



STAR TREK

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THE ENTERPRISE-B CHRONICLES

DEVORAX

by David Dietz

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PART ONE: ASSEMBLY

CHAPTER ONE

Blackness.

It was all around. It seemed to be drowning him in its cold dark waves. His arms reached out only to find more black as far as he could reach. He had always had nightmares about drowning in some deep, dark abyss which no light ever came in to or went out of. He often thought this must be what the inside of a black hole would be like.

Then, far ahead in the blackness, a tiny speck of light appeared. It seemed to be growing larger, as if it were steadily and swiftly coming towards him. Closer and closer it came, like the opening at the end of a dark tunnel.

Was this the ultimate journey to the afterlife that every being in the known universe was said to have experienced? Suddenly the light engulfed him, blotting out the blackness. Its brilliance was

momentarily blinding, but within a few heartbeats it faded.

The image which then came into focus was decidedly less than heavenly: Diagnostic beds with their life sensor lights blinking off and on in a spectrum of different colors indicating the lifesigns of their occupants.

Humanoid medical technicians, nurses, and physicians paced around the confines of the room, every one clothed in either medical scrubs, casual or formal uniforms. This place, he realized, was a starship medical bay and that he occupied one of the many diagnostic beds. He sighed somewhat disappointedly.

He then noticed a pretty, blonde medical technician hovering over him and smiling in what could only be described as a pleased manner. "Doctor T'Ma," she called over her shoulder. "He's come around."

He then noticed the not-unattractive Vulcan medical officer come to his bed. T'Ma eyed him curiously and then dismissed the technician with a curt, "Thank you, Pulaski." She then returned her attentions to the man on the diagnostic bed. "Well Commander, you gave us quite a headache there for a while."

"Sorry if I was a pain. How bad was it?"

"Your wounds were quite serious. I wasn't certain I had found the correct antidote to the poison inflicted on you, but obviously I did." Not many people were

comfortable around Vulcan physicians, their bedside manner was often cold and matter-of-fact, but somehow he found it rather comforting. He even suspected that underneath that collected outward façade, T'Ma was smiling the widest smile anyone could imagine. He often wondered what she would be like if she just loosened up.

Lost in his reverie he hadn't noticed that T'Ma had moved over to the communications panel on the far end of sickbay and had activated the call button. "Captain," she spoke into the receiver. "Commander Bairnson has just woken up. Would you care to see him?"

"I'm on my way Doctor," came the captain's short reply. T'Ma then moved on to see to the other patients which littered the sickbay.

Commander Jack Bairnson sat up on his bed and looked around him. He surveyed the happenings in the sickbay. There were about seventeen other people in the bay in the same instant that he was. Some were dressed in now-tattered and soiled Starfleet uniforms, others were dressed in more of a civilian manner. Bairnson's thoughts raced back to the events that led to his internment in the sickbay. The distress call from Omega Omicron 2 stating that they were under attack had brought the *Excelsior* to their aid. Jack Bairnson had been appointed to lead an Away Team down to the planet to investigate and

had found the planet's major settlement destroyed. The few colonists who remained were tired and frightened and before Bairnson could get any information on the attackers, they returned.

A fierce battle had ensued in which Bairnson and his Away Team fought bravely against an unseen enemy. And then, Bairnson remembered the strange sensation he felt at his neck. As though he had been injected with a hypo that had been set too high. Then he remembered the pain, then the paralysis, and finally falling down into the blackness he had been trapped in not more than five minutes ago. Now he was back on the *Excelsior* and he felt a twinge of sadness as he surveyed the injured remnants of his Away Team and the colonists they had tried to protect. He couldn't help but feel a sense of failure.

Then suddenly Bairnson's attention returned to reality as the *Excelsior's* captain entered sick bay and was escorted over to his bed by Doctor T'Ma. Captain Sulu smiled congenially at his first officer. "Well Jack," he began. "You gave us quite a scare back there." Bairnson pulled his thoughts together as best he could. "Yes sir. The Doctor said so before you arrived."

Sulu turned to his chief medical officer and couldn't help but chuckle silently at the Vulcan woman who had come to be known on the ship as the "Cold Fish."

Bairnson had always held Captain Sulu with a certain sense of awe, and even though he had been the *Excelsior's* executive officer under Sulu for five years now, he had never lost the feeling. Sulu had served with Captain Kirk and was very much a part of Federation history, and Bairnson couldn't believe his luck when he had been chosen to serve under him on the Federation's flagship.

Bairnson had come to regard Sulu as a sort of guru. Like the elderly master at an ancient Oriental monastery where the monks studied Buddhism and the Martial Arts.

In fact Sulu had taught Bairnson what little Kung Fu he knew and he never ceased to marvel at how much concern for his crew Sulu must have. He knew that if he were ever granted a command of his own, Jack Bairnson would certainly try to emulate Hikaru Sulu in every respect.

The aging Oriental face of the captain then turned back to Jack as Doctor T'Ma wandered off to tend to other patients in the sickbay, or so it appeared. Was Bairnson imagining things, or did it appear that T'Ma was blushing?

"So, how are you feeling, Jack?" Sulu queried.

"Well sir," Bairnson replied. "To be honest I've been better."

"Yes, so I see."

Bairnson composed himself as he tried to report his findings. "The enemy, whoever they were, attacked without warning. I don't think anyone really saw them. We tried to hold them off, sir, but..."

Bairnson noticed Sulu raising his hand, stopping him in mid-sentence. "Yes, yes. You can tell me all about that when you're ready to return to duty."

"I'm not sure I should return to duty, sir."

"Now Jack, what do you mean by that remark?"

Bairnson tried to compose himself as best he could, but it wasn't quite what he'd hoped for. "I couldn't save the colonists, I couldn't determine who the attackers were... I...." Dammit! Why couldn't he control his emotions?

Sulu's tone was warm and understanding. "Jack, you did what anyone could have asked of you. You found out what you could, and when you were attacked and overwhelmed, you got as many of your Away Team and the colonists as you could out of there."

"I failed, sir...."

"No Jack, don't say that! You performed under pressure in the best tradition of Starfleet."

"I don't know, sir."

"Can I tell you a story, Jack? And can you keep it in the strictest confidence?"

"Certainly, sir."

Sulu leaned close to Bairnson's ear. "One time, I was on shore leave in Yosemite National Park on Earth with a friend of mine, Pavel Checkov..."

"Captain Checkov? Of the *Leonov*?" Jack realized he had interrupted.

"Yes. Well, we were hiking in the woods when we suddenly realized we were lost! Can you imagine that?"

The helmsman and navigator of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, who had charted countless unexplored regions of space for the Federation were lost in a forested nature reserve on Earth."

"So what happened, sir?"

"I radioed the ship and a shuttlecraft came and picked us up!" It wasn't until several moments later that Jack Bairnson realized he had been laughing riotously with his captain. He suddenly felt closer to this man he admired so much than he had ever felt before. Like they were friends at long last.

After Sulu had calmed himself he said, "So do you think you'll be alright now, Number One?"

"Yes sir," Jack smiled. "I think so."

"That's good," Sulu continued. "Because I sort of have a surprise for you when you're ready to return to duty."

"What's that, sir?" Bairnson inquired, his curiosity piqued.

"I think I'll wait 'til you're ready to return to duty to tell you." Sulu intimated. "Give you an incentive for returning at all." Sulu then winked at his executive officer and silently strode out of sickbay.

Sulu had often played these mind puzzle games with Bairnson in the past. Sulu felt the games to be useful and found that it kept his officers always alert. His favorite player was Jack Bairnson; he played the games better than any other officer on the *Excelsior*. Often the games came up in times of crisis or stress which required quick yet thoughtful answers. Bairnson was correct seven out of ten times, but this time he couldn't even fathom what Captain Sulu had on his mind.

* * *

The following days were long, full, and at times, painful for Jack Bairnson as he set on a course back to a full recovery. Doctor T'Ma couldn't help but marvel at the rapid pace at which this human was healing. It was as though Captain Sulu's visit and subsequent message had spurred Jack Bairnson on his path back.

Bairnson too marveled at the speed at which he was recovering. Only a few days ago, Jack would have been content to let death embrace him. And now, only five days after he had awakened from that icy

blackness in the *Excelsior's* sickbay, Bairnson was ready to return to duty.

He stepped confidently onto the turbolift which would take him to the ship's main bridge. As the long ride to the bridge progressed, Bairnson's mind was racing.

Why should it do that? Was it anticipation of Captain Sulu's impending announcement that concerned him? Was it the almost embarrassing praise he knew he would receive after he stepped onto the bridge? Or was it something else entirely?

Omega Omicron 2.

Even though Captain Sulu had reassured Bairnson that he had done all that he could on that planet, it was still bothering him. Bairnson hated mysteries and Omega Omicron 2 was still plaguing him. Who had the mysterious attackers been? Why did they attack in the first place? And most of all, who had shot him?

Bairnson's reverie was broken by the familiar hiss of the turbolift doors opening onto the bridge of the *Excelsior*. He looked up somewhat sheepishly and noticed that indeed, all eyes on the bridge were trained on him. As he took his first tiny steps onto the bridge in five days, he heard the first pair of hands slap together. Gradually, the other crew members present on the bridge followed suit.

The sound of the applause had to have been amplified by the confines of the bridge; Bairnson's mind just couldn't accept that this applause was for

him. On top of the applause, Jack received a number of pats on the back and short hugs from a couple of the female crew members as he made his way to the command chair in the center of the bridge.

As he sat in the unoccupied command chair, he nodded in acknowledgement of the crew's accolades. What a bunch, he thought to himself. All Starfleet officers offering the best of what the Federation has, each one hoping to advance in their own particular fields as far as they could, and yet each one of them will take the time to welcome back an officer who had been ill for maybe a few days. Jack sighed and brushed back his thick auburn hair taking it all in.

Suddenly, the *Excelsior's* internal communicator beeped on, and the familiar voice of Captain Sulu was heard. "Sulu to Bairnson."

Jack pushed the reply button on the right arm of the command seat, "Bairnson here, Captain."

"If you can bear to tear yourself away from the accolades I know your friends on the bridge are giving you, I'd like to see you in my ready room."

"On my way sir," Bairnson chuckled. Many of the upper echelons of Starfleet Command found Captain Sulu's somewhat loose attitude towards his crew a bit unprofessional, but that only made Jack admire him more.

Jack had been a bit of a rebel himself, and it did his heart good to know that he had a few kindred spirits in the universe.

* * *

Jack Bairnson stepped off the turbolift once again, only this time onto one of the levels of the *Excelsior* immediately below the bridge. He strode down the corridor for several minutes exchanging greetings with other on-duty officers as he made his way. Finally, he came to the door he was looking for. He pressed the call button and awaited the “enter” reply which came shortly.

The doors opened with their familiar hiss of hydraulic operations, and Jack Bairnson entered the spacious briefing room. The walls along the interior of the room were decorated with several pieces of art from different famous galactic artists. In the center of the room was a large table surrounded by ten maroon-colored, plush upholstered chairs. The chair at the head of the table was occupied at the moment by Captain Sulu.

Bairnson stood at attention. “You wanted to see me sir?”

“Yes Jack,” Sulu replied. “Sit down and relax.”

Jack approached the table and took his usual seat at the Captain's right. Sulu then rose from his chair and walked over to the replicator situated on the far wall of the briefing room.

As Jack gazed out of the room's large observation window at the panorama of stars that littered the blackness of space, he heard Sulu ask, "How do you like your tea, Jack?"

Bairnson slowly turned, still lost in his reverie.

"Hmmm? Oh, sweet sir. Very sweet."

Bairnson tried to compose his thoughts again as Sulu ordered the replicator to make two cups of tea, one of which was Bairnson's "very sweet." It wouldn't do Jack Bairnson to be daydreaming again, especially not here in the presence of his captain.

Sulu brought the steaming cups of hot tea over to the table. He handed Jack his cup and then sat down taking a sip of his own. Replicator tea would never replace fresh-brewed in Bairnson's opinion, but until Starfleet engineers came up with a better kind of replicator system than what was currently available, he would live with it.

When he finished his sip, Captain Sulu sighed with contentment and then observed his first officer. "Not drinking it right off the bat I see."

"No sir," Bairnson replied. "I like to wait until it's just right for me."

"Yes," Sulu replied. "You know Jack, you can tell a lot about a person by the way they drink their tea."

"How so, sir?"

"Each person has a different way in which they like it. Some like to drink it when it's hot, some wait until it's the perfect temperature for them. Some like to spice it up with cream or sugar, and some prefer to just take it the way it comes." Sulu paused for a moment to let this thought sink in, then he continued. "I like mine hot and plain. I prefer to take it that way, regardless of the consequences."

"Consequences, sir?" Bairnson queried.

"Oh you know, like a burnt roof of the mouth, or maybe it's not stirred properly, or maybe it's just a bad batch, but that's how I like it. Each person's tea is a reflection on their personality. What do you think the way I take my tea reflects on my personality?"

Bairnson pondered this idea for a moment and then replied. "That you see things as they are, and that you take the proverbial bull by the horns and get things the way you want them, no matter what the cost."

Sulu smiled. "Very good, Jack. Now, you on the other hand, you prefer to wait until things come the way that you want them, and when it comes you try to make it more interesting for you than it actually is."

"Yes, I suppose so, sir. Is this what you wanted to talk with me about sir?"

"In a way," Sulu replied vaguely. Sulu then rose from his chair and strode over to the window to gaze out at the stars. He sighed again before he continued. "I wanted the *Excelsior*, Jack. I wanted to command her more than anything I've ever wanted in my life. I pushed and I scratched my way up the ranks of Starfleet until I finally got her. But you, Jack... you preferred to wait."

Bairnson rose from his seat and joined Sulu staring at the stars. He turned his head to face his commander.

"What exactly are you trying tell me, sir?"

Sulu then faced the man that he had called

"Number One" for the last five years. "Starfleet Command is offering you your own vessel, Jack."

Bairnson was taken aback by the abruptness of Sulu's announcement. "Me? My own ship?"

"She's yours if you want her, Jack," Sulu nodded.

Bairnson then began pacing the briefing room in sheer disbelief. "Did they say why?"

"Fleet's had its eye on you for the past several months. Your record has been exemplary. They feel that you're ready to go off on your own..." Sulu then paused for moment and finally added, "...and so do I."

Bairnson then glanced up at Sulu following his last statement. "Thank you, sir. That really means a lot to me."

But then Jack ashamedly turned his head away from his captain. "But, this whole thing with Omega

Omicron 2 is still bothering me. I'm not sure if I should leave while all this is...."

"Don't worry about Omega Omicron 2," Sulu interrupted forcefully. Somehow Jack still hadn't been able to cope with what had happened. "We'll be able to handle things. Jack, this is the opportunity that you've been waiting for. Starfleet has even given you the option to pick out several members of your own crew! Don't give it up for something that you had absolutely no control over."

Bairnson brightened somewhat upon hearing that last piece of information. And Sulu noticed that for perhaps the first time, Bairnson actually looked younger than his thirty-eight years betrayed. "My own crew?" he queried.

"Well, several members of it anyway."

Bairnson weighed the information on his mind. It had been what he had often dreamed about, and now it was coming to be reality. He could have certain people that he wanted in certain positions. Whatever this ship was, it must have been important for Starfleet to offer an incentive like that. Finally, Sulu noticed that Jack Bairnson, former first officer of the *U.S.S. Excelsior* was smiling; for what was probably the first time in weeks.

Sulu returned the smile. "I take it that smile means you're going to accept?"

"Yes sir!" Jack excitedly replied.

“Good. I’ll inform Starfleet of your decision.” Sulu then offered his right hand to Bairnson. “Welcome to the club, Captain Bairnson.”

Jack Bairnson vigorously returned Sulu’s handshake. He liked the sound of his new title, even more than when he became first officer aboard the *Excelsior*.

Then Jack asked the question that was eating away at his mind for the last five minutes. “What ship did they give me, sir?”

Sulu’s smile resembled that of a Cheshire cat. As though this had been hidden underneath the whole time.

“That’s the best part.” Sulu then returned his gaze to the stars outside the ship before he continued. “I’m actually kind of jealous of you, Jack. Perhaps I should have been the one to wait.”

“Why sir?” Bairnson was genuinely intrigued.

“Because the ship you’re getting is the newest flagship of the Starfleet. Construction number: NCC-1701-B. *U.S.S. Enterprise*.”

CHAPTER TWO

Jack Bairnson had been given a week to assemble the few members of his new crew that he would be able to choose while the *Excelsior* made its way to the Starfleet shipyards in the Antares solar system. Many of the lower-ranking officers that he had asked jumped at the opportunity to serve aboard the new vessel which had been granted an historic name.

Bairnson was now making his way to the lower levels of the *Excelsior*. The lift doors hissed open and Bairnson stepped off the turbolift and into the corridor. He strode down the length of the corridor and finally passed through another set of hissing doors. He found himself in the engineering section of the *Excelsior* surveying the vast number of engineering specialists busy at work in the immense room. As Bairnson casually walked through the room searching out one particular individual, the *Excelsior's* Chief Engineer, Harrison, came up to him.

"Hello Commander, or should I say 'Captain' now?" Harrison smiled.

"How are you Harrison?" Bairnson replied courteously.

"The news of your promotion is all over the ship, sir. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"I also hear you're looking to fill some positions on the new ship. Anyone I would know?" Harrison was obviously intimating himself.

"Perhaps," Bairnson replied looking around anxiously.

"Is Johnson on duty today?"

"Yeah, he's over there, sir," Harrison pointed over towards a young brunette man working by the interior computer boards that monitored the dilythium crystal chamber. Bairnson thanked Harrison curtly and then walked over towards Johnson.

He had quite obviously brushed Harrison off.

Bairnson had never really liked the chief engineer too much. Maybe it was the fact that Harrison was such an obnoxious individual whose only interest was self-promotion. Maybe it was because he was such an incredible suck-up. Maybe it was that barroom brawl incident on Rigel 3 that left Bairnson alone against three really big and very drunk Rigellians when Harrison made an innocuous comment about their questionable sexual practices. Anyway, Bairnson was not at all crazy about Harrison.

He liked Lieutenant Ryan Johnson better than any other person on the *Excelsior*. The pair had been roommates at Starfleet Academy when Johnson was just a young freshman and Bairnson an up-and-coming senior cadet leader. Bairnson had helped Johnson through some of the rougher times at the Academy, making him an effective cadet-leader by the time of his own graduation.

Bairnson had been *Excelsior's* first officer for two years when his young friend ended up serving on the same ship as his former roommate.

The two had often hung out together on the ship during off hours and Bairnson had often commented on what a great chief engineer he would make if given half the chance. Well, Bairnson was about to give him that chance.

He approached the lieutenant who was now ten years Bairnson's junior. Johnson was heavily intent on his work at the moment. Bairnson often marveled at the drive this young man had, in fact sometimes he worried about it.

Bairnson's credo had always been "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." He had tried to show Johnson that work wasn't everything but sometimes he felt that in this area, Ryan Johnson was a poor student.

"Am I going insane or did the captain call a red alert and not tell me?" Bairnson began.

Johnson was briefly startled, but then turned to see his friend, "Huh? Why do you ask?" Johnson replied.

"Sir?" He added almost forgetting that he was on duty again.

"Well, you seemed so intent on your work, I thought we might be under attack or something."

"Oh, no sir," Johnson apologized and immediately turned away from the terminal which hadn't been

registering anything important anyway. "Well, what can I do for you, sir?"

"I suppose you've heard about my promotion?"

Bairnson inquired only half-seriously.

"I think half the quadrant knows by now, sir."

Now Bairnson was embarrassed. How could anyone be expected to surprise friends and/or relatives with good news if everyone was aware of it already? Oh well, he thought, press on and hope for the best. "Yes, well then I suppose you know that I'm looking for people to fill a few positions on the ship."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, one of the positions that is available is the chief engineer." Bairnson paused to let this sink in Johnson's mind, then added, "I'd like you to fill that position, Ryan."

Ryan Johnson seemed to Bairnson to be almost as surprised by the offer as Bairnson himself was to his promotion. Ryan had to sit down once again to let it all sink in.

"Uh... well, gee sir," Johnson hesitated. "Do you really think that I'm the one you want on the *Enterprise*, sir? I mean Harrison is more qualified than I am."

"Yes, but then I didn't ask Harrison, did I? I asked you."

Johnson was completely amazed. He was still a young officer and really didn't see himself as ever advancing this far in so short a time. He thought that

maybe in a few years or so, he might become the chief engineer aboard some Federation starship, but not this quickly. And certainly not aboard the new flagship; not aboard the ship named *Enterprise*.

"Sir," Johnson began again hesitantly. "All my life, I've dreamed about becoming a chief engineer aboard a Federation starship. I've worked hard to get where I am right now, and it's not that I'm not grateful to you for the offer. But I'm just not sure that I'm ready for a major change like this. Not so soon anyway."

"Johnson," Bairnson began, but then continued more gently. "Ryan, I wasn't sure myself that I was ready for this position. But Starfleet has shown confidence in me. Captain Sulu has shown confidence in me. Now, I'm showing that confidence in you. I think you're ready for this position."

Ryan Johnson sat pondering for a moment longer before finally answering Bairnson. It wasn't the answer Bairnson was hoping for, but it was all Johnson could offer. "All I'm saying sir, is that this is such a big decision for me to make. Can you give me a little time to think about it?"

Bairnson hadn't realized how much he had been pushing people to make decisions concerning their new postings. He was anxious to get under way, perhaps he hadn't thought about how any other people felt. But Ryan had made Bairnson realize that other people's feelings were involved. Giving Ryan

ample time to make a decision was the least he could do. Bairnson smiled at his friend. "Okay. But try not to think too long. We arrive at Antares in two days."

Johnson nodded as Jack Bairnson strode out of the engineering section and back into the corridor towards the turbolift. Ryan Johnson then returned to his terminal screen, not so much intent on work that needn't be done, but on the prospect of being the chief engineer aboard the Federation's new flagship.

* * *

Some time later in the evening, Captain Jack Bairnson was relaxing in his quarters for what would be one of his last times. He had spent the first half hour of his off-time reviewing some of the names of the people he had chosen for his new crew. But after he became bored with the review, he activated the computer and it began to play some of Bairnson's favorite music. A little something from the twentieth century which the music connoisseurs of the time referred to as rock-n-roll.

Soon even the music became tedious and Bairnson opted for a change of pace, something soft and melodic.

He then showered and slipped into a comfortable robe that he had picked up on Golina. The material was similar to Earth silk but much finer, softer, and

more shear. He then sat in his recliner, put his hands behind his head and closed his eyes, letting the music wash over him like a gentle wave.

Suddenly, he heard the familiar chime that indicated someone was at his door. Bairnson groaned with some annoyance. He hadn't been expecting anyone and had been close to falling asleep on his recliner.

Reluctantly, he rose from his comfy chair and walked to the door calling for whoever was at the door to enter.

The doors parted and there to Jack's surprise was Janet Sunset. Jack's hazy eyes brightened at the site of the petite lieutenant. Sunset was from Earth herself and her ethnic background classified her as what used to be referred to as a Native American. Her dark hair and eyes and slightly tan complexion gave her an exotic beauty that most men, both human and not, found difficult to resist.

Only she could make a Starfleet uniform look like something out of a fashion magazine. At the moment however, she was dressed much more casually, and a bit more sexily than what most Starfleet officers thought of as "standard."

"Late night tonight, Sunset?" was all Bairnson could manage to say. Even then it sounded like a stupid come-on line.

Sunset stared up at Bairnson with those dark, dewy eyes that reminded Jack of a crater pool on Alpha Centauri. "No later than the one you're having, sir."

Sunset stared at Bairnson for what seemed like hours but was really only about a minute. "Is it alright if I come in?" Sunset finally said.

Jack realized for what must have been the hundredth time today that he had lost track of reality again. He motioned for Sunset to enter his quarters. Sunset surveyed what she could in the dim lighting which Bairnson had programmed. "Doing some heavy reading, huh?" Sunset said picking up the crew listing Bairnson had written up.

"Well, not that heavy. I knew what it said while I was writing it."

"Yes. Rather fine job you did too." Sunset said admiringly. Sunset then slinked over to the recliner Bairnson had been sitting in only a moment ago. She slowly reclined onto the plush chair and stared up at Bairnson with those eyes again.

Bairnson tried to compose himself from the obvious erotic excitement she was causing him and asked, "I uh..., take it by your presence here that you've had time to think about the chief of staff offering I gave you?"

"Mmm-hmmm," she nodded quite slowly and deliberately.

“And uh..,” Bairnson continued, “what have you decided?”

Sunset then calculatingly rose from the recliner and glided smoothly towards him. With each step Bairnson’s heart rate increased. With each step he felt the rather conspicuous stiffness at his waist, until Sunset put her arms around his neck and seductively drew his mouth to hers. They kissed as only lovers do. Their tongues flicking playfully with each other until finally she broke off and looked Bairnson square in the eyes.

“I take it that’s a ‘yes?’” Bairnson finally said. In reply Sunset kissed him yet again; not as long, but with just as much passion. Jack was beginning to love the way his fiancée communicated.

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The remaining days passed very quickly for Jack Bairnson. He finished up what little duties he had to accomplish while still *Excelsior*’s first officer, and by the last day, had settled back for the last few light years of the journey to Antares.

Now the *Excelsior* slowed to impulse power as it neared the planet on which it would lose several members of its crew. Jack Bairnson stood to the right of the captain’s chair as the looming image of the earth-like planet Antares 5 gradually filled the bridge’s

main viewing screen. Captain Sulu turned to his now-former first officer. "Like to take her in one last time, Jack?"

Bairnson turned to face the man he admired so much. "If it's not too much trouble, sir."

Sulu rose from his chair and motioned Bairnson to assume the command of the *Excelsior* one last time. Bairnson settled into the command seat with the confidence and ease of an experienced space veteran. He sighed as his hands gripped the arm rests.

"Alright helmsman," Bairnson began. "You've done this a hundred times already but... standard orbit."

"Aye, Captain," came the young helmsman's response.

The *Excelsior* glided easily into the gravitational pull of Antares 5. The actual effect felt by a starship in a standard orbit maneuver was minimal, but to Jack Bairnson it felt as if his entire world was experiencing what shuttle pilots called the "hammerhead stall." Turning up in the air and completing an almost 90-degree arc.

"Standard orbit achieved, sir," the helmsman reported.

"Nice job, Jack," Sulu complemented. Bairnson only smiled and nodded in acknowledgement of Sulu's praise. "I think you'd better go and prepare for your departure," Sulu added.

With that, Jack Bairnson rose from the command chair and stepped toward the turbolift. As the doors hissed open, Bairnson turned to the bridge crew and waved goodbye to his friends who would be unable to attend his send-off. The assembled personnel said their goodbyes, each in his or her own way. Bairnson then stepped through the doors and onto the turbolift for the final time.

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Jack Bairnson hadn't entirely finished packing his things the night before. Another visit from Sunset had kept him occupied for the entire evening once again. So he hurriedly packed the remaining remnants of his life aboard the *Excelsior* into his travel bag. When he finished he headed for the door, but as it opened into the corridor, Jack suddenly turned and surveyed his quarters.

It was only at this time, that he fully realized that his life was changing. The emptiness of the room which had once been his haven on the ship overwhelmed him. It seemed like a barren, lifeless asteroid now that all his personal possessions had been transferred to the new *Enterprise*. How many memories there were in this room; both happy and sad. If the walls could only talk... what a stupid thought! Whoever had first uttered that phrase must have been very sentimental,

indeed. But, the past was the past and future lied straight ahead. Out the door of the quarters that once belonged to Jack Bairnson.

* * *

Jack Bairnson confidently strode the corridor towards the transporter room where his send-off was to be held. Along the way he stopped in front of Janet Sunset's quarters just as she was coming out of the doors herself. She had a travel bag slung over shoulder as well and was dressed in the same Starfleet uniform that she always wore. Like Jack, her rank insignia had changed. Hers had become that of Lieutenant Commander, while Bairnson's was a shiny new Captain's brass displayed proudly on the white shoulder strap of his maroon jacket.

"Well," Sunset began. "Don't you look official?"

She smiled the smile that had made Jack fall for her in the first place then continued, "Ready to go?"

"No," Jack sighed. "But let's get going before they think we've pulled a Finney and hidden in the lower levels." Sunset chuckled and together they headed down the corridor to the turbolift. The doors opened and the pair stepped onto the lift. Then the doors closed and Captain Jack Bairnson and Lieutenant Commander Janet Sunset disappeared from the now completely empty corridor.

The turbolift doors finally opened on the level that housed the transporter room that Sunset and Bairnson were leaving from. As they hissed open, Bairnson received the surprise of his life: over a hundred crew members lined either wall of the corridor. Dressed in their best uniforms the assembled mass stood at attention as Bairnson and Sunset stepped off the lift and proceeded down the corridor towards the transporter room.

Bairnson smiled the most modest, congenial smile he could manage as he slowly walked down the corridor. "You're glowing," Sunset commented out of the side of her mouth.

"Am I?" Bairnson turned to Sunset worriedly as they walked.

"Don't worry," she said reassuringly. "It becomes you quite nicely." She then smiled at her new commander and offered him a little wink that expressed her admiration of this new side of his personality. In all the time that Janet Sunset had known him, she had rarely seen Jack Bairnson express much joy. He was always so serious about himself and about his life. She knew that he liked to think he was fun-loving, but deep down she knew him better than anyone else on the *Excelsior*. The smile was a sign that he was improving, though.

Together, the pair rounded the corner and entered the transporter room where Captain Sulu stood in front of the pads awaiting their arrival. The two captains exchanged greetings, shaking hands with each other. Sulu then offered his hand to Sunset smiling. "I hope you two aren't going to forget about me at your wedding."

Sunset chuckled somewhat embarrassed. "No sir," she replied. She then leaned and whispered into Sulu's ear,

"You couldn't speed things up between us on that track by any chance could you, sir?"

"He and I are the same rank, Sunset. My hands are tied," Sulu whispered back.

"Damn!" Sunset cursed humorously. She then returned to Bairnson's side as Sulu addressed him.

"Well Jack," he began. "It's been a good five years. You deserve all the best wishes that I and everyone on this ship can offer."

"Thank you, sir," Bairnson replied with a lump in his throat.

"Good luck."

Bairnson nodded in acknowledgement of his captain's send-off and together he and Sunset stepped onto two of the five pads on the floor of the transporter area. As Sulu was about to give the order to the transporter chief to energize, a cry was heard out in the corridor. "Wait!" it called.

Bairnson and the other crew members in the transporter room turned towards the doorway as Ryan Johnson stepped through, panting from exhaustion.

Bairnson smiled again as the young officer adjusted his travel bag over his shoulder and straightened up his uniform. He then turned to Bairnson on the transporter pad. "Is that offer still available, sir?"

Jack beamed proudly at his friend from engineering. "Come on up, Mister Johnson."

Johnson smiled and excitedly leapt up onto the transporter pad beside Jack Bairnson. Sulu shook his head in mocked exasperation and addressed Bairnson and the assembled mass. "Any other late-comers?"

A roar of laughter erupted from the crowd including Bairnson and Sunset. Johnson was the only who didn't seem to like the laughter at his expense, but a good-natured rib-poking from Bairnson soon had him joining in the joke too. After only a few seconds, the laughter died down and Sulu returned to what he was about to do.

Before he gave the energize order he said one last thing to Captain Jack Bairnson.

"As an old friend of mine is fond of saying:

'Remember that a starship is a lady. Treat her like one and she'll always bring you home.'"

Bairnson nodded taking the last bit of advice from Sulu as a son would from a father that he was leaving for the first time. With that, Sulu ordered the transporter chief to energize. Soon Jack Bairnson, Janet Sunset, and Ryan Johnson, sparkled with the transporter effect and within seconds they disappeared from the deck of the *U.S.S.*

Excelsior.

Captain Hikaru Sulu couldn't help but feel a sense of loss.

CHAPTER THREE

The shuttlecraft floated gracefully through the open arena of the massive Antares spacedock. The dock was built to a similar construction as the original which orbited the Federation homeworld, Earth, and was one of the first this far out. The shuttle cut through the open, airless confines of the spacedock with all the grace of a speedboat cutting through the calm waters of a mountain lake.

Inside the new captain of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* and his chief of staff patiently awaited the shuttle's rendezvous with the Federation's new flagship. Ryan Johnson and many of the other crewmembers chosen had boarded the ship earlier but Jack Bairnson had

chosen to take the traditional captain's shuttle journey from shore to his new command.

Bairnson sat close to Janet Sunset, his hand tightly clutching hers in nervous anticipation. Sunset had already complained that Bairnson had been cutting off the flow of blood to her hand, but her hand's relief after he had eased his grip was short-lived. Sunset then realized that she had never seen Bairnson this aroused, outside of sex, and decided that the numbness in her hand was good. After a while, it didn't bother her as much.

The interior of a spacedock was a lot like a gigantic cathedral. Instead of crosses, its sacred objects were starships of all shapes and sizes. At least that was how they had always appeared to Janet Sunset. Ever since she could remember, she had dreamed of travelling amongst the stars, like the little boy in one of the ancient stories of her people. Her decision to join Starfleet had not been a popular one among the members of her tribe. Her parents had especially protested, saying how Janet was abandoning the ideals and traditions of her people. Janet had fought back saying that Starfleet emulated all the finest ideals of her tribe and that they should be happy she had been accepted in such a fine organization.

The fight had raged on for years. All through the Academy and up until her last commission, her parents never let up. They continued insisting that all

she had learned could better benefit her if she returned home. And Janet continued insisting that the more she stayed in space, the greater the honor to her tribe. It continued back and forth, until the day Janet received a subspace transmission informing her of her parents' death.

Janet had been too far out in space on a mission to return home for the funeral and burial of her mother and father. She often regretted that the last thing she and her parents had in common was their constant, incessant bickering. Would she have better served her tribe if she had taken her knowledge from the Academy back home?

Would she and her parents have gotten along better if she had done so? Did they know how much she loved them even though they disagreed?

Suddenly the numbness returned to her hand in waves and pulses. She noticed that it was much more intense than before. She glanced down at her hand in Jack's; he had been squeezing it harder on purpose. "You okay?" he queried.

"Yeah," she replied uncertainly. "I'm fine, why?"

"You're mind seemed to be light years away. Is something bothering you?"

"Not at all," Janet smiled. She had never been able to tell Jack everything about her parents and the shame they had made her feel, even though she had nothing to be ashamed of. She had never even told them she

was engaged to Jack. That would have been the end of everything; their daughter engaged to a white? She did wonder though, if they eventually would have grown as proud of Jack Bairnson as she was.

"There she is, Captain Bairnson," a voice called from the forward compartment. Bairnson rose from his seat and escorted Janet to the front of the tiny shuttlecraft. The shuttle's young female pilot nodded once again ahead of them.

"That's her, sir," she stated. "The *U.S.S.*

Enterprise: NCC-1701-B." Bairnson stared out of the shuttle's expansive front window. His eyes brightened like the fire of a supernova at the site before him. There the *Enterprise* sat, serene and beautiful, like a painting that hung in the Louvre on Earth.

She was identical in every way to the *Excelsior*.

No surprise, seeing how they were both the same class of starship. The *Excelsior* class had always been Bairnson's favorite design, because like Bairnson himself, it was daring, radical, and deviated from the norm. Many had thought that the *Excelsior* design was a failure after its initial tests, but Bairnson always knew that the low-bowed, high-nacelle design would ultimately prove its worth.

Maybe Captain Sulu had helped in that respect.

After all, the *Excelsior* did help to ensure the success of the Khitomer conference: the first successful talks between the Federation and the Klingon Empire.

Then it had gone on to become second only to Captain James T. Kirk's *Enterprise* as the most legendary ship in the cosmos.

Bairnson only prayed that his voyages would be well-remembered by at least one stellar historian; he did have a reputation to live up to.

"Give us an overflight of the ship before docking, Ensign," Bairnson ordered breathily. The shuttle pilot acknowledged and brought the smaller craft into a course parallel to that of the top of the ship. As she slothily skimmed the upper portion of the ship, Bairnson marveled at every weld-seam, every nut and bolt of this ship's, his ship's construction. He was particularly awed as he read aloud the ship's construction registry.

As the shuttle dipped below the ship's warp nacelles, Bairnson draped his arm over Sunset's shoulder.

She looked up at Jack and smiled proudly. She was as proud of Jack as she would have been if the ship had been her own. The shuttle then made a second, low-level pass along the ship's port side. Bairnson counted the many illuminated and dark windows all along the side of the ship. Each of those windows housed a member of the crew, his crew. He shook his smiling, as if his mind could not accept what was happening to him.

Finally, Bairnson lost site of the side of the ship completely as the shuttle maneuvered into docking

position. Bairnson sighed with contentment as he felt the shuttle edging backwards towards the docking portal. He heard the familiar thud when the shuttle made contact with the side of the ship as well as the latches locking into position and the cabin pressure equalizing.

"Thank you, Ensign," Bairnson said to the pilot, "for a most enjoyable ride."

"Anytime, sir," came her curt reply. "Good fortune, sir."

Bairnson had little time to thank the girl as the shuttle doors hissed open. Standing at attention in the entrance as the doors parted was Lieutenant Commander Ryan Johnson. He stepped aside as Bairnson stepped through the hatchway accompanied by Janet. Johnson blew a traditional ship's whistle whose sound was more electronic than anything.

It was then that Bairnson noticed the small group of officers and crew that had assembled to welcome him aboard. They snapped to attention as Sunset announced,

"Captain on board!"

Bairnson stepped into the docking corridor. He remained impassive as Sunset moved to stand alongside Johnson at attention. "Permission to come aboard?"

Bairnson queried.

Sunset looked to Johnson to answer. He had been the most senior officer on board at the time. "Granted, sir,"

Johnson finally replied.

Bairnson then slowly advanced forward, giving a scrutinizing eye to each of the crew members assembled.

They were a mixed bag of different races and ages. A silver-haired Terran stood alongside a young, blue-faced Andorian woman. Tellerites, Caitians, Deltans, there was even an insect-like Xux among the group. The humanoids represented a fine diversity of the different ethnic groups of Earth and her colonies. Oriental, Russian, Latino, they were all there as well. Bairnson returned his gaze to the young Andorian woman. "What's your name, Lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant j.g., Thuroq Mirgant, sir," she replied snappily.

"And what do you do, Lieutenant Mirgant?"

"Ship's helmsman, sir."

"So, you're gonna get us where we're going, eh?"

"No sir," Mirgant replied. She then added, "That's the navigator's job, sir." An audible snicker erupted from the group. Bairnson even caught one side of his lips curling up into a smile. Andorians were notorious for their quick witticisms, and this one was an obvious firecracker.

The laughter abruptly halted when Bairnson asked,

"And who is our navigator?"

"That would be me, sir!" a masculine voice called. Bairnson noticed a middle-aged, coffee-skinned Terran step forward. Bairnson asked the young man's name.

"Lieutenant Curtis Winston, sir," the man replied. Bairnson eyed the man with some sense of admiration.

"Didn't you serve under Captain Styles on the *McAuliffe*?" Bairnson queried.

"Yes, sir."

"Pulled the ship out of quite a few sticky spots, didn't you?"

"I can't take all the credit, sir," Winston replied.

Bairnson smiled proudly, he admired modesty almost as much as he admired honesty.

Bairnson extended his hand to Winston, "Proud to have you aboard."

Winston graciously accepted his captain's hand and shook it vigorously. Bairnson then turned about to face the group from the opposite end of the docking corridor. "And not just Winston," he began. "You all had to have had something special about you to receive a commission aboard this ship. I hold you all in the highest possible regard. I think we shall have a fine crew if you all are any example to go on."

Bairnson then turned to face the turbolift elevator.

Sunset rushed to join him at his side. As the doors parted, Bairnson whirled around to face the assembled mass once again. "Everyone report to duty stations," he commanded.

"We depart in less than five hours."

Bairnson and Sunset were joined by Mirgant and Winston as the turbolift doors closed. As the lift ascended to the *Enterprise's* bridge, the crew members assembled on the docking corridor eased as Johnson dismissed them to their duty stations.

* * *

Several hours later, Captain Jack Bairnson sat in his command chair on the bridge of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. The skeleton crew on the bridge carried out their duties in preparation for the ship's departure from spacedock.

Officers and other crew members had been coming aboard in spurts for the last several hours, gradually filling the crew compliment of the ship.

Several higher-ranking officers still had not yet boarded. What was keeping them? A delay getting to Antares 5? Shuttlecraft or transporter malfunctions?

Whatever the delays, they were soon to be rectified.

Bairnson turned his chair around as he heard the turbolift doors hiss open. Janet Sunset stepped onto

the bridge tapping a final set of characters into her information PADD.

"How's it going, Sunset?" he asked.

"Y'know, for this being their flagship," Sunset began, "the Federation sure is taking its sweet time sending its officers to us."

"More delays?"

"No. It's just that these officers apparently think that since they've landed the *Enterprise*, they can take as long as they want to get here. And that we'll wait."

"We really don't have much choice, Sunset."

Suddenly, Sunset heard the attention signal on the ship's communications console. She strode over to the console and picked up an earpiece which she listened to intently.

Bairnson couldn't hear to whom she was speaking to but it must have been good news.

"Finally!" she sighed with relief.

"What is it?" Bairnson wondered.

Sunset came down to his chair. "Our communications officer has just beamed aboard and is on her way to the bridge."

"Great," Bairnson stated. "Who is it?"

Sunset checked the information on her PADD.

"Her name's Lieutenant Saallak."

"Saallak?"

"Yeah, she's from Vulcan."

"A Vulcan communication's officer?" Bairnson pondered. "Well, it can't be much stranger than a Vulcan doctor." Bairnson stopped his sentence short as he heard the turbolift doors hiss open again. Standing in the open lift was an exquisite-looking woman. Long, flowing hair the color of the night sky and only slightly permed.

Eyebrows that swept upward from her dark, steely eyes, and of course, the exotic pointed ears. She wore a Starfleet uniform almost as well as Janet did.

"Lieutenant Saallak, I presume?" Bairnson queried.

"Permission to come aboard, sir?" Saallak asked in turn.

"Granted," Bairnson replied cheerfully. Saallak stepped onto the bridge and almost immediately took her post at the communications console. Bairnson shook his head, marveling at the characteristic aloofness. She had begun busying herself with her duties when Bairnson stood from his chair and marched up the three steps to the upper level of the bridge. He stood at her station towering above her chair as she sat intent on her duties.

"Welcome aboard, Lieutenant," Bairnson intoned.

Saallak glanced up from her station briefly, just barely acknowledging his presence. Bairnson turned his head towards Sunset who just shook her head at him. Would he never learn that Vulcans just naturally didn't care about courtesies?

"I'm curious about something, Lieutenant,"

Bairnson began again. "Why would a Vulcan choose to become a communications officer?" He stared at her awaiting a response. "I mean, Vulcans are generally well regarded as scientists, philosophers. Why communications for you, Lieutenant?"

Saallak didn't even look up from her work as she answered Bairnson's question, "Language is the root of all knowledge, sir. How can we be expected to understand alien races, and hence forth solve their problems, and ours, if we cannot communicate? This is why I am a communications specialist, sir."

Bairnson looked up from Saallak's station with an expression of dumbfoundedness across his features. Sunset only looked at Bairnson for moment before bowing her head into silent laughter. "Thank you for clearing that up, Lieutenant," was all Bairnson could say.

"Anytime, sir," Saallak replied.

Bairnson moved back towards the safety of his command chair while Sunset looked on in obvious amusement. He sat down once again and firmly placed his hands down on the armrests. At least here, he was in control. "Wonder what we can expect next?" Bairnson muttered to no one in particular.

"Sir," it was Saallak calling to him. He whirled around in his chair to face her. "I believe our chief medical officer has just arrived," Saallak reported. She then

listened as her earpiece informed her further. "He seems to be somewhat annoyed, sir."

"Oh?"

"Yes, he's demanding to see you in transporter room four."

"He's demand..." Bairnson's voice trailed off. He wondered who this guy was. Bairnson then rose from his seat and headed for the turbolift. As he stepped on, Sunset rushed to join him and together they descended to the lower level of transporter room four where an apparently irate officer awaited their arrival.

* * *

Captain Bairnson and Lieutenant Commander Sunset stepped off the turbolift and proceeded down the corridor towards transporter room four. Bairnson's mind was a muddle. Why should a newly commissioned chief of medicine be so upset as he is transported aboard his new starship? It didn't make any sense.

Finally, Bairnson and Sunset rounded the corner and entered transporter room four. There, the transporter chief stood by his console, relieved that someone in authority had finally arrived.

"Well," Bairnson began. "Where is this gentleman?"

"I'm right over here!" a scratchy voice called out.

Bairnson and Sunset whirled about to see a man in early fifties emerge from a far corner of the transporter room.

He had sandy brown hair, and a weathered face. He came up and stood face to face with Jack Bairnson, although he stood full five inches taller than the captain.

"I'm Captain Jack Bairnson, sir," he began cordially. "And you are..."

"Not a happy camper, Captain!" the man spat in a decidedly heavy Irish accent.

"Yes, I can see that. But do you have a name?"

"Of course I do!" the man hissed. "Doctor James Alistair Crispin!" Bairnson indicated to Sunset to look up the man on her PADD. She keyed in the appropriate information and waited several seconds for something to turn up. She then pressed it several more times shaking her head discouragingly.

"Sorry, sir," Sunset said. "I have no listing for a Dr. James Crispin."

"That's because, my dear girl," Crispin began, "Starfleet only gave me this so-called 'opportunity' at the last moment!"

"You say 'opportunity' as if to mean it's more of an 'inconvenience,'" Bairnson interjected.

"My, aren't you the sharp one!" Crispin snapped.

"Do you know who you're addressing?" Bairnson intoned with a hint of menace.

“Oh, I know very well who I’m addressing,”

Crispin replied. “And as far as I’m concerned, you and the whole bloody fleet can go and get stuffed!!”

Bairnson almost lashed out at this pompous, egocentric loudmouth who was insulting not only Bairnson’s command, but the entire Starfleet as well. If Sunset hadn’t restrained him, Bairnson would have probably knocked the guy on his egocentric ass! Instead Bairnson sucked air through his teeth as Crispin turned away from him, frustrated now beyond the point of tolerance.

“Why don’t you let me talk to him?” Sunset suggested as she led Bairnson away from Crispin.

“Why?” Bairnson quipped defensively.

“Because, I have a soft touch that at the moment you can’t seem to summon.”

Bairnson sighed defeated. “Alright, I suppose anything’s worth a try.” She led him out into the corridor.

He turned one last time before she re-entered the transporter room saying, “But if you can’t make any headway with him, get him off the ship!”

Sunset shook her and shoved Bairnson back out into the corridor. She then re-entered the transporter room and came up behind the disturbed doctor. “Hello,” she began pleasantly enough.

“Well,” Crispin replied, his back turned. “What is it you want?”

"To talk," Sunset intoned gently.

"I've nothing to say."

"I think you do," Sunset softly persisted.

"What are you? A shrink?"

"No, ship's chief of staff."

"Why should I tell you my problems?" Crispin said, his anger becoming more forced.

"I'm willing to listen," Sunset offered. She moved her head to try to look into the man's eyes. Crispin turned his head to face Sunset. His expression had become more sad than angry.

"It's just that..." Crispin began hesitantly, "...my tour on starships was about up. I was going to be discharged in three months from the *U.S.S. Armstrong*, with Captain Ludwig's highest commendation. Finally, Starfleet sends me what I think are my discharge papers..., turns out it's a new posting: chief medical officer on this ship."

Sunset was beginning to understand and feel for the man's unhappiness as he relayed his tale. Starfleet had apparently made a clerical error that, instead of sending this man into retirement, had sent him here where he would be forced to endure another prolonged space voyage. By the end of the story, Sunset had her arm sympathetically draped over Crispin's shoulder.

"...All I ever wanted," Crispin continued more softly.

"Was to have a quiet practice in the countryside of

Ireland. I'd finally built up enough credits to do it and now... nothing."

Sunset offered words of comfort to Dr. James Crispin. All through their talk, Captain Jack Bairnson had occasionally poked his head in and had caught key points of the conversation. He now stood leaning against the doorway of the transporter room and offered what words of comfort he could. "I'm sorry for what Starfleet's put you through, Doctor."

Crispin glanced up briefly at Bairnson. "Thanks... sir."

Bairnson came closer to Crispin. "Look, the reason certain officers were chosen to crew the *Enterprise*, was because they were the best in their respective fields."

Bairnson was clearly getting through to Crispin since he was looking intently into Bairnson's eyes.

"I can't guarantee anything, Doctor," Bairnson stated, "but if you serve on the *Enterprise* for at least this first mission, I'll talk to Starfleet about your retirement."

Crispin thought hard about the offer this young captain was making. He looked into Sunset eyes for some kind of advice. She simply smiled, but in that smile, Crispin found the advice he was looking for.

Doctor James Crispin rose to his feet and stood face to face with the captain. "Permission to come aboard, sir?"

Bairnson smiled and extended his hand. Crispin took Bairnson's hand in his and pumped vigorously. "Welcome aboard, Doctor Crispin," Bairnson said. Bairnson glanced at Sunset and found that she was smiling with approval.

* * *

Slightly more than a half-hour after Dr. James Crispin decided to remain aboard the *Enterprise*, at least for the time being, things began to fall into place for the new starship. Its personnel began arriving in waves of such massive sizes in condensed times, that Lieutenant Commander Sunset almost couldn't keep up. Eventually, the new crew members settled into their quarters and familiarized themselves with their duty stations.

Finally, the time had come for the ship's departure into the trackless void of space. Captain Jack Bairnson awaited comfortably in his command chair, quietly surveying the now-fully active bridge officers at their stations. It had all come down to this. All his years of training and waiting were about to be put to their utmost test. Bairnson felt his palms perspire slightly, but he took it as a good sign. It really wasn't all a dream.

"Captain," Bairnson heard Saallak call. He whirled around to face his Vulcan communications officer

once again. She was listening intently to a message being relayed over her earpiece.

“Starfleet Command reports that our ship’s first officer is about to transport aboard,” Saallak reported. She then removed the earpiece and added, “He’s Yarzonian, sir.”

Now that was interesting news. Bairnson had heard of the Yarzonians, but he didn’t know that there were any in Starfleet. Yarzon, a desolate, orange planet on the far edge of Federation space had only become a member of the Federation twenty years ago. It had not been an easy task.

The Yarzonians were a tenacious race of humanoids who, on their homeworld, had been divided into several thousand different tribes of nomads. The harsh desert conditions of the planet had made them an aggressive, at times selfish race of survivalists. They did not give their loyalties easily. It was probably because their women were the leaders of the tribes, and it was said that their women were more suspicious of outsiders than the Federation was of the Romulan Stellar Empire.

Their society was something of a gender-bender, so much so that most of the Federation’s members found them an eccentric race at best, and downright bizarre at worst. The males had shoulder-length black hair and although did most of the physical labor in their nomadic communities, they were the more

nurturing parents and performed much of the domestic work. The females had close-cropped white hair and did much of the administration and financial business of the planet.

And their eyes.

Bairnson didn't know if it was Yarzon's atmosphere or something inherently genetic, but for some reason their irises and sclera were each a distinctive shade of green. The sclera were lighter than the irises, and anyone who had ever met a Yarzonian reported that their eyes had an eerie effect on them. Something similar to a good painting whose eyes seem to follow an admirer as they pass it.

Well now one was coming aboard Bairnson's ship, as his first officer no less. He would probably be a valuable addition to the crew, but what kind of special problems would Bairnson run into with him? If there had been any in Starfleet, then Bairnson certainly had not heard of it, but one was coming aboard as first officer. A male, no less! Bairnson didn't have time to worry about it as the doors to the turbolift hissed open onto the bridge.

The Yarzonian male stepped off the turbolift and let the doors hiss closed behind him. He was a lot thinner and scrappier-looking than Bairnson had anticipated.

Bairnson immediately noticed the Yarzonian's peculiar eyes, but was caught somewhat off-guard by

his thin, upswept eyebrows. They were characteristically similar to the ones one might find on the face of a Vulcan. However, the smaller, downward-sloping lines which divided them into a sort of peak above the eyeballs themselves, gave the Yarzonian's appearance a much more devilish quality.

The Yarzonian's jet-black hair was well groomed, but it draped lazily down the back of his head only barely above his rear shoulder blades. Yarzonian females had protested that to cut a male's hair down to the regulation length which Starfleet required would be diminishing to their "air of strength and virility." Something like the story of Samson which Bairnson had heard in his youth.

Starfleet had eventually relented to this small, but vital, clause.

Captain Jack Bairnson rose from his seat as the bridge crew looked on. He stepped onto the upper platform towards the Yarzonian, his hand extended.

"Permission to come aboard?" the Yarzonian asked.

"Granted," Bairnson smiled. "Welcome to the *Enterprise* Mister....?"

"D'nadrY'Gar, sir," the Yarzonian replied. He graciously accepted the Captain's hand.

"Well Mister..., uh," the Captain couldn't quite get the hang of the Yarzonian's unusual name.

"If you wish, sir," the Yarzonian said. "You may address me as simply 'Y'Gar.'"

"Very well, Mr. Y'Gar," Bairnson nodded. "You may take your station."

Y'Gar bowed slightly and Lieutenant Commander Sunset led him to the small command station on the upper platform directly to the Captain's right. Captain Bairnson then returned to his command chair as Lieutenant Saallak informed him of an incoming transmission. Bairnson ordered her to put it through on audio.

"Spacedock Operations," the transmission began, "*Enterprise* is cleared for departure. Once you have cleared Spacedock, proceed to rendezvous with the transport vessel *MacFarlane* at coordinates 114 mark 285."

"Acknowledged, Spacedock," Bairnson replied.

"Safe journey, *Enterprise*," the female Spacedock operator wished. Bairnson motioned to Lieutenant Mirgant to prepare the engines for departure. From over at his station, Commander Y'Gar stood and came to the Captain's side.

"Sir," he began. "Permission to pilot the *Enterprise* out of Spacedock?"

Bairnson eyed his new first officer curiously.

Holding out the first letter for a moment, he replied, "No Mr. Y'Gar. I'd like to take the reins on this one."

Y'Gar again bowed slightly and silently returned to his station.

Bairnson then proceeded with the docking clearance routine.

"Clear all moorings," he intoned.

After no more than a few seconds, Mirgant replied,

"All moorings are cleared, sir."

"Maneuvering thrusters, helmsman."

"Maneuvering thrusters, on line and activated, sir," Mirgant replied.

Bairnson felt the slight, almost imperceptible stir as the *Enterprise* shifted into sluggish momentum. On the ship's main views creen, the image of the main doors of Spacedock moved into center screen from the port side.

When it stood in the direct center of the screen, Bairnson ordered Mirgant to maneuver the *Enterprise* ahead through the main hanger doors adding, "Try not to scratch the paint, Mirgant."

Though her back was turned, Bairnson could tell she was smiling.

* * *

The *Enterprise* slowly inched forward towards the main hanger doors. The snaillike movement was in part for practical reasons, to avoid scraping against the walls in the close confines of Spacedock, but it also had a touch of ceremony about it. A newly

commissioned ship exiting its Spacedock on its first mission was like watching a hero's homecoming parade. Although there was no ticker tape or marching bands, there was always a sort of silent fanfare from the other ships that were docked alongside the new one.

Bairnson would never know the awe that watching a new starship launching stirred in others until years later.

Especially a ship whose name was *Enterprise*. He never saw the faces that silently wished him and his crew well.

He would not know the kind of comradery that was shared among Starfleet officers at such events. At least, not now.

* * *

The *Enterprise* eased its way to the now opening doors. As their image grew larger on the bridge's view screen, Bairnson could now make out the blackness beyond. At first he found himself sucking in air, until he finally saw the tiny white pinpoints of light which speckled the darkness beyond the doors. Finally, all images of the interior of Spacedock disappeared, and all that surrounded the *Enterprise* now was the wide-open cosmos.

The ship maneuvered ever so slightly away from Spacedock. Its pace began to pick up a little as the dangers of accidentally bumping against the interior walls of Spacedock disappeared. They were now at a safe enough distance and position to really begin. "Course plotted: coordinates 114 mark 285," Lieutenant Winston reported.

"Impulse power, sir?" Y'Gar enquired.

Only Sunset noticed the slight smirk that Bairnson had on his face as he answered, "Warp 8, Mr. Mirgant."

Mirgant was beginning to like the way this human thought. "Aye sir. Warp 8!" she beamed.

* * *

Somewhere, in the vast reaches of space, high above the planet Antares 5, a starship inched forward slightly. Then with a sudden whoosh that, had sound been able to travel in space, would have been called the "warp heard 'round the universe," the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, NCC-1701-B disappeared into the warp space dimension in a tunnel of bright multi-colored light

* * *

The *Enterprise* proceeded at warp speed through the limitless bounds of space towards its destination. Mirgant had reported that it would take less than five

hours to reach the designated coordinates, so Bairnson decided to take the opportunity to review the crew manifesto which Lieutenant Commander Sunset had prepared for him.

He sat alone at the head chair of the briefing table in his new ready-room, silently going over the names and positions of his new crew. They were a fine lot all of them, and Bairnson really had no qualms about any member of the crew. With the possible exception of Dr. Crispin, each one of them had kicked, scraped, fought, and cried to whomever would listen to serve aboard the *Enterprise*. It made Jack wonder about how easily his commission had come.

Easy? Bairnson couldn't help but laugh inwardly at himself. Two years serving a number of duties aboard a variety of Starfleet vessels. Five years as first officer aboard the *Excelsior* facing the unknowns of the universe.

Leading away teams, making first contacts, facing hostile alien life.

Hostile alien life.

Omega Omicron 2.

No matter how good things were going for him or how well he felt, somehow Jack Bairnson could not get his final affair aboard the *Excelsior* out of his mind.

Flashbacks to the incident still plagued him in his sleep.

The mysterious attackers, who had they been? At times it seemed that Bairnson was close to seeing their faces but then, they would either fade from sight, or he would awaken with a start. The sweat beading off his body like raindrops in a summer storm.

"Sir?" a voice spoke to him. Bairnson revived from his reverie to see Y'Gar standing in the doorway of the briefing room, waiting for the captain to speak. For a second, Bairnson hoped that Hikaru Sulu would come out from behind the chair, but then he sat up and straightened himself.

"Yes Y'Gar. What is it?" Bairnson said clearing his throat.

"Are you quite alright, sir?" Y'Gar queried.

"Yes. Fine. Just, uh, going over the crew roster."

"We're on course to our rendezvous with the *MacFarlane*, e.t.a: 1 hour 45 minutes. I've instructed that the crew is to carry on with normal ship's functions."

"That's fine," Bairnson replied. He noticed Y'Gar turn away as if to exit and called after him.

"Mister Y'Gar!"

Y'Gar slowly turned to face him once again. For some reason, no matter what mood Y'Gar might have been in, his face made him appear as though he were angry about something. "Please," Bairnson smiled indicating a chair. "Sit down a moment."

Y'Gar slowly and silently complied, taking the seat at the opposite end of the table from Bairnson. Y'Gar waited silently for Bairnson to begin speaking. When he did not, Y'Gar decided to begin the conversation, "What can I do for you, sir?"

"Nothing," Bairnson smiled. "I just wanted to sit down and have a simple conversation. I've had one with every one of the bridge crew except you."

"Sir, if it's all the same to you, I'm not much of a conversationalist."

"Oh come on! I'm no different from anyone else on the ship. I bleed like they do, maybe not the same color, but I do. I play games, I read, I laugh. And like everyone else aboard, I want to know more about you." Bairnson eagerly awaited the Yarzonian's reply.

"Not much to tell, really," it came after a few seconds.

"Not much to tell?" Bairnson sat back in surprise.

"A Yarzonian, a male one at that, ends up first officer on the Federation's newest flagship? You must be one hell of an officer."

"If I really were one 'hell of an officer,' as you put it, why am I not in command of this flagship?"

Bairnson sat back in his chair surprised once again.

Twice in one day? This had to be some kind of a record.

"What do you mean by that?" Bairnson queried softly.

"I mean, sir," Y'Gar began through clenched teeth,

“that the bureaucratic mentality of the Federation boggles the mind.” Y’Gar then rose from his chair and began pacing the room. “The first Yarzonian to enter Starfleet Academy and graduate magna cum laude. A male Yarzonian as you pointed out. And where do they put me?”

Only first officer aboard an untried starship with an untested captain.”

Bairnson was surprised at how blunt and unrelenting this man was. He might have tried to remind Y’Gar of his position but he was too interested in what the young officer had to say. “Oh, I do know of your immaculate record, but mine is just as good, if not better!”

“You are young, Y’Gar. Maybe you should think about that. When you consider your accomplishments thus far, there are many officers I know who would give their eye tooth to be in the position that you’re in,” Bairnson stated calmly.

“Don’t patronize me like you did Dr. Crispin, sir! I know myself and I know my skills! The only reason that you’re captain of this ship is because you’re Terran!”

Bairnson was pensive a moment. “I was under the impression that Yarzonians have a strict code of loyalty.

Haven’t you given your loyalties to the Federation and to Starfleet?”

“Yes,” Y’Gar stated. He then added menacingly, “But I haven’t given them to you.”

Bairnson noticed that Y’Gar was face to face with him, staring right through him it seemed with those strange eyes. Bairnson rose slowly and deliberately from his seat, never breaking from Y’Gar’s intent gaze. Y’Gar was a good two inches taller than Bairnson and seemed confident that even though he was thinner than the stockier captain, he could easily take him out in a fist fight.

“Remember who you’re addressing, Commander,” Bairnson hissed.

If Y’Gar had felt he had crossed the line, he never showed it on his face. “Sorry, ‘sir’,” he hissed back sarcastically. “Am I dismissed, now?”

Bairnson nodded saying nothing. Y’Gar then turned and began to exit. Before he did, he turned around and faced the captain once more. “I’m going to be watching every move that you make,” he stated flatly. “That is part of your duty, Y’Gar,” Bairnson replied calmly. As Y’Gar turned to exit again, Bairnson added, “And don’t forget that I will be watching you.”

Y’Gar never faced Bairnson during his last statement but he did not finally leave until a few seconds after the message sank in.

When the doors hissed shut again, Bairnson plopped down into his chair and exhaled heavily. *Another*

one? he thought. How many other people were there who didn't want to be aboard his ship?

PART TWO:

MISSION TO ZECHARIAH

CHAPTER FOUR

At coordinates 114, mark 285 was an uninhabited and seldom-visited rocky planetoid. It had no mineral wealth, it was too small and its landscape too rough to support a colony. In fact it was a wonder to several cartographers that Starfleet even bothered to acknowledge the planetoid's existence. But then, there's was not to reason why...

As the *Enterprise* slowed to impulse power for the approach to the planetoid, Bairnson had Mirgant put a visual of it on the main view screen. The odd, slightly egg-shaped rock appeared, and it looked to Bairnson like a small corner of Hell. The brown soil, the crater-pitted surface, all that was missing was a little guy in red with horns and a pitchfork.

Bairnson shook his head to himself. A pity those

“Genesis” terraforming experiments a few decades ago weren’t more successful, he thought. Wonder what they might have done to a pitiful-looking slag heap like this.

“Any sign of the *MacFarlane*, Winston?” Bairnson queried.

Winston checked his console. “Negative, Captain. Not a sausage.”

Bairnson paced down to the helm position. He observed the console readings over Winston’s shoulder.

“They didn’t beam down to the planetoid did they?” Bairnson quizzed.

“It’s not likely sir,” Mirgant replied. “The atmosphere is too thin to support humanoid life forms.”

“Who’s to say they’re humanoid, Lieutenant?” This came from Y’Gar at his station.

“Valid point, Y’Gar,” Bairnson countered. “But the *MacFarlane* has been assigned to carry ambassadors from the core of the Federation, and that means humanoids.”

Y’Gar bowed slightly to the logic of the Captain’s statement. Even Saallak had to admit that it made perfect sense.

“Captain?” Saallak called to Bairnson. Bairnson turned to face his communications officer. She was listening intently to her earpiece and when it appeared that the message had ended she

continued. "*U.S.S. MacFarlane* signaling that they're approaching the planetoid."

"There you go," Bairnson stated turning to his chair. "Ambassadors are never on time." Mirgant beamed to herself as Bairnson resumed his position. She then put an image of the *MacFarlane* approaching the planetoid up on the view screen, anticipating Bairnson's next command.

The ship was slightly smaller than the *Enterprise* and not as graceful or fluid of lines. Transport vessels weren't as fast as full starships but they could keep pace and defend themselves with the best of them. Their missions being mostly diplomatic in nature they had no need of heavy weaponry or great velocities. If problems ever arose, they often depended upon the starships to haul their butts out of trouble. Bureaucrats, go figure.

"Incoming message from the *MacFarlane*,"

Saallak reported. Bairnson ordered a visual, and within seconds the face of a man with sandy blonde hair who appeared to be in his late twenties flicked onto the screen.

Dressed in the standard neutral white overcoat, he addressed Bairnson first, "On behalf of the President and all the representative planets of the Federation, I'd like to extend my greetings and heartiest congratulations, to you Captain Bairnson!"

Bairnson rose from his seat smiling in both joy and surprise. "Geoff! Geoffrey Riggs, well fancy bumping into you in this neck of the galaxy."

Riggs acknowledged Bairnson's welcome graciously. "It's no coincidence Captain, I assure you. As a matter of fact I may have had a hand in picking you for this assignment."

"What do you mean? And what's with all the cloak-and-dagger stuff anyway?"

"Cloak and dagger? Jack, that went out with cryogenic life preservation!" Riggs chuckled.

"So I'm old fashioned. Is that a crime?"

"No, not really. Listen we're beaming over in a half-hour, assemble your line officers in your briefing lounge. I'll tell you what it's all about then." The image on the view screen then returned to that of the *MacFarlane* now in orbit above the planetoid. Bairnson sat back down in his chair, shaking his head in amazement.

The turbolift elevator doors hissed open and Janet Sunset stepped onto the bridge and down to the side of Bairnson's chair. She noticed his curious chuckling and inquired as to the source of the joke. "You wouldn't believe it, Janet. Guess who's on that ship over there."

"Who?"

"Geoffrey Riggs, you remember him?"

Sunset rolled her eyes up into head. "Him? What the hell's he doing over there?"

"Beats me. Guess he's a diplomat or something now."

"He never struck me as the diplomatic type."

"Well, people change. Anyway, he's beaming over here in a half-hour. Call a meeting of the line officers for that time in the briefing lounge."

* * *

One half hour later the line officers of the *Enterprise* had assembled in the ship's briefing lounge. All awaited the arrival of the Captain and First Officer escorting their arriving dignitary from the transporter room. Within moments, the doors hissed open and through the now-open portal stepped Bairnson, Riggs, and Y'Gar. Bairnson surveyed the assembled officers briefly and requested them to be seated.

Bairnson then introduced the new arrival. "This is Federation Special Representative Riggs. He is here to brief us on our assignment. Please grant him your closest attention."

Riggs moved about the room in an almost fluid fashion as he addressed the assembled personnel. "For several years now, the Federation has been involved in lengthy negotiations concerning the admission of the planet Zechariah.

"As you may or may not know, Zechariah is populated by a race of warriors. Arrogant and proud, they have

for years resisted joining the Federation. However, several months ago, a breakthrough came when a new ruler came to power.”

As the assembled mass’ eyes followed him, Riggs strode over to the far wall of the briefing lounge where a view screen was present. He pressed one of the control pads and the image of a beautiful young woman appeared.

Many of the male crew officers’ eyebrows rose in fascination. She was bewitching. In many ways she resembled that prized painting from Earth, the Mona Lisa, with her long black hair and lack of eyebrows.

Riggs continued. “Princess Zokara. She may be the last member of the royal family to ever rule the planet.” Riggs then turned to face the officers again.

“Unlike her predecessor, Princess Zokara sees the possible benefits that could come from an alliance with the Federation. Therefore she has invited a delegation from the Federation to come to Zechariah and finalize the proposal.”

“Representative,” a voice broke through. All eyes turned to Y’Gar. “I have studied the Zecharian society and find it difficult to understand this sudden turnabout in their attitude towards the Federation.”

“In what way, Commander?” Riggs queried.

“The Zecharians are a noble, proud, indeed self-sufficient race. Given time, they could build a technological society which would rival our own. Why

would they suddenly decide that they wish to join the Federation?”

Riggs pondered the Yarzonian's words moment.

He nibbled his own lip slightly before offering an answer,

“Is everyone in this room familiar with Devorax?”

At the mention of the name, the tension level of the room rose considerably. “Devorax,” as Riggs had called him, was the name of a mysterious intergalactic terrorist who for the past several months had been giving the Federation a considerable amount of trouble. Armed with only a single, powerful warship, which according to all reports was dubbed the *Erebus*, Devorax had attacked a number of Federation planets. As far as anyone could tell, his raids had caused minimal damage and loss of life. His crimes were severe but always as the Federation was about to capture and unmask the mystery man, he would disappear as though into thin air. Some experts speculated that he had some kind of cloaking device on board his ship; some of the more superstitious members of the Federation claimed that he was the devil himself whose swift attacks offered no mercy to his victims. In any case, the Federation could not capture the mysterious and elusive terrorist and now it seemed they believed that he might be involved in some way with Zechariah.

Riggs continued. "Over the past several months, Zechariah has reported that they have been experiencing a series of swift and deadly attacks from space. The patterns and ferocity of the attacks match Devorax's M.O. almost exactly."

"I haven't heard anything about this," Bairnson protested.

"We haven't made the information publically available yet. We wanted to be absolutely certain it was Devorax before we intervened."

"Representative," Y'Gar intoned. "The Zecharians are above all a race of warriors. Surely they are capable of defending themselves against a single terrorist."

"They are," Riggs countered. "But recently Devorax's attacks have become much more brutal and merciless. His equipment has gone beyond what any expert had predicted that he could possibly possess." Riggs then paused moment before continuing.

"Devorax's last attack was responsible for the death of King Kyras, former ruler of the planet and Zokara's father.

That is why she has asked the Federation for its help."

"So, if I'm reading you right," Bairnson stated.

"Not only does the Federation get the opportunity to admit a new member, but it also gets to put an end to the actions of a known terrorist."

"Precisely!" Riggs confirmed. "Two birds with one stone. That's why the President specifically requested the *Enterprise* to accompany him on the mission to Zechariah."

For the second time in only a few moments, Riggs had managed to shock the assembled officers of the Federation's newest flagship. "The President is on the *MacFarlane*?" Doctor Crispin asked with a start.

"Yes," Riggs stated flatly. "Such is the strength of his conviction to see Zechariah become a member of the Federation."

"Representative, with all due respect," Bairnson rose. "The *Enterprise* has only just been commissioned and launched from Spacedock. The crew hasn't had time to adjust, everything's still brand new."

Riggs smiled slightly. "Captain, you have assembled on board the finest officers in Starfleet. Every one a credit to their positions and duty in the finest tradition."

"Sir, we're just not ready. There is still much that needs to be worked out."

"You'll work it out on the way to Zechariah."

Bairnson turned away from Riggs and paced to the rear of the room. Sunset rose to her feet. She knew this side of Jack Bairnson all too well. The uncertainty eating away at him like a corrosive on a piece of metal. Though he blanked his face rather well, Sunset still feared that he might appear like a frightened child

heading to a corner of the room to huddle alone for safety from the rest of the outside world.

Sunset might have moved towards Bairnson to grant him a guiding hand had Riggs not already done so.

He addressed Bairnson in hushed tones. "Look Jack, I know it's not exactly a confidence-inspiring situation for your first command. Hell, I even told the President so, but he insisted upon the *Enterprise*. Said something about the legend and the awe the name inspired. I'm not asking you to be a James Kirk here, I'm just hoping that you'll do the best you can."

The words were from the heart and Jack Bairnson could feel their impact all the way to his toes. Riggs had said what Bairnson had wanted and needed to hear. He imagined that Captain Sulu might have spoken the exact same words to him had he been standing in the room.

Bairnson whirled around to face his assembled officers with a renewed confidence that Sunset could detect immediately from the wide grin which had found its way across Bairnson's lips. He came forward to the briefing table and stood over the communications PADD in the glass top.

He pressed one of the panel's buttons and spoke into the air. "Attention all hands, this is the Captain. Our destination is the planet Zechariah..." Bairnson then continued on with a brief summary of the ship's duty, adding at the end, "...Like you, I feel the impact that

this duty will have on us all. But I believe that with a crew such as ours and ship with a name that has inspired a legend, we will be successful.”

Bairnson then cut off his speech and contacted the bridge.

“Mirgant here, sir.”

“Plot course to Zechariah. Warp factor five,”

Bairnson ordered.

“Aye, sir.”

Bairnson smiled at his now-cheering assembly but all he noticed were Sunset’s exquisite eyes, one of which was closed in an affectionate wink aimed at him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Some time after the historic meeting in the briefing lounge, Captain Jack Bairnson strode into the spacious relaxation area which had been built on the *Enterprise’s* lower level. He noticed the other assembled off-duty officers, each enjoying a particular activity. A female ensign was beating a Xux at three dimensional chess.

Bairnson detected the annoyed officers insectoid chirrups of protest. At another end, two officers

practiced an ancient target which Doctor Crispin had insisted be put in the relaxation lounge. What had he called it? *Darts*, that was it!

Then from across the lounge, he heard a sultry female voice call to him. "Hi sailor. Buy a lady a drink?"

Bairnson turned to see Janet Sunset lounging quietly at a table her hands resting seductively on her chin.

Bairnson strode towards her noticing that she was wearing his favorite off-duty outfit: a red, low-cut, V-neck dress that he had bought her on shore leave once on Delta. Ah, Delta. Now there was a society who really knew how to party. Bairnson sat casually across the table from his lovely fiancée. "Heard you were back in town. So I thought I'd stop over and see if there was any chance of you an' me getting together," Janet said.

Bairnson chuckled. "Good Lord, have been watching Marlene Dietrich movies again?"

"Lauren Bacall," she smiled.

Bairnson sighed somewhat deeply and called over to the barkeep for two old-style Earth ales. He then returned to Janet's playful gaze. Damn! he thought, what a woman. So professional on duty and so sensual off! What had he ever done to deserve her? The barkeep then brought over to the couple the drinks they had ordered.

Jack passed one tall glass to Janet and kept the second.

Janet playfully rubbed her finger across the rim of the sweating glass. "You know," she began. "They say that if you rub the rim of a moist glass correctly, you can make it sing."

"Yes," Bairnson sighed. "But I don't think whoever found that out, meant glasses produced by a replicator."

Janet sniggered to herself. "No. Maybe not. Still, it's always worth a try." There was another thing Jack admired about Janet: her eternal optimism. She could turn something as mundane as maintenance into the most enjoyable experience that Bairnson could think of outside of sex. He reached his hand across the table and lightly stroked his palm along Janet's soft cheek. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation. Jack was about to lean across the table to kiss her when the sound of someone clearing their throat stopped them.

"Oh, sorry. Not interrupting anything I hope?"

Janet plopped back into her seat rolling her eyes.

"Not at all, Geoff. Sit down."

Geoffrey Riggs cheerfully took a seat at the lounge next to Bairnson. He smiled at Jack's embarrassment and Janet's sarcastic rage. "You two never could keep your hands off one another," Riggs commented.

He then leaned jokingly into Bairnson, "But Jack, you're a captain now.

You gotta watch yourself. Fraternizing with lower-ranking females could look pretty awkward to the rest of the crew."

Bairnson composed himself. "I think my crew can cope with any situation that may arise, thank you very much. You said yourself that they were the best in Starfleet."

Riggs laughed at the good-natured ribbing. "So I did, so I did."

Janet rolled her eyes. "What are you doing here Geoff?"

"Well, there's not much of a relaxation area aboard the *MacFarlane*, so I thought I'd take the opportunity of using my off-duty hours to see what the one on the Federation's new flagship was like."

"And annoy the ship's captain and chief of staff in the process?"

"No, that was a bonus!" Riggs laughed.

"Speaking of ships' captains," Bairnson intervened.

"What happened to you Geoff? We were both training to become starship captains at the Academy. What happened to you?"

Geoff sighed somewhat off-handedly. "Ah well, things happen you know. Situations arise, decisions are made and... well, I never got the chance to become a captain."

“So instead you went to work for the President?”

Janet queried.

“No, not exactly. Although that’s where I ended up. No I started off on starbases, worked my way up to diplomat, and before you know it, here I am! Special Representative of the President.”

Bairnson leaned into Riggs confidentially. “What does the President think, Geoff?”

Riggs gnawed on the question for a moment before replying, “He has high hopes for the admission of Zechariah. And the end of this Devorax.”

“Yes,” Bairnson interrupted, “but what does he think of us? The crew and everything.”

“Jack,” Riggs put his arm around Bairnson’s shoulders. “I’ve already told you. This is the *Enterprise*.

You have a reputation to live up to. If the President didn’t have confidence in you or your crew, you wouldn’t’ve been put on board her.” Bairnson could not help but swell with pride at his friend’s statement. Even Janet was beginning to forgive Riggs for interrupting their evening.

Suddenly a disembodied voice echoed through the expansive lounge. “Captain Bairnson, please report to the Bridge.” The voice repeated its message as Bairnson rose from his seat.

“Sorry to cut the evening short,” Bairnson said.

“But it sounds like Y’Gar’s worried about something.”

"I'll come with you if it's okay, Jack," Riggs stated. Bairnson nodded and then turned to Janet enquiring if she too was coming. She shook her head and told Jack that she would see him later. She then glided out of the lounge, the long skirt of her gown flowing behind her. As the doors hissed behind her, Riggs noticed, "You're sweating Jack," he snickered.

* * *

Jack Bairnson and Geoffrey Riggs stepped off the turbolift onto the main bridge. The room was a-bustle with activity.

Bairnson strode over to his command chair in which Y'Gar was still seated. Bairnson noticed the peculiar green-on-green eyes glance back at him. "What's going on, Y'Gar?" Bairnson asked.

"It seems we have a bit of puzzle, Captain," Y'Gar replied. "Lieutenant Mirgant, would you care to explain?"

Bairnson stepped down to his Andorian helmsman, who whirled around in her chair to address her commanding officer.

"Sir, I've been picking up a faint echo on our long-range sensors." Mirgant reported.

"An echo?" Bairnson queried.

"Yes sir. Faint, and at the extreme edge of our sensors' range."

Bairnson whirled about and strode back to beside his command chair. "Let's see it. Lieutenant, put up a tactical display on the main screen."

"Aye, sir," Mirgant replied. She then touched a few of the colored buttons on her console pad and the image on the bridge's main viewing screen altered from a forward view of a fast-moving starfield to a computer-generated graph displaying the coordinates of the sector of space which the *Enterprise* currently occupied. To Bairnson's surprise, there was nothing on the display.

Bairnson glanced quickly at Y'Gar and then at Riggs before saying, "I don't see anything Lieutenant."

"The image comes and goes, sir," Mirgant replied.

"It's there one minute and then it's gone but it is fairly regular." Just as Mirgant finished her sentence, a dark spot flashed in the top-left corner of the display. It was there only a second, and then it was gone.

Bairnson furrowed his eyebrows in thought. "It's not the *MacFarlane* is it?"

"Negative sir," Mirgant replied. "The *MacFarlane* is keeping pace with us."

"Y'Gar," Bairnson then began. "Any possibility that it could be an asteroid?"

"Yes sir," Y'Gar replied offhandedly. "A slim one.

It would have to be extremely magnetic for it to have kept up with us for a half hour. However, it is largely an improbability."

“What about a dust cloud echo?”

“Again, highly improbable, sir.” Y’Gar replied. Bairnson then looked his first officer in the eye.

“You think it’s another ship don’t you?”

Y’Gar Rose from the command chair and stood nose to nose with his captain. “That would be the only reasonable assumption one would make, Captain.” Y’Gar then strode over to another console on the rear wall of the bridge.

Bairnson took his place in the command chair.

Glancing back at Y’Gar he then stated, “Alright commander, let’s test your theory. Helm, bring us out of warp. Slow to impulse power. Let’s see if we can get a clearer image of this object.” Mirgant touched another series of colored buttons. All those present on the bridge felt the ship slow from warp to impulse drive.

Moments passed as each member of the bridge crew eagerly awaited the revelation of the mysterious object’s identity. Bairnson sat calmly in his command chair, a thousand thoughts racing through his mind at velocities greater than the ship’s warp engines could ever achieve. He glanced up briefly at Riggs, who stood to the right of his command seat, and then turned his attentions forward. “Lieutenant Mirgant,” Bairnson began. “Has the object closed to within visual range yet?”

“Nearly sir,” came her crisp reply.

Bairnson then turned to Riggs. "Representative, perhaps you should return to your own ship while they're still within transporter range."

"Alright," Riggs hesitantly replied. He then turned away from Bairnson's chair and strode towards the turbolift doors. As they hissed open Riggs turned back to Bairnson. "Good luck, Jack."

Bairnson quickly glanced in acknowledgement of his old friend's wishes and watch as the lift doors concealed him.

"Captain." Bairnson turned back when Mirgant called him. "The object is now within visual range," she reported.

Bairnson took his seat once again. "Alright, let's see it Lieutenant. Rear view." The image on the main viewing screen immediately changed from the empty, steady starfield to the star field that lay directly astern of the *Enterprise*. In the center of the screen was an indefinable black mass. Bairnson's expression turned quizzical. "Magnify," he ordered.

Once again the image changed, and this time the object was more clearly defined. A sleek, blue, almost black starcruiser sat in the center of the viewing screen surrounded on all sides by the pinpoint light of the stars.

Bairnson studied the ship's lean configuration. An elongated wedge with two levels rising on top of the length of its fuselage. An ominous-looking tower rose

from the top middle of the second level. The ship was elegant in its design but there was something odd about it.

Something which Bairnson could not quite put his finger on. "Power readout," he called for.

Y'Gar glanced up from his console, "Negative power emanations from the vessel, sir." That was it exactly: so elegant and yet it appeared to be dead.

Bairnson then turned to Saallak.

"Try hailing them, Lieutenant," he said. Saallak acknowledged and turned to her console in an effort to contact the alien ship. While she carried out her duty, Bairnson turned back to Y'Gar. "Anything on the configuration of the vessel?"

Y'Gar turned once again from his station. "The actual configuration itself is not listed in the computer's data banks. However, it has come up with many close approximations. I would therefore surmise, that the design is an amalgamation of those vessels."

"No response from the vessel on any frequency, Captain," Saallak reported.

Bairnson returned his attention to the screen, staring at it intently as he sat back in his chair. He shook his head dumbfounded.

"What's it doing out here?"

"Could be adrift, sir," Curtis Winston surmised.

"And tailing us for a half hour, Lieutenant?" Y'Gar snapped.

Bairnson shot an annoyed glance in the direction of his adamant Executive Officer. "It's possible," he stated plainly. "If it got caught in the backwash from our warp engines. That would have made it appear to have been following us like a shadow. Wouldn't you agree, Commander?"

Y'Gar cast his gaze away from Bairnson's. "As you say, sir," he acknowledged softly. Bairnson returned his gaze to the screen.

"It may have been in a battle and set adrift," Winston further offered.

"Any signs of life?" queried Bairnson.

Y'Gar glanced at the readings coming in on his console before turning back to Bairnson. "The readings are indeterminate, sir," he reported.

"Battle damage?" Bairnson further inquired.

Y'Gar shook his head. "Unable to determine from this distance, sir." Once again Bairnson looked to the screen lost in thought. He sat alone in his mind for merely a moment, pondering his next move like a chess master.

Finally, he resolutely announced, "Mirgant, full astern, half-impulse power. Let's get a better look at this vessel."

"Aye sir," Mirgant replied curtly and set the coordinates on her console. Bairnson felt the ship slowly turn about to face the mysterious alien vessel. He then felt a slight jolt as the *Enterprise* inched

forward; the image on the viewer growing larger as each second ticked slowly away. He glanced quickly about him noticing the reactions of his bridge crew to the ominous image slowly invading the picture frame on the viewer.

Y'Gar once again looked up from his console to report. "Sensors are detecting no signs of recent battle damage. Indications are..."

Bairnson whirled his chair around to notice Y'Gar quickly move back to his console as a warning light flashed on it. Y'Gar made a series of swift checks before addressing the Captain again.

"Captain!" he said with a start. "Power readout quickly building on the alien vessel!" Bairnson turned back to the screen where he noticed that several lights began quickly dotting the length of the alien vessel.

Bairnson ordered a yellow alert, and the crew responded appropriately. Within seconds the alien ship's full body was dotted by glowing yellow lights.

"Saallak, hail them again!" Bairnson quickly commanded.

"No response, Captain," she replied almost immediately, her calm voice almost slightly annoying Bairnson. Bairnson turned back to the screen and noticed two red lights flaring up from either side of the wedge-shaped ship. Too late Bairnson realized what they were.

"Raise shields!" he shouted as the *Enterprise* rocked and buckled from a double photon torpedo hit.

Standing bridge personnel were sent flying to the ground from the force of the blast. Bairnson himself only just managed to keep his seat as the alien vessel let loose a second barrage of photon torpedos. This time the blast which rocked the mighty Federation vessel was less severe. Bairnson tapped a comm panel on the arm of his chair.

"Engineering! Johnson did we get those shields up?"

It was a brief second before Bairnson heard Johnson's report. "Aye, sir. Shields raised and holding at 85% power."

Bairnson repositioned himself in his chair. "Right," he commented under his breath. "If that's the way we're gonna play it. Weapons crew, prepare to return fire."

"Captain!" Bairnson heard Mirgant calling. "The vessel's turning." She paused a moment as her instruments relayed the information to her panel. "It's heading away from us, sir," she announced.

"Course?"

The next voice Bairnson heard was Winston's.

"Course: 176 Mark: 32. It's on an intercept course with the *MacFarlane*. Speed: Warp 9."

"Warp 9?" Bairnson gasped. "No ship can sustain that speed for very long."

"On their present course sir, they won't need to,"

Y'Gar stated. "They'll intercept the *MacFarlane* in less than two minutes."

"Course to intercept!" Bairnson barked. "Try to match his speed." Bairnson then heard the comm panel on his chair beep an attention signal. He answered to find Johnson's voice on the other end.

"Captain, one of the torpedoes hit us in main engineering," Johnson gravely reported. "We got to work repairing it immediately, but I'm afraid the best speed I can give you now is Warp 6."

Bairnson hissed a heavy breath through his clenched teeth. "Very well, Mr. Johnson," Bairnson reluctantly replied. He then switched the comm panel's voice channel. "Weapons crew, continuous rapid fire on photon torpedoes. Target as best you can." Bairnson sat back in his chair wiping the sweat off his palm with the padded arm rest of the chair.

* * *

The next two minutes passed like an eternity as the *Enterprise* attempted to keep pace with the alien vessel.

Johnson had managed to coax the engines into hitting Warp 7.5, but even so, the alien ship would still be the first to intercept the *MacFarlane*. Bairnson had hailed the President's ship advising him of the situation. He had said that they would do their best to

come to the President's aid, but in his heart, Bairnson was filled with uncertainty.

It was just as the alien vessel was within firing range of the *MacFarlane* that a single, horrifying thought raced through Bairnson's mind: Omega Omicron 2. Why now? Why should the memory of that failed mission to a doomed colony come back to haunt him now? Perhaps because he was experiencing the same feeling of utter hopelessness he had felt when he realized that the planet was under attack. But perhaps it was something else.

Something strangely familiar to him that permeated from the past to the current crisis. To the current situation.

The *Enterprise* kept up a constant photon torpedo barrage against the alien vessel, but because of their speed, the torpedoes were having great difficulty hitting their mark. The *MacFarlane's* minimal shields and phaser power were hardly a match for the ominous, almost-black warship, but it was still putting up a valiant fight.

Finally, Bairnson heard Winston report that the *Enterprise* had reached the battle coordinates. Bairnson felt a sudden rush course through his body. Maybe, just maybe there was a chance they could help. "Target the alien," Bairnson ordered. Mirgant reported the targeting procedure initiated. The alien

vessel was targeted almost instantaneously. Bairnson ordered the weapons crew to fire.

The *Enterprise's* first barrage of photon torpedoes hit the alien vessel in its port, aft side. A huge explosion blossomed upward from the now-damaged area. The alien vessel listed slightly from the impact of the blast. Bairnson then ordered a second barrage, which struck the now exposed underside of the alien ship. The alien had maneuvered it's bow nose-to-nose with the *Enterprise*, and let loose a photon torpedo barrage of its own. The torpedos found their mark on the starboard side of the ship's main saucer.

The *Enterprise* listed severely from the force of the blast. On the bridge, Captain Bairnson had just managed to crawl back into his chair and ordered Mirgant to stabilize the ship. Operating at a slight angle, Mirgant managed to stop the ship's dangerous listing. Bairnson heaved a sigh of relief and requested a damage report.

"Life support failures on decks 23, 24, and 25," Saallak calmly stated. "Emergency evacuation procedures have been initiated."

"Captain," Y'Gar announced. "We have damage registered in one of the photon torpedo bays. Bay two is still operational."

"Order bay two to keep up their fire," Bairnson commanded. "We've got to get that ship!" Bairnson then heard his comm panel beep to attention.

Bairnson answered to find Johnson on the other end with the news that he most wanted not to hear.

"Our energy reserves are down to only 45%, Captain," Johnson reported. "If we keep this up, they'll be down to zero in less than fifteen minutes."

Bairnson cursed under his breath. He then told Johnson, "Keep that power coming Johnson. We need every bit of it."

Y'Gar stepped to the Captain's side. "With all due respect, sir, we're not going to be much help to the *MacFarlane* if we're disabled ourselves."

Bairnson slowly turned to face his first officer, a look of sheer disbelief on his face. "Are you suggesting that we withdraw? And leave the *MacFarlane* to the mercy, however small it may be, of that ship?!"

Y'Gar's reply was interrupted by Mirgant's call, "Captain!" Bairnson faced the screen where what Mirgant was about to report only became too obvious. "The alien's registered a hit on the *MacFarlane*."

"Location?" Bairnson queried.

"Main engineering," Mirgant grimly replied adding, "the warp coil, sir."

"My God," muttered Bairnson as his horrified face watched the tiny eruptions of flame building up from the *MacFarlane*'s main engineering section. Higher the flares rose as the explosion became more violent. The *Enterprise* barely registered the alien's retreat when the *MacFarlane* blew; painting the sky with an

eerie orangish red light that blotted out all the stars on the viewing screen for several interminably long seconds. Finally, the light faded and the screen was filled once again with the standard black field dotted by white pinpoint lights.

Y'Gar turned away from his captain who could only stare straight ahead at the emptiness which filled the screen.

CHAPTER SIX

Several hours later, the *Enterprise* remained suspended in space. Not moving from the coordinates it had gone into to fight the desperate battle with now-departed alien vessel.

Repairs continued on the battle-damaged *Enterprise*, but at an amazingly slow pace. Jack Bairnson didn't see much point in rushing the job now.

Bairnson was strolling along the corridor towards sickbay where he had been called by Doctor Crispin. The doors parted and Bairnson entered the medical bay to find every diagnostic bed occupied by an injured crewman being treated by a medical technician or physician. The carnage wasn't as terrible as on that day when Bairnson had awakened

from the incident on Omega Omicron 2, but the scene saddened him nonetheless.

He casually examined each diagnostic bed's occupant. Riggs had called them "Starfleet's Finest." It just proved how difficult it was living up to a legend when your crew bleeds.

Riggs.

That was also gnawing away at Bairnson's insides like a ravenous wolf with a freshly-killed piece of meat.

He had sent Riggs back to the *MacFarlane*, and to his death. Admittedly, Bairnson and Riggs were never in reality all that close, but still to have someone you know die so horribly was not an easy thing to cope with. It was even more difficult for Bairnson, knowing that he was responsible for sending Riggs to his grave, along with the President and whatever crew was on the *MacFarlane* at the time.

Bairnson entered the area of the medical bay that had been sectioned off as Doctor James Crispin's office.

He found the old weathered Irishman seated behind his desk. His arms rested on the table with his head on top of them. Bairnson addressed the Doctor who slowly raised his head until he met his Captain's eyes.

"You still wonder why I was looking forward to retirement?" Crispin asked. Bairnson didn't answer. He knew the Doctor was speaking rhetorically, and at

the moment, Bairnson couldn't help but agree with him.

"Actually," the Doctor continued, rising from his desk, "considering the heavy battle damage we received, we were lucky to have so few casualties but..." The Doctor let out a sigh. "...It never makes it any easier." Bairnson listened intently. He held a great deal of respect for physicians, no matter how crotchety.

Physicians held the highest regard for life in the universe, perhaps even greater than the Federation. Many doctors had been known to have put the Hippocratic Oath before the Prime Directive; a conundrum that still troubled the Federation even now and probably would into the future as well.

"Why did you call me down here, Doctor?"

Bairnson finally asked.

Crispin halted a moment to look his Captain in the eye. "One of my patients was asking for you."

Crispin led Bairnson through the seemingly endless maze of diagnostic beds and medical personnel to a single, lone bed on the far end of the bay. The sheets which were spread across its length covered a form which appeared to be slowly tossing and turning in a restless sleep. As Crispin led Bairnson to the head of the bed, Bairnson's expression slowly changed to one of sadness and sheer disbelief. Crispin removed the sheets from the figure's head to reveal its face. A face

Bairnson knew all too well, and suddenly made his stomach wrench.

"Oh my God, Janet!" he sadly whispered.

Janet Sunset's bruised face, slowly rotated to the direction from which the voice had come. She slowly opened her eyes and as the blur faded, she managed to work a small smile across her lips when she saw that it was indeed Jack standing above her. She happily whispered his name. "I was having a dream about you,"

she said hoarsely. "We were having a picnic on Earth. Just you and me.... alone.... no ship, no duty... nobody but us..."

"Save your strength," Bairnson whispered. He placed his hand delicately on her forehead.

"It was lovely day, too.... Promise me we'll go on a picnic someday, huh?"

"I promise," Jack smiled. Janet returned his expression before drifting back into the happiness of her dreams.

Bairnson turned to Doctor Crispin. "How did it happen?"

"She was coordinating the evacuation on deck 23 when the photon torpedoes hit," Crispin related. "There was a young ensign, trapped by a fallen beam. She rushed back into that inferno and somehow got him out."

A slight smile managed to work its way across Bairnson's lips. What a woman! But why of all the people in the world, did he have to be responsible for hurting the person he loved most in the universe?

"Will she be alright, Doctor?" Bairnson queried.

"Very likely. She has some severe burns and smoke inhalation, that'll keep her here for a few days, but after that she should be back to normal."

"Thank God for that," sighed Bairnson.

A cross look came to Crispin's face. "She was lucky, Captain. But there are others just like her who may not be so fortunate. Everyone in this medical bay is a hero as far as I'm concerned. And you can quote me on that!"

Bairnson turned away from Crispin. He began to pace towards the exit of the medical bay but turned back to Crispin as the doors opened. "So noted Doctor," he said softly but resolutely. As Bairnson exited the medical bay, Doctor James Crispin thought he heard him say, "So noted..." again. This time to himself.

* * *

Some time later, Bairnson had returned to the dark solitude of his quarters. Lighting was nonexistent as was any audible sound, as Bairnson laid across his bed. His right arm obscured all traces of the upper portion of his face. He was not asleep, but his mind raced with the speed of dreams.

The events of the day still lingered in his mind. His brief reunion with an old acquaintance and then his sudden and subsequent death. The Federation's president, allowed to be assassinated by Starfleet's newest flagship. Some first entry for a vessel supposedly continuing the great tradition of Starfleet. However, through it all, Bairnson thought most of Janet lying alone in a diagnostic bed in sick bay. He wanted to reach out and hold her tightly to him. Or was it perhaps he who needed to be held?

Bairnson was so lost in thought that he didn't hear the first chime at his door. Neither did he the second. But on the third insistent chime, he called out irritably, "Oh all right! Enter if you must!"

The doors parted and the light from the outside corridor spilled into the darkness of the room; a humanoid form silhouetted in the center. Bairnson heard his first officer's voice quietly call to him before the doors closed behind him. Bairnson sensed his footfalls on the room's carpeted floor for a brief moment before they ceased.

"Computer..." Y'Gar began.

"I prefer it dark!" Bairnson sternly interrupted, knowing what Y'Gar was requesting.

"As you wish, sir," Y'Gar humbly replied. As his eyes readjusted to the dimness of the room, Bairnson saw what he perceived to be Y'Gar's outline take a seat

near the head of the bed. Bairnson averted his gaze from the Yarzonian and stared at the ceiling. An awkward moment of silence passed.

"Well, what is it you want, Y'Gar?" Bairnson finally demanded.

Bairnson heard the creaking of the seat indicating that Y'Gar had adjusted his position. "We've just received a sub-space transmission from Starfleet sir," Y'Gar began in a subdued voice.

Bairnson noticed that Y'Gar had not finished his statement. "Well, go on," he commanded.

"The new president was appointed a few hours ago on Earth," Y'Gar reported with a sigh.

"Oh, really?" Bairnson commented sarcastically.

"It is the President's request that we continue with the mission as originally planned."

"Oh," Bairnson heaved. "So, when does he arrive?"

"After the... 'Incident,' the new President is being understandably cautious. He is requesting that the *Enterprise* transport Princess Zokara and any of her delegation to Earth for the conference." Y'Gar noticed Bairnson turn on his side with a grunt, his back now to Y'Gar.

Uneasy, Y'Gar decided to press on with his request. "Shall I inform the crew that we are continuing on as planned?" Then Y'Gar became very unnerved when he heard a slight chuckle emanate from the man on the bed whose back was turned.

"Why not?" Bairnson snickered in a slightly drunken, maniacal fashion. Anxious to vacate the room, Y'Gar rose and headed for the doors but was halted by Bairnson calling out, "After all, *you* were right, weren't you?"

Y'Gar slowly turned on his heel and paced uneasily back to the bed. Bairnson was now sitting up, his arms resting atop his bent legs. "I suppose I deserved that, sir," Y'Gar replied, his head bowed.

Bairnson shook his head, marveling this arrogant Yarzonian with perhaps the greatest astonishment he had ever felt in his life. He then boldly posed the question,

"You really don't like me, do you?"

Was it his imagination, or did Bairnson notice that his first officer was breathing heavily? As though he were in fear? No, it couldn't be that after what had been said between the two men. Could it?

Y'Gar finally summed up the courage to say,

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Oh? You mean you've been holding back all this time?"

Bairnson had him. He finally had this arrogant junior officer at a disadvantage. Probably the best thing to happen to him all day. He sensed Y'Gar unease, but urged him to continue.

Y'Gar composed himself as best he could before continuing. "Sir," he humbly began. "You have no

idea of what it's like to come from a society where you are looked upon as an inferior. Second class, merely because your chromosomal makeup favored the male gender. To be laughed at and picked-on when young, looked upon as merely a sex object when older.

I was not the first Yarzonian in Starfleet. I wasn't even the first Yarzonian male in Starfleet, but I was at the top of my class! Imagine, an inferior male from some obscure nomadic tribe on a backwards desert planet top of his class in an organization which made him feel welcome, needed, encouraged to be all that he could be.

It seems I may have taken my role a bit too seriously. Made myself more important than I actually was. But when I was passed over for the *Enterprise* in favor of you: a being from the planet the Federation calls home, I... I...! “

Bairnson had noticed that with each word, Y'Gar's speech was becoming more impassioned. He was finally airing all those things which had been bothering him and had worked himself into almost a mad frenzy before he stopped himself and was able to calm down. After a few anger-purging deep breaths, Y'Gar earnestly asked, “Well, how would you feel in my position?”

“I'd probably hate me too,” Bairnson quietly answered to Y'Gar's amazement.

"However," Bairnson calmly continued, rising to his feet to look his first officer square in his green-on-green eyes. "That is no excuse for your behavior the last few days. You've acted in a manor unworthy of that uniform you're wearing. You've given your loyalties to Starfleet and as far as you're concerned, here I *am* Starfleet, is that clear?"

"Quite clear sir," Y'Gar quietly replied now standing at attention.

"Your manor has been noted in your record Commander, and I warn you: if I ever have a repeat of what went on on the bridge today, I'll have you snapped so far back you'll be lucky if you get command of shuttlecraft. Is that understood?"

"Understood, sir," Y'Gar humbly replied.

"Good. Inform the crew that we're continuing on to Zechariah. Tell them to keep their eyes peeled for any sign of that alien ship."

"Aye sir."

"Dismissed," Bairnson said, a slight sideways grin forming on his face as his executive officer turned about and hurriedly strolled out of his quarters. Bairnson once again sat on the soft mattress of his bed, smiling to himself with the sense of joy and satisfaction of boy who had just bested the school bully. For the first time, Jack Bairnson truly felt like a Starfleet captain.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Two standard days had passed without incident as the *Enterprise* continued on its course to the rendezvous on the planet Zechariah. Their search for the mysterious alien vessel had turned out to be fruitless. Although with the help of Starfleet records, they had been able to positively identify the ship as the *Erebus*, the mysterious terrorist Devorax's ship, it was the only piece of data they had been able to come up with.

In the light of the former President's assassination, the Federation had doubled its commitment to eradicating this fanatical terrorist. They had made it the primary duty of all Starfleet vessels that the *Erebus* and its crew were to be destroyed on contact. A measure which Bairnson did not relish in the least.

It had always been Federation policy that all life was sacred and that the taking of life was the most heinous crime in the universe. Were the enforcers of the great Prime Directive now contradicting themselves by ordering the destruction of life? Bairnson was not ready to accept this new directive, and had made it a standing order on the *Enterprise*,

that if they should meet the *Erebus* in combat again, they would try to take the crew alive. Any crewmember failing in this duty, would answer to Jack Bairnson personally.

Bairnson had noticed a distinct change on the crew since the encounter with Devorax's warship. The downheartedness he had originally expected did not last long. In fact, it seemed to put a spark into the crew which grew each day into a burning desire to see this mad terrorist brought to justice. Even Bairnson himself could feel it, and he was beginning to enjoy it.

He was also beginning to enjoy the new confidence he had gained from the incident and his subsequent rank-pulling on Y'Gar. He even heard that several members of the crew had given him the nickname "*Old Hickory*." He liked the ring the name had to it and it even made him appreciate the significance of his full name—Andrew Jackson Bairnson—a lot more. Bairnson wasn't entirely certain, but he thought that perhaps Lieutenant Mirgant had started spreading the nickname around.

Janet Sunset would be returning to duty in a few days, Bairnson was informed, however until then she needed to be left alone to rest. Bairnson wasn't thrilled with the prospect of not being able to see her for a few days, but he decided that it would be better to have her back to her usual self.

Bairnson sat at a lone table in the recreation room, a tall glass of frosty ale in front of him. Bairnson watched as the bubbles rose from bottom of the glass to the inch-thick, frothy head of the liquid. "Mind if I join you, Captain?" a feminine voice asked.

Bairnson raised his eyes above the glass to see Thuroq Mirgant standing above him. She was wearing a light-green, off-duty dress that complimented her aquamarine skin. Bairnson couldn't help but notice her white hair gently cascading over her shoulders. And those exquisite antennae. Many human men found Andorian female's antennae as alluring as many human women found Vulcan male ears. Suddenly Bairnson realized that he had been staring and not uttered a sound.

"Um," he babbled and then cleared his throat, composing himself. "Certainly, Lieutenant." Mirgant seated herself across from her Captain never averting her gaze. She placed her glass of reddish liquid parallel to Bairnson's ale. An awkward silent moment passed. Why had Bairnson never noticed how devastating beautiful his helmsman was?

"That's a, uh..." Bairnson hesitantly began, "...nice outfit, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir," Mirgant smiled congenially.

"Something on your mind, Lieutenant?"

Mirgant paused a moment in thought before continuing on. "Everyone on the ship's talking about you, sir."

"Oh?" Bairnson raised his eyebrows in exaggerated surprise. "And what are they saying Lieutenant?"

"They've been expressing their admiration."

He was staring at her knowingly but his gaze demanded that she finish her thought. "At your determination to accomplish this mission despite all that's happened."

"Really, Lieutenant?" Bairnson smirked, playfully sipping a few drops of ale. He sighed with contentment as he placed his glass back on the table. He then directed his full gaze at his helmsman. "You wouldn't have had anything to do with that little 'nickname' the crew seems to insist upon calling me, now would you?"

Bairnson couldn't tell by her aqua skin, but if Mirgant had been Terran, he was certain her face would have been red with embarrassment. She quickly turned her eyes away from Bairnson's for a brief second as a bemused sigh escaped from her lips. After a few seconds, Mirgant had composed herself enough to turn back and look her captain in the eyes again. She cleared her throat audibly before continuing.

"Well, yes. I suppose so. But it's a reflection of the admiration the crew all feel towards you, Sir."

"But it's especially strong on your part. Is that what you're saying to me?"

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, sir, I..."

She thought carefully for a couple of seconds but all she could ask was for permission to speak freely.

Naturally intrigued, Bairnson consented.

"I realize that, things being the way they are now, what with you being Captain and engaged to Commander Sunset and all, a relationship between us is out of the question."

Bairnson nodded.

"I guess what I want to know is..." she hesitated, trying to find the words. "If this were another time.

Another place. If you weren't a captain and if Commander Sunset weren't around, could there have been something between us?"

Bairnson sat against the high back of his seat, casually observing this woman who had posed the question and now anxiously awaited the answer. The attraction was very mutual, but he couldn't tell her that. It would be all wrong. Finally, he sat straight up once again and addressed her not as an officer, but a confidant.

"Years ago," he began. "Back when I was in secondary school, my homeroom teacher for two years was a woman named Miss Abrahms. She was young, maybe twenty-five years old, black hair, and had a figure like a classical Greek sculpture. I was

never very popular in school, but every morning Miss Abrahms went out of her way to say 'good morning' to me. Make me feel really welcome. Like I was contributing something of value to the world by just being there. I fell in love her."

"What happened?" Mirgant queried.

"Nothing," Bairnson sighed. "She was a teacher and I was one of her students. It would have been all wrong for both her and me. So we just kept a nice friendly relationship for two years. And then I graduated."

Bairnson could see in her eyes that Mirgant had gotten the message the story. He added reassuringly, "Admiration for one of your superiors is perfectly natural in a young officer like you. And now that we've shared that with each other, you and I are closer than when we came aboard this ship."

Bairnson smiled at his junior officer who smiled back when she noticed that he was affectionately holding her hand. She looked up at Bairnson once again. "You really didn't answer my question though."

"Years later," Bairnson began again. "I went to a class reunion, after I had finished my first tour on a starship. I was wandering around the room when I noticed this woman standing in the corner, holding a glass of champagne. She was a little older and had more defined smile lines, but it was her: Miss Abrahms. She was very pleased to see me and we

brought each other up to date on what we had been doing in the years that had passed.

She told me that she had gotten married, but that it didn't last very long. She was divorced with a five-year-old son to take care of. And do you know what she told me?"

Mirgant shook her head.

"She told me that she wished she would have waited until I was the right age, and she wouldn't have let me go for anything." Bairnson rose from his seat and began to slowly pace away from Mirgant while his last piece of information sank in. He noticed out of the corner of his eye, the Andorian woman quickly rise from her own seat, nearly spilling her drink in the process.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded bemused.

Bairnson turned around smiling. "It means, Lieutenant, that in this universe, you never know."

* * *

Bairnson had left the recreation lounge and his now-befuddled helmsman and was strolling the corridor towards the turbolift. He was planning to return to his quarters for the rest of the evening. Perhaps a little music to relax, and then to bed. That was before the ship's intercom system began to page him. He

reluctantly strolled to the nearest comm panel and activated the reply signal.

“Sir,” Saallak’s disembodied voice said. “We have recieved a communique.”

“From?” Bairnson curiously replied.

“Someone claiming to be an envoy from Zechariah. He says that his ship will rendezvous with us in less than half an hour.”

“I see,” Bairnson stated flatly.

“He is also requesting an audience with you upon his arrival, sir.”

Bairnson heaved an exasperated sigh. “Alright then, send him to my quarters when he gets here.”

“Your... quarters, sir?”

“That’s right, Lieutenant. That way if he really is a diplomat I won’t be too far from somewhere to pass out.”

He then clicked off the comm panel.

* * *

The lights were very dimly lit, the soft melodies of a jazz quartet played in the background as Jack Bairnson reclined in his chair, half awake and half asleep. He let the music wash over his entire being like a wave in the ocean. He wasn’t thinking about anything in particular, just allowing his mind to drift in that void between reality and the realm of dreams.

He would have easily crossed the border into the dream world had not the chime of his door rung so seemingly loud and rudely. With a grunt of frustration and fatigue, Bairnson called for whoever it was to enter.

Bairnson then brought up the light level in the room a few notches as a lean, tall, and austere figure stepped into the room. The figure wore a form-fitting black uniform which Bairnson assumed was military of some kind. The right side was filled with distinguished-looking medals and a thin red rope ceremoniously draped the uniform's left shoulder. The man's face was weathered with the finely distinctive lines and crevices of advanced age. It did take a minute though, for Bairnson to notice that like the famous Earth painting, the Mona Lisa, the man's face had no eyebrows.

"Captain Bairnson, I presume," the man said with an air of contempt.

Bairnson confirmed the man's presumption and then apologized for the casual manner in which he was dressed. "I've been off duty for several hours and was getting ready to go to bed."

"I see," the man replied while giving the room a stroll of inspection. "All armies must receive ample rest upon the eve of battle."

Bairnson was a bit disoriented. Not from this strange man's attitude, but more from his own fatigue.

"Forgive me, but I didn't catch your name Ambassador..."

"General!" the man snapped correctively. "General Zaraff. Chief Military Advisor to Her Majesty, Princess Zokara of Zechariah."

Oh brother, Bairnson thought, someone who's fond of their title and likes everyone to know about it! Just what he needed before going to bed. "I see," Bairnson said as politely as he could manage. He then moved towards a cabinet set in the far wall of the room. "Can I offer you something to drink, General?"

"No. A clear mind and a clean body are essential for battle."

"I see," Bairnson said pouring himself a lone glass of very old Saurian brandy. He was going to need it talking to this guy. "Well, General. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit to my ship?"

"Captain, I have come on behalf of Princess Zokara to prepare your ship for her arrival."

"Well, that's very considerate of you General,"

Bairnson replied taking a tiny sip of the tasty but strong liquid in his glass. "However, if there were some special ceremony which needed to be performed to welcome Her Majesty on board, I think it could have waited until we reached Zechariah."

Zaraff turned away from Bairnson with a distained sigh. "We are a race of warriors, Captain. Such things as ceremony and ritualism have no place in our culture. I have come to prepare you for battle."

"Yes, you've been mentioning battles ever since you came in."

"I did so to make a point, Captain," Zaraff stated proudly. He then added with a smile, "And to test you."

"Test me?" Bairnson said with no little amount of surprise.

Zaraff smiled more cheerfully. "To see how you stood in the face of an unknown adversary." Zaraff could see Bairnson was still a little confused. "When I entered this room, I did so with an air of arrogance. Arrogance designed to test your resolve, Bairnson." Zaraff nodded contently at the captain adding, "You stood your ground, and maintained your control admirably."

"Thank you," Bairnson replied not knowing what else to say. "But, I still don't understand what exactly you mean by a battle."

Zaraff's expression became grim as his conversation with Bairnson went on. The Zecharian High Council had naturally been informed of the disaster with the *MacFarlane*, and of the new Federation president's wish to continue the negotiations. They had been made aware of the impending arrival of the

Enterprise to transport Princess Zokara to Earth, and here was where they became concerned.

"We fear," Zoraff continued, "that the attack on your President's ship may have been the precursor to an attempt to assassinate Princess Zokara. Devorax has been making every attempt to insure that Zechariah does not join the Federation. He has promised reprisals of incredible magnitude if Princess Zokara journeys to Earth."

Bairnson was held spellbound by the General's words. "Yes, it makes sense. If someone kills the Princess, then any hope of Zechariah joining the Federation would be lost."

"There are those, even among my own people who would not be displeased if that came to be so."

"But we have to be certain that the Princess does get to Earth," Bairnson stated.

"Yes. That is why I have come," Zoraff rose from his seat and began calculatingly pacing the room. "The *Enterprise* is scheduled to arrive at Zechariah tomorrow.

We believe, that Devorax will strike then. What I am proposing, is that we transport Princess Zokara out somewhat earlier than was originally agreed."

Bairnson rose from his own chair, his mind taking in all that the General had said. "You mean like an airlift?

Only it's the Princess that's the cargo?"

“Precisely,” Zaraff proudly confirmed. “If we go in with a small team from the *Enterprise* using my ship, the Princess will be safely aboard your ship before any of the fighting begins.”

“*Enterprise* personnel? Because you can’t be certain who among your own people can be trusted?”

Zaraff nodded.

Bairnson turned away a moment his mind deep in thought. Finally he faced Zaraff once again. “It would have to be a small team. No more than five personnel.”

“Including yourself, Captain.”

Bairnson hesitated a moment. “Me?”

“Oh yes,” Zaraff stated softly but firmly. “To assure Princess Zokara that it is not a trick.”

Bairnson paced the length of his room several times before speaking once again. “You understand that this is highly irregular,” he said.

“Yes.”

“That’s precisely why I’m going to do it!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

It wasn’t as spacious, luxurious, or indeed as fast as a Federation vessel, but Mirgant was smiling

contentedly nonetheless. The small, bulky Zecharian ship handled as well as any Federation shuttlecraft. The ship departed the *Enterprise* close to two hours following the meeting between General Zoraff and Captain Bairnson. Bairnson had called for two security officers, Doctor Crispin, and Lieutenant Mirgant to accompany him and the General on the mission.

Mirgant had calculated the quickest route from the *Enterprise* to the Zecharian capitol. The ship would set down just before sunrise and as such, the still-sleeping population of the city would not notice its arrival at the royal palace. Zoraff had agreed that the Andorian lieutenant's calculations were accurate. Better than even he could have formulated. It was at that moment that he invited the young woman to pilot the ship back to Zechariah herself.

She had obviously been excited at the prospect of piloting the ship herself, and so Bairnson did nothing to prevent her from realizing her ambition. Truth be known, Bairnson was anxious to learn how well she would respond in such a situation.

At the moment though, Jack Bairnson's thoughts concerned the command vessel he had temporarily left behind. Y'Gar was in command; that was protocol. His orders were to follow the Zecharian vessel on impulse power only. That way any enemy vessel in the Zecharian system would think that it was

not interested in any events which might be transpiring on the planet itself. If all went according to plan, the *Enterprise* would rendezvous with the smaller Zecharian ship as it cleared the planet's atmosphere with the princess aboard.

Jack Bairnson couldn't explain it even to himself, but somehow he felt that Devorax was somewhere close by. So close could see his face, assuming of course that he would recognize it when he saw it.

"On course," Mirgant announced from the ship's helm position. "Estimate contact with Zechariah in a little under half an hour."

Bairnson silently nodded his approval at the lieutenant's estimation. He was seated on a moderately comfortable bench which lined the walls of the nearly-too-narrow compartment. He glanced around the compartment taking it all in. It was rather aesthetically unpleasing. The walls and seat cushions were a rather drab shade of brown and Bairnson correctly assumed that it was not a pleasure craft, but more like a troop transporter designed to drop a whole battalion onto some unsuspecting target. It rather reminded him of the interior of one of those ugly old aircraft that used to fly during wartime on Earth that he had seen once in a museum.

Doctor Crispin sat next to the captain thoroughly checking his medikit one last time before the ship made planetfall. Obviously too busy to talk, Bairnson

looked across the narrow compartment to General Zaraff who sat still and silent in his seat. He seemed the only other likely candidate to strike up a conversation considering that Mirgant was lost in concentration piloting the craft and the two young security guards were talking among themselves about some subject that Bairnson had become disinterested in listening to some time ago.

He called across the cabin.

The general cocked his head violently downward, his eyes gazing piercingly at Bairnson. If Bairnson had not known better, he would have thought that he had stirred the general from a blissful slumber.

"Has anyone ever seen Devorax?" Bairnson finally queried.

The general pondered a moment before answering.

"Many who may, have never lived to tell about it."

"Surely there must have been at least one?"

"There have been the occasional rumors."

The general stopped, prepared to just leave it at that but the look on Bairnson's face insisted that he continue with the tale.

"They say," Zaraff began again. "That Devorax has no face. Not like yours or mine. Shiny as silver, with eyes of angry red. He speaks with a deep, sinister voice..."

"He would, wouldn't he?" muttered Bairnson to himself.

"...And his face is completely devoid of feeling."

Zaraff ceased. He then let a slight snicker escape from his lips. "Hearsay paints a wonderfully ominous portrait, does it not?"

"Yes," Bairnson agreed. "However, I've heard it said that most myths are based on facts."

"Perhaps," Zaraff said. "But one does not need such a portrayal to understand what a monster he is."

"Well, with any luck, soon he'll be just a bad memory for everyone."

Bairnson wasn't sure what had made him say that last sentence, but perhaps he needed to express the hope shared by the Federation and the Zecharians that together they could rid the universe of this menace to all civilized worlds.

* * *

The descent through the Zechariah atmosphere was relatively uneventful. Bumpy as all hell, but then most manufacturers of spacecraft capable of making planetfalls had not yet figured out how to comfortably cut through a gaseous layer surrounding a solid-surfaced oblate spheroid without jarring the teeth of every passenger aboard the craft. Perhaps Bairnson would recommend it as a pet project to Johnson when he returned to the *Enterprise*.

The Zecharian ship now glided easily through the skies high above the surface of the planet. Bairnson had moved to the front of the cockpit to glance out the

window at the surface features below them. Zechariah appeared to be a lush, green forested planet of tall trees. At least that was the sight Bairnson first noticed. The terrain below them soon turned to a more level, pastured plain where farmers grew vegetable crops and grazed strange-looking domestic food animals.

After flying straight towards the dimly lit horizon for what Bairnson only guessed to be about fifteen minutes, the Zecharian sun slowly began to rise. Their sun was yellow, not unlike Earth's, and Bairnson had marveled that even with all the time he had spent on his home world, he had never actually watched a sunrise before. It was a quite a sight to behold even though Bairnson knew that as an explorer, there were probably even greater sights to behold in the cosmos. It only made him thirsty for more.

Then below the craft once again, Bairnson noticed another change in the terrain. Gone was any trace of green vegetation. In its place, Bairnson saw what appeared to be paved roads winding through the countryside. Bairnson followed the lines of the roads for several minutes before he noticed the city they were leading to.

The city was a grand sight to behold. It rose majestically from the ground, the tall silvery buildings casting long shadows on each other in the rising sun.

The ever-brightening sun reflected off the glassy sides of the buildings in a prism of color. Bairnson smiled to himself as General Zaraff confirmed that this was the city of Arabeth. Their destination.

* * *

Several moments passed.

The next thing Bairnson noticed below him was a large, immaculate palatial estate. The grounds below stretched for several hundred yards in a beautifully deep shade of green, occasionally broken up by the cheery light blue of the several artificially-created ponds that littered the grounds.

The ship then passed over the house itself.

Bairnson noticed how much like a fairy tale castle it was. Gleaming white with thinly pointed blue spires rising skyward from the roof. How many rooms it had, Bairnson could not estimate, but it was the sort of palace that all little girls dreamed of living in some day. It was the sort of place that Janet had often told Jack she fantasized about them living in together.

Janet.

How was she back on the ship? Bairnson knew that she would be returning to duty soon. Crispin had told him as much. In fact, he had even said that when he told her about the mission. She was insisting to get out her diagnostic bed and come along. Crispin had

of course refused, and said that he wasn't sure who was more pig-headed: this lass or the captain she loved so much.

Bairnson had laughed, but he wondered if she was at all worried about him and the others.

* * *

The *Enterprise* was moving slowly towards the shining green sphere that was the planet Zechariah. On the bridge, Commander Y'Gar sat comfortably in the chair which betrayed his temporary command of the vessel. He was aware of the tension on the bridge at that moment. Was it his imagination or his own tension that made him feel that the thought of an imminent battle was not the sole cause of the crew's tension?

After all, he was next in the chain of command of the *Enterprise*. The captain had given him command of the ship until his return from the surface mission. He also knew that most of the crew had not looked upon him favorably since their first encounter with Devorax. Somehow, he had to prove to the crew and his captain that he was indeed the right choice for his position on the ship.

Y'Gar was stirred from his reveling by Lieutenant Winston calling to him from the navigation console.

Y'Gar asked for a report.

"Sensors are picking up another vessel in the Zecharian system," Winston announced.

Well, that's sent the tension level up another couple of notches, Y'Gar thought. He then asked for an identification of the ship.

Winston quickly scanned the information on his console. He soon shook his head with discontentment.

"The computers have no record of the ship's configuration. It's now just at the extreme edge of sensor range, sir," Winston reported.

"Let's see it then. On screen," Y'Gar ordered. He then turned his attention to the bridge's main view screen.

As with before, the image that first appeared was a shapeless mass viewed from a great distance. Y'Gar requested a magnification of the image.

As the image gradually grew into a more intelligible and decipherable picture, Y'Gar wished that he had had a heart monitor trained on each member of the bridge crew at that moment. Seeing that image of the same mysterious, black spacecraft they had encountered earlier had to have driven the heart rates on the bridge personnel to the near record number of beats per minute.

So, they were back.

But what were they doing? Y'Gar posed the question to his navigator.

"They seem to be on course for Zechariah, sir," the black man replied.

"Any indication of hostility?" Y'Gar queried.

"Unclear, sir. However, the ship's forward weapons array is powering up."

Y'Gar turned to Lieutenant Saallak. "Try to raise the captain."

"The Captain's orders were not to contact him until he had achieved orbit with the princess," Saallak replied.

Y'Gar abruptly turned away from the Vulcan communications officer. No way could he disobey a direct order this time. But he couldn't just let that ship approach Zechariah and not do anything about it. That could be even worse.

Then, an inspiration struck him. "Is that ship aware of our presence?"

After several seconds of thorough checks Winston announced, "Indications are that the ship is either unaware of or unconcerned by our presence in the Zecharian system."

All right! That was it! Just the answer that Y'Gar had been hoping for. With a new-found confidence Y'Gar once again sat in the command chair.

"Helm," he announced. "Bring us into a parallel course with the intruder. Match his every move."

"Aye sir."

Y'Gar had read once that while Captain James T.

Kirk was still in command of the original *Enterprise*, he had tried this same maneuver with a Romulan ship. Y'Gar could only hope that he would meet with as much success.

* * *

A landing port had been constructed in the rear of the expansive Zecharian palace. Obviously with the intent of allowing large diplomatic vessels to come to rest upon it, it was just the proper size for the bulky Zecharian troop transporter to land quite comfortably. No guards had come out of the palace to greet the arriving craft and not a sound could be heard as the Federation party stepped from the ship's landing ramp onto the decorated stone tile floor. Bairnson paused, his phaser drawn and poised at the ready. He made a visual inspection of the courtyard. He suddenly felt a queasy rumbling in the pit of his stomach.

General Zaraff led the security guards and Lieutenant Mirgant towards the giant doors that lead to the interior of the castle. Doctor Crispin noticed Bairnson's hesitance and stepped up close behind him. "Anything I can do?" Crispin asked.

"Not unless you've got something for nerves," Bairnson quipped.

"Nothing that'll keep you conscious," Crispin countered.

Bairnson turned his head and smiled gently at the older Irishman. The two men then followed the rest of the landing party inside the castle.

* * *

Inside the great architectural structure, the landing party was lead down several immaculately decorated corridors.

Lined with vases, trophies, and portraits hanging from the walls, the whole interior reminded Bairnson of the royal palace of Versailles on Earth which he had visited in his boyhood.

They continued walking for several interminable moments. Bairnson felt as though he were on a tour in a museum which he never wanted to visit in the first place.

He was beginning to feel a bit anxious when the group finally came to a huge wooden door. A beautiful design had been carved into the varnished reddish wood, and a huge metal handle which Bairnson guessed was either brass or a very near approximation, was embedded in the center.

General Zaraff opened the door and allowed the Federation officers to file into the room beyond it. The interior was decorated in a similar fashion as the corridor.

Huge pottery sat in either corner with artificially colored feathers billowing over the ceramic lips. The decor was very lavish with white walls covered by oil paintings of various nature scenes. Bairnson soon realized that immaculate as the room was, it was merely a connecting area between the outside corridor and yet another room concealed behind a similar reddish-wood door.

General Zaraff separated from the group and paced over to the new door. He grabbed the huge metallic handle and pounded harshly on the wooden frame. A few seconds passed as the *Enterprise* landing party stood around staring at each other uncomfortably. Finally a female voice, muffled by the thick wood of the door called out demanding to know who had disturbed her. Zaraff identified himself immediately and within moments, a young woman dressed in a thin, pinkish nightgown opened the heavy door stepped through into the room.

She was as beautiful a sight as anyone had ever seen. Her hair cascaded around her rounded shoulders in waves of snow white. Her face was soft but well defined and like her fellow countryman General Zaraff, she possessed no eyebrows. Her deep violet eyes held the gaze of Bairnson's security men like a shiny bauble used by a hypnotist. Bairnson had to snap them back to attention by clearing his throat perceptibly.

The young woman strode towards the landing party, the lower portion of her gown flowing regally as her legs moved. She moved closer to Bairnson whom she correctly presumed to be the man in charge.

"Princess Zokara, I presume?" Bairnson asked.

The woman nodded in reply. "And who might you be?"

For a moment Bairnson was confused. "Jack Bairnson. Captain of the starship *Enterprise* representing the United Federation of Planets."

The woman narrowed her eyes in bemusement.

She had not a clue as to who this strange man was standing in her foyer. She glanced at the others present.

Like this man who called himself Bairnson, they were dressed in the same maroon uniforms. They must have been from the same place, but what they were doing here, she hadn't a clue.

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Captain," Zokara coolly stated. "I was not expecting you to arrive until later today. And I certainly was not expecting to meet you in my bedroom while still in my nightclothes."

"General Zaraff thought it might be prudent if a small party of us came early and snuck you out to avoid any possible complications in getting you safely to the conference on Earth," Bairnson explained.

Zokara voiced her understanding in the incomprehensible manner which most humanoids would.

“Ah. Very commendable. A fine recommendation on your part... General?”

Zokara had turned around to face the general still standing by the door. Until that particular moment, no one in the room had noticed that the large hand laser the General kept closely by his side in a leg holster was now in his right hand and pointed directly at Zokara and the *Enterprise* crew. After a moment of startled realization, Bairnson spoke the one word that was probably on everyone's mind.

“Why?”

“I told you that there were those among my own people who did not want an alliance with the Federation,”

Zaraff stated.

“I guess I forgot to mention that I was one of them.”

* * *

The *Enterprise* stealthily pursued the *Erebus* as it approached the planet Zechariah. It had apparently not noticed the Federation ship or if it had, it probably thought that it was an echo of some kind on their instruments.

Y'Gar smiled contentedly to himself. His idea seemed to be working.

“Commander,” Winston called from his console.

Y’Gar requested him to continue.

“The *Erebus* will achieve orbit around Zechariah in approximately thirty seconds.”

Well, alright. Y’Gar had thought about phase one.

Phase two was concerning him now. What was he supposed to do next? He had hoped that the mysterious alien vessel would not attempt to orbit Zechariah, but soon realized how vain a hope it was. Winston now reported that the *Erebus* had achieved orbit.

Y’Gar called for a full stop. Winston and the helmsman on duty responded in the affirmative, and soon the great starship slowed to a halt.

For several minutes the bridge crew kept a silent watch over the ominous enemy vessel now in orbit over the unsuspecting planet of Zechariah. For a time all it did was sit there. Waiting. Then finally, Winston noticed something that made him report with a slightly greater volume than was normally anticipated.

“Sir, the *Erebus* has opened fire!”

* * *

“What about all that talk about what a monster Devorax is?” Bairnson said as Zaraff pointed the laser weapon unwaveringly at him and the rest of the shocked landing party.

"Oh, he is a monster," Zaraff stated.

"But a respectable one," Bairnson snapped. "A high-paying one?"

"Don't be absurd!" Zaraff spat. "Devorax is a mass-murderer, a villain of the worst kind..."

"Then why?"

Zaraff stared icily at the Federation captain. "He is a monster that we do not need outside help to defeat!"

"Your planet isn't the only one that Devorax has ravaged!"

Bairnson was surprised to hear that impassioned statement come from Lieutenant Mirgant.

"Perhaps. But Zechariah more than anyone else has endured the cold pain of his tyranny. And we will not endure it any longer."

"What are you talking about?" Bairnson boldly asked.

"I noticed you checking for guards when we landed Bairnson. Yes, they are away preparing to fight Devorax and his troops."

"So, what good will it do you to kill us?" Crispin wondered.

"The Princess simply being eliminated is not enough. If your bodies are found dead along with hers, we will have just cause to never be bothered again by outsiders."

"General!" Zokara boldly took a step forward.

"You would betray your ruler and your planet?"

Zaraff stared distastefully at the princess.

“Presumptuous child! What I do I do for the honor of Zechariah! The glory of the past! What do you know of such things?”

“Your prehistoric attitude will be the death of this world!”

A cold smile curled across Zaraff’s lips. “And as this world’s embodiment,” he said with relish. “You, my dear, will be the first!”

As Zaraff raised his weapon to fire, a shock wave rocked the palace. Followed closely by another. And then another. Bairnson could hear substantial explosions muffled by the thickness of the walls coming from outside.

The sudden surprise gave Bairnson his opportunity. He rushed forward and in a flurry of movement, leapt into the air and onto the General. The pair fell to the floor struggling over the gun as they went.

Mirgant and the security men rushed over to the aid of their captain, their phasers drawn at the ready. They could only watch helplessly as the two men rolled around on the floor struggling, clawing and punching as the walls shook around them.

Bairnson marveled that as old as Zaraff appeared to be, he was a lot stronger than he looked. And he certainly didn’t expect the aged general to flip him over onto his back. The security men and Mirgant crouched to Bairnson’s aid. Bairnson stated that he was alright and that they should get the general.

As the security men moved to carry out his order they were stopped in their tracks. Zoraff fired two shots hitting the first security man in the right thigh, the other in his left shoulder. Gasping and panting but still standing steady, Zoraff now turned with an almost maniacal smile on his face to Zokara.

“Fairwell, ‘Your Highness,’” he sneered.

Suddenly, another explosion rocked the house. It was much more focused and powerful than the previous shots and the shock waves it created were much heavier.

The ceiling of the room cracked and buckled under the stress until a large, thick and extremely heavy chunk broke loose from the rest of the high ceiling and plummeted downward.

It struck down General Zoraff mere seconds before he managed to pull the trigger.

When the dust had settled, the landing party noticed that the chunk of concrete now completely covered the lifeless body of the former Zecharian general.

Bairnson could see the general’s right arm protruding out from one side twitch with the last signs of life and then abruptly stop.

Bairnson was assisted to a standing position by Mirgant and Doctor Crispin. The princess came over to the captain’s side and also lent a hand in helping him up as another explosion violently erupted outside, shaking the palace all over again.

Bairnson reached into his pants pocket and produced his communicator. He flipped open the lid activating the call signal.

"Enterprise. Enterprise, this is Captain Bairnson. Come in please," he said with a slight degree of urgency.

"Commander Johnson here, sir," came the reply from the small device's speaker.

"Right on schedule, Johnson. Six to beam up. And hurry it up, would you?"

Bairnson then closed the communicator panel and returned it to his pocket. Mirgant, Crispin, and Zokara had assisted the two security men to their feet as well and brought them over to where the captain was until they huddled together in a compact group.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Bairnson said.

As if on cue, the six people disappeared from the room as the sparkling transporter beam surrounded them and returned them to the *Enterprise*.

* * *

When the landing party rematerialized inside the bay of the transporter, Bairnson hastily stepped off the pad and onto the shiny floor a few feet below. Lieutenant Commander Johnson cheerfully greeted the returning captain and his team. Bairnson quickly introduced the chief engineer to Princess Zokara and suggested that he show the princess to

her quarters where she could change into more suitable clothing.

Johnson happily consented and he and the beautiful heir to the royal throne of Zechariah exited the transporter room. They were closely followed by Doctor Crispin who was leading the two injured security men down to sickbay and finally by Bairnson and Lieutenant Mirgant who were bound for the bridge.

Crispin had protested, saying that the captain should visit sickbay as well to treat his wounds. Bairnson brushed the comment aside and continued towards the turbolift doors with Mirgant following closely behind.

* * *

The turbolift doors parted with their usual hydraulic hiss to reveal the interior of the bridge. Bairnson allowed Mirgant to exit the turbolift and she darted to her familiar helm console while Bairnson bee-lined to his command chair, the back of which was facing him. Bairnson noticed that the main view screen was still activated and was displaying an image of the blue/green orb that was Zechariah. At the moment the image was very calm and serene. There was no trace of the *Erebus* whatsoever.

Bairnson called for Commander Y'Gar to give a report. The current occupant of Bairnson's command chair swiveled around to face him. Bairnson's already frazzled nerves received one last shock when the occupant turned out not to be the Yarzonian executive officer, but Lieutenant Commander Janet Sunset.

Jack Bairnson managed to maintain his composure but noticed the strained expression on Janet's face. Sunset rose from the chair allowing Bairnson to resume his proper command position. Bairnson eased into the cushioned seat, shifted to a comfortable position and finally asked the question that was currently occupying his thoughts.

"Explain why you were sitting in the command chair."

"I was the only ranking officer available sir," Sunset replied in a slightly hoarse voice.

Bairnson surveyed the bridge from one end to the other and then asked the second question on his mind.

"Where's Commander Y'Gar?"

Sunset fidgeted for a brief moment, unsure of quite what to tell him. His eyes were still trained on her demanding an answer. "Commander Y'Gar is... no longer aboard the *Enterprise*," she finally stated.

A lot had happened to Jack Bairnson in the last few weeks. He had been granted command of Starfleet's newest flagship. The namesake of a legendary

vessel. He had fought initial resistance during his first days of command, and even managed to whip the crew into a finely tuned unit after the disaster with the *MacFarlane*.

But his executive officer abandoning command?

Bairnson knew that Y'Gar resented him. He had even challenged his authority. But to abandon command of the ship when Bairnson had shown confidence in allowing him to sit in the chair in the first place? This was too much for a boy from southwestern Pennsylvania to handle. He demanded an explanation.

"The *Erebus* had opened fire on Zechariah,"

Sunset nervously began. "We engaged the enemy vessel and managed to weaken their shields and ultimately disable their warp capability."

"What happened next?" Bairnson asked a bit more gently.

"The *Erebus* began to move away from the planet,"

Curtis Winston said, picking up the story.

"Commander Y'Gar wanted to pursue them. Lieutenant Saallak reminded him of your orders to stay in orbit until we received your signal to return to the *Enterprise*."

"At that point he called me to the bridge," Sunset interjected. "When I arrived on the bridge, he was gone."

Bairnson was understandably perplexed. He wondered where the Yarzonian could have gone and vocally expressed his wonderment.

"The ship was moving away on impulse power and so Commander Y'Gar set off in pursuit using one of our shuttlecraft," Saallak stated.

"He ordered us to remain in orbit until your return, sir." Bairnson huffed with sheer disbelief. The look on his face suggested that a joke was running through his mind whose punchline was lost to everyone else on the bridge. He silently sat in his chair that way for several seconds and when he finally spoke, his first words came almost in a chuckle.

"And you mean to say that you just let him go?"

An uneasy wave of tension cascaded over the present bridge officers. Bairnson inspected each and every assembled crewman with the eye of a mother who was cross with a group of petulant children.

"I mean, I realize that he's not the most popular person on this ship, but he is still a Starfleet officer. And a damned fine one at that! Overbearing and ambitious to an extent, but who here can honestly say that they didn't behave the same way to get a commission aboard this ship?"

Bairnson had been standing and found himself now circulating reprimandingly around the bridge. No officer was safe from his gaze. He now worked his way back to the command chair. He stood there one

last moment gazing about the room, his balled fists resting on his hips.

The sound of air escaping from the cushions as Bairnson sat once again was all that could be heard on the bridge apart from the routine clicks and whirrs of machinery.

“What heading did he take?” Bairnson flatly asked.

“According to the shuttle’s ion trail, Course 318 Mark 5,” Mirgant reported.

“Plot a heading on that course Lieutenant. Impulse power.”

Mirgant concurred and Bairnson felt the massive starship turn and finally edge forward on the course taken by the errant shuttlecraft.

Bairnson had no idea where Y’Gar was going, but for some inexplicable reason he felt that it all was going to come to end wherever it was.

PART THREE:

CONFRONTATION

CHAPTER NINE

The U.S.S. *Enterprise* was capable of incredible speeds.

Its engines had it within their power to reach warp nine and possibly faster. The original design of the *Excelsior* class vessel upon which the new ship was based, was equipped with what they had called Transwarp drive. This would have granted the ship an even higher velocity had the Transwarp experiment not been such a dismal failure.

Instead, the *Enterprise* was fitted with the top of the line in current warp engine technology. In many respects, it was even superior to its sister ship the *Excelsior*.

However, Captain Jack Bairnson had chosen not to utilize the warp technology in the pursuit of the ship's missing shuttlecraft and executive officer.

From what the crew had told him, the *Enterprise* had severely damaged the *Erebus's* own warp capability and so wherever it was heading, it was doing so on impulse power only. Bairnson also knew that even the newest shuttlecraft Starfleet engineers had been able to come up with, while being more agile and maneuverable than any starship, could only manage an impulse speed nearly equal to that of a starship.

Maintaining this speed would cause the shuttle to leave a “wake” of ions which any starship’s sensor array could detect and follow with a minimum of effort.

At least that’s what Bairnson hoped his errant first officer was doing: allowing the *Enterprise* to follow the shuttle to wherever Devorax was going. He would feel terribly stupid if Y’Gar had simply gone AWOL.

* * *

For several days the *Enterprise* followed the ion trail left behind by the shuttlecraft. They had not actually seen the shuttle or the *Erebus* but then Bairnson really wasn’t expecting to. All anyone on the bridge would have seen for the last several days was the stars streaking past the ship on the bridge’s main viewing screen.

According to all the information that was available on this sector of the galaxy—which wasn’t much—there was nothing to encounter on their present course. No planets. No stars. Not even an errant asteroid. Nothing.

And to Jack Bairnson, that made absolutely no sense. Why would a ship like the *Erebus* go into an uncharted sector of the galaxy with damaged weapons and zero warp capability? They couldn’t be simply trying to throw the Federation ship off as to the

extent of their damage while planning a counterattack. Even Bairnson had to admit to himself that it was so fantastic an idea, that not even H.G. Wells or Jules Verne would have bought it for the plot of a novel which was causing them writers' block.

Finally Bairnson took a cue from his Vulcan communications officer and started to think logically. And it was there that Bairnson came up with the only acceptable answer: they wouldn't be heading on a course through an uncharted part of the galaxy through which there was apparently nothing unless there was something there. Something which no one else was aware of.

Something like a base of operations perhaps?

* * *

Jack Bairnson was spending this particular evening alone in his quarters. The lights were down to the lowest possible level and he had ordered some relaxing twentieth-century music to be played. It was a musical group Bairnson had once loved years ago and had only recently rediscovered. This music was particularly interesting as it was all inspired by the work of a Spanish architect named Antonio Gaudi. Bairnson allowed the slightly Latin-styled techno music to soak through every pore of his body.

He then heard in the distance the ringing of a bell. For a moment he imagined that it was part of the recording, but when it suddenly chimed out of time with the music, he realized it must have been the attention signal of his own cabin door. He called out for whoever it was to enter.

The doors hissed apart and through the open hatchway, silhouetted by the light from the outside corridor stepped Janet Sunset. She strolled into the quarters quickly but easily allowing the doors to close and the darkness to once again consume the interior of the room. She made a brief inspection of the room for no apparent reason but quickly picked up on the music.

"The 'Gaudi' recording again?" she innocently queried. "You seem to be listening to it a lot lately."

Bairnson shifted in his chair to a more casual seated position. "It's amazing how you never really appreciate some things," Bairnson postulated.

Janet came closer to Jack's chair. She gently placed her hands on his shoulders. "What do you mean?"

"Well, take this recording for example," Bairnson began, feeling her hands gently pinch the flesh of his shoulders. "In its time it was a very under-appreciated musical work. It wasn't until two centuries after it was released that it came to be appreciated for the classical work that it is."

Janet snickered, "I remember Doctor Woodard said that years ago in our fine arts class at the Academy." "Yes," Bairnson sighed as he began to enjoy the massage. "And the same could be said for me as well."

Bairnson felt her hands stop their delicate work and soon found Janet's face in front of his. A quizzical expression across her darkly beautiful features.

"The *Enterprise* wasn't the first ship I was offered command of," Jack explained. "I turned down two other offers to sit in the big chair before I finally accepted command of this ship. And I might not have accepted the *Enterprise* if Captain Sulu hadn't insisted that I do."

By now, Janet had moved to a kneeling position beside the chair in which Bairnson was seated, hanging on his every word.

"I was executive officer on the *Excelsior* for five years. I led landing missions, diplomatic parties. Hell, I was even in charge of a first contact. And in all that time, it never occurred to me that I was a good leader. It never struck me that I could actually handle the responsibility of commanding an entire starship, myself."

"A starship captain is never totally alone in commanding his ship," Janet reassured.

"But it is the captain who ultimately decides what course the ship and her crew must take. And I never really appreciated those qualities in myself, until now. When I came aboard this ship, I fully expected everyone to accept me as their leader from the word 'go.'

And then, when I met the initial resistance, and when we were given such a delicate mission our first time out, I felt ready to step down."

"But you didn't step down."

"No. I didn't. How would that have looked on my record?"

"I don't think it was your record that really bothered you, was it?"

For a moment Bairnson sat pensively. "No. It was the fear of failure. I've had it ever since I came aboard. I didn't want to blow again like on Omega Omicron 2."

"How can you still blame yourself for something that wasn't your responsibility?" Her words weren't scornful, but deep with sincere concern.

"That's just it, Janet. How could I accept command of a starship if every decision I made had as much effect on me as Omega Omicron 2 did? With all that's happened, I'd probably be insane by now."

"So what happened to change it?"

Bairnson thought a moment, pausing longer than a moment ago. "I don't know. Maybe it was the easing of Y'Gar's resentment of me. Maybe it was Doctor

Crispin's realization that I wasn't to blame for his position."

Janet eased closer to him, her arm lovingly draped over his shoulder. "Maybe the crew's belief in your ability made you believe it yourself."

Bairnson slowly turned his head to face her nose to nose. She was smiling at him the way she always did when she said something that proved that she knew Jack Bairnson better than even he knew himself. She was a remarkable woman, no question about it. He would be a fool to give her up for anything else. His face moved closer to hers. Their lips met tenderly yet full of passion.

Bairnson broke away after a few seconds and sat gazing into her dark eyes. He couldn't think of the right words to say. "What did I do to deserve you?" seemed cliché and could not fully express his appreciation that she had chosen him, lone among all others in the universe to be hers. He soon realized that the words weren't necessary. She felt as strongly for him as he felt for her.

Who knew? Maybe someday he would be able to properly repay her for the last half hour.

Bairnson then began to suspect that Janet was wishing for perhaps a little payback right then and there.

With a coy half-smile, she playfully dragged him by the hands into his bedroom. With an exaggerated

grunt of exertion, Janet shoved Jack onto the soft blue-sheet covered mattress. She then seductively crawled up onto the bed until she spread her legs across his prone body.

She bent down and planted a full open mouthed kiss on his mouth.

Jack enjoyed the sensation of Janet's tongue dancing with his to a tune which only they knew the rhythm and meter. The pair of them were in a fairly aroused state when ship's intercom system whistled paging Bairnson's name.

The intercom repeated its call as Janet and Jack simultaneously slumped onto their backs with a moan of agonized frustration. Never a tender moment, Janet thought to herself as Jack pieced himself together and strode over to the comm panel on the far wall of his quarters. He pressed the respond button announcing his acknowledgement of the summons.

"Captain," Lieutenant Saallak's disembodied voice came over the speaker. "You are urgently needed on the bridge."

"Why Saallak? What's the problem?"

"There is no actual problem, sir."

"Well can't it wait until morning then?"

"I believe this is a matter of the utmost priority, sir."

"Alright then," sighed Bairnson. "What is it?"

“Sensors have detected a planet on our present heading, sir.”

CHAPTER TEN

It wasn't particularly large or attractive in any aesthetic sense, but the orange/brown orb filling the view screen on the main bridge held the crew's attention nonetheless. It had been almost by a fluke that they had even spotted the planet in the first place.

The *Enterprise* had been continuing to follow the snaillike ion trail left behind by the shuttlecraft when the main sensor array indicated that the trail was no longer present. Fearing that they had lost all trace of the craft, Mirgant brought the great starship to a halt and initiated a full three hundred sixty degree sensor sweep of the immediate vicinity. The crew frantically worked at rediscovering the ion trail for several nervous moments before it finally was rediscovered. At a point which veered dangerously to port from the *Enterprise's* last heading.

The ship was about to set off again when Lieutenant Winston announced that he had located a large object ahead at the extreme edge of sensor range. A

magnification of the area revealed the image of the small orange/brown planetoid which Jack Bairnson and Janet Sunset immediately noticed on the bridge's main viewer as they stepped out of the turbolift.

Bairnson moved to his command seat with Sunset closely behind. He seated himself and called for a status report.

"Standard orbit around planetoid established sir," Lieutenant Mirgant reported.

"Analysis?"

"Planetoid's mass is slightly less than that of Earth's moon."

Bairnson swiveled in his seat and noticed to his astonishment that Sunset had moved over to the unoccupied science console and was giving the report on the planetoid.

"Terrain is barren and rocky," Sunset continued.

"Vegetation and animal life is sparse and minimal."

Sunset then rose from the console panel and finished her report standing at attention with a satisfied smile.

"The planet does possess a class M atmosphere, however."

Class M? thought Bairnson.

An oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere similar to that of Earth.

That meant that somebody could live down there if they had to. And the ion trail of the shuttlecraft had led them to this until now uncharted world.

"Lieutenant Mirgant," Bairnson called. "Initiate a sensor sweep of the planet's surface. See if you can locate the shuttlecraft."

"Aye sir."

For several moments Mirgant fidgeted with the controls on her helm console as data was sent and received from the ship's main sensor array. Within moments, the answer came.

"I have located the shuttlecraft sir," Mirgant proudly reported. After only two seconds, Mirgant even startled herself with her next report.

"I have also located the *Erebus* sir."

Bairnson shot up from his command and moved down until he towered over his seated helmsman.

"Are you sure, Lieutenant?"

"Positive sir," said Mirgant as she made a few last-minute adjustments to confirm her data. "The two craft have landed nearly five kilometers apart from one another."

"Magnify the area of their touchdown," commanded Bairnson.

Mirgant replied and not a second later, the area appeared in much greater detail on the view screen. Bairnson could not make out precisely the images of the two spacecraft, but the huge mountain in the center of the screen could be seen in much greater detail. Bairnson called for an analysis of the mountain.

"Indications are," Sunset began. "That it's a volcano. Approximately twenty five kilometers in elevation and two kilometers wide at its mouth. At the moment it's dormant and has probably been so for millennia"

Bairnson chewed on an idea for a moment before asking, "Where exactly did the *Erebus* land?"

Mirgant checked the readings on her panel.

"Apparently," she said slightly bemused, "inside the volcano."

Bairnson knew it! It was all beginning to make sense.

"And the shuttlecraft?"

"Five kilometers from the base of the volcano, sir."

Bairnson paced the length of the bridge for several seconds. In that time he contemplated his options, but in the end, only one made sense.

"We're going down," he sternly announced. "I want a small landing party assembled in the transporter room in ten minutes. Commander Sunset," he turned to face Janet still standing at the science station.

"You will temporarily serve as first officer.

Assume command of the bridge."

"Aye sir," Sunset replied.

Bairnson quickly turned and was heading for the doors to the turbolift. Sunset took two quick paces forward and nervously called out to Jack.

"Where will you be sir?" she asked in a more official manner.

"I'm going down to the surface with the landing party."

Janet's mouth gaped slightly in astonishment.

"Shouldn't you remain in command of the ship?" she asked with a slight quiver in her voice. "I mean a starship captain shouldn't just leave his post to go on a landing party mission that could be dangerous."

Bairnson had moved down from the open turbolift doors halfway through her speech. He now stood face to face with her.

"Devorax has been playing with me up 'til now," Bairnson said gently. "He's led me half way across the quadrant to a nearly dead planet. Whatever it is he wants, he has to face me man to man. Nothing else will satisfy him. I have to go."

Bairnson realized that Sunset's concern was genuine. Not only for the man she loved, but also for the safety of the *Enterprise*. She tried to further press her point. "You should take a whole garrison of security with you."

"No," Bairnson shook his head. "Y'Gar's already down there and Devorax's probably expecting more. The less people I take with me the better."

Janet continued to try to make him stay, but in her heart she knew that Jack Bairnson had made up his mind.

Nothing she could say or do could stop him and so she decided to stop trying and abide by his decision. As Bairnson turned to exit the bridge he made one final command to Sunset. "If you haven't heard from

me in exactly two hours,” he stated and then paused for effect.

“You’re to open fire on the surface of the planet. Destroy that volcano. That way, we’ll be certain that Devorax never terrorizes anyone ever again!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jack Bairnson had always enjoyed playing games. Partly because he had fun but mostly because he was so good at it. He had always enjoyed the mental puzzle game which Captain Sulu had often played with the crew aboard the *Excelsior* as he always came out on top of everyone else at them.

But Bairnson was not having any fun at all with this game.

This game that Devorax was playing with him was something akin to what had once been called Russian roulette. No matter how many times someone played it, no matter how proficient they got at it, someone always ended up dying.

Worlds had been terrorized. Populations slaughtered. Even the Federation president had met an untimely end playing this game.

And now, Bairnson had grown tired of it all. The game had long since lost its appeal and it was time once and for all to end it.

Jack Bairnson hated games where someone else was constantly changing the rules.

* * *

The surface of the unnamed planetoid was indeed as barren, sandy, and rocky as the *Enterprise* computers had said it was. The dull orange sand stretched out for thousands of kilometers with no end in sight. The rocky crags were sheer and almost unscalable, and the climate was unbearably hot and dry.

If Y'Gar had successfully landed here, as everything seemed to indicate, he probably felt right at home. The conditions were not too dissimilar from the arid world of his origin. Bairnson chuckled at the thought of this as he surveyed the area which he and the other members of his landing party had beamed down to.

Saallak probably felt at home as well as she surveyed the area with her tricorder. She moved with typical Vulcan speed and efficiency and soon made her report.

"No sign of humanoid life of any kind in the immediate vicinity, sir."

Bairnson nodded at her report and for no apparent reason, checked to make certain that his phaser was still attached to the belt of his uniform.

“Captain!”

Bairnson turned upon hearing Curtis Winston’s call. He strode over to the sheer cliff face where Winston was standing. As the black man pointed out ahead of them, Bairnson stared with obvious pain in his heart.

In an open valley below, a green fertile plain stretched out for acres irrigated by an single but persistently flowing, narrow river. It was almost as though the valley didn’t realize how incongruous it looked against the orange desert sand. Even if it had, it probably wouldn’t have cared and would have continue to function as it had before anyone had even noticed.

It was the burned-out constructions however, which saddened Bairnson’s heart.

They had been of a small, primitive thatched twig-and-mud construction. But now, all that remained were blackened half-structures. Burned out by some kind of conflagration which Bairnson theorized was by no means natural.

“This was someone’s home,” gasped Bairnson.

Winston said nothing but nodded in silent agreement. Bairnson turned away from the dead valley below and set his sights upon the volcano which rose steadily into the sky a few meters away from them.

Without a word, Bairnson began to trudge straight towards the ominous mountain. Winston, Saallak, and Commander Ryan Johnson followed.

* * *

The landing party only walked for a half hour before they arrived at the base of the volcano, but they were as hot and sweaty as if they had just walked the length of the Sahara.

They stopped as Bairnson pulled a canteen from the satchel which he had slung around his shoulder. He took a quick but fulfilling drink of its cold water before passing it around to the others.

As Johnson took a sip from the metallic container, Bairnson looked over at the unaffected Saallak.

"Lieutenant," he said. "Scan the area for any kind of entrance."

Saallak concurred and refusing her chance at the canteen, activated her tricorder and began pacing the area.

She continued to scan for several moments. Finally she stood still. Staring down at the tiny screen on the instrument for a moment to confirm her data, she gave her report.

"There is an entrance approximately thirty meters from this position. This way." She indicated heading directly right from where they currently stood.

Bairnson, Johnson and Winston followed the Vulcan woman.

* * *

“Bit obvious isn’t it?”

Johnson was commenting on the huge metallic door set in the orange rock face of the volcano which towered fifteen feet above the sandy floor of the desert.

Bairnson had to admit that Johnson was probably right, but then why conceal an entrance from hostile visitors on an unknown alien world which nobody came to?

Bairnson scrutinized the door from top to bottom.

The huge metal bolts welded in to hold the structure together were at least as big as a human hand. None of them had been designated as a handle.

“I’d appreciate any suggestions you may have,”

Bairnson finally said.

Johnson stepped forward and repeated what the captain had done. Johnson’s visual inspection proved to be more useful. He asked Lieutenant Saallak for her tricorder and began adjusting a couple of the machine’s dials.

Bairnson came over and curiously inspected what the engineer was doing.

“If this door works on the principal I think it does,”

explained Johnson. "It should simply be a matter of finding the right audio frequency to trigger the opening mechanism."

"Judging by the size and material composition of the door," Saallak added. "I would say that it is probably somewhere in the range of a very high A-sharp frequency, Commander."

"Could be," commented Johnson after finishing his adjustments to the tricorder.

"Are you ready?" queried Bairnson.

Johnson nodded.

He then pointed the tricorder directly at the huge metallic barrier. He slowly turned a dial. Saallak winced from the high pitch of the tone which only her highly-tuned Vulcan ears could detect. Bairnson noticed her slight discomfort before registering the low rumbling directly behind him.

Like a thunderstorm on the horizon at first, the noise grew slightly greater before easing to a comfortable level. The ground beneath the landing party vibrated slightly as the huge metal door slowly rose up into the mountainside. It stopped about halfway up its course as Johnson switched off the tricorder.

The strain on Saallak's face disappeared and the door was open high enough to allow them to enter.

Bairnson drew his phaser. He ordered the others to set theirs on stun before leading them through the now-open doorway.

The passageway in which the landing party now found themselves, was constructed of the same metallic material as the door. It echoed their footsteps as they slowly proceeded down its length. It had been illuminated at first by the outside light filtering through the open doorway, but fifteen minutes into the corridor the light started to fade.

Winston had taken a torch from out of his satchel and activated it. The bright luminescence the torch provided was not as great as that provided by the desert world's sun, but it was adequate to allow the team to find their way down the corridor's length.

After what seemed to be about half an hour or so, the landing party arrived at the end of the corridor. There was another door staring them in the face. It was only of a standard size and this time there was an access panel on the wall immediately to the door's left. Johnson made a quick inspection of the panel.

"Probably programmed to respond to an individual fingerprint pattern," Johnson concluded.

"So what do we do to bypass it?" Winston queried.

"This."

Bairnson raised his phaser and pointed to the panel. He squeezed the trigger and a fine orange beam of light burst from the weapon's nose. The beam

followed a short trail to the access panel and within less than a second, had completely destroyed it in a shower of sparks and smoke.

As Bairnson replaced his weapon at his side, the three other landing party members marveled at him. They had been perhaps thinking of a more stealthy way of entering wherever the door led, but Bairnson was through playing around.

"He knows we're here," Bairnson said before stepping through the now open doorway.

* * *

The doorway had been like the entrance to the princess's bedroom on Zechariah, leading them into a small foyer which had yet another door at the end. Bairnson again used his phaser to open the other door and allow the landing party to step through.

They now found themselves in an expansive, rocky walled, circular chamber about the length of three football fields laid end to end. Bairnson glanced skyward and saw a tiny circle of light high above him which provided the only illumination in the dimly lit cavern.

Winston called over to the captain and drew his attention to the huge black starship resting at the far end of the cavern. Bairnson came closer to Winston and the pair of them immediately concluded that it was in fact the *Erebus*.

They were inside the vent of the volcano itself.

Bairnson glanced down and noticed that the floor on which they were standing was constructed of the same grey metal as the doors and corridor had been. Effectively plugging up what lied below.

This was obviously the place Devorax had wanted them, so why hadn't anything actually happened yet? Bairnson wondered. As he and the others surveyed the immense cavern and its contents, Bairnson began to feel uneasy. He felt like a batter standing on home plate with a three and two count knowing that the pitcher was about to deliver a curveball.

"Welcome," an ominous voice boomed from overhead.

The landing party members looked around in mild confusion. The immense size and circular shape of the cavern made the voice echo all around them in so many different directions that it was difficult to tell from whence it came.

"I trust you didn't have too much difficulty locating me," boomed the disembodied voice once again.

Bairnson couldn't make heads or tails as to the voice's origin and decided to keep silent until he could determine it.

"I'd hate to think you went to all the trouble of following me across the quadrant and then have difficulty finding me on an uninhabited desert world," the voice wryly stated.

“Uninhabited?” Curtis Winston boldly called out.

“What about that village back there?”

A cruel snicker was audible before the voice spoke again. “Those primitive peasants had served their purpose.

I no longer required them.”

“Just another population to terrorize and then eliminate, huh?” Winston said with obvious disgust.

“Unlike the other planets they served me well,” the voice boomed. “But their time came just as all the others.”

The voice stopped for a moment.

“As yours soon will,” it then added.

Now it was time for Bairnson to speak.

“How is it that you can justify the destruction you cause?”

“Ah, Captain Bairnson,” the voice said with what could only be approximated to sinister glee. “I especially owe you for the disgrace you’ve brought on me. Your debt will be paid with interest.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Bairnson said unscathed by the voice’s threat.

“I don’t need to justify my actions to anyone,” the voice replied. “Especially you!”

Bairnson really hadn’t expected an answer to that question, he was playing for time. Trying to find the voice’s source and then deal with whoever it was.

“Actually,” the voice began again. “If anyone’s to blame for the destruction I’ve caused, it’s you!”

That caught Bairnson completely off his guard. He wasn’t expecting his opponent to pull some kind of trump card out of his sleeve. Bairnson noticed the other three staring at him questioningly. Was he really to blame for all the destruction?

“That’s right Jack, old friend. You’re to blame for what I am and what I’ve done!”

Bairnson was totally confused. What had he done to make whoever this was say such a thing? He decided to find out.

“How?” he simply asked.

“Oh come now,” the voice said reprehensibly.

“Jack Bairnson, honors graduate of Starfleet Academy. Executive officer of the *U.S.S. Excelsior* for five years, decorated ten times for bravery? The man hand-picked by Starfleet to be the commanding officer of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*?”

This was beginning to get irritating. Whoever he was, he knew Bairnson’s history. All the way back to the Academy.

“Who are you?” asked Bairnson. “Why are you doing this?”

There was silence for a brief moment and then the voice spoke again.

“You are, what I could have been. We are the same.”

“We’re nothing alike!” hissed Bairnson.

"Ah, but we are. We've just gone about it differently. We are both powerful men. We command great starships. We have the ability to decide who lives and who dies!"

"That's not how it is," Bairnson said through clenched teeth.

"Oh, but it is," the voice said with no trace of emotion. "You were given that right by Starfleet. I was not. So I had to give it to myself."

Bairnson surprised himself by crying out "NO!" and raising his phaser to fire. He pointed in several different directions and squeezed the trigger, but all the beams hit were the rocky walls.

Bairnson's breath came in aggravated heaves as he ceased firing and heard the voice's laughter echoing through the cavern. The three other landing party members were startled to see their captain behaving in such a manner.

"Careful Captain," the voice steadily began again.

"You almost killed one of your own."

Bairnson didn't realize what the voice meant until a spot light suddenly came on and illuminated one of the cave's far walls. The spotlight drew attention to the wall upon which a man had been hung. Although beaten and bloody, with his clothes ripped nearly to shreds, Bairnson immediately recognized the crucified man.

It was Commander Y'Gar.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jack Bairnson's jaw nearly touched the floor as he stared in disbelief at the hanging, crucified form of his executive officer dangling a scant five feet above the metallic floor of the volcanic cavern. The beaten Yarzonian officer hung motionless. The whole scene reminded Bairnson of a horrific image from one of his own nightmares. So, this is what it was coming down to, was it?

Johnson, Saallak, and Winston also stared in complete shock. It was true that they found the Yarzonian man abrasive and unlikable, but as the captain had said, hadn't they also been to receive a commission aboard the *Enterprise*? They wouldn't have wished a fate like this on their worst enemies. It certainly wasn't fit for someone who was supposed to be a friend.

"Oh come now," the mysterious, disembodied voice began again. "You really didn't believe that I hadn't noticed his pursuit, did you Jack?"

The voice paused for effect, letting the question ooze its way into Bairnson's mind.

"How else could I have prepared for your arrival?"

“What do you want?” Bairnson asked finding nothing else that he could do.

“Isn’t it obvious, Jack?” the voice sounded slightly hurt by the question. “I want the pleasure of personally destroying you.”

It was then that Bairnson heard the low electronic hum. Once again the reverberation of sound the circular chamber created made pinpointing the sound’s origin difficult. However, soon the sound was accompanied by an ever brightening light emanating in the direction of the *Erebus*.

Bairnson turned his head towards the growing illumination. A walkway hatch was opening from the belly of the black starship. A pair of humanoid legs were outlined against the white backdrop of light. They were advancing from out of the ship.

The voice returned once again. Although still deep and ominous, this time it did not seem to surround the landing party, but came directly from the steadily lowering ramp.

“Actually, it’s true I’ve had several opportunities to kill you before,” it said. “But somehow, this seems so much more poetic.”

The humanoid figure was now completely in view. It’s dark silhouette still surrounded by an aura of light. The hatchway behind it slowly began to close.

The methodical way in which this person operated fascinated Jack Bairnson no end. However, he found

himself confused by the figure's last remark. His confusion did not go unnoticed.

"Surely you remember the time I came the closest, Jack?" the figure said sarcastically. "On Omega Omicron 2?"

Omega Omicron 2.

The incident on that planet had never been far from Jack Bairnson's mind. Now events that had occurred on that world were beginning to make sense. The mysterious vessel the *Excelsior* couldn't get a proper a sensor lock on.

The attack on the colonists and Bairnson's away team by an unseen enemy. And most of all, the mysterious injection which Bairnson alone had received. The reason he had survived was because Doctor T'Ma had found an antidote for the lethal poison barely in the nick of time.

"Why do you think your first assignment as captain of the *Enterprise* involved me?" the figure said. "You got the closest to me."

Closest?

Bairnson would have hardly considered that that made him the ideal choice to snare Devorax. But who knew how the upper echelons of Starfleet Command operated?

Bairnson now noticed that the hatchway on the *Erebus* had now closed completely. As his eyes

adjusted to the returning dim light, Bairnson finally got his first look at the infamous terrorist.

He was wearing a one-piece uniform made of a silvery, thinly metallic fabric. His boots and gloves were of a slightly deeper grey than the rest of the outfit and they seemed to completely cover any trace of skin tone which Devorax might have had. What really struck Bairnson though, was the figure's helmet.

It was exactly the way General Zaraff had described it. Metallic silver with two huge, red circular eyes. A red fin split the face of the helmet into two sides as it arced downward from its crest at the helmet's apex.

The mouth, at least that's what Bairnson presumed it was, had been finely etched into the lower half of the face. It was mainly there to give a vaguely human appearance. It did not move as the figure spoke. The face was permanently frozen into a single, emotionless expression.

The more Bairnson gazed at the helmet, the more it reminded him of the helmet from a standard Federation V-16 survival suit. In fact, Devorax's whole outfit was of the exact same material out of which such suits were constructed. The helmet had been radically modified to give it a more ominous and frighteningly stoic appearance, but otherwise it matched the V-16 almost perfectly.

There was more to Devorax than first met the eye.

He slowly began advancing on the landing party, a phaser poised at the ready in his right hand. Bairnson decided to bait him for more information.

"One way or another Jack," continued Devorax.

"I've been behind every move you've made."

"So it's just me you want?" Bairnson countered with a barely detectable boldness. "In that case, why don't let the rest of my crew go?"

"Oh, I intend to let those on the ship live,"

Devorax stated adding, "However you and the others here know far too much. You must be eliminated."

"In that case," said Bairnson. "Since we're all doomed to die anyway, why don't you show us who you really are?"

Devorax stopped in his tracks. This was the first sign of hesitation the terrorist had shown. He spoke again, but his confidence sounded forced.

"Oh no, Jack. You're not going to get the satisfaction."

"Why not?" Bairnson boldly asked. "You've proved yourself a better man than I am. Why not satisfy your own ego by revealing your true identity to me?"

"You're trying to trick me," Devorax said with a barely detectable quiver in his voice. "I won't!"

"Coward!" Bairnson spat.

"I fear nothing!" Devorax angrily replied.

"Especially you, Bairnson!"

"Prove it, then. Show me who the better man is.

Show who you are!"

Devorax stood still a moment contemplating his next move. Bairnson could tell that he had struck a nerve deep within the terrorist's being. Devorax's breath was short and came in angry, frustrated huffs. Finally the masked terrorist spoke.

"The sight of my face Bairnson," said Devorax pointing at the Federation captain, "will be the last thing you ever see!"

Devorax raised his hands to press them firmly against either side of his helmet. His fingers moved, as though activating a single hidden control loosening the fit of the helmet against his head. Devorax raised the helmet slowly until it revealed a stubbled human chin. A mouth, a nose followed. Finally the man's deep blue eyes and sandy brown hair were completely exposed. He placed the helmet down on the metallic floor and stood once again pointing his phaser directly at Captain Bairnson.

Bairnson recognized the man. It didn't actually surprise him to know, in fact he smiled with the satisfaction he often felt at the end of a mystery novel when he realized that he had had the murderer figured out all along.

"Riggs," Bairnson simply said. "Geoffrey Riggs."

Riggs shifted his weight on his feet uneasily. "You can't have known, Jack."

"Oh no. Not at first," agreed Bairnson. "But when this whole thing turned into a game of revenge against

me, I could only think of a handful of people who resented me enough to try it.”

“Ah,” Riggs said with an almost restored confidence. “But the incident aboard the *MacFarlane*. You couldn’t have predicted that could you?”

“Oh the suicide was a nice touch, I admit. But you didn’t count on one thing: the Council appointing a new president.”

“That wasn’t the point!” shouted Riggs. “The point is that I succeeded in assassinating the president of the Federation alone!”

“Yes that must have been quite a rush for you. For a while anyway. What were you proposing to do for an encore?”

“Your death was always the integral part of my plan. Here on this world you would meet your deaths and I,” Riggs paused dramatically. “I would be found safe and sound. A survivor. Escaped from the carnage of the infamous Devorax.”

“I see,” Bairnson said with fascination. “You would be the lone survivor of a battle between Devorax and us. You’d be a hero.”

“Yes,” sighed Riggs in ecstasy. “I’d get the *Enterprise* at least. Finally, command of my own starship.”

Riggs paused again. He stressed his next words with sadistic relish to Bairnson’s face.

“I may even finally win over that little waif of yours: Janet!”

Bairnson managed to contain his rage. "It's perfect, Geoff. It almost could've worked too."

Bairnson's statement took Riggs by surprise. He cocked his head back in confusion. Within seconds he brought it forward again with an evil smile curled across his lips.

"You seem to forget, Jack. I hold the winning hand."

"Maybe," Bairnson calmly replied.

Suddenly, as if on a cue from Bairnson, a terrible tremor struck the volcanic cavern. Riggs glanced skyward and noticed a huge, orange fireball erupting from the mouth high above the cavern. A second explosion followed not a few seconds later. Riggs' face twisted in horror building with rage. He slowly glanced down at Jack Bairnson who stood calmly with an inane grin on his face.

"But I have an ace up my sleeve!" said Bairnson with satisfaction.

Huge chunks of igneous rock began to fall from above as the relentless explosions continued to pound the top of the volcanic mountain. Bairnson moved, dodging the falling rock. He called out to the others to set Y'Gar free. Johnson, Saallak, and Winston jumped in response to his command and immediately ran over to the far wall on which the Yarzonian hung crucified.

Devorax had remained standing where he was as the shower of stone began to increase in its intensity. He

began crying out in agony as the world that he knew began to crumble all around him. Bairnson rushed over to aid the others in setting Y'Gar free. He stopped as Riggs' voice called out to him. Bairnson turned to face the man who had fallen to his knees. He advanced towards him.

"What have you done!" screamed Riggs.

"That 'little waif Janet,' as you called her, has obeyed my orders to the letter and opened fire on this mountain. Having not heard from us exactly two hours after we beamed down," replied Bairnson with a satisfied smile.

Bairnson hadn't expected Riggs to pick his phaser up and point it at him again in one swift move, but that was exactly what he did. Bairnson took a step backwards nearly avoiding being struck on the head by another falling rock. He continued to slowly move backward as Riggs nervously pointed the phaser at his heart. His lips curled into a sinister and maniacal grin.

"If I die here," heaved Riggs. "I won't go to Hell alone."

Riggs slowly began to laugh. The sound built up higher and higher as his mind slowly slipped away. He advanced towards Bairnson who continued to back away.

Riggs' steps became quicker. He was determined not to let Bairnson escape. Riggs had backed Bairnson

up against one of the far walls of the cavern and held him paralyzed against the cold, hard rock with his phaser.

Then, without warning, Riggs suddenly convulsed and fell backwards to the floors unconscious.

Bairnson barely caught his breath and managed to force his eyes to stare straight ahead where he saw Y'Gar and the others standing in front of the open doorway through which they had entered the cavern. Y'Gar was holding a phaser straight out in front of him. It had been he who had fired and stunned Devorax.

Bairnson then realized that the stone shower was at its most severe. He heard Y'Gar calling to him to join him and the others. Bairnson ran forward, leaping and swerving to avoid being killed by one of the huge volcanic boulders raining from above.

Within seconds he reached the doorway.

Y'Gar began pulling Bairnson through the open doorway where they would flee down the long metallic corridor to safety. However, Bairnson would not budge.

Y'Gar asked him what was the matter.

"We can't just leave him in there," said Bairnson calmly.

"What?" Y'Gar could barely believe his ears. He looked his captain square in the face, using his green on green eyes to their fullest effect.

“After what he’s done to the Federation? Not to mention all of us and you especially?”

Y’Gar straightened himself and made his point calmly and firmly.

“He deserves to die!”

Bairnson gave his executive officer a reprimanding look. Even through all that had happened, the Yarzonian still had much to learn.

“If we leave him,” Bairnson began, “then he really will have won. He’ll have proved that we aren’t any better than him. And I don’t intend to let that happen.”

Bairnson quickly darted away from the four other officers and began the mad dodging and swerving game run to avoid being crushed to death by the falling rocks.

He reached the body of Geoffrey Riggs, lying motionless on the metallic floor in what he would afterwards think had to have been a galactic record.

He tried to rouse Riggs any way that he could. He shook his motionless shoulders. Slapped his unresponsive face. Nothing he did seemed to rouse him. Bairnson was about to bend down and carry Riggs out of the cavern over his shoulders when he heard Y’Gar cry out.

“Captain! ***Look out!!*** ”

Instinctively, Bairnson dodged aside, just seconds before a mammoth sized boulder landed on top of Geoffrey Riggs’ body with a mighty thud. Bairnson

rose from the floor. The stone shower was beginning to ease a little.

Bairnson stared at the floor in front of him. A gigantic boulder now sat where Geoffrey Riggs had once been. He was dead. And Bairnson could not help but feel a twinge of sadness. Why did it have to come to this? Why did Geoffrey Riggs feel so jealous of Jack Bairnson that he became an intergalactic terrorist?

These were questions which Jack Bairnson could not easily and satisfactorily answer. He doubted he would ever understand why, after so many generations of evolution, a man could still be driven to this.

Bairnson glanced around him and realized that the four officers who had joined him on this mission were now all around him. Their looks betrayed the genuine sorrow and compassion they seemed to share with their captain. Finally, Jack Bairnson gave the one order he was certain that everyone present would agree to.

“Let’s go home.”

EPILOGUE

It had been five days since the *Enterprise* had moved away from the orange desert planetoid. Princess Zokara had been dropped off at starbase 270 where she would be picked up by the *U.S.S. John Heinz*, bound for Earth.

Captain Bairnson had been reassured by the princess that once she had reached Earth, she would do her best to see that nothing would further hinder the admission of Zechariah to the Federation. Of this, Bairnson had said he had no doubt.

* * *

Captain Jack Bairnson sat alone in his ready room with a small black, resin computer pad in his lap. He mulled over his thoughts for a brief moment and then activated a switch on the small console.

"Captain's log, Stardate: 9895.7," he began. "The first mission of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* under my command has been completed. The ship and crew have performed admirably. We have managed to help the Federation gain an ally in the planet Zechariah. Princess Zokara, head of the royal family of the planet is currently bound for Earth where she will complete the negotiations for the admission of Zechariah to the federation.

The *Enterprise* has been ordered to return to the sector of space to which we chased Devorax in order

to begin further exploration and cataloguing of this once-uncharted sector of space.”

Bairnson paused a moment. His tone became much more somber.

“This area, which has been named the ‘*Gourami*’ sector, has already claimed one human life,” he said.

“Geoffrey Riggs. Special envoy and administrator to the president of the Federation, was killed on an uninhabited desert planet by the ruthless intergalactic terrorist, Devorax.”

Bairnson stopped.

For the first time, he had noticed that someone else was in the room. Commander Y’Gar had entered while Bairnson was making his log entry and had overheard the tail end of what Bairnson had recorded.

“I’m not interrupting, am I sir?” Y’Gar innocently asked.

“Not at all,” Bairnson replied, placing the computer pad on the table in front of him. “What’s on your mind, Commander?”

Y’Gar took a seat and fidgetted nervously before speaking. It was the first time Bairnson had ever noticed his executive officer that way.

“You didn’t mention that Riggs was Devorax in your report sir,” Y’Gar pointed out trying to make small talk at first.

"No," Bairnson replied. "No point. Besides, Riggs never felt that Starfleet had treated him properly. Maybe now, his ghost will rest a little easier."

Bairnson paused a moment. Y'Gar had never really known Riggs and Bairnson caught his attempt at making polite conversation. He asked Y'Gar what he really wanted to know.

"I suppose," Y'Gar began, "that there's going to be some kind of official reprimand for what I did.

Abandoning the ship to chase Devorax, I mean."

"Yes I suppose there'll have to be," sighed Bairnson. "Protocol and all, you know."

Y'Gar had realized this. There was a strong tradition in Starfleet about discipline in the ranks. Even the great Captain James Tiberius Kirk had fallen prey to it eventually.

"In that case sir, I just would like to express my sincerest apologies."

Y'Gar then stopped as his mouth tried voice the words that his mind had told him to say.

"And offer my resignation," he finally said.

Bairnson leaned back in his chair eyeing the Yarzonian. This young man, who when he had first come aboard this ship had openly challenged Bairnson's ability to command, was now sitting before him, humbly offering to resign his beloved commission in Starfleet. Bairnson could see where Y'Gar and Riggs were so much alike.

Both had felt themselves unfairly treated by Starfleet, but whereas Riggs chose to fight against it, Y'Gar had chosen to ride it out and hope for the best.

Bairnson couldn't help but be amazed.

"Do you really want to do that?" asked Bairnson.

"No," Y'Gar immediately replied. But then added,

"However, it is the only honorable thing to do."

"Y'Gar," Bairnson rose from his seat. He strolled the room until he stood above Y'Gar's seat.

"It's true you've acted with a degree of impetuosity."

"Arrogance would be more accurate," Y'Gar quickly added.

"Please don't interrupt me, Commander," said Bairnson calmly. Y'Gar made an audible gulp, realizing his mistake. Bairnson continued.

"You're atypical of most Starfleet officers that I've come across. Now, I kind of like to think of myself as a bit of a rebel as well."

Bairnson paused letting the thought sink in. He then added, "We kindred spirits are few and far between.

We have to stick together."

Y'Gar whirled around in his chair to face the captain. A look of sheer disbelief across his face.

"How can you say that, sir?" gasped Y'Gar. "The way I've been acting, I'm surprised you didn't suspect that I was Devorax."

"Oh, for a hot second, I did," said Bairnson.

Y'Gar sank in his chair.

“But then I remembered hearing you say that you had given your loyalties to Starfleet. And loyalty is a valuable commodity among your people. Isn’t that right?”

Y’Gar nodded.

“When you took off in that shuttlecraft, yes I was angry at you for abandoning your post,” Bairnson paused for effect. “But deep down inside, I admired you for having the balls to go after him. Alone. Knowing that we would follow you.”

Bairnson could see Y’Gar swelling with pride.

Y’Gar didn’t want to leave Starfleet any more than Bairnson wanted him to leave his ship. The pair were too much alike to end it like that.

“So Commander,” Bairnson announced. “About this resignation...”

“Who’s resignation would that be, sir?” Y’Gar interrupted with a smile.

Bairnson smiled back at his executive officer and cheerfully dismissed him from the room. Y’Gar exited through the doorway with a new spring in his step that Bairnson hoped he would never grow tired of seeing. Jack Bairnson then returned to the computer pad sitting on the table. He picked it up, sat back down, and continued with his entries.

“Note commendations for the following officers: Lieutenant Commander Janet Sunset, Lieutenant Commander Ryan Alex Johnson, Lieutenants Thuroq

Mirgant, Curtis Winston, and Saallak. Doctor James Alistair Crispin,” Bairnson paused and then added with a proud smile, “and Commander D’nadrY’Gar.”

* * *

*Captain’s log, supplemental. The **Enterprise** has re-entered the Gourami sector and begun its probe out into the unknown. I am confident that whatever awaits us out there, we will be more than ready for it.*

On a more personal note, my beard appears to be growing in quite nicely. I expect it to be fully grown in in another week. So far the crew seems to approve of it.

Although Janet thinks it tickles.