

How I Spent My Summer Vacation
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First Place (tie): Futures Magazine Short Story Contest

It all began with two ominous and unrelated noises. The first one interrupted my summer vacation. The second one changed my life.

The wheel of my ten-year-old Ford Explorer shimmied as I crossed a small bridge on Interstate 75, right outside Sarasota. An ominous thumping noise punctuated the movement.

The source, I figured quickly, was a balding tire I couldn't afford to replace on my meager teacher's salary.

Now I'd have to scrounge up a tow fee as well.

"Oh great," I said. Well, not really. I said something a lot stronger than 'oh great'. But after nine months of correcting profanity in my students, my brain was still in the self-edit mode.

I pulled over to the shoulder and got out of the car. One of my high heels immediately sank in the soft ground. I stood there, yanking on my shoe, sweating in my best summer dress, and surveyed the deserted highway for any signs of help. Abandoned orange groves bordered both sides of the road. The nearest gas station was at least twenty miles back. The only thing working in my favor, I thought as my shoe finally came unstuck, was that it wasn't raining.

Then, as if reading my thoughts, the sky darkened overhead. And a second ominous noise buzzed behind me. I knew that lightning made your skin prickle, but did thunderstorms also crackle on approach? I whirled around, hoping I had enough time to dash back into my car. I wasn't dressed for rain.

A man and a woman wearing identical gray pajamas stepped out of the air between me and the orange grove. They saluted.

I definitely wasn't dressed in a manner that would cause anyone to salute me.

But salute me they did.

Really.

"Captain, sorry for the delay." The man was tall, with broad shoulders and short brown hair framing a lean face. He looked like he could be a lifeguard on Lido Beach. Not a guy in gray pajamas who just appeared out of nowhere in an orange grove. "It took us a while to find you."

"To find me? You're here to fix my flat tire?" I wanted to focus on the tire instead of the fact that they'd just materialized out of thin air.

"Your tire?" the woman asked. She had long dark hair pulled to one side in a thick braid. And interesting bright blue skin.

Really. Bright blue.

"We have no request to reclaim any mechanical units, Captain," the blue skinned woman said. "The recall-to-duty order specifically states only yourself."

Recall to duty? I'm a schoolteacher. Thirty-one years old. Never been in the military. Had no intention of enlisting now.

"I think you've got the wrong person." I backed up a step. Make that two.

Lady Blue turned to Tall Guy. "She doesn't remember. The neural memory lock didn't dissolve on schedule."

The only thing on my schedule was a student's graduation party. I was on my way to be part of the celebration when the tire blew. I glanced quickly over my shoulder. My car was about five feet behind me. Close enough for me to jump in and peel off down the road, flat or no flat.

Tall Guy raised his hand to a metallic badge on the front of his pajamas. "Away Team to bridge. We have a problem."

"Solve it on board," came the disembodied reply.

"Acknowledged. Three to beam up."

Beam up? I didn't even know anyone named Scotty.

My vision suddenly hazed and I heard that odd buzzing noise again. Then the orange grove turned white and glittery. And disappeared.

When the sparkling fog cleared from my eyes, a group straight out of a casting call for a Star Trek production stood before me. I blinked and looked at Lady Blue, who had me firmly by the elbow.

"Holy shit," I said. I really did.

"This way, Captain."

This way turned out to be a long room with an oval conference table in the center. Eight chairs. I was none too gently guided to a high-backed one at the far end. Something stung my right arm. A man in a lab coat held a fat silver cylinder just below my shoulder. "Hey! Just what the hell do you—"

My words halted when I saw the windows behind him. Floor to ceiling. Eight of them. And through the windows, the same kind of deep space starfield that I had on my computer screensaver.

"Captain." Tall Guy slid into the seat cater-cornered to mine. "We don't have a lot of time. I need to bring you up to date." He touched the center of the table and a translucent screen blinked into the air between us.

"The T'Kral broke the peace treaty and took over NeKafrin Station. Which, as you know, means they now control the NeKafrin jump gate. Sector Ten is stranded." He pointed to some squiggles on the screen. "As are the First and Fourth Fleet. That leaves only us and Second in a position to defend the quadrant."

Somewhere in the middle of his earnest recitation I decided this must be a dream. I was lying on the roadside, unconscious from heat exposure. I wasn't really here in this room with all of outer space on one side and a tall man wearing a gray pajama-jumpsuit on the other.

Might as well play along and have fun until I woke up. "Doesn't sound like anything we can't handle."

He seemed to take my comment as encouragement. "Agreed. But Second's at Larik-Five, dealing with an insurrection attempt. We're much closer to NeKafrin. At the moment, the T'Kral situation is up to us."

I looked from Tall Guy to Lady Blue and then around the room at three others who had come in during our discussion. All in gray pajamas. Flightsuits. I put on my 'concerned captain' face and nodded in what I hoped was a good Captain Kathryn Janeway imitation. Or was it Kirk? Or Picard?

"Recommendations?" I asked Tall Guy. In my next dream I'd remember to add nametags.

He tapped the screen twice. It changed. "The Chief and I have come up with a plan that should weaken the T'Kral until Second can join."

I studied the lines and squiggles and dots made to look like little ships. Looked good to me. I pinned Tall Guy squarely with my eyes. "Make it so."

Corralling the T'Kral invaders wasn't as difficult as I expected. But then, this was my dream. And I was a teacher, so it was only fitting my Fleet captains were well trained. They responded with flawless synchronization and flashes of brilliance as we burst on the scene from three different angles. I remembered a couple of battle sequences from one of the "Star Wars" movies and repeated them to Tall Guy and my blue-skinned Chief.

They worked. Two T'Kral mega battle cruisers bit the dust, though their demise was a bit anticlimactic. Nothing like the special effects pyrotechnics I'd seen in the movies. I'd have to remember to add those, too, in my next dream.

Second Fleet showed up when more than half of the T'Kral invaders were limping or decimated. Those that could, left in a hurry. Those that couldn't were taken prisoner. It was pretty much the same routine I witnessed when I had cafeteria monitor duty at school every Thursday. Rowdy kids scattered whenever the principal and Coach Murphy showed up. Piece of cake.

We reconvened in the conference room. Ready room, Tall Guy corrected me, sotto voce. But he was grinning too widely to be much disturbed by my slip-up. Chief Blue and the rest of my command staff stood at attention until I sat down, tugging at the short hem of my summer dress. My feet were killing me. Next dream: sneakers.

"Well done, ladies, gentleman and—" A thin scaly-skinned person at the far end of the table nodded its snout at me. Snake? Lizard? Whatever. "—and friends," I concluded. "Now, if you all don't mind, I'd really like to wake up and get back to my life. I was supposed to be at a graduation party in Tampa," I glanced at my watch, "eight hours ago. Obviously, I'm late."

The guy in the lab coat waved a translucent pad in front of my face. "The neural lock," he said to Tall Guy. "It's still in place. The hypospray didn't dissolve it."

"That's impossible!" Tall Guy sounded angry. "She just directed a decisive campaign against the T'Kral."

"Yes, I know, Commander. But the 'she' who did so is not yet the 'she' who is Captain Stafford. And your wife."

I kind of figured my dream would know who I was: Cayci, as in Acacia-but-I-don't-use-it, Stafford. But wife? Not that Tall Guy couldn't

qualify as the man of my dreams. He could, with that lean, handsome face and to-die-for broad shoulders. Maybe in my next dream I'd call him Tall And Gorgeous. 'Tag' for short.

He was staring at me. Nice brown eyes. "You really don't remember me?" He grabbed my hand and squeezed it rather affectionately. Then his thumb traced my fingers in a decidedly sensual and suggestive fashion.

Really.

Lab Coat waved the pad in my face again. "No, she doesn't."

I slanted him a withering glance. If I'd wanted him to answer for me, I would've told him.

"It's only a dream," I told Tag, deciding the name fit him right now. "Tomorrow night I'll remember you and we'll spend the rest of my summer vacation on, oh, I don't know." I grabbed the first jumble of letters in my mind. "Zenara. We'll go sailing."

"We went sailing on Zenara three years ago."

So what, we can't go again? was on the tip of my tongue but it never made it out of my mouth. Because my brain interfered. Cayci, my brain said, either one of two things is happening here. Either you've totally lost control of this dream.

Or it's not a dream.

I reached under the table as discreetly as I could and pinched my leg. Hard. Really hard. I twitched. It hurt like hell.

"This isn't a dream, is it?" I asked Tag softly.

He shook his head, his mouth pursed into a wry smile. "Nope. This is real. We—"

A shaft of light shot up in front of me. It was that screen thing. It showed me the frowning face of one of my bridge officers. "Captain Stafford, we've picked up a distress signal from the Celainian Royal Convoy. They're under attack!"

Tag stood. I stood. I beat him to the door of the bridge only because I'd kicked off my heels and ran in my stocking feet.

"Are we in range?" I asked the frowning officer who stepped to my side as I strode towards my chair.

"Affirmative, Captain. We could be at their coordinates in forty-five minutes if we push it to warp eight."

"Warp factor eight it is, Mister—"

Damn it! I have to remember name tags next dream. I pivoted towards a young woman seated at a console in front of the bridge. "Helm, plot an intercept course."

"Course already set, Captain."

Efficient. Very efficient. The teachers' union could learn something from

these guys. I sat, crossed my legs and tugged down the hem of my dress.

Tag took the chair next to mine, swung his armrest controls into position. I did the same.

We exchanged quick smiles. The rescue of the Celainian Royal Convoy awaited us. I raised my right hand, accentuated my command with a flick of my index finger in my best Jean-Luc Picard imitation.

"Engage!"

I had a feeling I'd be saying that a lot until school started again.

But not next year. Next summer vacation, I'm going sailing on Zenara.

With Tag.