



# STAR TREK

THE ENTERPRISE-B CHRONICLES



*futurelife*

by David Dietz

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*For Darwin Thomas Jarrett,  
creator of the Dräkmarian Alliance International Star Trek  
Fan Club and all things related to the world of  
Dräkmar IV.  
Passed beyond the rim way too soon...*

# PROLOGUE: DISCOVERY

*"I have been one acquainted with the night."*

Why should that particular passage come to mind?

There was no easy answer, it seemed. Perhaps it was because when his mind roused even for an instant, it was greeted by surrounding darkness. He thought he had overcome this irrational fear long ago, but now it had returned. Sometimes with even greater intensity than ever before. But the dark was not the only thing that gnawed at his mind.

*Where am I? Who am I?*

It hardly seemed to matter anymore.

*How did I get here? Where is here?*

He couldn't feel anything. He was aware of his body, but he couldn't use it. Feelings as simple as raising his arm to scratch his ear or taking a deep breath of cool mountain air had become alien to him. He felt like he wanted to cry.

He couldn't do that either.

Had it really come to this? Consciousness without feeling? Living death? He didn't know how to describe it. Even if he could find the proper phraseology for it, who could he tell it to? Who could he tell any of this to?

As far as he knew, his world had ended. Everyone he knew, everyone he loved, gone. Why had he been spared? What was so damn special about him that the fates

had decided to destroy all he knew but allowed him to go on? Yet another question which had no easy answer.

What was the point? Why debate with himself?

Unfortunately, he was all that he had left.

He decided to let the dark embrace him again. The darkness was his lover now, why not just give in to her charms?

*"I have been one acquainted with the night..."*

\* \* \*

Commander William T. Riker was feeling particularly ebullient as he sat in the center command seat of the bridge of the U.S.S *Enterprise*. He had just had a wonderful dinner with Deanna Troi in Ten Forward. They had discussed taking a vacation on Risa that Riker had proposed several weeks ago. Deanna had had her reservations at first, but Riker had been very persistent, and it seemed that she was now ready to just let go and have a few laughs with him on the popular vacation planet.

Riker now surveyed the activity on the bridge. The *Enterprise's* android officer, Lieutenant Commander Data sat in his usual place at Ops. Riker watched as the android's dexterous golden fingers danced across the lighted pads on the station's adjustable control panel. Even after all these years together, the android still amazed Riker. The advanced analytical machinery was only one aspect which Riker admired. He particularly found the android's almost childlike innocence as his most endearing aspect.

Riker then glanced towards the Conn position and found the equally fascinating Bajoran Ensign Ro Laren making similar motions as Data, though not as rapidly. Ro was an enigma herself. A troubled childhood in and out of Bajoran refugee camps during the Cardassian war had given her an intense, and at times hard-to-get-along-with personality. No one seemed to know that much about Ro. No one had gotten really close to her, except for maybe Guinan, Ten Forward's hostess, and if she knew anything, she wasn't saying a word.

Riker shook his head at the thought of the two puzzling individuals at the controls of the *Enterprise*. He then glanced up at the large, main viewing screen of the bridge. The stars were passing by the ship in elongated streaks. Riker always found the sight of the stars comforting, even when streaking by at Warp 8. It wasn't that they made him feel insignificant, too many other people felt that way. He liked to think of himself as being one with them.

"Commander."

Data's voice snapped Riker out of his musings. He directed his attention towards the human-appearing android.

"Forward sensors have detected an object ahead sir," reported Data.

"Is it in our path?" asked Riker.

“Negative sir,” Ensign Ro replied. “It is several degrees off of our present course, but it has fallen within range of the sensors.”

“Can we get a visual on it?”

“I believe so sir,” affirmed Data.

Riker then watched with no small degree of fascination as the android’s fingers danced across the Ops panel at almost a blur. Within seconds, the image on the viewer changed to what amounted to a sideways view of the stars streaking by the *Enterprise*. Far off in the distance, moving sideways at a much slower rate than the stars themselves was an indefinable silvery object.

Quickly, Riker ordered a magnification on the object. The image on the view screen changed once again, as though it were personally obeying the first officer’s orders. The object now appeared as a small vessel of some type. Riker guessed that the ship was about fifteen feet long and came to a nearly pointed snout from a boxlike rear. Two warp nacelles stuck out from the bottom of the craft.

To Riker’s astonishment, the craft appeared to be charred and blackened in several areas where it should have been almost gleaming white. Riker called for an identification of the ship.

“Indications are that the vessel is an old-style, class 4 Federation shuttlecraft sir,” reported Data.

“A class 4?” Riker wondered aloud. “They’ve been out of use for at least sixty years.”

“59.0736 years, to be precise, sir,” added Data.

Riker smiled to himself almost forgetting Data’s precision streak.

“Class 4s were usually attached to starships, weren’t they?” asked Ro.

“Yes,” said Riker. “Data, are there any records of a vessel coming this far out?”

Data sat silently for a moment as his positronic brain computed the question posed. “Negative,” he finally answered. “As far as we know, we are the only vessel to probe this part of the galaxy.”

“Then what the hell is that shuttle doing out here?”

“Commander!”

Riker turned his head towards Ro. She was making frantic movements up and down the pads on her panel checking and rechecking the data. A look of sheer disbelief further furrowed the ridges of the bridge of her nose. Riker moved towards her and glanced down at her panel. He asked for a report.

“Sir,” Ro began. “Sensors are detecting one humanoid life form aboard the shuttlecraft.”

Riker turned back towards Data, looking for a confirmation. Data confirmed the Ensign’s findings adding, “Heart rate and breathing are at the barest minimum, sir. I would therefore speculate that the occupant is in some kind of cryo-sleep.”

Cryogenic freezing? On an old Federation shuttlecraft? It just didn’t seem possible. Before Riker



could allow the thought to completely engulf him, Data made another report.

“The shuttle’s structural integrity is unstable. If it continues on its present course, I estimate that it will break up under extreme stress in approximately ten minutes.”

“Ensign, full stop!” snapped Riker. “Plot course to intercept that shuttle.”

Ro acknowledged Riker’s order, and could feel a slight drop in the pit of her stomach as the *Enterprise* came to a halt. Within seconds, the great starship turned slightly and began to inch closer to the endangered shuttlecraft.

Three minutes later, the image of the burnt and battered ship completely filled the view screen. Riker stood above Data’s station; his hand clenched in a tense fist.

“Can we lock onto it with a tractor beam?” asked Riker.

“I do not believe the shuttle would remain intact under our tractor beam,” replied Data.

“Alright, then we’ll have to do it the old-fashioned way.”

Riker never saw the slightly puzzled look which came across Data’s face as he moved over to Ro Laren’s station. “Ensign,” he began. “I want you to maneuver the ship so that we’re just below the shuttlecraft. Can you do it?”

Ro silently nodded.

She then pressed a series of the pads on her console. Riker could feel the *Enterprise* dropping slowly

but steadily; almost like one of her many turbolift elevators. The shuttlecraft on the view screen rose ever so slightly until it was nearly out of the top of the picture. Riker ordered Ro to stop.

With Riker's next command, Ro made the *Enterprise* inch forward slightly. Riker watched the view screen as the bottom of the shuttlecraft moved seemingly towards the great starship and then disappear from sight. An aft view shot showed the shuttle's front underbelly inch away from the *Enterprise* as the ship's stern also came into view.

Riker order Ro to stop once again.

"Now," he continued. "I want you raise the *Enterprise* up again, slowly. Line up the shuttle with the docking bay."

Ro carried out Riker's instructions now realizing what he was trying to do. Fortunately, the *Enterprise* responded to small, delicate maneuvers with the grace and precision of a cat. Ro managed to get the shuttlecraft lined up almost exactly with the docking bay entrance.

"Docking bay 2," said Riker tapping his comm badge. "Prepare to receive shuttlecraft."

The crewman on duty in the docking bay acknowledged Riker's order. The Commander then ordered Ro to back the *Enterprise* up at nearly one-quarter impulse power. All those present on the bridge barely detected the *Enterprise's* movement and seconds later, Data reported, "Docking bay has received the shuttle, sir."

Ro let out an audible sigh of relief. She then glanced up at Commander Riker whose smile was enough of an indication of a job well done.

Riker then strode to the upper level of the bridge towards the main turbolift. He stood before Worf, the *Enterprise's* burly, Klingon Security Chief. "Have a small security detail report to shuttle bay 2."

"Aye sir," replied the Klingon in his deep, almost ominous voice.

Riker then tapped his comm badge. "Sickbay. Doctor Crusher, please have a medical team report to shuttle bay 2."

"Acknowledged Commander," came Beverly Crusher's curt reply.

As Riker entered the turbolift accompanied by Worf, he tapped his comm badge one last time.

"Captain Picard, please report to shuttle bay 2."

# CHAPTER ONE

Captain Jean-Luc Picard was strolling down one of the *Enterprise's* many corridors at his usually fast pace. Though he kept his outward appearance passive, inside he was slightly irritated.

He had been enjoying a relaxing afternoon on the holodeck, caught up in one of the fictional mysteries of his favorite detective, Dixon Hill. For someone whose library ranged from the collected works of Shakespeare to James Joyce's "Ulysses," many of the crew still found it odd that the Captain's favorite holodeck fantasies revolved around the world of a little-known, 1940's-Earth pulp-magazine gumshoe.

During his time as captain of the *Enterprise*, Picard had had several members of the crew join him in his holodeck fantasy world just so they could experience the appeal of Dixon Hill themselves. Rarely had any one of them been disappointed.

Picard had often thought how interesting it might be if he were to concoct a holodeck fantasy which crossed the fictional universes of Dixon Hill and Commander Data's favorite detective, Sherlock Holmes. Data had in fact expressed interest in such a scenario and would be willing to try it should Picard ever find the time to formulate it. No doubt the rest of the bridge crew would want to come along too, if for nothing else just to watch.

Somehow, it always seemed that Picard never found the time to actually devise the fantasy. Too many problems requiring his attention kept cropping up when he least expected them.

Like now.

The *Enterprise* had been heading to various planets to pick up delegates to a major medical conference taking place at Starbase *Hippocrates*, the Federation's major medical research facility. The mission was relatively simple and Picard had been anticipating no problems.

Then, just as he was about to reveal the murderer of Johnny LaRue to an assembled parlor room of suspects, Commander Riker's message had come down from the bridge. With a sigh of reluctance, Picard froze the program and stored it in the holodeck's massive memory with the hope that he would continue it later. If he could remember the murderer's identity himself.

Picard had rushed back to his quarters, changed into the more comfortable grey shirt and red jacket uniform and began to make his way to Shuttle Bay 2.

\* \* \*

When he arrived, he found the bay bustling with nearly as much activity as the bridge during a Romulan attack. Picard noticed Commander LaForge and several members of his engineering corps, including the rather strange Reginald Barclay, inspecting the body of what appeared to be a badly weathered old-style Federation shuttlecraft.

Picard stepped forward past the two security personnel on either side of the bay's entrance towards Commanders Riker and Data, who were also surveying the craft. He asked Riker for a report and the first officer briefly relayed the details of the events leading up to the shuttle's presence in the bay.

"Any idea of where it might have come from?" Picard asked.

"Negative," replied Data. "It appears to have been adrift for several days. A week, at most."

"Data, if I'm not mistaken," Picard continued, "a modern shuttlecraft would have lost all motive and life-support power within a week."

"That is correct, sir."

"And this is a shuttle of the same series that was decommissioned by Starfleet nearly sixty years ago. Its power capacities were considerably less than what we have today, is that not so?"

"Again, you are correct sir."

Picard sighed heavily. "And there are no records of another vessel having probed this sector?"

Riker nodded.

"It appears we have a mystery on our hands."

Picard then walked around the rear of the craft to find LaForge and Barclay continuing to make their analysis of the shuttle. "Commander LaForge, can you identify the starship this shuttle was connected to?"

The stocky black man turned towards Picard, shaking his head. Even with his VISOR covering his eyes, Picard knew the expression of disappointment all too well. "The ident markings have been worn off, sir. There's really no way to tell where this shuttle came from until we can get a look at her record log."

"Why hasn't that been accomplished yet?" wondered Picard.

"It's just not been possible, sir. Every system aboard this ship has been frozen. Literally."

"And the occupant?"

"Also frozen, sir," said Commander Data as he and Riker joined the Captain.

"However, we do have indications of life on board," added Riker.

Picard thought for a moment before he announced, "Mr. LaForge give priority to getting the occupant of the shuttle out and safely to sickbay. Perhaps whoever it is will have some of those answers."

\* \* \*

*"I have been one acquainted with...."*

*What was that?*

*It sounded like it might have been....*

*No. After all this time? Impossible.*

*Light.*

*Voices.*

*Someone is here. Who are you? Who are...?*

*Shadows. Moving about. Coming over.*

*Has it finally happened? Is the suffering about to end? They seem to reach out, as if they were beckoning me to join them.*

*Dare I?*

*Floating.*

*It seems the decision has been made for me.*

*The light. So bright, and warm, and comforting.*

*Perhaps, I will see them soon, my lost compatriots. Will they welcome me? Will they throw wreaths of laurel leaves at my feet?*

*Or will they spurn me? Stake me to a fire for bringing about their doom as well?*

*No matter.*

*Whatever awaits, I am ready.*

\* \* \*

“Computer, set up isolation field,” Doctor Beverly Crusher huffed.

“Working,” replied the unemotional but distinctly feminine voice of the *Enterprise*’s main computer. Within seconds an aqua-colored field of energy appeared, surrounding the diagnostic bed upon which was Crusher’s latest patient. Satisfied that the field had properly stabilized, Crusher spoke again.

“Now, Computer, decrease room temperature inside the containment field by forty percent.”

The computer was silent for a moment. “Unable to comply,” it finally stated. “Decrease in temperature would



subject the patient to temperatures outside the sphere of human tolerance.”

“I realize that, Computer. But his body has already been subjected to those kinds of temperatures. We need to bring him back to a normal temperature very slowly.”

In all her time aboard the *Enterprise*, Crusher had discovered that she still treated the ship’s computer almost as if it were another person. She knew, of course, that it was irrational, but then again, people treated Data as a person too. So why should she feel any stranger about the way she talked to the ship’s computer from time to time?

“Unable to comply with request,” the computer droned.

Especially at times like now, she continued her thought, when it tended to be as bull-headed as Wesley had been years ago when he didn’t get his way with her. Much to her relief, Crusher heard the doors to sickbay opening and turned her head to see Captain Picard stride through them and into sickbay.

As Picard come over to Beverly Crusher’s side, she told him about the computer’s refusal to implement her instructions. Picard understood about the safety protocol installed in the computer’s software and knew that in order to carry out Doctor Crusher’s orders, it would need the override of two senior staff officers.

“Are you sure that’s necessary, Doctor?” wondered Picard. “You didn’t have this problem the last time we had cryo-sleepers aboard.”

“This is different, Captain. Those people were intentionally frozen by artificial means. Because of the conditions we found him in, what this man has experienced is more like a severe case of hypothermia. I have to treat it as such or we could lose him.”

“And any chance of discovering what he’s doing here in the first place,” pondered Picard. The Captain then averted his gaze from Crusher’s patient and with a slight upward glance, ordered the computer to override the safety protocol in this instance and carry out Crusher’s instructions. The computer beeped its compliance.

Beverly looked down at the tricorder she held in her left hand. The temperature readings from inside the containment field began to drop slowly until finally, they read close to ten degrees below zero centigrade. Doctor Crusher sighed her relief.

“Thank you, Captain,” she said. Crusher then moved over to one of the medical comm panels on the wall nearest to the bed. She moved her hands along the panel’s length, her fingers occasionally touching it at various points. This accomplished, she turned her attentions back to her tricorder, where she saw the numerical reading of the temperature within the containment field slowly but steadily begin to rise. Satisfied, she snapped the tiny box-like device closed and once again joined the Captain at his side.

The pair silently scrutinized the mystery man who laid on the bed within the blue aura of the containment field for a moment.

“Now what do we do?” Picard finally asked.

“Now, we wait for his body temperature to adjust to the room.”

“Will he recover?”

“I don’t see why not. I’ve treated dozens of hypothermia cases.” Beverly paused for a moment, leaning in closer to the containment field, her eyes squinted to make out the features of her patient.

She shook her head with a sigh, “But not like his.”

Picard nodded with a barely audible grunt.

“Who is he, Jean-Luc?”

Picard copied Beverly’s previous action, but shook his head with disapproval. “I’m not sure. His uniform seems to indicate that he’s a Starfleet Captain, though.”

“But from where? What ship?”

“I suspect, Doctor, that only he knows those answers. I want you to let me know the minute he regains consciousness.”

“Aye, sir.”

Picard nodded to his Chief Medical Officer, and with a curt smile, turned on one heel and purposefully strode out the doors of sickbay and into the corridor; bound for the bridge.

\* \* \*

The doors to the main turbolift parted, and Captain Jean-Luc Picard stepped through the now-open archway onto the plush carpeted floor of the bridge. He returned Lieutenant Worf's nod of acknowledgment and strode down the horseshoe walkway towards his command seat. Commander Riker rose from the chair and retook his own seat to the Captain's immediate right. Picard lowered himself into the chair which was now as comfortable to him as an old pair of shoes.

Picard glanced at the bridge's main view screen, and noticed that the stars which littered the image on it were still. Apparently, the *Enterprise* had not moved since bringing the adrift shuttlecraft aboard. Probably normal enough, but now that the shuttle and its occupant were safely aboard, was there really any reason to stay here? They did have a medical conference to attend, and there were many more delegates to be picked up.

"Number One," he said glancing over at Riker. "Is there any particular reason why the *Enterprise* is still at these coordinates?"

"We were investigating the possibility of finding debris, or anything else that might explain the shuttlecraft's presence in this sector sir," said Riker.

*Good boy Will, Picard thought. Probably would have done the same thing.* "Any conclusions?"

Data turned in his chair to face the Captain. "Scanners have registered no debris within a light year of these coordinates."

“What about some kind of wormhole?” queried Picard.

“Again, all scans are negative, sir,” replied the android.

*Seems as though we won't find any answers here,* Picard thought disappointedly. This whole situation was beginning to have all the earmarks of a classic Dixon Hill mystery. A stranger seemingly from nowhere, in whom it seemed were the only answers to the questions burning in Picard's mind. Answers that he would not hear, at least not until the stranger had awakened in sickbay. Until then, there seemed to be no point in hanging around here. Not while the *Enterprise* still had a job to do.

“Well,” Picard finally said. “Unless someone else has a suggestion as to the reason for the shuttlecraft's presence, we must move on to Hippocrates.”

The bridge was silent except for the usual hums and beeps of the computer equipment. That was all the confirmation Picard needed.

“Ensign Ro, lay in a course for our next stop before the conference.”

“Aye sir.”

Within moments, the view screen on the bridge was filled by the streaking white strands that were the stars as they appeared during warp drive.

\* \* \*

*Light. But not like before.*

*Not bright, warm, and inviting. Cold, blue, and frightening.*

*Shadows running through the light. Or on the other side of it?*

*No. No, it can't be!*

*After everything that's happened, how could it be here? Perhaps this is my final punishment; my final damnation for letting them all die.*

*But what else could I do? We were overwhelmed. Weren't we? Don't know. Can't offer any explanation, any defense.*

*Wait! What was that?*

*My finger. It just twitched.*

*There. It did it again!*

*My hand! I can feel it again. It clenches! Maybe this wasn't the damnation. Maybe this was the salvation!*

*A shadow. Moving towards me. Can barely make it out through the light. More blue, but not like the light. And red... could it be? Red hair? Yes, that's what it seemed to be.*

*The shadow has a face. A beautiful, angelic face smiling. Smiling at me? I think so. The first thing I've actually seen in... how long? No matter.*

*I couldn't be more pleased to be seeing it.*

*\* \* \**

Beverly Crusher moved over to comm panel at the far end of sickbay. She activated the call button trying to reach the

bridge. She grinned slightly to herself upon hearing Captain Picard's voice.

“I think you may want to come down to sickbay,” she said. “Our patient is waking up.”

## CHAPTER TWO

For the second time today, Captain Picard found himself strolling down one of the *Enterprise's* expansive corridors. This time, heading back to sickbay. The way things were going, he probably wouldn't be getting back to his Dixon Hill fantasy at any time today. Taking long and purposeful strides as he went, Picard hoped that he wouldn't forget Johnny LeClerque's murderer...

*Or was it LaRue? Dammit! I'm beginning to forget already!*

*Oh well, he thought with a sigh. I suppose I could always back up the program to a point where my memory will jog. But that takes half the fun out of it.* Picard silently hoped that this mystery man wasn't just some kind of garbage scavenger or a Federation officer gone AWOL. That would just totally destroy the whole effect and end up really annoying him at having expended all the time and effort of bringing him aboard.

Picard's thoughts had almost made him forget where he was going and he nearly bumped into an off-duty ensign. He brushed himself off, excusing himself and his somewhat frazzled nerves and continued on his way.

\* \* \*

His eyes opened once again.

This time he had no delusions about where he was.



The blue light had gone and he was now witnessing a scene that seemed somewhat familiar to him. Bright, white, overhead lighting. People bustling back and forth near him. Helping people up and laying them down on cots similar to his own.

He glanced up behind him and noticed a brightly-colored computer display screen of some kind. There was a humanoid outline on the far-left corner of the display and on its right, a series of five different wave-like patterns, changing ever so slightly with each passing moment.

Not really wanting to sit up, he returned his head to a more comfortable position and remained laying there on the bed. He sighed contentedly to himself. It was a little different, but still infinitely reassuring. He had been in and out of enough of them to recognize a starship sickbay when he saw in one.

All the same, why had it taken so long to realize this?

Then he remembered the cold. The darkness. The loneliness. And finally, the bitter sadness he felt. Even though he was on a starship, with people who appeared to be human like himself, or at least humanoid, he felt terribly alone. As though he had instead awakened aboard the *Mary Celeste*, or the *Titanic*, or some other great ghost ship from the history of his world.

To his relief, the angel with red hair, whose face he had first awakened to, had come over to his side. She

smiled down at him, and that, at least, made him not feel so alone.

“Good,” she said in soft, almost musical tone of voice. “You’re awake.”

“Where am I?”

“Sickbay,” said the angel. That he already knew, but he just wanted to make sure, and hearing her say it would confirm his thought. Somehow, this angel didn’t strike him as the deceptive kind.

“What happened?” Not the most original thing he could have said, but he needed to start somewhere. Besides, how do you talk to an angel?

“You were frozen in a state of suspended animation,” the angel replied. “I had to gradually bring your body temperature up to normal before you could regain consciousness.”

He only partially understood what she was saying, but it didn’t really matter. Listening to her soft, delicate voice was like listening to a Mozart symphony. He imagined she could give a lecture on a boring subject like quantum physics and still make it an enjoyable experience.

For a moment he laid there, staring up into her deep blue eyes. It took a moment for him to realize that she was now talking to someone else who had come up beside her. A tall, somewhat daunting figure of a man. He was slightly older than the angel, maybe in his mid-fifties, with only a slight white band of hair ringing his otherwise bald head.

It was only then that he noticed the pair were wearing a similar kind of clothing. The angel's was bluish for the most part with the upper third around the shoulders black. The other man's was slightly different. A red jacket over a grey top, but both with the same black area in the upper third of the ensemble. The man also had on the outside of his jacket, a peculiar but somehow familiar looking pin.

A silver wedge sweeping upward to form a point which pointed skywards also sweeping downwards and back in on itself at the bottom to form two more equidistant points sweeping downwards. Surrounding this wedge was a gold-colored oval shape resting on its side. Both this man and the angel had them on the upper left-hand chest side of their uniforms. He had hoped this would be the case, otherwise he would have felt slightly embarrassed at having stared for nearly a minute at the angel's chest.

The bald man bent down slightly towards him. His smile and kindly grey eyes reassuring him of his friendly disposition.

"Welcome aboard," he said. "I'm Captain Jean-Luc Picard, and I'm sure you already know Dr. Crusher." He indicated the angel standing next to him.

"Well," said the man on the bed. "Now I know the angel's last name anyhow."

He smiled to himself as he noticed Dr. Crusher's face turn slightly pink with embarrassment. Apparently,

the angel wasn't used to compliments, perhaps to spare her any further embarrassment, he should keep any future comments to himself. It was the least he could do for her.

"Beverly," the angel finally said.

Ah, that must have been her first name. As lovely and lyrical as her voice.

"While we're on the subject of introductions sir," said Picard, "may we know your name as well?"

The man opened his mouth to speak, but for some reason he seemed to freeze. As though every muscle in his body had suddenly hardened to stone. Finally, his brow furrowed as he tried to think of the answer to Picard's question. Try though he might, the answer simply would not come to him.

"I..." the man said vainly. "I... don't know. I can't remember!"

The man's face began showing signs of panic, however Dr. Crusher, his 'angel' laid a reassuring hand across his troubled brow. Soothing away all the turmoil in his mind.

"It's alright," she said smoothly. "It's perfectly understandable after what you've been through."

Clearly that memory had faded as well. The expression on the man's face pleaded with the two for some explanation. The bald man called Picard was able to provide it.

“We found your shuttlecraft adrift in space and brought it aboard. We discovered all of the onboard systems had been frozen somehow. And so had you.”

“Which is fortunate for you,” Crusher added. “The freezing process slowed down your metabolic rate to a point that allowed you to survive for a long time without food or water.”

The man nodded slightly, acknowledging his understanding. “But how did I get there in the first place?”

He noticed Picard frown slightly to himself. “We were hoping that *you* could tell us that, Captain.”

The man’s face now bore a new expression. One not as desperate as the last, but equally noticeable: confusion. “I’m sorry,” he said. “What did you just call me?”

“The uniform that you’re wearing indicates that you’re a Starfleet captain,” explained Picard. “Granted, it’s about eighty years out of date, but it nonetheless commands the same authority and respect.”

For the first time that day, and for perhaps a longer while than that, the man sat up on his bed. He inspected the clothing that he had been wearing. The colors were slightly soiled and dull from exposure but were still recognizable. A maroon jacket whose opening flap snapped together across his chest just below his left shoulder. A white strip of cloth, emblazoned with a peculiar, faded-gold, ladder-like pin fastened the flap to the rest of the jacket.

Around his waist, just slightly above the lower half of the jacket and his black pants, was a black leather belt fastened together at the center by a gold buckle that was nearly an exact replica the emblem which Picard and Crusher sported on their uniforms. The man quickly checked his own upper left chest and noticed that, indeed, a wedge-shaped badge also occupied that area of his uniform. His was a slight variation of the ones worn by Picard and Crusher, with an added strip underlying the bottom of the badge, but it was nonetheless the same emblem.

The man smiled to himself. "Well," he said with some relief. "At least I know people won't be calling me 'Hey You.'"

Picard and Crusher chuckled at the man's joke. This made him feel even better inside. He had been awake no more than fifteen minutes and he had already made somebody laugh. Now if I could remember my name, I'll be batting a thousand.

"Well Captain," Picard said after a moment. "Whenever you feel up to it, I'll be more than happy to give you a tour of the *Enterprise*."

Picard smiled at the man and courteously excused himself from Beverly Crusher's sickbay. The Captain watched as the bald man strode out the main doors of the bay. He then turned back to face his 'angel' once again, a look of sheer bewilderment across his face.

“Did I hear him right?” asked the Captain. “Did he say this ship is the *Enterprise*?”

“That’s right,” said Beverly with a smile. “What do you think?”

The Captain glanced around him, taking in as much of the sickbay as he could. “It’s all wrong,” he finally said.

“What do you mean, ‘wrong?’”

“The sickbay was never this big.”

“Have you been on the *Enterprise* before?” queried Beverly.

The Captain sat silently a moment, not quite sure how to answer the question. “Yes,” he finally said. “At least... I think I have.”

The Captain turned once again, swiveling his whole body in order to get a much more detailed inspection of the sickbay. The dull aching sensation he felt in his bones was ignored as he tried in vain to search for something familiar. Something that would remind him of the time he had last visited this ship and possibly even an idea as to his name.

Sadly, though his eyes inspected every piece of equipment, every person, male and female on duty in the sickbay at the moment down to the minutest detail, nothing triggered any memories. The Captain sighed disappointedly to himself and shrugged his shoulders with resignation. He turned his attention back to the angel Beverly. Perhaps something in her eyes would hold the answer he sought. But nothing, apart from a slight sexual arousal, came out of that longing look.

“Maybe you were on one of the other ships?”  
Beverly hopefully suggested.

The Captain returned his gaze to her eyes again.  
The look on his faced confused, yet curious.

“What do you mean?” asked the Captain. “What other ships?”

“The other ships called *Enterprise*.”

The Captain’s look remained the same: bewildered beyond belief. The angel was now speaking to him in riddles. Perhaps he had been right all along and that he was in fact meeting his damnation.

Except... Picard had said something. Something about his uniform. What was it, now? Eighty years out of date, or words to that effect? Perhaps that was the key to the door the angel was offering him. He decided to try to use it.

“What’s the registration number of this vessel?”

“NCC-1701-D,” replied Beverly.

Five? There had been *five* starships called *Enterprise*? He could vaguely recall one or two of them, but this ship was the *fifth*? Eighty years. Could that have been how long he had been frozen, as Beverly had said he was? If so, he had missed out on a lifetime, and was far behind whatever era it was he currently found himself in.

“Do you want me to check with Starfleet, Captain?” he heard Beverly say.



He glanced up into her eyes once again, uncertain of what good that would do. He soon learned that Beverly was a very good reader of people's facial expressions.

"If we check the Starfleet records of all the ships named *Enterprise*, we're bound to find some kind of record of you."

The Captain had to admit, it was worth a try. He nodded his agreement to Beverly and watched as she strode across the sickbay and through a clear glass archway into to her office. She activated some kind of terminal in the center of the desk and spoke to the tiny view screen.

He couldn't quite make out what she was saying, but the Captain assumed she must be contacting the bridge for access to a subspace transmission. The Captain smiled to himself and laid back down on the comfortable mattress of the diagnostic bed. He closed his eyes, and within moments returned willingly to the darkness from which he had emerged an hour ago. Knowing full well that this time, he would in fact wake up later.

\* \* \*

Messages travelled back and forth across the boundless wastes of space all the time. Signals came from starship, star bases, and space stations and were broadcast outward into the cosmos where they would be picked up by communications relay stations. The relay stations would then decode the messages sent by these ships and then transmit them to the destination which the sender had intended.

More often than not, the signal got through clearly, and was uninterrupted by any natural or artificially created interference and the receiver was able to interpret the message and do whatever was required of it. Often these communications were handled by computers of enormous memory capacity that could handle a hundred thousand messages a second and process them accordingly.

One particular message sent out into space was from the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. It was beamed out from the core of the starship's mainframe with the intention of reaching the United Federation of Planets mainframe on Earth. Once there, it would access the records of all the Federation starships named *Enterprise* and correlate that information with the service records of the respective ships' personnel.

However, this particular message triggered something else within the Federation mainframe. A subroutine that had been written into the mainframe's processing units decades before. It would return the information which the *Enterprise* requested at lightning speed, but it would do something else as well. Something that no one who currently operated the mainframe, or anyone with advanced knowledge in current computer science techniques would ever know anything about.

It transmitted another message to another mainframe. A mainframe far out in the wilderness of space. A mainframe that was the central records holder for a race occupying twin planets. A mainframe in a part of

space that no Federation personnel, no matter how brave, would ever dare to violate.

\* \* \*

Captain Jean-Luc Picard studied the faces of the officers seated around the conference table in the briefing lounge. Commander Riker's bearded features appeared impassive but interested as always. Worf looked as though he was slightly annoyed at having to attend yet another meeting. Again, nothing unusual. It was always difficult to tell what Data was thinking at any time. His synthetic, android face did not betray one glimmer of any readable thought or emotion.

And then there was Ro Laren.

She had almost jumped up from her chair as though she had been sitting on pins and needles when Picard requested her presence in the meeting as well. After all, she had been the one who helped to bring the shuttlecraft aboard the *Enterprise* in the first place. It was only fair that she attend the meeting as well.

Picard glanced up from his musings when the main doors to the briefing lounge parted, and Doctor Crusher stepped in. She apologized for her slight tardiness and quickly took her seat next to Commander LaForge. Picard straightened himself in his seat and addressed the assembled group.

"Doctor, how are our guests finding their accommodations?"

"I've had nothing but satisfactory reports from all of the delegates," said Crusher with a smile.

Picard turned his attention to his android officer. "Mr. Data, how many more stops do we have before we reach *Hippocrates*?"

"Two sir," said Data. "There are four delegates from Rigel 4 and six on Pollux 2 still awaiting our arrival."

"And after we pick them up, how long until we reach *Hippocrates*?"

"Three hours forty-seven minutes at maximum warp sir," replied the android.

Satisfied that that particular agenda of business was out of the way, Picard saw no reason to keep them in suspense any longer. "Well, I suppose we should discuss the elephant in the room."

"Pardon me, sir," said Data. "I do not see a pachyderm in here."

The group chuckled heartily at the android's pronouncement. Data cocked his head to the side and asked, "Did I do it again, sir?"

Picard nodded as he turned to face Beverly Crusher. "What's the status of our *other* guest, Doctor?"

"He's recovering from the effects of the hypothermia," said Crusher. "He's showing no signs of any permanent neurological damage. However, he still can't recall his name or what he might have been doing out here."

“Were you able to get any information on him from Federation central records?”

“Not much,” Crusher replied with a furrow in her brow. “I got a name: Jack Bairnson. But not much else.”

“Jack Bairnson?” said Picard with some wonder.

“Do you know him, sir?” asked Riker.

“I’m not sure,” replied the captain. “That name seems familiar to me. But, I can’t for the life of me think of why.”

“Well,” offered Crusher, “he appears he served aboard the third *Enterprise*.”

“The *Enterprise-B*?”

Crusher nodded.

“That would explain the shuttlecraft sir,” said LaForge for the first time. “We were finally able to determine that it was registered to that ship.”

“So, he was the captain?” Picard asked of Crusher.

“I guess...” said the doctor.

“I take it by that answer that you’re not entirely convinced?”

“Well, the message that I received from Starfleet was very brief and vague. I tried to request additional data, but all I got was that any additional records were not available.”

“Does he know yet?”

“No,” said Beverly. “I thought that since we weren’t entirely sure, it might be best not to tell him. Besides, he could remember on his own any time now.”

“Fine,” said Picard with resolution. “We’ll continue on with our mission to *Hippocrates*.”

Picard looked over at Beverly Crusher once again. “Doctor, when you feel that he’s ready, I want you to release him from sickbay. We’ll provide him with some appropriate quarters, and I’d also like him to start seeing Counsellor Troi. He made need her to help him cope with what’s happened.”

Beverly nodded her agreement. With that last statement Picard ended the meeting and dismissed his officers. One by one, the captain and the others filed out the open, narrow archway of the lounge to return to their respective duties. Except for one.

\* \* \*

Had anyone in the meeting cared to notice Ro Laren’s face the moment that the name Jack Bairnson was mentioned—instead of ignoring her as usual—they would have seen a reaction that was unusual for the hard-nosed Bajoran ensign.

A look that expressed a kind of familiarity. As though the name of a friend, not heard from and forgotten for years had suddenly been spoken as if from nowhere. From that point on, Ensign Ro Laren lost all train of thought as to the meeting and could only concentrate on that name.

A name from her troubled past.

## CHAPTER THREE

Of the all the places someone could be on the *Enterprise*, Ten Forward appeared to be the most popular. It was easy to see why. There were always so many people scattered about the spacious room, that it was easy to just lose oneself in the massive crowd.

That was exactly what Jack Bairnson—"The Captain" as he had simply become known—was trying to do, at least in part.

In truth, he had yet to really acknowledge his true identity or the reasons behind why he was aboard this *Enterprise* in the first place. After being released from Doctor Crusher's care in the sickbay, he sought the first place he could find to help him put his thoughts into perspective.

For some reason, he seemed to recall that rarely, if ever, did he ever collect his thoughts in his assigned quarters on a starship. Even if he could be made as comfortable as possible in them, which seemed unlikely in this time and place, his mind could never sort out the carrots from the crackers in the primordial soup of his mind. *Why should I remember that particular detail?* he thought.

Another recollection which he also couldn't quite fathom at the moment, was his taste for beer. Particularly a golden lager which came from the one continent on Earth

that was originally established as a penal colony. Perhaps it was the sudden dryness in his throat that made him recall that fact, and as he left sickbay, he found himself asking his angel, Beverly where he could wet his whistle?

*Wet my whistle? Where did that come from?*

At Beverly's suggestion, Bairnson now found himself seated at a lone table situated near one of the far windows of the lounge. He gazed out at the image of the stars streaking by the ship as thin, pale threads of light. The effect was new and somewhat alarming to him.

Even at maximum warp on whatever ship it was that he had been on before arriving here, he had never seen this phenomenon. This *Enterprise* had to be incredibly fast. More so than any ship Bairnson had ever had experience with before.

He sighed.

He knew somehow that no matter how much of his memory would return, he was alone. Like Rip Van Winkle who had fallen asleep and had awakened to find that the world he knew was gone, that was how Bairnson felt. It seemed unlikely that anyone who might have known him would still be alive. Even if they were, would they recognize him after all this time, however long it had been?

He noticed his dull reflection in the window's glass. Despite all that he had apparently been through, he still managed to appear somewhat respectable. Granted, he had had to trim his long, scraggily beard and fiery auburn



hair a bit, but even he had to admit, he still looked pretty damn good. That thought at least, made him smile briefly.

Bairnson cocked his head forward again suddenly.

The dark-skinned woman with the somewhat flamboyant taste in clothing had returned to his table and had placed a tall, frothy, bubbling glass of golden liquid on it in front of him. Bairnson thanked the woman politely and took a sip of the liquid. It was good, but it seemed to be lacking something.

“Is there a problem?” wondered Guinan.

Bairnson took another quick sip. He replaced the glass on the table and faced the keeper of the lounge.

“Well, it tastes fine,” admitted Bairnson. “It’s just that it seems to be... missing something.”

“What do you mean?” said Guinan.

“I don’t know. Usually this stuff has really good kick to it. Whatever this is you’ve given doesn’t seem to have that.”

Guinan gave an understanding nod. “Synthehol.”

Bairnson’s face wrinkled with puzzlement.

“That lager has no alcohol in it,” explained Guinan. “It’s made with a synthetical variant that gives it the taste of alcohol without the effects.”

“Sort of defeats the purpose then, doesn’t it?”

Bairnson commented with a sigh.

Guinan giggled in spite of herself. “I’ve found that nowadays, humans don’t have much call for those effects.”

“Maybe not,” said Bairnson. “But at the moment, I wouldn’t object to a little dose of that kind of mental muddle.”

Guinan nodded understandingly, like a mother would to a despondent child.

“I can sort of relate to what you’re going through,” admitted Guinan. “I blinked once, and didn’t realize for weeks that one of my favorite planets had come and gone.”

Bairnson glanced up into her dark eyes with a start. “Must’ve been some blink,” was all he could say.

“Well, when you get to be my age, you sort of get used to it. You brush yourself off and move on.”

Guinan bent down and addressed the Captain in more of muted, conspiratorial tone. “Which is what you should do, Captain.”

Bairnson’s mind was a muddle once again, but at least this time it was focused on something other than his own problems. This woman, who didn’t appear all that old to him, had just casually told of the birth and death of a world. An entire civilization that he didn’t even know about, gone. And this bartender explains it as simply as if had been tomorrow’s weather forecast!

Was she speaking literally or metaphorically? Either way, it didn’t seem to make any difference. It certainly made Bairnson’s problems seem like trivial complaints about a cup of tea not being at just the right temperature.

But there was something he had to know.

“Just how old are you?” he asked with a slight waver in his voice.

Guinan smiled at Bairnson mischievously. “Why, Captain. Don’t you know that it’s impolite to ask a woman’s age?”

With a wink of eye, Guinan turned on her heel and walked no, almost floated, back to behind the main bar at the opposite end of the room. *What next?* thought Bairnson. *Jacob Marley?*

\* \* \*

The wooden-appearing main doors to Ten Forward parted and Ensign Ro Laren stepped through the archway and into the lounge. As the doors came together again behind her, the Bajoran officer surveyed the spacious interior of the room. Although crowded as usual, she strained her eyes in an attempt to find who she was looking for. A frustrated sigh escaped from her lips.

“Can I help you with something, Ro?” a familiar voice said.

Ro cocked her head to her right and was relieved to see her friend Guinan standing behind the bar as usual, dispensing drinks to another off-duty officer. Ro stepped over to the bar as Guinan came towards her on the other end.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Ro said somewhat relieved. “I’m looking for someone.”

“Take a look around,” replied Guinan, adding with a wave of her hand, “there’s plenty to choose from.”

“Not now Guinan, please,” said Ro slightly annoyed. Guinan wiped the smile from her face and rested her chin atop her knuckles.

Ro leaned in closer, her face very severe. “I’m looking for the Captain.”

“Last time I checked, Captain Picard was on the bridge,” said Guinan.

“No, not Captain Picard. Captain...”

Ro suddenly snapped her mouth shut. She shouldn’t have said as much as she had already, but at the moment, she hadn’t been thinking about what her duty was to the ship and its mysterious passenger.

“Captain Bairnson?” suggested Guinan.

Ro faced her friend with astonishment. The Captain’s name hadn’t been made public knowledge yet. But then again, Guinan always did seem to have a way of knowing something before anyone else. And this wasn’t the first time she had caught the Bajoran ensign by surprise in the time they had known one another.

After clearing away the astonishment from her mind, Ro nodded. Acknowledging the fact that Bairnson indeed was who she had been looking for.

Guinan directed her attention to a table situated in front of one of the lounge’s high windows at the opposite end. Sitting alone at the table was a man whose fiery auburn hair and beard, made him not dissimilar in appearance to Commander Riker. He sat with his hand

cradling a tall glass of bubbling reddish liquid which Ro assumed Guinan had served him.

He was wearing an old style, maroon Starfleet uniform that only enhanced his somewhat regal features. Guinan noticed Ro smiling to herself. Something which she had rarely, if ever seen her do. Apparently, Ro had not intended for Guinan or anyone notice, and she immediately put her severe face back on.

Ro curtly thanked Ten Forward's hostess and stepped away from bar. With a smile curling her own lips, Guinan watched as Ro walked in the direction of the Captain's table.

\* \* \*

For the past several moments, Jack Bairnson sat silently to himself. His eyes concentrated on the steadily rising stream of bubbles from the bottom of his glass of lager. What the point of this exercise was, even he didn't know. But at least it made him forget about his problems. If only for a moment.

So intent was his gaze upon his glass, that the Captain had lost all awareness of anyone else in the packed lounge. As far as his world was concerned, he was alone and therefore acknowledging anyone else's existence was not only futile, but stupid.

It therefore took him nearly a whole minute to notice a young woman in a red uniform similar to the one Beverly had worn, come up to his table. Apparently, she had patiently been standing there attempting to attract his

attention somehow, and like a stone, he hadn't even noticed.

Finally, he glanced up. And was taken slightly aback.

The young woman's hair was as black as the night and was combed straight back off her brow into a gentle wave that cascaded down the back of her head to barely an inch above her shoulders. Her eyes were like deep and dark, like the mysterious pools scattered about the cratered surface of a planet.

But two things set her apart from the other women the Captain had seen aboard the *Enterprise* thus far. One was the ridges that began between her eyebrows and gently tracked down her nose to its tip. The other was the fact that even though she obviously wasn't human, for some reason which at the moment he couldn't quite fathom, she seemed somehow familiar.

"May I join you, sir?" she asked.

Bairnson sat a moment, staring somewhat dumbfounded at the girl.

Ro Laren repeated her question. This, it seemed, was able to snap his mind back from wherever it was it had been. He now looked up at her somewhat disbelievingly.

"If you'd rather be alone, sir, I understand," she said. She turned away from the Captain and began to slowly walk away.

*What are you doing?* Bairnson thought to himself. *You've been alone too long already! Beverly and Troi both*

*said it would do you good to open up to someone.* Besides, there was something about this girl. Something that reminded him of where he had come from. Something that made him feel comfortable and not so alone in the universe.

“Wait!” the Captain called out.

Ro Laren slowly turned around to face him once again, her face filled with expectation. Bairnson shook his head a moment to make himself quit staring. “Actually, I think I would like some company,” he said.

The girl inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment of his invitation and slowly came up to his table. She pulled out the chair across from the Captain’s and planted herself into it.

Yet again, Bairnson found himself staring at her for a moment. He soon realized that one of them would have to start talking and at the moment, it didn’t seem like it was going to be this girl.

“Can I get you something?” he finally said.

“A Bajoran Tingler,” the girl replied.

Bairnson raised his hand to call for Guinan, but to his astonishment, discovered that she had already come over to the table. She placed another tall glass of reddish, bubbling liquid on the table before Ro. Guinan smiled and then turned back in the direction of her bar, but not before sharing a wink with her two friends.

“What was that all about?” wondered Bairnson.

“Don’t ask,” said Ro. “She does that all the time. We’ve sort of gotten used to it.”

Ro sipped a small sample of liquid in her glass. Bairnson joined her but furrowed his brow with some distaste. There was nothing worse in the universe than the taste of beer that had gone warm.

Bairnson placed his glass back down on the table and stared deeply into Ro Laren’s face. For the first time since he had awakened aboard the *Enterprise*, he felt strangely at ease. There was something about this girl. Her mere presence next to him was enough to wash away all the troubles from his mind. He felt as though he had finally found someone he could trust and confide in. Just the way Janet had been.

Janet!

That was who she reminded him of. But who was she? Evidently, she was someone important. Someone who had made a great impact on his life. But as for who she actually was, Bairnson still couldn’t remember. No matter. He was a step closer to remembering than he was an hour ago.

“So, what can I do for you, Miss....?” said Bairnson.

“Ensign Ro Laren.”

Bairnson nodded, eyeing her drink. “Bajoran?”

“My home.”



She paused a moment, there was something else. At first, Bairnson believed that she wouldn't tell him. Finally, she added, "Sort of."

Bairnson nodded. Apparently, there was something else she wasn't telling him, but he would not press her for the information. Not now, anyway.

"Well," he began again. "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"

Ro giggled briefly to herself but covered her mouth with her hand almost a second later. Apparently, she wasn't used to demonstrating this kind of emotion in public and Bairnson guessed that it would have embarrassed her to persist. However, making three people laugh in only a few hours since his revival was enough to make Bairnson smile himself.

"I came to see you," said Ro after a minute.

"Why?" wondered Bairnson.

"I just had to."

Bairnson shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "You're not some kind of shrink or something are you?"

"I'm sorry?" said Ro slightly confused.

"No, I guess not. Otherwise you would've been grilling me for information the minute you sat down."

Bairnson adjusted himself back into a more comfortable position. "I'll give you credit, though."

Ro stared blankly at the Captain.

“Apart from that bartender, you’re the only one who’s talked to me so far that hasn’t demanded information about how I got here,” he explained.

“I’m not interested in that,” said Ro Laren. “I’m only glad that you are here.”

*Just like Janet, Bairnson thought. Always knows the right thing to say.* Though he had only known this Ro Laren for about five minutes, Bairnson had to admit that he liked her. Perhaps the first person he’d met since waking up aboard this ship that he honestly could say that about.

“You must like puzzles then,” said the Captain. “Cause so far, no one else on this ship has been willing to approach the ‘mystery passenger.’”

“You’re no mystery to me,” said Ro. “I know exactly who you are.”

Bairnson’s eyes widened. Had he really heard what this girl had just said? Did she perhaps hold the key to unlocking the riddle of who he was and what he might be doing here? Regardless of the consequence, he simply had to know.

Bairnson begged the young Bajoran ensign to tell him what she knew.

The story was painful for the girl to tell, Bairnson could see that in the way she took her time piecing together the details. But it began in her childhood.

The Bajorans had been made slaves on their own world by a bloody war with a race called the Cardassians. The Bajorans had been made to perform brutal, punishing

labor in the mines of their own world and several others, digging up the fuel for the Cardassian war machine.

Ro Laren had never actually seen Bajor itself. She was born in a prison camp on one of the planets the Cardassians mined. She had watched her mother die at the hands of the alien butchers, and her father worked until he could hardly even stand. She saw all the inhumane cruelties that one race could inflict upon another before she even reached the age of ten.

Any other person would have surely been driven mad by watching such atrocities, but there was one thing that allowed Ro Laren to maintain her sanity.

It was a book. An ancient file record, actually.

It had somehow been smuggled into the camp and managed to find its way into the hands of Ro Laren's father. Every night, before she went to sleep, her father would read to her from it. No matter how many times she heard the stories, she never grew tired of them.

Eventually, when she became old enough to read the stories herself, her father gave the book to her as a gift. He had made her promise, that even if he should die, she should keep the stories alive within the minds of the other prisoners. She had kept her promise. And even to this day, she still had the book. It was now kept in a glass case in her quarters, wherever she served.

"So, what does this have to with me?" wondered the Captain.

Ro took a deep breath before she spoke. “That book was a mission log of the starship *Enterprise*, NCC-1701-B. Commanded by Captain Jack Bairnson.”

Bairnson remained slightly perplexed.

“That was your ship,” Ro explained. “That’s who you are.”

The Captain sat back in his chair, allowing the plush cushioning to nearly engulf him. He had only been awake for a few hours and suddenly he had gone from a John Doe to the captain of this other ship, this other *Enterprise*. Not only that, but he had gone from someone everybody else on the ship was suspicious of to this girl’s childhood hero. The man whose stories gave her hope to hold on for a better tomorrow.

Bairnson smiled warmly at the girl who had now returned him the favor in kind.

“You said you still had this book?” said the Captain.

Ro nodded.

“Can I see it?”

Ro smiled warmly at the Captain and rose from her seat. Bairnson stood as well and Ro motioned for him to come with her, back to her quarters.

As the pair strode together out the main doors of Ten Forward, Guinan shook her head to herself. A warm smile curled its way across her lips.

\* \* \*

Ro Laren's quarters were by no means lavish. Bairnson had initially marveled at the size and plush furnishing of the room until Ro explained to him that her quarters were fairly standard for a ship this size.

Still, Bairnson had to admit that quarters that came furnished with a sofa, chair, desk with computer terminal, and a food replicator would have been fine for him. But a small, completely furnished bedroom attached to the main living room was an added luxury that Bairnson couldn't imagine even he had on the *Enterprise-B*.

Ro brought the Captain over behind her desk. There, resting in a glass case on tiny shelf immediately behind the desk itself, was the book. Ro opened the top drawer of the desk and produced a tiny, metallic key. She moved over to the far side of the glass case, bent down slightly, and stuck the key in the case's panel lock.

While she was doing this, Bairnson surveyed the living room of her quarters. Ro Laren apparently didn't have much of a taste for art, not even in a decorative sense. There were no paintings on any of the walls in the room. And then he saw it.

About three feet above where she was fiddling with the case's lock, Bairnson noticed a drawing of some kind also encased in a glass frame. He stepped closer to study the picture. It appeared to have been done in crayon, yet it pictured the face of a beautiful, brunette woman. Despite being drawn by a child's hand, the face had all the shape and grace of anything done by any Earth's master artists.

The woman in the picture had a warmth and kindness about her that radiated throughout the room and somehow made it more like a home than Bairnson had originally theorized. The ridges which ran down the woman's nose betrayed the fact that like Ro Laren, she too was Bajoran.

"Very nice," said the Captain.

Ro glanced up from her work questioningly.

Bairnson indicated the drawing.

"Oh," said Ro with a nod. "Thank you."

"Did you do that when you were a kid?"

"Yes," said Ro, removing the book from its case.

She then stopped herself for a moment, a half-smile curling the right side of her mouth.

"Sort of," she added.

Ro placed the book into Bairnson's hands. The Captain stood there a moment, still amazed by the vividness of the portrait. He shook his head bemused.

"Who is she?" he wondered.

Did he see her eyes well up with tears for a moment before she told him? Bairnson wasn't sure, but he began to suspect that perhaps she was much more passionate and emotional than she cared to let anyone else know.

"My mother," she said softly.

Bairnson nodded comprehendingly. He then turned his attention to the book in his hands. Sure enough, it had the Starfleet insignia in the center of its dingy blue velvet

cover. Bairnson opened the cover and began to briefly skim the first few pages of the journal.

Apart from a brief mentioning of a Captain John Harriman, and an incident involving some kind of plasma ribbon, it listed mostly the crew's names and several of their service records at the time of publication. The names were familiar. Johnson, Mirgant, Crispin, Y'Gar, they all struck a chord deep within Jack Bairnson's mind. He read down the roster a little further.

"Sunset, Janet. Lieutenant Commander: Tactical and Ship's Chief of Staff."

*Well, at least I know who she is finally. Or do I? Seems like there was more to it than that.*

Bairnson flipped a few more pages as Ro watched with interest. Log entries, mission specs. They were the next part of the book. Devorax, that was in there. As was the admission of Zechariah to the Federation. That rang a bell.

Bairnson read further on. As he skimmed the last page of the journal, his brow furrowed. He turned the page again, but the next one was merely a blank one placed in the book as a space holder by the publisher of the journal. He flipped back to the last worded page and read it again with great care. Bairnson's brow further furrowed. He snapped the book closed.

Noticing his reaction, Ro Laren glanced up into his eyes. Her own look expressing some concern over what he might have read.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked.

Bairnson shook his head slightly. “I don’t get it. It just... ends.”

“Well, that’s how most books go isn’t it? Even history books.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Bairnson flipped the book open again to the last page he had read.

“Take a look at this,” he said. “The last entry is a log report saying that the *Enterprise* was responding to some kind of distress call at coordinates 691 Mark 53.”

“Yes,” Ro nodded. “I know what it says. I’ve practically memorized it.”

“But look,” added the Captain, flipping over to the blank page. “Why is there nothing else?”

Ro looked at him perplexed.

“No final reports on the success or failure of the mission,” he explained. “No log entries afterwards. Not even a note on the decommissioning or destruction of the *Enterprise* itself?”

Ro shook her head uncomprehendingly. “What are you saying, sir?”

“If I am Jack Bairnson, then maybe my being here has something to do with the incompleteness of this record.”

Bairnson put the book down on Ro Laren’s desk and began pacing the length of the room. His mind swam. Ro watched with worry as he began muttering



incomprehensibly to himself, bouncing his index finger off his chin as he paced. To Ro's great relief, he finally stopped after only a moment. He came over to face her.

"If I can find out what the *Enterprise's* mission to those coordinates was," said the Captain excitedly. "Then maybe I can find out how I got here – eighty years after the fact."

Bairnson smiled with satisfaction at his new young friend. He grasped her shoulders tightly for a moment and then turned towards the main doors to the quarters. As he reached the entrance, the doors parted allowing him access to the corridor outside.

Before he stepped out, Bairnson turned back in to the Bajoran ensign. "Thank you, Ro," he said with conviction. "You've been more than helpful!"

"You're welcome sir," she replied.

Bairnson turned to exit once again.

"And if you need any more help," she called out, "you know where to find me!"

Bairnson poked his head back through the open doorway into Ro's quarters.

"Oh, yes!" said Bairnson with a wink. He then disappeared into the corridor.

As the doors closed, Ro Laren plopped herself down into the plush comfort of her sofa. She kicked her boots off her sending them flying into different corners of the room. She curled her arms around her bent legs,

hugging them tightly, and with a smile baring her perfect, white teeth, let out a gigantic sigh.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Captain Jean-Luc Picard strolled the length of one of the lower corridors of the *Enterprise*. He made certain not to move too quickly, he was in no hurry this morning to assume duty. Whenever he did appear to be making haste for the bridge, he had noticed that most of the officers he would pass would think that there was an alert of some kind.

Fortunately for the sake of everyone's emotional well-being, Picard had managed to curb his habit of walking at a quick pace unless there really *was* some kind of emergency. Silently, he accepted the thanks of his crew, new and old.

Too bad he never did get back to that holodeck program.

After all the excitement concerning Captain Bairnson, Picard found himself too weary to return to the world of Dixon Hill and solve the murder he had left behind. Not to mention the fact that he had completely forgotten who it was who killed Johnny LaRue anyhow.

*Oh well, something for another time.*

Picard turned upon hearing his name being called out.

Sprinting at leisurely pace to catch up with him was Counsellor Troi. Picard smiled pleasantly at her as she came up the corridor to stand at his side. When she had

finally caught up with the Captain the pair continued down the corridor side by side.

“What’s the hurry Counsellor?” wondered Picard.

“I just thought you’d like to know,” she said.

“Captain Bairnson appears to be making excellent progress.”

“Splendid. Does he know who he is yet?”

“Well,” she said with a slight hesitance, “he knows his name.”

Picard knew that look on the Counsellor’s face all too well. After all this time together, the Captain had become quite good at reading what was on the mind of one of his crew from the expression on their faces. Perhaps the mind-meld Picard had experienced with the Vulcan ambassador Sarek had something to do with it, but in any case, he could tell when someone was voluntarily holding back information from him.

Troi should have known better being a telepath herself. Besides, what did she have to fear from him after all the years they had served together? What was it that she couldn’t tell him to his face?

“I’m afraid,” Troi began after a moment, “that knowing his name hasn’t helped him to remember the circumstances surrounding how he came to be here.”

Ah, that was it.

Perhaps as Captain, Picard had often asked his crew to perform the impossible and as a result of their success, he always expected the immediate response to a given

problem situation to be the correct one. Beverly had told him that in matters involving the human mind, such immediate results were not guaranteed, and that the only healer in mental illness was time.

Besides, what was the rush in learning how Bairnson had come to be here, anyway? There didn't appear to be any immediate danger to the man, Picard's ship or his crew. In fact, if the grapevine on the *Enterprise* was accurate, the Captain had come to be quite the topic of off-duty conversations in Ten Forward. And it wasn't often that one visitor generated more interest in the crew than an entire ship full of visiting medical delegates.

Picard nodded simply his understanding to the Counsellor.

"But you may be interested to know," Troi began again, "that he's made a friend aboard the ship."

"Really?" said Picard with no little surprise.

Only three days since being pulled from a frozen slumber aboard a malfunctioning shuttlecraft, and already Bairnson had someone he could confide in aboard the *Enterprise*. Picard smiled inwardly to himself. Perhaps his new friend would be able to help him remember.

"Who?" asked Picard.

Troi smiled somewhat mischievously at the captain. "Ensign Ro," she said with a slight giggle.

"Ensign Ro?" Picard replied with shock, stopping dead in his tracks. The Counsellor also halted and was looking at the captain as though she had just revealed the

punchline to a joke that had completely gone over the captain's head. Had he really heard the Counsellor right? The sometimes-troublesome ensign from the planet Bajor had warmed up to the *Enterprise's* mysterious visitor?

"Ensign Ro Laren?" he repeated incredulously.

Troi nodded, her grin increasing in width.

The more Picard thought about it, the more it made a peculiar kind of sense. The two had a few things in common: they were both Starfleet officers; they were both kind of alone. But there was one thing which, at least to Picard, seemed to be the one element which would really have brought them together: a sense of displacement. Bairnson in time and Ro in place. Situations stranger than that had brought people together in the past.

Besides, Picard had always thought that Ro could use a few more friends on the *Enterprise*. She was a fine officer who deserved a lot more than the cold shoulder she often received from the other officers aboard the ship. Perhaps associating with this lost-in-time Captain would help her to better relate to her fellow officers.

But still, it was peculiar to think that someone like Ro Laren would just flock to someone like Bairnson out of the goodness of her heart. There was probably more to it than he realized, but at the moment it hardly seemed to matter. As long as it made them both happy, Picard saw no reason for the relationship not to continue as it was.

"To each his own, Captain," said Troi.

"Indeed," Picard replied.

He hoped that the tone of his voice was enough of an indication of his approval to Troi. Together the pair continued on down the corridor until they reached the turbolift that would take them to their day's duties on the bridge.

\* \* \*

Captain Jack Bairnson was also strolling the length of one of the ship's corridors. Like Picard, his pace was leisurely, but not because he feared the crew of this ship would think that there was an emergency going on. His reasons were much more basic.

He was lost.

This *Enterprise* was by far the biggest starship he had ever seen in his life. No ship from his own time could match her in size, speed, or performance. Just knowing that was enough to make him uneasy. If the Federation was able to build a ship like this, what would the Federation's enemies have been to come up with that could match her?

Enemies.

Something stirred slightly in Bairnson's mind. Like when he heard the name *Enterprise* for the first time. Could one of the Federation's enemies have had something to do with why he was here? His mind raced to try to remember the political situation of his day.

It probably wasn't the Klingons. The Federation had been able to reach a detente with the warrior race years before he had graduated from Starfleet Academy. It didn't make sense that the Klingon Empire, struggling to

restructure itself would attack a representative of the one power in the galaxy that was willing to help them.

Could it have been the Orions? No, not their style.

The Tholians? Nobody had even heard from them in the last twenty years.

The Gorn? They had pretty much left the Federation alone since that incident on Cestus III.

The Romulans?

It was then that Bairnson turned his attention to the direction in which he had been travelling. He glanced quickly about him noticing the maroon carpeting of the floor, the shiny black panels that lined the creme-colored walls, the bright yellow lights which bathed the corridor in a warm glow.

*Where the hell am I?* he asked himself.

There were officers in different-colored uniforms passing him on all sides. Some didn't even bother to notice him; others shot the Captain a quick puzzled glance. Bairnson wasn't certain how to deal with these people yet.

Fortunately, at that moment a piece of his memory returned. Something that one of his instructors at the Academy had taught him to do when confronted by a situation like this. How did it go? "Always look like you know what you're doing. Your crew will never know the difference and in time, you'll figure out what you're supposed to do."



Bairnson quickly changed his expression from a befuddled gape to a stern face that demonstrated confidence and composure. At least he hoped it did.

He made another quick survey of the corridor, and to his relief saw a large metallic door only a few feet away from him. With an exaggerated spring in his step, Bairnson paced towards the door. As he stepped up in front of it, the metallic barrier parted and Bairnson stepped through the now open portal.

As the doors closed behind him, Bairnson made another quick visual inspection of the room he now found himself in. It was slightly larger than his quarters, lined with panels, and on the far end a series of tiny stairs which led to a large, open, circular area divided into six pie-cut segments. Bairnson sighed with relief. Like a sickbay, he'd recognize a transporter room in any century.

"Can I help you, sir?" a masculine voice said.

Bairnson turned and noticed a stocky man with curly blonde hair standing behind a console. He was wearing a yellow uniform and was staring quizzically at the Captain.

"No, Mister..." said Bairnson.

"O'Brien, sir," replied the man.

"O'Brien," repeated the Captain, adding with a nonchalant shake of his head. "Just inspecting the ship."

O'Brien nodded and returned his gaze to the console. For several moments, Bairnson paced the length of the transporter room not knowing what else to do. He

tried several things to make himself look important. Running his index finger along the wall as if looking for dust that shouldn't be there, glancing over O'Brien's shoulder as though checking that his calculations were correct.

Finally, the Captain sighed. It was no use trying to disguise it any more.

"Uh, listen," Bairnson began. Though there was no one else in the room, he leaned in closer to O'Brien and almost whispered in his ear.

"I'm little embarrassed to say this, but I'm lost."

O'Brien glanced up into the Captain's eyes.

Bairnson searched for the humor in them that was bound to show at his expense. However, O'Brien's eyes were not reprimanding in any way, but kind and understanding. He smiled pleasantly.

The fact that O'Brien did not burst out laughing at him encouraged Bairnson to explain further. "You see, I was heading to sickbay, and well, I kinda got sidetracked and ended up here."

"It's quite understandable, sir," said O'Brien with a smile. "What with you being new to the ship and all. Keiko's always saying that this is the only ship in the fleet that you could get lost on while looking for the john."

Bairnson chuckled slightly. O'Brien was only the fifth person he had met while on the *Enterprise*, and apart from Ro Laren, he had to admit that he liked O'Brien the best. The man had a warm-hearted nature and a kindly

face. And his lilting Irish accent made you feel welcome, no matter how strange you were to the ship and its customs.

If all the officers aboard the ship were like O'Brien and Ro, then maybe this wasn't going to be such a bad experience after all. In fact, there was something about O'Brien that reminded Bairnson of someone else he once knew. Now who was it? Oh yes! Crispin. Doctor James Alistair Crispin, his former Chief Medical Officer from the *Enterprise-B*. How could he ever have forgotten him?

"Well sir, if you're willing to wait," said O'Brien after a moment. "Doctor Crusher will be here any minute. She's coming to greet the final delegates to the medical conference."

"Fine by me," said Bairnson with no little sense of relief. O'Brien chuckled.

The medical conference was about the biggest topic of conversation that Bairnson had heard on the ship. Apart from himself, of course. The *Enterprise* had arrived at Pollux II that morning and Bairnson had to admit to himself that he was curious to see some these delegates for himself.

So far, not one of them had turned out to be a psychiatrist or memory expert of any kind. How ironic, he thought. On a ship full of doctors and not one of them able to help me with my problem. Bairnson supposed that was the reason why Picard and Crusher had both insisted that he continue to see Counsellor Troi.

Apparently, she was the one everyone on the ship went to see about their personal problems. Bairnson couldn't recall if he had had a ship's counsellor aboard his *Enterprise*, but now that he had seen it in action, he could see where it might be a pretty good idea. For others anyway.

Bairnson shook his head to himself. While he did find visiting the Counsellor a desirable experience, she was doing little to help jog his memory. Although she was doing wonders for his libido.

Bairnson glanced up again as the doors to the transporter room opened once again. Beverly Crusher paced into the room. She was looking a little different than when Bairnson had last seen her. Her hair was combed immaculately, she had touched up her makeup and was now wearing what Bairnson guessed to be the formal equivalent of the uniform worn by all the Starfleet officers aboard the *Enterprise*.

She noticed Jack Bairnson standing beside O'Brien's console and came towards him. A smile curled her lips. "Hello," she said with some surprise. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

Bairnson was quite taken by the way she looked, but as she came closer to him, he noticed something else. A sweet aroma that seemed to follow her wherever she went. *Some kind of perfume*, thought Bairnson.

"Well, I..." said the Captain with some reluctance.

“He was inspecting the ship Doctor,” O’Brien interjected.

Beverly nodded with a smile and turned back to face the transporter bay.

“Thank you,” Bairnson whispered.

“Any time, sir.”

Bairnson heard an audible chime emanate from O’Brien’s console. The transporter chief touched a red pad in response to the hail. They were ready to transport the delegates on Pollux II. This was what Bairnson had been waiting for: the chance to see this ship’s advanced technology in operation.

Beverly called for O’Brien to energize the transporter beam. Bairnson watched with fascination as O’Brien moved his hands across the panel, touching a few colored pads here and there. Finally, he brought his hand above the bottommost corner on the far right side of the console. With one swift motion, O’Brien moved his hand upward along the length of the console.

A series of orange lights followed the motion of his hand and within moments, Bairnson heard the familiar chiming feedback that the transporter device was bound to cause. He glanced up to see three figures gradually forming within the transporter bay. Within seconds, the sparkling, bluish outlines were replaced clearly and distinctly by three humanoids.

As Doctor Crusher stepped forward to greet the delegates, Bairnson sighed disappointedly to himself. For

all intents and purposes, this *Enterprise's* transporter was no different from the device that the Captain had been familiar with.

“Something wrong, sir?” asked O’Brien.

“I dunno,” replied the Captain. “I guess I was just expecting something a little more... spectacular.”

“Transporter technology hasn’t changed much in eighty years, sir. ‘If it ain’t broke, why fix it?’”

Bairnson nodded with an understanding smile.

O’Brien was right, of course. Starfleet had hit upon a good thing decades ago when they came up with the transporter, and even though more than a hundred years had passed since its inception, it was still basically the same as it had always been. How does one improve upon perfection?

Bairnson glanced up again in the direction of the transporter bay. He carefully inspected the three delegates who had materialized aboard the ship. They were as diverse a group as one could have expected to find. One was a Vulcan female dressed in the traditional gown of a scientist. Another was from a race whom Bairnson had never seen before. He was kind of tall and thin with almost sticklike arms and legs. His high, sloping forehead and bald top were the color of ashes left over after a fire.

O’Brien explained to the captain that he was a Ytoxen, a race whom the Federation had only recently encountered. His world was being devastated by a plague which the Federation hoped to help cure before admitting them as a new member. He had specially been invited to

attend the conference by the Surgeon General and the Federation President himself.

Bairnson lost track of what O'Brien was telling him after that. His attention suddenly focused on the third being in the group.

He was decidedly older than the other delegates, about eighty, Bairnson guessed. His round head possessed a tiny amount of white hair that would have been described as a "dusting of snow." The man's stocky build and somewhat abnormal height, almost kept Bairnson from realizing that he was human.

Bairnson gazed deeply at the older man's wrinkled features. He studied the eyes, the mouth, the nose; everything that he could see. There was something familiar about him. Bairnson could swear that he had seen this man at some other time in his life. When he was younger, and slightly thinner, and not so weathered by life and time.

Doctor Crusher began to lead the delegates out of the transporter room. The doors opened and the *Enterprise's* Doctor led the other delegates out the open archway and into the corridor. Bairnson had to know. He quickly thanked O'Brien for his time and dashed out the still open doorway.

\* \* \*

Bairnson followed the delegates for several moments, listening to every bit of dialogue exchanged by each member of the group. He paid particular attention to the large old man whose face seemed so familiar to him. With

each new word the man spoke, Bairnson began to realize more and more who he was.

The slightly cocky way in which he swaggered about as he walked, the loud, boisterous voice which seemed to compliment the size of his girth. The slightly off-color remarks he made as the group continued down the hall. Beverly laughed at his jokes, but only out of courtesy. The Vulcan's expression never changed and the Ytoxen found the whole process rather curious.

That was it! The jokes. Bairnson knew who he was finally!

"Joe?" he called out.

The big man stopped in his tracks. The other three members of the group noticed his sudden halt and also stood a moment.

"Joe Vitro?" said the captain once again, approaching the large doctor.

Vitro slowly turned around to face the man who had called out his name. Bairnson was smiling with joy at the sight of a familiar face. He quickly came up to face the man who was considerably taller than him.

"You don't know how relieved I am to see a friendly face," said Bairnson extending his right hand to Vitro. "I was beginning to think that..."

The silence that met Bairnson's ears was deafening. It was only then that he noticed the expression on Vitro's face. Stern and cold, like the faces of one of the presidents carved into Mount Rushmore. Vitro did not extend his



hands to Bairnson in kind, but kept them closely to his sides, balled into nervous and quivering fists.

The rest of his face tried desperately not to show it, but the perspiration of his forehead was only part of the giveaway. Bairnson could see it in his eyes. They were wide, the pupils dilated to their fullest extent. Joe Vitro looked not like a man who was happy to see an old friend, like one who suddenly found himself cornered by a hungry lion with no means of escape.

“Joe?” said Bairnson with concern. “Are you alright? It’s me, it’s....”

“Beverly,” Vitro interrupted through clenched teeth. “Get him away from me!”

Bairnson stared wide-eyed with confusion at the burly doctor as Beverly quickly dashed up beside him. Her face betraying the concern she felt.

“Doctor Vitro,” she said. “What’s wrong? What’s the...”

“Get him the hell away from me, Beverly!” exclaimed Vitro forcefully.

Beverly shot a quick, confused glance at Bairnson who could only stare back at her dumbfounded. She then took Vitro by the arm and with a concerted effort, led him away from Bairnson.

Bairnson could not even speak for a moment. He just stared wide-eyed, mouth gaping as Doctor Crusher led Doctor Vitro and the other delegates back down the

corridor. A few seconds later, Vitro stopped the group again. He turned to face the captain once again.

“You’re dead!” Vitro cried out. “You have to be! Or else it was all for nothing!”

Beverly turned Vitro away from Bairnson once again and slowly began to lead him back down the corridor. The other delegates followed closely behind. Bairnson watched the four doctors slowly pace down the corridor until they finally disappeared around a bend.

*It was all for nothing?* thought Bairnson. What was that supposed to mean?

Vitro’s cry had not been one of hostility, but more one of anguish and despair. Perhaps even guilt? If he’s feels guilty, then he must know what happened! Much though he wanted to race down the corridor and catch up with Vitro, he realized that the Doctor obviously wanted nothing to do with him. For a moment, Bairnson felt depressed. Depressed that perhaps his one hope of discovering how he got here, had now vanished forever.

Then, an idea.

If Vitro was alive and knew what had happened to him, maybe there were others who did as well! It was a chance he had to take, and with a newfound sense of purpose, Bairnson dashed back down the corridor in the direction he came.

Back to his quarters.

\* \* \*

The doors parted and Jack Bairnson stepped through the open portal and into his plush accommodations. He brought the light level in the room up to an illumination with which he was comfortable and darted over to his desk. He swiveled the small, desktop computer terminal until the screen side was facing him. He touched a small red button in the lower right-hand corner of the device.

The screen glowed to life and within a few seconds, the female voice of the *Enterprise's* main computer spoke to Jack Bairnson, requesting instructions.

"Computer," Bairnson began. "Are you able to access Starfleet service records from the Federation mainframe on Earth?"

"Affirmative," the voice replied after a few seconds.

Bairnson smiled. "Computer, get me the service records for the following officers of U.S.S. *Enterprise*. Construction number NCC-1701-B."

Bairnson then picked up the record of the *Enterprise-B* that Ro Laren had given him. He opened the cover and quickly flipped to the page which listed the crew roster for the ship under his command. He read the names that seemed the most familiar to him. Commander D'nadrY'Gar, Lieutenant Commander Janet Sunset, Lieutenant Commander Ryan Alex Johnson, Doctor James Alistair Crispin, Lieutenants Saallak, Curtis Winston, and Thuroq Mirgant.

Bairnson instructed the computer to produce the service records for those officers. There was silence as the computer worked to carry out his instructions. While Bairnson waited, he looked down on the names listed on the duty roster.

Joe Vitro was on there somewhere, and he wanted to see it in black and white print for himself. Strange, he wasn't in the medical section like Bairnson had thought. He read a little further. Then he saw it.

Lieutenant (j.g.) Joseph Vitro, Engineering.  
Engineering? Vitro was an engineer?

"The information you requested is now available," chimed the computer voice.

That was fast, Bairnson thought. "Alright Computer, readout the information to me. Limit your reports to current ranks and whereabouts."

The computer voice was silent a moment as it processed Bairnson's new request. After a moment, it spoke. "Commander D'nadrY'Gar. No information available..."

"Stop!" snapped Bairnson. He stared at the screen of the terminal on his desk. Addressing it as if it were a green cadet on their first deep space assignment.

"Explain lack of information regarding Commander Y'Gar," he then added.

"All files concerning Commander D'nadrY'Gar have been deleted," said the computer voice in its soft, feminine monotone.

Bairnson nodded comprehendingly. "Continue."

"Lieutenant Commander Janet Sunset: No information available. Files deleted," said the computer. "Lieutenant Commander Ryan Alex Johnson: No information available. Files deleted..."

"Stop!" snapped Bairnson again. This was getting ridiculous. Was he going to have to go through every single name on the roster before he got an answer? What if it turned out that Joe Vitro was in fact, the only one who knew what had really happened to Bairnson?

"Has the information on every single officer that I've requested..." he said, the frustration in his voice rising, "...just disappeared?!"

"Negative."

*Well. Wasn't expecting that.* "Alright, give me the names that you do have."

The computer was silent once again for moment. "Lieutenant Thuroq Mirgant: Current rank: Commander. Current assignment: Executive officer, U.S.S. *Monitor*." Mirgant.

Yes, that was a name he remembered very well. The Andorian officer who had started Bairnson's "Old Hickory" nickname aboard the *Enterprise*. The helmsman who once admitted to admiring him from afar even though she knew that he was betrothed to another.

If there was anyone who could and would tell Bairnson what had happened, it was her.

She owed him that much.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The turbolift elevator rose smoothly at a medium pace through the multi-leveled framework of the starship *Enterprise*. Even though the technology behind the turbolift had improved greatly in the last eighty years, Jack Bairnson still experienced the sensation of rising. Perhaps turbolift engineers had designed them with this sensation on purpose.

Too often humans felt uncomfortable when deprived of familiar sensation, and even if it had the unfortunate side-effect of causing nausea, it was a familiar kind of nausea that went hand-in-hand with the feeling of rising and falling.

Actually, when he had stepped onto the turbolift car moments before, Bairnson was surprised to discover that it responded to his voice commands with the same silent compliance as it must have on his own ship. It made no mechanical protests as Bairnson requested transportation to the bridge, and when the request had been made, it began to move in the same smooth, even manner in which it was currently moving.

Soon Bairnson felt the turbolift slow ever so slightly. Then it came to a complete halt and the doors in front of him parted, revealing the interior of the at-the-moment very busy bridge.

As Bairnson stepped off the car and felt his feet sink slightly into the plush maroon-carpeted floor, his jaw momentarily dropped. He had not been expecting it to be this immense! It had to be at least twice the area of the bridge of his *Enterprise*, but still had a few areas that were familiar to him.

Behind him was a series of consoles at which were seated differently-colored uniformed personnel, each carrying out some assigned duty. His attention returned to ahead of him where the gigantic view screen at the far end of the bridge currently displayed a starfield streaking past outside the ship as it travelled at warp speed. The thin, lined streaks that were the stars made his head spin slightly. In his time, the warp-speed effect was never like this.

Bairnson glanced below him where the floor of the bridge sloped down a level in a kind of horseshoe-shaped design. In the center of the lower curve of the design were three large chairs embedded into the tiny wall caused by the sloping of the bridge. None of them were occupied at the moment.

*Oh well,* thought Bairnson. *Guess I'll just have to do it myself.*

“Can I help you with something, sir?”

Bairnson quickly glanced to his right. Immediately, his gaze caught sight of the huge, but well-built chest of someone in a yellow uniform. Bairnson slowly moved his

eyes up the length of the man's chest until he finally caught sight of his face.

The face threw him slightly aback.

The ridges on the forehead and long, dull brown hair was enough of a giveaway and in some way, a Klingon face attached to that deep, ominous voice, made a strange kind of sense to Bairnson. It must have finally happened. Peace with the Klingon Empire must have finally been achieved by this time, because here was one, in the flesh, serving aboard a Federation starship.

For a moment, Bairnson could not help but stare and marvel at the being. The closest Bairnson had ever been to a Klingon before now was that time when he and a party from the *Excelsior* accidentally got themselves involved in a friendly game of tug of war with a group of them on one of their visits to Khitomer.

*Hey, how about that?* thought Bairnson. *I remembered that!*

The Klingon stared back at Bairnson, and that made him slightly uncomfortable. Not possessing any tear ducts, Klingons had a habit of being able to just stare at an adversary for hours on end. They used it as a kind of intimidation, and this one was itching for a fight. Actually, any Klingon which Bairnson had ever met seemed to be itching for a fight, but this one's eyes; they were the eyes of a warrior. A warrior who has had to restrain himself in order to live among non-aggressive, non-warrior types.



Bairnson secretly hoped that he had a mate, or least some kind of exercise program that helped to vent a little of that pent-up aggression.

“Yes,” Bairnson finally replied. “Lieutenant....”

“Worf, sir,” said the Klingon after a moment.

“Worf. Send a subspace transmission to

Commander Mirgant on the U.S.S. *Monitor*, please.”

Worf just stood there silently, uncertain of whether or not to carry out Bairnson’s order. I was afraid of this, the Captain thought to himself. Then he noticed another man rise from one of the consoles situated in front of the view screen and purposefully approach the Klingon and him.

This officer, who also wore a yellow uniform, outranked the Klingon slightly, but his appearance did not phase Bairnson in the least. He had heard of this officer; the one with the pale skin and yellow eyes. The android second-in-command.

Data came over to the Captain’s side. “I am sorry sir,” he said with little trace of emotion. “Subspace transmissions must be authorized by the Captain.”

“I *am* the Captain,” Bairnson replied somewhat more forcefully than he usually liked. Bairnson didn’t like to, but he had to show the Lieutenant Commander that he ranked higher. He stood his ground confidently for a moment.

Until a frightening thought struck him. “Unless, of course, they’ve decommissioned *my* rank as well,” he mumbled slowly.

Data stood silently a moment. He didn’t detect it immediately, but eventually Bairnson noticed the android’s head twitching slightly. It was a phenomenon he had never seen before; but then again, how many androids had he ever seen?

Finally, the incessant, almost fitful twitching of Data’s head ceased. The android turned his head back to Bairnson.

“I can find no record of your rank ever having been decommissioned, sir,” he said.

Relieved, Bairnson sighed inwardly. He let a wry smile curl his lips as he turned back to Worf, asking him once again to send the subspace transmission. From the corner of his eye, Bairnson noticed Worf’s glance at Data who merely nodded that it was all right to do as Bairnson ordered.

Data whirled around on his heel and was heading back to his console when Bairnson called out to him. Data turned like an obedient dog and returned to Bairnson’s side.

Bairnson smiled at the android who returned the gesture with that constant look of puzzlement the Captain had heard so much about.

“Commander Data,” he said.

“‘Data’ sir,” the android immediately corrected, stressing that his name used the long ‘A’ sound instead of the short one Bairnson had erroneously used.

Bairnson chuckled to himself. Obviously, he wasn’t the first person to get the android’s name wrong, and the mistake didn’t seem to offend him at all. Perhaps he had gotten used to the misnomer, or perhaps Bairnson was reading too deeply into the android’s reaction.

“‘Data,’” Bairnson verbally corrected himself. “I need to ask a favor of you.”

“I believe I have already overextended the length of my ‘favors’ to you, sir.”

Again, Bairnson chuckled to himself. The android was sharp, he had to admit that. Perhaps someone had tried to pull the wool over his eyes a few times before. That would make what Bairnson had to do a little more difficult, but he had to press on.

“Of course,” replied Bairnson. “I just need to know what’s located at coordinates 691 Mark 53.”

“That information can be obtained by accessing the *Enterprise’s* mainframe computer, sir.”

“Yes, but I’m not asking the mainframe, Data,” said Bairnson. “I’m asking you.”

Once again, Data’s head began twitching slightly as his positronic brain processed Bairnson request. That was a close one, the Captain thought. He really had to keep on his toes with Data, but in a peculiar sort of way, it was kind of fun. But damn, was that twitching head freaky!

Finally, the twitching stopped. A curious frown curled the android's artificial lips and wrinkled his deeply furrowed brow.

"Curious," he finally said. "The information concerning those particular coordinates has been classified."

"I know," Bairnson replied. "That's what the mainframe said. Any idea why that is, Data?"

"I will check, sir."

Again with the twitching! Whoever designed and built Data obviously didn't want to make him *too* human. Oh no, that would have been far too easy. Instead he blessed the android with these peculiar idiosyncrasies that just separated him from being human. Whether this thinking was a blessing or a curse to Data and whoever he lived with, Bairnson couldn't tell.

*Thank God, it's stopped again.*

The lines on the android's face were wrinkled even more deeply than before, if that were possible.

"I have just accessed the Federation mainframe on Earth," Data began.

Bairnson leaned in closer to the android, hanging on his every word.

"According to Federation records those coordinates have been quarantined under Starfleet General Order Seven."

*General order seven?* thought Bairnson. Now that *was* interesting. No contact whatsoever allowed. To do so

invited the only remaining death penalty in Federation law. Talos IV was the only other planet Bairnson knew of that had General Order Seven stamped all over its file.

The coordinates were the last thing written in the journal about the *Enterprise-B*; the last coordinates the starship had reported entering. What was it about them that the Federation didn't want anyone to know about? It had to be something to do with why the records of Bairnson's crew had been deleted. Bairnson bit his lower lip, drumming up the courage to ask.

"What's at those coordinates, Mister Data?"

"I cannot tell you that, sir," replied the android.

"The information has been classified by Starfleet."

*Damn! I was afraid he'd say that,* thought Bairnson bitterly. Had he simply been programmed, or was he duty-bound by Starfleet regulations not to reveal that information? *Think fast, Bairnson. How can you make the little birdie sing?* Much as he hated to do it, Bairnson realized that he had to trick Data into giving him what he wanted. It was the only way he was ever going to figure out what he was doing here in the first place.

"Data," Bairnson began evenly. "You're not an extension of the Federation mainframe, are you?"

"No sir," said the android simply. "I am a completely independent unit."

"Well then, surely you don't have the same subroutines written into your software that prevent users of

the mainframe from accessing certain kinds of information?”

“No, sir.”

“Well then, why can’t you give me the information I want? Is there perhaps some kind of failure in your system that I don’t know about?”

“I can find no fault, sir.”

“Well then, tell me what’s located at coordinates 691 Mark 53.”

*Again with the twitching! Is he getting the information or have I really gone and done it and blown some kind of sophisticated fuse in that positronic brain? Have I created some kind of dichotomy in his head that’ll ruin any chance I have of finding out what I’m doing here?*

It stopped again. Data glanced at the Captain.

“According to my internal database,” said the android. “There is a solar system located at those coordinates. Six planets orbiting a red giant sun. The fourth planet and several of its moons appear to be class M.”

*Excellent!* thought the Captain. “I see,” he said smoothly. “Does the system have a name?”

“According to my database,” replied Data. “The system is classified as ‘*Epsilon Dräkmar*.’”

Dräkmar!

Now there was a name that sounded familiar. Something stirred deep within Bairnson’s subconscious. That name, that world. The *Enterprise-B* had been there all

those years ago, but why? He still couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Whatever it was, it must have been pretty damned important for Starfleet to classify the entire system under general order seven.

Bairnson frowned slightly. Partially it was from not fully knowing the reason. It was like having a giant puzzle that you didn't know what the final assembled picture looked like, and were still missing several vital pieces.

Bairnson shot Data a quick glance, as if to say, "Sorry for having to do that to you." Since the android's face displayed little or no emotion, Bairnson couldn't tell if he had registered the sentiment.

"Sir," Lieutenant Worf called.

Bairnson turned to face the large Klingon security chief.

"I have the *Monitor* on subspace for you sir," he reported.

"Good," replied Bairnson. "Have Commander Mirgant report to the *Enterprise* immediately. Tell her..." Bairnson paused momentarily. Finally, he added, "Tell her: The Captain wishes to see her. When she arrives, have her report to my quarters."

"Aye sir."

Bairnson smiled courteously at the Klingon, a gesture which he had noticed in the past tended to irritate them. However, Worf nodded, graciously accepting the gesture and returned his attention to his security console.

Bairnson turned on his heel and stepped towards the turbolift doors once again. The doors parted and with one quick, long stride, Bairnson stepped onto the elevator. As the doors closed, he noticed Data enter Captain Picard's ready room situated at the far end of the bridge.

\* \* \*

Several hours later, Commander Thuroq Mirgant straightened her red Starfleet uniform as she stepped through the doorway of transporter room and into one of the lengthy corridors of the *Enterprise*. She moved her right hand to the top of her head, making certain that the bun style which held her long, flowing white hair was secure and unlikely to come undone.

Her antennae stood erect and sturdy and her aqua-toned skin was just the right shade for a meeting.

Outwardly she appeared to possess all the poise and calm of a highly experienced and professional Starfleet officer. Or like many of the Vulcans she knew.

But inside, Mirgant was filled with a sense of worry and even dread. What had she done that warranted a sudden call to the *Enterprise*? Many thought of it as an honor to be requested to come aboard the Federation's flagship, but not Mirgant.

It was the name: *Enterprise*.

It filled the Andorian commander with uneasy feelings. Feelings she was not comfortable possessing, let alone expressing. The thought of the disasters with the last



two ships to bear that name, caused a curious dryness in Mirgant's throat.

She had promised herself years ago that she would never board this ship, or any other one to bear that name for as long as she lived, but here she was. As she stepped onto the turbolift, Mirgant bitterly thought of how insistent Captain Rollins had been that she come here.

"Maybe Riker's finally accepted a command of his own," he had said, "and they're looking for someone to replace him."

Silently, Mirgant shook the resentment towards Rollins from her mind. He was right, a posting to the Federation's flagship would look good on her record. But what good was it to have an exemplary record, when your conscience still never forgave you for one incident in your life?

The turbolift doors opened once again, and Commander Mirgant stepped off the elevator and into another lengthy corridor. Still, something else gnawed at the back of her mind as she began to walk the corridor's length to her destination.

Why would Captain Picard ask to see her only in his quarters?

He was a little unusual for a Starfleet captain, but even this was beyond what anyone would expect. No matter, she thought, if he wants to see me in his quarters then that's where he'll see me.

Mirgant finally stopped in front of the doorway to which she had been sent. Her eyes narrowed as she read the cabin number. It was the right one alright, but where was Captain Picard's nameplate? She reached out her hand and rang the door chime.

The door opened a fraction of a second later. No voice called out to her to enter. No figure stood in the now-open archway. In fact, from outside the interior of the quarters was noticeably darker than the brightly lit corridor. Mirgant cautiously stepped through the archway into the dark quarters.

A second later, the door closed behind her, and the available light disappeared. The darkness coldly embraced the Andorian commander.

As Mirgant's eyes adjusted themselves to the darkness of the room, she called out.

"Hello?"

No reply.

With great care, Mirgant circled the interior of the quarters. The whole thing reminded her of one of those "haunted tunnel" rides on one of Earth's many amusement parks. Only this time, she no lover beside her to hold her hand and calm her when the monsters leapt out from the darkness at her.

"If you're trying to scare me, Captain," she called out as calmly as she could. "You're doing a good job."

"Thuroq," a voice said.

Mirgant whirled around. There, standing in another archway on the far end of the darkened living room stood a figure. From what she could see, Mirgant guessed that the figure was humanoid, male, about five feet eleven inches tall. He had kind of a stocky build that one would expect of a killer in an ancient Earth horror movie.

But it was the voice which really frightened Mirgant.

Not because it was particularly, deep, hoarse, or ominous in any way, but because it was... familiar! A voice which Mirgant had convinced herself she would never hear again. *It couldn't be!* she thought.

Mirgant's jaw dropped slightly as the shadowy-outlined figure called for the computer to bring up the level of illumination a little. Within moments, Mirgant's worst fears were confirmed as the light gave her a clearer image of the figure. A ghost from Mirgant's distant past.

"Hello Thuroq," said Captain Jack Bairnson.

\* \* \*

Bairnson sat and marveled at his former helmsman. After she had gotten over the initial shock of seeing him alive again, Bairnson managed to sit her down on the sofa in his quarters. Mirgant looked every bit as marvelous now as she did eighty years ago. In fact, the few age lines and wrinkles to her aqua face only added to her appeal.

She sat there sipping a hot Andorian tea which Bairnson had whipped up for her on his replicator. She took deep, nervous breaths as though she was still shaken

up from having received an electrical shock. Finally, Bairnson noticed her look up from her tea. Her eyes met his for the first time, and Bairnson smiled.

“Feeling better?” asked the Captain.

“I... I think so,” replied Mirgant.

Bairnson’s smile widened. *Good ol’ Thuroq*, he thought. She always had had the ability to bounce right back from any kind of trauma. Bairnson wondered if it was something inherent in Andorian physiology, or whether it was something Mirgant had developed on her own. Anyway, he admired her for it.

“When they told me I would be meeting with the Captain, I...” she said.

“Wasn’t expecting me?” said Bairnson completing her thought.

Mirgant nodded.

“I know,” said Bairnson with a reassuring nod.

“But it was the only way I think of to bring you here.”

He waited patiently as Mirgant took another sip of her tea. When she had finished, she placed the still steaming mug down on the coffee table in front of her.

“I mean,” Bairnson continued. “Would you have come if they told you that it was me who wanted to see you?”

“I don’t know,” Mirgant replied after a moment. “I mean, we never did find you. I suppose it could have been possible that...”

Mirgant stopped, finally noticing the disbelieving, wry look across Bairnson's face. She put the thought out of her mind.

"No. I guess not," she finally admitted.

Bairnson nodded with a smile. Mirgant picked up her mug again and took another deep sip. Bairnson stared at her for a moment. Realizing, Mirgant glanced up from her mug quizzically.

"Well?" asked Bairnson.

"Well what, sir?"

"Don't you have anything you want to ask me?"

Mirgant stared at her former captain puzzled.

"Like: 'how the hell did you get here?'" offered Bairnson.

The look on Mirgant's face betrayed her wonderment. But still, she was either too polite or too ashamed to say anything. And she continued sit quietly across from him.

"Well," said Bairnson, rising from his seat. "To tell you the gods' honest truth, I don't know either."

He stopped and turned to face Mirgant again. "I was hoping you could shed some light on that particular subject," he added.

Mirgant put her mug down on the table again slowly. As if she were using the motion to build up her courage.

"Where did they find you?" she finally said.

"I'm not sure," replied Bairnson. "All I do know is that I was discovered aboard a shuttlecraft in some kind of cryogenic state."

"The *Hawking*," Mirgant muttered to herself. "But sir, none of our shuttlecraft were equipped with cryogenic facilities. There was never any reason for it."

"According to Commander LaForge," said the Captain. "Every system aboard the shuttlecraft had been frozen. Quite literally, I might add."

Bairnson moved over to the window next to the couch and stared out at the stars streaking by outside the ship.

"Some kind of natural phenomenon they figure," he added.

"The wormhole," Mirgant muttered just below her breath.

Bairnson quickly whirled to face her. Apparently, she hadn't meant for him to hear that last remark, but now, the look on his face demanded an explanation.

"You were on board the *Hawking*," Mirgant began to explain. "When all of a sudden, *Wham!* This wormhole appears out of nowhere. The *Hawking* got swept up in some kind of gravity vortex and was pulled inside. Seconds later, it was gone."

Bairnson leaned in closer to the Andorian.

"Didn't the *Enterprise's* sensors detect this wormhole?" he wondered.

“There was no indication of any kind of stellar phenomenon like that,” said Mirgant. “It just appeared and then disappeared in a matter of seconds.”

Bairnson rose and glanced out the window once again.

“What was the *Enterprise* doing at Epsilon Dräkmar?” said Bairnson.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bairnson noticed a startled Mirgant turn her head to face him.

“My gods,” she gasped. “You know about Dräkmar?”

Bairnson eyed the Andorian commander curiously.

“I’m out of touch, Mirgant,” he said. “Not out of order.”

Mirgant abruptly looked away from Bairnson.

“Dräkmar’s been classified under General Order Seven, sir,” said Mirgant with finality.

“I know that,” said Bairnson. Once again, he leaned in closer to the woman. “What I don’t know is: why?”

Mirgant sat a moment, her breath coming in aggravated huffs. Bairnson remained where he was: just above her left shoulder. He wasn’t going anywhere. He’d waited this long to find out how he had gotten to the *Enterprise-D*, he could wait a little longer for Mirgant to tell him why.

Finally, a sign of weakness on the part of Mirgant: she closed her eyes. Her lower lip quivered slightly as if she were fighting back the tears caused by decades of pain.

Finally, Mirgant inhaled deeply, calming herself. She opened her eyes and glanced up into her former captain's stern, but gentle auburn-bearded face.

"The *Enterprise* was on a mercy mission," said Mirgant, a slight waver in her voice.

Bairnson moved over to his seat across from the sofa and planted himself in it. Mirgant continued the story.

"We were escorting a Dräkmarian aid ship to Dräkmar IV when we were attacked by an unknown force. The aid ship was hit first and hardest."

Bairnson nodded several times throughout Mirgant's speech, hanging on her every word. With each new revelation, a bigger and more significant piece of the puzzle which had been in Bairnson's mind fell into place.

"Commander Y'Gar beamed an away team over to the Dräkmarian ship. They were going to try to save as much of the crew and the medical supplies as was possible."

"Where did the Dräkmarians get this medicine?" asked Bairnson.

"From the Federation," explained Mirgant. "Dräkmar IV had been a member for about fifty years."

"Why were we transporting it back home?"

"Some kind of plague outbreak. They weren't entirely sure what it was or where it had come from. But they asked the Federation for help, and our best medical minds came up with some kind of vaccine that they hoped would stop the spread of the plague."



Bairnson leaned back into the plush cushioning of the chair. Adjusting his position so that he felt more comfortable, he indicated for Mirgant to continue.

“Just as Commander Y’Gar reported finding the supply of the vaccine,” said Mirgant, “the attackers returned. They opened fire on the Dräkmarian ship and the *Enterprise*. Weapons control and engineering were the hardest hit.”

“Who were these attackers?” wondered Bairnson.

“We couldn’t get a reading on it. It was like a ghost. It fired its weapons without us even seeing it.”

Bairnson inhaled deeply, sucking the air through clenched teeth.

“Romulans,” he said with disgust.

“Maybe,” replied Mirgant. “But remember the Klingons had the cloaking technology as well. And we were having problems with them, too. So, it could have been them.”

“Possibly,” muttered Bairnson, his index finger resting on his chin thoughtfully. A moment passed before he realized that Mirgant was glaring anxiously at him. She mustn’t have told this story to anyone, and now that she was finally getting it out into the open, she had to tell it all.

“What about the *Hawking*?” Bairnson finally asked. “How did I get there?”

“That was your idea,” said Mirgant with an admiring smile. “Our engines and weapons were disabled. We had no way to run or fight back. And so, you decided

to draw the attacker's fire by using one of our shuttlecraft. That would give us the time to repair the damage and get the away team off the Dräkmarian ship."

"I decided to pilot the *Hawking*?" said Bairnson incredulously.

"You wouldn't hear of anyone else doing it. Commander Sunset protested. But, once you've made up your mind, it's like trying to stop a runaway train with a gauze bandage."

Bairnson smiled inwardly. He noticed Mirgant smiling too. Perhaps it was the first time either of them had had something to genuinely feel proud about in a long time.

"What happened then?" asked the Captain.

"Well," began Mirgant with a slight hesitation. "You were able to draw the enemy vessel's fire for about fifteen minutes."

Mirgant paused a moment, then added with an admiring glance, "You fly like a demon."

Bairnson smiled.

"We were able to get the Dräkmarian ship in our shield envelope, but then..." Mirgant's voice trailed off.

"That wormhole appeared," said Bairnson completing her thought.

Mirgant nodded sadly. It was emotionally painful for her to remember this, Bairnson could tell. He hated to put her through any more needless emotional distress, but he had to know what ultimately happened.

“The enemy vessel fired again,” said Mirgant, fighting back the tears. “They destroyed the Dräkmarian ship, and then....”

Mirgant inhaled deeply.

“They fired on us,” she finally said.

Bairnson sat back into the cushioning of the chair yet again. His mind reeling from what Mirgant had just told him. He stared ahead of him disbelievingly. He knew what happened next, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask Mirgant for a confirmation of his suspicions.

Maybe he really didn’t want to hear it. But somehow, he knew that he had to. It was a fact of history now and like it or not, now there was nothing he could do about it.

“The *Enterprise*,” he began slowly, “was... destroyed. Wasn’t it?”

Mirgant nodded sadly.

Bairnson lowered his eyes to the floor. It was as if he had lost a relative that he barely had been given time to know. He shook his head disbelievingly, not wanting to accept a fact which many twenty-fourth century historians already knew; but which he had just been made aware of.

“How many got off?” said Bairnson to the floor.

“One hundred fifty,” said Mirgant simply.

*Less than a quarter!* Bairnson agonized. Mirgant, Vitro; they made it off the ship at least. But what of the others? What of crotchety old Doctor Crispin? What of Bairnson’s young friend, Lieutenant Commander Johnson?

What of the Vulcan communications officer, Lieutenant Saallak?

What about....

“Commander Sunset?” said Bairnson, searching Mirgant’s eyes for some hope. None came.

Mirgant gently shook her head.

“She stayed on board to coordinate the evacuation,” explained the Andorian. “When the *Enterprise* blew, she wasn’t on any of the shuttlecraft or lifepods.”

Through the distress on his face, somehow Bairnson managed to smile. That Sunset! She had the spirit of one of those wild stallions that fed near her family’s reservation on Earth. In a way, it made Bairnson feel worse for never marrying her, but as an officer and colleague, he felt proud to have served with her.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Mirgant said.

“It’s alright,” replied the Captain, calming himself. “There’s nothing you could have done.”

“No. It’s not just that, sir.”

Bairnson detected a steadily rising waver in her voice as she rose from her seat and stood facing the window beside the sofa. Her back turned towards the Captain ashamedly.

“When we finally made it back to Starfleet Command,” she began to explain. “Commander Y’Gar wanted to mount a return to the Epsilon Dräkmar system.”

Bairnson rose and slowly approached the distraught Andorian Commander.

“To find out who the invaders were, yes,” she continued. “But mostly to try to find and rescue you.”

Bairnson now stood directly behind Mirgant, hanging on her every word.

She continued, her voice wavering with sadness.

“They told him ‘no.’ They said that as far as they were concerned, you were dead. And that if we wanted to keep our careers in Starfleet, we were to forget about you.”

Bairnson placed his hands on Mirgant’s shoulders. With great gentleness, he began to massage them. Hoping to ease away the pain and tension in her mind.

“Commander Y’Gar didn’t listen,” she reported through her tears. “He and several other members of the crew hired a mercenary ship and returned to Epsilon Dräkmar to look for you.”

Mirgant sighed as Bairnson continued to massage her shoulders.

“They were never heard from again,” she concluded.

Bairnson ceased his actions on the Andorian woman’s shoulders. He kept his hands firmly placed on them however. Right now, he felt, Mirgant needed to know that he understood.

“It’s alright,” he said reassuringly.

“No, it isn’t alright!” blurted Mirgant, breaking away from Bairnson’s grasp.

Bairnson watched dumbfounded as Mirgant strode away from him to the far end of the room. She buried her

head in her hands momentarily, but then composed herself to turn and face her former captain once again.

“I should have gone with them!” she explained, her voice still a waiver. “You meant as much to me as you did to them. Probably even more!”

Bairnson began to slowly approach her again.

“But I was young, and naive,” she continued. “I didn’t want to ruin my career in Starfleet, so I... I did what they told me, and convinced myself that I was doing the right thing, thinking you were dead.”

Bairnson now stood facing his former helmsman. For the first time, Mirgant could not hold back, and the tears streaked down her face. Glistening on her aqua skin. Bairnson stared compassionately into her eyes.

The pained expression on her face spoke volumes to the Captain. Yes, she did care for him. But Bairnson had to admit that at the time, she was still just a young officer fresh out of Starfleet Academy. To have disobeyed a direct order from Starfleet Command would certainly have led her to a dishonorable discharge, if they ever found her. So, speaking from an officer’s standpoint, Mirgant did the right thing.

Bairnson thought that had he been in her shoes, he probably would have done the same.

Bairnson gently grasped Mirgant’s arms and pulled her in close to him. Mirgant gratefully accepted her former commander’s embrace, and allowed herself the luxury of crying into his large, strong shoulders. Bairnson gently

stroked Mirgant's white hair and whispered to her that everything was alright.

After a moment, Mirgant lifted her head from Bairnson's shoulder. She wiped her eyes dry with her sleeve and then glanced up into the Captain's eyes. They were warm, gentle, and kind. Bairnson smiled.

"How can you stand to look at me, sir?" she said. "After all that I've told you?"

"Thuroq, look at it this way," began Bairnson. "If you hadn't obeyed Starfleet's orders, who would be here now to tell me all this?"

Mirgant sighed briefly. She cast her eyes downward to the floor, a smile building on her face. When she glanced back up into Bairnson's eyes, the smile was complete and wide.

\* \* \*

Bairnson sat alone in the darkness of his quarters.

It had been hours since Mirgant left to return to the *Monitor*. She had promised to come see him again as soon as possible, but when it would be, she couldn't say.

For the past few hours, Bairnson sat alone in the dark silence of the room. His mind raced back eighty years to the time when he first stepped onto the deck of the *Enterprise-B*. He chuckled to himself at how nervous Johnson was at being the senior officer aboard, and having to officially welcome him as the ship's new captain.

He remembered crotchety old Doc Crispin. How he hated being posted to Starfleet's then-flagship after

believing he was returning home to Ireland to retire. Eventually, Crispin and Bairnson had become quite good friends. Often, they played darts, three-dimensional chess, or audio-visual association down in the *Enterprise's* rec room. Bairnson would miss the talks he often had with the wise old man about life over a glass of his favorite Australian lager.

Commander Y'Gar. How could he ever forget him? The brash, young, Yarzonian Commander who, like Crispin, at first resented being aboard the *Enterprise*. The daring young officer who had taken a shuttlecraft and singularly pursued the intergalactic terrorist Devorax to the desolate planet where they had their final battle. The officer who would have resigned his beloved commission in Starfleet for his initial behavior to his captain.

They hadn't become close friends; there hadn't been the time. But Y'Gar led the expedition to try to find and rescue him? Against Starfleet's orders? There was something to admire in the man. Bairnson only wished that he didn't have to have waited until now to learn this. He would miss Y'Gar, too.

Janet.

What more could be done about her? She had seen Bairnson through many tough times. The death of his parents, the loss of his brother, each time he needed her, she was there.

But what about the one time she really needed him? Where was he?



Out trying to prove some macho male crap by single-handed flying a shuttlecraft to draw an enemy attacker's fire away from the *Enterprise*. What the hell was he thinking? He was captain of the ship, for godssakes! There was no reason for him to be out there doing that!

*I'm sorry Janet, he thought sadly. I'm so, so sorry.*

The door chime sounded.

Bairnson hadn't really been expecting anyone to pay him a visit, and the sound of the chime startled him for a moment. He composed himself for moment before calling out for whoever it was to enter.

The main doors to his quarters opened, briefly flooding a fair-sized chunk of the room with bright, white light. A voice called to him from outside in the corridor.

"Come in Laren," said Bairnson in a monotone.

Ensign Ro Laren stepped into Bairnson's quarters, the doors closing silently behind her, throwing the room once again into darkness. Ro slowly approached Bairnson who remained seated in the same easy chair he had spent most of the afternoon in.

He said not a word to the young Bajoran ensign. She knelt down beside his seat, gazing up at him.

"Is everything alright, sir?" she asked.

"We're not on duty, Laren. You don't have to call me 'sir,'" Bairnson replied disheartened.

Bairnson adjusted his position in his seat and glanced down at her.

“I’m sorry,” he said gently. “I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“It’s okay,” Ro smiled understandingly. “I’ve kind of gotten used to it.”

Bairnson cast his eyes skyward again.

“I was just saying ‘goodbye’ to some old friends,” Bairnson explained.

“The members of your old crew?” queried Ro.

Bairnson nodded.

Ro gently placed her hand over Bairnson’s on the chair’s armrest.

“It’s never easy, is it?” he wondered.

Ro shook her head slightly. “I’ve lost more friends than I can count.”

She rose to stand erect on her knees, her dark eyes piercing Bairnson’s.

“And every time it gets harder,” she said.

Bairnson sighed.

A moment of silence passed as the two officers shared each other’s sense of loss.

“I’m alone now,” Bairnson finally said.

Ro returned her attention to Bairnson’s eyes.

“I’ve lost everyone I’ve ever known,” he continued. “Everyone I’ve ever loved...”

Silence.

“No,” said Ro after a moment. “Not *every* one.”

“Mirgant sure,” said the captain. “But who else is there?”

Ro struggled as her mouth tried to comply with what her mind told her to say.

“There’s me,” she finally managed to say.

Bairnson diverted his eyes from the ceiling and stared down into Ro’s eyes. Seemingly embarrassed, she looked away. Bairnson noticed her rise up from the floor and pace to the other end of the room, much the same way as Mirgant had done earlier in the day.

Bairnson sat up straight, his attention completely focused on the Bajoran ensign. After a moment, Ro turned to face him once again.

“This isn’t easy for me,” she admitted.

Bairnson nodded comprehendingly. He urged her to go on.

“I mean, I’ve kind of developed a reputation on this ship for being cold, hard-nosed, all business.”

Bairnson nodded.

“No one really knows, well except for maybe Guinan, that I have feelings just like everyone else.”

Ro began pacing back and forth in front of Bairnson. He could only watch her amazed.

“I laugh. I cry. I feel helpless from time to time.”

“Laren,” Bairnson had to interrupt, “I know all this. What exactly are you trying to tell me?”

Ro stopped in her tracks. She finally turned and faced him, composing herself as best she could.

“There’s something I didn’t tell you,” she began to explain. “About my growing up in the refugee camps.”

Bairnson sat straight, eagerly awaiting whatever it was she felt she had to say to him.

“You were more than just a symbol of hope to me.” She paused a moment, as if trying to find the right words.

“You were the first man I ever loved.”

Bairnson sat back in his chair again, not so much surprised, but intrigued by Ro’s revelation. He urged her to continue.

“I know it’s crazy,” she said, half chuckling.

“Being in love with someone you’ve never even met. But I knew that you were the kind of person that I felt I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.”

Bairnson rose from seat and slowly began approaching her.

“And then, when I finally meet you,” she continued, “I find out you’re even more than I could have dreamed of. And it just makes me love you even more.”

Bairnson now stood face to face with the young Bajoran ensign. They exchanged not a word for several moments.

Of all the things that could have happened since Bairnson came aboard the *Enterprise*, this had to be the best. Maybe there was a life for him in this century after all. If this young woman, who reminded him so much of Janet, could come out and tell him how she really felt, then maybe it was possible for him to go on.

Bairnson placed his hand under her chin, and gently lifted her lips to his. Ro closed her eyes as her mouth

joined his for a gentle brush. She broke away briefly, her pulse racing, until finally, Bairnson pulled her lips to his once again.

They locked together in as strong a kiss as has ever been seen on any old Earth romantic movies. They stayed together a long while, opening occasionally, as their tongues danced together to a rhythm all of their own making.

Bairnson didn't know how long it had been, but he savored the sensation of this woman's mouth linked together with his, and didn't want it to end. Eventually though, the pair broke off and for several moments, stood staring into each other's eyes.

Ro's were undoubtedly the darkest, most beautiful eyes Bairnson had ever had the pleasure to look into. They were very much like Janet's had been, and though he realized that Laren wasn't Janet, he knew that was one of the reasons why he was attracted to her in the first place.

"Stay with me," Bairnson whispered almost imperceptibly.

Ro nodded silently, a joyful smile across her lips.

Taking her by the hand, Jack Bairnson led Ro Laren through the archway that connected his living room with his bedroom.

## CHAPTER SIX

Jack Bairnson had never been an early riser.

Even through all his years in Starfleet, every morning as the chime of his alarm clock awakened him to a new day, his arm reached up and violently pounded the snooze alarm. Hoping for a few extra minutes of peaceful slumber.

But for some reason, ever since he awoke aboard the *Enterprise-D*, Bairnson found the annoying chime a refreshing and yes, even delightful sound. In fact, this morning he even managed to open his eyes five minutes before the alarm even sounded.

Perhaps part of him still feared returning to the darkness, but as Bairnson rolled over on his side, he focused his eyes on the angelic, still-sleeping face of Ro Laren. She looked so peaceful lying there. Bairnson sighed to himself, pondering whether or not to disturb her.

Was it his imagination, or did this woman, whom everyone else on the ship claimed had so volatile a personality, have a slight but contented smile curling her lips? Bairnson couldn't help but smile himself. Taking great care, Bairnson slowly and silently slid out from between the sheets. With soft steps, he strode out of the bedroom.

\* \* \*

An hour or so later, Jack Bairnson reclined comfortably in his new favorite easy chair set in the lounging area of his quarters. Soft, electronically produced music which seemed to emanate from all around, surrounded the Captain as he sat relaxing.

This particular recording was one of Bairnson's favorites, made by twentieth-century combo who took their name from the largest continent on Earth. The rich, harmonious keyboard-made melodies combined with ever so subtle yet deeply lyrical acoustic guitar playing, put Bairnson in one of his most peaceful frames of mind.

As the music played, Bairnson's mind raced back through the years to his childhood on Earth. He saw himself as small boy, no more than five years old, playing in the moist sand of a beach along the Atlantic Ocean. The waves gently lapping his legs and midriff as he played.

His parents watched from up on the dryer and looser sand a few feet away, their faces alight with joy and love. The hot sun beat down from a clear aqua sky, while seagulls soared overhead chirping to another as they searched for tiny fish upon which to feast.

He had been trying to build a castle in the sand, but at this tender age, Jack Bairnson completely oblivious to the fact that every time he managed to build something up, another wave would splash up causing the newly erected tower or pulpit to lose its shape and slowly melt back down into the wet sand.

No matter.

He would keep trying to build that castle, no matter what the consequence. The waves could wash up on the shore all they wanted, but nobody was gonna stop him from building that castle!

And there, in the mindset of the small boy he used to be, Bairnson found what he had been searching for all this time. The determination to go on, no matter what the consequences. That was how he needed to feel right now. One castle is built and destroyed, and another one soon takes its place.

And above all else, you must enjoy the castles while you can and even after they are gone, they live on in your mind and in your heart.

\* \* \*

Like he had done so many times before on his own ship, Bairnson at first confused the chime of his door as being part of the music he was hearing. Finally, as it chimed out of rhythm with the current song, he called out for the person to enter.

Bairnson glanced in the direction of the door as it moved aside. Standing in the doorway was Commander Riker. Bairnson pleasantly told him to enter. As Riker took a long stride to enter the room, Bairnson mentally sized up the *Enterprise's* exec.

Tall, broad-shouldered, piercingly keen greenish eyes, and hairstyle and beard which, although differently colored, resembled Bairnson's own auburn locks in many ways. He had heard people in Ten-Forward remark how



much he and Riker looked alike, but even then, it was still a bit of a shock for Bairnson to see a slightly younger version of himself walking into his quarters.

“I’m not disturbing you, am I sir?” said Riker pleasantly.

Bairnson shook his head. He indicated for the Commander to take a seat on the couch across from him. Riker silently refused.

“I was just wondering...” Riker began.

Bairnson sat up to listen but noticed Riker cease as his attention directed towards the archway which connected the lounging area with the bedroom. Standing there finishing zipping up her red uniform top was Ensign Ro Laren.

As she finished pulling the zipper up the length of its teeth, she realized that all eyes in the room, including the unexpectedly-arrived Commander Riker’s, were on her. Ro put a pleasant, but businesslike, expression on her face as she greeted the *Enterprise’s* XO.

She then quickly strode into the room and stooped down beside Bairnson’s chair. She kissed the Captain briefly, but fully, on his lips and then headed out through the doorway and into the outside corridor. Bairnson watched as the doors closed behind her.

He then returned his attention to Riker who continued to stand looking towards the doorway, a stunned and baffled expression on his face. Bairnson smiled humorously and shrugged to himself.

“Something wrong, Riker?” said Bairnson.

“No sir,” said Riker with slight hesitation. He then smoothed his composure and turned back to face Bairnson once again.

“It’s just that I never pictured you...” he began again. He paused momentarily, glancing about the room before adding, “... as listening to classical music.”

“Classical?” said Bairnson curiously. Then he remembered the recording.

“Oh yes,” he added. “I guess tastes really do change after all, don’t they?”

“Do you play at all, sir?” wondered Riker.

“A little piano. I mean, I’m no whiz at it. But I used to tear up the rec room every Saturday night with my rendition of ‘Great Balls of Fire.’”

Riker smiled. He had one of those gentle, understanding smiles like Captain Sulu used to have. They always made Bairnson feel really good inside. *Some day, Bairnson thought, he’s gonna be a terrific Captain.*

“Well sir,” said Riker again, “I have a little combo that plays every now and then in Ten-Forward. Perhaps you’d like to sit in with us some time?”

“I’d like that, Riker,” said Bairnson with a smile.

He noticed Riker look away uncomfortably for a moment. There was something bothering him. Something that his cool, outward veneer could not camouflage. Bairnson decided to let him get whatever it was off his chest.

“That’s not what you came to talk to me about though, is it Riker?”

“No sir,” said Riker with a sigh. “Captain Picard wishes to see you. Something about unauthorized transmissions.”

Bairnson rose from his seat smoothing his slightly wrinkled uniform. As he pulled the cuffs straight, he gave Riker a reassuring nod.

“I was wondering when he’d get around to it.”

\* \* \*

“Come,” Captain Jean-Luc Picard’s voice called.

The doors to the ready room parted gently with a slight pneumatic hiss to reveal its interior to Jack Bairnson. His eyes scanned the room momentarily, taking in the decor.

“Ah, Captain Bairnson,” Picard said. “Please, come in and have a seat.”

Bairnson stepped through the archway, the doors closing behind him when he was completely through. As Bairnson stepped towards one of the two plush-back, maroon chairs situated in front of Picard’s desk, he scanned the interior of the room once again.

Things had certainly changed since his time. On his *Enterprise*, he had never had the luxury of a single ready room. All line officer meetings had to be conducted in a conference lounge as well as any private meetings between the Captain and any one of those officers about ship’s business.

Bairnson nodded approvingly to himself. Maybe he could get used to life in the twenty-fourth century, if he could have an office like Picard's. Bairnson had had an Oscar that would look as well as Picard's Lionfish did swimming in a tank in one corner of the office. The painting of the *Enterprise* itself which decorated one of the far walls would also look nice.

"Captain," Picard began as Bairnson took a seat, "I wanted to have a word with you about this transmission you made to the *Monitor*."

"Yes," said Bairnson with composure. "I kind of thought that you might."

"As a guest of this ship, you are of course, permitted to use any of its facilities that you wish. If you wanted to contact another ship, you didn't have to come up to the bridge to do so."

That was something that Bairnson had not considered. Perhaps, there was still much about life in the twenty-fourth century that he had to master before he could successfully become a part of it.

"What concerns me more," Picard began again, "is this 'classified' information which you had Mr. Data access for you."

"Yes," said Bairnson. "That was a bit low of me, I know. I hope I didn't bruise Mr. Data's ego at all."

Picard sniffed humorously. "I doubt that Mr. Data has an ego to bruise. At least, not one as you and I know it."

Bairnson shared in Picard's joke. He hadn't had much contact with the Captain since he had been revived, but Bairnson had to admit that he liked this fellow. He imagined that in another time, another place, they might have been as close as Bairnson had been to Mirgant.

"However," Picard said, serious once again. "I would appreciate an explanation as to why you did it, and subsequently, why you had Commander Mirgant come aboard?"

Wasn't there anything that Picard didn't know? Well, Bairnson had to admit to himself, had this been *his* ship, he would have wanted to know everything that went on aboard her as well.

Bairnson rose from his chair and slowly paced the room. Finally, he stopped before the window behind Picard's desk. He gazed out at the stars streaking by.

Bairnson sighed, "Ever since I woke up aboard this ship, I've been trying to work out some kind of rational explanation as to... how and why I got here."

Picard rose from his own chair and moved beside Bairnson staring out the window.

"Figuring out *who* I was, was only part of it," Bairnson continued. "And learning my own identity didn't make it any easier. How could a lone officer, in a shuttlecraft, suddenly wake up and realize that eighty years had passed?"

"And so," said Picard, "what is it that you've discovered?"

Bairnson turned to face Picard. He then briefly told the Captain everything that Mirgant had relayed to him. With each sentence Bairnson spoke, Picard's face changed as his understanding of the events which lead up to Bairnson's arrival became more evident.

As Bairnson ended his story, he noticed Picard's face twist into an expression which resembled, at least to Bairnson, like the balding Frenchman had just finished sucking on a lemon. Bairnson could only guess that something he had said had left the Captain more confused than before he had begun to tell the tale. He asked Picard what was on his mind.

"If what you're saying is true," Picard said cautiously. Bairnson studied Picard's face as he slowly began to voice the questions that had been forming in his mind.

"That means that Starfleet deliberately covered up what occurred at Epsilon Dräkmar," concluded Picard.

"More like swept it under a rug," said Bairnson sternly.

Picard turned away from the window and paced to the center of the room.

"But why?" he wondered.

"I'm not sure," said Bairnson. "All I do know is that the Federation had created a vaccine for a plague outbreak to give to the inhabitants of Dräkmar IV. A vaccine which, as far as I can determine, was never delivered. And then, completely forgotten about."

“And the inhabitants of Dräkmar IV... perished.”

Bairnson nodded gravely. “I’m afraid so.”

Picard closed his eyes tightly, as though in that single moment, he could feel the deaths of an entire world. Deaths which he had been powerless to prevent. Bairnson could only stare helplessly at the Captain. In his time, Bairnson too had felt the deaths of many, but to realize death on a planetary scale was always overwhelming. Picard must have been particularly sensitive to it.

Finally, Picard opened his eyes and stared into Bairnson’s own hazel eyes. Bairnson could see in them a fire that had been sparked by the story of the death of Dräkmar IV. A fire that burned not only as a reminder of the lost inhabitants of that world, but as something else. Something far more intense and powerful.

It was a desire to see justice done for them.

“Perhaps,” Picard began with a new resolution in his voice, “we should go to the Epsilon Dräkmar system ourselves and find out just what is going on.”

Picard quickly turned on his heel and headed for the doors.

“Jean-Luc, wait!” Bairnson called out.

Picard stopped before the doors parted open and turned back to face Bairnson. The auburn-haired captain stepped forward to speak to him. His voice came almost as a conspiratorial whisper.

“If you take the *Enterprise* to Epsilon Dräkmar, you’ll be violating general order seven. If Starfleet finds out, it’s death for you!”

“I’m aware of that, Jack.”

“Are you also aware of the possibility that you could be throwing your life away for nothing? I mean, for all we know, the whole affair at Dräkmar IV could have been covered up to avoid embarrassment on the part of the Federation for a mistake they made eighty years ago.”

Picard sighed a moment, as if taking in all that Bairnson had just said. Finally, he gazed straight back into Bairnson’s eyes.

“I appreciate your concern, Captain. But this is *my* ship, and I’ll command her as I see fit!”

Bairnson lowered his eyes to the floor like a child who had just been chided by a parent for knocking over a priceless piece of pottery.

Picard turned back to the doors and as they parted, he turned his head to glance back over his shoulder.

“Besides,” he said, “I can’t help thinking there’s more to this than just a convenient cover-up!”

Bairnson quickly glanced up from the ready room’s carpeting and dashed out the doorway behind Picard. He glanced at Picard as he stepped over to the helm position and ordered the on-duty ensign to change course for the Epsilon Dräkmar system.

Bairnson then stepped over to join Picard as he stood next to Commander Riker at the rear horseshoe



where their command chairs were situated. Bairnson took the seat at Picard's left just as Riker took the seat to his right.

Suddenly, Bairnson felt the entire ship lurch and quake. His stomach barely had time to recover when yet another wave of lurching and quaking struck the great starship. Even in the twenty-fourth century, Bairnson knew when a ship had been rocked by an enemy attack.

Bairnson glanced up as Picard turned to Lieutenant Worf for a damage report.

"Warp nacelles disabled," the Klingon reported. "Impulse drive: undamaged."

"Shields up!" ordered Riker.

"Shields up at 75% power, sir," Worf replied.

Bairnson realized that these people knew what they were doing, and even with the best of intentions in mind, if he tried to lend a hand, he would only end up getting in the way. So instead, he did the one thing he knew may not help, but wouldn't hurt either.

"What hit us?" queried Bairnson.

Worf answered Bairnson with the same quickness and certainty that he would have with either Picard or Riker. "Disrupter fire, sir."

"Scan the area for any enemy vessels," said Picard calmly.

Bairnson's gaze turned to the Ops station where Lieutenant Commander Data, hurriedly dashed his fingers across the panel of the Ops console. Even in a time of

crisis such as this, Bairnson took a moment to note the near lightning-quick speed with which the android's dexterous fingers danced about the console.

"Scanners can detect no sign of..." said the android. But then he moved his fingers about the console once again, as apparently new information poured in. Within moment, he amended his original summary.

"Romulan Warbird decloaking."

Bairnson turned his attention to the immense main viewing screen at the very front of the bridge as Picard ordered a visual. Within moments, a swirling, greenish image appeared to be taking form on the screen. As it solidified into a single solitary mass, Bairnson's breath escaped and for a single interminable moment, he swore his heart stopped beating.

Never before had he seen a ship like this. It was big. Really *big*. Bairnson had marveled at the size of the *Enterprise* which filled him with a kind of awe. However, this ship, the Warbird as it had been called, filled him with dread.

Its nose was shaped like that of hungry vulture surrounded by an immense oval of metal that seemed to swallow up the void of space beyond it. Bairnson guessed that the designer of the craft had to have been extremely clever. For even though its actual metallic mass may have been less than the *Enterprise*, its vast, immense shape and ominous appearance more than made up for its actual weight.

Bairnson finally caught his breath as he heard Lieutenant Worf calling out to Captain Picard.

“The Warbird is hailing us sir,” the Klingon reported.

“On screen,” said Picard.

Bairnson directed his attention, along with Picard and Riker’s, back to the main view screen. The image of the immense Warbird was replaced by that of the interior of the ship’s bridge, and in the center, the ship’s commander.

Although outwardly impassive, as his training at Starfleet Academy had taught him to be, Bairnson was taken aback by the commander’s appearance. He remembered seeing Romulans before, but there was something different about this one.

Her metallic-looking silver uniform with the checkerboard patterning and collar so high and tight it might have choked a giraffe, was disconcerting enough. It had obviously changed as much as the uniforms of Starfleet personnel had in the last eighty years.

But it was the woman’s face which particularly struck a nerve in Bairnson’s head. Her eyebrows were not as upwardly swept as most Romulans were. Neither were her ears as pointed. And the fact that she had hair the color of the morning sun and steely grey eyes which appeared to see through everything around her, made Bairnson realize that, even for a Romulan, this woman was dangerous.

“Greetings, Captain Picard,” said the Romulan in a voice so stern she could have made even the most innocuous of comments sound like threat.

“Commander Sela,” said Picard with the same even voice he always had. “I demand an explanation for this attack. We are nowhere near the Neutral Zone and...”

“Before you get yourself worked up for nothing,” interrupted Sela, “I’d like you to take a look at this.”

Sela nodded to someone who could not be seen by Bairnson and the others on the bridge. The image on the view screen changed once again. This time to that of a woman in a variation of the Starfleet uniform worn by Picard, Riker and the others.

A thin black triangle, laced with gold piping descended from the uniform’s collar and ended at a point just above the waist. She also had gold piping ringed around the ends of her sleeves as she sat, hands clasped together at a desk somewhere at Starfleet Command on Earth.

Her face was slightly wrinkled with age but still possessed an old-world-type charm and dignity which complemented her age and apparent status. Hers was a face that apparently Picard knew very well.

“Admiral Brackett,” Picard said with no little degree of astonishment.

Admiral Ruah Brackett brushed a lock of her salt-and-pepper hair back off of her forehead as she returned Picard’s greeting.

“What’s the meaning of this?” demanded Picard.

“Captain,” Admiral Brackett began, “you are to take no action whatsoever against Commander Sela’s ship. She is in Federation space with the full approval of Starfleet Command.”

“What?” gasped Picard, shooting a glance at Riker and then over to Bairnson.

“Please comply with her requests.”

“Admiral, with all due respect, Commander Sela has attacked the *Enterprise* without cause or provocation. I believe...

“The Commander *does* have cause, Captain,” said Brackett sternly. “Your orders are not to return fire and to comply with Commander Sela’s requests. Brackett out.”

The image on the screen changed back to Commander Sela on the bridge of the Warbird. A wry smile had wormed its way across her beautiful but hard face.

“Assuming I believe what I’ve just seen Commander,” said Picard.

“Oh, you can believe it,” Sela said with cold reassurance. “I have no reason to lie.”

“When has that ever stopped you before?” muttered Worf.

“Please Captain,” replied Sela. “Can we not be civil to one another when I ask for so little?”

Bairnson suppressed a smile. Obviously, Worf had not intended her to hear that last comment, but with a

Romulan's acute hearing, no message spoken was left unheard.

"Very well Commander," said Picard finally. "What is it that you want?"

Sela reclined comfortably back into her chair, satisfied that she was about to get what she wanted. Bairnson doubted that she rarely, if ever, *didn't* get what she wanted.

"I am simply here in order to bring back to Romulus a known fugitive. Someone Romulan authorities have been searching for for a long time."

"I see," said Picard still somewhat suspicious. "And may I ask what exactly it is this fugitive is supposed to have done?"

"You may ask, but it is not your concern. This is strictly a matter of Romulan internal security."

Picard paused a moment. Bairnson wasn't sure if he was trying to decide what his next move should be or whether he was stalling for time, trying to make the Romulan sweat it out a bit longer. Finally, Picard turned back to face the screen again.

"Since I can't ask why," Picard began, "can I at least ask who?"

Bairnson felt a shiver pulse up through his spine as Sela's eyes stared directly at him. He swallowed imperceptibly as she said his name.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

They were after him.

As if it hadn't been bad enough waking up from a cryogenic state and discovering that eighty years had gone by without you. As if it weren't enough trouble trying to adjust to a world with which you were completely unfamiliar. But then to discover that some enemy authority was after you?

It was all a bit much for Jack Bairnson to take in.

Without a trace of emotion on his face, Bairnson stared defiantly back at the image of Commander Sela on the *Enterprise's* main view screen.

He said nothing, how could he?

Who would have suspected that Romulans would be after him? More to the point, *why* were they after him?

Had it really been the Romulans who attacked the medical transport at Epsilon Dräkmar and consequently, Bairnson's *Enterprise*? And if so, what did they need him for now?

Bairnson barely had time to think as his attention was diverted by Picard once again addressing the Romulan.

"Before I give you my answer," began Picard evenly, "I'd like an explanation as to why you've attacked my ship?"

“I have merely disabled your warp capabilities Captain,” sighed Sela. “The damage I have inflicted upon your ship is minimal and repairable.”

“But why?” insisted Picard.

“To prevent you from trying to escape with the fugitive Bairnson.”

Picard shot a glance at Bairnson. All the former *Enterprise* Captain could offer for an answer was a shrug of his shoulders. Picard returned his attention to the screen.

“What will you do if we turn him over to you?”

“Why, I will leave, of course,” said Sela simply. “We have business back on Romulus.” She then stared directly at Bairnson, stressing her last words, “Don’t we, Captain?”

“Commander,” said Picard, forcing Sela to return her attention to him. “We have set a course for the Epsilon Dräkmar system in order to discover the reason behind Captain Bairnson’s presence here. Perhaps if you’d care to accompany us...”

“That is unacceptable!” Sela fumed. “You are stalling for time, Captain. I do not intend to fall victim to your wiles this time. I do not wish it; but if necessary, I will destroy your ship to get what I want.”

“Is that a threat, Commander?” said Picard incredulously. “I was under the impression that your presence here was benign.”



“Make no mistake, Picard,” said Sela sternly, “only you will determine whether I will leave with or without firing a shot.”

Bairnson had heard enough of this banter.

“Commander,” he said finally breaking his silence. All eyes on the bridge suddenly turned in his direction as did the eyes of the female commander on the view screen.

“I’ll beam over to your ship in ten minutes.”

A satisfied smile came to Sela’s face. “You’ve made the right decision, Captain Bairnson. It’s refreshing to see at least *one* human with common sense.”

Bairnson nodded simply, lowering his eyes to the floor.

“I’ll expect you in ten minutes!”

With that, Sela closed the communications channel on her end and the image on the *Enterprise’s* view screen returned to the image of the Warbird floating ominously in space.

Picard and Riker simultaneously turned to face Bairnson. The look on their faces indicated that they were not happy about his decision.

“Why did you say that, sir?” wondered Riker. “We might have been able to make them leave.”

“With warp engines disabled and shields not at maximum power?” said Bairnson.

“We’ve faced worse...”

“Will,” Bairnson interrupted. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but really, this is for the best.”

Picard took a step towards Bairnson. "Are you sure, Captain?"

"Jean-Luc, I don't want you sacrificing this ship for me. I already have enough deaths on my conscience."

Picard nodded sympathetically.

Bairnson looked to Riker for at least an acknowledgment of what he was doing. He noticed the bearded exec smile weakly and then give a nod to him. Bairnson extended his hand and grasped Picard's and Riker's respectively. Each of them gave his hand a vigorous pump.

Bairnson then turned away from them and slowly paced up the rise to the higher level of the bridge. As he reached the turbolift doors, he turned to, in some way, say goodbye to this crew who had been so kind to him.

As he whirled around to face the on-duty bridge officers, he was surprised to see that every one of them, including Worf, was standing at attention for him. Bairnson's voice momentarily caught in his throat, but he managed a brave smile for the group.

"I'll never forget you," he said simply to the assembly.

He then turned and stepped towards the turbolift doors which parted to allow him access to the elevator. He stepped through the foyer and into the car. Slowly, the doors closed before him, forever obscuring the bridge of the *Enterprise*.

Bairnson commanded the turbolift to take down to the level on which his temporary quarters were situated. After a moment of descent, he changed his mind and commanded the car to take him to another location.

There was someone he had to see before he left. He only hoped that she would understand what he was doing.

\* \* \*

“Well I don’t understand!” blurted Ro Laren. She turned away from Bairnson and paced over to the window at the far end of her quarters.

Bairnson sighed momentarily to himself. He was afraid that she would take it like this. Inside, he really couldn’t blame her for being upset. She had lost so many other people she cared about in her young life, and now losing him had to be tearing the girl apart inside.

Bairnson stepped warily towards her, lightly placing his hands upon her shoulders. When she suddenly jerked away from his grasp, Bairnson took a step back.

Ro Laren turned to face him. In the dim light, Bairnson momentarily saw the tears streaking down her cheeks. He frowned as she presently sniffed and then violently wiped the tears from her eyes with her hand.

“Well, go on!” she said with sudden anger. “Go on out there and be the big hero!”

Bairnson could not help but shut his eyes. Ro’s words came with the fierceness of a fist across his face. He imagined this might have been what Janet might have said to him about his hot shot flying.

“Don’t even give a second thought to.... those who... care...” Ro speech came in spurts as another well of emotion burst inside of her. “...About you... the most...” she finally said before burying her face in her hands.

Bairnson rushed over and wrapped his arms around the Bajoran woman. Ro struggled to free herself from his embrace for a moment, but ultimately gave up and wrapped her arms around him as tight as a vice. For a few moments, Bairnson let Ro sob into his shoulders. For some inexplicable reason, he couldn’t help thinking that she wasn’t just crying for him.

All those others that she had talked about losing in her life, had she had the opportunity to mourn their leaving? Or had she simply kept those emotions buried deep within her; never revealing them to anyone. Until now. Was it that that had made her so outwardly hostile and cold? Bairnson might never have known for certain. But at least she was expressing her feelings for him, now.

Bairnson placed his fingers under Ro’s chin, and lifted her face so that their eyes met. Ro’s deep, dark, mysterious eyes, now awash with tears were nonetheless burning with an intense fire of emotion. For a moment, the souls of Jack Bairnson and Ro Laren merged and became one. For a moment, the outside world ceased to exist and all that either of them knew or cared to know, was each other.

For a moment.

“I’d better go,” said Bairnson gently.

"I wish you wouldn't," sighed Ro.

"You're not alone."

Bairnson pulled her close to him. After a moment he broke off from the embrace. Bairnson gazed deeply into Ro's eyes, a tender smile on his face.

"Who knows?" he said after a moment. "It could be that this Sela has the answers I'm looking for."

"If she does, I'll lick a Ferengi's earlobes."

Bairnson and Ro shared a laugh. He had never heard the Bajoran make a joke before, and this one coming in the face of who knew what, made it all the more special.

Finally, Bairnson broke away, and began backing towards the door to the quarters. He never averted his gaze from Ro's lovely eyes, and ultimately, as the doors parted to reveal the outside corridor, a soft smile came to Ro's face.

"Don't forget me," Ro said hoarsely.

Bairnson stopped in the doorway and stood erect before her.

"Laren," he said. "If there's such a thing in the universe as destiny, I'll find you again!"

Ro's smile widened at the promise. Bairnson returned the gesture and quickly turned and strode out the door. As he walked the length of the corridor towards the turbolift, he dared not to glance back.

\* \* \*

No more than a few moments passed for Jack Bairnson as he walked the length of corridor towards the transporter

room. Yet, in those few moments, a lifetime seemed to pass. As the doors parted before him, he allowed himself the brief luxury of a deep and satisfying sigh. Bairnson then stepped through the archway and into the room. The doors hissed close behind him.

Chief Miles O'Brien stood, as usual, behind the transporter console, his face seemingly impassive. But as Bairnson was savoring every moment of freedom he had left, he took a moment to examine the Chief's eyes. Though outwardly he displayed no emotion, as good Starfleet officer on duty would, Bairnson saw within the Chief's eyes a kind of sadness.

It couldn't be that the Chief was actually saddened by Bairnson's having to leave the *Enterprise*.... could it?

Bairnson was about to step onto the transporter pad without a further word exchanged between them. Something made him stop. He turned around again to face O'Brien. He still had the same outwardly impassive face, but the sadness in his greenish eyes, continued to bother Bairnson.

Bairnson stepped over to directly face O'Brien; only the width of the transporter console prevented him from getting any closer.

"Chief," said the Captain.

O'Brien glanced up from his adjustments. Obviously, he had tried to cover his feelings with work, but Bairnson had been too sharp for him.

“I was wondering if you could do me a favor,” Bairnson continued.

“Oh, certainly sir,” said O’Brien. “What is it?”

“I was wondering if you could look after Laren for me.”

A puzzled look came across O’Brien’s face.

Bairnson guessed that no one else on the ship called her by that name.

“Ensign Ro,” explained Bairnson.

“Ensign Ro?” said O’Brien, his voice rising in astonishment.

“Yes,” replied the Captain. “I have a feeling that the next few days are going to be difficult for her. I’d just like to know that someone will be there for her.”

O’Brien shook his head in amazement. “With respect sir, I think that Ensign Ro is a lot stronger than you think.”

“She’s like Coronian porcelain,” said Bairnson. He noticed O’Brien’s brow furrow, not comprehending the analogy.

“Outwardly strong and unbreakable. But one little crack in the right place, and the entire piece crumbles to dust.”

O’Brien nodded. “Don’t worry, sir. Keiko and I will make sure she’s alright.”

“Thank you, Miles,” said Bairnson, clearing away an imaginary obstruction in his throat.

Bairnson then turned on his heel and paced to the transporter pad. He scaled the three-step climb and firmly planted his feet on the closest pad. As he turned to face O'Brien once more, he heard the report of the coordinates for the Romulan Warbird being relayed to O'Brien's station from the bridge.

Bairnson steeled himself as O'Brien activated the transporter. As Bairnson's surroundings shimmered away from existence his mind raced. He had no idea what fate awaited him on the Warbird, but he resolved that whatever it was, he would be ready for it.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Within moments, the bright, spacious transporter room on the *Enterprise* sparkled out of existence to be replaced by the dim and stifling one that Bairnson presumed was on the Romulan Warbird. Sure enough, a silvery/grey clad Romulan woman with close-cropped dark hair, pointed ears, and upswept eyebrows stood at what Bairnson believed to be the transporter console, taking a few last-minute readings from the console before turning her head to her left and nodding.

Bairnson followed her gaze to the two burly security guards standing by what he presumed to be the entranceway, which at the moment was closed off by a thick, and heavy-looking metallic door. One of the men wordlessly stepped up to the transporter platform, producing a small device from inside his belt. Before Bairnson could inquire about it, the guard roughly grasped the back of Bairnson's neck, holding it steady while he forcibly pressed the device against it.

Bairnson stifled an agonized grunt as the Romulan kept pressure on the device and his neck for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, the brute yanked the device away from Bairnson's neck and released his grip.

After taking a moment to recover his bearings, Bairnson noticed the Romulan guard staring intently at the device. His expression barely changed as the device

produced a steady stream of clicks, processing whatever data it was analyzing. Bairnson deduced that it must be some sort of DNA tester. Finally, the device gave a satisfied digital beep, indicating that the analysis was complete. Bairnson couldn't tell if the results pleased or disappointed the guard because his expression remained as stony as ever.

The Romulan guard nodded to his cohort, who stepped up to join him on the transporter platform. The pair flanked Bairnson, each grabbing one of his arms, forcing him to move in the same the direction as they were. The heavy door to the transporter room parted with a heavy industrial hiss as the trio approached, revealing the dimly lit corridor beyond it.

As the guards compelled Bairnson to pass from the transporter room into the corridor, he overheard the transporter operator reporting to the bridge over the console's built-in communicator. "Identity is confirmed, Commander."

"Excellent," came the response from the bridge. "We will immediately set course for..."

And that was all Bairnson heard as the transporter room's heavy door closed behind him. He could only wonder what fate was in store for him as his handlers marched him down the corridor, their firm grip never wavering the entire way.

\* \* \*

Bairnson figured that he would be placed in the Romulan version of the brig. In fact, his cell really wasn't all that different from the ones in the brigs of the Federation starships on which he had served. Confined and sparse, its only furnishings were a slab bed built into one cell wall, sporting the thinnest of mattresses. The bed served as the only place a person could sit on that wasn't either the floor or the tiny commode on the far end of the cell.

Brigs weren't supposed to be comfortable by any stretch of the imagination, but even Bairnson realized that the ones on Federation ships were like a room on a resort world like Risa compared to this hole. The only sound that one could hear in the place was the dull electronic drone of the force field in the cell's entranceway, which prevented any prisoner from attempting to escape.

Bairnson stared out of his cell at the lone Romulan guard standing vigil at the far end of the brig, near the entranceway. When the two guards had brought Bairnson into the brig—shoved, actually—he noticed that none of the four cells in the room were occupied.

He was the lone prisoner. He found that oddly flattering. But, now—gods know how long ago that had been—he was becoming a bit restless. And punchy.

“Hey!” he called out to the guard. “Can you hear that?”

The guard stood idly by, not acknowledging the query.

“I think your force field projector has a loose connector or something.”

The guard did not move.

“It’s just awfully noisy, don’t you think?” Bairnson asked. The guard remained rooted to his spot.

“Any chance you can get someone down here to fix it?”

The guard’s stony visage remained stony.

“Or, heck! If you bring me some tools, I can probably take care of it myself,” Bairnson smiled. *It’d at least give me something to do while I’m in here.*

Movement! The guard raised a finger to his face and rubbed beneath his prominent nose before returning his arm to its original position at his side.

“Want to hear a joke?” Bairnson called out again. Still, the Romulan did not move a muscle. Bairnson wasn’t even sure his eyes ever blinked.

“I promise you’ll like this one!” The Romulan remained as still and silent as a stone statue.

“How many Starfleet engineers does it take to change a lightbulb?” queried Bairnson. His companion said nothing.

“Five. One to screw it in, and four to say, ‘*I could have done that! And I could have done it *better!*’”*

Was it Bairnson’s imagination or did one side of his minder’s lips briefly curl upward in a half smile? And did his dark eyes give off the tiniest of twinkles before resuming their empty expression?

*And here I thought they didn't have a sense of humor*, Bairnson mused. He stepped back over to the bed in his cell and sat down.

“Hey, when’s chow time around here?” he called again out to the guard. No response.

For a moment, he pondered what to do next before ultimately laying down on the nearly nonexistent mattress. As there was no headrest to speak of, Bairnson quickly doffed his maroon jacket and fashioned it into a makeshift pillow before placing it underneath his head. Like the mattress, it wasn’t ideal. But under the circumstances, it would do just fine.

Bairnson began thinking about the course of events that had brought him to this place. Waking up on the *Enterprise-D* and meeting the various members of her crew. Discovering that anyone he had once known was either dead, missing, or wanted nothing to do with him. Even his minder mostly seemed to ignore him.

It was a complete 180 from how he’d felt not so long before, when it seemed he had finally found an ally who would help him unravel the mystery of his past. Picard had been prepared to sacrifice his career—indeed, his life—to make it so. Would he and his crew continue on that Arthurian quest? Or would they obey Starfleet’s orders and abandon it?

Bairnson could only guess.

If it was the latter, then he could find solace that Laren wouldn’t needlessly suffer any more because of him.

She deserved some peace and happiness in her life. Even if it was without him. He prayed that she would.

The pneumatic hiss of the brig's entranceway door opening pulled Bairnson out of his reverie. The unmoving guard finally stepped aside as the striking Romulan commander Sela stepped into the brig. With a nod, she dismissed the guard. And as the entranceway door closed behind him, Sela slowly and purposefully strode toward Bairnson's cell.

A slight smile curled her lips as each step she took brought her closer. "I had to see it with my own eyes," she said with a hint of relish. "'The Butcher of Dräkmar.'"

She took a moment to look Bairnson from foot to head, her expression one of revulsion. "You don't look so frightening to me."

"I'm sorry..." Bairnson said with obvious confusion. "What did you just call me?"

Sela stepped in closer, her eyes narrowing. "Does the name offend you, Captain? It's fitting given the sheer magnitude of your crimes."

"And... what 'crimes' would those *be*, exactly?"

Bairnson's eyes widened when Sela said the words. Murder. 100,000 counts.

Bairnson hadn't expected to laugh at the accusation, he couldn't help himself. The charge was just that absurd. He quickly noticed Sela regarding him with curiosity and suppressed any more forthcoming guffaws.

After taking a deep calming breath, he said, "You're not serious?"

Sela stared back him stone-faced.

Bairnson's own expression grew more concerned.

"O... kay, you... *are* serious."

He paced away from Sela as far as the length of his cell would allow, gathering his thoughts. After a moment, he turned back to her. "How exactly did you work that charge out?" he asked.

"Your actions at the battle of Epsilon Dräkmar were the catalyst for the deaths of 100,000 Romulans."

"That's insane!"

"It is a chaotic universe, Captain," intoned Sela.

*Oh great*, thought Bairnson. *She's philosophical to boot!*

"Eighty years ago," Sela continued. "Your Federation and Romulus agreed that, if you were ever to resurface, Romulus had sole jurisdiction over what to do with you."

In other words, for all intents and purposes, the Federation had abandoned him. Bairnson was now a man without a country; worse, without a world. Not only that, but it seemed as if that world had literally thrown him to the wolves.

It was like an unexpected, powerful punch to the gut. Bairnson's knees buckled. He slowly turned away from Sela and took labored steps toward the bed. He placed one hand on the nearly nonexistent mattress for

support as he lowered himself to a seated position, his eyes lowered to gaze at the patternless floor of his cell.

After taking a moment or two to catch his breath, Bairnson raised his head once more to look out the entranceway of his cell. Sela still stood there, but something was now different about her. She had her head slightly cocked to her left shoulder and her brow furrowed with bemusement.

“Curious,” she said flatly. “You seem... troubled by this.”

“Yeah, well...” croaked Bairnson. “It’s not every day that you find out your Federation has turned on you.”

Another silent moment passed as Bairnson gathered his thoughts. “I presume we’re on our way to Romulus?”

Sela nodded.

“Where I’ll be... what? Tried?”

“Executed,” said Sela definitively. “Publicly.”

Bairnson snickered. “Of course.” How could it go any other way? A wry smile wormed its way across his face.

Sela stepped closer to Bairnson’s cell. “You find this amusing?”

“Would you prefer to see me crying? On my knees, begging for mercy?” Bairnson shook his head. “I’ve already lost everything that ever mattered to me. What you’re going to do sure as hell won’t make things any worse.”



Sela stood silently for a moment, seemingly pondering what to do next. Finally, she said, "You are a most peculiar man, Captain."

"Well, I guess that's a step up from being a mass murderer," said Bairnson with bitter irony.

"Is it not customary among your people to confess your sins before journeying to the afterlife?"

"What 'sins'?! " Bairnson seethed, rising from his bunk. He stepped toward Sela until they were just about nose-to-nose. Only the force field prevented them from reaching through the threshold and choking each other. "I have no idea what you're even talking about. And even if I did, the last person I'd confess *anything* to would be some albino freak!"

"I am *not* albino," spat Sela.

"Yeah? Well, *I'm* not a murderer!" Bairnson retorted with no small level of consternation. "Hey, ho; what do you know? We have something in common after all!"

Sela quickly reached down to her right hip and drew her disruptor from its holster. Within seconds, it was pointed directly at Bairnson's forehead. "You do realize that we already have your DNA on file; don't you, Captain? There's no need to take you all the way to Romulus. I could simply execute you right here. Right *now*!"

Perhaps it was the heightened adrenaline coursing through Bairnson's body, but at that moment, it was like

someone flipped a switch in his brain. She was right. They didn't *need* him alive. Sela could have killed him the moment she stepped through the threshold into the brig. And yet, here he stood verbally sparring with the uncharacteristically blonde Romulan commander. At that moment, he felt more like what he presumed was his "old self."

His rage disappeared and an insatiable curiosity took its place. He gently and evenly asked the question that was currently on his mind, "Then... why haven't you?"

Sela's narrowed eyes immediately opened to their fullest and her furrowed brow softened to a more neutral expression. At that moment, Bairnson realized what had been going on since the moment she entered the brig. She had been using psychological interrogation techniques to get him to reveal some piece of information that she was convinced he knew. But, when none of her approaches had worked to her satisfaction, she ultimately resorted to the last move she had left in her arsenal: The threat of violence.

But Bairnson knew that move all too well. And he knew where it always originated: Out of desperation. And that finally gave him the upper hand. He couldn't lose it now.

"What do you know, Sela?" he asked her gently, using her given name instead of her rank in the hope of putting her at ease.

With frustration, Sela holstered her disruptor. “Clearly, more than you do.” She turned away from Bairnson’s cell and stood silently. A wordless moment passed between the two.

Finally, Bairnson offered, “Penny for your thoughts?”

Sela turned to face Bairnson again, a look of confusion across her pale complexion.

“It’s an old expression,” explained Bairnson. “It means, do you care to share what’s on your mind?”

“Romulans do not mind-meld,” said Sela flatly.

If the circumstances were different, Bairnson would have probably laughed at her remark. But he kept his amusement to himself. She probably didn’t even see the humor in her statement. Or *did* she?

“Well,” he began again, “judging by our conversation, your mouth certainly has no issue forming words.”

Sela turned back around and stared at Bairnson. It took a second, but then he saw it: The same slight twinkle that he had seen his original guard’s eyes when he told him that horrible joke. He was getting through to Sela!

“What happened on Epsilon Dräkmar, Sela?” he asked.

“And why would I tell you?” said Sela coyly. “Isn’t the story well documented in the Federation archives?”

Bairnson inclined his head slightly, with a wry half-smile. “Any record of the incident seems to have...” He

made a gesture with his hands that resembled a firework bursting in the air.

“Typical...” Sela huffed. “We soldiers do all the dirty work only to have it wiped away with the stroke of a politician’s stylus!”

Then Bairnson remembered part of the story that Mirgant had told him. “The Dräkmarian plague,” he said. “Did your people have something to do with it?”

Sela’s nod confirmed Bairnson’s suspicions.

She revealed to him how at that time, a new Praetor had assumed power on Romulus. She was young, ambitious, and eager to prove that she was worthy of the mantle she had won. One of her first acts was the establishment of listening posts throughout the Alpha Quadrant. Her greatest ambition, however, was to establish at least one such post beyond the Neutral Zone, deep in Federation space.

Dräkmar IV offered the perfect opportunity.

Although the Dräkmarians had established relations with the Federation, the alliance was still somewhat tenuous and contentious. By approaching the Dräkmarians with her proposal, the Praetor had hoped to shift the balance of power back in favor of Romulus. But, if the Dräkmarians had reservations about the Federation, they held nothing but contempt for the Romulans. And despite the strength of her vaunted military, the Praetor realized that engaging in combat with the fierce Dräkmarian warriors would only lead to defeat.

“That’s when she devised the plague,” said Sela. “She had our top geneticists work feverishly day and night to create it. And when it was ready, we would secretly unleash it upon Dräkmar IV.”

“How?” wondered Bairnson.

“We have our ways,” said Sela slyly. Bairnson decided not to press her any further on the subject. He was lucky to have gotten that much information. He then asked her what happened next.

Sela told him that that was the second part of the Praetor’s plan: To magnanimously offer the Dräkmarians the cure for the disease – because, of course, it just so happened to be similar in many ways to a global pandemic that had once decimated Romulus. The Dräkmarians, for their part, would be so grateful for the Romulans’ help, that they would willingly allow the Praetor to establish her listening outpost on one of Dräkmar IV’s moons.

Bairnson had to admit that—while diabolical—the plan sounded nearly perfect. But, if Bairnson had learned anything from his nearly forty years of life, it was that the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

“But there... *was* no cure,” Bairnson conjectured. “Was there?”

“Oh, no,” said Sela to Bairnson’s astonishment. “That part of the story was true. A pandemic had once decimated Romulus and a vaccine existed...” Her voice trailed off and her expression changed back to one of

disgust. “But that’s when hubris and politics got in the way...”

Sela told Bairnson about a small—but vocal—contingent within the Romulan senate that had become extremely popular with the people at the time. This small cadre of senators secretly convinced the Praetor that it would be far simpler—and much less costly to the Empire—to simply let the plague do its dirty work and wipe out the Dräkmarians altogether. Then, the Romulans could swoop in and claim the Epsilon Dräkmars system as Romulan territory without ever firing a shot.

That was when the Dräkmarians reached out to the Federation for help. Within weeks, Federation geneticists working closely with the Dräkmarians developed their own version of the vaccine. When it was tested and ready to administer, Starfleet dispatched the Federation’s flagship—the *Enterprise-B*—to escort a Dräkmarian aid ship back to Dräkmars IV as both its protector and as a symbol of cooperation between the two cultures.

Well, of course, upon hearing this, the Praetor and her allies in the Senate determined that it couldn’t be permitted to happen. So, she dispatched her own top-secret flagship to engage the small convoy.

“And, as you might know,” concluded Sela. “They were successful. Naturally, there were casualties on both sides of the conflict, but... we ultimately prevailed. The Romulan Star Empire humiliated the mighty Federation by destroying its flagship.”

Something in the way Sela said that last sentence made Bairnson realize that she was parroting the “party line” with bitter irony. “If you had any Romulan ale, I’d drink a toast to your success,” scoffed Bairnson.

“Many toasts were poured in the days and months that followed,” admitted Sela. “Epsilon Dräkmar was ours. And work began almost immediately on the new outpost...”

Her tone suddenly became more melancholic. “But that’s when the first victims succumbed to the plague.”

“Victims?” Bairnson asked. “You mean... Romulans?”

Sela nodded. It turned out that the genetically engineered plague mutated in Dräkmar IV’s atmosphere, becoming far stronger and more virulent than it was originally believed to be. It also appeared that Romulan and Dräkmarian physiology was more alike than either race would care to admit. The plague raged throughout the Epsilon Dräkmar system, killing anything that contracted it within days.

“But... you had a vaccine,” said Bairnson. “So did the Federation...”

“The Federation’s supply of vaccine was lost when that Dräkmarian aid ship was destroyed,” said Sela. “And as for ours...” Sela’s voice lowered to nearly a whisper when she explained how the Praetor had ordered all existing stores of the vaccine to be destroyed when news of her flagship’s victory over the *Enterprise-B* reached her.

Bairnson sat down on the bed again. "My gods..." he muttered.

That explained why Starfleet had classified Dräkmarr IV under General Order Seven. And why there were no records of the incident to be found on any Federation database. The Federation Council must have been so chagrined by the loss of the *Enterprise-B*, that they decided to just wipe the entire incident from their records! As if it never even happened. Just as the Romulan Senate had apparently done.

"Sela," Bairnson said contritely. "I am so sorry. If there was any way I could change what happened, believe me, I would."

"I honestly don't know what to believe anymore," said Sela softly. "Take you, for instance."

The remark befuddled Bairnson. He briefly glanced up and down his own body. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, we have your DNA. We ran it several times to confirm your identity."

Bairnson's brow furrowed. "But...?"

"But how can you be him?" she asked pointedly. "How can *you* be Jack Bairnson? It is not logical. You should be close to 120 years old by now..."

Realization dawned on Bairnson. "Ahh. That would be the wormhole."

"What wormhole?"

"Well, that's what Mirgant called it, anyway. But it wasn't like any wormhole I've ever encountered before."



“Explain.”

Bairnson quickly summarized his encounter with the strange phenomenon that Mirgant had told him about. How it must have frozen his damaged shuttlecraft’s onboard systems and left him in a state of suspended animation until he was awoken in the 24<sup>th</sup> century by the crew of the *Enterprise-D*.

“And how long did they say your shuttle was... frozen?” wondered Sela.

Bairnson had to think. “I never heard a specific number. But it sounded like it had only been a few days...”

That’s when Bairnson heard Sela mutter the word *T’Lajia*. Even though he’d taken a basic course in alien linguistics at Starfleet Academy, that was not one of the Romulan words he remembered hearing. He asked Sela what it meant.

Her reply was to draw her disruptor from its holster and point it directly at Bairnson once again. Instinctively, he stepped back from his cell’s threshold, even though the force field would prevent any disruptor fire from reaching him. Sela quickly removed that barrier by reaching over and pressing the panel beside the cell’s threshold, which disengaged the force field and allowed her to pass into the cell.

Bairnson slowly backed away from Sela until the wall halted his progress. Sela continued to approach him, the look on her face betraying no inward emotion. Bairnson raised his hands in surrender.

“What are you doing?” he demanded.

“Someone must pay for what happened at Epsilon Dräkmar, Captain,” said Sela calmly.

“But... you *know* I didn’t do whatever they told you I’ve done!”

“As I said before, Captain,” countered Sela. “There is no reason to take you to Romulus. We have your DNA. I can execute you right here. Right now.”

“Look,” said Bairnson, his voice quavering with nervousness. “I apologize for calling you an albino, all right? That was uncalled for, and I deeply regret it...”

For a moment, Bairnson thought he saw Sela’s eyes break her gaze on him to glance up to her right. Was she surreptitiously signaling him? He quickly glanced up and noticed that there was indeed a surveillance camera staring down into the cell at him.

Before he could completely process what was going on, he heard Sela say, “*Most* peculiar.”

She then pulled the trigger on her disruptor.

And the blackness fell over Bairnson.

## CHAPTER NINE

Blackness. Silence

Then, a deep inhale. Like someone whose head had been submerged under the surface of the water for far too long, it tried to bring as much oxygen into the lungs as possible before being dunked down deep once again.

But that didn't happen.

Instead, the breaths came continuously. And as one came after the other with no sign of stopping, they slowed and normalized.

He tried to bring himself to a seated position, but clanged his head on the metallic ceiling mere inches above it. *What the hell...?* he thought. He reached his hands above his head and touched the cold, smooth surface, feeling for any sort of control or clasp that would permit him to exit. But there was none to be found.

He was confined. His movement limited.

His first thought was to panic. Was he in some sort of sarcophagus, buried deep underground? But, if that was the case, why would a thin, pale green line suddenly appear along both sides of his prison, providing limited but nonetheless sufficient illumination? And if he was indeed buried underground, why would he feel a sensation of momentum all around?

And what the hell was that small, flashing red orb on the ceiling at just about eye level? The one that

appeared to be calling out to him, pleading for him to touch it? It certainly was insistent, wasn't it? Try though he might, he could no longer resist the temptation. He reached out and touched the light with his right index finger.

Immediately, the ceiling above became blinding white as low-level energy excited the air molecules around the orb into movement. An image slowly coalesced into a recognizable humanoid form. It took less than a second; and when the process was finished, the visage of a woman with close-cropped blonde hair, subtly upswept eyebrows and dully pointed ears stared back at him.

"Greetings, Captain," said the image.

He remembered her. The woman who had shot him!

Sela.

"No doubt you are experiencing some confusion and disorientation at the moment," the image of Sela continued. "However, let me begin by reassuring you that you are, indeed, alive."

*Well, thanks for that one, Commander Obvious,* thought Captain Jack Bairnson sardonically.

"I'm sure you must have many questions," said Sela.

*Boy, do I ever,* thought Bairnson.

"Unfortunately, time is a luxury we do not have."

*Great,* Bairnson thought, bitterly. He realized now that he must be watching a holographic recording that Sela

had made and loaded onto this... whatever it was he was on.

As if it read his mind, the recording of Sela announced, “By now, you must realize that you are on board one of our infiltrator pods. I’m sure I do not need to tell you what that is.”

Bairnson had heard rumors that the Romulans used small, photon torpedo-like devices to sneak weapons and provisions to troops across enemy lines. They were small enough—and fast enough—that they could evade detection by even the most highly-calibrated sensor arrays. Apparently, they were also just the right size to hold an average-sized adult, making them the perfect tool for espionage.

“This pod,” Sela began again, “has been programmed to take you to the Epsilon Dräkmar system.”

*Why?* wondered Bairnson.

Eerily, the seemingly clairvoyant recording responded, “You said that if you could change what happened, you would. Well... I am giving you that opportunity.”

Bairnson’s eyes widened at the proclamation. Romulans rarely, if ever, just let their prisoners go. Not without some ulterior motive. But Bairnson would be left wondering what that might be as Sela revealed the details of the plan. Once the pod reached the Epsilon Dräkmar system, it would emit an elevated neutrino beam which would open the T’Lajia near Dräkmar IV.

There was that word again. *T'Lajia*. What did it mean?

“Once opened,” Sela continued. “The pod will enter the T'Lajia and return you to the battle of Epsilon Dräkmar.” Sela paused momentarily. “At least... I *believe* that it will.”

*You believe...?* thought Bairnson incredulously.

Sela's hologram informed him that once he was through to the other side of the T'Lajia, he was to activate the pod's emergency transporter. He would then be beamed directly onto the *Enterprise-B*.

“Once aboard your ship, your mission is three-fold. First: Avert the destruction of the *Enterprise-B*. Second: Save Dräkmar IV from becoming a poisoned realm. And third...” She paused momentarily before finishing her thought. “Show the crew of the Romulan ship that attacked you the same mercy that I have just shown you.”

Bairnson registered the sensation of his momentum slowing. The pod buckled as its reverse impulse thrusters activated. That told him that the pod was entering the Epsilon Dräkmar system.

“Good luck in your mission, Captain Bairnson,” Sela's hologram concluded. “Jolan tru,” it added as a final punctuation before fading away.

Bairnson felt a slight jolt as the pod dropped out of warp speed to impulse power. He glanced about his surroundings, searching for any control that might activate a viewer. That way, he could see for himself what was

happening outside the pod. He pressed down on a control pad to his right side, and another holographic view coalesced before his eyes.

This time, it was a live feed of the starfield just outside the pod. The tiny pinpoint lights of multi-colored stars shifted to the left and right as the pod automatically adjusted its trajectory. Finally, he saw it. The orange-and-yellow orb that was Dräkmar IV. It had always held an inhospitable aura about it. But knowing that it was now a dead world made its appearance even more ominous.

A light began flashing on a control pad to Bairnson's left. Like the first one he'd seen, the light's incessant blinking called to him to press it. He did so, thinking, *Typical. She didn't say I'd have to do it!*

Bairnson watched on the hologram as a narrow beam of light pulsed out from the bow of the pod. Its rhythmic waves gushed out for what seemed like an eternity. Then, they abruptly stopped.

For a moment, Bairnson laid in his supine position, waiting for something to happen. It didn't. He quickly glanced to the pad by his left hand. An indicator that once showed a nearly full energy level was now down to less than a quarter. The neutrino beam must have severely drained the pod's energy reserves. And there didn't appear to be enough energy left for a second attempt.

Hadn't it worked? Or was there ever really a "T'Lajia" to begin with? Had Sela set him up to die on

what was left of Dräkmar IV? He certainly wouldn't put it a past a Romulan to do so.

Then, almost instantly, it appeared on the hologram. The massive swirling, pinkish, wormhole-like vortex.

The T'Lajia. It was there, after all!

Bairnson felt the pod's momentum pick up as the gaping maw of the phenomenon grew larger on the hologram. The pod was being drawn to it.

It didn't take long for the T'Lajia to completely surround the pod. Bairnson felt the pod accelerate as the T'Lajia's gravity well grabbed hold of the pod and forced it down its esophagus like a piece of perfectly cooked chicken. Bolts of energy violently struck the pod, jostling it as it careened down the vortex, seemingly out of control.

One of the bolts must have struck the pod a little too close to its electrical systems because the green light panels above Bairnson's head flickered, and sparks briefly erupted from Bairnson's right side.

He quickly deactivated the viewer and found another pod just above his left hand which he used to shut off the lights. He needed to conserve as much energy as possible. He hoped it would be enough to maintain the pod's life support systems.

All he could do then was brace himself and hope like hell that one of those energy bolts didn't strike a more crucial area of the pod.

\* \* \*



As quickly as Bairnson's thrill ride had begun, it ended just as suddenly. The pod's forward momentum vanished, and it felt as if it was bobbing along in the calm eddy of a fast river.

Bairnson quickly pressed the pad to his right, calling up the holographic viewer once again. Outside the pod was a starfield. Its pattern appeared to be identical to what he had remembered being at Dräkmar IV when his journey began. But he couldn't be sure because they were spinning all around him.

Then, just out of the viewer's range, he saw a flash of light. It was followed closely by a what sounded like a thunder clap. But that sound didn't just emanate from the viewer – he felt it rattle the pod. It was quickly followed by another flash-boom. And then another.

Bairnson quickly glanced down to the right pad and found what he believed to be the inertial damper controls. He activated them, and within moments, the pod's position stabilized. He skimmed the image on the hologram for some clue as to what was going on outside.

Then, he saw it. Two silvery shapes in the distance – one larger, one considerably smaller. He pressed the viewer control, hoping it would somehow magnify the image. It did. And the image that appeared was exactly what he had hoped it would be.

It was the *Enterprise*. And the Dräkmarian aid ship he'd been told about.

The Dräkmarian ship was in terrible shape. Burnt and pitted in several areas, it had moved to a position closer to the *Enterprise* so it would fall inside the protective bubble of the larger ship's shields. An energy burst from an unseen assailant struck the *Enterprise's* shield barrier.

And Bairnson could tell by the dull aura it created that those shields wouldn't hold long.

Suddenly, the view on the hologram rotated away from the two ships, and Bairnson could feel the pod tumbling, as if it had been caught in some other vessel's impulse wake. Another flash-boom rocked the pod, and Bairnson pressed the pad to his right again to bring the pod back under control.

When the image on the hologram stabilized, he widened the view out to see the rear of the shuttlecraft *Hawking* zooming away from his position. A few more flash-booms, and the *Hawking* was hit! Plasma seeped out of the shuttle's right nacelle, and it continued to fly along an erratic trajectory.

This was it. This was the moment he had to act upon.

The holographic image suddenly broke up in a flash of static and within a second, it was gone. Bairnson glanced down at the pad to his right. The energy reserves were dangerously low, according to the now flashing indicator. If he was going to do this, it was now or never.

He frantically began searching for the emergency transporter activator.

\* \* \*

The bridge of the *Enterprise* was bathed in red illumination and a slight smoky haze filled the air as the crew worked frantically at their stations. Fire extinguishers hissed as fire control crews tamped out a recent flair.

Lieutenant Commander Janet Sunset sat tentatively in the captain's chair. All her years at Starfleet Academy and on numerous starships in the intervening years had prepared her for a moment like this. Even so, her brow was thick with sweat. After wiping her sleeve across it, she reached back behind her head and pulled her shoulder-length jet black hair into a ponytail.

She inhaled deeply, silently calling upon her Cherokee ancestors to bestow their strength upon her in hour of need. She pressed the comm panel on the chair's right arm rest.

"Y'Gar," she called to the air. "How are you holding up?"

The main viewer at the front of the bridge shifted from a view of the starfield just outside the *Enterprise* to the interior of the Dräkmarian aid ship. Commander D'nadrY'Gar's head and upper torso filled the center of the screen. Around him, Sunset could see that, like the *Enterprise's* bridge, a smoky haze filled this section of the Dräkmarian aid ship.

Y'Gar's face was sweaty and dirty, and unlike his usually immaculate, button-down dress sense, his now soiled maroon jacket was open, exposing the now dingy white tunic underneath.

"Barely, Commander," responded Y'Gar, also wiping a bead of sweat off his branched eyebrows. "Warp drive is completely inoperative. And there's no way we can escape on impulse power. We could really use Mr. Johnson's services right now."

"Wish I could spare him, Commander," said Sunset regretfully.

"What about the Captain?" queried Y'Gar. "Is he really going through with that mad plan of his?"

Sunset nodded with a wry smile. "Right now, he's the only thing keeping that enemy ship off our backs!"

Y'Gar chuckled. "You still sure you want to have that man's children?"

It was an open secret on the *Enterprise* that Sunset and Bairnson were engaged. Some said it was the single longest engagement in Starfleet history. Nonetheless, Sunset made no attempt to remind Y'Gar of protocol. Especially not under the current circumstances. Instead, she simply smiled and quipped, "Jury's still out on that one, Commander!"

Sunset then heard the *Enterprise's* Andorian helmsman Lieutenant Thuroq Mirgant call to her. She reported that the ship's sensors were suddenly registering

elevated neutrino levels in the vicinity of the *Hawking*. Sunset called up an image on the viewer.

A swirling, pinkish vortex suddenly appeared in space. It churned like an oceanic whirlpool, drawing in bits of nearby stellar matter and cloud particles from recent weapons explosions. Sunset ordered Lieutenant Saallak, the *Enterprise*'s female Vulcan communications officer, to hail the *Hawking*.

After a moment, Saallak reported, "I have the *Hawking* on audio, Commander."

"Jack," Sunset began. "Watch yourself out there. Some kind of wormhole just popped up out of nowhere."

"Yeah, I see it," said Bairnson's disembodied voice over the bridge's speakers. "Might just be the break we need!"

Lieutenant Curtis Winston, the *Enterprise*'s navigator, called out to Sunset. He reported that the *Hawking* had altered its course. It was now heading directly *toward* the wormhole-like phenomenon.

"Jack, are you out of your mind?!" bleated Sunset.

"Don't worry," said Bairnson reassuringly. "With a bit of luck, I might be able to get our attacker caught in that thing's gravity well."

"I would highly advise against that, Captain," came Y'Gar's voice. He had been monitoring the bridge communications from his location on the Dräkmarian aid ship.

“Y’Gar’s right,” pleaded Sunset. “*You* could be caught in the gravity well, too!”

“Or worse,” Y’Gar interjected. “Crushed by it!”

“Well, then,” said Bairnson coyly. “The *Enterprise* will finally be yours, Y’Gar!”

“You know I don’t want that, sir! Not like this!”

On the main viewer, three small flashes of light erupted near the phenomenon. Sunset ordered a magnification of the area. The view shifted, and Sunset and the bridge crew stared helplessly as an image of the *Hawking* appeared. One of the enemy ship’s blasts had found its mark on the shuttle’s starboard nacelle. Its illumination slowly faded as plasma oozed into space from the damaged nacelle.

Slowly, the plasma drifted into the gravity well of the phenomenon, followed closely by the *Hawking* itself.

“Jack!” Sunset called. “Get the hell out of there. Now!”

“Believe me, I’d like nothing better,” coughed Bairnson. “But I’m having trouble rerouting available power to life support...”

Sunset pressed a button on the chair’s right arm rest. She called for the transporter chief to lock onto Bairnson’s position and beam him out. Unfortunately, the chief reported that the elevated neutrino levels coming from the phenomenon made it impossible to lock onto the Captain’s position.

The shuttle hurtled ever closer to the phenomenon's event horizon.

"Jack," Sunset desperately called again. "You've got to use the emergency transporter on the *Hawking*..."

"I'm trying..." croaked Bairnson. "But the systems seem to be... freezing up..."

At that moment, Bairnson's signal cut out altogether. Sunset called Bairnson's name, twice, before ordering Saallak to get him back. She watched as the Vulcan woman operated several control combinations on her work stations. But, in the end, all she could do was shake her head.

Sunset turned back to the main viewer and watched in horror as the *Hawking* tumbled end over end as the phenomenon's gravitational pull embraced the craft. The *Hawking* circled the phenomenon's maw, being pulled toward the center like a leaf caught the vortex of a tornado.

And just as it hit the phenomenon's center, the *Hawking* disappeared, along with the phenomenon itself. Where once there was a swirling, pinkish vortex, only the black void of space now filled the viewer.

## CHAPTER TEN

Lieutenant Commander Janet Sunset stood paralyzed on the bridge of the *Enterprise*. To her, sounds had become muffled, and motion seemed to occur in a murky blur around her. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't even feel her own heartbeat. It was as if an ancient warrior from a rival tribe had reached into chest and pulled her heart out of her body. And now, he seemed to be standing over her, his evil grin taunting her as he held her still-beating and blood-drenched organ over her.

She had, of course, been prepared to accept the loss of personnel as a consequence of command decisions. But not even the fabled *Kobayashi Maru* simulation—the no-win scenario that struck fear into the heart of every Starfleet cadet—could have prepared her for the loss of the man she loved.

And she was not prepared to accept it herself.

“Get him back...” she murmured.

“Commander?” came Saallak's confused response.

“I said, GET HIM BACK!” shouted Sunset.

Sunset glanced around the bridge. Everything had returned to sharp focus. And she saw the looks of both confusion and pity on the faces of her crewmates.

“Commander...” Saallak repeated soothingly.

“Gods dammit!” spat Sunset. “What the hell's wrong with all of you?!” Her breaths came in deep,



exasperated huffs as she tried—perhaps too hard—to steady herself.

“Prepare to fire photon torpedoes,” barked Sunset. “Full spread!”

“JAN!” Saallak shouted much more loudly and insistently than Sunset had ever heard the soft-spoken Vulcan woman speak to her before.

Sunset turned to face Saallak. If the Vulcan had had a rare moment of genuine emotion, it had passed. She stood at her station as calm and serene as ever.

“He... is gone,” said Saallak with finality.

Sunset slowly sank into the cushions of the Captain’s chair. His chair. Her world was crumbling all around her. She tried to fight back the tears, but they gushed forth from her dark eyes nonetheless. She felt a comforting hand on her shoulder and glanced up to see her friend Saallak gazing at her with an expression that was the closest Vulcans came to consolation. Sunset reached up and gripped Saallak’s hand as she wailed in sorrow.

At that moment, the bridge was as silent as a tomb at midnight. Some of the bridge officers looked to Sunset with a combination of sorrow and longing. Longing for her to offer them some sort of guidance in what had become their darkest moment.

Of all the crew, it was Mirgant who caught Sunset’s eye the most. The Andorian woman must have known that Sunset had been staring at her longer than the others. Because she quickly wiped her eyes—had she been crying

too?—and whirled around in her chair to her duty station at the helm, chanting what Sunset believed to be an Andorian prayer for the dead.

A violent tremor suddenly rocked the ship. Followed closely by another. The invisible enemy was back! Bairnson's plan—as insane as it was brilliant—had failed. And Jack had died for nothing!

“Shields down to 60%,” reported Winston. “What are your orders, Commander?” Winston whirled around in his chair to face Sunset. She did nothing. Said nothing.

“Jan?” said Saallak, gently squeezing her hand to get her attention. “What *are* your orders?”

In a daze, Sunset slowly rose to a standing position and pressed the intercraft address system button on the chair's right arm rest. She spoke slowly, with great sadness. “All hands – this is the acting commander. Initiate emergency evacuation protocols.”

She cleared her throat before adding, “Abandon ship. I repeat, abandon...”

“All hands!” came another voice over the speakers, cutting Sunset off mid-sentence. A joyously familiar voice!

“This is the Captain,” it continued. “Belay that last order. Remain at your posts. I repeat, remain at your posts!”

“Jack?!” cried Sunset in disbelief. “Where are you?”

“In the turbolift,” he replied. “I’ll be on the bridge in five seconds. Have Helm initiate evasive maneuvers as best she can!”

Sunset glanced to Saallak, uncertainly. The look in her friend’s eyes told her that she wasn’t hallucinating. Saallak had heard the same words as she had! Sunset then turned her attention to Mirgant, who had turned in her chair to face her. Her aquamarine visage also carried a shocked expression, but her eyes gleamed with hope.

“You heard the man,” was all Sunset could say.

\* \* \*

The doors parted with their usual pneumatic hiss, and Captain Jack Bairnson stepped off the turbolift onto the bridge of the *Enterprise*. It felt as though he had been away for long time, which he had! Saallak stepped away from Sunset—who stood by the Captain’s chair—and proclaimed his arrival.

“Captain on the bridge,” she announced.

Sunset sprang from her position, rushing up the single step to the upper level of the bridge. She flung her arms around Bairnson’s neck and buried her face in his chest. He could feel her trembling and she clung to him so tightly that Bairnson had to strain to take a breath. He wrapped his arms around Sunset in return.

After a few moments, Sunset broke the embrace. She gazed up into Bairnson’s eyes, seemingly in disbelief. The redness and puffiness in her eyes told Bairnson that

she had been crying hard only moments before. He beamed widely and asked facetiously, “Miss me?”

Sunset slapped him across his face. Hard.

The bridge officers, who up till then must have believed they were sharing a beautiful moment at the couple’s unexpected reunion, quickly returned their attention to their duty stations with a low collective gasp.

“Don’t you *ever* do that to me again,” hissed Sunset.

As the stinging sensation slowly subsided from Bairnson’s cheek, the only sound he heard was low “Daaaaaammnn...” from Winston.

Bairnson then returned his attention to his fiancée. He knew they were going to have a long discussion about this later – assuming, of course, later ever came. For at that moment, another tremor rocked the *Enterprise*. Bairnson ordered Sunset to assume the tactical station. And Sunset—now in full Starfleet officer mode—immediately complied.

“Shields down to 58%,” reported Winston. Another tremor shook the vessel. “56%,” he added.

“That’s odd...” Bairnson commented as he made his way to the Captain’s chair.

“You find it odd that our shields are failing?” queried Sunset incredulously.

“No. The percentage.”

The expression on Sunset’s face demanded that Bairnson explain himself. He told her that if their enemy

had been firing their disruptors at full power, the damage to the shields should have been far greater.

“Disruptors?” wondered Sunset, with confusion. “You mean you think they’re Rom...?”

“Damaged,” Bairnson replied, cutting off whatever thought Sunset might have had. He then added, with relish, “More so than they’d like us to believe...” A smile slowly wormed its way across Bairnson’s lips. The ship must have been caught in the T’Lajia’s gravity well after all – even if only for a moment. But it was enough.

“Son of a bitch...” he marveled. “His plan worked after all...”

Saallak bemusedly opined, “Pardon me, sir. I believe the plan was *yours*, was it not?”

Another tremor rocked the *Enterprise*. Winston reported that shields had fallen to 54%.

“Never mind the semantics,” Bairnson told Saallak. “We have to take away their advantage.” Bairnson confidently took his seat and pressed the comm panel on the right arm rest.

“Bridge to Engineering,” he called. “Ryan, you still with us?”

“You know it, Cap!” came Chief Engineer Ryan Johnson’s exuberant reply.

“Good. ‘Cause I’m gonna need you to work a little magic!”

\* \* \*

It would be the biggest gamble of Jack Bairnson's life. Success would mean victory. Failure – oblivion.

But if there was any ship in the quadrant that could pull it off, he knew it was the *Enterprise*.

He asked Chief Engineer Ryan Johnson to reroute auxiliary power to the ship's main deflector dish. And, on his command, that energy was to be dispersed out ahead of the ship via the dish.

The still youthful Johnson was uncertain of exactly how much energy he could muster for Bairnson's plan, but he said that he would do his utmost. Bairnson reassured him that, if they were lucky, they would only need to do it once. He also told Johnson to give restoring power to at least one of the ship's rear phaser banks the highest priority.

Next, he ordered Curtis Winston and Thuroq Mirgant to fly the *Enterprise* to the same coordinates where the T'Lajia had been. Winston seemed confused by the word. Bairnson quickly corrected himself, calling it the wormhole-like phenomenon they had seen. Winston questioned whether flying toward those coordinates might somehow cause the phenomenon to appear again. If that happened, as Sunset pointed out, then both the Dräkmarian aid ship *and* the *Enterprise* could be drawn in.

Bairnson was certain that that wouldn't happen, but Sunset's remarks reminded him to adjust certain priorities. He ordered Saallak to open a channel to Commander Y'Gar on the Dräkmarian aid ship. Bairnson's long-haired,

green-eyed Yarzonian first officer quickly appeared on the bridge's main viewer. Bairnson briefly summarized his plan to Y'Gar, telling him that as soon as the *Enterprise* reached the designated coordinates, he was to break off and head to Dräkmar IV at best possible speed.

"Understood, sir," complied Y'Gar. "But... what about you?"

A wry smile curled Bairnson's lip. "Careful, Y'Gar. People might start to think you actually care about me."

"I care about the *Enterprise*, sir. And everyone on it," he snapped. He then paused momentarily, before adding, almost imperceptibly, "The fact that you happen to among those people is just... fortunate happenstance."

Bairnson smiled. The pair had never been what one might consider "friends." But, if what Mirgant told him in the 24<sup>th</sup> century was any indication, Y'Gar most certainly *respected* Bairnson. If he didn't, why would he single-handedly mount a mission to find him after his disappearance? At that moment, the respect Bairnson had for his sometimes-abrasive Number One soared to new heights.

"You know that vaccine is more important than us, Commander," said Bairnson. "That's why I put my best officer in charge of it."

Y'Gar beamed proudly at Bairnson's unexpected compliment. Was it Bairnson's imagination, or was he actually choking back some tears? Finally, Y'Gar nodded

with understanding, saying, “I won’t let you down, Captain.”

“I know,” affirmed Bairnson, returning Y’Gar’s smile. He then wished the Yarzonian good luck.

“And you... Jack,” he replied before cutting the transmission. It was the first time he had ever uttered the Captain’s first name.

Bairnson glanced around the bridge. All eyes were upon him. These people had been with Bairnson for quite a while now. They had grown from an upstart bunch of raw Starfleet recruits into one of the most highly effective crews in Starfleet. It had taken a while—and it wasn’t without a few bumps and bruises—but Bairnson had come to regard them as his friends. In some cases, even his family. And now, here they were. Facing what could very well prove to be their final mission.

And in that, they shared a silent moment of unity.

Sunset finally broke the silence on the bridge, quipping, “Is it just me, or did anyone here even *suspect* that Y’Gar had teeth?”

“And quite impeccable ones,” added Saallak with curious admiration for a Vulcan.

Bairnson and the other bridge officers turned their attention toward the Vulcan communications officer following her uncharacteristic and unexpected comment. After a moment in which she appeared to have been caught committing the cardinal sin of Vulcan—expressing an emotion—she quickly returned her attention to her station.



After audibly clearing her throat, she added, “All stations report ready, Captain.”

Another tremor rocked the ship.

“Okay,” said Bairnson. “This is it.”

He turned his attention to Mirgant.

“Helm,” he nodded. “Take us in.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“One minute to designated coordinates,” reported Lieutenant Curtis Winston as another tremor rocked the *Enterprise*. Followed closely by another. And then another. Sunset reported that shield power had dropped below 50%.

*Good*, Bairnson thought. *That means they’re losing patience.*

Bairnson glanced behind him as he heard the turbolift doors hiss open. Lieutenant Commander Ryan Johnson, the *Enterprise*’s boyish chief engineer, quickly exited the lift. He darted over to an unoccupied station on the bridge’s upper level, no doubt wanting to get into position before the ship was fired upon again.

As Johnson sat at the station, he pressed a control pad and announced, “Transferring main engineering controls to the bridge.”

After giving him a moment to orient himself to his station, Bairnson queried, “You ready, Ryan?”

Johnson nodded. “Main deflector dish is primed, but...”

Bairnson sat on pins and needles, anxiously awaiting the conclusion to Johnson’s sentence. The apprehensive expression on his face told Bairnson that he wasn’t going to like it.

“I’m sorry, Cap,” said Johnson with regret. “Phasers are a no-go.”

*NO!* Bairnson's mind screamed. If his plan was going to succeed, he *needed* those phasers. Bairnson pounded the left armrest of his chair in frustration. A wave of despair washed over him, as his old feelings of failure and inadequacy suddenly reared their ugly heads once more.

Winston reported that the *Enterprise* was now 45 seconds away from the designated coordinates.

"I'm sorry sir," pleaded Johnson. "But there just wasn't enough time..."

Bairnson tuned Johnson out as his mind raced. What could he do? How could he make lemonade out of the rotten lemons the universe had thrust upon him once again? Then, realization dawned on his face as the inspiration he was searching for finally struck! Or was it the new tremor that hit his ship?

At any rate, he whirled around in his chair to face Johnson. "How many bursts from the main deflector can you give me?"

Johnson's nose crinkled in confusion. "You said you only needed *one*!"

"Yeah, well, that was when I *thought* we were going to have phasers. Can you give me at least two?"

Taking the hint, Johnson turned in his chair with an exasperated huff, and his fingers began frantically tapping the pad. "I'll have to recalibrate the entire deflector array..." he said.

“Do it!” barked Bairnson as yet another tremor struck. Sunset reported that shields were down to 46%; and almost simultaneously, Winston reported that the *Enterprise* was 20 seconds away from the designated coordinates.

Bairnson impatiently turned back in the direction of Johnson’s station. “The second burst needs to be a lot stronger than the first.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured that,” snapped Johnson with slight annoyance. Bairnson was well aware of good was Johnson at his job, but was he good enough to pull things together when Bairnson needed him?

“15 seconds to designated coordinates,” reported Winston.

Beads of sweat trickled down Bairnson’s forehead as yet another tremor rocked the ship. He wiped away the perspiration with the sleeve of his jacket, keeping his eyes glued to the viewer, which displayed the stars slowly passing by outside. He ordered Mirgant to keep the ship as steady as she went.

“Ryan...” said Bairnson nervously through gritted teeth.

“Just a second, Cap...”

“We don’t *have* a second, Ryan!”

“Ten seconds to designated coordinates!” chimed Winston. He then began counting down the numbers until their arrival. Bairnson looked back over to Johnson, who

was still frantically typing at his station. They weren't going to make it, he thought.

When Bairnson heard Winston call out the number five, he pressed the comm pad on his right armrest.

"Y'Gar!" he called. "Get the hell outta here. Now!"

Four...

A yelp of joy erupted from Johnson!

Three...

"Main deflector array primed and ready, Cap!" he reported.

*Yes! Thank you, Ryan!* cried Bairnson's mind.

Two...

Bairnson's mouth instead said, "On my mark..."

Johnson placed his hand by the control pad in anticipation of his Captain's order.

One...

Winston reported that the *Enterprise* had arrived at the designated coordinates.

"Now, Johnson!" called Bairnson.

Johnson pressed the control pad, and the main viewer briefly flashed orange as the *Enterprise's* main deflector dish emitted its first energy pulse. A second later, the flash faded, and all that remained in view was the starfield the ship had been passing through all along.

The crew, including Bairnson, stared at the viewer with bated breath. To a casual observer, it hadn't been a particularly spectacular display by any means. In fact,

some would have called it downright disappointing. The crew began regarding each other uncertainly.

“Did it work?” asked Sunset, finally.

“Let’s find out,” said Bairnson. He ordered Mirgant to bring up the aft view. Following a few taps of her fingers, the image on the viewer changed from that of the stars coming toward the *Enterprise* to one of the stars passing away from it.

Not far in the distance, something was happening.

Narrow ribbons of orange light randomly darted and dashed about in space, occasionally colliding and sparking. That was what Bairnson had hoped would happen. The energy dispersed from the main deflector dish was exciting the residual neutrino particles left over from when the T’Lajia closed. But would it be enough? And did their enemy have any inkling of what the *Enterprise* was doing?

It didn’t take long to find out. For at that moment, the ribbons of energy began to take on a peculiar shape, as if the hull of a ship was passing through them. It didn’t penetrate the enemy ship’s cloaking device, but it was almost as if a thin sheet had been suddenly dropped on top of it, revealing a crude shape.

This was their moment! Finally, the enemy could be seen!

“Helm – hard about!” Bairnson barked. “Sunset, lock onto the enemy vessel!”

Bairnson and the rest of the bridge crew felt the G-force pin them back to their chairs as Mirgant quickly reoriented the ship's position.

"Johnson, prepare to fire the second burst on my mark!"

"Cap!" Johnson interjected. "I can't guarantee that this burst will even damage the enemy vessel, let alone destroy it."

"Doesn't matter," said Bairnson. "As long as it disables their cloaking device!"

Johnson nodded his comprehension. Within seconds, the G-force subsided to a more normal level, and the *Enterprise* was face to face with its attacker.

Bairnson did not hesitate. "Now, Johnson!"

Another orange burst of light, slightly longer than the first, filled the main viewer as the *Enterprise's* main deflector dish carried out Bairnson's command. When it subsided, the crew watched as the mysterious shape that had been firing upon them only moments before slowly revealed its true self.

The orange energy ribbons began fizzling and fading away. Bit by bit, the energy dispersed into the ether; and in its place, a scarred and battered metallic hull took their place. Little by little, the hull's shape revealed itself, as if a conjurer made it magically appear from his hat.

"My gods..." Mirgant gasped. "What *is* that?"

Sunset shook her head in awe. "I never seen anything like it before..."

Bairnson had. But he daren't tell his crew—at least, not yet—that they would be seeing more of them in the years to come.

To him, the ship's configuration was unmistakable. Granted, it was a bit rough around the edges, not yet possessing the smooth angular lines that it eventually would. But the prominently beak-like bow and wings etched into its sides left no doubt in Bairnson's mind.

It was an early version of the Warbird he had seen in the 24<sup>th</sup> century. Possibly the first of its kind.

Bairnson turned to Sunset, asking her to scan the vessel for its current energy output. Sunset's fingers danced across her control pad as she worked to bring up the information he requested. After a moment, she reported, "I can't be certain because of the ship's configuration. But it appears to be hovering at just above 30%."

The sound of Saallak's voice calling his attention pulled Bairnson's gaze in her direction. She informed him that the enemy ship was hailing them. Bairnson told her to put the call through to the main viewer.

The image on the main viewer changed from the nascent Warbird to the head and shoulders of a Romulan male. It was difficult to make out what was behind him, but Bairnson did detect a wisp of smoke passing behind his head. The Romulan appeared to be as young as Johnson was. Of course, because Vulcans and Romulans aged at a



slower rate than humans, it was impossible to say how old he really was.

Nevertheless, he did not appear to be old enough, perhaps, to be in command of the vessel. He had to have assumed that position after the original commander was incapacitated somehow.

“Federation starship,” said the youthful Romulan, his voice cracking somewhat. “You have proven to be a worthy adversary.” Bairnson smiled slightly at the unexpected compliment. “Nevertheless, I am prepared to accept your immediate and unconditional surrender.”

Bairnson chuckled on the inside. Was this guy serious? He could tell by the looks on the faces of some of his crewmates, that they shared his amusement.

“I don’t think so, *Commander*,” said Bairnson, stressing the rank ironically as he rose to a standing position. “According to our sensors, it looks like you have just enough reserve power to safely make it back home to Romulus.”

The Romulan’s expression changed. He had been caught. He tried desperately to save face. “You know that is not our way, Captain.”

Bairnson nodded. He knew all too well from history that Romulans preferred suicide to returning home in shame after an enemy had bested them. But something about the look in the young Romulan’s eyes made Bairnson think twice. Maybe things didn’t have to go down that way.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” asked Bairnson gently.

The Romulan visibly swallowed, as if summoning his courage. “It is... an honor to die in service of the Praetor.”

“But a Praetor that lied to you?” said Bairnson.

All heads on the bridge turned to Bairnson. He knew they were wondering what the hell he was doing, and he would explain everything to them.

Eventually.

“What do you mean?” growled the Romulan.

“She’s planning to commit wholesale genocide. By letting the plague that you manufactured wipe out the entire population of the Epsilon Dräkmar system!”

The Romulan appeared stunned by Bairnson’s pronouncement. “No!” he said in disbelief. “No. *We* have the vaccine! *We* are going to give it to them...”

“No,” said Bairnson gently. “You won’t.”

Seeing the look in the Romulan’s eyes, Bairnson added, “And I think you already know that...”

The Romulan glanced about him uncertainly.

Bairnson knew then that the young man was having a crisis of conscience, something he hardly expected to see in a Romulan. But then again, if Sela’s actions were any indication, Romulans were capable of just about anything.

“This is... not possible...” the Romulan finally said under his breath. He then faced forward again, addressing the Captain. “You are lying!” he spat.

Bairnson raised his arms out to his sides in a gesture of submission. "I'm a lot of things, sir. But a liar ain't one of `em," he said softly and evenly.

The Romulan was cornered. He stood, uncertain of his next move. Finally, Bairnson gave him his out. "Go ahead," said Bairnson. "Scan me if you like. See if I'm telling you the truth."

The Romulan's right arm moved as his hand pressed a panel that Bairnson and the *Enterprise* bridge crew could not see on the viewer. Bairnson's body was quickly enveloped in an eerie greenish glow. Sunset sprang to her feet, ready to defend her Captain. A quick, calming look from Bairnson made her stand down.

After a moment, the glow surrounding Bairnson was gone. He lowered his arms back to his sides.

The expression on the Romulan's face revealed his shock.

"How can this be?" he asked.

"What's your name?" countered Bairnson kindly.

The question seemed taken the Romulan by surprise; but after a moment, he said nervously, "M... Meldet..." After a second, he got a hold of himself and added, more formally, "*Centurion* Meldet."

"*Centurion* Meldet," said Bairnson with a tilt of his head, a gesture of reverence for the young man's title. "The real question is: Now that *you* know, what are you going to do about it?"

Meldet pursed his lips as his mind seemed to race. Finally, he looked up, appearing as if he was staring directly into Bairnson's eyes. Time momentarily stood still, until Bairnson noticed Meldet's right shoulder shift slightly, as if his hand was reaching for a console. He quickly shook his head. "I will not be party to this..." he said firmly. The image cut off, and the battle-damaged Warbird prototype once again filled the viewer.

For a moment, the *Enterprise* bridge stared spellbound at the viewer, holding their collective breath in anticipation of what was to come next. Finally, the prototype Warbird slowly turned on its axis away from the *Enterprise*; and within moments, it began moving away from them. Apparently, in a direction that would take them back to Romulus, if Winston's report was to be believed.

Bairnson and the *Enterprise* bridge crew heaved a collective sigh of relief. Afterwards, a round of cheers and applause erupted from the bridge officers. Over the ship's intercraft system, Bairnson could hear the echoes of more accolades coming from the ship's lower decks. He then noticed that all eyes on the bridge were focused upon him. The crew of the *Enterprise* was throwing those accolades his way.

Bairnson's cheeks flushed briefly before he raised his arms and waved his hands, calling for the crew to cease their applause. He felt he only deserved partial credit, at best, for saving them. As the roar began to subside, he took his seat, pressing the intercraft comm panel on the right

arm rest. “All hands,” he said. “Cancel red alert. Damage Control – report to affected areas.”

Bairnson glanced over and noticed Johnson rise from his station and begin striding toward the turbolift. Of course, Johnson would have to supervise the damage control operation. But as the doors to the lift hissed open, he shot a smile to his captain and brought his right hand to his temple in an old-style to salute as the doors closed before him.

Bairnson then called to his communications officer. “Saallak, call Y’Gar. Tell him we’re on our way...”

\* \* \*

*Captain’s Log: Stardate 9832.5.*

*The Enterprise is currently orbiting Dräkmar IV where medical teams from the ship, led by Dr. Crispin, are currently aiding Dräkmarian officials in distributing and administering the plague vaccine amongst the populace.*

*Meanwhile, damage control teams are working on repairing damage the ship sustained in battle. And while they are doing an admirable job, I believe we will still have to stop at a nearby starbase to completely return the Enterprise to fully operational status.*

*The Romulan ship we encountered has shown no signs of returning. My guess is that it’s well beyond the Neutral Zone by now and on its way back to Romulus. No signs of any other Romulan incursions to report, either.*

\* \* \*

Bairnson paused the recording of his log entry. He sat alone at the desk in his office just off the bridge. It was late, and he had yet to take a rest period. He rubbed his fatigued eyes with his thumb and forefinger. It had been a *hell* of a day.

He glanced out the office window to see the orange and yellow orb that was Dräkmar IV passing by, miles below the ship. It still held the same inhospitable aura it had when Bairnson first saw it in the 24<sup>th</sup> century. But as Bairnson watched one of the *Enterprise*'s other shuttlecraft descend toward the planet's surface, he smiled, knowing that life on the planet would not come to an end on this day.

He turned back to the computer terminal atop his desk and squinted when he noticed something out of the ordinary on the monitor: A file named "Bairnson\_X". He didn't remember putting the file onto the computer. But, then again, his memory of the past few days had been greatly jostled.

He called out to the *Enterprise*'s main computer, which had recently been upgraded to include new voice-activated Assistant program. "What's this file on my terminal?" he asked.

"Please be more specific," intoned the Assistant.

"There's a file named 'Bairnson\_X' on my terminal."

"Affirmative."

Bairnson rolled his eyes. It was too late to be dealing with an Assistant that was so pedantic that it required great specificity to give you the answer you were looking for. “Well, I don’t remember putting it there.”

The Assistant was silent as it attempted to decipher what information it could report in response to Bairnson’s statement. When it seemed like an answer wasn’t forthcoming, Bairnson decided to try a different approach. “Never mind,” he said, stopping the Assistant’s virtual wheels from spinning. “What can you tell me about the file?”

The Assistant was silent another moment as it analyzed the file. When it was finished, the Assistant stated that the file was created on Star Date 46117.5. Bairnson’s eyes widened in shock. He asked the Assistant to confirm its assessment, and it repeated the exact same star date.

*How could that be?* Bairnson wondered. That meant that the file was created 80 years from now. Or was it... *will be* created? Linguists constantly argued over the correct application of semantics when time travel was involved. They had yet to come to a satisfactory conclusion. Bairnson pondered who could have possibly created the file, but only one name came to mind.

Sela.

Upon realizing this, he ordered the Assistant to scan the file for any viruses that it could unleash on the *Enterprise*’s systems. The Assistant reported that it could detect no evidence of malware. Bairnson certainly hoped

that this was indeed the case, because his curiosity over what the file could possibly contain was trouncing any other rational thoughts. He told the Assistant to play the file. It advised him that, to achieve the optimum experience from the file, it would be necessary to run it on a holodeck.

*All right then*, Bairnson thought, rising from his chair. He ordered the Assistant to transfer the file to the *Enterprise's* holodeck.

\* \* \*

When Bairnson arrived at the ship's lone holodeck, he was somewhat relieved to discover that it was currently unoccupied. He shouldn't have been too surprised, though. With most of the crew either off the ship on Dräkmar IV or attending to other business on board, who would have time to indulge in a holodeck simulation right now, except him?

In fact, he should probably be finishing his own report to Starfleet right now. But, in all honesty, the temptation was just too great. He pressed the panel beside the holodeck's entranceway. The door slid open, revealing the room with the floor-to-ceiling grid pattern on the other side. Bairnson stepped through the open archway and heard the door close behind him as he strode to the center of the room.

When he stopped, he inhaled again, steeling himself, before asking the Assistant to run program "Bairnson\_X". Within moments, a humanoid figure began to form in the center of the room. With far greater speed



than a transporter could ever hope to accomplish, the form quickly revealed itself to be distinctly feminine.

Bairnson appreciated how her legs were long and muscular, even under the leggings she wore. Most of her upper femininity was concealed beneath the unflattering silver tunic, but her blunt pointed ears, barely upswept eyebrows, and close-cropped blonde hair made her individual identity unmistakable.

“Greetings, Captain Bairnson,” said Sela’s hologram pleasantly. “If you are seeing this recording, then it is safe to assume that your mission was successful. Congratulations.”

Bairnson began circling the hologram, taking in every detail of it. Apart from some slight improvements in resolution, it appeared as if 24<sup>th</sup> century holodeck technology remained more or less the same as it currently was. And why not? After all, you can enhance a virtual experience only so far.

“As I said to you on the infiltrator pod,” the hologram continued. “I’m sure you must have many questions. That is why I created this holodeck avatar and programmed the pod to transmit it to your personal terminal inside your emergency transporter beam.”

*Clever*, Bairnson thought with admiration. If the mission failed, the file would have been destroyed along with the ship, and no one would have been the wiser.

Sela’s hologram informed Bairnson that the avatar was programmed with full responsive capabilities and

would answer as many questions as it was programmed to anticipate him asking.

Bairnson shook his head, bewildered. “When did you find time to do all this?” he asked with a slight chuckle.

“I am a woman of *many* talents,” she unexpectedly responded. Was it Bairnson’s imagination, or was she actually being coy with him? Furthermore, she seemed to be actually *looking* at him, as if she was aware of his presence. Bairnson shook the thought off. It must have been an optical illusion, like how the eyes in a really good portrait painting seem to follow the gazer. Or it could have just easily been a 24<sup>th</sup> century holodeck simulation improvement.

“All right,” Bairnson nodded, ready to begin. “Why did you send me back instead of killing of me?”

“In your cell,” Sela began. “You said—rather sardonically—that you and I had something in common. Well... you do not know how accurate that statement was.”

Sela explained that both she and Bairnson were temporal paradoxes. In other words, they were people who shouldn’t exist in the 24<sup>th</sup> century. But, because of the chaotic and illogical nature of the universe, they did nonetheless. Bairnson asked Sela how she was displaced in time. She responded that *she* was not. Her mother was.

“At least... that’s what she always claimed,” added Sela. “I never really believed her completely. But then I met you.”

“Who was she?” asked Bairnson. “Your mother?”

Sela told him that her mother was a Starfleet lieutenant named Natasha Yar who was taken prisoner along with several other *Enterprise* crewmembers following the Battle of Narendra III. Bairnson stood still momentarily, his heart suddenly racing and his face flushed with worry. Had Sela just revealed some bit of information about the future that he shouldn't have known?

He queried the Assistant to search the ship's personnel files for someone by that name. It came back empty. He then ordered it to search Starfleet's vast database for the same information. Again, after a moment, it returned no results.

The hologram must have detected what he was doing, because it said reassuringly, “Oh. Not *your Enterprise*. The one that will come after you: The *Enterprise-C*.”

Bairnson heaved a sigh of relief. “So,” he said, ensuring his facts were straight. “She was from the *Enterprise-C*...”

“No,” said Sela surprisingly. “She was from the ship *you* encountered: The *Enterprise-D*. Or... some... variant of it.”

“Okay, I'm confused,” said Bairnson, his brow furrowed. “If your mother was from the *Enterprise-D*, how did she end up on the *Enterprise-C*?”

“A T'Lajia,” said Sela. “Not unlike the phenomenon you encountered.”

*Aaahhh...*, thought Bairnson. *Now* it was starting to make sense.

Sela explained that the *Enterprise-C* had also come into the 24<sup>th</sup> century via a T'Lajia. And when it returned to its own time, Lieutenant Tasha Yar went with it.

Sela's explanation of events—while mostly satisfactory—still left Bairnson to wonder, “Why would she do that? Why would she *voluntarily* go back in time on a doomed ship?”

“That is not important,” said Sela flatly. “And quite frankly, I don't have the memory to explain the entire incident. Moreover, it gives me a headache trying to make sense of it all myself. What *is* important... is that she became my father Meldet's consort.”

*Meldet?* The name sent an electric shock through Bairnson's being. The boyish Centurion from the prototype Warbird?

Sela explained how her father was a young officer on board the prototype Warbird that the *Enterprise* fought at Dräkmar IV. How he was badly disfigured in the battle, and how even though he and the remaining crew of the ship were hailed as heroes upon their return to Romulus, no Romulan woman would ever have him because of his injuries.

How, despite all that, Meldet still managed to rise to a position of power in the Romulan Senate. Yet, in spite of all his achievements, he remained a desperately lonely man. And then, after the Battle of Narendra III, he became

smitten with the golden-haired human woman from the *Enterprise-C*. She agreed to be his consort in exchange for sparing the lives of her fellow crewmates.

And Sela was the product of their coupling. Bairnson nodded with comprehension. Being half-human would certainly explain her distinctly un-Romulan-like appearance. It all made sense to Bairnson.

"I get it now," he said, still somewhat surprised. "You sent me back to help your father somehow. Didn't you?"

Sela inclined her head, acknowledging his assertion. "I realize that—by sending you back—I've broken all Romulan protocols," the hologram said with finality. "I also realize that, in doing so, I may no longer exist. But I don't care."

Bairnson noticed that Sela's expression had grown melancholic. "While my duty and loyalty will always be to the Romulan Star Empire, my first duty—like that of any living being—is to family."

Sela seemed to stare intently into Bairnson's eyes. "I sincerely hope you found a non-lethal method of neutralizing my father's ship." And with those last words, Sela's hologram disappeared into the ether.

Bairnson stood silently in the center of the empty holodeck for a long moment, taking in all that he had been told. If he recalled correctly, Meldet didn't appear to have sustained any injuries. Nothing that would cause permanent disfigurement, at any rate.

Bairnson turned and walked back toward the holodeck entranceway. As the doors parted, he asked the Assistant to save program “Bairnson\_X”. The Assistant reported that no such file existed in the holodeck’s memory core. He then asked the Assistant to find the file anywhere in the *Enterprise*’s computer matrix. It could not.

Bairnson nodded with comprehension. Of course, Sela would have programmed the file to delete itself once it had played. Bairnson pressed the comm panel near the holodeck’s entranceway, calling the bridge.

Y’Gar’s voice responded over the speaker. Ever the overachiever, he must have taken an extra shift on the bridge.

Bairnson ordered Y’Gar to prepare a warning buoy for launch. He wanted it near the coordinates of the T’Lajia so that it couldn’t cause any more temporal damage.

\* \* \*

Somewhere in the 24<sup>th</sup> century, a Romulan Warbird made its way through the vastness of space, crossing the Neutral Zone into the safety of Romulan space.

In her quarters, Commander Sela sat at her desk, silently tapping her report to Romulan Central Command on a PADD. After a moment of typing, she seemed to reach an impasse. She stared at the PADD intently, seemingly waiting for inspiration to strike. But, no matter how hard she stared, the words would simply would not come to her.

She gently placed the PADD down on the glass desktop with a sigh of exasperation. She then glanced about her, as if ensuring that no other eyes were watching her. Years of living in a paranoid society like Romulus will do that to you. Satisfied that she was indeed alone, she reached down and pulled open a drawer in the desk.

From this drawer she retrieved a small disc that she cradled in her palm with all the gentleness and care of a mother caring for her newborn. She pressed a panel on the disc's edge with her thumb, and a still three-dimensional holographic image appeared.

It was Sela as young girl on Romulus standing beside her father Meldet, his right hand on her shoulder. Although both of them had stern, severe expressions on their faces, Sela remembered the moment this image was taken as one of her happiest with her father.

Meldet appeared to have one milky eye, and his left arm was missing, as if it had been amputated years before the image was taken.

Sela regarded the image with as much pride as she could muster. But then, her brow furrowed and her eyes squinted as she regarded the image more closely. It appeared to her as if, one moment, Meldet's milky eye drew her focus; and then the next, it appeared normal. As though it had never been injured at all.

And where he seemed to have had only his right hand on her shoulder, suddenly he had two strong-looking hands resting on her shoulders. Even their expressions

seemed different. While they were still stern—as was customary for Romulan portraits—it actually appeared as if the pair had a brightness in their eyes that wasn't there just a moment before.

A brightness that, to an outside observer, seemed very close to joy.

For some reason she would ever explain—let alone admit to—she reached her free hand up to her shoulder, as if she could feel her father's spirit standing over her right now, the way he was in the image. After a moment, she moved that hand to her cheek to wipe away an irritant that had come into contact with it. When she regarded the spot on her finger, she noticed that it was suddenly moist with a clear liquid.

For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, Sela was crying. But she wasn't crying because she felt sadness.

She was crying because—for the first time in as long as she could remember—she was feeling joy.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

The chronometers built into the *Enterprise*'s systems cycled from "night" to "morning." The ship's automatic on-board illumination system went from the dimness of the evening to the brightness of a new dawn. And all over the ship, personnel on active duty in the morning relieved those on the night shift.

One of those people ready for duty that "morning" was Captain Jack Bairnson. He entered the corridor on the level of the ship where his quarters resided, the door to his quarters sliding closed behind him. He strolled down the corridor toward the turbolift at its end, acknowledging one or two of his neighbors as he went.

Today should be fairly routine, he mused. Just await the return of the last of the medical teams from Dräkmar IV, and then it was off to Starbase 73 for some much-needed repairs. Hopefully, some R&R as well; the crew could certainly use it after the events of the past few days.

The turbolift doors parted, and inside the car—much to Bairnson's delight—stood Doctor James Alistair Crispin, the *Enterprise*'s Chief Medical Officer. A handful of junior medical staff members—familiar strangers from sickbay to Bairnson—flanked his sides.

"Ah, top o' the mornin' to ya, Cap'n," greeted Crispin in his distinctive Irish lilt. Bairnson returned

Crispin's greeting as he stepped onto the turbolift car, squeezing as best he could in between the larger man and his colleagues.

"Finally back from the surface, eh?" quipped Bairnson. Crispin shot him a look that screamed "What was your first clue?" The pair had developed a working relationship that included a constant, playful ribbing of each other. And Bairnson smiled good-naturedly at the Doctor's look.

"I was starting to think that maybe you liked it down there," quipped Bairnson.

"Aw, hell naw," said Crispin. "Far too hot and steamy for my taste. Give me a cool Irish rain over that any day!"

Bairnson chuckled for a moment, then asked Crispin for his prognosis of the vaccine's effectiveness.

"Early indications all look good," he replied. "As long as the Dräkmarians follow our protocols to the letter, I'd say the plague should be well under control in about a month or so."

Bairnson nodded with satisfaction. The car came to a halt on a floor, and the door slid aside revealing another corridor. One of Crispin's staff exited the car, and Crispin wished him a happy rest period as the door slid closed. The car began its ascent once again, and Bairnson glanced about as the turbolift car's remaining occupants shuffled, readjusting their places.

That's when Bairnson finally noticed him.

A young human male, no more than 25 years old stood among them. Ordinarily, he might not have stood out from the thousands of other young officers like him on the ship. But the fact that his uniform bore the insignia of the Engineering Corps—instead of Starfleet Medical like Crispin's other companions—made him stand out like a sore thumb.

Also, there was something about his face that seemed oddly familiar to Bairnson. He turned to Crispin, cocking his head subtly in the young man's direction behind them. "You needed an engineer on your team?"

Crispin regarded the young man Bairnson had indicated. He explained that he was a bit short-handed the last couple of trips down to the surface—staff fatigue—so he asked the other department heads for volunteers. "And that young lad stepped up," he concluded.

The turbolift stopped again on another floor, and the young engineer moved toward the door to exit the car. As the door slid aside with its usual pneumatic hiss, Bairnson called to the young man as he stepped into the corridor. He then asked the young man's name.

"Vitro, sir," he said, somewhat astonished. "Junior Grade Lieutenant Joseph Vitro. We met briefly last year at Commander Johnson's Christmas party."

Bairnson smiled. Of course. *That's* why the young man had seemed so familiar to him both here and in the 24<sup>th</sup> century. Johnson had called him one of his rising stars. But to hear that he was willing to volunteer to help other

departments as well spoke volumes about his character, the man that he was and the one that he became in the future. Or *would* become. Again, the temporal semantics made Bairnson shake his head.

“All you alright, sir?” asked Vitro upon seeing Bairnson’s head shake.

“Fine,” Bairnson replied. He beamed at the young man. “But I’d say a commendation is in order for you, Vitro.”

Vitro lowered his eyes with chagrin. “It was nothing, really, sir.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, lad,” Crispin interjected. He then turned to Bairnson, explaining that Vitro appeared to have a natural talent for medicine. “I barely had to explain anything to him at all.”

Bairnson regarded Vitro with astonishment. “Is that so?”

“Well,” Vitro stammered, rubbing the back of his neck. “The body is basically a machine, isn’t it? Albeit an *organic* one and not a mechanical or digital one. But the basic principles are the same.”

Bairnson nodded his comprehension. Vitro made a very convincing point for one so young. “Well, don’t let us keep you from getting some rest, Lieutenant.”

Vitro thanked Bairnson before turning on his heel to head toward his quarters. He stopped and turned back to the turbolift when Bairnson called his name again. “Maybe

you should consider a career change,” Bairnson said with a sideways glance to Crispin that said: “Make that happen.”

Vitro’s proud smile was the last thing Bairnson saw as the turbolift door slid closed in front of him.

As the turbolift began its ascent once again, Bairnson noticed Crispin glance at the level indicator panel beside the door. Only two floor lights displayed. “Well, guess our floor’s next.

Bairnson nodded his comprehension. Then, he remembered that he wanted to ask the doctor, “You’re coming to the gathering tonight? My quarters?”

Crispin nodded as the turbolift came to a halt and the door slid aside. “I’ll be there with bells on, sir!” He stepped into the corridor, followed closely by his remaining two staffers. The door slid closed, and Bairnson rode the rest of the way to the bridge on his own.

\* \* \*

That evening—ship time—as the *Enterprise* made its way to Starbase 73, Jack Bairnson stood alone in his quarters, going over the last-minute preparations for the gathering that would begin shortly. Now out of his duty uniform and dressed in some comfortable, yet appropriately styled party clothes, he placed the last bottle of alcohol on the table that he had set as both the bar and hors d’oeuvres service.

It was a prized bottle of champagne that his old commander Captain Hikaru Sulu had given him on the one-year anniversary of his promotion to the captaincy. Bairnson had been saving the bottle since then for a special

occasion—as Sulu had suggested—and couldn't think of a more special time than now. He sighed as he silently wished he could share this moment with that other *Enterprise* crew – the ones from the 24<sup>th</sup> century.

And especially with Ro Laren.

It was the first time he had even thought of her since his return to his own time. It was difficult for him to believe that the woman he had shared a special bond with only a week ago did not even exist yet. He secretly hoped that he lived long enough to see a day when their paths might cross once again.

The door chime rang, pulling Bairnson out of his reverie. He called out for whoever had rung the chime to enter.

The door to his quarters slid aside, and into the room stepped Thuroq Mirgant. Bairnson smiled. She looked radiant in the same red dress that she had once worn when she and Bairnson shared an intimate conversation in the ship's rec room during their first mission.

As it had been back then, her long white hair cascaded down over her bare aqua shoulders. And the dress's plunging neckline instantly drew Bairnson's attention to her modest cleavage.

"Oh," said Mirgant, somewhat surprised. "First one here. Awkward."

"Actually, you're right on time," said Bairnson. "I wanted to see you before anyone else arrived."

Mirgant's eyebrows raised in slight astonishment. "Really?" she asked.

Bairnson nodded; then suggested that she pour herself a drink. Mirgant stepped up to the bar/table and picked up a bottle of neon greenish liquid. She poured a generous helping of the liquid into a nearby paper cup and took a quick swig.

"You all right?" queried Bairnson.

"Yes, sir," replied Mirgant stiffly. "Sorry, sir. Just a... bit nervous is all, I guess."

"We're off duty, Thuroq," chuckled Bairnson. "You don't have to call me 'sir.'"

"Oh gods..." gulped Mirgant, quickly taking another draw of her drink.

Bairnson noticed how odd his helmsman seemed to be acting and inquired what was the matter. Mirgant explained that, so far, their conversation was playing like a seduction scene from one of those trashy romance holonovels.

"You play those?" wondered Bairnson.

"No," she said defensively. Bairnson eyed her curiously until she confessed, "I may have... written one... or two..."

Bairnson chuckled again. "Seriously?"

Mirgant nodded nervously.

"Well, relax, Thuroq. I'm not trying to seduce you."

“Oh. No?” said Mirgant with a hint of disappointment. Quickly, though, she added, “I mean: Good! Because that would be... inappropriate. I mean, you are my superior officer and I’m...”

“Thuroq, have you been drinking?”

Mirgant shot him a quick look that said, “Well, DUH!” She then raised her nearly empty glass as evidence.

“I mean before you got here?” Bairnson added.

Mirgant’s face fell and the antennae on her head drooped slightly. Her ruse had been discovered. “That obvious, huh?”

Bairnson wondered why, and Mirgant explained that tonight was the first time he had ever invited any of the bridge officers to his quarters for any reason. “Well, except for Sunset,” she said, with an awkward snicker. “And we all know what you two get up to in here!”

“What?” said Bairnson, stunned.

“Oh!” Mirgant’s left hand quickly covered her mouth. “Did I say that out loud? I’m sorry. That’s really none of my business, is it?”

Bairnson encouraged her to get her story back on track. Mirgant said that when she received her invitation, she felt a toots... suits... tsunami of different emotions wash over her: Joy, pride... and, of course, fear.

She said she wanted to make a good impression but was afraid that she’d do something awkward to ruin the evening for everyone. So, she went to Doctor Crispin to see if he could prescribe something to calm her down. He



told her that his supply of sedatives was low and that he needed to stock up when they reached Starbase 73.

“So instead,” she continued rapidly. “He gave me a couple shots of something called ‘Dewars.’”

“A couple?” queried a surprised Bairnson.

“Well, technically, I *asked* him for the second one.

But that’s only because I didn’t think the first one was working right because I’m still nervous and still doing awkward things like talking a lot. Am I talking a lot? Because the last thing I want is for you to think any less of me because I’m talking so much...”

Bairnson grasped her shoulders, effectively arresting any other words from spewing forth from her mouth. “Thuroq,” he said soothingly. He looked into her hazel eyes, smiling gently. “I could never think of you as anything... other than a fine officer.”

He could feel her trembling beneath his grasp. He paused momentarily before adding, “And a good friend.”

Mirgant beamed widely and her drooping antennae perked back up to their more normal standing.

“You...” slurred Mirgant with some hesitation.

“You really mean that?”

Bairnson nodded.

“You think of me as a... fine officer?”

Bairnson stifled a laugh, but a slight “snik” sound escaped through his nose anyway. It hadn’t been quite the response he was expecting. But, then again, it also could have been that the Dewars was doing most of Mirgant’s

talking. Nevertheless, he shook his head with a kind smile. "Yes," he finally said. "And I'm sure you'll make an outstanding captain yourself someday."

Mirgant loudly scoffed at the notion. "Well," she drawled. "I really don't think a captaincy is in my future, but..." She playfully punched Bairnson in his left arm. "Thanks for the vote of confidence... Jack!"

"In fact," Bairnson continued, finally finding the opening to tell Mirgant what he'd wanted to tell her in the first place. "As your superior officer, if I could give you one piece of advice, it would be this: Never let your dedication to duty ever get in the way of your conscience."

Mirgant's eyes squinted and her brow furrowed with confusion. "Huh?" she gaped. "What does that even *mean*?"

Bairnson shook his head again. "With any luck, you won't ever have to know."

Mirgant staggered on her feet, and Bairnson grabbed her around the waist, saving her from falling to the floor in a heap. He pulled her body tight into his own, supporting her weight until she righted herself. To an outside observer, it appeared as if the two were momentarily locked in some sort of romantic clutch.

That's certainly how it appeared to Janet Sunset when she entered the room unbeknownst to both Bairnson and Mirgant.

\* \* \*

An hour or so later, the gathering in Jack Bairnson's quarters was in full swing. Some of Bairnson's favorite 20<sup>th</sup> century rock music played in the background while his bridge officers—all dressed as casually as he was—conversed while enjoying the provided food and drinks.

As Bairnson stood chatting with Sunset, he glanced around the room. Every one of his bridge officers was there: Curtis Winston, Mirgant, and Saallak – along with Ryan Johnson and Doctor Crispin. However, one remained conspicuously absent. Bairnson was anxious to address his guests, but he couldn't until *everyone* was there, including...

The door chime rang. *Finally!* thought Bairnson. He called out for the person at the door to enter. The door slid aside and into the room stepped Y'Gar. Unlike everyone else, Y'Gar was dressed in his duty uniform, which appeared to be impeccably crisp. Had he just pressed it before his arrival?

"I apologize for my tardiness, sir. But I was..." Y'Gar said. He stopped speaking as he glanced around the room, noticing how everyone except him was dressed. "Oh," he said somewhat surprised. "I... did not realize that this was an... *informal* gathering."

Bairnson chuckled. "It's fine, Y'Gar. Come on in and grab yourself a drink."

Y'Gar strode to the makeshift table/bar where, curiously, Saallak held a drink at the ready for him. As if on cue, the background music changed over to one of

Bairnson's favorite Alan Parsons Project songs: "Time". Bairnson let the song play through its first verse before he ordered the room's computerized Assistant to lower the music level. After it was done, Bairnson clanked the edge of his glass with a cutlery knife to call everyone's attention.

The room gradually grew quiet, and all eyes fixed on Bairnson.

"Thank you all for coming here tonight," he began to say. "When we first started working together—like all of you, I'm sure—I had my doubts about whether this thing was going to work. After all, we were all on the *Enterprise*, right? We had some pretty big shoes to fill. Especially after what happened during its maiden voyage..."

A light chuckle erupted from the others. Bairnson wasn't wrong. With a ship whose predecessor had gone down as one of the finest—if not *the* finest—ship in the annals of Starfleet history, there was a lot of pressure on the crew to live up to some extraordinarily high standards.

"But when we got the call to bear the Federation's sigil to Dräkmar IV... I don't know about you, I felt proud. Proud to think that we were finally living up to the legacy of the name *Enterprise*."

Bairnson could tell that his assembled guests shared in that pride. Their collective smiles was all the evidence he needed.

"Then, when the Romulans attacked... I'll be honest with you; I didn't think we were going to make it."

There were some nods and some head shakes. Bairnson presumed that the ones who silently disputed his assessment were undoubtedly thinking the same as he did at the time.

“But...” he began again, “if there’s one thing I’m damned certain of, it’s this... the legacy of the name *Enterprise* doesn’t end with us. And no matter what happens in the days and years to come... we *are* part of that legacy. And we always will be.”

Bairnson raised his glass above his head. “So, here’s to all of you. My compatriots. My friends. My family. May we be forever worthy to always be called... the crew of the Starship *Enterprise*!”

A boisterous “Here!” erupted from the crowd. Bairnson and his compatriots took a drink from their respective containers; and when they had finished, Ryan Johnson began a round of applause for the Captain’s words. Bairnson’s cheeks flushed momentarily before Johnson shouted the crowd down.

“All right. Everyone shut up a second,” slurred Johnson. Bairnson rolled his eyes. Johnson had apparently overindulged a bit, as usual.

“I wanna make some toast, too...” Johnson continued, somewhat louder than necessary.

Sunset tried to gently deter him from speaking any further, but he could not be dissuaded as he refilled his cup. “I wanna make some toast...” he reiterated, raising his cup in salutation, “...to my friend, Cap’n Jack Bairnson.

For the greatest execution of the Dolemite Maneuver since James Tiberius Kirk himself!”

The crowd responded with another “Here!” that was somewhat less enthusiastic than the one they’d given Bairnson. Nevertheless, it was more than enough to mollify Johnson and prevent him from further making an ass of himself.

Bairnson stood momentarily confused. Johnson had butchered the word so badly that he didn’t understand what he meant at first. It wasn’t until Sunset reminded Johnson of the word’s actual pronunciation that it registered with Bairnson. “Oh, riiiiiiight...” Bairnson nodded. “Corbomite. Good stuff...”

He must have said it with less mirth than he’d intended because, even in his slightly inebriated state, Johnson noticed. “Well, come on, Jack,” chuckled Johnson. “I mean, you’ve gotta admit that some of that stuff you said was preeeeeeeeetty outrageous.”

Bairnson turned to Johnson, suddenly deadly serious. “Like what, exactly?”

Johnson stood momentarily dumbfounded until Sunset came to his rescue. “Well, you know. All that stuff about the Dräkmarian genocide at the hands of the Romulans.”

Bairnson stared stone-faced at her.

“I mean,” she continued. “The Romulans would *never* do that.”

“Wouldn’t they?” he asked her pointedly.

Mirgant then chimed in. "Then, why did the Captain have the Romulan ship scan him?"

Bairnson shot Mirgant a smile. She seemed to have caught onto something that none of the others had at that moment. The other officers regarded Mirgant with an expression demanding her to explain.

"I mean..." stammered Mirgant. She looked to Bairnson. "I presume that's why you did it, right? To prove to that Centurion that you weren't... bluffing."

Sunset turned to Bairnson in complete astonishment. "Wait a minute. Are you telling us that what you said was *true*?"

Bairnson nodded. "Every word." He then sipped his drink.

Sunset was dumbstruck. "But... how is that even possible?"

"Precognition," said Saallak after a moment. Again, all eyes turned in her direction. Noticing her colleagues' expressions, she shrugged, simply stating, "It is the only logical explanation."

Y'Gar stepped in closer to Bairnson. "Sir. Are you telling us that you... you've *seen* the future?"

Again, Bairnson nodded. "Not only have I *seen* it, I've been to it!"

Sunset demanded to know how.

Bairnson drew in a deep breath before speaking. He had been hoping to keep this as his secret for a while; but after the accolades he had given them barely a few

moments ago, his crew deserved to know the truth. “When that T’Lajia appeared...” he began.

“T’Lajia?” Winston interjected. “That’s the word you said on the bridge.”

Bairnson nodded. Before he could continue his story, though, Saallak interjected.

“Captain,” she said. “That phrase is of *Romulan* origin. It literally translates to...”

Bairnson completed her thought. “‘Corridor of Time.’ I know. I looked it up. Can I go on now?”

Bairnson glanced about to make sure no further interruptions were coming. When he was satisfied, he told them how the systems on board the *Hawking* had literally frozen up after the Romulan disruptor blasts hit it just before the T’Lajia drew it in. He blacked out, and the next thing he remembered was waking up 80 years in the future – in the sickbay of the *Enterprise*.

The looks on the faces of his crewmates betrayed their astonishment and confusion. Bairnson smiled momentarily. He was hoping that would grab their attention. After letting them stew for a moment, he quickly clarified, “Oh. Not *our Enterprise*. The second one after us. The *Enterprise-D*.”

Bairnson’s smile widened as he remembered the people he had encountered on the future starship. “That’s how I know our legacy will continue,” he commented.



After taking another moment to process his extraordinary tale, Sunset finally spoke. "So... the crew of this... future *Enterprise*. What were they like?"

"Like us," said Bairnson simply. "With a few notable exceptions." Again, he noticed the looks on his guests faces. They wanted to know more. He had to be careful what he told them. Finally, Bairnson said that the ship had an android helmsman, something called a "ship's counsellor," and a Klingon security chief.

Winston nearly spat out his drink when he heard that last piece of information. "What?" he scoffed. "*Klingons* on Starfleet ships?"

"Well, on *that* one, anyway," replied Bairnson. "To be honest, though, he was really the only one I saw..."

"Nevertheless, it seems logical," commented Saallak. "Perhaps the Khitomer Conference bears fruit after all."

"And so... what?" said Y'Gar. "They worked out how to get you back home?"

"No," said Bairnson. "That I owe to, of all people, a *Romulan* commander."

Again, Sunset's eyebrows raised in surprise. "So... we make peace with the Romulans, too?"

Bairnson hesitated before saying, "Not... as such..."

Mirgant interjected. "But... this Romulan commander sent you back?"

Bairnson nodded, saying that she sent him back through the T'Lajia on an infiltrator pod. He transported onto the *Enterprise* from it.

“And here we thought you just managed to get the emergency transporter on the *Hawking* working,” slurred Johnson.

Mirgant shook her head in wonder. “Must have been one very progressive Romulan.” She then sipped her own drink.

Bairnson shook his head saying, “Not really. She just had her own reasons.”

Sunset turned to Bairnson with a quizzical eye. “*She?*”

Bairnson didn't catch the hint of jealousy in her expression.

“Captain,” said Saallak following a moment of silent reflection. “While I do not doubt the veracity of your story—our predecessor ship was documented to have time-traveled on more than one occasion—I must point out that they traveled to the *past*, not the future.”

“Right,” Bairnson nodded. “Sooooooo... what's your point?”

“My point, sir,” said Saallak with her usual serenity. “Is that time is fluid and nebulous. And while the past has remained virtually unchanged...”

“For all *you* know...” Johnson facetiously interjected.

Saallak cocked her head in acknowledgment.

“Point taken, Commander.” She then informed Bairnson that it would be more accurate to say that what he visited was not *the* future, but *a* future. One of an infinite number of possible outcomes.

“And by returning to this point in time – here and now,” she concluded. “You have undoubtedly altered the trajectory of that timeline. Perhaps even to the point that the future you visited no longer exists.”

Bairnson and his crewmates stared at Saallak in silent, stunned amazement. Did she study this stuff in her downtime? Nevertheless, she was right. Bairnson had said nothing to his crew concerning the fate of the *Enterprise* at Dräkmar IV in the future he visited. About how Starfleet had wiped all records of the incident. And how they had apparently conspired with Romulus to place the blame squarely on his shoulders, thus making him a wanted Romulan fugitive.

But he had returned. And he had changed things, just as he told Sela he would if he were given the chance. But, in doing so, had he created a temporal tsunami that had completely erased the future timeline he had visited? Would there now even be an *Enterprise-D* and its crew?

And what about Ro? If he met her in the future, would she even recognize him—that is, if she even existed? Bairnson realized that he might never know the answers. Not for at least another 80 years, anyway. Or if he

discovered another way to travel forward in time, which he really did not want to do.

“You really know how to bring a party down,” jeered Johnson. “Don’t you, Saallak?”

\* \* \*

An hour or so later, Jack Bairnson cleared the soiled utensils, crumb-filled plates, and half-empty drink containers strewn about his quarters. The party did indeed start breaking down following Professor Saallak’s dissertation on time travel, but it really didn’t matter. Everyone had to be on duty on the bridge in the morning anyway, and Bairnson was grateful to have plenty of time to pick up after his guests before turning in for the night himself.

His only remaining “guest” was Janet Sunset. She was giving him an extra hand in placing the leftover food into containers to be stored in his chiller unit. She had always been good at organizing, which is one of the myriad of reasons why he had chosen her to serve as COS.

However, she had been strangely quiet since the others had departed. She often did that when she had something on her mind but was either too polite or too afraid to talk about it. It was one of the things that drove Bairnson crazy in their relationship.

After taking a load of paper plates and cups to the kitchen incinerator, Bairnson tried to make small talk with Sunset in an effort to get her to open up. “Have fun tonight?” he asked.

“Yup,” she replied simply, betraying no hint of emotion whatsoever. Bairnson shook his head. Saallak must have been giving her tips on how to be more stoic. Sunset continued placing the leftovers into their plastic containers.

“Looks like we’ll have enough food to give the replicators a break for a couple days.”

“Uh-huh,” she replied non-committedly.

Bairnson had had enough. He stepped closer to her. “Have I done something wrong?”

Sunset ceased shoveling food and placed her utensil down into a container. She looked him dead in the eyes.

“You tell me,” she said insistently.

Bairnson’s expression conveyed his confusion.

“What the hell was that between you and Mirgant tonight?” demanded Sunset.

“I’m... not sure what you...”

“Oh, come off it, Jack! When I came in here tonight you were all over her.”

Bairnson’s eyes widened in astonishment. “What?” Then he remembered what had transpired between them earlier. “Oh! No, no, no. I was just helping her stay on her feet.”

“What – after you’d already swept her off of them?”

“No!” Bairnson explained how she had gone to Crispin for sedatives to calm her nerves before the party, and how Crispin had given her the Irish whiskey instead.

“Oh? And is *that* why she rushed to your defense about that whole scanning thing?” Sunset pouted.

Bairnson’s brow furrowed in confusion. Sunset laid into him even harder.

“Come on, Jack!” she spat. “Are you really that dense? She’s in love with you! Has been ever since the moment she stepped aboard this ship!”

“Oh please,” scoffed Bairnson. “I must be twice her age!”

“No. She’s twice *your* age! Don’t let that baby face of hers fool you.”

Bairnson’s expression seemed to ask, “How could you possibly know that?”

“Remember, I have access to the crew’s personnel files.”

Bairnson had had enough. “Janet. What’s *really* bothering you?”

Sunset sighed. She seemed to have vented all the venom she had stored up over the course of the evening and was now ready to calmly speak her peace. “It’s just...” she began slowly. “A few days ago, during the battle, there was a moment where I thought I’d genuinely lost you. For good. I’ve never felt so helpless—so alone—in my entire life. It scared the hell out of me, Jack. And I’m still scared. Scared that it might happen again.”

Bairnson nodded his understanding. He reached out and embraced her warmly. “I’m sorry you had to go through all of that. But... you know that, as Starfleet

officers, it's always a possibility. We just have to accept that."

"Or..." said Sunset hopefully. "We don't."

Bairnson looked down at her, his brow once again furrowed in confusion.

Sunset looked up into his eyes. "Remember Tommy Heathcote?"

"The kid from our cadet squadron?" Bairnson asked.

Janet nodded. "Right!"

"I remember he had really bad acne..." commented Bairnson.

"Well, he finally saw a dermatologist and got it cleared up. And... he's now one of the top flight instructors at Starfleet Academy."

"Good for him," hmphed Bairnson. "But what does that have to do with...?"

"He contacted me the other day. Said that two of the old associate instructors were finally retiring. And he thinks that you and I would be perfect replacements!"

Bairnson released Sunset from his arms. He turned away from her with an exasperated sigh. Sunset stepped closer to him.

"I know it's not as exciting as being a starship captain, but it's an amazing opportunity. And it's... safe."

There it was! The truth was finally out in the open. Bairnson turned to face Sunset.

“And...” she continued, placing her hands on Bairnson’s shoulders. “We could... finally start that family we’ve always talked about.”

“In San Francisco,” deadpanned Bairnson.

Sunset nodded excitedly. “There’s the bay! Lots of fishing...”

Bairnson broke away from her. “No offense, Janet. But once you’ve seen the Crab Nebula up close, San Francisco Bay is a bit of a letdown.”

“But...” Sunset protested. “We could have a family there!”

“We could have a family *here!*” countered Bairnson. “Out here. Among the stars.”

Sunset folded her arms. “And where did you get *that* idea from? Your ‘future’?”

“Maybe...” admitted Bairnson sheepishly. “But what if we’re the one of the ones who help to make that happen? Wouldn’t that be incredible?”

“Yeah. Until one of us—or gods forbid *both* of us—go out on a mission and never come back. You really want to orphan your son or daughter?”

Bairnson was uncertain of what he could say, except, “Janet. I may have been to the future, but I can’t control it.”

Sunset nodded sadly. “And why that doesn’t scare the hell out of you, I’ll never know.”

Sunset sighed as she stepped back over to the kitchen counter. She grabbed a container of leftover food



that she had prepared for herself. With the container in hand, she strode toward the door to Bairnson's quarters. Bairnson watched in silence as the door slid aside, revealing the corridor beyond.

Sunset stopped just inside the door frame and turned back to Bairnson. "Just... promise me you'll think about it. All right?"

Bairnson nodded.

Sunset returned the gesture, saying, "Good night, Jack."

The door slid closed, leaving Bairnson alone in the dimly lit room.

At first considered a monumental failure, the *Excelsior* class starship design had risen like the phoenix from its own ashes and gone on to become Starfleet's workhorse design. Long after its namesake vessel and its sister ship the *Enterprise-B*, *Excelsior* class starships continued to be built and remained in service for decades – even into the 24<sup>th</sup> century.

The U.S.S. *Monitor* was of the old guard *Excelsior* class ships in the fleet. It had been commissioned around the same time as the *Enterprise-C* and—even after a few upgrades to some of its onboard systems—it remained in service, showing absolutely no sign that it was ever being considered for the scrap heap.

The *Enterprise-D* had pulled up behind the *Monitor* less than an hour before. It had been called upon to deliver some much-needed supplies to the ship for its next important mission. The last of the *Enterprise's* shuttlecraft was making its way back to the hangar deck. And Commander William T. Riker could not have been more pleased to hear it.

Although he realized that it was the Federation flagship's occasional duty to perform mundane supply runs to its sister ships in the fleet—because it had one of the fleet's greatest cargo capacities—Riker was eager to get

back to the mission he had signed up for: The exploration of deep space.

Riker sat in the captain's chair on the bridge, tapping a report into the PADD he held in his left hand. He had been expecting this delivery run to be no different than any of the other couple hundred or so had done since becoming the *Enterprise's* XO. But if he had learned anything from his time aboard the ship, it was to always expect the unexpected to crop up.

He heard the chime emanate from the security console above and behind him even before Lieutenant Worf called his attention. "Sir," said Worf in his usual guttural tone. "The captain of the *Monitor* is asking to speak to you."

Riker rose to his feet and placed the PADD down on the captain's chair. Straightening his red tunic, he then asked Worf to put the message through. When the image on the main viewer didn't immediately switch from one of the *Monitor's* aft section floating in space ahead of the *Enterprise*, Riker turned to Worf – his expression alone demanding an explanation.

"Privately," was Worf's simple response.

Riker's eyebrows rose in surprise. Still nonplussed, he informed Worf that he would take the call in the captain's office. Worf acknowledged Riker's pronouncement as Riker briskly strode from the captain's chair to the office, which was just off the bridge on the left side.

The door slid aside as Riker approached it, allowing him to enter the office unimpeded. He quickly sat in the chair behind the captain's desk and reached out to activate the terminal atop it. Within seconds, the smiling aquamarine face of the *Monitor*'s captain flashed onto the screen, looking back at him.

"Captain Mirgant," said Riker with his usual genial smile. "I trust everything is satisfactory?"

"Oh yes, Commander," replied Thuroq Mirgant. "The *Enterprise* delivered its usual top-notch service with a smile."

Although Riker knew that Mirgant was at least four decades his senior, he still found the Andorian woman absolutely mesmerizing. Because Andorians aged more slowly than humans, the crow's feet she had around her eyes and light creases in her forehead gave her the appearance of a human woman half her age. Adding to her attraction was the fact that Riker knew her to be—like the ship she commanded—one of the "old guard" of Starfleet officers. And her distinguished career was still talked about to this day.

"I apologize that Captain Picard isn't here to speak to you personally," said Riker. "But he's taking some well-deserved R&R."

"On Risa again?" asked Mirgant with a coy smile.

"You've heard about that?"

"I think half the Alpha Quadrant has."

The pair shared a momentary chuckle before Mirgant got down to business.

“Actually,” Mirgant began again. “I’m kind of glad to be talking to you instead of Jean-Luc. I think I can trust your discretion a little more than his.” Mirgant then explained that she had a VIP aboard the *Monitor* who was eager to visit the *Enterprise*.

“As a matter of fact,” she continued. “The second he heard we were meeting up with you, he caught the first transport he could find to get to us.”

“We’d be happy to give him the grand tour,” said Riker.

“That’s the thing,” said Mirgant cautiously. “He wants to keep his visit on the QT until he takes care of some... what did he call it? ‘Unfinished personal business.’”

Riker’s eyebrows raised once again. “And... you’re OK with that?”

Mirgant smiled with a nod. “I know it goes completely against Starfleet protocol, but... let’s just say I owe him one. Or twenty.”

Riker nodded with understanding and returned her smile. He imagined how he might do the same thing for his own commander someday. “Very well, Captain. I’ll advise the transporter operator to exercise discretion.”

Mirgant thanked Riker for his understanding.

“May I at least ask who this VIP is?” ventured Riker.

Again, Mirgant smiled coyly. “Oh, I think you know *exactly* who he is, Commander. He certainly remembers *you*. He told me to tell you that he hopes your combo has been practicing a song called... ‘Great Balls of Fire.’”

\* \* \*

The transporter beam faded away, revealing the interior of the *Enterprise*’s transporter room. The young human female in the yellow and black tunic stared ahead in complete awe, making the object of her gawking somewhat self-conscious.

It seemed to last only a moment as the raven-haired woman quickly straightened herself up, and—in true Starfleet fashion—congenially said, “Welcome aboard the *Enterprise*, Admiral.”

The Admiral glanced down at his own red and black tunic. He silently chastised himself. In his haste to make it over to the *Enterprise*, he had neglected to change into some less-ostentatious clothing.

Still, it was too late to turn back now. The best thing he could do was roll with it, just like he always had. He briefly glanced around the room, in search of something that he was expecting to find but wasn’t. The young woman must have noticed.

“Is something wrong, Admiral?” she asked.

The Admiral looked directly at the young Ensign. “No,” he said reassuringly. “Everything’s fine. I came through in one piece, same as usual. It’s just...”

He gazed at her face. She had the most mesmerizing green eyes, and her high cheekbones only made her beauty more appealing. The Admiral shook the lewd thoughts from his aged mind. Better to focus on why he was here.

“While I’m certainly pleased to make your acquaintance, young lady,” he said, sounding much older than he had hoped. “I was hoping to see Miles.”

The Ensign’s green eyes narrowed inquisitively as she repeated the name. Then, realization dawned on her face. “Oh! You mean Chief O’Brien!”

The Admiral nodded. “That’s right. Where is he? Off-duty in Ten Forward?”

“Actually,” the young woman said, almost afraid to tell him. “He was transferred to Deep Space Nine five months ago.”

“Is that a fact?” said the Admiral as he stepped down off the transporter pad and made his way toward the exit. The door slide aside, revealing the corridor beyond. “I’ll have to make it a point to stop by there...”

The door slid closed behind the Admiral, preventing the young Ensign from hearing another word he said.

\* \* \*

The doors to Ten Forward parted, revealing a room full of off-duty personnel enjoying some free time away from their daily duties aboard the ship. As the Admiral entered the room, he noticed that none of them seemed to have

taken any notice of his presence – unlike the ones he'd encountered in the corridors and turbolift on his way here.

*Good, he thought. Last thing I want to do is spoil the surprise.*

He glanced about the room, searching for his quarry. But with the sheer amount of people in the room, he had to admit that he was having great difficulty.

“Welcome back, Admiral,” a feminine voice pierced the drone of voices to grab his attention. He turned around to see the mocha-skinned proprietor of Ten Forward... what was her name? Guinan. That was it! She was, of course, exactly the same as the last time he had seen her, dressed in violet robes with an oversized head covering that concealed whatever hair she may—or may not—have.

Curiously, Guinan held a glass in each of her hands, both containing reddish liquid. One glass was taller, and the liquid inside bubbled from the bottom of the glass to the top, where they coalesced into a healthy head of foam. The other glass was shorter and stouter with little to no hint of effervescence whatsoever. Guinan handed both concoctions to the Admiral, and while he was a bit dumbstruck, he accepted them nonetheless.

“What’s this?” he asked, indicating the glasses.

“Your usual. For you... and the lady,” purred Guinan with a nod. She then pointed to a small table at the far end of the room, near the expansive observation windows. Another dark-haired woman in a red and black



duty uniform sat alone at the table, her back to the rest of the room.

“How did you...?” stammered the Admiral.

“Please,” said Guinan dismissively. “I knew you’d be back. After all – it was only a matter of time.”

Guinan smiled widely at the Admiral before playfully shoving him in the direction of the table.

The Admiral smiled to himself as he slowly stepped toward the table. Based on what he’d seen so far, the *Enterprise-D* seemed to be almost exactly the way he’d remembered it. And Guinan’s words only confirmed his hope that his past actions had only modest effects on the future.

\* \* \*

It had become Ensign Ro Laren’s custom to come to Ten Forward following one of her work shifts. She would sit at a table—alone—and stare out at the stars through the deck’s oversized observation windows. Guinan would always offer her a beverage on the house, but Ro always refused her. Every time.

Still, Guinan had insisted to her that she would continue to make the gesture because she knew that, someday, she would accept. Ro also rebuffed any attempts others made to get a drink for her. Even the people she had grown somewhat fond of on board.

She always was a solitary person. But lately, she seemed to have withdrawn even further into herself. Troi had noticed; as had Guinan. And although they tried their

best to help her deal with her feelings, it seemed that their efforts were fruitless.

Tonight, she just wanted to gaze out at the stars and wonder for a little while before returning to her quarters to sleep. And tonight, as it seemed to be happening more and more often, she sensed that someone was standing behind her – no doubt regarding her with feelings of pity that she did not desire.

Without turning around, Ro said as calmly as she could, “If that’s a Bajoran Tingle you’re bringing me that some do-gooder crew member bought me, please take it away.”

A red-sleeved hand placed a small, stout glass of clear reddish liquid on the table. Ro’s face contorted in consternation. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” she continued through slightly gritted teeth. “But I’m really not in the mood for company.”

A taller glass of effervescent red liquid with a healthy foam head was placed right beside its smaller relative. Ro could now make out the abdomen of her server. It too sported a red and black tunic. But in the dim light of Ten Forward, it was difficult to discern any other details.

“You just don’t give up. Do you?” said Ro sardonically.

“Nope,” said a hauntingly familiar voice. “Never have. Never will.”

Ro finally glanced up to see the face that accompanied the voice. Her eyes widened as she took in his features, and her breath momentarily caught in her throat. His hair had grown a ghostly white at the temples; but on top, it had the same reddish tint she remembered. Perhaps it had dulled a bit from the fiery red to more of cool ember. But nevertheless, it had yet to surrender its fire to the snow on his temples.

The beard he had once sported was now gone, and his face was weathered with more creases, crags, and dimples. But his brown eyes still held the same spark she had remembered. And—dare she say it?—even... loved. Yes, he was considerably older in his Starfleet Admiral's uniform. But he was still the most gorgeous man she had ever beheld.

“Hello, Laren,” beamed Admiral Jack Bairnson.

Ro's pearly white smile added just the smallest hint of light to the otherwise dim room.