

CHAPTER TWO

“Put Me in Cold”

"Are you crazy?"

'Some people think so, but that hasn't stopped me.'

– Lt. Cdr. Amber Townsend & Captain M. Robert Avenger,

Star Trek: The Crouton Generation “Into the Net”

"Mike, you haven't even had your advanced starship tactics class yet." The tall redhead hung his dusty leather baseball glove and classical wooden bat from special hooks he had installed in the back of his closet. "Why do you need to do it now?"

"Look, John, it's a test of character, right?" Cadet M. Robert Avenger removed his red Philadelphia Phillies baseball cap and tossed it casually over his shoulder. It fluttered across the room and landed expertly on the hook nearest the doorjamb, on the antique wooden hatrack he had placed by the door of their two-person Star Fleet Academy dormitory room. "So, if it's a test of character, why should it matter when you take it or what courses you've had?"

John Heins shook his head and, in a light-hearted, yet somewhat sarcastic tone, put aside his roommate's line of reasoning. "You're a character, alright. I'll give you that." He rolled his head around in a circle and then rotated his shoulders a few times to match, trying to work out the kinks from this afternoon's Academy baseball team practice. "Maybe if you'd just get some sleep instead of staying up all night watching your old 'television shows,' you wouldn't get such weird ideas running through your head."

"John, come on. It'll be fun. The test is already scheduled for next Thursday. Are you with me?"

John turned from his dresser, which he had been digging through fruitlessly searching for a clean cadet uniform to change into before dinner. He decided to stick with the dirty baseball uniform after all. "Hey, Chi," he acknowledged to the cadet now standing in their open doorway, then turned back to Avenger and sadly shook his head in the negative. "Maybe next time."

"Is this about Mike's *Kobayashi Maru* again?" asked Chi An from the doorway.

"You're coming, right?" Avenger looked at . . . and through Chi An with pleading eyes.

"O-okay. Count me in. I'll drive," said Chi An. Avenger continued to stare right through him. "But point those things somewhere else, will you?"

Avenger turned the eyes on Heins.

"No." Avenger continued to stare. "Absolutely not. The puppy eyes aren't going to work, Mike. I've got stuff I've got to do." He grabbed a padd from his bed and punched up his ground tactics textbook as he brushed by Avenger, to join Chi An on the walk to the mess hall. "Like study for my security ops test."



Avenger stopped for another swig of root beer. "So there I was, the following Thursday, captain of the *Galaxy*-class starship *Excelsior*." He noted the blank look on Soraya's face. "That's what the Academy was using as the mock-up in those days, you know.

"We got the usual call from Captain Kojiro Vance. *Kobayashi Maru* was damaged, orbiting some no-name planet in the Gamma quadrant. 'Blah, blah. Can you assist us, *Excelsior*? Can you assist us?' Well, duh! Of course, we *have* to assist, or we fail the test!"



"Red alert!" cried Avenger. "Shields up full. Load torpedo banks. Ready phasers."

Commander Blackadder, the senior instructor in the *Kobayashi Maru* simulator crew, watched with detached amusement from where he stood, just off the port side of the captain's chair. Blackadder still wore the black-on-black uniform of Star Fleet Intelligence, leftover from his early career. He was something of an embarrassment to the Intelligence Corps, a forty-something schemer from a long line of charlatans, snake oil salesmen, BBC Program Controllers and Ministers of Parliament. He was dismissed after only three weeks on the job, having satisfied the current generation's debt to the destiny of failure that plagued his ancient British family. Letting him keep the uniform, out of misplaced pity, was almost as big a mistake as had been the decision to assign him to Intelligence in the first place. Blackadder continued to wear the uniform, ostensibly because of his family's traditional fashion sense, but also because it allowed him to better intimidate cadets, bully senior officers and hit unsuccessfully on young women who would be otherwise instantly repulsed by him.

Blackadder leaned over and whispered to Avenger. "Captain, are you certain you should be taking such a provocative stance?"

"Trust me," smiled Avenger. "I know what I'm doing."

Avenger was tempted to leap to his feet, rush to the science station and examine the sensor readings directly. Fortunately, he was able to restrain himself (just) and allow the science cadet positioned there to do his job. He remembered that a good commander was supposed to let his officers do their jobs. His feet and lower legs fidgeted a bit, releasing some of the pent-up energy.

"Full sensor sweep, Mr. Navas," Avenger ordered. "Let's see what we've got."

Third-year cadet David Navas tuned and tweaked various sensor arrays to pull down as much information as quickly and efficiently as he could. He stammered a bit as he tried to juggle all the information he was taking in with his eyes with the smaller amount he filtered through his vocal chords. "Well, um . . . standard Class-M planet, numerous life forms, some big cities . . . looks like they, uh, use a lot of Thorntagons in their architecture."

Blackadder rocked back and forth on his heels. "A potential first contact situation, eh, Captain?"

"I don't like it," muttered Avenger, scratching at a chin that he still did not need to shave more than once a week. "Keep checking those long-range sensors, will you, Mr. Navas?"

The Ops console lit up like a Christmas tree and chimed twice. Chow glanced over from the helm, nervously, expecting something bad to happen next.

Fourth-year cadet Dianne Hackborn, tall and wispy (although the wispieness was something of a physical smokescreen for the much stronger and more complex personality lurking underneath) and barely fitting her long, slender but muscular, legs under the Ops console, turned her head

slightly. "Captain, we are being hailed from the planet."

Avenger hesitated a split-second as a bead of sweat on his forehead broke and trickled down his nose. He wiggled his nose, then scratched at it suddenly with his left hand, then contorted his face into his particular look of confusion. "On screen, . . . I guess."

A gray-haired man with weathered, wrinkled skin appeared on the viewscreen before them. He folded leathery calloused hands before him before beginning to speak. Hackborn couldn't help but chuckle when she recognized Boothby playing the role of the planet's leader in this pre-recorded segment of the exam. "Alien vessel, you have violated our space and taken up a provocative stance," said Boothby in his gruff, chiseled voice. "We do not wish to harm you, but if you persist to invade our airspace, we will be forced to take defensive action."

Avenger looked really confused now. "Wait a minute, isn't that the gardener . . .?"

He had this too well laid out in his head, thought Chow. He wasn't expecting this. Well, neither was I, but . . . Come on, Mike, think of something!

Chow decided he had better do something to guide Avenger back to a position of real control here. "Captain," he piped up. "Their defensive grid is capable of damaging our vessel. Perhaps we should do as they say and, um, leave."

Avenger glanced around the bridge blankly, waiting for someone else to make the right decision, but instead found everyone looking to him, their captain, as he should. "Uh, okay. Let's break orbit and get out of here."

Avenger looked now to Blackadder for solace, but found only a troubled frown. Disappointment. *What's going on?*

"All right, I think that's enough," called a voice from behind the bridge viewscreen. "Open her up."

The viewscreen slid to one side, revealing the corridor beyond. Commodore Walter, known colloquially as "Uncle Marty" to most of his students, entered the mock bridge, shaking his head sadly.

"That's it?" Avenger looked around, confused, slightly defensive. "But I thought . . ."

"You completely missed the point of the exercise, Mr. Avenger."

Avenger felt his heart plummet into his stomach, with an acceleration due to gravity much greater than Earth normal. *Roughly 88% Jovian "surface" gravity*, he calculated, as his mind drifted onto one of its frequent tangents.

The commodore now stood before him. "Your provocative stance ruined what could have been a peaceful first contact mission."

"But . . . but . . ." Avenger still could not believe it was over. *Where were the Borg cubes? Where were the Jem'Hadar fighters? Where were the cloaked obsidian battlecrabs that screamed like banshees? Where was the no-win scenario?*

"Not only that, *Cadet*," Blackadder interjected with shielded glee, "but you also left the *Kobayashi Maru* and her crew in a decaying orbit around that planet." Blackadder chuckled before adding one last jibe. "I understand Captain Vance has added you to his shit list, although I doubt he'll be able to do anything about it, since he'll be sucking vacuum in less than an hour."

"But . . . but . . ."

"We'll reconvene for a full debriefing at 1315," Commander Blackadder said for all the students' benefit. "Go get some lunch and think about what happened here today." The other cadets began to shuffle out of the simulator room as Blackadder lowered his voice and turned back to

Avenger. “You should reflect on what has just happened here today and consider whether anyone in Star Fleet would want you in command of a vessel, at any time in the future.”

Blackadder picked up his padd and marched stiffly out of the simulator room. Avenger turned and fought through welling tears to read the fine print on a fire extinguisher some ten meters away, next to the faux turbolift doors. Marty walked up and gently placed a hand on one of Avenger’s shoulders.

“Cadet, you’re going to make a fine officer some day, but you’ve still got a lot to learn about leadership and command. Take your time and think about what went wrong today. I know you will eventually figure it out, and I’m sure you will do better next time. Just be patient.”

The words of encouragement had their intended effect on Avenger, but he still felt ashamed. He nodded quietly, his back still to the senior officer.

The commodore stepped into the hallway and chatted with a few lingering cadets about their individual performances. Avenger soon found himself being bundled out of the simulator room by some annoyed technicians. Commodore Walter and Commander Blackadder were walking away and around the corner, discussing the main topics for the upcoming briefing. Avenger was sure he overheard the words “stupid git” at least once before the two senior officers left sensor range.

In his peripheral vision, Avenger noticed a tall redheaded cadet in security yellow stand up from a nearby bench.

“Didn’t go so well, huh?” Heins asked, extending a hand.

Avenger nodded, grasping the proffered hand weakly.

“I told you it was too soon.” Heins realized he was lecturing and thought better of it. “Maybe I’d better be in there with you next time. You know, watching your back.”

Avenger, still dejected, brightened somewhat and cracked half a smile. “That would be much appreciated. What are you doing here anyway? I thought you had a security ops test.”

“Oh, I got done early and figured I’d meet up with you for lunch.” Heins smiled then. “Besides, I thought you might actually do something as crazy as beating the simulator on the first try. I couldn’t miss that for the world.”

They began the long walk towards the mess hall. “Well, I think I did break *one* record today,” Avenger sighed, as Heins eyed him curiously. “Fastest to fail the *Kobayashi Maru*?”