

— STAR TREK —
ENTERPRISE

BITTER HARVEST



While Mayweather
place in Starfleet,
contend with the
fatal illness among



wonders about his
Doctor Phlox must
outbreak of a strange
a group of colonists.



KATHY ROSE

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We wish you a pleasant time reading this story.

Mayweather ducked his head in acknowledgment of the doctor's words. "I guess I was having some doubts about why I'm out here, doing what I do. I couldn't see that I was doing any good for anyone, least of all myself."

Phlox remained silent for a few moments, considering his words. "And this situation with the colonists helped you resolve those doubts?"

"Yeah," Mayweather said, keeping his eyes on the control panel. "I realized that, even though I'm a small cog in the big machinery of Starfleet, I'm valuable to the whole. Without all the pieces, so to speak, there'd be no way anything like Starfleet could work."

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Revision 1

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Bitter Harvest

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Also in the EVS6 collection:

- 6.01 Missing Pieces, Part One
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Episodes 6.03 to 6.17 to be edited in 2006 - 2007

CHAPTER

1

Ensign Travis Mayweather, seated at the helm of the starship Enterprise, gazed at the viewscreen before him. A lush, green-blue planet was rotating peacefully. Wispy white clouds were scattered like errant strands of cotton candy in the planet's atmosphere.

Mayweather gave his head a shake. He really needed the upcoming shore leave, if his uncharacteristically fanciful thoughts were any indication. Not only would Enterprise be providing some assistance to the Arctura III colony, but the ship's personnel would get a chance to spend some time relaxing on the planet.

Not that there would be much to do. Arctura III was an agricultural colony, and there weren't many sophisticated amusements on the planet. But perhaps he could get in some hiking or mountain climbing. If all else failed, there was the picnic Commander Tucker was planning.

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A picnic. Quaint, Mayweather thought, and probably very relaxing in a sit-around-on-the-ground, don't-really-do-anything sort of way. The idea of eating outside in the open air of a planet did have a certain novelty to it, considering he'd spent more of his life aboard spacegoing vessels than on planets.

He just hoped it wasn't boring. So much of what he did any more was boring—the same things over and over, with not much outside his duties as helmsman and shuttlepod pilot with which to occupy himself. Oh, sure, it seemed like there were emergencies every time you turned around, but only occasionally would he be called to help out on a project in Engineering or some such thing. Those instances were too few and far between for his liking.

Sometimes it felt like he was contributing less to Starfleet than he had as a member of the crew of the *Horizon*, the freighter operated by his family. Starfleet seemed, at least in Mayweather's opinion, to be emphasizing specialization. Once you got stuck in a position, you could forget about anything else for years.

Enterprise's commanding officer was a good example. Jonathan Archer had been the captain when the ship was launched. More than four years later, he was still captain. That was all well and good for Captain Archer, Mayweather supposed. Archer had never made any secret of the fact that he was first and foremost an explorer. The man was doing what he loved. He'd seen how unhappy the captain had been when he thought he was going to be taking command of Starbase 1. It probably would have made Archer miserable

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if that really had turned out to be the case.

Mayweather knew exactly what that would feel like. It was how he was feeling. He couldn't help but wonder if there ever would be more than what he was doing now.

And finally, there had been Gannet. He hadn't realized how much she'd meant to him until she was gone, and his coming to grips with her death was undermined by the belief that he was somehow at least partially responsible for what had happened to her. If he hadn't been in Starfleet, leading her to worry about him, maybe she wouldn't have been involved in that Terra Firma debacle and what had come after it.

Part of him realized that was just his ego talking, but it didn't ease the remorse he felt. If anything, it was one more reason to keep busy so he would avoid brooding about it.

Archer's voice startled him from his somber reverie. "Come on, Travis," Archer said, one foot on the upper level of the bridge as he headed for the turbolift. "You're piloting the first shuttlepod down."

Mayweather turned the helm over to a relief officer and followed Archer into the turbolift. The captain flashed him a bright smile as he thumbed the control panel to close the door and send them on their way to the launch bay.

"I don't know about you, Travis," Archer said, "but it will feel good to get some solid ground under my feet for a while."

Mayweather shrugged good-naturedly. "If it's all the same, sir, I prefer something about point-eight

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Earth normal," he said.

Archer laughed. "That's right. Your father always kept the artificial gravity a little light on the Horizon, didn't he? You told me he said it put a... a..."

"Bounce in your step," Mayweather finished.

Archer nodded. "Well, Arctura III has near-normal Earth gravity. I might not be able to tell it's not quite the same, but you'll probably be able to."

"Maybe, sir," Mayweather replied noncommittally.

Inside the launch bay, they joined the rest of the first party to go down to the planet. Commander T'Pol was there, as were Commander Tucker and Doctor Phlox. As Archer went to join the other three, Mayweather climbed into the shuttlepod and took the pilot's seat. He could hear the others' conversation as he settled in and got ready for launch.

"After I talk to the head of their hospital, I'll set up a schedule to see anyone who needs medical treatment," Phlox said to Archer as they climbed in.

"Are you expecting any major problems?" Archer asked, taking one of the seats behind Mayweather.

"I have no idea," Phlox replied. "They would have notified us of anything serious, but with a population of one hundred thousand and very few doctors, most of whom are general practitioners, you would think there would be at least a few cases that require my attention, hmmm?"

"What they seem most concerned about is their farmin' equipment," Tucker put in from his spot across from Phlox on one of the bench seats.

T'Pol, at the auxiliary console behind Mayweather,

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turned to favor Tucker with a raised eyebrow. "Arc-tura III is primarily an agricultural colony," she said. "It is logical that the efficient operation of their machinery is of importance to the colony's inhabitants."

Tucker conceded the point with a dip of his head.

"Officially, Starfleet is providing assistance at the colony's request," Archer put in. "The unofficial reason is that the lines of communication need to be kept open with humans who have established communities away from Earth."

"You mean keep them in line," Tucker put in.

Archer frowned at him and, leaning forward toward Mayweather, said, "If you're ready, Travis, let's go."

CHAPTER

2

The captain had gone off to talk with one of the colony's administrators, and T'Pol and Phlox had left for the hospital. For lack of anything better to do, Mayweather found himself tagging along after Tucker. Usually in such situations, Mayweather would stay with the shuttlepod as a precaution against it being tampered with, whether intentionally or out of curiosity by the inhabitants of the place they were visiting. The people here were human, however, and not too long removed from Earth. There shouldn't be any problems.

At least, he hadn't thought there would be. As they rode along in a ground vehicle, Mayweather's thoughts kept straying to the lukewarm reception they'd encountered. Only a planetary administrator, a doctor from the hospital, and a factory foreman had met them at the landing site. The doctor had seemed pleased to

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meet them, but the other two men acted as if they had better things to be doing.

The factory foreman was taking them to a facility that made farming equipment. Mayweather listened to Tucker trying to pry information out of him with numerous questions, but all he got were short, tight-lipped answers. Despite Tucker's easygoing nature, he seemed to be at a loss as how to get the man to open up.

"So, from what little you've told me..." Tucker's voice trailed off. "Um... I'm sorry. What'd you say your name was again?"

The foreman, who had been keeping his gaze straight ahead on the road, favored Tucker with a glare. "George Smith," he said, and turned his attention back to his driving.

Tucker shot Mayweather an exasperated glance before plowing on. "From what little you've told me, George, there's a problem with the strength of one of the alloys you're usin'."

Smith nodded sharply. "That's right," he said. "We've put the equipment together like we always have, but in the last several months, some of the individual pieces have become brittle within a matter of weeks after manufacture."

"Can you give me any examples?"

"A main drive shaft snapping while a combine was in operation. An auger that warped suddenly before breaking. Exterior panels for the operator cabs showing extreme wear and tear that shouldn't happen, even after twenty years of use!"

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The vehemence in the man's tone took Tucker aback. Mayweather looked at the engineer with questioning eyes. Tucker shook his head slightly and rolled his eyes. Returning his attention to Smith, Tucker said, "Well, I suppose the problem could be the quality of the parts you're shippin' in from offworld."

Smith gave Tucker an incredulous glare. "The parts we ship in?" he repeated. "No way! We don't ship in anything. We're totally self-sufficient. We don't ask for anything we can't make ourselves or do for ourselves, for that matter. We even mine the ore to make items that require metal."

The unmistakable pride in the man's words touched a chord with Mayweather. It was very similar to the self-sufficient attitude among those who, like his family, worked on long-distance cargo freighters. You either made do with what you had, or you did without. It was as simple as that.

Having to ask for outside help had to rankle the colonists, Mayweather realized with a pang of empathy. It was tantamount to admitting they couldn't do something on their own. The cold reception they'd received now made sense. From his own experience growing up on the Horizon, Mayweather knew the colonists' pride would make it even harder for them to accept the help they needed.

CHAPTER

3

Arctura III's hospital was modern and clean but, Phlox had to admit, a bit on the spare side. There were none of the extra touches like plants or artwork that helped brighten a patient's spirits. The facility was a sterile environment that encouraged patients to recuperate as fast as they couldóif only to get away from the place.

"What do you think?" asked Doctor Jones, a genial man in his mid-fifties with thin, graying hair.

Working with the Interspecies Medical Exchange had taught Phlox a few things about diplomacy, so he was able to couch his reply with tactful honesty. "It seems very... efficient," he said.

"I know," Jones said affably, neither fooled nor offended by Phlox's response. "It seems a very cold place to take care of sick people."

"Welló" Phlox started, only to be interrupted by

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T'Pol, who was accompanying him on the tour of the facility.

"There is something to be said for aesthetic surroundings," she said. "At least among humans, a congenial setting often aids the healing process."

Jones nodded. "That's true. But there are only so many resources to go around," he said. "We are satisfied that at least we can provide the best medical care possible on Arctura III."

Phlox turned the conversation toward unusual medical cases Jones had encountered on the planet, and was pleased to find that there really was no need of his own services. For one thing, the colonists kept up with scheduled immunizations. In addition, there were no new diseases associated with the planet, although there was one form of insectoid life that was venomous. Most emergency medical cases were the result of work-related accidents. Farming always had been a dangerous occupation, what with being outside in all kinds of weather as well as working with heavy equipment like tractors.

"No chemicals, though," Jones said. "All the food grown here is organic. That's helped contribute to the general good health of the population. It's also a vindication of one of the reasons this colony was established—to live a life free from unnecessary technology."

Phlox nodded in understanding but didn't say anything, and he and T'Pol followed Jones down a corridor as the colony doctor continued to talk about life on

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the planet.

Jones led them into a patient waiting area. Several people were seated on straight-back chairs and, as they entered, a medical staffer entered from the opposite side of the room. A loud sneeze caused both Phlox and T'Pol to look in concern at a youngster who, from all appearances, was suffering from a good, old-fashioned head cold.

"You'll have to excuse me, I'm afraid," Jones said as he took a chart from the med staffer. "We've had a run on respiratory complaints lately." Glancing around at the waiting people, he added, "There's always an increase in such minor ailments at this time. It's spring in this hemisphere on Arctura IIIó"

Jones broke off as a series of hacking coughs issued from the boy who had sneezed. The coughing continued unabated to the extent that the child couldn't catch his breath. Both Jones and Phlox rushed to his side.

"Help me get him to the examining room," Jones said.

CHAPTER

4

"Surly bunch," Trip remarked as he and Mayweather left the factory. Smith had just excused himself to fetch the vehicle.

Mayweather, remembering the stares of the workers as they'd been shown around the facility, had to agree. "Makes me wonder why we bother to do this if they don't want our help," he said as they walked toward Smith's ground vehicle.

Trip shrugged as they stopped at the curb. "They may not want our help, but they need it. That much is obvious," he said, looking at the alloy sample he had been given in the factory.

Pointing to the piece of metal Tucker was holding, Mayweather said, "I'm surprised they even gave us that."

"Well, they're kind of at their wit's end," Tucker said, running a finger along the jagged edge of the

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sample. "They've already run every test I would have on it and haven't figured out what's goin' on. We'll just have to see what we can come up with back on board Enterprise. We have some scanners their technology here can't touch." A hint of pride tinged his voice.

Smith pulled up then, swinging a door open so they could get into the vehicle. Mayweather saw Tucker take a deep breath as he seated himself.

"George, is there any place around here where some of our crew can take some R and R?" Tucker asked.

Smith frowned. "We don't have any fancy night-spots or anything like that, if that's what you had in mind," he said.

"That's all right. I was thinkin' more along the lines of some place outdoors where some of us could have a picnic, or play some football maybe?" Tucker let his voice trail off hopefully.

For the first time, a smile crossed Smith's face. "I guess even you Starfleet types need some fresh air now and then," he said.

"We sure do," Tucker responded sincerely.

"In that case," Smith said, "you'll probably be interested in our park system."

To Mayweather's surprise, the man became absolutely verbose. He carried on and on about Arctura III's natural beauty and what the colonists had done to preserve and nurture it. The man was still talking as they arrived back at the shuttlepod. Captain Archer was standing outside the craft.

Tucker exited the vehicle first, and turned back to

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Smith as Mayweather climbed out. "I'll see what I can find out about this," Tucker said through the open window, holding up the piece of alloy.

Immediately Smith's shuttered expression returned. "Yeah, you do that," he said, putting the vehicle in gear and driving off almost before Mayweather could shut the door.

A shout from Archer distracted them from the factory foreman's rude departure. "Good news, Trip! I was able to obtain permission for shore leave for the crew," Archer said. Glancing around, he added, "Not that there's going to be much to do other than stretch our legs. But you know, considering what happened during shore leave on Betazed, that's just fine with me."

Tucker grimaced at the memory. During their stint on Betazed last month, one of his Engineering crewmen had been suspected of falsely of murder, an interplanetary incident that had nearly scotched negotiations between Betazed and Earth. "That'll be fine, Cap'n. I've got it all taken care of," Tucker said. Reaching over, he clapped Mayweather on the shoulder. "Maybe we can even teach our Boomer what people in the country do to have some fun."

Archer chuckled as he climbed into the shuttlepod.

Mayweather took the pilot's seat and began a systems check prior to takeoff as they waited for Phlox and T'Pol. He'd done this procedure hundreds of times before, so he was able to listen in as the two officers told each other how their respective meetings went. They hadn't been talking long when T'Pol returned

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alone.

"Where's Phlox?" Archer asked.

"At the hospital," she answered as she took her place at the auxiliary console behind Mayweather. "There was a medical emergency. Doctor Phlox is assisting the local doctor."

"Anything serious?"

"A respiratory problem," she said. "Doctor Phlox performed an emergency tracheotomy on a ten-year-old boy."

When T'Pol didn't elaborate, Mayweather couldn't help asking, "Is the child okay?"

T'Pol turned to face him before answering. "I believe that is why Doctor Phlox wished to remain behind. He wants to be certain the child will be 'okay'."

"It's a good thing he was there," Archer said.

"No doubt the local physician is well qualified," T'Pol said dryly. "However, Doctor Phlox has had considerable surgical experience, more so than Doctor Jones. The child is receiving the best medical care currently available on the planet."

Mayweather caught the amused glance that passed between Archer and Tucker at T'Pol's understated assessment of the ship's doctor, and, smiling himself, he finished readying the shuttlepod for launch. One thing could be said about Starfleet: its members were the best, no matter what their profession.

The trip back was, as Mayweather expected, routine. The closer they got to Enterprise, however, the stronger the sense of boredom became, and he concentrated even harder on his piloting to block it out. The

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problem was, it was all too familiar: the procedures, the controls, even the view. After the shuttlepod was pulled into the launch bay, he must have given some sign of his dissatisfaction, for Tucker came up and nudged him on the arm. The engineer was looking at him in concern.

"You all right?" Tucker asked.

"Yeah," he responded, rolling his head on his neck to get the kinks out. "Just a little tired."

"Well, don't forget about our picnic tomorrow," Tucker reminded him. "We'll head down at 1000 hours. You want to drive?"

Mayweather mustered a smile. He remembered a day four or five years ago when such a request would have made him leap for joy. "Sure."

CHAPTER

5

As it turned out, Mayweather didn't pilot the shuttlepod for the picnic. Crewman Michael Rostov from Engineering, citing the need to get in some flying hours to retain his pilot's certification, was at the controls when the group departed.

Mayweather knew Rostov was still a little skittish after being falsely accused of murder on Betazed. Letting him pilot would be one way to help build up his confidence again. But paradoxically, Enterprise's first-string helmsman wasn't sure he liked someone else piloting, even though he himself hadn't really wanted the assignment, and ultimately he decided it was the feeling of loss of control that was bothering him. If they crashed, Mayweather thought darkly, at least he wouldn't be to blame.

"Commander T'Pol won't be coming with us," Ensign Hoshi Sato said from her place next to May-

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weather on one of the bench seats. "She's trying to find out what's causing the problem with the metal sample Commander Tucker brought back. And Captain Archer said he had too much paperwork to catch up on."

From the auxiliary console, Lieutenant Malcolm Reed asked, "Then what's Porthos doing with us?"

Hearing his name, the beagle gave an enthusiastic bark and wagged his tail. The dog was perched between Tucker and a huge picnic basket on the other bench seat.

Sato laughed before she replied. "Porthos needs some shore leave, too. It's probably even harder for him being cooped up on a starship than it is for us. Don't worry, Lieutenant. I'll keep an eye on him."

Rounding out their group of picnickers were two more Engineering staff members. Mayweather had assumed that Doctor Phlox would have come along. A picnic would have aroused the Denobulan's intense curiosity about yet another human custom. But, according to Sato, the doctor was working instead of enjoying an outing with the rest of them. Phlox had remained overnight on the planetósomething about several more colonists having some type of breathing problems.

"Relax, Travis," Sato said, having noticed his distraction. "Michael's flying just fine."

Mayweather gave her a smile, took a deep breath, and tried to relax. It was ironic, he thought. He was bored doing the same things like piloting over and over again. Yet when it came down to it, he'd rather be

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piloting the shuttlepod than be a passenger.

CHAPTER

6

Phlox watched as the last of the patients was wheeled out of the emergency room. His normally cheerful demeanor was absent. "I don't understand it." Phlox stripped off his surgical gloves. "Four tracheotomies in less than a day. You said you normally don't do even one a year."

"It is the season for colds," Doctor Jones reminded him, "but four people having the same life-threatening condition requiring what for us is a radical procedure is an unlikely coincidence."

"I don't believe it's coincidental, either," Phlox said.

Jones looked at him quizzically. "What could it be? A mutation in the germ causing the cold?"

"It's possible. It may be there's something causing an unusual change in a run-of-the-mill human bug brought here when Arctura III was settled. Or maybe

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it's just taken this long for a local virus to circumvent the human immune system," Phlox said. Then he shrugged. "I won't know for sure until I do some analysis. It's interesting that nothing turned up via immunoassayóbut at least that means it's probably not airborne. I want to run the genome of the microorganism we've discovered through cell culture."

Jones ran a hand through his sparse hair. "You're talking about some very sophisticated lab work," he said. "We don't have the facilities for that."

Phlox gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry," he said. "We have everything we need aboard Enterprise."

CHAPTER

7

"Sssssh! You have to be quiet when you sneak up on 'em or you'll wake 'em up, and then they can get mean."

Mayweather gave Tucker a dubious look. "They're cows," he said. "I may not be a farm boy, but even I know they're pretty tame animals."

"Maybe, Travis, but you're sneakin' up on a bull!"

Mayweather, uttering a muffled "Oops!", quickly altered his course across the field and homed in on another unsuspecting target. How had he let the commander talk him into this?

They'd all been sitting around after eating an excellent lunch prepared by Chef. The novelty of a picnic had worn off quickly, and Mayweather had felt the boredom creeping in again as he listened to the others' chatter. Then Tucker began talking about the things he and his siblings would do during their summer vaca-

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tions from school, and the next thing he knew, he was out in this field about to attempt his first cow tipping, with Tucker egging him on.

He'd never heard of cow tipping. Most of his life had been spent in space, and you didn't find too many cows out there, that was for sure. And although he wasn't very familiar with farm animals, his error concerning the bull was rather embarrassing. He hadn't known that bulls didn't always have horns.

Moving stealthily, he approached the cow from the side. Tucker was a few steps behind him, loudly whispering instructions.

"All right, that's good, Travis. Now, put your hands on the cow's rump."

Standing next to the cow and gingerly placing his hands on the animal's hindquarters, Mayweather looked over his shoulder. Behind Tucker, he could see Sato, Reed, and the others watching from the other side of the fence that separated the field from the picnic area in the park. Porthos was straining at the leash held by Sato.

"Don't stop now," Tucker said encouragingly. "You want to be the first Boomer to tip a cow, don't you? Now give her a good shove."

Mayweather looked at the cow. It was a good-sized animal, and it appeared to be fairly well braced on its four legs. It would have to be, since it seemed to be asleep and hadn't fallen over on its own. He didn't know if he tip the cow over by himself, but he gave the animal a tentative push anyway.

Nothing happened.

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"Oh come on, Travis!" Tucker said. "You can do better than that."

Gritting his teeth, Mayweather pushed harder. Still nothing.

"Put your back into it!" Tucker said.

There was something about the commander's voice that jerked Mayweather's head around to look at him. The engineer was laughing at him, and so were all the others lined up at the fence. It dawned on Mayweather that this was some kind of joke.

He gave the cow one last shoveópartially in amusement and partially in irritation that Tucker had pulled a fast one on himóand the previously unmoving animal finally took note of what was going on and stepped to the side. His balance compromised by this unexpected removal of support, Mayweather fell flat on his face. The cow emitted a mournful moo and leisurely wandered off.

Mayweather lay on the ground for a moment, resigning himself to being laughed at, when he heard Tucker shout in alarm.

"Get up, Travis!"

Mayweather lifted his head to see a ton of beef headed for him at a run. Apparently the bull didn't take well to anyone messing with his herd.

"Shit," Mayweather muttered under his breath.

Scrambling to his feet, he took off at a run behind Tucker, and both men leaped the fence. To add insult to injury, Mayweather's foot slid out from under him when he landed on the other side, and he wound up sitting on his rear.

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The bull, satisfied that it had chased the interlopers out of its territory, snorted, pawed the ground a couple of times, and, with a flick of its tail, turned and trotted back to his herd.

Tucker was laughing so hard he was holding his sides. Looking over at him, Mayweather said, "Cows don't tip over, do they?"

"No," Tucker rasped out, laughing even harder.

Sato, trailing Porthos on the leash, came over and squatted next to Mayweather. "Are you all right?" she asked, her concern not quite masking the amused gleam in her eyes.

"Nothing's hurt but my pride," he answered, reaching out to pat the beagle's head. "You would have taken care of that big bull, wouldn't you, boy?"

The unexpected sound of several communicators signaling cut through the laughter. Tucker, out of breath from laughing so hard, motioned for Reed to answer the hail.

Taking his communicator from his sleeve pocket and opening it, he said, "Reed here."

"Lieutenant Reed," came T'Pol's voice. "All shore leave has been canceled. Please have your group return to Enterprise as soon as possible."

The members of the shore leave party immediately sobered at her words.

Reed, glancing around at the others, asked, "What's happened?"

There was a pause before T'Pol's voice returned over the communicator. "Doctor Phlox has declared a medical emergency. Every member of your party is to

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go directly to decon when you return."

CHAPTER

8

"None of you appears to have picked up whatever it is that is affecting the colonists," Phlox said through the speaker at the decon observation window. "You're free to go."

As the shore leave party filed out of decon, Reed paused next to the doctor. "What exactly is affecting them?" he asked.

"We're not sure yet," Phlox said. "It appears to be a mutation of a common rhinovirus, but with extreme consequences. Without intervention, it can be fatal."

Reed paled at the doctor's words, and Tucker gave the tactical officer a reassuring slap on the arm. "Quit worryin', Malcolm. The doc said we're fine."

Mayweather followed the others out of decon but paused as they were going through sickbay. His gaze went to the biobeds, all of which were occupied. The medical facilities on Arctura III, faced with an un-

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precedented number of patients, were sending some of those afflicted up to Enterprise for treatment. The added benefit was that Phlox could take tissue samples from the patients to aid in his research.

To Mayweather's surprise, one of those occupying a biobed was the factory foreman, George Smith.

Phlox caught Mayweather's concerned expression and said, "One thing we have figured out is that it's not transmitted through the air. Don't worryóyou won't catch anything. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have more research to do."

"Can I talk to Mr. Smith?" Mayweather called after Phlox.

Phlox turned back. "Of course. As I said, you are in no danger of catching whatever the colonists have by breathing the same air they do. But it probably would be wise not to touch himójust in case," he said.

Mayweather cautiously approached Smith. "Hi," he said softly. "How are you feeling?"

Smith grunted and raised a hand wearily in greeting. "Like one of my own tractors ran over me," he said, "but your doctor says I'll be fine."

"If Doctor Phlox said you'll be all right, you can count on it," the helmsman replied. "He's the best. I ought to know. He's fixed me up enough times."

Smith gazed steadily up at the young man standing next to the bed. "I really ought to apologize," he said.

"For what?" Mayweather asked.

"I was rude when you and that other officer came to the factory," Smith said. When Mayweather didn't respond, he continued, "We need help with the alloy

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and my pride wouldn't let me admit it. I resented you taking over."

Now Mayweather did try to interrupt, but Smith put up his hand. "Don't tell me otherwise, because I know I was a first-class SOB. Now I'm grateful your ship is here. I could have died if it hadn't been for your doctor."

CHAPTER

9

Phlox was at an impasse. He'd run every analysis he could think of but still couldn't explain why the virus worked the way it did. It overwhelmed a person so quickly that the body's normal defenses couldn't handle it. The most serious consequence in many of the cases was when a person's airway would swell shut—hence the incredible number of tracheotomies.

He checked the latest report on the number of reported cases and was shocked to see that more than two hundred people had contracted the strange malady. Three of the victims, who had not been able to reach medical help in time, had died. Almost all of the people who had come down with the illness were from the small capital city where he had visited the hospital. That indicated some form of transmission, if not from a central source, then from person to person in some manner. But even that didn't make sense, because

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some of the victims had had no contact with any of the other infected people.

At least Doctor Jones and his colleagues had come up with a less extreme solution than performing surgery to open a patient's airway. The serum they'd developed using information Phlox had gleaned from his genomic research eased the symptoms if administered in time. As luck would have it, one of Jones's colleagues had done a stint in epidemiology. His insights had greatly cut down on the time it took to formulate the serum.

Jones's work left Phlox free to work on tracking down the source of the ailment. If he knew where it was coming from or how it was transmitted, he might be able to find a way to stop it. He was sitting down at a work station to go over his research notes again when T'Pol entered sickbay.

"I would like your opinion on something," T'Pol said to him, "if I'm not interrupting, that is."

Phlox waved his hand dismissively. "No. In fact, the distraction is most welcome. What is it?"

T'Pol passed him a small container. "This is a segment of the alloy Commander Tucker brought back from the planet. I believe I have discovered the reason for its unreliability. The molecular structure of one of the base metals has been altered."

Phlox raised his eyebrows. "I'm assuming you can correct the problem now that you know what's causing it."

"Perhaps," she said, tilting her head. "However, I would like confirmation on what I believe altered the

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structure."

She took the container back from Phlox and went over to the molecular microscope. Taking a slide from the container, she inserted it in the device and adjusted the settings. The monitor revealed what Phlox expected to see—a typical representation of a metallic substance.

Except for some writhing cells.

"Those shouldn't be there," he said, fascinated.

"Exactly," T'Pol said. "It should be inert. Instead, there is some sort of living organism in it."

With a grin, Phlox said excitedly, "I think you may have given me a clue to the mystery I'm working on."

He bustled over to the patient area and pulled aside the curtain at Smith's biobed. "You work at the facility that is having the alloy problem?" he asked.

"Yes," Smith replied.

"Can you tell me where the ore is mined that is used in the alloy?" Phlox asked.

CHAPTER

10

Archer and Phlox were standing at the situation table the next morning when T'Pol joined them. Phlox had just informed the captain that the medical facilities on Arctura III were close to being overwhelmed by the influx of patients. Doctor Jones could hardly make enough serum to treat the ailment to keep up with the demand.

"The problem with the alloy is definitely caused by the same virus affecting the colonists," T'Pol said, handing a data PADD to Phlox who quickly perused the information.

Archer rubbed his chin. "So the alloy has something to do with the outbreak among the colonists?"

"Not necessarily," Phlox replied, still scanning the data on the PADD. "Some of the people working with the alloy have come down with the ailment; others haven't. Still others who have become ill have had no

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contact with it whatsoever."

"Then how are they contracting it?" Archer asked.

Phlox looked to T'Pol to explain. Putting her hands on the edge of the situation table, she said, "It appears to be an engineered mutation of a common Earth rhinovirus which, when absorbed with water into the body, causes the violent reaction."

"The most likely explanation is that the colonists drank water contaminated with the virus," Phlox put in.

"But others, such as the workers at the factory, could have contracted it by contact with the alloy through their sweat," T'Pol added. "The water supply at the settlement where the ore refining facility is located is the most likely source of the contamination. Because water is used in the refining process, it is logical to conclude the alloy was contaminated at that point."

There was silence for a few moments as the two men pondered T'Pol's words. Then Archer looked at her and said, "You said the mutation was 'engineered.' Someone deliberately did this?"

"That appears to be the case," she replied.

"But why?"

T'Pol stared back at him mutely. She apparently had no answers to give him.

Phlox cleared his throat. "Excuse me, but there's a more pressing concern. We're fairly certain the virus is in the water supply near the ore refining facility, but we need to check all the water supplies. Not all the colonists who came down with this affliction can be

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linked to that one water source."

CHAPTER

11

So much for boredom, Mayweather thought. He'd been flying the shuttlepod for eight hours straight, taking a team of crewmen to rivers and lakes used as water sources by the colonists. They were collecting samples for Phlox and T'Pol to analyze.

The doctor had nixed the idea of using the transporter to bring water samples up to the ship. In addition to being a tricky piece of workóbeaming the water into sealed containersóPhlox had said the process might affect the water. His reasoning was that because they were dealing with something that had been tampered with on a molecular level, the transport process might cause further changes, and then the samples wouldn't be any good.

Mayweather experienced a surge of anger as he compensated for a strong updraft while he brought the shuttlepod in for yet another landing. Who would want

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to hurt the colonists? They were just trying to make good lives for themselves on this planet that was their home. What was wrong with that?

The shuttlepod touched down with only the slightest of bumps. "Last stop," he called out to the crewmen, and one of them popped the hatch.

The crewmen climbed out and Mayweather sighed heavily. It had been a long day, but he wouldn't begrudge the time he'd spent on this assignment. The colonists didn't have the resources to deal with this deadly ailment. The last he'd heard, more than a dozen people had died from it. Somebody had to help them. If Enterprise hadn't been here, there was no telling how many people would have died.

A lot of people could still die, for that matter, if they didn't come up with some answers soon. If that meant he had to fly the shuttlepod back and forth for who knew how long, so be it.

CHAPTER

12

Phlox had been staring at slides of water samples for what seemed like hours. He was rubbing his eyes when the doors to sickbay opened and Captain Archer walked in.

"Any progress?" Archer asked.

"The serum Doctor Jones has developed is working well," Phlox said, giving Archer the good news first. "In fact, the colonists are beginning an immunization program that uses an improved version of the serum based on our findings. None of the people who have received the immunization has come down with the ailment."

Phlox looked at the microscope he'd been using when the captain had walked in, and said, "As far as what I'm working on... There doesn't seem to be a consistent pattern to what I'm finding. All but one of the water sources are contaminated with the mutated rhi-

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novirus, but each site has its own peculiar variation of the virus."

"So," Archer said, "you're saying that each water source has some form of the rhinovirus, but no two are alike?"

Phlox nodded. "Yes. Even more puzzling is that some of them are harmful to one degree or another, the one near the ore refining facility being the worst, while others are milder. And then there's the one location where there is no virus at all. The whole situation reminds me of..."

Phlox's eyes lost their focus as he became lost in thought.

"Doctor?" Archer prompted as the silence stretched.

"That's it!" Phlox said, snapping his fingers. "We know we're dealing with an engineered virus—someone deliberately made it. Now they're testing it on the colonists. The one uncontaminated water source is the control against which to measure the others. The planet is being used as a giant lab, and the colonists are the test subjects."

"Someone's trying to find a biological weapon to use on humans," Archer said, his expression forbidding as he made the intuitive leap. "And what better place to test it than an isolated colony populated only by humans? But who would do this?"

Phlox clapped his hands together as he contemplated the work to be done. "That is what you must find out," he said. "Doctor Jones and I will concentrate on how to render the virus—in all its forms—harmless."

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Immunizing the colonists is a step in the right direction, but any human who visits the planet in the future would be at risk until receiving an inoculation. And there's always the possibility that the virus could be accidentally taken offworld."

"Looks like we've both got our work cut out for us," Archer said grimly. "Good luck, Doctor."

"You too, Captain."

CHAPTER

13

Archer was at the situation table the next morning with T'Pol and Reed. It seemed he spent a lot of time standing here lately, and he hoped this latest meeting would answer some of his questions.

"Phlox is confident that the mutated virus will be eradicated?" Archer asked T'Pol. "I knew he was good, but that he's come up with a way to resolve this situation in less than a day is almost unbelievable."

"You must have misunderstood the doctor," she said bluntly. "He would be the first to tell you that he is not responsible. It seems the virus is spontaneously breaking down on its own."

Both Archer and Reed looked surprised at this news.

"I don't understand," Reed said.

Addressing the lieutenant, T'Pol said, "Either the virus is finally responding as a common rhinovirus

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would be dying when exposed without a receptive living host or it was designed by its makers to have a limited life span. The latter possibility is most disconcerting."

"The makers wanted to have all traces of their handiwork gone before anyone came to find out what had killed off everyone in the colony," Archer said grimly.

"Or the makers are susceptible to it, too," Reed put in. "If their goal was to clear the planet of humans so that they could take over, that would be a possibility. Is there anything on the planet that would make it particularly valuable?"

"No. Just good farmland. That's why the colonists settled here in the first place," Archer said. He looked away for a moment before returning his attention to his officers. "As it is, we were damn lucky the way things turned out. If it hadn't been for the colony contacting Starfleet for assistance with the alloy, we'd never have been here to help when the outbreak occurred."

"Perhaps the virus's effects on the alloy were unexpected by its makers," T'Pol said thoughtfully.

"If that's the case," Archer said, "they'll probably be more careful if they try it again in the future."

T'Pol shifted her weight. "Until we know who is responsible, speculation will give us no solid answers."

"I'd put my money on the Romulans," the tactical officer said darkly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"We don't know for sure that they are the culprits," T'Pol said.

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"But we're relatively close to where we stumbled upon their minefield a few years ago," Reed said, refusing to back down. "And who has been giving us the most trouble lately? We had a Romulan masquerading as a Vulcan, and then the plot to destroy Starbase 1. We know the Romulans have cloaking technology. They could have remained unseen in orbit while they planted the virus. In fact, they could still be here, watching the response."

T'Pol opened her mouth to respond, but Archer cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"We don't know who did this," Archer said firmly. "Personally, I hope it was the Romulans. Earth doesn't need another unknown enemy. We've been through enough conflict in the last few years. We don't know much about the Romulans, but at least we know of them."

Phlox, stepping out of the turbolift onto the bridge in time to hear Archer's words, said, "You may have gotten your wish, Captain. I thought to check the personal effects left behind by Trannon, our supposed Romulan spy, after his precipitous departure before our visit to Starbase 1. What I found was a hair on a piece of clothing, as well as a few skin cells. There are enough similarities in the connective structure of the genomes in the skin and that of the virus that I'm certain someone of the same species as Trannon was responsible."

Archer's lips were set in a tight light as he looked at his officers. "I keep remembering what the Romulan disguised as Admiral Gardner at Starbase 1 told me.

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He said they have many plans and many methods to destroy the new alliance of planets. This could have been a test of one of those methods."

Phlox pursed his lips. "They chose a well-understood and common virus, so the colonists would think it was a natural mutation. If it hadn't been for the sophisticated equipment we have on board Enterprise, this may never have been discovered."

T'Pol nodded. "A biological weapon that could decimate the human population would have an adverse effect on the alliance, to say the least. Humans have been instrumental in promoting the need for an alliance. Without their presence, it could fall apart."

This compliment about humans from T'Pol pleased Archer, but the gravity of the situation prevented him from commenting on it.

CHAPTER

14

Mayweather was behind the shuttlepod controls once again. This time, however, he wasn't shepherding a group of crewman on a sample-gathering mission. He was returning some of the colonists who had been treated on Enterprise back to Arctura III.

"Hey, Mr. Smith," he said over his shoulder to the factory foreman, "you want me to drop you off at your house after we take everyone else to the capital city?"

He heard Smith, who was at one of the auxiliary consoles behind him simply because all the other seats were occupied by colonists, laugh. "You can do that?" the man asked in delight.

"As long as there's a big enough space for the 'pod to land," Mayweather replied, grinning as he adjusted the controls. "It's no problem at all. Where do you live?"

"You went on that picnic, didn't you?" the man as-

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asked in return. Mayweather replied that he had, and the man continued, "Well, there's a big pasture with cattle next to the park you were at. That's part of my land."

Now it was Mayweather's turn to laugh. "It figures."

"Why do you say that?"

Mayweather shook his head. "I suppose you've heard of cow tipping?"

"That's a joke played on city slickers," Smith said, laughing again.

"And Boomers, apparently," Mayweather agreed.

In a more serious tone, Smith said, "I want to thank you for everything you've done."

Mayweather was embarrassed and was glad he was facing the controls so that Smith couldn't see his face. "Me?" he said. "I didn't do much."

"You did plenty," Smith assured him. "And the other people on your ship. If all of you hadn't been here, this whole situation could have been a lot worse than it was. It's a good thing there's something like Starfleet."

Any reply Mayweather could have made was drowned by the applause from the other colonists who had overheard their conversation. He'd never had anyone applaud his choice of profession before.

A few minutes later, he landed the shuttlepod at the hospital, the prearranged debarkation point for the colonists. Smith decided to leave with them, turning down Mayweather's offer to take him directly home.

"We probably need to check in with the hospital or

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something," Smith said as he stood by the hatch before stepping out. "I guess they're keeping track of all the cases."

"That's correct," came a voice through the open hatch. Doctor Phlox stuck his head in the opening and continued, "Doctor Jones is waiting to check over your group one last time before officially declaring you cured."

Thanking both Mayweather and Phlox again for all their help, Smith climbed out.

"Are you the only passenger for the trip back?" Mayweather asked as Phlox clambered aboard.

"I believe so," Phlox replied, settling into a seat behind him. "The immunization program seems to have stopped the progression of the affliction among those who were infected before the virus began breaking down. No new cases have been reported since the immunization was completed."

"All the colonists have been immunized?"

"Yes," Phlox said with a chuckle. "When they put their minds to doing something, they don't let anything get in their way. They had it done in record time."

Mayweather grinned. He'd already known the colonists were determined, not to mention independent and self-reliant.

He launched the shuttlepod and turned it toward Enterprise. He was still thinking about the colonists and their way of life when Phlox said, "You seem to be in a better mood today."

Mayweather glanced back at Phlox. "What are you talking about, Doctor?"

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"Now, now," Phlox said. "I could tell something has been bothering you lately. I'm sorry I was too busy to ask you about it, but you seem to be dealing well on your own with whatever it was, hmmm? I'm sure I have a degree in human psychology somewhere among all my educational certifications, if you still have a need to talk to someone about it."

"Are you serious?" Mayweather asked as he shot another glance, this one incredulous, at his passenger.

"Got you!" Phlox crowed. "I was just teasing. Of course I have a degree in human psychology."

Mayweather let out a long breath and grinned. "One of these days, Doctor, I'll get you."

"Ah, that's the Travis Mayweather I've come to know," Phlox said with a smile, then sobered. "Really, Travis. I was quite concerned about you. I haven't had a practical joke using my animals played on anyone for months. I am happy to see you in a better frame of mind."

Mayweather ducked his head in acknowledgment of the doctor's words. "I guess I was having some doubts about why I'm out here, doing what I do. I couldn't see that I was doing any good for anyone, least of all myself."

Phlox remained silent for a few moments, considering his words. "And this situation with the colonists helped you resolve those doubts?"

"Yeah," Mayweather said, keeping his eyes on the control panel. "I realized that, even though I'm a small cog in the big machinery of Starfleet, I'm valuable to the whole. Without all the pieces, so to speak, there'd

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be no way anything like Starfleet could work. Look at how Enterprise was able to help these people. I guess what it comes down to is that somebody's got to do what I do. It may as well be me."

"Because you're the best pilot in Starfleet?" Phlox asked.

"Well, I wasn't going to say tható" Mayweather said, laughing. "But yeah."

End.

— STAR TREK — ENTERPRISE

Bitter Harvest

A group of agricultural Human colonists experiences troubles with a curious illness that touches people as well as metal. Phlox must find a cure before it turns to catastrophe. Meanwhile, Mayweather wonders about his place in Starfleet.

At the eve of creating the interstellar alliance, a new adventure begins for the NX-01 Enterprise crew, by Kathy Rose.

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