



Star Trek: Signature Edition: Imzadi Forever (Star Trek: The Next Generation)

By Peter David

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Imzadi: to the people of the planet Betazed, including Counselor Deanna Troi of the *Starship Enterprise*,™ it means "beloved" and denotes that which can never be truly broken.

Yet to whom does Deanna's heart truly belong?

Commander William Riker was the first Deanna called Imzadi. Long before they served together on board the *Enterprise*, they shared a tempestuous love affair back on Betazed. And even now, many years later, Riker will embark on a desperate journey across time and space to save Deanna's life.

But Riker is not the only Starfleet officer to capture Deanna's heart. Lieutenant Commander Worf, the fierce Klingon warrior, is also drawn to Deanna's gentle and caring nature. Brought together by fate, he and Deanna share an unexpected passion that tests the bonds between Troi and Riker -- even as a deadly Romulan conspiracy threatens them all!

Bonus: An Exclusive Interview with the Author

This edition includes *Imzadi* and *Imzadi II: Triangle*.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Peter David is a prolific *New York Times* bestselling author whose career, and continued popularity, spans more than two decades. He has worked in every conceivable media—television, film, books (fiction, nonfiction, and audio), short stories, and comic books—and acquired loyal followings in all of them. In the literary field, he has had more than a hundred novels published. He lives in New York with his wife and four children.

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Chapter One

"Let's get the hell out of here."

A gentle, eerie howling was in the air, which seemed to be permeated with the haunting and lonely cries of souls that had existed or might never exist or might be in some state of limbo in between.

In the distance was the city. Its name was unknown and would forever remain so. The air was dark and filled with a sense that a storm might break at any moment. It was that way all the time. The storm never did break. It just threatened to do so. The very withholding of the actual event implied that, should that storm ever arrive, it might very well bring with it enough power to wash away all vestiges of that remarkable intangible called reality.

None of that mattered to the man who was the leader. The man in the greenish yellow shirt, whose mind was elsewhere and elsewhen. Behind him stood his friends, his crew. They waited patiently. For a moment it appeared that he was wondering just how long they would be capable of waiting. What were the limits of their patience? The limits of their confidence in the man who was their captain?

But it was clear that he was not going to test those limits. A man who had been driven to go out and explore new places, discover new frontiers...this man had finally found a place filled with potentially endless vistas of exploration. Anywhere, anywhen. And his response was not to embrace it. No, all he wanted to do was leave it behind, to get as far away from it as possible.

"Let's get the hell out of here." The words hung there a moment, startling in their vehemence, in the longing and resignation and overall sense of *Oh, God, I can't stand it anymore, get me away from here, away to a place where I don't have to think or feel, to a place where I can just be numb.*

The crew took several small steps closer to each other. To a degree it was out of reflex, to make sure that they would be well within range of the transporter effect. But there was something else as well this time. It was an unspoken desire to try to lend support by dint of the fact that they were *there* for him. There was nothing they could say or do. Indeed, they didn't even fully understand what was going through the captain's mind.

They did not yet know the sacrifices their commanding officer had made. Did not know that, in the best tradition of romance, he had found a part of his soul existing in a woman and had been drawn to her. And then had lost that part of his soul, which he hadn't fully realized he was missing in the first place. Lost it

beneath the screeching of tires, under a truck's wheels...

Not just the wheel of a truck. A wheel of history, an unrelenting, unyielding cog that had ground up his love and his soul and spit them both out, bloodied and battered...and broken.

Yes, that was the difference that the crew sensed this time in their captain. Many a time had he been battered...but as the old saying went, "Battered but unbowed." This time, though...he was bowed.

They got the hell out of there.

And Commodore Data watched them go.

She was simply called Mary Mac. Her last name actually began with a sound approximating "Mac," but the rest was a major tongue twister. As a result, the other scientists addressed her as "Mary Mac."

Mary Mac was extremely peculiar. For one thing, she was an Orion. This in itself was not particularly unusual. She was, however, fully clothed. This was unusual, as the vast majority of Orion women existed purely to be the sex toys of men in general and Orion men in particular. They were known as vicious and deadly fighters and radiated sex the way suns radiated heat...and indeed, some thought, a bit more intensely.

Mary Mac's skin was green, as was standard for an Orion woman. In every other aspect, however, she was markedly different from the rest of her kind. She wore loose-fitting clothes...deliberately loose so as to do nothing that could potentially emphasize the formidable curves of her body. Because she liked her arms unencumbered, her tunic was short sleeved, although an off-the-shoulder cape was draped stylishly around her. She had long, jet-black hair, but rather than hanging saucily around her shoulders, it was delicately and elaborately braided...certainly not an ugly hairstyle, but hardly one that would inflame the senses.

Most incredibly...she wore glasses. They had a slight tint and huge frames.

Nobody wore glasses. They were considered to be phenomenally out-of-date as well as unattractive.

Which is why she wore them.

Mary Mac regretted, every so often, that she felt a need to "dress down," as it were, so that she could operate within society. She was, however, used to it. There were precious few prejudices that one had to deal with in the day-to-day operations of the United Federation of Planets, but one of the few remaining was that all Orion women were nothing but animalistic sex kittens. It was an understandable notion because that description did indeed fit virtually all Orion women, including most of the ones whom Mary Mac had ever met.

It did not, however, fit her, and if she had to go to extremes to get her point across, well...then so be it. Her "look" had gotten her quite far. It had, in fact, been something of a plus. People would be interested and amused by her as she would discuss some involved or arcane bit of scientific lore...interested because usually they'd never heard an Orion woman put together a sentence of more than five or so words, and amused because they'd smugly be waiting for her to revert to type any moment. She never did, of course. She'd trained too long and too hard to allow that to happen. As a result she was always a bit of a surprise, and throughout the galaxy, people loved to be surprised.

Which is why Mary Mac had worked her way up through the ranks and eventually landed the assignment of

project administrator on Forever World.

The planet did not have an official name. Somehow it had seemed presumptuous for any mere mortal to give it one...somewhat like painting a mustache on the face of God. It had simply been nicknamed Forever World, and that was what had stuck.

She passed her associate coordinator, Harry, who didn't seem to notice her. A muscular and dark-hued terran, Harry's attention was fully on a set of equations or some other bit of scientific data on a palm-sized computer padd. "Hi, Harry," she said to him as he walked past. He waved distractedly and continued on his way. He had probably already forgotten that he'd been addressed at all, much less by Mary Mac.

Mary Mac made her way across the compound, nodding or conversing briefly with other scientists on the project. One of the odder aspects of conversation on the Forever World was that one tended to speak in a hushed voice. There was no particular reason for it. It certainly wasn't mandated by law or tradition. But somehow, particularly when one was standing outside and the eerie howling filled one's ears and one's soul, the speaking voice tended to drop to a soft tone that could best be described as "subdued"...and perhaps even a bit fearful. Mary had once commented that it always seemed as if the cosmos was hanging on your every word here. It was an assessment that had been generally agreed with.

The gravel crunched under Mary Mac's boots as she got to the other side of the compound and headed toward the reason for the perpetual presence of a half dozen or so scientists on the Forever World.

Just ahead of her was the only other constant noise that existed aside from the mournful sigh of the wind, and that was a steady, constant hum of a force field. She stepped over a rise, and as always, there it was.

As always was not a term used lightly, or incorrectly. As near as anyone could tell, the Guardian of Forever had always been there, and would most likely always be there.

The force field that had been erected around it was ostensibly to protect the unique archaeological discovery from any potential ravagers. But in point of fact, it was there for a subtly different reason. Namely, to protect life (as it was known) from itself.

Erected just outside the force field was a free-standing platform about two meters tall. An array of readouts charted the energy fluxes that surged around the Guardian of Forever within the force field. There were, in addition, two small lights, one brightly glowing red, the other pulsing a very soft green.

To the right of the platform was a large screen. It offered, in essence, a taped delay. When a request for a period was made on the Guardian, it ran so quickly that the best anyone could hope to perceive was fleeting images. But the screen would then capture those images and play specifically requested moments in a more accessible fashion.

At this particular moment, the Guardian had finished yet another run-through of a particular era. It was now silent, displaying nothing, waiting with its infinite patience for the next request from an audience.

Standing outside the field, staring at the Guardian, was an android. Playing out on the screen, having been recorded moments before for replay, was a scene very familiar to Mary Mac.

She stopped and simply took in for a moment the irony of the situation. On one level, what she was seeing was one machine watching another. But neither of them were simple machines. Both of them had sentience,

which raised them from the level of machine to the status of...something else. Something unclassifiable.

The very thought of something that could not easily be labeled or pigeonholed was anathema to Mary Mac, and yet at the same time the existence of such things was a pleasant reminder that no one could ever fully know every wrinkle that the universe had to offer...and that, therefore, a scientist's work would never, ever, be finished.

Her first inclination had been to think of the android, despite the rank of commodore, as an "it." Just as she had thought of the Guardian as an "it" before coming to the Forever World. However, shortly after she'd met Commodore Data, she'd found herself forced to revise her opinion and mentally elevate the commodore to a "he." As for the Guardian, she was still trying to get that sorted out. The best she could come up with at the moment was a "whatever." Or perhaps, more accurately, a "whenever."

Data stood there, his back to Mary Mac, hands draped just below the base of his spine. The stark black and green lines of his uniform, with the silver trim on the arms and trouser cuffs, seemed to shimmer in the perpetual twilight of the horizon. His attention shifted momentarily from the Guardian to the scene being replayed on the screen.

Mary Mac heard a familiar voice, a voice filled with resolve and yet hidden trauma. And the voice said, "Let's get the hell out of here."

She smiled and called out, "That figures."

Data turned and looked at her, his face calm and composed as always. His gold skin glittered in the half light. "Pardon?"

She pointed at the Guardian. "That moment. It's one of the most popular."

Data nodded slowly and looked back. On the screen, the crew of explorers was drawing closer to its leader and then, moments later, shimmered out of existence. "That's not surprising, I suppose," said Data.

"Although there are many moments from history that would be far more impressive in their scope, the history of James Kirk and the crew of *Enterprise* would certainly hold some degree of fascination. People would probably feel more empathy toward someone who is closer to their own frame of reference. What I find interesting is how primitive the transporter technology was."

Mary Mac looked at him in surprise. "You know, Commodore, I've seen so many people watch this moment. The story of Kirk's ordeal with the Guardian, and what he sacrificed for the sake of history...it's become so well known. One of the few modern-day legends we have. And I've seen so many reactions, ranging from hysterics to mourning. I've never heard anyone just comment on the technology...especially not when they're seeing it for the first time."

Data glanced at the screen. "It's not the first time. It's the second."

"When did you see it before?"

"When it was displayed on the Guardian, one point three minutes ago."

She blinked in surprise. "You were able to make out something that played on the Guardian himself?"

"Of course. The image feed may be rapid for you, but for me it's relatively sluggish. Still, I wished to see it on the replay screen in the event that I missed some sort of nuance. But I didn't."

She shook her head. "You are a rather different customer than we usually get around here, Commodore, I must admit. Most people don't quite know how to react when they see their ancestors brought to life, or shadows of life" -- she gestured to the Guardian -- "before their very eyes."

"Understandable," said Data. "However, the difference is...I have no ancestors."

"You were made. Other androids existed before you, even if not in direct lineage. If they're not ancestors, what would you call them?"

He considered it a moment. "Precedents," he decided.

She smiled broadly and clapped him on the back. "Come on. We have dinner up back at the compound. We'd be honored if you joined us."

"I'd like to touch it."

Her hand stayed on his back, but her expression slid into a puzzled frown. "Touch what?"

"The Guardian of Forever."

"Whatever for?"

He looked at her in such a way, with his gold-pupiled eyes, that Mary Mac felt a slight chill. The same sort that she had felt when she first stood in the presence of the Guardian.

As if he had been reading her mind, Data said, "To be honest...I'm not entirely sure. The Guardian and I...we are rarities in the universe. We are each one of a kind." He shifted his gaze to the Guardian. "For a brief time I had a brother...but he's gone now, although part of him" -- he tapped his forehead for a moment -- "remains with me. For an even briefer time -- forty-two years ago, to be exact -- I had a daughter...but she was barely here long enough to establish her presence. I sense in the Guardian a kindred spirit." He looked back at Mary Mac. "Would you consider that funny, Doctor? The notion that something inhuman would try to lay claim to something as human as a spirit?"

"No," she said quietly. "No, I wouldn't think that's funny at all. But...look. Getting within range of the Guardian...it's not exactly regulations. In fact, it's against regulations."

"I am very aware of all Starfleet regulations, Dr. Mac. My programming makes me incapable of violating them. What is prohibited is unauthorized use of the Guardian, especially for the intention of altering or changing time lines. I don't wish to use it. I simply want to..."

He paused, and for someone as clearly articulate as Data, it seemed very odd for him to be pausing, trying to find the right words. "To connect with it," he said finally.

She studied him for a moment, then showed her white teeth. "All right, Commodore. Although frankly, I'm taking a big chance here of getting my ass handed to me."

Data frowned and looked at her buttocks, but she quickly made a dismissive wave. "Not literally."

She stretched out an arm and placed her palm flat against the control padd that stood outside the Guardian. As she did so, Data looked with curiosity at her upper arm. "How did you acquire that bruise, Doctor? It's very peculiar."

She glanced at where he was looking. Sure enough, there was a small abrasion on her upper right arm, perfectly round and about as large as if one made a circle from the thumb and forefinger. "I don't know," she said in mild surprise. "Must have banged it against something."

She dismissed it mentally and looked back at the control platform. A thin beam of red light shot out from it and scanned her right eye, feeding the retinal pattern into the compound's central data banks. It came back with a Priority Alpha clearance. A moment later the force field faded, the steady hum of the generators disappearing. Now there was nothing but the crying of the wind.

Commodore Data slowly walked forward, approaching the Guardian with as close to trepidation as he could possibly come. He stopped several feet away. "Who are you?" he asked.

The vast, round portal flickered as a voice spoke with a booming, all-encompassing vastness that seemed to come from everywhere at once. **"I am the Guardian of Forever."**

"Are you a Guardian in the sense of a preserver? Or a Guardian in the sense of a protector?"

"Both...and neither."

Data cocked his head slightly. Mary Mac, for her part, had quietly activated her wrist recorder. Any direct communication with the Guardian could result in some unexpected new insight. She had conversed with the vast portal on a number of different occasions, and every time there was some new nuance to its replies.

"How is such a self-contradictory assessment possible?" Data asked.

"Since I am possible...then all is possible."

Data considered this a moment. "Are you saying that you are the keeper of time and protect it from trespass...but since every man's fate is in his own hands, you really cannot protect it from those who wish to affect it."

"All living beings affect the flow of what is. I am but one portal through time. There is an infinity of others."

This response brought a startled glance from Mary Mac. Data didn't turn his attention from the Guardian.

"Are you saying there are others like yourself?"

"Of course. In every moment of time that there is...then I am there. As you exist within all the moments of your lifetime. But you exist in the individual moments. I exist in all."

"Holy Kolker," whispered Mary Mac.

"You transcend all boundaries of time and space?" asked Data.

"No. I do not transcend them."

"What, then?"

"I define them."

Data looked back at Mary Mac. It was a curiously human move. It was almost as if Data wanted to reassure himself that she was still there. Then he looked again at the Guardian.

"May I touch you?" asked Data.

"You have free will. Do as you wish."

Data paused, then walked up to the rocklike surface of the Guardian. Without hesitation, he placed his gold palm against it.

The lights throbbed beneath his hand. From the chill that cut through the air, he had expected that the Guardian would feel cool, even cold. Instead it pulsed with an odd sort of warmth. Data lifted his hand for a moment and could feel no heat being radiated from the Guardian's surface. But when he placed his hand against it again, there it was, entirely self-contained.

"Very curious," he said.

He stayed that way for a long moment, then stepped back. "I would like to talk again at some other point."

"All will occur," replied the Guardian.

Data turned and walked back to Mary Mac. She watched him with curiosity. Anyone..."normal," for want of a better word...would have walked away while glancing repeatedly over his shoulder at the Guardian. But Commodore Data, having decided to take his leave, was now completely focused on the next order of business.

"Thank you for the opportunity," said Data.

Mary Mac inclined her chin slightly toward the Guardian. "Did you understand any of that?"

"I have an interpretation that I believe to be fairly accurate. I'd be most interested in comparing my conjectures with those of the other members of your research team."

"Hey, that's what you're here for. To check up on us and keep Starfleet apprised of our progress. The invitation to dinner is still open."

"Thank you. I'll just check with my ship first....Commodore Data to *Enterprise*."

Mary Mac stood and watched him as he held a conversation with thin air.

"Good. I will be remaining on the planet surface several more hours. Be sure to keep the ship sufficiently

outside the range of the temporal distortions, since we're uncertain of the effect long-term exposure could have....I'll want Science Officer Blair joining me....Very well, then, as soon as he's completed them....Thank you, Lieutenant Commander. Commodore out."

He turned and looked back at Mary Mac, who shook her head. "I can't get over that," she said. "That comm-chip implant so that you can hear each other inside your heads."

"A two-second procedure to install. Inserted with a hypo spray. Impossible to lose, so we can remain in touch with each other at all times. Plus increased privacy for communications. Had I wished to, Doctor, I could simply have whispered my replies and you would not have been able to hear any of it. However, there was nothing particularly confidential about this communiqué."

"What's it like?" Mary Mac looked skyward as if she could detect it with the unaided eye. "The *Enterprise*, I mean."

"The *Enterprise*?" Data paused. "In many ways, the *Enterprise* 1701-F is similar to the 1701-D upon which I first served. It is larger, more powerful, more maneuverable. Crew complement of two thousand twenty-three people."

"And you're in command."

He nodded slightly. "There is that, of course. And yet, in some ways...I find myself thinking of the past, more and more often. I suppose, as one acquires more memories, that is natural."

"Yes. It is. Certainly -- just like yourself -- not without precedent."

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