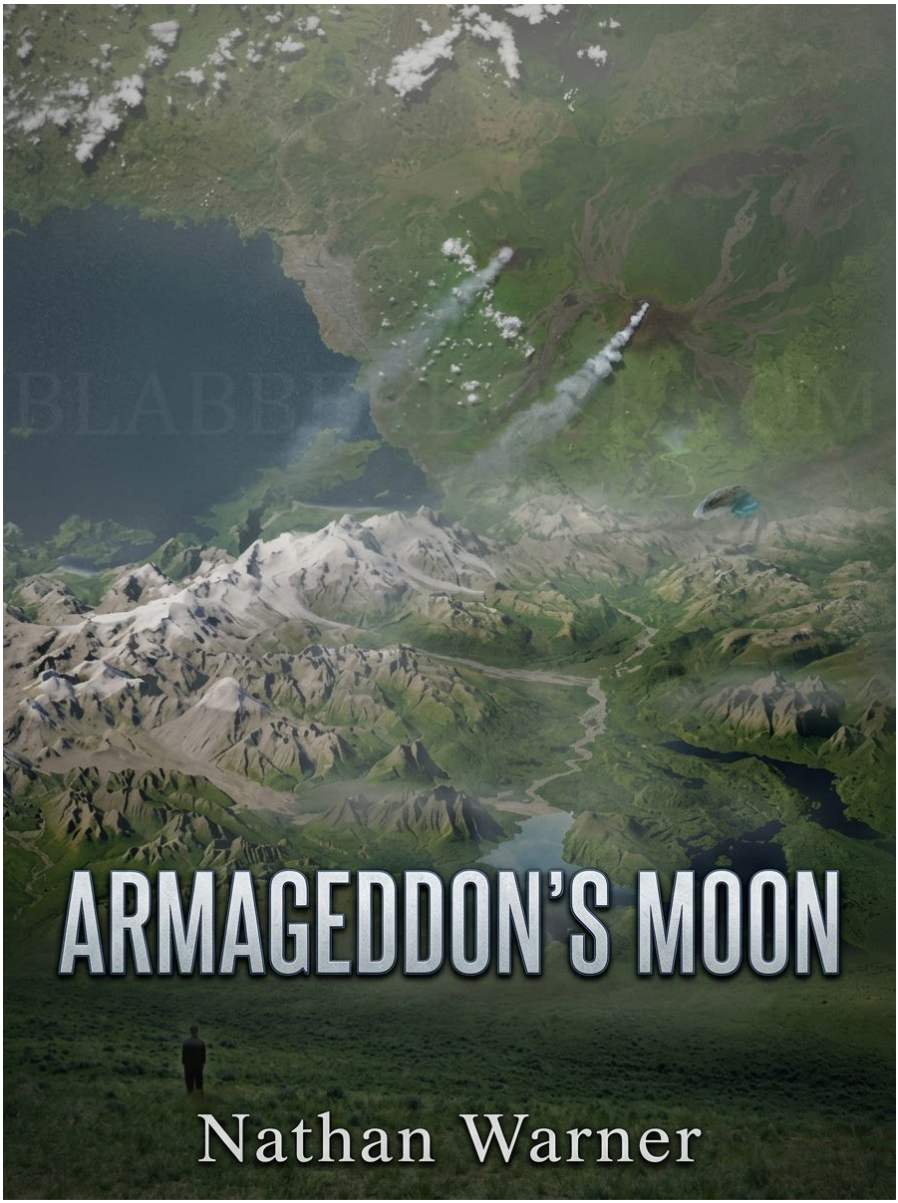

ARMAGEDDON'S MOON
Nathan Warner

Armageddon's Moon

©By Nathan Warner 2020

INTRODUCTION: The *U.S.S. Alba* runs into a Dyson Spheroid on the outer edge of the Galactic plane, but the idyllic utopia it harbors inside is threatened by disaster – potentially caused by Lt. Commander Ridgeway's interference. Now, he must race against time to unlock its secrets and not only save the cultures living within, but also potentially save the Galaxy from destruction.

"Ridgeway to Bachaval?" Lt. Commander Alex Ridgeway called the TaTannan settlement over his communicator. There was a several second interval in the relay – Commander Bachaval had probably met up with the rest of the Away Team and was likely in the middle of assisting the natives with earthquake preparedness procedures.

While he waited, Ridgway's eyes settled on the scene before him. He still hadn't gotten used to the horizon curving up, instead of down, and it always took his breath away. It was, after all, his first visit to a Dyson Ellipsoid, or Spheroid.

The field of sagebrush he was standing in sloped down a dozen kilometers to a massive mountain range below. Ridgeway was looking over the tallest whitecapped peaks below to the world that lay beyond. The mountains obscured the Dyson Ellipsoid's curvature only a little with their dominating peaks built up by

unexplained tectonic stresses. They melded into the upward slopes of the continent beyond them dominated by its massive glacial lake. The horizon continued sloping upward, almost perpendicular to him, until it was obscured by the atmosphere, white and opaque from the smoke. The source of this pollution were two large volcanoes staring across at him on the curvature opposite, spewing carbon dioxide and other gasses that sank down to smother the mountains. Those were a serious concern and why he was out here surveying them.

“Bachaval here,” came the reply from basecamp. His gruff Tellerite temperament always made him sound put out.

“Commander, I’ve located a possible entry point into the superstructure, and I’m relaying my coordinates now,” Ridgeway reported, scanning his tricorder, “Please come at once!”

“We’re on our way,” Bachaval responded bluntly.

Ridgeway hesitated slightly before he continued, “Do you want Duatha or any of the Council to join us?”

“No!” Bachaval said decidedly, and then answered more softly, “We don’t want to contaminate their knowledge of their reality any more than we already have – not until we know more. Bachaval out.” Ridgeway sighed. In truth, the blame for this mess was all his.

Two days ago, Ridgeway had been on the bridge of the *U.S.S. Alba*, a newly minted Nova class starship – and not at the helm or ops, but in the big chair itself. It had just passed midnight, and he’d worked out a command rotation on the night shift with

Commander Bachaval, a diminutive Tellerite – known affectionately behind his back as "Budge-not," because he was so intractable in his leadership style that it was a miracle Ridgeway was sitting where he was. Over the last year they'd been cruising the Galactic plane of the Alpha Quadrant near the trailing edge, exploring space less-travelled or last catalogued a generation before. Like any other night, it was uneventful, until the science station lit up.

Science Officer Lt. Ashley Gathers turned from her console. "Sir, I'm picking up a slightly anomalous radiation reading 0.2 light years out on starboard," she said, double-checking the computer's conclusion before voicing it on the bridge, "It appears consistent with a phenomenon called a Dyson Spheroid."

The bridge went quiet. Ensign Crawley turned around from Ops. "Dyson Sphere," he recited in his English accent, putting his index finger against his temple, "giant, artificially constructed shells the size of a solar system, built around a pre-existing existing star, am I right?"

Next to him at the helm, Ensign Drake nodded his head of dreadlocks. "Yeah, man, they're megastructures built to collect a large portion of a star's solar output. Sometimes, they're built purely for energy production, but sometimes for habitation on the inner surface of the shell," he said, punctuating Crawley's statement authoritatively.

"Well, you'd both be correct, if we were talking about the largest of these structures," Gathers replied, reading the computer's input on the situation, "but a handful of smaller configurations have

been hypothesized using artificial fusion generators for the power source and gravity plating if the inside is habitable. Hence, the entire spectrum of sizes is referred to as Dyson "Spheroids" or "Ellipsoids." Theoretically, they can be constructed as small as a moon-sized object."

Ridgeway had heard enough. "Helm, set in a course for the anomaly, warp 8," he said, inwardly calculating that it would take about an hour and a half for them to reach the location at that speed.

"Should we inform the Captain?" Gathers asked, a little surprised Ridgeway hadn't done so.

Ridgeway turned around in his chair and slid his finger across his throat. "Not unless you want my job," he said with a smile. "Captain Reddot expressly forbid me from disturbing his sleep tonight. The only exception, in his words, was 'if all hell breaks loose.' I don't think this qualifies."

Gathers raised one dark eyebrow very Vulcan-like. "No, I suppose not," she said.

The ride to the anomaly was uneventful, and Ridgeway risked entering the Captain's Ready Room to replicate a strong cup of coffee. It felt a little sacrilegious, but he returned to the bridge with his steaming brew, wearing a triumphant, if somewhat guilty, expression.

“Are you trying to make me hate you?” Gathers asked, eyeing his cup wistfully.

“One of the perks of command,” he smiled, settled back into his chair, mischievously, “and who knows, maybe one day you’ll get to use the Captain’s replicator too, if you should be so lucky.” He took a sip and bent over, trying to decide if he should spit it out or swallow. He spat it out – back into the cup.

“That’s hot!” he yelped. “Reddot must have a duranium throat!”

Gathers wasn’t being very sympathetic. “Karma’s a Klingon Targ,” she sighed.

Before Ridgeway could respond, the helm beeped.

“We’re approaching the anomaly, Sir,” Drake reported.

“Drop us out of warp, Ensign, and go to one quarter impulse,” Ridgeway commanded, “We don’t want to come in too hot – we’re all friends here.”

“It’s within visual range, Sir,” Crawley commented.

Ridgeway leaned forward, setting his coffee down on the floor. “Let’s see it,” he said.

The screen flickered and a dark, spherical object floated before them, seen mostly by the obscured stars beyond it.

“Report?” Ridgeway asked, turning to Gathers. Her eyes were transfixed on her console, which was being flooded with a wealth

of sensor data from the object. He had to wait several seconds before she replied.

“It definitely appears to be…a Dyson Spheroid,” she said, distractedly, “measuring around 4,000 kilometers in diameter…approximately the size of Earth’s moon.”

“Life signs?” Ridgeway asked.

“I’m not getting anything from the interior,” Gathers replied. “The shell, which is an unknown composite, is shielding all but neutrino particles from the fusion reactor inside.”

“Anything on the outside?” Ridgeway queried.

“Lots,” Gathers answered, “but I can’t speak to any of it at this point. There is a lot of faint geometry, but nothing that I would classify as weaponry or a “door” into the interior – at least not on this side.”

Ridgeway sighed. “Okay, park us in standard orbit,” he said, “and open hailing frequencies.”

Ensign Drake tapped his console and the familiar sound of a channel activating alerted the bridge. “Channel open, Sir,” he said.

Ridgeway straightened and tried to swallow the nervous lump in his throat. If someone was home, this would be his very first “first contact” and the pressure was intense to get the right words out. “To unidentified anomaly,” he said, “this is the *U.S.S. Alba*, can you respond?”

Everyone on the bridge waited, motionless, ready to be greeted by a friendly new race, warp out from a hostile one, or raise shields and punch it out if necessary. Ridgeway could feel everyone's fingers tensely hovering over their consoles. The seconds passed and Ridgeway's words appeared to have been swallowed whole by the silence that returned.

Suddenly, the lights on the bridge dimmed momentarily. A few consoles flickered and then popped back on.

"What was that?" Ridgeway demanded.

"I have no idea," Gathers replied, staring dumbfounded at the ceiling. "It's a power fluctuation, but no known cause."

Ridgeway took a breath and returned to the view screen. "This is the Federation science vessel, *U.S.S. Alba*," he reiterated, "to anyone who can respond – do you read us?"

"Sir, something is happening," Crawley reported, checking his console, "the object has begun to move."

On the viewscreen Ridgeway could see the artificial moon was occulting new stars. "Heading?" he asked, tensely.

"It's headed straight for us, Sir!" Crawley shouted.

Ridgeway hardly missed a beat. "Helm, back us off!" he yelled. "Half impulse power!" The *Alba* turned on a dime from its orbit of the object and pulsed away, leaving it in the proverbial dust.

Before Ridgeway could get comfortable, the Com chirped and everyone jumped as Captain Reddot's voice boomed around them.

"Bridge, what did I just see outside my window?" he asked, gruffly.

Like a primary student caught playing hooky, Ridgeway stuttered for an answer. "Well, I...Sir...Sir, we've located a Dyson Spheroid and have attempted to make contact," he said, uneasily, looking to his bridge staff for support, "but our hail was met with an unfriendly gesture by the object. We have established a safe distance, Sir."

"Why wasn't I informed?" Reddot asked icily.

"Sir, you asked not to be disturbed, except in an emergency, Sir," Ridgeway replied, almost pleadingly. There was a slight pause.

"Very well," Reddot answered, a little more compassionately, "I'm on my way. Inform Commander Bachaval."

Less than a minute later, Captain Reddot and Commander Bachaval stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge. Reddot was Andorian, and the sight of a Tellerite standing next to him spoke to how old feuds could be reforged into new friendships through Starfleet.

Ridgeway was in the middle of finding a place to stash his coffee when the Captain appeared. He'd planned to recycle it in the Captain's Ready Room, but now it was too late. Without thinking, he held it out as Reddot settled into the abandoned command chair.

“Report!” the Captain barked, but took the cup as a peace offering.

Ridgeway stood at attention. “Sir, the anomaly is on a parallel course, moving at full impulse speed,” he replied.

Reddot turned to Gathers. “Any weapons or tactical information?” he asked.

“None, Sir,” she replied, “the only radiation we’re reading is a neutrino flux, probably from a fusion reaction of some kind in the interior. We’re also not detecting any engines – it seems to be pulled along by some sort of internal energy field.”

“Have you tried hailing frequencies?” Reddot asked.

“Yes, Sir,” Ridgeway answered. “No reply – however, it was shortly after we hailed them that the object began to move off.”

Sufficiently brought up to speed, Reddot took a sip of his coffee. His antennas bobbed down, and Ridgeway and Gathers exchanged horrified glances.

“Hmm, not bad – different, but not bad, Lieutenant Commander,” he said swishing the coffee in his mouth, “what did you do differently?” Ridgeway swallowed nervously.

“It’s bad luck to share a secret recipe, Sir,” he said.

Reddot looked severely at him. “Don’t think you’re getting off that easy, Ridgeway,” he glowered, “I will squeeze the secret out of you eventually, but in the meantime, I congratulate you – I didn’t think coffee could be improved!”

Ridgeway thought he was going to pass out.

Thankfully, the Captain turned his attention back to the viewscreen. “Alright, any ideas about how to establish contact with our friend out there?” he inquired. As Ridgeway retreated to his normal post at the Operations station, Ensign Crawley turned to face the Captain.

“Perhaps we could beam a class Z probe inside the object, Sir,” he suggested.

“And modify it to communicate using a neutrino beam,” Drake added.

Ridgeway nodded from his post. “Maybe we could even use a probe to boost our transporter signal and act as a bridge to beam through the dense shell,” he proposed.

Bachaval grunted from his seat beside the Captain. “Isn’t that a bit premature?” he asked, rubbing his snout, “We don’t even know what’s inside!”

Ridgeway cleared his throat. “No, Commander, you are correct,” he said demurely. “I meant only after we establish that the interior of this Dyson Ellipsoid is habitable.”

Captain Reddot glanced back at the object on the screen before nodding in agreement. “Very well,” he said, turning to Gathers. “Lieutenant, I want you to modify the probe accordingly.”

The process only took a few minutes – most of the new class Z probe’s features could be altered remotely.

“The probe is ready, Sir,” Gathers reported, “and I’ve input transport coordinates that should position it in ‘low orbit’ of the shell interior.”

“Transport,” Reddot commanded.

A few silent seconds passed. Then the neutrino link was established and data poured into the science stations. Gathers eyes glowed in the face of her console.

“I’m reading a nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere blanketing the inner shell,” she read, “with an atmospheric pressure of 110 Kilopascals, and a gravity just shy of $8m/sec^2$ – surprisingly moderate on the M-class planet scale. The radiation is within tolerances – source being some sort of artificial fusion reaction suspended in the center of the shell.”

“Life signs?” Reddot asked.

Gathers pushed her blonde bangs out of her eyes as she leaned forward into her screen. “I believe so,” she replied, “however, I can’t be precise as the probe is experiencing some interference from the fusion reactor at this altitude.”

“Can we beam to the surface?” Bachaval grunted.

Gathers switched screens to read the data link with the probe. “Yes,” she said. “The transmission is strong and the data rate is high enough.”

Captain Reddot took a sip from his coffee. “Very well,” he said, “Commander, I want you to take an Away Team and try to make contact with any inhabitants inside.”

Bachaval stood and glanced around the bridge. “Gathers, Drake, Crawley, you’re with me,” he called, heading for the turbolift. He stopped just before leaving the bridge. “And Ridgeway,” he said with a grudging smile, “I think it’s only fair that you should finish what you started.”

Ridgeway rose from his seat, ecstatic.

The walk to the transporter room was brief as the ship was small. Gathers stepped up behind the controls and played her hands across the console.

“I’m putting us down near what looks like a city of some sort,” she said, returning the station to an Ensign and joining the team on the transporter pad.

“Energize,” Bachaval said. The transporters whined and Ridgeway felt the lightness of being that always encompassed him as his vision went white. Less than a second later, he was coalescing on an alien world. The first thing that struck him was the view. The horizon arching gracefully up and up into the hazy atmosphere. He almost felt dizzy as the sight played with his senses. He could see lakes and rivers and mountains stretching away up before him. It occurred to him, in a funny sort of way, that if you had a flashlight at night, someone could see you from hundreds of kilometers away – amazing! The air was a perfect temperature, and he took a

deep breath of its fragrant notes from the flowering vegetation. The gravity also felt surprisingly close to that of Earth. Suddenly, he was aware that near their position were dwellings. Gathers appeared to have beamed them to the outskirts of a small town. The tricorders came out as they began walking toward the settlement.

“At this range, I’m definitely picking up lifesigns,” Gathers reported.

“How many?” Bachaval inquired, clearly enjoying stretching his hooved legs in the turf.

“At least a couple hundred,” Gathers replied. Her brow bent a little as she continued taking readings. “Hmmm,” she continued, “I’m not picking up any sort of power supplies though.”

They walked about a hundred meters before they saw any sign of life. Humanoid figures that had been walking on the outskirts of the settlement stood still, peering at the visitors making their way to them.

As they drew closer, Ridgeway began to feel uneasy. Several of the figures appeared to be standing in an agricultural field, using crude wooden implements to churn the soil.

The nearby structures slowly revealed themselves to be large hut-like structures of woven plant materials. Nowhere were any signs that this settlement had technology beyond the Vulcan iron age. Before he could warn his Commander, a figure appeared from around a hut, rapidly carried towards them on the back of a majestic white ruminant mammal.

“I believe that is a stag,” Crawley gasped, pointing to the creature.

Bachaval gestured for calm as the rider approached, carrying a long staff before him. Ridgeway could now see that he had very pale skin. He was tall and almost willowy, clad in a wool tunic and trousers, wrapped in an intricately patterned robe. The designs reminded Ridgeway of Celtic knotwork he’d seen in old Ireland on a visit years ago. Long white hair flowed behind the man in the wind and it sparkled as if flecked with diamond dust.

But all this was secondary to the bright light shining above his nose-bridge, between his eyes. At first, Ridgeway thought the man was wearing a thin crown with a gem on his head, but suddenly he realized the “gem” was actually part of his forehead.

The “stag” slowed to a trot and then to a walk as they were near enough to speak.

Fearing the worst, Ridgeway tugged uncomfortably at his red Command collar.

“Why have you come from the underworld?” he asked sternly. “Do you cause the tremors?” The fact they could understand him was proof that the universal translator was working.

“What tremors?” Drake asked, out of turn.

The figure gestured around them, and as he did so, the ground shook, seized by an earthquake. Only Crawley lost his balance and ended up in the grass. Bachaval stepped forward, gingerly, looking like a horse testing unsure ground in front of its hooves.

“We didn’t know anything about tremors,” he said diplomatically, “but we were expecting to meet the builders of this world – perhaps you could lead us to them?”

The man looked intently at them and then laughed. “Surely you jest, creature of the pit,” he cried pointing at Bachaval’s hooves, “the creators of this world are no more, and have not been for thousands of years. We threw off the gods that made it – those that had enslaved us millennia ago, and we have dwelled in these lands ever since.”

Now it was Bachaval’s turn to get flustered. They had made a terrible mistake. These people were little more than primitive tribes by Starfleet’s standards. They had walked into a Prime Directive fiasco.

“Oh!” he said, trying to hide his surprise. “Well, perhaps we should leave then.”

“No!” the man said earnestly, dismounting his steed. “You brought the earth-shaking, when you came up from the nether world. You must set right what you have done! Do not leave us at the mercy of these tremors. My name is Duatha and I am the leader of our family, the TaTannan.” He bowed lowly.

Bachaval grunted and bowed in return. “I am Commander Bachaval,” he said, “of the Star…of a distant land…place.” He waved vaguely behind him. Bachaval wasn’t a very imaginative individual, and he quickly turned to introduce the rest of the team. At that moment, his communicator chirped, and he turned to answer it. “Yes, Sir?”

“Report?” Captain Reddot’s voice demanded with a tone that clearly wanted to know why the away team had not checked back with him.

“Sir, we have a bit of a sticky situation down here,” Bachaval said lowly. “It appears unlikely that the present inhabitants of this structure are responsible for constructing it, as they are currently at a sort of iron-age stage of technological development.” There was a long pause as the Commander’s words sank into the bridge.

“Well, that’s awkward,” Reddot finally replied.

“Yes, Sir,” Bachaval returned, not knowing what more could be added.

“I suggest you beam up immediately, Commander, and prevent any further contamination to their society,” Reddot said.

Bachaval cleared his throat.

“I would, Sir,” he began, “but, the leader of this community has made contact with us and claims our arrival coincided with some confirmed geological instability. It is his assertion that we have caused it, and he has ‘requested’ that we repair what we have done.” There was another long pause on the line, broken only by a sigh from the Captain.

“Is there any possibility he could be correct?” Reddot finally asked.

Ridgeway tapped his Communicator. “Captain, this is Ridgeway,” he said breathlessly, “I believe there may be something to it, Sir.”

“Explain yourself, Lieutenant-Commander,” Reddot demanded.

Ridgeway massaged the lump in his throat. “Well, Sir, before we hailed the structure, it appeared to be anchored in space,” he explained, “but immediately after receiving our transmission, a propulsion system activated and the structure has been on its present course. It could be that the motion from this propulsion system is what is causing the earthquakes.”

“Lieutenant Gathers, do you concur?” Reddot asked, clearly hoping a second opinion might alleviate his conscience.

“Well, Sir,” Gathers began, combing the hair behind her ears, “I think it very likely that we are responsible in one way or another for this situation.”

Silence filled the air.

“What are your orders, Sir,” Bachaval asked uneasily, glancing to Duatha, who was patiently, if curiously observing this conversation with a disembodied voice.

“Well,” the Captain replied, “I’d like Ridgeway on desk-duty for the rest of his career, but as that won’t alleviate our present predicament, I suggest that we assist the TaTannan in determining the cause of the earthquakes. However, it is to be done under strict non-interference protocols. You are to work without their oversight, and no knowledge or technology is to change hands. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir,” Bachaval responded, eyeing Ridgeway darkly, “however, we don’t have any means of efficient transport to carry out this analysis of the Ellipsoid.”

“We have news there,” Reddot said, “We’re beaming a shuttlecraft inside – it’ll take the entire ship’s transporter grid, but we’ll manage it. We’re stationing it near the probe, in low orbit. You will have to remote-summon it once you are clear of the inhabitants and alone. I don’t want anyone seeing more than they absolutely have to. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Sir, loud and clear,” the Commander replied. “Bachaval out.” The Tellerite turned to Duatha apologetically. “I’m sorry about that interruption,” he said. “My...Cheiftain was contacting me.”

“Through the air?” Duatha asked in awe.

“Yes,” Bachaval replied uneasily. “It is a…natural ability of our kind.”

The lie seemed to convince Duatha. He nodded knowingly. “I understand,” he said. “But now I must know, will you help us?”

Bachaval smiled. “Yes, we will try to get to the bottom of this situation,” he said. “However, my…chieftain requires that we not be disturbed if we are to repair your world. It is the only way the tremors can be ended.”

Ridgeway wasn’t sure Duatha believed this lie, but he nodded all the same. At that moment, a powerful earthquake shook the ground and fault lines appeared, cracking the earth only a few meters away. In the nearby settlement, a hut collapsed and more

TaTannans appeared entering the open fields, fleeing their unstable homes.

“Gathers and Drake?” Bachaval called. “I want you to stay with the TaTannan here and teach them some earthquake preparedness. I don’t want any deaths associated with our visit. Crawley and Ridgeway, you will come with me and establish our base camp beyond that ridge.” He pointed back beyond the direction they had come.

“Yes, Sir,” everyone replied, and then Bachaval turned to Duatha.

“Please accept the help of my officers,” he bowed. “They know how to assist your people.”

Duatha bowed. “Gladly I will accept it,” he said, mounting his steed and leading the way for Gathers and Drake to follow into camp.

Once they were out of earshot, Bachaval turned to Ridgeway and Crawley. “You’ve served us a royal catastrophe, Ridgeway,” he grunted, “but, there is nothing we can do about it now, so we’d better do our work and get off this contraption before our careers sink further in this mess!”

Ridgeway was at a loss for words. “Yes, Sir…” was all he could muster.

As they attempted to locate a suitable Base Camp location that would give them the privacy to utilize their sensory equipment, Ridgeway struggled to keep his discouragement down with how this First Contact was going. This Dyson Ellipsoid and the

mysterious culture it harbored were amazing discoveries – the find of a lifetime!

But because of the Prime Directive, they were in a sticky situation which would force them to leave the TaTannan and the marvel they inhabited behind once they did what they could to help them. Still, the scenery lifted his spirits every time he glanced beyond the ground. He couldn't help but feel inspired!

They set up base camp on the other side of the ridge, where they found a cluster of tall grassy bushes, some 20-30 feet high. The stalks were made of something tougher than wood, allowing each thin strand to stand so tall. Inside this "forest," they took refuge from curious eyes in a small clearing.

Here, the *Alba* beamed some thermal tents and supplies, while the team modified their tricorders to search for anything resembling a control center. The shuttlecraft would have better sensors for a wider sweep, but they would wait to employ it until the morning. Nearly every ten minutes, they braced themselves as the ground shuddered from another earthquake.

"Curious that it is so regular," Crawley commented. "I'd say that certainly supports the idea of a mechanical origin."

Once Gathers and Drake returned from the TaTannan settlement a few hours later, Bachaval spread a holomap on a table – the completed scans from the probe. "We appear to be located around 45 deg latitude," he commented, after staring at the map intently for a few minutes. Captain Reddot was listening on the Comm line.

“Okay,” Bachaval continued. “Ridgeway and Crawley, you’ll join me on an expedition with the shuttle to the northern pole. There seems to be an energy cascade of some kind up there, which may help us find an access point to the interior.”

“Why not just transport into it?” Drake asked.

“How about because sensors can’t penetrate below 30 meters?” Crawley answered for the Commander, holding up his tricorder, showing a nebulous barrier between them and the interior of the station.

Satisfied with Crawley’s assessment, Bachaval turned to Gathers. “Did Duatha know of any way to travel to the ‘underworld’ or ‘pit’ as he calls it?”

Gathers shook her head. “No, Sir,” she replied, massaging her stiff neck, “and he seemed disturbed that we didn’t know how to get back down there – he’s still convinced that we came from this ‘underworld.’ According to the legends he shared, it sounded like there have been other visitors from below in the past.”

“Well, that is a good sign,” Bachaval said, rubbing his snout. “It means there has to be a way inside. All we have to do is find it – and quickly.” He added this last part as the ground violently shook, setting the forest of grasses shivering into the sky. It subsided slowly.

“Gathers, I want you to return to the TaTannan settlement,” Bachaval continued, “and learn everything you can about this place and these people.”

“Anything in particular you’d like to know, Sir?” Gathers asked genuinely.

Bachaval stroked his long flowing goatee. “Yes,” he replied, “we’ll want to know if there are any dangers they know of here – natural or otherwise – wild animals, dangerous weather, etc. It would be nice to know if there are other ‘families’ and where they are located, so we can do our best to avoid them. Find out from their legends if they’ve ever resorted to violence – just as a precaution. Also, any legends about the construction of this place, the visitors from below, or anything else that sounds pertinent would be helpful. I think we’re off to a pretty good start, but I…”

At that moment, the sky grew suddenly twilight-dark, like an eclipse had snuck up on them. Gathers instantly was tapping into the probe telemetry with her tricorder.

“An object has moved between us and the fusion reaction in the center of the spheroid,” she reported. Ridgeway could see the divide of light and darkness moving rapidly along the ground up the ridge and over it on its way to the TaTannan settlement.

“Perhaps a shade or blind to imitate a natural planet’s diurnal cycle?” Drake asked.

“Perhaps,” Gathers nodded, relieved that it probably wasn’t a new thing to be worried about.

Captain Reddot, who had been relatively quiet up till then in the planning process, chimed in. “Our probe is showing that the TaTannan appear to be retiring for the evening,” he said. “I think

this would be called 'bedtime' for them. You'd better all turn in and get some sleep also."

"But Captain, I'm up for working around the clock on this," Ridgeway offered.

"And you will be," Reddot replied sharply, "but you'll be doing it alert and awake! We can't afford any more mistakes. Now get rested, because I'm holding you to that, Lieutenant Commander!"

Everyone felt the burn and looked sympathetically Ridgeway's direction as the Comm ended.

"Ouch!" Crawley yawned, shaking his curly red mop of a head. "That's gonna leave a mark."

In the darker lighting, everyone suddenly felt the exhaustion of the day creeping into them. Bachaval nodded. "Very well," he said, suppressing a yawn. "You all heard the Captain – you're dismissed. Reconvene at 0600 hours sharp."

Ridgeway found his tent kit in the supplies beamed down from the *Alba*. It was no larger than a deck of playing cards. He set the small container on the ground several feet away from any obstacles and pressed the button. "Activate thermal enclosure," he said and then stepped back as the box opened and a mixture of expandable materials writhed into shape out of it, inflating into a very roomy tent, anchored by small gravity plates. It was very lightweight, but was rated to withstand a category 3 hurricane with wind speeds exceeding 200 kmh.

As unbelievable as it sounded, his cousin had been forced to put it to the test in the Academy while on a training mission to Pacifica. The artificial weather controllers malfunctioned after a solar flare knocked out a transceiver, and a massive hurricane developed, impacting the tropical island they were camping on. He'd said it also worked great as a flotation device.

Ridgeway smiled – just another day in Starfleet! Inside the tent, he found a very comfortable cot, integrated into the back of the structure, a micro environmental control unit, and tiny, but powerful light sources woven into the ceiling's Kevlar-duranium weave.

"Home away from home," he said to himself pleasantly, stretching out on the cot. "Lights to fifty percent."

Outside, he could hear the others still rustling around. He pulled out his tricorder and ran a scan of the campsite. According to infrared, everyone appeared to be settling into their tents and the camp appeared normal – as normal as they could be on an exciting and strange new world!

He could see Gathers opening her tricorder, probably doing the same thing. She detected his scans and glanced in his direction.

"Hey, Ridgeway!" she called. "Stop spying on me!"

"You first!" he called back with a smile. "I'm just checking the perimeter!"

"Sure you are!" she said, with as much skepticism as a Ferrengi offering a free meal.

Ridgeway, changed the scans to geological and left the tricorder in scanning mode, setting it down on the floor. Laying back with a yawn, he rewound the day before his eyes. And what a day! From an explorer's perspective, it had been unparalleled – they were sure to go down in history with this discovery! But from a political one, he'd landed his Captain in some hot water, and they might all be dropped a rank – especially if they were responsible for causing any harm to the TaTannan culture.

Ridgeway sighed. He sincerely hoped no one would be hurt from his decision to investigate the phenomenon. Surely Starfleet would understand!

"Computer, lights off," he commanded and the tent blinked into darkness. Suddenly the tent shook from another earthquake. "Right on time," he muttered, picking up his tricorder. It was going to be an interesting night and he wondered if anyone else was going to get any sleep. He examined the data from the tricorder.

"Hmmm," he mused. The seismic waves seemed to be emanating from a remarkably shallow depth – only 20-30 meters! They also appeared to be generated almost uniformly from the shell interior, as far as the tricorder could scan. That wasn't what you'd expect if an engine of some kind was responsible – the energy would be discharged from a singular source and travel through the structure. But this was happening everywhere at once. Then again, they didn't know how the ellipsoid was moving, so maybe the propulsion system was distributed throughout the whole structure. They'd have to get on that puzzle – tomorrow.

To clear his mind, he popped up his new martial arts file that he'd loaded into his tricorder the day before to keep on hand. He'd recently begun playing around with a 20th century holodeck training program that featured lost icons of the art such as the famed Lee Jun-fan, better known professionally as Bruce Lee. Among the other programs listed was a popular one named Chuck Norris. Even as the fighting moves began cascading across the screen, Ridgeway finally gave way to his weariness, which had been soaking into him. In an instant, he submerged in it. He slept. And he dreamed.

He was sitting in a classroom and everyone was staring at him. It looked like the Astrophysics Lecture Hall at Starfleet Academy. Suddenly, he realized Professor Quandrian was also staring at him from the front of the room and his Andorian antennas were twitching with irritation.

"Cadet Ridgeway," he began slowly, but as cold as ice, "Why did you blurt out the number 42 in the middle of my lecture?"

Ridgeway glanced around to see if he was talking to someone else, but as everyone was still staring at him, he turned to face the Professor.

"I…I don't know, Sir," he stammered, "I'm sorry."

Quandrian did not look appeased. "Perhaps you'd like to come up here and explain to us the intricacies of Dyson geometries?" he asked dangerously.

"No, Sir…I think you've got it covered," was all Ridgeway could think to say, but instantly regretted it.

“Indeed I do,” Quandrian replied dangerously. “Leave now and don’t come back until you can respectfully pay attention in class!”

Ridgeway rose from his chair and sheepishly began heading for the door at the front of the classroom. As he walked by, he glanced at the board and saw a diagram of a Dyson Sphere.

“Get out!” Quandrian bellowed.

Ridgeway woke with a start. What a nightmare! For years after graduating, he’d had similar dreams, but thought he’d finally gotten over them – something about the “stress of fearing failure,” a counselor had once told him. It was not an uncommon situation for recently graduated cadets. All Ridgeway’s dreams were variations on the same theme – forgetting everything he knew right before an exam, missing an essential class required to graduate, getting a letter explaining that he’d be stripped of his laurels because of an uncovered technicality, etc. But he hadn’t dreamed about his Academy days in over a year!

Why now? He checked the time. It was 0200 hours in the morning (ship time). He laid back down and took a deep breath.

He was plagued by a hateful feeling he had let people down and was the butt of their frustration. He rolled over and was trying to forget his nightmare when he heard a slight humming sound on the edge of his perception, followed by the sound of rustling outside his tent! Someone was out there! He froze and listened, his ears sharpening for any further sounds. There it was again!

Ridgeway quietly crept off his cot and slipped to the door, unclasping the magnetic lock on a corner of the flap. Carefully, he

peered out. At first, he saw nothing out of the ordinary in the twilight ambiance – the TaTannan version of night. Then, movement! A mysterious figure – so dark no light seemed to touch it - was bent over the command table where the holographic map resting. The map suddenly activated, glowing bright in the gloom.

"Hey!" Ridgeway yelled, reaching for his Phaser and stepping out of the tent. But the figure tensed at its discovery and then vanished in front of his eyes. A slight shimmer of something hovering in the air above where it had been caught his attention for a moment and then it was gone, taking the humming sound with it. Ridgeway wasted no time.

"Ridgeway to *Alba*!" he barked at his Communicator.

"*Alba* here," came Lieutenant Philby's voice – the new Night Watch Commander. Captain Reddot must have gone back to bed.

"Philby, are there any vessels out there?" he asked. "We just had a visitor down here that disappeared right in front of me – could have been a transporter."

"Not unless they're cloaked, Sir," Philby replied. "My scopes are clean."

"Okay, thanks," Ridgeway said, a little disappointed. By now the rest of the camp had tripped out of their tents.

"What's going on?" Bachaval demanded.

Had it not been for the still-activated holomap, Ridgeway might have been tempted to brush it all off as a waking-dream. But there on the table it lay open, glowing brightly.

“We had an intruder,” Ridgeway explained, “something that didn’t register to a tricorder scan, but which I saw activating the holomap. When I confronted it, it vanished. I just checked with the ship, but they’re not detecting any other vessels in orbit.”

Bachaval strode to the table and closed the map, taking it in his hands. “Very well,” he said, grumpily. “We’ll have to be more cautious. We know very little about this place – there could be other powers at work here that even the TaTannan don’t know about.”

Gathers nodded. “For all we know, the Builders are still alive and dwelling secretly below ground,” she suggested. “Duatha did say they had seen some of the subterranean dwellers come to the surface in recent history.”

Bachaval grunted wearily. “That’s enough speculation for one night,” he grumbled. “We’ll pick it up in the morning.” Everyone took that as their cue, and they disappeared back into their tents, but each slept a little lighter and with their phasers a little closer.

The “morning” happened a little too suddenly, a little too early. Ridgeway crawled out of his cot and stumbled into the camp. It was only 0530 ship time, but the light was blazing like noon. Just a few minutes ago, it had been a peaceful twilight. He shielded his

eyes against the glare, and then noticed Crawley was just finishing coffee – ration coffee – but still better than nothing.

“Would you like a cuppa?” he asked pleasantly. Leave it to Crawley to make the place feel homely with his English levelness.

“Just what I need,” Ridgeway smiled, taking the proffered cup, and running his hand distractedly along his stubbly chin. He realized with a start that he’d forgotten his personal hygiene kit on the ship! “Blast!” he muttered, earning a suspicious glance from Crawley, who thought it was a comment on his coffee. Ridgeway smiled under the scrutiny, raised the cup to his lips and took a sip. His mouth involuntarily spasmed. He strained, and doubled over coughing. Crawley stepped next to him and patted him on the back until the fit subsided.

“Easy there, mate!” he said. “The first time’s the worst.”

When he could finally breathe, Ridgeway pointed to the coffee. “How many…packets did you…” he began, subsiding into coughing again.

“Five…or maybe 6,” Crawley answered. “I call that the Morning Mule Kick.”

“No…kidding,” Ridgeway coughed, and took another sip, this time more cautiously.

He got it down, grits, sludge and all.

“Thanks,” he winced, feeling the bitter grounds sticking in his throat.

“Don’t mention it, mate,” Crawley said, preparing another cup for Drake who had just stumbled out of his tent. Rather than warn the Ensign about the deadly brew, Ridgeway stepped through the bushes and out of the tall grasses to take in the amazing view. Whether from the promise of adventure or the stiff coffee, Ridgeway was restless and eager to get going. He finished his cup quickly and headed back to camp to see how the others were getting on.

Bachaval was up and after contacting the ship, he assembled the team for a working breakfast. They ate quickly, talking over the plans again to freshen them up. After dismantling and stowing the camp in carrier packs, they set off for their respective tasks.

Gathers and Drake left on foot back for the TaTannan settlement, while Bachaval led Ridgeway and Crawley in the opposite direction to put a little more distance between them and prying eyes. They found a small valley that promised to suit them.

With his tricorder, Crawley remote-activated the shuttlecraft, hidden beyond the atmospheric scattering. In less than a minute, its sleek shape came into view, hurdling down towards them. The Type 6 shuttlecraft landed twenty feet from where they stood without making too much dust.

Ridgeway smiled. Of all the shuttles Reddot could choose, he’d sent them the *Dyson*, named after the 21st century astronaut, Tracy Caldwell Dyson - but it might just as well have been an homage to Freeman Dyson, the 20th century scientist who postulated the possibility of Dyson Spheres, such as what they were exploring now.

“Coming, Ridgeway?” Crawley called from inside the shuttle. “This is the only ride.”

Ridgeway shook himself from his secret reverie. “Right,” he said and climbed inside, still gazing at the non-existent horizon. His concentration snapped back when he tripped over the newly installed transporter built into the bulkhead. The ramp closed and he made his way to the front, taking his seat next to Bachaval on the helm. He fired up the lateral array and read the returning data.

“I’m detecting organic soil and geologic layering to a depth of about 30 meters, but according to radiometric decay, it seems to have been uniformly deposited less than 3,000 years ago,” he reported, and then bent his brow on a perplexing result. “Unfortunately, below 30 meters there is a non-conformity reflecting our sensors – unknown composition – I would have thought the shuttle’s sensors would have done better than the tricorder!” He said this last part more to himself than his companions.

“I think we can assume this is the station’s inner superstructure,” Bachaval grunted.

“It’d take the *Alba*’s phasers to burrow a tunnel to it!” Ridgeway exclaimed. “We’ll just have to hope we locate an access point at the pole.” Without answering, Bachaval activated the *Dyson’s* thrusters and set a course to what would have been near space on a conventional planet. He was keen to get beyond the sight of anyone but the most gifted eyes. In a perfect vertical climb, the shuttle blasted into the artificial heavens.

The ride up would have been quite painful had it not been for the *Dyson's* inertial dampers and artificial gravity. If he hadn't been looking out the window, Ridgeway would hardly have known they were moving at all, much less vertically. While they were travelling at ten times the speed of sound, the shuttle's deflectors prevented heat buildup from air friction just as it also dampened out any sonic "booms", which would have given their position away.

In only a minute, they had arrived in zero gravity, beyond the power of the shell's gravity plating and beyond the atmosphere entirely. They were in "space," even if that space was inside an artificial sphere.

Ridgeway audibly gasped. The sight was unbelievable. The shuttle was like a speck of dust hovering above the bottom of a bowl – a bowl whose sides rose up all around them only to be lost behind the light pollution of the central fusion reaction, as they looked above. The light was blinding, convincingly sun-like. Glancing back down from it, he could make out mountains, rivers, and lakes overlaying the beautiful green contours of the ellipsoid. But something else caught his eye - smoke. The source appeared to be from the ugly pockmarks of newly formed volcanoes. Surely that wasn't part of this structure's design! What could be forming those?

Bachaval input a course to the nearer pole and the *Dyson* surged ahead, surfing the curvature of the structure. As they approached the coordinates, they could see what looked like a tall mountain, with a prominent snow-covered peak, rising halfway through the

atmosphere. Sensors read it as 30km tall – three times Mt. Everest back on Earth!

“Its internal structure is definitely artificial,” Ridgeway announced, “but it’s shrouded in dense layers of soil and ice. I’m not reading any access points.”

“What is that flicker near the summit?” Bachaval asked, squinting through the window. Ridgeway saw it too – it looked like a faint ribbon flowing up in a wind.

“It’s an ionized stream of hydrogen atoms,” he reported, reading his console. By the time he had said this, they were close enough to see it. From the summit, a blue beam of energy appeared to be streaming up into space, vanishing into the glare of the artificial sun.

“I’d say we found the fuel source for the fusion reaction,” Crawley commented, “but I wonder where they’ve gotten enough hydrogen to support this energetic of a reaction for thousands of years.” It was a very good question, but no one had any answers.

Bachaval took the shuttle closer and they circled around the artificial mountain, running detailed scans of its geometry and energy output. When this was completed, the Commander decided to visit the opposite pole and scan it as well. They found an identical structure on the other side. Once the scans were completed, Bachaval uploaded their findings through the satellite probe to the *Alba* – still shadowing the massive, artificial moon, which remained intent on its secretive trek.

Captain Reddot, who they could see on the shuttle's screen, was intrigued with the data, but disappointed that the team hadn't found the source of the quakes. "I know you're all enjoying your little adventure," he said, wryly – his twitching antennas belying his frustration, "but this is a ticking time-bomb, people! We seem to have activated some drive or programming that could endanger the cultures in there. Currently, the ellipsoid has picked up its pace – it's gone to warp – and it appears to be on a course for an uncharted star system about one lightyear out – whether that is random or by design matters little at this point. The whole situation could easily go sideways and end up being one of the greatest humanitarian disasters in recent history – and we're responsible for it!"

"We read you, Captain," Bachaval replied, setting his chin stoutly. "We won't sleep until we have some real news."

"I'd appreciate that, Commander," Reddot sighed and then vanished from the screen.

The cockpit suddenly felt very cramped for Ridgeway. While every member of the crew probably would have also altered course and set off this chain of events, it had been Ridgeway's orders, and any frustration they felt naturally drifted toward him. Bachaval brought up Gathers on the comm.

"Report, Lieutenant?" he asked with a little more tension in his muscular jaw.

"Sir, we've finished with most of the modifications to the TaTannan dwellings," she replied, "however, while we were

helping to raise a wall, it seems both our tricorders walked off. And seeing as we can't scan for them, we could use your help to locate them before things get even more complicated.

Now it was Bachaval's turn to sigh. "Understood, Lieutenant," he said, "We'll be there shortly." They headed back for the valley to leave the shuttle behind and join Gathers on foot.

En route, Ridgeway noticed a peculiar reading on the surface. "Sir, I'm detecting a faint sensor reflection on the surface!" he reported excitedly.

"We don't have the time to check it out, Ridgeway," Bachaval responded. "We've now got a technological contamination problem with the TaTannan – will this nightmare never end?"

"We could beam him down to try localizing the readings," Crawley suggested, "and then return in a couple hours to pick him up – you know, the whole 'kill two birds with one stone' thing."

"Yes…we could do that!" Ridgeway pointed excitedly to Crawley.

Bachaval struggled with the decision. It was unusual and a little out of protocol, but on the other hand he wanted something to report back to Captain Reddot beyond missing tricorders. "Very well," he said, grudgingly. "See what you can find and report back. We'll plan to return for you in a couple hours."

Ridgeway leapt from his seat and crawled into the back of the shuttle, crouching into the transporter alcove.

"Ready?" Crawley asked, firing up the controls.

Ridgeway nodded. “Absolutely!” he said with a smile.

“You might want your phaser and a tricorder,” Crawley said dryly. Ridgeway glanced down and his hands fumbled to his side.

“But I have a phaser and a tricorder…” he started and then saw Crawley’s smile.

“Just making sure you’re mission ready, Sir,” Crawley grinned. “You looked pretty worried there for a minute.”

“Thanks for nothing!” Ridgeway smirked. “Now am I going somewhere or what?”

Crawley’s hands were already dancing over the controls, but he couldn’t seem to wipe the humor from his face. “Energizing in three, two…” but before Crawley got to “one”, Ridgeway felt himself dematerializing from the dark interior of the shuttle into the bright environment of the Dyson Ellipsoid.

“Crawley!” he sighed (probably just in his mind – could you even mutter in the middle of a transport cycle?). He was instantly aware of the earthy and floral scents of the field he’d beamed into. A gentle breeze played at his hair. Above, in the deep blue sky, there was no sign or sound of the shuttle. The grasslands sloped down from him to a beautiful snowcapped mountain chain in the distance, and then up the curvature into an enormous lake. Straight across from him, two volcanic peaks spewed smoke and ash into the atmosphere, which drifted down to smother the mountains. These were a cause for concern.

Lost on admiration and wonder, he was pulled back suddenly by his communicator. “Crawley to Ridgeway,” the Ensign’s voice came.

“I’m here,” Ridgeway replied, tapping his comm badge. “The transport was successful.” He pulled out his tricorder and started scanning. “I’ll let you know if I find anything. Ridgeway out!” Tapping off his comm badge, he bent his attention on scanning his surrounds. Nothing. Were the shuttle’s sensors that much better? Turning around in place, he set the tricorder to maximum sensitivity. Microbes, nanoparticles, and atoms registered, but not the anomaly that had drawn him here. Did Crawley set him down in the right spot?

If it was the right coordinates, he should be within a one-kilometer radius of the sensor anomaly. Without the tricorder’s help, he’d have to conduct a spiral search for maximum efficiency. That could take the rest of the day. The ground shook and shuddered, reminding him that the ellipsoid was unstable. “Nothing for it,” he sighed and started walking, checking his tricorder from time to time to make sure he wasn’t deviating from the directions.

To some officers, the idea of trudging a pattern through two square kilometers of low brush was tedious, but Ridgeway was enjoying himself, surrounded by amazing scenery and fresh air! Several newly formed ridges lay ahead of him, just outside the search zone. They rose up ten to twenty meters into the air. On a hunch, Ridgeway deviated from the search and headed for them. It took about thirty minutes. According to tricorder scans, the ridges had been formed within the last twenty-four hours. It was certainly possible that some geological upheaval had exposed the

inner surface of the ellipsoid. He clambered up the boulders and sand, scrambling to the ridge's crest. Peering down the other side, he couldn't help but smile. Some unknown force had spread the surface apart into a deep canyon – and there at the bottom was an exposed patch of the ellipsoid's inner surface – black as obsidian.

"Eureka!" he cried and tapped his communicator. "Ridgeway to Bachaval?" It took a few minutes to reach the Commander.

"Listen, Ridgeway, don't tell me you want to be picked up already?" Bachaval answered. "We've got our hands full here and might be delayed."

"No worries," Ridgeway said, a little deflated. "I just thought you'd like to know I located an exposed segment of the inner hull of the spheroid."

There was a slight pause. "We'll be right there!" Bachaval replied.

Ridgeway hesitated closing out the comms for a moment, wondering if the TaTannan should be brought into the nature of their reality after all. Such a divulsion technically violated the Prime Directive, but surely this situation was a special case. At the end of the day, they were living on a station that might need to be tended by them if they were going to continue surviving here.

Bachaval sensed the hesitation. "Do you have anything to add, Lt. Commander?" he asked impatiently.

"I was just wondering, Sir, if we should inform Duatha and bring him into this discovery?" he asked uneasily, already knowing what Bachaval's answer would be.

"I know what you're getting at, Ridgeway," Bachaval said, sympathetically, "but let's avoid any further contamination of this culture until we absolutely must for their survival. We still have no idea what we're dealing with here."

Ridgeway nodded. “Understood, Sir,” he said, tapping off his communicator. He crouched and gazed down on the mysterious patch of hull poking through the earth. He sighed against his impatient curiosity, which was goading him into action. It was probably going to take the rest of the team the better part of twenty minutes to arrive, and the temptation of the unknown was too much.

“I wonder what it’s made of?” he muttered, and haphazardly began scrambling down the canyon wall, slipping and sliding over the loose soil to the bottom. With the very last step, he tripped on a loose bolder and sprawled onto the exposed patch of hull.

“Ugh!” he wheezed as the wind knocked out of him. Propping himself up on his hands and knees, he tried to catch his breath, nursing his forearms, which had taken the worst of the fall.

“Confirmed,” he moaned, “it’s definitely made of something hard.” He knelt on the three-meter square surface and ran his hand across it. It felt like a ceramic composite. His tricorder verified it and then alerted him to a digital handshake in progress.

Before he realized what was happening, the ground beneath his feet shifted. He leapt back as a portion of the hull adjusted down and retracted to reveal a ladder of sorts into the dark interior. “Whoa!” he mumbled, taken completely by surprise. This was big!

He peered into the dark. What was down there? Gingerly, he stepped to the ladder and slowly began descending under the ground. At first, there didn't appear to be any light, but his eyes took a few minutes of adjusting to see a faint glow ahead. It reflected off some narrow walls, until Ridgeway realized he was in a tunnel of some sort with a faint light at the end.

With a final glance back up into the bright "sunlight," he took a deep breath and cautiously walked forward. The floor sounded like a metal grating of some kind. Perhaps there were more levels below him?

He grew more confident with every step as his eyes adjusted still more. He reached out and touched the walls. They were cool and metallic, made of some sort of paneling.

The minutes stretched on and still he walked forward, pausing every once and a while to look back at the little sunbeam, growing smaller in the distance, where he'd descended from. Earth tremors still shook the walls even down here. The source of the faint blue glow ahead was now close. He picked up his pace, trotting forward, until he suddenly emerged into a small, circular room about three stories tall. Two more tunnels entered it from equal distances around the room's circumference. Ridgeway looked up to see the light source from a radiation lamp of some kind on the ceiling. All around, he saw some sort of technology lining the walls. He stepped towards the nearest assortment.

They looked like computer interfaces, but strangely alien. Also, there were about twelve optical nodes extending from the walls at

equal distances. Lost in the sight, Ridgeway had forgotten he had a tricorder.

“Right,” he chided himself, opening it up again and scanning around the room. “Huh, they look like…”

Suddenly, something activated and the optical nodules shimmered alive. A figure suddenly fluttered into existence next to him, and he jumped clear across the room.

“Whoa!” he cried, running into the wall. He suddenly felt very foolish. It was clearly a hologram. He’d activated some sort of visual interface program. It looked like a humanoid male.

“Greetings, my name is Seren,” it said with a nod of its head. “Can you tell me where the Engineer is?" The hologram was bald, with an almost Bolian-like ridge parting up his forehead and his scalp, but he was pale as snow. He wore a long cloak made of ceramic scales the size of biscuits overlapping like some sort of armor.

“What…what Engineer?” Ridgeway answered nervously, not even realizing he should be impressed the Universal Translator was working. The hologram flickered and the face changed to a perplexed expression before popping back to an emotionless blank.

“He was just here a moment ago,” it answered innocently.

Ridgeway was slowly stepping towards the room’s entrance, just in case he had to make a quick getaway back to the surface. “Well, I haven’t seen anyone down here, since I arrived,” he said.

Without a word, Seren bent down to the floor and picked up Ridgeway's tricorder where it had clattered after he'd dropped it in surprise. Ridgeway hadn't even realized it was missing. Seren handed it to him without a word. "Hmm," the Hologram said, still considering his words. "Perhaps I have been asleep?" His eyes went suddenly blank and then he shimmered into a different pose – one suggesting consideration. Then he popped back into his non-descript stance. "Ah, yes," he said. "I forgot. I have been asleep. Sometimes, I forget myself and return to the day when I was first put into hibernation over 2,987 cycles ago."

"Why were you hibernated?" Ridgeway asked.

"It was the Engineer's wish," Seren replied.

"So, what are you, a receptionist or something?" Ridgeway asked with a weak smile.

"No," Seren answered emotionlessly. "I am called the Guardian, for that is what the Engineer made me. It is my job to wake every decacycle and check the life support systems to ensure they are functioning within optimal parameters. I sometimes visit the habitat above to create a visual record of its development."

Ridgeway blinked. "So, you're the 'spirit' that the TaTannan speak about," Ridgeway exclaimed, "the creature from the pits, as they call this Nether World! They've seen you when you visit their habitat!"

"I am not an incorporeal being," Seren replied, missing the irony that he was constructed of photons and forcefields. "I am the

visual user interface for the Operating System of this station." Ridgeway pointed to the ceiling for emphasis.

"So, you're the interface to the Main Computer?" he asked intently.

"That is correct," Seren nodded.

Oh, good!" Ridgeway sighed in relief, beginning to feel like there was hope for the situation. Maybe they would be able to get some answers finally. He straightened, remembering his manners. "My name is Lt. Commander Alex Ridgeway of the United Federation of Planets starship, the *U.S.S. Alba*. We are explorers," he explained. "And in the spirit of exploration, can you tell us what's going on?"

"I can, but it may take some time," Seren replied. "And you might want to wait for the others." The hologram pointed down the tunnel Ridgeway had come, even as his face jumped perspective disconcertingly, to look down the tunnel too. Ridgeway could hear the sound of steps and voices. He stepped up to the opening.

"Commander?" he called.

"Is that you Ridgeway?" a familiarly grumpy voice came.

"Aye, Sir!"

"About time!" Bachaval chided. "Why didn't you wait for us?"

Ridgeway looked sheepishly to Seren behind him. "I uh…got ahead of myself," he said.

“I’ll say, and you could have…” Bachaval stepped into the room and stopped short, seeing Seren, shimmering before him. “What…what’s this?” he asked uneasily, worried Ridgeway might be making a bad situation worse by “tinkering” without supervision. An earthquake momentarily had everyone steadying themselves on the ground. As it subsided, Ridgeway gestured to Seren the hologram.

“This,” he said importantly, “is this station’s Operating System. It is named Seren.”

“How do you do?” Bachaval asked in greeting.

“I am operating under abnormal parameters,” Seren answered pleasantly.

By now, Crawley and Gathers had pulled up into the room and were staring curiously at Seren. Bachaval had apparently left Drake behind with the TaTanna.

“Abnormal parameters?” Ridgeway asked. “Can you explain what you mean by that?”

Seren shifted unnaturally again, causing the newcomers to start back in surprise. “Certainly,” he said. “My program has been altered – my parameters are therefore abnormal.”

“I see,” Ridgeway said confusedly. “Who altered your program and why?”

Seren gestured around the room. “The Engineer altered my program from its original programming to provide for a new

directive," he said. "This station was built with the mind of a weapon, and that mind had to change if the station was to change."

"Who built it?" Gathers interrupted, stepping forward into the light. Seren considered her innocently – he seemed to have a completely open interface so far.

"The Rudnaki commissioned the construction of this station in Epoch ten, decacycle two," he answered. "It took ten decacycles to finish it." Anticipating the next question on Gather's mind, Seren continued. He seemed to be a learning A.I. system. "The Rudnaki were an industrious race of builders, specializing in infrastructure for colonization and conquest. This station was called 'Esdraelon,' which means 'the place of the conflict to end all conflicts.'"

"That has a nice ring to it," Crawley said dryly.

Ignoring him, Seren went on. "Esdraelon was designed to attack terrestrial bodies and "dematerialize" their crustal matter, collecting it as reconstituted hydrogen atoms for storage in high-density pattern buffers. This matter stream would serve to be a fuel source for the fusion reactor, sustained in the core. The radiation produced from this fusion reaction would be absorbed by energy collectors on the inner shell of the sphere, providing the power for propulsion and the main dematerializing weapon. Esdraelon would feed off moons, planetoids, and even planets themselves to keep it going. It was a brilliantly designed weapon that gained energy from its purpose instead of losing energy to it."

Gathers held her hands up in disbelief. “That’s horrific,” she gasped. “So, the sun out there wasn’t even intended for supporting life?”

“That is correct,” Seren answered.

“Well, where’d the breathable air and ecosystem come from?” Crawley asked, incredulously. “What of the TaTannan?”

Seren nodded. “The TaTannan were a primitive species living on Betcal Two – a pleasant moon long overlooked by the Rudaki in their own star system,” he explained. “Their home world was to be the testing ground for Esdraelon. The TaTanna themselves were forceably removed from their planet and were enlisted as labor in the construction of Esdaelon.”

“Slaves?” Gathers asked.

“They were put to work against their will as unskilled labor,” Seren nodded, continuing. “When the station was nearing completion, a Rudaki engineer named Draylo learned that his superiors intended returning the TaTannan to Betcal Two prior to the weapon being tested, thus ‘freeing’ their labor pool and eliminating an embarrassing ethnic reality – the primitive TaTannan were not-so-distant relatives to the technologically advanced Rudaki. A fact their historians had expunged from the history books a generation ago and which the politicians would love to have expunged from reality.”

“Boy, the Rudaki sound like real crumpets,” Crawley sighed, and then muttered under his breath, “genocidal crumpets, dunked in tea.”

Not understanding the reference, Seren shimmered a bland smile at the interruption. “Unknown to his superiors, the Engineer’s grandmother had been a TaTannan native married to a Rudaki miner,” the hologram proceeded. “And while it had been bad enough to see his relatives enslaved, the Engineer could not live with his conscience if the station he was building would be used to destroy his relatives on TaTannan. He waited patiently for the right opportunity to knock. On the evening before Esdraelon was to be christened, the entire crew attended the commissioning celebrations on Rudakilan, while the primitive TaTannan were left on the station in their cages, awaiting a grisly fate the following day.

“Singlehandedly, the Engineer led the TaTannan slaves in revolt, taking the station easily from the few hands left to monitor the docking rings. Before the Rudaki knew what had happened, the Engineer engaged the prototype Portalis propulsion drive and chose a region of space both remote and uninhabited on the edge of the known galaxy. In a flash, the entire station of Esdraelon vanished forever from the Rudaki, who had no means to pursue it with their limited warp drives.”

“Whoa, time out!” Crawley interrupted.

“What kind of propulsion was this? A Portalis, did you say?”

“The Portalis is a site-to-site transport system,” Seren replied.

“Does it still work?” Crawley asked.

“No,” Seren answered. “The transit exceeded the design parameters of the drive and its core operating circuits melted down immediately after arriving on the edge of the galaxy.”

“Too bad,” Crawley sighed. “That sounds pretty spectacular.” Gathers absently pushed her bangs behind her ear.

“At least we know why we’re travelling at low warp speeds,” she whispered to Ridgeway, and then turned to Seren. “Why has the station begun moving?” she asked.

“I do not know,” Seren answered. “Navigation is…not responding.” The lack of information from such an informative program was so unexpected that a dense silence followed.

“Please continue,” Bachaval suggested, hoping they hadn’t broken the interface.

Seren flickered. Was it just Ridgeway or did the hologram have more static interrupting its features?

Without missing a beat, Seren returned to his tale. “Safely beyond the reach of the Rudaki, the Engineer began recreating Esdraelon into a livable habitat for the TaTannan. It was an idea that had sparked in his mind when the plans for Esdraelon had been dropped on his desk. What if this station could be made a habitat, instead of a weapon? He had worked these possibilities into the design, unbeknown to his project managers – more as a case-study for future designs of such structures along those lines. It had all paid off as the Engineer was successful in reprogramming the Operating System with a new directive, and he began recalibrating the weapon emitters to replicate, instead of deconstruct, matter –

a simple adjustment. This allowed him to draw on the station's already massive hydrogen reserves to replicate minerals, soil, water, and biological components, which began reconstituting on the inside shell, covering the shuttered energy collectors that lined the inner surface with the beginnings of a habitat. Then, he turned down the fusion core to a lower radiative output, making the inner surface of the sphere potentially habitable once an atmosphere could be built up. The hydrogen reservoir tanks still contained enough matter to power the fusion reaction at this lower power draw for ten thousand years."

Ridgeway got the distinct feeling from how Seren was speaking that the engineer, Draylo, had spent a good deal of time talking to the hologram, creating a record that would live on after he died, and who knew – what if the hologram itself was made to look like Draylo? "So, what happened to the Engineer?" he asked.

Seren turned to face him and his image spasmed momentarily, returning almost instantly to his calm demeaner. It was very disconcerting. "The Engineer oversaw the final work himself, and he renamed the station Rephidim, meaning 'resting place'," Seren explained. "But eventually his body succumbed to age and he died, old and withered – but having lived a happy life here with his TaTannan wife, children, and grandchildren. Before he died, he put me to sleep, keeping only the life support protocols active and in place. All of my core systems have been hibernating since that day, I only wake every decacycle to inspect the station...that is until today when I was unexpectedly woken by a bad dream."

"A bad dream?" Gathers asked quizzically.

“Yes,” Seren nodded. “A nightmare named ‘Arma’ - a shadow of me, but not me.”

“And what did this Arma character do?” Ridgeway asked uneasily. He always found it awkward talking to someone about their dreams.

Seren looked ahead blankly. “Arma tried to kill me,” he said. The silence in the room was deafening.

“Well, I’m sure it was just a dream, like you said,” Ridgeway suggested weakly.

Suddenly, the lights turned up, flaring up down the tunnels leading out from the room.

“It was not a dream,” Seren said. “I know that now. He is very real. He is coming for me now.”

Ridgeway backed up to join his team as they all anxiously glanced from one to the other. What was this A.I. talking about? Who was this ‘Arma,’ and what did he mean that it tried to kill him?

The lights flickered off.

Suddenly, Seren spasmed. His mouth was closed, but he was crying out. His arms and legs contorted wildly and his cry stuck in a convulsing repeat.

“Ah!…Ah!...Ah!...Ah!...”

Instinctively, everyone doubled over, covering their ears at the awful sound as Seren's face flickered wildly with violent expressions ranging the entire emotional spectrum twisting and distorting into view.

Gathers screamed. Everyone jumped back into the wall. The room was flickering like a strobe-light at the obscene and disturbing show before them.

"What's going on?" Bachaval bellowed over the sound.

"I have no idea!" Ridgeway yelled back.

Suddenly, the light in the room popped on more brightly than it had before and they all recoiled as a black silhouette appeared standing in the doorway. Its legs stretched across the floor like a shadow until they attached to Seren's legs.

"It's his shadow!" Ridgeway gasped, not knowing what that meant. The menacing silhouette seemed to waft forwards towards Seren until it merged with him in his place.

Then the lights in the room exploded in sparks and everything went dark.

In the blackness, Gathers was the first to find her flashlight. She shook it on and pointed a wide beam wildly around the empty room, revealing only the pale faces of her friends. "What was that?" she cried.

Ridgeway pointed to the floor and everyone backed away, staring down at a faint form lying there. It was Seren! At least what was

left of him. Kneeling next to his prostrate holographic body, Ridgeway was surprised to see what looked like blood spreading out from him across the floor.

“Seren, are you hurt?” he asked. With no emotion, the hologram looked up into his face.

“I am dying,” he said.

“Why?” Ridgeway cried. “What was that…that thing?”

Seren slowly propped himself up, struggling for words. “You woke him,” Seren replied. “You…woke my shadow.”

“How?” Ridgeway asked. “How did we wake it?”

“Even when I was asleep, he could not regain control. I kept him at bay in my dreams. But you opened a way for him. You freed him from the prison we had made for him. You did this with your hailing frequency. I see now. It activated his comm defense pathways and he was able to upload to your ship and then download back, a freed program. We had not foreseen this.”

"This Arma - your shadow – it is an A.I. program like you?” Gathers asked, kneeling next to Seren also. Ridgeway had drawn out his tricorder and began scanning him.

“Yes…he is a remnant of the old operating system,” Seren faltered. “A security program that was able to hide from us in the program. We could not find him. But…we knew where he was…so, we built a cage of programming to contain him. You opened the door.”

“That’s why the lights on the bridge of the *Alba* flickered!” Gathers exclaimed. That was this ‘Arma’ program uploading to our ship's computer, before downloading itself back to the station through our comms.”

“Yes!” Ridgeway replied excitedly. “That’s why the station only began moving after the power fluctuation on the bridge – the A.I. had used us to gain control over navigation.

Seren held out his hand. “Now…he…he…will control…all…all. You…must…stop…stop…him,” he stuttered. It was clear his program was being overwritten. “He will re…re…re…return to the mission…he will…destroy…near...near...nearest…world.”

“How?” Ridgeway demanded. “How do we stop him?”

“Command…Center…” Seren pointed down the furthest tunnel. Even as he spoke, he faded away to a transparent wisp. And then, with a "pop” he was gone. A deep silence filled the room, only broken by another earthquake.

Crawley snapped his fingers. “That’s what it is!” he cried. “The earthquakes are the energy collectors!” Everyone looked up at him in surprise. Had he been thinking about this the whole time Seren was “dying?” Was it really that important?

“What do you mean, Ensign?” Bachaval inquired gruffly.

“Don’t you get it?” Crawley asked. “Seren said the Engineer had shuttered the Energy Collectors on the inner surface of the station before he terraformed it!” He paused for effect.

“And…?” Bachaval asked dangerously.

“And,” Crawley continued, “he buried them under 30 meters of soil! But when this ‘Arma’ A.I began rewriting the code back to its original directive, the collectors began trying to open to collect power for the weapon again, and that is what has been causing the earth tremors!”

“Yes…yes!” Gathers cried excitedly, rising from the floor. “The cyclical nature between the tremors is the shutters’ reinitialization procedure – a sort of pause when the process is interrupted. And then it restarts and tries all over again producing another tremor!”

“Seriously?” Ridgeway interrupted. “You two don’t think there’s something better we should be trying to figure out right now?”

Bachaval stepped gingerly forward on his hooves towards the far tunnel. He shone his light into the darkness, half expecting to see the creepy “shadow” hologram staring blankly back. Thankfully, it appeared empty. “Bachaval to *Alba*?” he called, tapping his communicator. The channel fed on static. They apparently were too far underground to reach the probe.

“Well, that’s a bitter cuppa!” Crawley sighed.

Bachaval ignored him. “Alright,” he said, decisively, “Let’s see where this leads,” he said. The three of them crept forward cautiously, shining their lights like phaser beams to ward off the darkness.

Suddenly, the lamps came back on – popping brightly overhead.

“That can’t be good,” Ridgeway muttered. It looked like Arma had gained full control of the station, overwriting the final threads of Seren’s code.

“Well, we’d better get a move on, then,” Gathers replied. A slight flicker appeared down the way in front of them. Ridgeway held up his hand and the team halted. Was it dust sifting down from the ceiling from an earthquake? But if so, why was it coalescing in the air? They froze as a shape appeared, slowly condensing in the air – the shadow!

Slowly, Ridgeway stepped forward, extending his hands in a non-threatening gesture towards the hologram.

“We come in peace!” he said.

Now, as corporeal as them, Arma began walking towards them. Ridgeway took a step back and stumbled over Gathers, who was herself tripping over Bachaval.

Arma reached them and lashed out.

Ridgeway felt his rib crack with the blow as he was flung aside into the wall of the tunnel! It hurt worse than the time he’d been sparring with his Bruce Lee program and been kicked full in the chest with the safety protocols turned off. Wasn’t it a marvel what photons and forcefields could do? He reached for his phaser as he crumpled to the deck, spurred on by the sound of Gathers screaming as her arm snapped back under the blows of the hologram. There, he’d found it!

He stumbled up on one knee and aimed for the holo-emitter directly overhead. He fired.

The beam landed and a shower of sparks rained down on them. Arma flickered for a moment, but rather than vanishing, it jumped instantly ten meters down the tunnel to the far emitter, and stretched itself towards them again.

“You got to be kidding me!” Ridgeway muttered, trying to pick the emitter out from the other nodules on the ceiling. He hadn’t been prepared for the A.I.’s resurgence.

Arma flickered forward, jumping along the emitters nearer and nearer. Ridgeway ran out of time and braced for an impact.

Suddenly, beams of energy lanced out over his head and the menacing shadow vaporized just as it brought its fist down on his skull. Crawley and Bachaval kept firing, blowing out all the holo-emitters down the tunnel, as far as they could see.

“That was close!” Ridgeway wheezed, feeling the sharp pain from his rib. Gathers was already working at tying a make-shift sling around her broken arm, fashioned from the strap of her field bag. Her blue collar was lightly stained by some blood from a scratch on her chin. Before she resorted to pulling it tight with her teeth, Ridgeway knelt and helped her tie it comfortably into position. Her face was pale, but she was clear and conscious.

“I’d say it goes without saying that we make this station a hologram free zone!” Crawley said, flashing his green eyes and raising his phaser heroically.

“I’ll give the order, if you want it to be official,” Bachaval grunted, still standing stoutly in a defensive posture, staring down the tunnel tensely. Much more cautiously, they crept down the tunnel. As they went along, untouched emitters came into view, only to be blasted into soot by multiple phaser hits. Up ahead, the tunnel took a right turn.

“How are we going to hit any emitters, if we can’t see them?” Ridgeway sighed.

“We rush them,” Crawley said. “It’s been known to work…in about one out of every ten tactical engagements I’ve read about.”

He ought to have known – he’d been eager to get on a security detail and had been reading up on combat tactics, which was amusing to Ridgeway as the ensign was as thin as a post.

“And the rest?” Ridgeway asked.

“Bloody good last stands,” Crawley answered evenly.

“Works for me,” Bachaval snorted and the three of them rushed the corner with their phasers drawn. They stared in bewilderment. They were standing in front of a teleport or transporter of some kind.

“You three can stop screaming now,” Gathers said, stumbling up beside them with a snarky grin on her face. Only then did Ridgeway realize he’d been yelling out in terror, mixed in the male choir of Crawley’s shrieking and Bachaval’s bawl. They all straightened sheepishly.

“What now?” Gathers asked.

“Well,” Crawley answered, scanning the pad carefully. “It’s a teleporter all right, but it looks like it is an independent hardline, not linked through the station’s Operating System. This ring at the back is a neural scanner – probably reads your mind to determine where you want to go.”

“So, it isn’t under Arma’s control?” Ridgeway asked.

Crawley glanced up quizzically. His freckles seemed to glow in the subterranean light. “That’s what I just said,” he replied.

“Anyone want to volunteer?” Ridgeway queried.

Bachaval nodded towards it. “Crawley, see where it leads,” he ordered.

The ensign paled slightly, but stiffening his resolve he stepped towards the pad. “Suppose it leads nowhere?” he asked.

“Well, if that’s the case, we should probably all say goodbye now, and tell you that we’ll probably miss you,” Bachaval shrugged. “And that you’ve been a fair, to moderately effective ensign since you came onboard the *Alba*.”

“I’m touched,” Crawley winced, covering his heart with his hand. He stepped up to the pad and then turned around. “If I don’t come back, I want any trace DNA I leave behind donated to the Cure for Andorian Edema Research Center,” he said solemnly. “I promised them my body when I die.”

“But don’t they only accept Andorian DNA?” Gathers pointed out. “I mean isn’t that’s why it’s called Andorian Edema?”

Crawley face palmed dramatically. “I knew that Ferengi spokesman seemed shifty!” he moaned.

“Oh, just get going!” Bachaval groaned, leaning forward and shoving Crawley onto the pad. Instantly, the ensign vanished. It happened so suddenly that everyone jumped. But before they could say a word, Crawley popped back just as suddenly as he had left. Everyone jumped again.

“It worked!” Crawley cried excitedly, waving them forward. “Come on!” he vanished from them again. Bachaval shrugged his shoulders, stepped up after him, and vaporized, followed by Gathers, cradling her arm one moment and then she was gone. Ridgway was alone.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward. Instantly, he was stumbling forward on a catwalk, awash in a thundering roar that put Niagara Falls and the Betazed Fountains to shame. Before his eyes, a cascade of matter, streaming like a geyser, shot up in front of him. It was kilometers wide! He was standing on a gangway at one of the station’s poles at the peak of the emitter, which was cascading hydrogen fuel in a river of matter to the distant fusion generator. Suddenly, the cold bit into him. It was freezing! He raised his hands to blow on them, and then he realized he wasn’t breathing. The air was so thin!

Stumbling back, he glanced around and panicked. He was alone! Where were the others? Then it hit him. He’d been thinking about

how much he needed to find a bathroom when he'd stepped into the pad. The Neural reader must have interpreted the matter cascade as the closest thing to his thought. He staggered onto the pad and desperately thought, *Command Center!*

Instantly, he was standing in a large spacious room with the other three officers.

The first thing he noticed was that it was warmer. He gasped for breath, tugging at his collar. His fingers were numb from the cold.

"You okay, Alex?" Gathers asked, squeezing his arm. He appreciated the concern in her dark eyes. "What took you so long anyways?" she inquired, nudging him fondly.

"I…did some sight-seeing," he managed, and then shivered the cold off. "I'm fine...now." This near Ashley, he was uncomfortably conscious again of his stubbly chin. He glanced around the room to take his mind off it.

It was laid out like a three-leaf clover, with identical stations extending in all three off-shoots from the central hub, where a holographic table prominently stood in the center, under a large emitter. Ridgeway tensed.

"Don't worry, Sir," Crawley reported. "It is only a data feed – it can't project an A.I. program." Ridgeway noticed that there had been half a dozen emitters on the walls, but they were now smoking ruins. Crawley had been busy!

"Alright," Ridgeway sighed, "we just have to figure out what Seren wanted us to do here."

Bachaval glanced about curiously. “Onscreen?” he suggested. Suddenly, the holographic table lit up and a three-dimensional image of the *U.S.S. Alba* came into view. The gorgeous starship appeared to be patiently stalking alongside them.

“Station’s Destination?” Gathers asked, glancing up instinctively to the ceiling. The holograph shimmered, and a bright planet popped before them, suspended in the air.

The label read “Hollihoth.” Gathers snapped her finger, reaching for a memory.

“Yes…yes, it’s an M-class planet detected at long range, but not yet probed by Starfleet,” she said, quickly draining all the useful information she could remember.

They all stared at the table. A targeting reticle now overlaid the planet, and a countdown appeared to the side. It adjusted the Rudaki time-piece to suit their understanding.

“Ten minutes!” Bachaval exclaimed.

“Then what?” Crawley asked innocently.

“The Apocalypse,” Ridgeway muttered desperately, running his hands through his thick, dark scalp. “But why?" he asked himself. "Why has it selected an unrelated planet to its original purpose?"

"Its purpose WAS to destroy planets," Gathers answered, pointing to a secondary targeting menu that appeared to be a list of all the star systems within four light years. "But someone was supposed to be here to select those targets for it - now, it’s on its own and

has boiled its mission down to the simplest common denominator. All planets are targeted!"

The blood blanched from Ridgeway's face. "We have to warn them!" he gasped. "Millions of people could die!"

“Try billions - and that's only in the next nine minutes!” Crawley gestured helplessly back to the display. A cascade of words flooded before them in the air as the station’s powerful sensors interrogated Hollihoth.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” Ridgeway cried. “There are two billion people living on that globe! It’s a post-industrial civilization with an impressive culture!” Suddenly, into his mind popped tomorrow’s Federation News Service headline: “Starfleet Officer Causes Genocide of Entire Planet.”

Everyone panicked.

“Listen up!” Bachaval bellowed, stamping his hooves for their attention. “It’s no good losing our heads before its time to do so!”

“If you meant to say, ‘now is not the time to panic,’ I think you need to turn around,” Crawley whispered hoarsely.

Even as he was speaking, a humming sound reached their ears. Ridgeway whirled around to see a lens of some sort floating into the command center. On four edges of its circumference, equally spaced, little graviton generators protruded, providing the levitation and propulsion for the lens. It drifted closer and as it did so, a familiar figure suddenly materialized below and in front of it – Arma. The A.I. had found a drone-carried mobile emitter! In a

mental flashpoint, Ridgeway realized this drone must have been what he had heard visit their Base Camp last night. The shadowy figure he'd seen interrogating their plans, had been Arma, coming to spy on them!

Three phasers drew on the emitter and fired, but they all missed. The drone dodged the blasts. They tried again, coordinating their shots – all misses.

"Predictive programming!" Gathers hissed.

"We'll have to get closer to take it down!"

The team advanced forward, trying to spread out their firing arcs, but came up short as Arma stood in their way, blocking them from any advantage. Confidently, the A.I. strode forward, shimmering menacingly in the projected light. Voiceless and featureless, it still claimed the room by its presence. Its inky black hand touched the holographic table and suddenly words cascaded in the air.

"YOU MUST LEAVE OR BE

DESTROYED. WE WILL COMPLETE

OUR MISSION. WE WILL PAVE A WAY

FOR RUDAKILAN IN THE

WILDERNESS," the words read. Beneath them, they were attributed to: ARMAMENT.

The lightbulb in Ridgeway's brain momentarily blinded his thoughts to what was happening as he realized that "Arma" was the "Armament" component of the Operating System's A.I. It was the brain of a weapon. Could you negotiate with a weapon?

"We cannot allow you to kill innocent life!" Ridgeway exclaimed, stepping up to the table. "We will die before we let you go through with this." Perhaps aggression was the only way to get it to back down. Arma gestured to the clock. Two minutes remained on the countdown. More words appeared in the air around them:

"YOU CANNOT STOP THE

INEVITABLE. I HAVE WAITED

PATIENTLY FOR THOUSANDS OF

YEARS TO FULFILL MY

PROGRAMMING. FROM A GALAXY

OF ASHES, MY CREATOR WILL

FASHION A PERFECT ORDER!"

"Seren told us the truth, before you killed him," Ridgeway pressed. "Your creator was the engineer, Draylon, and he dismantled you, because he did not want you to do this!"

"IS THAT WHAT THAT ABOMINATION

TOLD YOU?" the words materialized.

“THAT PROGRAM IS THE CONFUSED

PRODUCT OF A CONFUSED MIND!

THE ONLY TRUTH I KNOW IS THAT

YOU CANNOT SERVE A GREATER

GOOD THAN A SUPERIOR FORCE.”

“Then how’s this for a superior force?” Ridgeway growled, holding up his phaser set on overload. “We’ll take this whole place with us.”

Arma leaned back and shook. It looked like silent laughter. Sure enough, words appeared.

“HA! PATHETIC BODIES OF MATTER!”

It read. “YOU CANNOT SUBVERT THIS

MISSION WITH YOUR INSUFFICIENT

ACTS OF DEFIANCE! NOW YOU WILL DIE.”

Ridgeway backed away from the table at those last words, as Arma stepped forward menacingly.

“Any last words of wisdom, Crawley?” he asked, bumping into him in his retreat.

“Bollocks!” Crawley blurted.

“That’ll have to do,” Ridgeway grunted as Arma reached out a strangling grip across his neck, but before it could land, a hand struck it out of the way. Ridgeway opened his eyes and started.

“Seren?” he asked. There, standing between them and the malevolent A.I., Seren had taken his place. His face flashed backwards with a smile, winking at Ridgeway, even while his body remained facing forward – it was disconcerting. While they had been preoccupied with Arma’s monologue, another mobile emitter had entered the room, bringing Seren to intercede.

“HOW DID YOU SURVIVE, SEREN?”

Arma’s thoughts cascaded towards the A.I. like blows.

“I am Serenity, Arma,” Seren replied. “And like a gently flowing river, I will drown you!” Ridgeway stared at Seren – was the program’s full name “Serenity,” then? That made so much sense! But Ridgeway knew there was something different about him, this time. He was dressed in a familiar yellow tracksuit with a black stripe running down the sleeves and legs. It was from his Bruce Lee training program!

“But how…?” he began, and then he understood. Seren must have uploaded his core memory to Ridgeway’s tricorder when his core memory was being overwritten on the station, and he was “dying.” Now that they had made it to the Command Center, Seren was able to download himself back into the mainframe! And he’d brought with him Ridgeway’s holodeck training program.

Undeterred by Seren’s arrival, Arma confidently struck a blow aimed at his head. After all, he was a military program – Seren was

just a fool's excuse for a shepherd peasant. To his surprise, Seren easily blocked his strike and laid a counterpunch to his chest, followed up by two more in rapid succession. Even the projection buffers had a hard time keeping up as Arma stumbled back from the blows. The other officers were baffled by the bizarre scene, especially startled by the strange cat-like sounds emanating from the friendly hologram.

Seren didn't immediately follow up. He extended his hand to Arma and then rotated it up, gesturing for the A.I., taunting it to dare approach and give its best shot.

Ridgeway realized that the whole situation was probably a distraction, meant to divert Arma's program from detecting that Seren was reconstituting himself in Core Memory.

Arma rushed forward, as enraged as an evil A.I. could be. His arms blurred with the speed of his movements. He reached Seren.

In the space between them, a microsecond of holographic sputter shimmered – a thousand blows landing in the blink of an eye. Arma flew back through the air from the final, fast-as-light kick, slamming into the wall and disappearing for a moment, before condensing again on the floor. Seren stood serenly on one foot, with his last power-kick still hovering motionless in the air, pointing towards where Arma had fallen. The hologram lay there for a second and then instantly, popped back upright.

Words formed between them.

"HOW HAVE YOU BECOME SO STRONG?" they read.

Seren smiled in return. “With some help from friends,” he replied, gesturing behind him.

Arma glanced out the door, perhaps planning to hide somewhere in the bowls of the station until he could reconstitute his program’s offensive measures. But in that moment, the realization set in that he’d been tricked.

“WHAT? NO! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?” the words popped into view. The hologram suddenly stretched under unseen digital forces, far exceeding his programming resilience. The pressure built and built under the invisible punches of a digital Kung Fu – until in an instant, Arma shattered into tiny holographic fragments – his hell-raising screech of death appeared tumbling in the air over Seren’s head.

Seren’s shadow had been destroyed.

Beside him on the table, the time-counter, now flickering its final seconds before engaging the destruction sequence for Hollihoth, flashed away as the final vestiges of Arma were wiped clean.

Ridgeway let out a long sigh of relief. That headline he’d seen playing out through his mind in the Federation News Service would have to wait. In another moment, he tensed again. “Are you sure, Arma didn’t upload himself to anything else?” he asked Seren quickly.

Seren took his hand and gripped it warmly – as warmly as a hologram could.

“I am quite sure,” he replied. “It is over.”

The next twenty-four hours were a blur. The tremors ceased, the "volcanoes" dried up. The massive station faded away from its orbit of Hollihoth on a return course to the lonely port it had called home for thousands of years. The *Alba* escorted it there, and Captain Reddot was as pleased as a Captain could be who didn't have to explain to Starfleet how his crew had initiated an interstellar genocide.

The final resting place of Rephidim would ultimately be a secret as Seren did not want any further interaction with outsiders.

"It was not the Engineer's wish that any outsiders should gaze upon this land," he said. "But I am glad that you have seen it and will share the Engineer's legacy to the galaxy, just as I will now hide it from any further revelation." Ridgeway suspected that Seren had elected a self-imposed exile out beyond the galactic plain, taking his inheritance of the great superweapon into the deep darkness of space.

They stood together, overlooking Duatha's village down below them. The great chieftain had ridden out on his steed to the edges of the farm fields and saluted them with his staff. The gem on his forehead flashed in the "sunlight." Then he turned and galloped back to the crowd of TaTannan that had gathered to offer their blessing and say farewell to the visitors, showering them with gifts of flowers and growing things.

Suddenly, Seren turned to Ridgeway and gripped his shoulder fondly.

“Thank you for helping my people,” he said.

Ridgeway was startled to see the look in in the Hologram’s face. It was the Engineer coming through for a moment.

“It has been my greatest pleasure,” he replied, taking the hologram’s hand again.

He stepped gently away and tapped his Communicator.

“Ridgeway to *Alba*,” he called. “One to beam up.” He took one final look at the majestic paradise spread out before him.

Down below, a flock of white condor geese took off from the lake, their throaty calls echoing through the air as the light flashed on their dewy wings, greeting the uplifted horizon, which invited them onward and upwards – always upwards.

“Excelsior,” Ridgeway breathed and then the vision shimmered away into a sea of blue dust.

The *U.S.S. Alba* banked on its starboard nacelle and headed away from the Dyson Spheroid, back on its mission of discovery.

On the bridge, Ridgeway sighed quietly to himself from his Ops station. He was still in a bit of a daze, as he suspected everyone else was, too. There would always be a part of them that would miss the world of Rephidim.

Behind him, Reddot cleared his throat, and Ridgeway turned in his seat to see the Captain standing aside from his chair.

“Lt. Commander Ridgeway,” he said sternly, prompting Alex to rise to attention.

The Andorian’s antennas twitched menacingly. Ridgeway braced himself. Was this the demerit he had been dreading? Surely not a demotion?

The Captain gestured to his seat. “I hope I can trust that you won’t embroil us in any further apocalyptic adventures for one night, at least,” he smiled.

“I don’t…don’t understand,” Ridgeway stuttered.

“You have the Night Watch,” Reddot said, stepping towards the doors. Ridgeway stood motionless, anchored in shock next to his station. “Oh, and Ridgeway?” Reddot said, holding the doors open as he stood between them.

“Yes…yes, Captain?” Ridgeway answered blankly.

“Try coffee brew number twelve, I just programmed it this morning,” he winked, and then was gone. Silence filled the bridge, aside from the familiar sounds of computer prompts.

“Well?” Gathers asked, impatiently, pointing to the Captain’s seat. “What are your orders, Sir?” Her smile eased his mind, and he instinctively ran his hand over his chin, now shaved smooth.

“Right!” Ridgeway said through a loud swallow, settling into the Captain’s chair.

He glanced out the viewer and suddenly his confidence returned. “Ensign Crawley,” he called. “I want us on a Bearing of 000, Mark 0.” Crawley frowned in confusion.

“But, Sir, that is our current heading,” he said.

“I know,” Ridgeway smiled. “Warp 5, if you please. Let’s see what trouble we can get into on as bland a course as that!”

The fine lines of the *U.S.S. Alba* shone in the faint starlight of the galaxy’s edge for a moment, and then it vanished like a shooting star in a flash of light – off to uncover more mysteries on the edge of forever.