter was maintaining a pleasant, nonjudgmental persona; years of training should have smoothed over my old Academy hang-up.

“A little, though I doubt most people would notice. Living on Bynaus, I’m probably more attuned to the reactions of offworlders to this highly unusual place. I have to admit,” I chuckled, “that I’m surprised to see a technophobe as a recruiter for S.C.E.”

Quinteros wasn’t the first person to make that observation—my senior officer was, who he’d interviewed me for the position. I’d often wondered why I enjoyed my job as much as I did. “My job is to identify and evaluate potential candidates for Starfleet. I assess their intellectual abilities, their emotional health, physical stamina—whatever Starfleet requires in a candidate to fill a position.”

“You’re plugging people into vacant slots? How different is your process from the Bynars, who run their society similarly by assessing who best can do a job and assigning them to do so?” he said, offering a bemused smile.

I chose to ignore Quinteros’s gentle poke at my hypocrisy. “There are many factors to consider. But in the case of staffing engineers, I think because I have so little aptitude for the discipline, it makes me that much more curious about why these people gravitate to what they do.”

“Opposites attract?”

“I suppose.”

Quinteros and I continued our genial conversation into the turbolift. Upon arrival in the lobby, I discovered that a Bynar pair was waiting for us.

“Lieutenant Brewster, these are the representatives from Citizen Services who will advise you during your time here. They will help you navigate the process of sharing your mission with the Bynars.” Quinteros turned and greeted the pair, then introduced them as 110 and 111.

I blinked, wondered if I should extend my hand, but settled on a polite shoulder bob instead. I loathed feeling like a typical greenhorn, but here I was, blundering around like I had just gotten out of the Academy last week. Maybe taking this on as my first travel assignment was a mistake. I should have gone someplace easier—like Cardassia!

As I rose back up to my full height, I looked at them once again, trying to remember which one Quinteros had indicated was 110 and which one was 111. I didn’t have a clue. I hate it when people say they can’t tell two or more individuals apart—it sounds lazy. As if they don’t care enough to pay attention to the details that make a difference, such as vocal intonation, eye expressions, and other subtle variances. I know the Bynars aren’t clones—they’re not genetically engineered any more than humans are these days. Scientists may tweak for genetic diseases or congenital defects, but otherwise they allow nature to take its course. The Bynars conceive their offspring in labs; they are gestated in birthing chambers. I knew this intellectually. Logic struggled to overcome my eyes’ insistence that the Bynars were identical.

“Hello,” I said hesitantly. “110, 111. Thank you for your assistance.”

“We have—”

I focused on the Bynar I believed to be 110.

“—arranged for a slot—”

Shifted my attention to the other—

“—on the planetary network.”

—and back again.

“Is your statement—”

“—prepared?”

It took me a moment to realize that the dual-channel audio had stopped and that the pair now stood as still as robots. “Yes. I’ve prepared my stump speech,” I said, offering them a friendly smile. “I’m hoping to convince some of the Bynars that it is their patriotic duty to join Starfleet.”

“Stump—”

“—speech?”

“Patriotic—

“—duty?”

I'd forgotten—the literal-minded Bynars had difficulty translating idioms. “My recruitment statement that I hope will persuade your fellow Bynars that they have a vested interest in helping Starfleet prevail in the current conflict.”

“The Dominion—”

“—War.” 110 and 111 cocked their heads in opposite directions, apparently satisfied by my explanation, and indicated that I should follow them.

As we walked out into the open, I attempted to follow 110 and 111's rapid-fire explanation of the day's schedule, rules, and procedure. In an effort to be polite, I looked from side to side each time the conversation switched speakers, but I lost track of what was being said. I gave up trying to know who they were individually and kept my eyes focused on the pathway through the city, consciously ignoring the sea of seemingly identical faces scurrying around me. My mission gave me purpose. I couldn't allow myself to be sidetracked by the white noise of the Bynar world.

Citizen Services Employee Report

Agent Unit 110/111

Assignment: Starfleet Recruiting Visit on Behalf of Starfleet Corps of Engineers

Lieutenant Brewster's statement was delivered over the interplanetary communications network at 22:46:07. Potential recruits will meet in Building C81 Quadrant 4 at 34:05:29. Citizen Services will tally responses and provide them to Lieutenant Brewster. CS agents will be in attendance at recruiting meeting to advise Starfleet on Bynaus protocols. Response over the network indicates that the message was received by those eligible to participate. This unit can conclude that the requirements set out by the Equality Protocol have been met.

Personal Log, Lieutenant Temperance Brewster

I can't talk about it now. I can't. I think I may have to throw up. Or scream.

Citizen Services Employee Report

Agent Unit 110/111

Assignment: Starfleet Recruiting Visit on Behalf of Starfleet Corps of Engineers

We ended the meeting after one hour elapsed and those in attendance received the information they had come for. This unit had some discussion with Lieutenant Brewster regarding appropriate social protocols within Bynar society. We sensed she did not fully understand our statements because she wanted to go through them multiple times. We are uncertain whether she is satisfied with our explanations. We will review them with her in the morning after we have had a chance to check the suitability of our statements against the information in the human database. This unit believes it can aid Lieutenant Brewster in attaining rational understanding on this issue.

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