

Star Trek: Yesterday's Enterprise "One Little Ship"



by WCS Marsh

Star Trek

Yesterday's Enterprise

"One Little Ship"

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A novel based upon the legendary Star Trek: The Next Generation episode.

Final Fourth Edition

Star Trek: Yesterday's Enterprise – “One Little Ship”

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A note on the Final Fourth Edition: A few minor alterations and additions were made to make this, my first novel, more readable, as well as to lend support to all of my subsequent works. The story as a whole remains unchanged.

-W.M.

Prologue

2349

Tomorrow

For the second time in her life, Tasha was running. Not from the brutal rape gangs of her homeworld of Turkana Four, but instead from her new life here on Romulus. In her right hand, she held a small datapak containing the highly classified, long-term Romulan plans for the conquest of Vulcan. In her left arm, she cradled her four-year-old daughter, Sela.

“Mommy, where are we going?” the little girl asked with a yawn. She clutched tightly to a small brown teddy bear and continued to rub the sleep out of her soft blue eyes. As they bounced hurriedly down the broad foyer staircase, her long blonde hair fluttered backwards to reveal sharp pointed ears; the only readily apparent alien feature she had gained from her father.

“We’re just taking a little trip, honey, don’t worry,” Tasha said softly. Her own blue eyes narrowed in the dim light of the foyer. She glanced nervously around her for any other signs of life, then breathed a heavy sigh of relief. The rest of the house was dark.

“Isn’t Daddy coming with us?” Sela said plaintively, peering up into her mother’s face and yawning again.

“No, sweetheart, your daddy’s away on business.” Tasha quickly crept across the foyer to stand beside a tall table. She glanced over the datapak one final time before stuffing it into a black leather satchel. She knew all too well that the future of the entire United Federation of Planets could very well hinge on that one precious datapak. She also knew that she would face certain death if caught with it.

“But Mommy, I don’t want to go. Daddy’s taking me to the zoo tomorrow. He promised.”

“I know honey, but mommy has to go see some old friends. We can go to the zoo another time.”

“But why can’t I stay here?” the little girl pleaded.

“Shhhh, Sela,” Tasha whispered. “It’s alright, everything’s going to be alright.” She picked up the heavy satchel and placed the strap over her shoulder, then readjusted her daughter to balance the load. It was going to be a long and dangerous hike to the rendezvous point, but Tasha had been in far more dangerous situations than this.

As they turned towards the door, Sela spoke again, chilling her mother to the bone. “We’re going to Earth, aren’t we?”

“No... no, honey, our home is here on Romulus.”

“You’re lying,” Sela said as they started across the foyer. “Daddy said this day might come.”

“Shhhh, honey. Be still.”

“I won’t let you take me,” she said plainly, beginning to squirm.

“Sela, please!”

“I don’t want to go,” she shouted. “I want to stay here with Daddy!” She began to push away from her mother’s tight grasp as Tasha struggled to pull open the front door. She continued to squirm even as they stepped out onto the front stoop and were confronted by two armed security guards.

Sela became suddenly still as her mother stopped and stared with dismay at the guards. Months of careful planning. Dozens of clandestine messages with the other Federation prisoners on Remus. Stealing the secret plans and keeping them hidden. The difficult negotiations to gain transport offworld. It had all been in vain.

Tasha pushed all of this aside and thought instead of her daughter. Sela would be an orphan now, just as Tasha had been for all those awful years back on Turkana IV. She had hoped this escape might work. Had hoped that Sela might have a chance for a better life growing up in the free societies of the Federation. Instead, she would grow up here, on Romulus, learning to hate the Federation and everything it stood for.

Tasha let out a deep sigh of despair. She shivered involuntarily as the door creaked open behind her. She closed her eyes tightly as Sela wriggled around to see who it was.

“Daddy!” the little girl cried. “Mommy was trying to take me away to Earth just as you said she would.”

“Yes, I know sweetheart,” her father replied. “And what do we

do to traitors of the Empire, my precious child?”

“We punish them,” Sela replied matter-of-factly. Tasha pushed back the tears. Fought against the sobs that threatened to overwhelm her entire being. She had hoped that Sela would never have to witness this, but knew deep inside that it had always been inevitable. She squeezed her daughter tightly, not wanting to let go, and kissed her on the forehead.

“I love you, Sela,” she whispered. “I want you to remember always that mommy loved you.” Slowly, she relaxed her grip and Sela slid out of her arms to the ground. They stood there and held hands for an instant more before the little girl turned and jumped into the arms of her father.

“Zethus, please,” Tasha whispered, “take her inside.”

“Your mother is a traitor Sela, and now she must be punished.” The child merely nodded at her father’s solemn words of wisdom.

Tasha stared up at the distant starlight and let her memories wash over her. It hadn’t all been bad, she realized. There had been some good times too. She concentrated on these, the good memories as first one, and then the other guard raised up their disruptors and fired. She was surprised at the lack of pain as her body began to dissolve around her. And as her consciousness slowly drifted away, her final thoughts were for Sela.

Perhaps one day, she thought, there can be peace. Perhaps one day, my daughter can be free.

Part One

2344

yesterday

“...begin Chapter One.”

Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett sat on the Bridge of her starship and stared silently out at the abyss of stars and darkness. Sometimes she saw the stars, sometimes she saw only the dark space between. This morning had already become one of those dark in-betweens. The Captain was understandably apprehensive about the latest orders sent her from Starfleet Command: *to patrol the Klingon border relative to the Romulan Neutral Zone*. A daunting task on even the best of days to be sure... but these weren't necessarily the best of days. Her ship was in tatters, her crew — tired.

So there she sat, just minutes away from a senior staff meeting that was sure to be tense, and tried to center herself for the next thirty minutes of short tempers and high emotions. This crew, amongst the best in the fleet, was nearing the end of a grueling five-year tour of duty that had taken them to farthest reaches of the frontier and beyond. It had sapped the strength right out of all of them, and she wondered if they had anything left to give. They were tired yes — both emotionally and physically — but nevertheless, their return course to the Al-Betaz Sector skirted a host of these border worlds and put them in prime position for a patrol run. Naturally, given the unsteady circumstances, Starfleet Command simply couldn't resist the urge to show the flag, no matter how weary the crew.

In the fifty years since the signing of the First Khitomer Peace Accords, the Federation's precarious relationship with the Klingons had certainly improved, but the two great superpowers still had a long way to go to reach a lasting understanding. There were still a few outlying star systems on both sides of the border not yet quite ready to let go of a

hundred years of anger, fear, and distrust. And while the commencement of the Second Khitomer Accords was no doubt offering a fresh new hope for the next generation, it had also managed to reignite some of the old tensions that had always managed to simmer just below the surface of these far-flung fringe worlds. It was a hesitant harmony only finely tuned.

In the periphery of all this, the Romulan Star Empire was an even greater threat to Federation security. The Romulan government was not at all pleased with this longstanding era of stillness that coolly existed between its two greatest adversaries. The Second Khitomer Accords had only served to worsen these underlying hostilities, giving even further cause for the border worlds to feel all that more jittery and uncertain. Although there had been virtually no contact with the Romulans since the Tomed Incident of 2311, the threat, real or imagined, was still ever present. This angry and unpredictable serpent could strike

at any moment, and no one understood that better than Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett.

The Romulans were every Starfleet Captain's worst nightmare.

Be that as it may, Garrett nonetheless straightened, and with decades of command experience automatically kicking, she carefully stowed all apprehension safely aside, then stood with confidence and pulled the ruffles out of her tunic. Over a fit body honed by expert training, she wore the stylized red field jacket and black trousers that had remained the Starfleet standard ever since the legendary days of Captain James T. Kirk. Over her left breast was pinned the gold Starfleet arrowhead symbol, with its matching bars and embedded communicator; a century old favorite that predated even Kirk. She pressed this now and spoke in a clear, firm voice that conveyed undeniable authority.

“Computer, begin day watch... this is the Captain, all senior staff please report to the Observation Lounge for morning briefing. Garrett out.” The concept of day and night is, of course, a relative term in space, but nevertheless, the ship sprang to life at her command. All lights came up to full standard intensity, and the day crew began pouring out onto the Bridge to relieve those weary souls at their night stations. It was a carefully choreographed skit also honed by training,

and smooth as glass in its simplicity. After a few moments quiet commotion, the night staff slowly dissipated and Garrett at last turned to the chief duty officer and spoke this time in a soft reserved tone.

“You have the Bridge, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, Captain,” the young officer acknowledged. “All stations... status report for department heads due at Ops in twenty-three minutes.”

As Captain Garrett moved slowly towards the forward accessway to the Observation Lounge, she smiled inwardly at Lieutenant Dardanelle’s very precise command style. He had come a long way since the crash of the *Ambassador*, and someday soon, she mused, that sandy-haired young man would most certainly make some captain a fine first officer. At one-quarter Vulcan and three-quarters Terran, Dardanelle possessed the good humor and personality of his human heritage, combined with the efficiency and the preciseness of his Vulcan grandfather. *Truly the best of both worlds*, she thought as she entered the Observation Lounge.

Crossing the room, Garrett took a position relative to her chair at the head of the table and tried not to focus again on the dark space between the stars that twinkled seemingly just outside the expansive viewports. She then briefly surveyed her senior staff before at last offering them a peculiar sort of smile, and a slightly stilted good morning. Her First Officer, quiet in his reply, eyed her with bemused speculation as she slowly settled into her chair and made herself comfortable. Bemusement notwithstanding, she made him wait just a bit longer than usual before turning to him finally and scolding him with mock reproach.

“Commander Stadi,” she said levelly, “since you have no doubt already robbed our new orders from my weary mind, I sense that perhaps you don’t quite understand the unjustified good cheer I have towards them...” The Captain eyed him with a wry, almost playful smile on her face. A Betazoid and full telepath, Spencer Stadi stared back at her with the colorless ebony eyes of his alien heritage. His hair was a salt and pepper mix, his features soft and compassionate. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and soothing to the senses and he could always be counted on to put almost anyone at ease; though this time, telepathic or not, one could almost sense a bit of beleaguered tension in

his terse response.

“No, Captain, I’m afraid I do not,” he replied honestly, his face turning a faint crimson. Despite their years of service together, Stadi was still a bit self-conscious at times when caught in the act of reading his commanding officers mind.

“Nor do I... perhaps it is the irony,” she admitted soberly. The playful grin left her face as she turned to address the puzzled looks of the rest of her seasoned officers. “As I’m sure you’ve already guessed,” she said forlornly, “at 0600 hours this morning I received new orders from Starfleet Command. Rather than our intended, relatively straight course back to Betazed, we have been ordered to extend our tour three standard months on a more, shall we say, parabolic course.”

There were several gasps and whispers of agitation around the room as the captain inserted an isolinear optical chip into the computer console. It had been a long journey already and she perhaps was just as dismayed as they were. She hid from her face a bone-weary tiredness as an image of a star chart appeared on the wall screen behind her showing their most recent relative position in the surrounding area of space. There were more gasps.

“As you can see,” Garrett sighed, “we are in prime position for a patrol run of the Klingon border relative to the Romulan Neutral Zone.”

With a delicate touch to a control button, a red line crossed the star chart showing their projected new course. There were even more whispers of agitation around the room as their peril became apparent.

“Obviously,” Stadi picked up from Garrett’s mental cue, “this new heading will take us through many potentially hazardous star systems all along the Klingon border...”

“And,” Garrett added despairingly, “Starfleet reports that, partly because of the recent Khitomer Accords, the Empire’s ongoing conflict with the Romulans has heated up again, with numerous small skirmishes popping up all through this area of space.” The captain finished off this last statement with a haphazard gesture towards the star map behind her, then out the viewports to her right. Again, at Garrett’s mental cue, Stadi continued.

“Starfleet has recommended that our first port of call be the former Federation colony on Turkana Four. Reports from that failed colony have, as of late, been sketchy at best.” Garrett touched a control

and an image of Turkana IV appeared on the view screen.” As some of you may know,” she said, “the Independence movement on Turkana began to unravel about seven years ago. The reasons for its decline are varied and vague, but one of the largest factors involved is, of course, their proximity to the Klingon border. Many of the residents were not pleased with the stipulations of the original Khitomer Accords, and a subsequent revolution twenty years ago left them vulnerable to the Klingons, and without Federation aid.” She glanced at Stadi and mentally told him they’d better conclude their little dissertation before the crew fell into a coma. He smiled at her dry sense of humor before turning back to their audience for a few final remarks.

“As a result,” he summed up, “two political parties began to form. All those pro-treaty became known as the Coalition, and all those anti-treaties became known as the Alliance. Twenty-odd years of bitter and unrelenting rivalry have ultimately led to the decay, and quite possibly, the eventual collapse of the local government.”

“The Federation Council feels,” Garrett said with a sigh, “that civil war is inevitable, unless Starfleet intervenes.” Her first officer now looked at the senior staff with a half-hearted grin. The Betazoid people were famous for their optimism, and amongst this group, Spencer Stadi was infamous for it.

“That’s where we come in,” he said smiling. “This ship is to show the flag, assess the situation, and make a recommendation to the Council as to a possible course of action.” There was a brief pause before Captain Garrett sat up in her chair, taking up a more formal posture. Her slender fingers changed the image of Turkana Four back to that of the starmap and their projected new course. She then clasped her hands together and looked at everyone with an understanding eye.

“I know this is a difficult assignment, and a lot to take in all at once, so at this point, I’d like to open the briefing up to any questions, comments, or suggestions that any of you may have.” Knowing full well that each member of the group would have something to add, she was not at all surprised when her staff began to squirm in their seats. *Indeed*, she thought, *this truly is the best crew in the fleet*. Sensing the captain’s own unspoken words of admiration, Stadi stared at her with a similar gleam of pride in his eyes.

Lieutenant Commander Onovan, ships counselor, was the first to

He was an El-Aurian, the first, and currently the only one in Starfleet to serve as a full Academy graduate and officer. His skin was coal-black, and like the other members of his species, his face and head were completely devoid of any form of body hair. Known as a race of listeners, El-Aurians lived for centuries and were often considered to have an almost strange and mysterious air of clairvoyance about them. When he spoke, the counselor's words were always carefully chosen, his sentences always carefully orchestrated.

"Captain," he began thoughtfully, "while you and the Commander were briefing us, I glanced over library computer information on the Turkana Four colony. The current governor, a Mr. Pugachev, is a member of the Alliance Party... radical is not a sufficient adjective to describe his views. You can expect any discussions with him to be biased and full of half-truths and innuendo. And as for this area of space," he continued, "let's just say we can expect a potentially dangerous surprise around almost every corner." This he offered as almost a forewarning. Garrett and Stadi both nodded at the counselor in unison. It was always well to take heed of his advice, his age and wisdom supplanting even theirs.

Commander Marta Batanides, ships tactical and weapons officer, was next to speak. A petite and attractive Terran female with dark hair and a pinched, dimpled smile, she always spoke with a very confident and easy-going manner. Well liked for her zeal and charisma, Marta was an attention getter in any situation.

"Captain," she confessed, "I'll admit I know very little about Turkanan politics, but I will of course come up with a complete tactical overview of their weapons capabilities. Also," she grinned rather demurely, "I have two Academy classmates serving on starships in and around this sector... Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the *Stargazer*, and Commander Cortin Zweller of the *Ajax*. I will contact them both on subspace and request any information they have that may be helpful for our transit through the borderlands."

"Very good, Commander," Garrett acknowledged with a reciprocal smile, "keep me posted. Lieutenant Commander Skyl, your assessment of our new orders?" Everyone now looked in the direction of the ship's chief engineer, a full-blood Vulcan with, by human standards, vaguely Asian features. Fingers steepled beneath his chin,

Skyl paused for a moment, apparently deep in pensive thought.

“As with any potentially hazardous assignment,” he finally warned, “it is wise to exercise extreme caution, thus avoiding casualties to the crew and damage to the ship... especially the warp core.” Much to his chagrin, the rest of the senior staff all let out a slight chuckle at this last statement. Skyl raised an upswept eyebrow and surveyed his colleagues before dropping his hands to the table.

“Captain,” he protested, “I hardly think that damage to the warp core is cause for jocularity.”

“You are correct, Mr. Skyl, it is not,” she granted him, “but the warp core does just happen to be your own particular area of expertise...” She looked at him with an amused sort of smile as the chief engineer’s brow began to furrow even deeper.

“Captain,” he stated flatly, “I was merely trying to stress the dangers of having core damage this close to Romulan and Klingon space with no maintenance starbases within the immediate vicinity.” The rest of the department heads all turned with smiles toward their captain, anxiously awaiting her retort to the Vulcan’s most undeterred persistence. But the joke now hopelessly lost, Garrett decided instead to simply shelve the matter and continue on with the course of discussion around the room.

“Doctor, if you please,” she said with a sigh. Lieutenant Ann Grey, Chief Medical Officer, tucked her brown hair behind one ear before leaning forward and placing her crossed arms on the conference table. She glanced at Skyl through the corner of one eye, then tried in vain to mask the human tendency towards nervousness she always displayed when addressing a crowd... even a crowd as familiar to her as this. A timid creature, her voice trembled in just such a way as to make one feel awkward, if only on her behalf.

“I-I-It is not uncommon,” she said quietly, “for a starship crew to display a c-c-ertain amount of fear and apprehension when dealing with the unknown, Captain. The more often the cr-cr-crew is kept apprised of our current situation, the more likely they will be able to deal with any potential crisis.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Garrett nodded, “some well thought out advice,” she added with some surprise. The captain turned now towards her helmsman at the far end of the table. A handsome young man in his

mid-thirties, Richard Castillo was quickly becoming a rising young star in the annals of Starfleet history. His dark wavy hair and deep blue eyes mixed well with his warm and friendly personality, making him an instant favorite among the rest of the diverse crew. Normally his smile could melt lead, but he looked strangely grim instead.

“Your turn, Lieutenant,” Garrett said with a somewhat cautious smile.

“Well, to be blunt, Captain,” he began earnestly, “the Klingons in this sector simply cannot be trusted, especially this far out from their homeworld... and the same can also be said for these rabble-rousing former colonists,” he shrugged with a somewhat imperialist sneer. “Due to the Second Khitomer Accords, tensions in this area of space are off the scale... (he glanced darkly around the room) I’m with Skyl and Onovan, use extreme caution no matter who we’re dealing with, and be prepared for antagonism from any or all of the above... and I think that should naturally include the Romulans as well,” he added as a final parting shot.

Somewhat taken aback by Castillo’s stern words of warning, Captain Garrett paused for a moment to let the rest of her staff reflect on them. She then looked to her Operations Officer for the last word. The young woman in question often offered a very unique perspective on any subject, and this time was sure to be no different.

A former Orion slave-girl, Ensign Cecilia Garrett had escaped from her captivity more than a decade ago at the age of thirteen. Taking the frightened young child under her wing, Captain Garrett adopted her, and eventually arranged for her entrance into Starfleet Academy. There, much to most everyone’s surprise, she excelled. Upon her graduation, Starfleet Command questioned the wisdom of the Captain’s request that someone so close to her be assigned to the Bridge of her very own starship, but the captain ultimately prevailed, and Cicely (as she was now affectionately called) was quickly making her own place in the history books as part of this most legendary crew.

She began, as she always did, with a bright-white smile framed by a round, bright-green face. “Captain, I am reminded of the ancient Earth fable *Gulliver’s Travels*.” Her brown sparking eyes fell on each one of her colleagues in turn. “In it, much like on Turkana Four, the Lilliputians had been embroiled in a long-standing dispute amongst

themselves... the Big-enders versus the Little-enders. This conflict had gone on for so long that neither faction could remember anymore what they were even fighting about. In the end, with the help of Gulliver, the Big-enders were ultimately victorious... but upon learning from a peasant what the dispute was actually all about, Gulliver could not forgive himself for his involvement.” She paused, looking earnestly at her captain, brown eyes narrowing.

“Governor Pugachev is going to do everything in his power to convince us to assist in *his* cause, but we must try to maintain an open mind to the views put forth by *both* factions, Captain. This entire area of space is full of political intrigue and differing political views. Remaining neutral is our own best hope for avoiding conflict.”

Cicely’s green skin flashed in sharp contrast to her red uniform as she stopped and realized everyone was now leaning forward and intently staring at her. She broke into another bright smile and looked down at the tabletop, trying to look interested in the grain of its wood finish. The room was quiet, save for the myriad of tiny little sounds that always accompanied life aboard a starship.

Who’d ever guess, Captain Garrett thought, that that bright young woman used to be an Orion slave-girl? Commander Stadi nodded in agreement, their two minds so much in tune after twenty years that it was often almost impossible to determine within whose mind a thought had originated in the first place! The captain stood slowly now and walked over to the viewport to her right. Turning, she sat on the edge of it, back to the stars, and surveyed her senior staff.

“I know the road ahead seems hard,” she said solemnly, “but if we all stick to our instincts and live up to our beliefs, then I’m sure we’ll do just fine.” She stood now and returned to the head of the table, staring confidently at her officers .

“Commander, see that our new orders are posted for the rest of the crew,” she ordered. “Counselor, assist the crew in their acclimation to these orders. Tactical, coordinate with Engineering... I want this ship ready to fly... and ready to fight if necessary.”

Looking further down the table: “Doctor, we are liable to run into the Romulans, or maybe even a few rebel Klingons,” she added with a wry smile and a slight tilt of the head, “and we *may* get a bloody nose or two... please tend to your Sickbay. Cicely, I believe you have a

few dozen morning reports to sort through?” She offered the young ensign a sharp toothy grin, then stared at last across the table at her still stoic helmsman.

“Mr. Castillo,” she nodded, “set course for the Turkana System, Warp Five... Dismissed.” And with a simultaneous *Aye, Captain!*, the officers all stood in unison and began filing out of the lounge one by one. But as Stadi and Onovan approached the door, Garrett called after them, a small measure of hesitation in her voice.

“Commander, Counselor...” They both paused and turned to look back at their captain as the doors hissed shut behind them. She let out a deep sigh, tugged at her uniform jacket, then spoke quietly. “Will you two gentlemen please join me for a walk in the arboretum... let’s say, in a half an hour?”

The two men exchanged a brief glance before Stadi finally proclaimed: “Yes, Captain, of course.” Garrett offered them a quick nod and faint smile as they turned to leave. She then faced the viewport a final time and stared silently out into the abyss of stars and darkness, trying yet again *not* to focus on that ever-present dark space between. *I guess that didn’t go too bad after all*, she thought ruefully. Still, her apprehension slowly began to return, combined with a new sense of foreboding. They were weary yes, and the road less traveled by had been a difficult one. Five years can be a long time. She sighed somewhat mournfully, uncertain of what the future held for them all, and fell slowly into the darkness.

“...begin Chapter Two.”

Preoccupied by sinister thoughts, and still gritting his teeth, Lieutenant Richard Castillo stepped out onto the Bridge followed by Ensign Garrett, the others having boarded an adjoining turbolift bound for distant parts of the ship. Going quite unnoticed as he paused there in place and simmered, Cicely passed on beside him and moved toward the Bridge’s upper level. Bouncing up the three steps, she then crossed to her station and set herself immediately to work. For a moment, Castillo couldn’t seem to break free from the trance. His mind turned the briefing over and over again in his mind. It wasn’t so much the weariness of prolonging their arduous five-year tour of duty, for him it was more the nature of the mission itself: *to patrol the Klingon border relative to the Romulan Neutral Zone.*

All he could hear was explosions and screams. Snapping suddenly to attention, he surveyed the sight before him. The circular command center was the absolute embodiment of modern technology. From the aft facing science stations to the forward-facing helm and tactical seats, all were designed to convey maximum efficiency and comfort, with an almost perfect functionality. Yet, despite all his years of service, Castillo still hadn’t quite gotten used to the fact that he was serving on the Bridge of the flagship of the Federation. Her name, like all those before her, was recognized throughout half the galaxy with legendary status. *A part of history*, he thought with a thoughtful smirk. In truth, he was lucky to be here at all and he never forgot it, and certainly never took it for granted. This ship was the top of the line and only a select few had ever had the honor to be in her service.

Striding forward with newfound resolve, he took one small step up onto the command level and stood with no small modicum of awe next to the Captain’s very own chair. Lieutenant Dardanelle stood there too, his quasi-Vulcan features staring intently at a padd.

“Status report please, Mr. Dardanelle,” Castillo intoned in an attempt to break the young man’s unwavering concentration. Somewhat startled, Dardanelle stepped smartly to the side to yield the honors of command to his superior officer.

“Uh, yes Sir,” he said recovering. “We are just now clearing the

Zeta Amore solar system and are traveling at full impulse on adjusted course for the Al-Betaz sector. Awaiting command for warp speed.”

Castillo moved in front of the captain’s chair and sat down somewhat reverently before making his reply.

“Thank you Lieutenant, but our orders have now changed. Set course for Turkana Four, Warp Five,” he said with feigned confidence.

“Very well, Sir,” Dardanelle nodded, then turned to face the viewscreen. “Helm... set course three-zero-zero mark three-three-zero. Speed: Warp Factor Five.” The blue fingers of the young Andorian at the helm sped quickly across the control panel as she prepared to set the great ship in motion.

“Course and speed laid in, Sir,” she acknowledged. Squinting at the stars ahead, Castillo clenched his right fist and gave the order to engage. He then sat back and watched as every conceivable color began racing across the screen before him.

The United Star Ship *Enterprise*, *Ambassador*-class, Starfleet Registry NCC-1701-C, banked gracefully to the left and slightly downward, then leapt into warp, leaving nothing in her wake save an explosion of ultra-bright light.

The chaotic flashes of color were soon replaced by the more familiar rainbow streaks of warp stars, and with a nod, Dardanelle smoothly rounded the upper-level railing to position himself in front of an aft science station. Once there, he began immediately to acquaint himself with their new orders from Starfleet Command. At Ann Grey’s suggestion, Commander Stadi had already posted these on the shipwide Situation Display Network so as to keep everyone informed as to what was to come.

This left Castillo all alone with his thoughts in the command chair, thoughts which were slowly beginning to drift into memories. He remembered once again the treachery of the Romulans, and the untrustworthy nature of the Klingons. And he remembered of course the thousands of lives lost to both adversaries in the endless skirmishes over the past two hundred years. History had proven these points time and again, and Castillo felt strongly that, no matter how many peace treaties were signed, these things must never be forgotten. Most of all

however, he remembered the screams, and the greatest loss of all.

His father had once been an engineer aboard the *Enterprise-B*. The ship was on a routine layover at Station Salem One just light-years from the Romulan Neutral Zone when Richard Castillo's life was changed forever. The unprovoked sneak attack by the Romulans was both carefully orchestrated and completely unanticipated by the over two thousand helpless officers and civilians living there. At the time, two other ill-fated starships were also docked at Station Salem One; the *Constellation*-class USS *Phoenix* was undergoing repairs, and the *New Orleans*-class USS *Tulsa* was offloading supplies.

The hapless *Phoenix* was destroyed almost instantly as her warp core overloaded, taking a third of the station along with it. The *Tulsa*, reeling from torpedo explosions and venting drive plasma, soon wrenched itself free from the mooring clamps and spiraled uncontrollably into the station's central core where it too soon exploded, but only after burying half its hull deep inside the densely populated superstructure. And then, as the legend went, (or so Castillo had been told by his grandfather), the *Enterprise-B*, badly damaged and missing half her crew, "gave those Romulan devil's a fight they wouldn't soon forget" supposedly "chasing them clear back to the homeworlds..."

In reality, Castillo knew, the *Enterprise-B* barely managed to get underway at all. On fire, and crippled beyond repair, the once mighty flagship then tried frantically to defend those few on the shattered and screaming station that still remained alive, but their sacrifice was ultimately to no avail. The damage had been done, the ship and station doomed. Some years later, rumors began to surface of captured survivors, but these were never confirmed, and Richard Castillo, as yet unborn on Archer IV, never had the chance to know his father, never had the chance to do all those things that fathers and sons do.

Castillo squinted at the streaking warp stars and clenched his right fist. *No*, he thought, *these things must never be forgotten*. And then a new thought slowly crept into his consciousness and he glanced over his left shoulder and spoke thoughtfully.

"Hey Cicely... what were they fighting about anyway?"

"I beg your pardon, Sir?" Cicely turned in her chair and frowned across the Bridge at Castillo in the center seat.

"You know, the Big-enders and the Little-enders... what were

they fighting about?” Cicely smiled and began to explain.

“If memory serves, I believe it was in regards to whether an egg should be opened from the big end, or from the little end.” Castillo shook his head and harrumphed.

“Imagine,” he replied, “those foolish people starting a war over such a silly little thing.”

“Just a difference of opinion, Sir,” Cicely rebuffed him.

“Say what?” He turned his whole body now.

“Just a difference of opinion,” she repeated, “every conflict starts with just a simple, easily negotiated, difference of opinion that soon escalates into a bloody war. History has told the tale many times,” she shrugged, “from your own American Civil War, to the assassination of Chancellor Gorkon, the Salem One Border Conflicts,” she clicked her tongue, “and even the events occurring now on Turkana IV... all just differences of opinion.” With a tilt of the head, she shrugged her shoulders once more and turned back to the displays on the screen before her. For his part, Castillo reflected on these points a moment, then formed his own argument.

“So, Ensign,” he shot back rather gruffly, “you believe that nearly two centuries of conflict with the Romulans, and seventy-five years’ worth of bloody wars with the Klingons could’ve all been prevented with some quote: ‘simple negotiations?’”

“Certainly, Sir,” Cicely replied, never taking her eyes off her screen.

“Impossible,” Castillo stated with clear indignation in his voice. He sat back in the command chair and faced the viewscreen, effectively ending their conversation. Cicely exhaled through pierced lips and shook her head.

“Then may the Great Elf of the Forest protect us all,” she whispered. *And the Great Bird of the Galaxy as well*, she thought. Her brown eyes studied the next page of text while her long, green, twig-like fingers quietly prepared the following pages for her inspection.

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Marta Batanides and Lt. Commander Skyl stood in the center of Main Engineering and hovered over the table-like *master systems*

display console. The warp core pulsed behind them with the almost subliminal ambiance of a heartbeat, sending incredible amounts of energy down the line to the warp field nacelles. The nacelles, bleeding this energy off into subspace, were currently pushing the starship along at nearly 214 times the speed of light. Even so, given the vast distances of interstellar space, it would still take the *Enterprise* another twenty-two hours to reach Turkana IV.

The two officers had configured their console screens to display the power readouts of a dozen different systems. These included the warp and impulse drives, phaser and shield power, and gravity and environment. All vital systems in case it became necessary to defend the ship — ready to fly or ready to fight, as Garrett had put it, and the two seasoned officers knew she meant it.

Marta studied each system individually as Skyl crosschecked her findings; redundancy playing a key role in Starfleet's continuing success. Each person backing up the findings of another, each computer processor seeking agreement from other related subprocessors. Thus man and machine worked together in harmony to ensure a smooth and safe operation with remarkably few mistakes, and they had done so for centuries.

"Everything seems to check out," Marta said, leaning on two backwards hands. She then frowned at a barely intelligible reading. "No, hold on... I'm detecting a very slight anomaly in the power coupling of the starboard EPS conduit, Deck Eighteen."

"Confirmed," Skyl replied matter-of-factly. The Electro Plasma System tapped into the fierce energies created by the warp core, and then carefully fed it into the ship's other lesser powered systems. This conduit in particular supplied energy for half the vessel's circular primary hull, including its shields and phasers. Still frowning, Marta continued.

"It does not appear to have a definable cause." She shrugged her shoulders and looked up at Skyl with a smile. "It's probably nothing." Still, Skyl checked a few more readings and made a decision.

"It may indeed be 'nothing' Commander, as you so haphazardly put it," he said, looking up at last, "nevertheless, I believe it would be wise to have a member of the engineering staff go to Deck Eighteen and confirm these readings."

“No, I’ll go,” Marta offered. “I have to make a few subspace calls anyway, I’ll just use the dedicated stations on that deck after I check out the conduit.”

“As you wish, Commander.” With a nod, the Vulcan moved to the far side of the table-like display station and went immediately to work on the rest of the day’s business. The man certainly didn’t hold very tight to any social graces, Marta thought, as she adjusted the gold clasp that kept her dark hair pulled tightly behind her head. She then reached under the tabletop and grabbed a tricorder before walking towards the passageway that led to the nearest turbolift. She smiled to herself as she strolled down the corridor and remembered now how much she’d disliked Vulcans upon first meeting them at the Academy. She found their logical, unemotional, no-nonsense attitudes to be both rude and condescending; almost as if other species, especially humans, somehow weren’t good enough.

It was only after years of working with Skyl, and many other Vulcan officers, that Marta realized that what she mistook as condescension was actually profound confidence, and that their unemotional nature was, in turn, balanced by a strong sense of dedication and sincerity. *A society to emulate perhaps, she thought, with the necessary amount of human unpredictability of course,* she concluded with a smile. As she approached the turbolift, Marta wondered if the two worlds, Vulcan and Earth, could ever survive if separated after so many long decades of close cultural contact. Indeed, she hoped they would never have cause to find out.

The turbolift doors slid open to reveal Dr. Ann Grey standing in the middle of the car, nervously biting the nail on the tip of her left index finger. She was very much startled to see Marta standing there before her and as such, jumped back against the rear wall, then stepped forward again slowly, regaining only a very small amount of her fragile composure.

“Hi, Marta... Hi!” she stammered, “I was just, uh, just going to, umm, talk to Sky... I mean Lieutenant Commander Skyl. Y’know, see how he was feeling and all.” Marta gave her an evil smile as they switched places.

“I trust you will find him well,” she winked, then whispered a final note... “Good hunting, Annie!” ...the doors sliding shut between

them. Nonplussed, the good doctor stood there for a mortified moment, then brought a trembling hand up to her forehead, then down to her mouth. She puffed a quick breath through her fingers. Turning, she headed down the corridor to engineering, tucking an errant strand of hair behind her left ear as she went.

Skyl was still standing where Marta had left him, yet thanks to his exceptional Vulcan hearing, he was not completely oblivious to who, and perhaps what, was coming. His body language conveyed a sense of trepidation, though one would have to be an actual Vulcan (or a very astute off-worlder that had lived on Vulcan for a lifetime) to truly notice his unease.

Most people thought Vulcans were naïve when it came to matters of the heart, but in fact, they merely chose to remain as vague as possible on the subject. After all, one's own personal affairs were no one's business but one's own... or so the theory went anyway. With humans however, Skyl often found that this was not necessarily the case. They seemed to want to meddle in everything! He pretended not to notice as Ann entered behind him. She paused there for a moment, then walked up and stood to his right side, looking nervously at the warp core. Her heartbeat was racing well beyond the subtleness of its own gentle ambiance.

Finally, the Vulcan felt compelled to acknowledge her existence. "Doctor, may I assist you?" He glanced at her with narrow dark eyes and a raised, upsweped eyebrow. Her blue eyes met his only for a moment, then dropped down to the computer monitors.

"I, uh, I just came to see if y-y-you," she stammered, "I mean, to see if Engineering is ready for our up-up-upcoming mission." She cursed herself for spouting off such an obvious lie. With disinterest, Skyl's eyes moved back to the displays at his fingertips.

"All engineering systems appear to be nominal at this time, Doctor," he replied impatiently. "Might it not be more prudent for you to direct your concerns toward Sickbay?" She cringed inwardly at the direction this conversation was taking. *Okay, Annie-girl, she thought, you only get one more shot at this, don't screw it up!* She focused on her speech therapy lessons and concentrated fully now on *not* stuttering, then puffed out her lips.

"Actually, Sickbay's ready and I have some free time tonight."

She swallowed hard. “Since things here appear to be ‘nominal’, do you think that you might be free to join me in my quarters later on for supper?” She closed her eyes and chewed her lower lip. She opened them and looked up at Skyl, who appeared to be mulling over her offer; or perhaps over a sensor anomaly, she couldn’t be sure which. Finally, after some time, Skyl gazed up and looked directly into Ann’s expectant blue eyes. There *was* a certain allure about them.

“My intentions were to oversee the realignment of the portside power transfer conduit this evening.” Skyl watched as Ann’s eyes dropped to the floor and her shoulders sagged to meet them. He sighed, then raised an upswept eyebrow and continued.

“However,” he said non-enthusiastically, “the mid-shift staff is fully capable of completing this task without my supervision. I accept your invitation, Doctor.” Ann’s face lit up with unrestrained astonishment, and she practically fell over herself with excitement. She rolled back and spun around on one heel, then placed her left hand on Skyl’s shoulder.

“Skyl, that’s great!” she practically shouted, “I’ll see you there... seven o’clock!” Ann then turned and skipped off towards the corridor leading to the turbolift, a newfound sense of confidence guiding her way. Sometimes hope can be just as transformative as fear.

“...begin Chapter Three.”

CAPTAIN'S PERSONAL LOG

STARDATE 21329.9

I CAN'T HELP BUT HAVE THIS STRANGE FEELING OF APPREHENSION AND FOREBODING ABOUT OUR NEW ASSIGNMENT TO PATROL THE BORDER ZONE. CERTAINLY THIS CREW HAS PROVEN ITS WORTHINESS TIME AND AGAIN, BUT THIS TIME I FEEL AS IF WE ARE EMBARKING ON A ROAD THAT WILL HAVE FEWER AND FEWER TURNS AS WE PROGRESS DOWN THE UNSEEN PATHS OF OUR FUTURE... A FUTURE WHICH SEEMS MORE UNCERTAIN TO ME NOW THAN EVER BEFORE.

FOR INSIGHT, I FIND MYSELF DRAWN TO THE LOGS OF ANOTHER CAPTAIN OF THE *ENTERPRISE* WHO ALSO FOUND HIMSELF THROWN INTO THE POLITICS OF THIS REGION. HE TOO WAS APPREHENSIVE ABOUT SUCCESS.

MY ONLY HOPE IS THAT I SHOW THE SAME LEGENDARY RESOLVE FOR THE TASK AHEAD THAT HE SHOWED TO HIS CREW ALL THOSE MANY YEARS AGO.

Rachel Garrett, padd in hand, stepped into an arboretum awash with light and began walking down a partly shaded path towards her first officer and counselor. The two men were seated contentedly on a nearby bench and chatted amiably amongst themselves as she quietly approached. An intense combination of sights and fragrances awoke the captain's senses as she inhaled deeply and paused to admire a shimmering lagoon in the distance. The environmental controls of this overlarge chamber had currently been programmed to simulate the spring season so common to so many of the Federation's worlds, and the trees and shrubs transplanted from these worlds were now abloom in every conceivable color of the spectrum. They all swayed placidly in the coolness of a simulated breeze.

“What a beautiful day for a walk,” Garrett proclaimed, half to herself, perhaps startling the two gentlemen just a bit. “I used to go for hikes with my grandfather on days just like this,” she added thoughtfully as Stadi and Onovan rose to stand beside her. Her story continued as the trio began walking down the path together, practically arm in arm.

“In Letchworth State Park,” she reflected, “near to where I grew up back on Earth.” The captain did not often think of home, and was never one for nostalgia, but sometimes, just sometimes, years cooped up aboard a starship can grow weary on a weary soul. She glanced to either side at her officers and self-consciously smiled. “It is my understanding that today is *May Day*, an ancient Earth holiday celebrating the arrival of Spring.”

“May Day?” Stadi furrowed his brow. “Sounds like a call for help.”

“Perhaps it is,” Garrett mused, not unaware of her own predicament. Onovan detected the hidden meaning in her statement and was about to address it when the captain spoke again, cutting him off. She was obviously prevaricating, so he let her continue.

“The focal point of the May Day celebration was the Maypole,” she explained with a gleam. “The top was decorated with flowers and attached to colorful paper streamers.” She raised a hand and twirled her forefingers. “Dancers then held the loose ends of these streamers and spun around the pole, weaving intricate patterns as they passed over and under each other in the dance.” At this, Stadi let out a sinister laugh.

“Maybe we should invite the Klingons to just such a dance as a show of good faith,” he grinned. “Let them know there are no hard feelings,” he shrugged. The group laughed lightly and continued to smile as images of burly Klingon warriors prancing wildly about a Maypole flashed through their collective consciousness.

They walked on a bit further, then stopped at the rim of the lagoon and studied for a time the yellow water lilies floating near its edges. Garrett inhaled deeply once again and looked up into the endless blue green ‘sky’. The simulated UV felt fantastic on her face and somewhat reinvigorated her, filling her with the deep radiant warmth of the sun. They all reflected a moment more in quiet contemplation before a frog suddenly splashed and disturbed the mercurial

countenance of their reflected images.

“So, Captain,” Onovan finally said at last, breaking the trance, “tell us what it is you wish to talk to us about on this fine day.”

“Yes, please do,” Stadi added, “you don’t usually invite us for a walk unless there’s something on your mind.” They both faced their captain now with crossed arms and hidden grins. Garrett stood there quietly for a minute longer and continued to look thoughtfully at the shimmering water. Although the captain’s psi-factor was not high enough to allow for direct telepathic communication, she had nonetheless been working with Stadi for years to develop and nurture the natural extrasensory abilities inherent in every human mind.

He’d also taught her the Betazoid technique of erecting mental walls to prevent the telepathic probings of others. Given that well over half her crew was from Betazed, this had become a vital skill for Garrett to master. Not only were there were security issues to be considered, but also the simple and mundane things such as ordinary everyday privacy. The Betazoids were a fully open society... whereas humans, well they, they still had their secrets to keep, and Rachel Garrett, well, she had perhaps more than most.

Stadi was concerned by the fact that Garrett had maintained such a mental wall ever since her entrance into the early morning briefing. She was clinging to it now like a security blanket, and he found it more unnerving than usual; wanted nothing but to help.

“Captain?” Onovan ventured. His urging released a sudden explosion of frustrated anger deep within her mind. It continued to build as she clenched her right fist, causing her arm to tremble. Stadi involuntarily flinched as the walls at once came tumbling down.

“Starfleet has some nerve sending us on this mission,” she finally blurted out. “Five long years we’ve been out on the frontier, away from our families, away from our homes.” She gritted her teeth. “And now, now, after all we’ve been through, after all our heartache...” she paused, “...now they’re sending us into the middle of a political hotbed and expect us to once more save the day?” She threw her right arm up in the air, then let it fall.

“We’ve been so out of touch for so long, how do they expect this one little ship to make a difference in the grand scheme of things?” Garrett spun around and stepped away in continued frustration, slightly

embarrassed by her rare outburst of emotion. There was a short period of silence amongst them before Stadi finally turned to face his captain's back and spoke with profound and thoughtful conviction.

"We won't make a difference, Captain, we *are* the difference. The name *Enterprise* is respected and revered on both sides of the border..."

"And this crew is the best in the fleet," Onovan stated with just as much confidence. "You made it that way, Captain," he reassured her, "we *will* prevail..."

"And with a renewed Federation-Klingon treaty, peace will be stronger than ever before," Stadi finished with a grin, yet the captain still faced away from them. She surreptitiously brushed a single tear from her eye, then turned and smiled at her officers.

"You're both right of course. I don't know what got into me. This will be the crowning glory of another successful five-year mission of exploration." The hint of sarcasm was not lost on the two men as she gestured left and the three of them started down a new path. "Still a beautiful day for a walk," she murmured. They all smiled and strolled ahead, caught up in a sort of awkward silence. Then Stadi looked down to the captain's left hand.

"What's on the padd, Captain?" he asked, beckoning to it.

"Oh this?" She brought up the small book-like device and glanced at the text contained therein. "It's the logs of Captain James T. Kirk," she explained, "it seems that he too was having a few guarded reservations about the borderlands when Starfleet ordered his *Enterprise* into this region." Captain Rachel C. Garrett then studied his impassioned words a moment more before beginning to quote from Kirk's very own innermost thoughts:

"CAPTAIN'S PERSONAL LOG
STARDATE 9522.6

I'VE NEVER TRUSTED KLINGONS, AND I NEVER WILL.
I CAN NEVER FORGIVE THEM FOR THE DEATH OF MY
BOY.

SEEMS TO ME, OUR MISSION TO ESCORT THE
CHANCELLOR OF THE KLINGON HIGH COUNCIL TO A

PEACE SUMMIT IS PROBLEMATIC AT BEST. SPOCK SAYS THIS COULD BE AN HISTORIC OCCASION AND I'D LIKE TO BELIEVE HIM. BUT HOW ON EARTH CAN HISTORY GET PAST PEOPLE LIKE ME?"

Garrett clasped her hands behind her back and paused beneath a tall Andorian Soliel tree. Its large, hand-like leaves cradled delicate blossoms in a dizzying array of purple and blue patchwork. She inhaled a whiff of their intensely sweet, but almost pungent smelling fragrance. It caused her nose to involuntarily scrunch up and twitch.

"Of course," she said at length, "you both know that ultimately the mission was a resounding success. Despite all the hatred and distrust on both sides, the resulting peace has been maintained for fifty years." Garrett smiled a moment upon thought of Kirk's legendary status. "It's even been rumored," she added reverently, "that Captain Kirk is the only non-Klingon to be immortalized with a statue deep inside the halls of the First City on Qo'noS."

Garrett sat down on a bench and sighed. Stadi and Onovan looked down at her sympathetically, then took their respective seats by her side. Stadi was dismayed that her mental block was still firmly in place. He wished he could get through somehow, to help with whatever was truly bothering her. In their over twenty years of service together, their minds had virtually become one. More and more, as they got older, Stadi was finding himself missing the captain's thoughts when they were apart; or on rare occasions such as this, when she was blocking him out. There was a long silence in which no one spoke. Then at length, Onovan could bear it no longer and risked a legitimate question.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but frankly I'm afraid I don't see your point." Garrett let out an agitated half-laugh, then finally acquiesced to the demands of her officers, teeth clenched.

"There is no point per se, Gentlemen, I believe it would be better construed as a problem, really... you see, as I read over Kirk's logs, I strangely find myself sympathizing with him." She glanced again at the text on the padd. "I don't trust the Klingons either... or even the Romulans for that matter. Deep down, I don't think I ever have. But on

the other hand, I can also see their point of view too... the Klingons and the Romulans don't trust us any more than we trust them!" She drew in a short, exasperated breath.

"The Federation is growing far faster than anyone ever anticipated and its influence is quickly spreading across the quadrant. Entire worlds are being swallowed up and their cultures lost to a sea of Federationalism." A frustrated look passed over her blushed features. "Can you blame them for wanting to resist us? They are merely trying to protect their own unique way of life." She sat back on the bench and excitedly tapped the padd against her crossed knee. Commander Stadi waited with patience while his captain slowly relaxed. He then began an age-old story that had been told to every Betazoid schoolchild.

"Many decades ago," he said solemnly, "a proposal was put forth to the Five Great Houses of Betazed. It called for Betazed to join with several other planets in a growing new union, a union dedicated to peace and exploration.

"For many months, this proposal was debated within the Great House Consensus. It was debated within the Legislative Assembly. It was debated in every home and on every university campus across the planet." Stadi smiled. "It was debated until every possible detail, every pro and con, had been scrutinized and examined a hundred times over.

"Yet, the Great Houses could not reach Consensus, and the Assembly remained deadlocked. Throughout it all, one inescapable fear began to surface. It was feared that, in joining such a union, the purely unique cultural lifestyle so dear to the Betazoid people could all be lost to a sea of Federationalism. That an influx of offworld influence could in some way corrupt the 'purity' of Betazoid society." Stadi was pleased to see that he held both Garrett and Onovan's undivided attention. He slid onto the edge of the bench and turned so as to more directly face them.

"It seemed," he continued, "that the matter had no hope of resolution. But then, one day, a Vulcan ambassador materialized... completely nude... smack in the center of the Great House Consensus. Members of all the Five Great Houses sat and stared at him in stunned silence."

Garrett and Onovan both broke into broad toothy smiles. Although the Betazoids, a society of open-minded telepaths, were well

known for their penchant toward nudity, the thought of a Vulcan suddenly appearing in the flesh before the whole of the Consensus was quite a sight to be imagined to be sure.

“In his hand,” Stadi went on, “the Vulcan held a withered old piece of parchment. He immediately raised it up and began to read from it. It was in fact, the early, unrevised edition of our Prime Directive which strictly forbade any Federation world from interfering in the cultural and political developments of any other Federation world.”

Stadi stopped and slid back into the bench. They all smiled for a few more moments at the continued thought of a nude Vulcan giving oratory in front of a large group of people. Finally, Onovan leaned forward and asked who the mysterious streaking Vulcan was.

“It was Ambassador Sarek,” Stadi answered with no small amount of reverence, “legendary son of President Skon and father of Admiral Spock.” Onovan and Garrett both nodded and smiled. Stadi turned to them again, this time with a hint of excitement in his voice as he spoke with growing conviction.

“We laugh now, but the Betazoid people saw Sarek’s brave act as an incredible sign of respect for the cultural beliefs and traditions of my people.”

“And Betazed,” Garrett nodded, “has become one of the most important and influential worlds in the Federation.”

“Yes,” Stadi agreed. “Don’t you see, Captain? Cultures aren’t being lost, they’re being incorporated. Two parts becoming one and making the whole stronger. I’d be willing to venture that eventually the Federation and the Klingon Empire will be as inseparable as the Five Founding Worlds are today.”

“If they aren’t inseparable already,” Onovan offered. But Garrett wasn’t so sure she shared in the optimism of her two officers with regard to that last statement. It still seemed to her that relations had a long, long way to go before a hundred years of anger, fear, and distrust was completely washed away between these two vastly different cultures.

With the Klingons, it was a delicate line between peace and war, a line that was far too easy to cross. And Garrett sincerely hoped that she would never have cause to cross that line. Eyeing her carefully,

both Stadi and Onovan could see that the ice was beginning to ever so slightly melt, but there was yet to be a complete thaw. With a glance from Stadi, Onovan took the cue to begin his own assault on the captain's beleaguered senses.

"Oi, you two, I feel like I'm being bushwhacked!" Garrett laughed, rolling her eyes.

"Merely doing our job, Captain," Stadi replied, "and after all, *you* invited *us*."

"Fair enough," she conceded, looking at Onovan, "so what's your story?" Onovan's face turned so suddenly somber that it startled his two listeners into rapt attention.

"When my homeworld was destroyed and my people scattered to the solar winds, we drifted from solar system to solar system all across the galaxy in search of aid. Most worlds were indifferent. Many treated us with disdain and disgust. Oft times, we were chased off with weapons fire, then pursued and hunted for sport." Garrett gave him a *this-is-supposed-to-cheer-me-up* look, while Stadi, for his part, gave the counselor a *what-the-heck-are-you-doing?! kind of look*. Onovan eyed them both levelly, then raised his palms for peace.

"At long last we arrived here, on Earth, a shattered, broken people... yet the Federation accepted us with open arms. Our wounds were healed and we were given jobs and places to live. Our culture, our very way of life, was reborn and nurtured by a newfound hope." Onovan's mood changed from somber to more uplifting as he finished.

"You see Captain, we weren't swallowed, we were *saved*. And now we are a respected, contributing part of the Federation family." It was a long while before any of them spoke again. Stadi was pleased to sense that Garrett's mental wall was slowly beginning to dissolve — her thoughts, slightly more relaxed and a little less agitated. Finally, she stood up, made a glorious stretch, then took one final breath of the fresh fragrant air.

"Thank you. Gentlemen," she said with newfound contentment. "Once again you've given me a renewed perspective on things, and secured my sanity for another day." The two men stood and smiled brightly at her. Together, they all turned and began strolling down a blossom-strewn walkway that lazily wound its way towards an exit.

"I suppose," Garrett smirked, "that we should spend some of our

time today actually *on* the Bridge.” They all laughed at this as they passed through an ornate alcove, out of the vast colorful expanse of the arboretum, and into the stark honeycomb corridors of the *Enterprise*.

“...begin Chapter Four.”

Marta Batanides, having left a stunned Ann Grey standing back on Deck Twenty-eight, ordered the lift to take her to Deck Eighteen. As she sped upwards towards her destination, Marta began to think broodingly to herself. Admittedly, she really had to question the wisdom of Ann’s decision to try at long last to pursue her love interest in Skyl. Ann Grey had a strange and unpredictable personality; a sharp contradiction to Skyl’s straight-forward, no nonsense Vulcan heritage. However, she knew better than to ever interfere in her friend’s personal life. *Best to just let it be*, she mused, *maybe it’ll be good for them both*.

This man Marta was about to contact, Captain Jean-Luc Picard, had been her closest friend at the Academy. They too had once considered something more, a relationship, but in the end had ultimately agreed that it would forever change their *friendship*. Her experiences (including a brief liaison with Lieutenant Castillo) had taught her that friends who tried to be lovers often ended their affiliation to each other with disastrous consequences. Like many, she had learned the hard way. Additionally, as Starfleet officers, there were a host of other concerns to be considered as well. Maintaining a relationship within the tight confines of a starship was not an easy task on even the best of days. Out on the frontier, there was no escape, you couldn’t just walk away. She hoped it might be different between Ann and Skyl, but Marta still had her doubts about the whole thing.

The background thrum of the lift began to slow, then stop, and the doors parted to reveal Deck Eighteen. Marta hesitantly stepped out and looked around. The doors behind her slid shut with a quiet hiss and the lift sped away on another mission, leaving her all alone in the dim light. She found the sudden stillness to be disturbing. This out-of-the-way deck was contained within the connecting dorsal, the massive superstructure that joined the secondary hull and nacelles with the large circular primary hull. This, and the adjoining decks, were most often vacant of crewmembers and were instead filled with a vast array of sensors, computer subprocessors, and subspace communication relays.

Marta always felt a certain level of unease when entering these darkened areas of the ship, almost as if she were stepping into a vast no-

man's land between the populated realms of the primary and secondary hulls. Several decks above her she could hear the low rumble of the fusion reactors that fed the main impulse engines and provided backup power for any number of other shipwide systems. It was an unnerving backdrop to the dark quiet. Marta was certain that the temperature here had to be at least five degrees warmer and she began to perspire ever so slightly. With some reluctance, she started to move softly down the bleak narrow corridor, not wanting to disturb the eerie stillness. Surreptitiously, she crept around a corner and glided down another narrow, dimly lit passageway.

Moving in the general direction of the power coupling, she slowly became aware of a mysterious *thump-thump-thumping* in her chest. She could only assume it was her heartbeat, though her heightened senses suggested that it was, and was not, all at the same time. Her mind began to entertain notions of unseen creatures or crazed stowaways lurking there, in that ghostly darkness, and the perspiration began to make her skin feel clammy. The temperature had most certainly gone up another five degrees now, and Marta anxiously considered returning to the bright friendly environment of the saucer section. *Let Skyl send in one of his engineering teams*, she thought ruefully now. The *thump-thump-thumping* became louder and louder and Marta was convinced that her heart could quite possibly leap right out of her chest at any moment.

She ducked down another corridor, and another, and then at last saw before her the source of the incessant throbbing. The sought after EPS conduit pulsed away in the darkness, no more inviting than the halls themselves. Marta was amused to find that her heart was throbbing at nearly the exact same frequency as the heavy metal casing thumping against its framework. She let out a great sigh, then laughed.

“And you're supposed to be the Chief of Security... Ha!” she proclaimed. Her voice echoed down the distant corridors like an unwelcome stranger and a slight sense of unease all too eagerly returned to her. Marta shrugged it off, no longer amused, and pulled out her tricorder. She scanned the coupling for a few minutes, then touched a control panel embedded in the casing. Making a few adjustments, she both heard — and felt — the throbbing as it gradually diminished and her own heartbeat slowly returned to normal. Once the source of heat

had been removed, the environmental controls also quickly dropped the temperature back down to a more comfortable level. This left Marta feeling much relieved as she reached up and wiped the sweat from her upper lip. She took a final reading, then tapped her commbadge.

“Batanides to Skyl.” Her voice again echoed off the walls and down the corridors.

“*Skyl here, Commander.*” His voice filtered out of her commbadge so loudly that it too resounded down the dim passageways before losing itself in the shadows.

“I just realigned the starboard power coupling on Deck Eighteen, but I am still detecting variations in the magnetic fields. You may want to consider replacing this section at our next maintenance layover.”

“*Acknowledged, Commander,*” Skyl replied, “*I will make note of it in the maintenance schedule.*”

“Very good... Batanides out.” She wondered how the meeting between he and Ann had gone. Obviously, she couldn’t tell by the tone in *his* voice, so she’d just have to get the skinny from her later. For a fleeting moment, Marta felt like a teenager again, and this caused her to giggle. Agree or not, the prospect of a new onboard romance was still an exciting distraction from the mundane, day-to-day routine of life aboard a deep space starship. Despite all the ‘legendary’ hoopla, it seemed like nothing exciting ever happened aboard this bucket.

Marta strolled down a few more corridors before coming at last to a subspace communications alcove. She sat down and tried to think of the last time she’d even talked to Jean-Luc Picard. She had of course kept up with his career and advancements over the years, and they’d even exchanged a few letters; but it had to have been at least fifteen years since they’d actually spoken in person. Time flies, even in space, and she sighed.

“Computer... open a personal subspace commlink to Captain Jean-Luc Picard, USS *Stargazer*, NCC-2893.” The computer offered its usual cheery jingle of compliance which, Marta concluded, seemed woefully out of place on this dreary deck. She was, however, comforted to hear that her voice didn’t seem to reverberate quite so badly here inside the alcove as it had out in the passages behind her.

The words **STAND-BY** flashed on the bottom of the screen while a

thin yellow line traced the signal's path. It bounced off several deep space relay stations before reaching its target.

"Commlink established. Awaiting Reply. Please stand-by..." said the computers distinctive female voice; the origins of which had long since been lost to the annals of antiquity. The image of a distinguished man in his late thirties suddenly appeared on the screen, somewhat startling her, and she inhaled sharply. His broad chin and pronounced nose conveyed strong authority, but both were tempered by deep-set, unalarming green eyes. He'd changed so much! It was humbling to think that she too must've aged accordingly, and it caused her to involuntarily run her slender fingers through her dark hair.

"Picard here. Oh... Marty, hi, what a pleasant surprise! It's so nice to hear from you." His strong voice made him sound like he was standing in the room right next to her, rather than talking to her from dozens of light years away.

"Johnny, how have you been?" Marta could tell by his barely discernable reaction that he probably hadn't been called 'Johnny' in a very long time.

"Why fine, just fine... last I heard, your ship was out on the frontier?"

"Just returning actually." She let out a deep melancholy sigh. "It's been a long five years my friend... but would ya look at you now... *Captain.*"

Picard smiled and returned: *"Me? Look at you... Second Officer of the Enterprise... Marty, that's quite a prestigious posting."*

"Don't you worry, Johnny, someday you'll get your chance at the *Enterprise.*" Marta offered him a twisted smile and a wink and Picard laughed right out loud.

"What... that monstrosity?" he rejoined with a chuckle. *"I'm quite content here on my own little ship, thank you very much. Now tell me, what's on your mind?"*

"We've been ordered on a patrol run of the Klingon border. You've been serving in this sector of space for quite some time now, right?" Marta pretended to play coy. "I was hoping you could offer us some friendly advice to help us on our way."

"Yes of course, I'll have any pertinent information sent to your ship immediately. Is there anything else?" His demeanor was now one

of complete business and his professionalism was quite impressive, even rivaling that of some admirals she'd met.

"What is your impression of the border worlds?" Marta asked.

"How well have they managed the transitions of peace since the Khitomer Accords?" Picard pondered this a long moment before replying. There were no easy answers on this subject, not even for him.

"It's really quite fascinating, actually," he said, leaning forward.

"Each world has adjusted differently and at varying degrees according to their cultural beliefs, trading status, frequency of contact, and even on some worlds, their religious dogmas. Overall, I think we've come a long way... but it is important to realize that we still have a long way to go."

"And Turkana IV?" she prompted him further. Picard let out a groan and rolled his eyes. He brought his right hand up and pinched his lower lip before continuing softly.

"Turkana IV..." there was a long pause before he spoke again.

"When we last visited the Turkana System six months ago, things were already becoming critical. I strongly urged that Starfleet send in its top negotiators at once..."

"Just think of it, Marty, a civil war on a Federation colony! It's almost unimaginable. And it could have potentially serious repercussions for every other star system throughout this sector. Be that as it may, Starfleet's position was such that any action taken at that time would be premature... and be an explicit violation of the Prime Directive."

"The Prime Directive?" Marta interrupted with a puzzled look.

"Surely it does not apply in this situation?" She'd had many a debate with her own captain regarding the finer points of the Prime Directive, especially after the events of Ethos, and then after that, Directoria.

"Aligned worlds are assured the exact same protections as unaligned worlds. The Federation Council and Starfleet may not interfere in the internal affairs and natural developments of any planet unless intervention is specifically requested by the government of that planet. The principle holds true for Earth, Vulcan, Bajor, and even Turkana IV; regardless of their history, or how you and I may assess the situation."

"And when the government collapses and civil war breaks out?"

What then?" Marta tried her best to pin her friend down on the subtleties of Prime Directive law.

"Then the debate of intervention would lie in the hands of the Federation Council, I suppose." Picard smiled and Marta realized he was alluding to the fact that their own debate could go on for hours. She returned his smile as he offered her a final bit of advice.

"Marty, any reports that you have received are, in all likelihood, outdated and inaccurate. Be prepared for the worst-case scenario when you arrive there."

"Thanks for the free advice, Captain." She paused and sighed. "It's been way too long Johnny." They smiled at each other for a long moment before he finally replied.

"It has indeed... Picard out." Marta gazed into his eyes for an instant more, then his image suddenly vanished. She reached up and briefly touched the darkened screen before becoming sharply aware that she was no longer alone. She had the acute sense that some-one, or something, was prowling around in the somber passages somewhere behind her.

Marta slowly, breathlessly, ran her right hand down her abdomen and reached for the small personal hand phaser she always kept tucked in her belt. She could feel her heartbeat pounding inside her chest again, felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise and stand on end. Whoever, *whatever*, it was, was very close now, perhaps even right behind...

With a sudden decisive move, Marta spun in her chair and pointed the weapon directly at its target. A startled and quivering Ann Grey plastered herself against a bulkhead and let out a blood-curdling scream that pierced metal, and resounded endlessly down the long, half-lit corridors as it stretched on and on and on, perhaps even a bit longer than it should have.

"Annie?!..." Marta finally shouted. "Great Shades, you scared the hell out of me! Why in the world are you creeping around down here?" Ann peeled herself off the wall and straightened her tunic, not altogether happy with the situation, yet not willing to admit her embarrassment either. Her fear was quickly replaced with anger.

"I scared the hell out of you?" she exclaimed. "You're the gun-toting maniac that just tried to sauté my innards!" Still trembling and

staring nervously down the dark narrow halls, Ann tried to regain some composure, but still shook uncontrollably.

“I got lost,” she then tried to explain, “looking around in this dungeon for you. I’ve never seen some of these decks before and the computer told me you were here, so I thought I’d check it out...” Marta stood up and placed the phaser back in her belt. She then chuckled softly as she shook off a small bit of her own trembling.

“You should have seen your face,” she laughed. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Are you quite finished?” Ann asked as Marta kept giggling.

“Oh yes,” Marta smirked, “I’ll call the *Ajax* later.”

“Not that,” an unamused Ann Grey exclaimed. She then too began to chuckle, albeit faintly. “My face? You should’ve seen yours. I don’t see how you could shoot anything with your eyes closed.” Marta laughed right out loud, then prodded her friend in the ribs.

“So how did it go with Skyl?” she asked with a wink. The good doctor smiled and looped her arm in Marta’s. Together, the two friends turned and went laughing down the corridor in the general direction of the nearest lift, all inclinations of fear left quietly behind them in the darkness.

~ ~ ~ ~

As Skyl watched Ann go, he could not deny the brief, fleeting sensation of anxiety he suddenly felt. He was caught somewhat unawares by this, and it left him disturbed. Like the others of his race, the Vulcan had spent a lifetime honing down his psyche until all, but the barest hints of emotion had been purged. This sudden sensation was illogical. The erratic doctor’s interest in him came as no surprise to be sure. So why the anxiety?

He stepped to the right and brought up the readings from the starboard warp nacelle. A slight oscillation in the warp field had plagued the starship ever since the Battle of Ethos. For an engineer, perfection can be everything, none Moreso than for a Vulcan engineer. The *Enterprise* had taken some pretty sound beatings in her lifetime, and a major overhaul was long overdue. The twenty-two-year-old spaceframe was beginning to show its age, and perfection was slowly

starting give way to nothing more than simple structural fatigue.

Anxiety is illogical, Skyl thought, attempting to reinforce this within his mind. He had never held the fascination with humans that so many of his Vulcan brethren seemed to excel at. His interest was held fast in technology. He'd been perfectly content at his desk at Seran-T-One, that is until that damnable Garrett had convinced him to stay aboard. The clear-cut, straight-forward operation of machines fascinated him now, just as it always had. Within a given set of parameters, their operation never varied. Ann Grey was as far from this as any human being could get. He wondered now why he had ever agreed to her dinner invitation.

This oscillation in the warp field vexed him. It was not logical. His every attempt to correct it over the years had met with failure. Even an extensive realignment of the starboard nacelle at Starbase 105 had done little to alleviate it. One of his assistants had once made an obscure reference to 'ghosts in the machine' — but be that as it may, it simply did not fit within the parameters of warp field theory any more than Ann Grey fell into the parameters of normal human behavior.

So why had he agreed? It had been almost five years since Ann Grey had first come aboard the *Enterprise*. Other than the standard greetings, he'd had virtually no contact with her in all that time. She certainly was a curious creature though. He'd never met another human with her level of strange behavior and bizarre unpredictability. Pleasant enough to be sure; but she fit into *no* parameters whatsoever. He had often heard the human expression 'opposites attract' — yet he had never come to a readily apparent motive for her almost inexplicable attraction to *him*. It was all purely illogical.

Touching several buttons on the tabletop control surface, Skyl adjusted the plasma flow regulators in the starboard nacelle. Almost immediately, the ship began to take on a slight shudder, which in turn triggered several alarms. *Curious*, he thought, *that should not have happened*. He quickly reversed the changes and silenced the alarms. Reviewing the data, he soon saw his error; it was a child's mistake, a simple miscalculation in mathematics. He began now to get the sensation that the problem was not with the technology, but with he himself. His thoughts of Ann Grey were distracting him from his work. Curious indeed.

“Bridge to Engineering... Everything alright down there Mr. Skyl?”

“My apologies, Commander,” the Vulcan replied. “A slight variation in the warp field occurred... I have corrected it.”

“Understood... Stadi out.” Skyl immediately felt overwarm and sensed his heart rate increase ever so slightly.

Stepping back to the left, he checked the environmental controls in Engineering. All systems operating within normal parameters. The female doctor certainly was attractive... by human standards of course. Her bright blue eyes were a rare human specialty. She maintained her body in a peak physical condition that seemed shapelier than most. Her shoulder-length brown hair hung in her eyes with a will of its own that seemed to defy all sense of logic. The harmonic variations in the pitch of her voice seemed almost melodic in nature and were soothing to the senses and pleasing to the ear...

Some moments later Skyl found himself staring blankly down the long corridor where Ann Grey had just passed. *Fascinating*, he mused, *yet another curious sensation*. Stepping back to the right, he studied the readouts from the starboard nacelle. The technology was flawed. It did not fit within a given set of parameters, its operation varied. Perhaps he could learn something from this young doctor that would help him accept this fact. Nothing in the universe was perfect, there were indefinable flaws, things that were not logical. He glanced briefly at the ship’s chronometer... ten hours until their date. *Anxiety is illogical*, he repeated to himself, yet he knew not why.

“...begin Chapter Five.”

The Starboard Café was a luxurious lounge nestled into the right-side rim of the massive circular saucer section. It was graced with long elliptical windows that stretched from the floor to the ceiling across three full decks. Numerous potted shrubs and bushes encircled the first level, while long flowering plants cascaded down over the edges of the smaller second and third tiers, giving the entire place a hanging-gardens-like appearance. After their shift, off duty personnel often came here to relax and socialize with their fellow crew members. It was a welcome place to unwind after a long tedious day when not much seemed to change aboard ship... one of the pitfalls of deep-space travel.

Although the lounge was open to everyone, it was somewhat of an unwritten rule that the third tier was mainly reserved for the senior staff and other members of the somewhat elite Bridge crew. It was here that Lieutenant Richard Castillo sat and gazed down at the relaxed and laughing off duty day watch. There was remarkably little conversation given the telepathic nature of the nearly all Betazoid crew... but still, they laughed. Warp stars streaked by the long oval windows providing a dramatic backdrop to the blackness of infinite space. Castillo let out a long sigh and took another draught of his synthale. After a time, Lt. Commander Onovan entered the lounge and came up next to him, standing there for quite some time entirely unnoticed.

“Counselor!” Castillo exclaimed finally, somewhat startled. “I’m sorry, I didn’t see you standing there... I was kind of staring off into space, so to speak,” and he smiled.

“May I join you, Lieutenant?” Castillo gestured to the vacant chair opposite him and Onovan slid into it, then ordered a drink for himself from a passing attendant. Once he was settled, he looked down and out at the passing stars then up again to Castillo, who himself was still gazing out the great windows.

“You look like a man who has a lot on his mind,” Onovan ventured.

“Huh?” Castillo intoned. He then snapped back to attention. “Oh! It’s nothing, just thinking is all. What’s on your mind?”

“Well, we’ve served together for many years and have never really gotten to know each other very well, so I thought... ‘Why not today?’ ...I know that you’ve never really felt very comfortable around me,” he demurred somewhat awkwardly.

“Don’t feel bad,” Castillo smirked, “it’s not you, just shrinks in general.”

“Oh, why is that?” Onovan said with a laugh.

“Let’s just say, Starfleet doesn’t know when it’s time to just let things rest.”

“Didn’t your father serve in Starfleet?” Onovan asked with feigned naivety, despite the fact that he already knew the lieutenant’s full historical background. Castillo gave the counselor a perfunctory smile followed by a menacing look. He fingered his glass a moment, then decided to dodge one bullet with another.

“Tell me about your homeworld,” he said. “I heard El-Auria is very far away. I’ve also heard that your people live to be very old and that some of you have very strange mental abilities that allow you to see into the future.” Onovan decided to indulge Castillo in his purposeful little attempt at diversion. After all, sometimes the ends justify the means, or so the saying went anyway.

“You should be careful what you hear, Lieutenant,” the Counselor countered, wagging a finger. “Yes, my people do live to be very old. I was born on El-Auria in your Earth-year 1974. My mother was born at the time of your American Revolution. And yes, a very small group of my people do have enhanced mental abilities... though it is something we do not like to talk about. I will say though that they did gain these some of these abilities during an accident aboard the *Enterprise-B*.”

“Were you aboard the *Enterprise-B*?” Castillo sat forward and asked this with an almost childlike glimmer of hope in his eye.

“No, I was not,” he answered truthfully, “but my wife was.”

Onovan pushed away a sudden flood of memories, concentrating instead on his patient. He realized with dismay that he’d just blown a perfect opportunity to make some headway, but honesty must always prevail. Castillo’s shoulders sank as he glanced again out the great windows.

“So, what’s El-Auria like anyway?” he asked at length.

Onovan's shoulders sank slightly too as more memories flooded into his aged consciousness.

"Well, to answer your previous question," he responded, "El-Auria *was* about 7,000 light-years away. By some accounts, it was the most beautiful planet in the galaxy... even more beautiful than that famed vacation planet of yours, Risa." Onovan paused now as if he were remembering a distant memory of enchanted days long since gone. Castillo cleared his throat and took another swig of his synthetic ale, unwilling to make eye contact in the awkward silence. Onovan smiled faintly and also took a long drink before continuing.

"The name El-Auria," he continued on an upbeat note, "is actually Federation shorthand for the full name *Tor Umbria Omri Nexus El-Auria*... loosely translated, it means: The Moon's A Window to Heaven." Castillo frowned and looked at him speculatively.

"That's a song my mother used to sing to me!" The lieutenant grinned as if the counselor was pulling his leg.

"It is also a song," Onovan conceded with a slight tilt of the head. "One of our more careless travelers introduced it to Earth culture in... oh, I'd say, the late Twentieth Century? A forested place called Holler Woods, I think. Anyway..."

"Oh, come on," Castillo was now laughing. "You're kidding me, right?" He shook his head and signaled for two more drinks. "You're telling me that an old folksong about the moon being a window to heaven is the name of your planet?" Onovan was not laughing, but he was at least smiling a bit.

"It was a name *before* it was a song, Lieutenant... You have the context all wrong, try looking at it from the other direction." Castillo could see that Onovan was serious and decided to tone back on the laughter, at least for a moment.

"Okay, go on," he said, trying his best to remain serious.

"You see," Onovan continued, "when our space travelers would return home, weary from a long journey, they would proclaim as they approached our planet: '*Tor Umbria Omri Nexus El-Auria*' ...the moon's a window to heaven... heaven of course being our homeworld."

They sat in silence for a while reflecting on this, and perhaps too remembering to always try to look at both sides of the coin.

After a time, Castillo finally asked: "I noticed you kept saying

was about El-Auria... Why?"

"Sadly, Tor Umbria Omri Nexus El-Auria is no more," Onovan answered quietly. "Something else we don't like to talk about, for obvious reasons." He sighed and finished off his first drink. "Your turn, Lieutenant. Tell me about Earth, you were raised there, were you not?"

"Yes," Castillo nodded, "but I was born on Archer Four. My mother was staying there with my father's parents when my father was killed. I was born several months later. My mother then moved back to Earth to live with her own parents in St. Augustine." Castillo laughed lightly. "I traveled back and forth from Archer Four to Earth so many times I lost track. I was the only child born to only children, so for my grandparents, there never seemed to be enough of me to go around."

"When did you decide to join Starfleet?" Onovan asked.

"Well... when I was young, I used to make my grandfather take me down the coast to the ruins of the Kennedy Space Center... destroyed during World War Three," he paused, tilting his head as Onovan nodded. "There's a museum there that chronicles mankind's first attempts to reach out into space, including full-scale models of the archaic launch and orbiting vehicles they used.

"I guess seeing all those things gave me a glimpse of the dreams they had for the future of humanity, and the ruins showed me how fragile and easily destroyed those visions can be... even today." Castillo finished off his second drink and gazed longingly out the elliptical windows at the warping stars.

"So," Onovan guessed, "you felt that by joining Starfleet, you could both live those dreams and protect them at the same time?"

Castillo nodded distantly. His thoughts were now filled with memories of his formative years spent happily on the beaches of the Atlantic Ocean. Equally as happy perhaps were his memories of the exciting journeys to Archer IV and back, which often led to many interesting layovers on any number of different planets and starbases. Taking advantage to Castillo's quiet repose, Onovan made the perhaps fateful decision to move in while the lieutenant's guard was down.

"Did the fact that your father served and died in Starfleet have any impact on your decision to join?"

"Well sure," Castillo answered plainly, "I wanted to honor his

memory too...” And then he stopped short and tensed, realizing that this was beginning to look like yet another ambush by yet another Starfleet shrink.

“And how did you feel when you found out that our new orders will be taking us so close to the Rom...”

“**STOP** right there, Counselor!” Castillo burst out suddenly. “How I feel about the Romulans is nobody’s business but my own... and I certainly don’t need to be psycho-analyzed by you or anyone else about it either.” He stood up abruptly and glared at Onovan angrily. “Like I said, Starfleet doesn’t seem to know when it’s time to just let things rest.”

With that, the Lieutenant marched across the room and out the door. Onovan simply sat there for a few minutes and stared at the warp stars as they slowly flashed by. He let out a long sigh and went over the conversation again in his mind. He should’ve known better. Presently, he finished his drink and stood up. As he walked up to the edge of the railing and looked down, he could think of only one word that properly befit the situation — it was a human expression that went something like this: *Dammit!*

~ ~ ~ ~

Lt. Commander Skyl stood pensively outside the door to Dr. Ann Grey’s quarters and hesitated there in a most un-Vulcan-like way. Though his greenish-tan skin showed no sign of blush, he was disturbed to find that his heart rate was once again slightly elevated and his breathing somewhat above normal. He reached up to touch the door chime, but involuntarily stopped short. *Anxiety is illogical*, he repeated to himself, as his hand dropped slowly back to his side. Unnerved, he began to recite within his mind an ancient Vulcan meditation chant to hopefully help center himself, and to slow his racing heart: *Structure. Logic. Function. Control. A structure cannot stand without a foundation. Logic is the foundation of function. Function is the essence of control. I am in control. I am in control.*

Skyl’s thoughts immediately began to clear, and he sensed his heart rate return to normal. Without further delay, he reached up and touched the door chime. Almost instantly, the doors slid open to reveal

Ann Grey standing in the entry with a thumb still on the opposite control pad. She looked sheepishly into Skyl's eyes for a moment, then down to the floor. A form-fitting black dress hung off her shoulders on thin delicate straps, while her brown hair cascaded down over her soft shoulders in great undulating waves. Impulsively, she reached up and tucked an errant strand behind an ear before speaking.

"Skyl, hi! You're right on time... of course I-I-I suppose you would be." She smiled and gestured Skyl in, then stood aside to give way.

"Actually, I believe I am several seconds late," he responded. "I was momentarily delayed in the corridor." He took several steps inside before turning to face the good doctor as the doors slid shut beside her. "It appears that I am not dressed appropriately for the occasion." His eyes followed her form once more and she smiled demurely.

"No, it's okay," she said. "You look fine, I mean your uniform is fine. I just get tired of wearing them. D-d-don't you think they're kind of, you know, stuffy?"

"Vulcan has a very warm and arid climate. Consequently, I often find the cooler, more humid environment aboard the *Enterprise* to be uncomfortable. It has been my experience that our heavily lined uniforms often serve as a 'winter coat' ...if you will allow the human euphemism."

Ann giggled. "I didn't necessarily mean stuffy as in warm, Skyl. More along the lines of, oh I don't know, too formal, I guess."

"Curious," Skyl stated with a raised brow, "in your culture, is not your present attire considered to be *formal* wear?" Her blue eyes flashed him a look that would have turned most human men to jelly. She smiled brightly, then walked past him towards the table.

"Please, sit down," she offered. "Everything is almost ready, all I need is your drink order."

"Mantua tea, hot," he responded, then walked up to inspect the table. There were settings for two using ancient earthenware he believed was once called fine China. A blue lacework pattern wound its way around the rims of the plates and saucers. In the center of the table, a large glass bowl, brimming with a mixture of vegetables and noodles, simmered over a laser heater. Surrounding it were foods and condiments consistent with a traditional human meal.

“A most pleasing aroma, Doctor. Soup?” Skyl inhaled another waft of the vapor then looked at Ann with an upraised eyebrow.

“Yes, vegetable,” she nodded. “My mother’s recipe.” Ann stepped away from the replicator carrying two matching China teacups full of steaming tea. Her hands shook lightly as she set them down in their saucers. She then looked up at Skyl, quite proud of herself for the nervous accomplishment.

“I never liked it as a child,” she explained, “but after being away from home for so long, I’ve begun to get cravings for it from time to time. Plus, I thought it’d be perfect since I know Vulcans don’t eat meat.”

“If memory serves,” Skyl asked as he sat down, “your home is on the planet Dulisian Four, is it not?” He took a roll and passed the basket while she handed him the salad bowl.

“Yes, born and raised outside the small village of Lumina. I hope to have a chance to visit there as long as we’re in this sector.”

“Lieutenant Castillo expressed a similar desire to visit his grandparents on Archer Four. The Captain was understanding, but stated the opportunity would depend on mission parameters.”

“Skyl,” Ann said quietly, “do you ever, you know, miss Vulcan?”

“That would presuppose an emotion I believe humans call ‘homesickness’, a desire I do not possess.” He noticed Ann seemed to be caught up in a blank stare, twirling her fork aimlessly in her salad. “Doctor, do you possess such a desire?” he finally asked.

She shrugged her shoulders, then answered distantly. “I don’t know... sometimes I guess... I mean it’s been *five* years, Skyl. You have *no* desire at all to go home?”

“I will admit, Doctor, it will be agreeable to see my family and home again, but at present, my foremost responsibility is to oversee the smooth and safe operation of every system aboard this vessel. That responsibility is not altered by the length of our mission, or by our proximity to home.”

“You’re right, of course,” she said somewhat distantly. “I’m sorry, Skyl. I’ve just had a lot on my mind lately.”

“It’s quite all right, Doctor...”

“Skyl, please,” she chided with a soft smile, “we’re off duty...”

call me Ann.”

The couple continued to talk for a while as they finished their salads and a small appetizer she'd prepared. They described their homeworlds, and discussed the details of their latest mission. They talked of their plans upon return to the Betazed System, and of future assignments in Starfleet. And through it all, Ann Grey began to relax and act more naturally; a point that did not go unnoticed by the very astute Skyl. When they'd finished with the prerequisites, Ann collected up the plates and took them to the replicator.

“Computer, begin dematerialization cycle.” The computer chirped and the dishes vanished in a dazzling display of swirling energy. “I never did like doing the dishes,” she giggled absently, thinking of her mother's monotonous toil for doing things ‘the old-fashioned way’. Ann then moved back to the table and began dishing up two large steaming bowls of soup.

“Skyl,” she asked presently with a slightly peculiar tone, “do you know what Marta was doing on Deck Eighteen today?” He found it curious that her hands were now trembling again, and that her tendency toward nervousness had made a subtle but dramatic return. Curious indeed.

“Commander Batanides,” he answered intently, “realigned the starboard power coupling, and I believe, made a number of subspace inquiries regarding our arrival in this particular sector.”

“Is... is the coupling okay? Wh-wh-what I mean is... is it going to blow us up or anything like that?” Skyl sampled the soup, then looked up at Ann with raised eyebrows.

“Excellent soup, Ann... I assure you, the coupling is quite safe for the time being, but it will need replacement when we dock to the Galatea Space Center on Betazed.” His dark narrow eyes narrowed further, and he gave her a questioning look. “That is the second incident today in which you have enquired as to the status of the engineering systems. Does something concern you that I should be aware of?”

“No, no, no” she answered rather suddenly. “I've... I've just wanted to, you know, expand my horizons lately. Become more familiar with ship operations.” Ann paused a moment while Skyl

nodded. “That’s interesting about... about the, um, coupling. Are there any more, uh, little quirks about the ship that most people wouldn’t know about?”

Her nervousness was now quite apparent and Skyl’s acute senses could detect slight variations in her pupil dilation and skin pigmentation. This left him puzzled and he studied her for some moments before finally answering.

“It is little known that, due to a design flaw,” he sighed, “the ship’s hull is particularly weak surrounding the Starboard Café. It is for that reason that the Café is evacuated during Alert conditions. Lieutenant Castillo insists that the port-forward RCS thruster is ‘sluggish’, though my engineering teams have found no cause for the anomaly. And ever since the Battle of Ethos, there continues to be a slight oscillation in the starboard warp field despite repeated attempts to correct it.

“Do you wish me to continue, Ann? There are several dozen fascinating variations in the operations of the internal systems as well, such as an unexplained periodic backup in the sewage reclamation plant...”

“No, no, no,” she exclaimed, turning red. “That’s okay... but perhaps someday you can, um, take me on a tour of the, um, ship?” Ann could tell that Skyl was pleased with her interest in his line of work. It was clear that not too many people wanted to hear about the ship’s sewage plant. *This is perfect*, she thought.

“A tour would be acceptable, Ann,” he stated. “In turn, I should like to increase my understanding of Sickbay procedure.” She blushed again at his unexpected return of interest in her own career. This brought on another fit of nervousness as she began to stand, which in turn set into motion an even more disastrous chain of events.

With a stifled *Ouch!* and a clattering of silver and dishes, Ann caught her thighs on the edge of the table as she rose. The large glass bowl full of steaming hot soup rocked precariously on the edge of oblivion for a short second, then toppled off the laser heater with a crash, spilling its near boiling contents into the lap of one Lt. Commander Skyl.

“Oh... my God. Skyl, oh my God. Are you all right?” The Vulcan clutched the edge of the table and let out a barely audible groan

as the scalding liquid soaked fully into his heavily lined uniform.

“Doctor,” he said through clenched teeth, “I think I am in need of your medical assistance.”

Her medical training automatically kicking in, Ann helped Skyl to his feet, then painstakingly led him into the bedroom. Laying him down on the edge of the bed, she grabbed her med kit and finally, with the greatest of care, helped him remove his clothing. Large blisters had already formed on his abdomen and on his... more delicate areas... as she began treatment. Ann had hoped to see Skyl naked at some point in their relationship, but this wasn't quite what she'd had in mind.

“...begin Chapter Six.”

CAPTAIN’S LOG

OLD FEDERATION STARDATE 41002.7

NEW GALACTIC STARDATE 21332.4

THE *ENTERPRISE* HAS ENTERED ORBIT OF TURKANA FOUR AND WE ARE PREPARING TO SEND DOWN AN AWAY TEAM. COMMANDER BATANIDES HAS BRIEFED THE SENIOR STAFF ON WHAT TO EXPECT, AND I MUST SAY, THE SITUATION ALREADY LOOKS GRIM.

THE FIRST OFFICER OF THE *AJAX* HAS EVEN SUGGESTED THAT THE UNREST SEEN HERE MAY ONLY BE A SMALL PART OF A MUCH LARGER PROBLEM.

UNWILLING TO RISK DISCUSSION OF DETAILS VIA SUBSPACE, HE HAS REQUESTED A RENDEZVOUS ON BEHALF OF HIS CAPTAIN. I HAVE AGREED, SCHEDULING DEPENDANT ON MISSION PARAMETERS.

“Report, Mr. Castillo.” Captain Garrett sat firmly in the command seat and stared at the image of Turkana IV rolling silently beneath them.

“I have established geosynchronous orbit above the capital city of New Moscow. Transporter range in one minute thirty-six seconds.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Garrett glanced to Castillo’s left at Batanides, also seated at one of the center stations ahead of the command chair. “Miz Batanides, any weapons fire?”

“None detected,” Marta replied. She swiveled in her chair to face Garrett. “However, it is approaching dusk and we cannot be certain of what the night will bring.”

“Agreed,” Garrett nodded as Marta turned back to her controls. The captain stared again at the peaceful image of the planet below. She smirked upon reflection of one of the greatest ironies of space travel... on any given planet, no matter what borders were erected, no matter what wars the inhabitants fought, no matter which faction was in control... from orbit, all these things were meaningless. From orbit,

one complete world rolled peacefully and silently through space, undisturbed for millions of years. The captain stood abruptly and adjusted her uniform.

“Onovan, Batanides... you’re with me. Commander Stadi, you have the Bridge.” She turned and headed for the lift with Marta at her heels. Stadi was about to raise an objection to his captain leading the away team, but was silenced by a quick thought from Garrett: *Please, Spencer, no lectures on General Order Fifteen and all those other Starfleet regs and protocols*, she insisted. He nodded at her and bowed quietly to her wishes.

The rest of the Bridge crew of course was not usually even aware that these little mental deliberations ever took place. To them it appeared that Garrett and Stadi were a unified team, always in agreement, smoothly operating like any other redundant system aboard the *Enterprise*. Although this was true most of the time, Garrett was still in command, and Stadi understood and accepted that with respect. It was a close, almost symbiotic relationship, that had taken years to develop.

Some minutes later, the forms of Garrett, Onovan, and Batanides materialized on the steps outside the Governor’s Palace. The palace was situated on the South-end of a large square at the city center. At the opposite end stood a large, imposing structure that housed the Turkanan Directorate.

The elaborate swirling pattern of the colored cobblestone square and the large brick buildings surrounding it all took on a blood-red hue as the Turkanan sun began to sink in the West. The vast square and its radiance of streets were strangely deserted, and an eerie silence hung over the entire city.

Uneasiness settled in on the trio as they climbed the few remaining steps to the heavy wooden palace doors. Marta drew her phaser upon discovery that one of the doors stood slightly ajar. Onovan and Garrett gave way as Marta cautiously pushed the door aside and peered into the long hall within. It too was deserted. They entered, and then for security purposes, closed the door tightly shut behind them. Their research on the *Enterprise* had told them that the governor’s office was at the end of this hall, and that the living quarters were

upstairs. Nothing moved, not even the air.

“Captain,” Marta whispered, “I suggest that we proceed to the governor’s office first.”

“Agreed,” Garrett answered. “Stay sharp, watch the side passages and doorways.”

The three officers then began to creep up the dimly lit hallway. The dead silence was absolute except for the *clack-clack-clack* their footfalls made on the hard marble floors. They all tried to step lightly, but it was no use. The sound bounced up and down, back and forth, and seemed to linger indefinitely in the ceiling that arched a full ten meters above their heads.

Still, the invading sound roused no one, and they arrived at the secretary’s desk without incident. As expected, the secretary’s chair was also vacant, and the desk itself was in a state of complete disarray.

“It would appear that we do not need an appointment,” Onovan said wryly, motioning toward the slightly ajar door that led into the governor’s office. Moving forward, Marta guided it silently open and tiptoed in, followed close at hand by Garrett and Onovan.

“Stop breathing down my neck,” she whispered into her collar. The captain smiled and placed a hand on Marta’s shoulder, then glanced around the room, making a quick survey. It was sparsely decorated with but a few ornate wall hangings on the grey walls. Straight ahead was a large desk flanked by two large potted shrubs. Behind the desk, a swivel chair sat with its high backside blankly facing the intruding party.

“Hello?” Garrett called. Her voice shattered the silence. The chair moved as if startled, then swung slowly around to reveal a frail old man in an oversized suit. His shoulders sagged and he slouched to the right, leaning on one of the chairs winged sides. His fine white hair was combed such that it was standing pretty much on end.

“Governor Pugachev?” Garrett inquired.

“Yes, may I help you nice folks?” His shaky, labored voice was the only indication that the man was, in fact, still alive.

“I am Captain Rachel Garrett of the *Starship Enterprise*. These are my officers, Commander Batanides and Lieutenant Commander Onovan.” Marta and Onovan nodded respectfully to the governor.

“Please, sit down.” He raised a boney hand, palm up, as a

gesture for them to have a seat. The captain sat down, followed by Marta and Onovan, who sat on either side and slightly behind her. Once they were settled in, the captain began.

“Governor, we were sent by Starfleet to try to ascer...” She stopped up short as the governor placed one boney finger across his dry ashen lips to silence her. He then pointed up toward the ceiling making a circular motion.

Garrett sensed Marta tense and stealthily reach for her phaser as the governor yanked open a desk drawer with great effort. From it, he pulled out a tricorder. With still greater effort, he then stood, opened the tricorder, and began scanning the room. He first scanned the ceiling, then the walls, his visitors, himself, and finally, the potted shrubs.

Apparently satisfied with the results, the governor snapped the device shut and tossed it forlornly into the one of the shrubs. With a grunt, he sat back down and breathed heavily as if the entire procedure had sapped every last ounce of strength right out of him.

“You can’t be too careful,” he labored. “This entire city is crawling with Coalition spies. Please, continue... Captain Carrot is it?” Captain Garrett closed her eyes and sighed.

“As I was saying, Governor, we have been sent by Starfleet to try to ascertain the level of stability in your government as opposed to its potential for instability and possible conflict.” The poor captain sighed again as the Governor placed one of his boney fingers up his nose, dug around a bit, inspected his find, then placed it in his mouth.

Marta quietly groaned and Onovan brought a hand over his mouth to stifle an uncontrolled snicker. Garrett stared at Pugachev in disbelief.

“Hello, I’m Governor Pugachev. May I help you nice folks?” Unwilling to admit defeat, Garrett began a third time.

“Governor, we...”

“Yes, hello.”

“*We have been sent* by the Federation to check on the status of your government.” Garrett stopped and shook her head as the governor’s eyes closed and his head slumped against the wing of the chair. The captain’s mouth dropped open, clearly at a loss for words.

“Oh my God,” Marta whispered. “Do you think he’s dead?”

“Maybe we should call for a medic,” Onovan added with a sinister smile.

Garrett could feel a headache coming on. Clearly it was time to leave. She slammed her hands on the desk, palms down, and stood. Marta and Onovan jumped up behind her, exchanging devilish glances. The loud noise and all the commotion startled the governor so much that he nearly fell out of his chair.

“Hello, I’m Governor Pugachev. May I help you nice folks?”

“Thank you, Governor,” Garrett said. “Your insights into planetary government have been most helpful. But we really must be on our way.”

“Glad I could be of assistance,” he called as the trio headed for the door. “I’ll have my secretary show you out.” He pressed a comm button. “Katarina... will you please show these nice folks to the door? Bye now, come again!” he called after them.

Once the three officers reached the front steps, they each let out a long, discouraged sigh. The sun was very low on the horizon now and the square had become dim and fraught with shadows. Captain Garrett was about to speak when she was once again silenced, this time by Marta.

“Captain, Counselor... do you hear that?” she whispered. Each pricked their ears for a few breathless moments and strained to hear any sound at all. Finally, Onovan broke the silence.

“That sounds like phaser fire. Very distant.”

“Yes, and lots of it,” Garrett concurred. “We’re running out of time.”

“*Enterprise to Captain Garrett.*” Stadi’s voice filtered out of the commbadge pinned to her chest and startled all three of them. She puffed a breath through her nose and tapped the badge with her fingers to activate a return signal.

“Garrett here. Go ahead, Commander.”

“*Captain, we are now beginning to detect small weapons fire throughout various parts of the city.*”

“Yes Commander, we can hear it. Very distant. I don’t believe we are in any immediate danger. Nevertheless, keep a transporter lock on us.”

“*Understood.*”

“Now, listen carefully. Our talk with the governor was, shall we say, discouraging. I want you to get on the horn with Starfleet Command and tell them they need to get a shipload of troops here *yesterday*. Also, we need the name and address of the Coalition Party leader.”

“*Standby, Captain...*” There was a short pause as Stadi was no doubt drilling Cicely for the needed information. At long last, his voice finally popped back in.

“*At last report, Captain, a Director Razin was leader of the Coalition Party. He resides at Zarya House, Number Ten Anastasia Street. It is several kilometers outside of the city center, East-northeast of your present position.*”

“Captain,” Marta interjected, “for security reasons, I recommend that we transport directly to that location.”

“Agreed,” she nodded. “Did you copy that, Commander?”

“*Yes, Captain. Ready to transport at your command.*”

“*Energize...*”

Seconds later, the forms of Garrett, Onovan, and Batanides rematerialized on the sidewalk outside of Zarya House. Before them was a brick wall, about waist high, broken in the middle by a black, wrought iron gate. The words ‘*Zarya House*’, also of wrought iron, arched high over the gate and framed the impressive three-story brick townhouse beyond.

The cobblestone street stretched for over a kilometer westward, then down a gentle slope and into the central square. The city stretched onwards still farther beyond that, down into a valley where a dark river wound its way into the twilight. Untold hundreds of kilometers farther still, the red-dwarf sun began to slip behind black mountains.

It really was quite beautiful, and Garrett allowed a brief instant for them to stand and admire it. Yet, despite the serenity of the scene, she found it unnerving that not one city streetlight was lit, and very few houses showed any signs of life. Moreover, orange flashes of light dotted the landscape in a random pattern that could only be likened to phaser fire.

Suddenly, somewhere, in some obscure corner of the city, a muffled explosion consumed an indiscriminate building and sent a ball

of flame rolling high up into the air. A second explosion rocked some other place near to the first, and two pitch-black columns of smoke belched forth into the heavens, creating a blotted silhouette on the horizon.

“It’s beginning,” Garrett proclaimed. In earnest, she pushed open the wrought iron gate and marched briskly up the walk to the steps. These she took two at a time till she reached the top, and without delay, rapped loudly on the door with her fist. She then rigorously adjusted her uniform as Onovan and Marta stepped breathlessly into place beside her. Some time passed before the door finally opened a crack, and a man, say in his mid-forties, peered through it at the three intruders.

“Please, Sir,” Garrett pleaded, “we are from a Federation starship. We need to speak with you.”

“There is no time. Go back to your *star* ship before it’s too late.” He began to close the door, but Garrett stuck her toe inside to block it.

“Please, Sir,” Garrett pleaded once again. “Mr. Razin, please. We need to know what’s happened here. Perhaps we can help.” She knew there was very little they could do now, but hoped that the offer might at least get them inside the door. The man eyed her a moment more and then sighed.

“Bahhhh,” he exclaimed, pulling open the door. “Come in, come in! Quickly, quickly!” he half-shouted, looking anxiously up and down the darkening street. Once all were inside, he slammed the door shut, locked the knob, and fearfully turned the deadbolt as well.

They stood in a large foyer with a rose-colored ceramic tile floor. A crystal chandelier hung from the white stucco ceiling far overhead, and cast a smooth light on the tan stucco walls. Straight ahead, a gorgeous dark wooden staircase went up and wound its way to the left before reaching a wide balcony on the second floor. Director Razin stood with crossed arms and a furrowed brow, barring access into any other portion of the beautiful house.

“I am Captain Garrett of the *Enterprise*. This is Commander Batanides and Lieutenant Commander Onovan.”

“*Enterprise*, hmmm?” Razin raised his right hand and stroked his stubbly chin. “Starfleet has finally decided that a big enough

problem exists here to send in the flagship, hmmm? Poor Picard tried to warn them, I tried to warn them, but they would not listen.” The Director pounded his fist in his hand for emphasis. Garrett was certain she could detect a very faint Russian accent in his voice. She was surprised she hadn’t heard it in Pugachev’s; but quickly concluded it must have been masked by the old man’s frailty.

“Director please, we need to know what has happened here since the *Stargazer’s* departure.” The man let out a long sigh. He had a haggard, distant look and his eyes portrayed someone who’d had very little sleep for quite some time.

“One hundred eighty-three years ago,” he began, “my people left their homeland, left Earth, to find a new home. They feared a growing plague that threatened their culture, their very identity. They feared globalization and something they called Americanization. But most of all, they feared the coming of the United Federation of Planets.

“Eventually, the colonists settled here and began building this beautiful city. They named it New Moscow to honor their homeland and for one hundred eighty-three years it has thrived with very little outside influence... until now, that is.”

Those last four words caught Garrett’s immediate attention. Marta and Onovan noticed the abstraction too and took a step forward to stand next to their captain. Be that as it may, Razin regarded it merely as an afterthought. He stood for some moments, apparently in deep reflection. Garrett regretted being so persistent, but she feared that Razin might at any moment lapse into some sort of madness just as Pugachev had.

“*Till now that is?* Director, what does that mean?” He didn’t seem to notice her. “Please sir, do you believe that there is some form of outside influence at work here?”

Just then, they were interrupted by a resounding *clack-clack-clack* as a little girl came hurriedly down the wooden staircase. She wore black, hard-soled shoes, white stockings, and a blue and white print dress. Her long golden hair bobbed as she ran across the foyer to Razin. She then held up a smaller black shoe and stared at him with expectation in her deep blue eyes.

“Uncle,” she pleaded, “I cannot find Ishara’s other shoe. I’ve looked absolutely everywhere.”

“Natasha, can’t you see Uncle is busy?” The little girl blinked up at him undeterred. He chuckled softly and knelt before her. “Why don’t you check beneath Ishara’s bed? If it’s not there, perhaps Ms. Poppinsarov can help you find it. I’ll be up shortly. Now run along, Natasha.” She gave him a broad smile and a peck on the cheek before turning and bounding up the stairs. As he watched her climb and pass from sight, all the color began to drain from his face. Without turning towards the captain, he spoke in a soft, broken voice.

“You are lucky you and your friends were not killed on the street, Captain... these are dangerous times” he sighed mournfully. “Two weeks ago, my daughter Anna was killed by an Alliance sniper whilst the children played in the sunshine just out there on the front steps.” Razin bowed his head and closed his eyes. His three visitors looked at the floor in an awkward form of condolence. He faced them and added, with a hint of anger in his voice:

“Two years ago, my sister and her husband were killed in the crossfire between two rival gangs, leaving their two baby girls orphaned forever... fortunately, they are now in my care,” he added somewhat distantly. Again he turned and looked to the top of the stairs as if seeing a vision of his lost daughter bouncing down to greet him just as she’d always done.

For a time, Garrett and company stood speechless, knowing that no words they could possibly offer would ever console the man in his grief and pain. All the events of the outside world seemed to be forgotten, and the flow of time came to a halt in the soft light of the foyer. War was not about the destruction of property and the loss or gain of territory. It was about the destruction of lives and family and the emptiness that was left behind.

Time abruptly resumed however, and events came back in force, as a deep rumble shook the house and pounded in Garrett’s skull. The chandelier rattled and flickered while fine particles of dust filtered down from the ceiling. Beneath their feet, barely perceptible cracks spread across the tile floor and crept up the stucco walls. All, no doubt, the result of an explosion somewhere very close.

“Is there no one in control here, Director?” Garrett eyed him with newfound earnestness. “The Directorate Building appeared deserted and our meeting with Governor Pugachev was less than

encouraging.”

“Pugachev is a paranoid, senile old fool,” Razin stated with a flit of anger. “Two months ago, he dissolved the Directorate, sent in troops to clear the building, then barred the doors. Shortly thereafter, he instituted martial law. Conditions have steadily deteriorated ever since.”

“I don’t understand,” Garrett said. “Why would Pugachev dissolve the Directorate?”

“Rumors began to surface that members of the Coalition were receiving weapons from the Klingons. My colleagues and I assured the Directorate that these rumors simply were not true... at least not to my knowledge,” he sighed, “I’m not so certain now... at any rate, accusations then began to fly unchecked and the Directorate began to unravel.

“Some evidence even suggested that it was, in fact, the Alliance that was receiving the weapons. Regardless, the truth may never be known... unless of course the *Enterprise* were to continue the investigation?”

“I assure you, Director, a threat like this will not go unnoticed by Starfleet and the Federation Council.” Razin nodded at the captain. His attention was again redirected to the head of the stairs where a woman and two small girls were beginning their noisy descent.

The younger girl was wearing a red and white print dress in the same style as her older sister’s. Her hair was a shade darker, and she had green eyes to match her uncle’s. The older sister, Natasha, clutched tightly to a small, furry kitten. The animal purred loudly despite the commotion of their bouncy, clattering descent. Finally, the woman led them off the last step and across the foyer to one of its many closed wooden doors. She then adjusted their dresses and told them to wait quietly there.

Razin smiled throughout the entire production even as the woman walked up to stand before him. She had on a black ankle-length dress and black-laced, high-heeled boots. Her dark hair was pulled up tightly on her head while a light red blush highlighted her sharp cheekbones. She offered a smile to the three guests, then spoke to Razin with a faint British accent.

“Excuse me, Sir, beg pardon the interruption, but the Missus

refuses to leave your late daughter's bedroom, despite all my attempts at persuasion.”

The smile left Razin's face. “Thank you, Marie,” he replied sullenly. “I'll see to it. Now please, take the girls below.”

“Yes, Sir, of course, Sir,” she replied. Crossing the foyer and taking the girls again in hand, she opened the door and led them down a set of stairs, presumably into the basement.

“Certainly, Director,” Garrett offered, “you and your family would be much safer aboard the *Enterprise* than crouching in a cold dark cellar.”

“No, no, Captain,” Razin said, “you don't understand. Turkana is our home and I can't leave her now in this time of such great need.”

“Then the children at least,” Garrett pleaded.

“The children will be safe,” he insisted. “Shelters have been set up in the tunnels left over from the Klingon War era. Besides, I couldn't separate them from their family a second time. It would devastate them.”

“But, Sir...” Marta this time beseeched him. He raised a hand to silence the three officers and gave them a threatening look. It was obvious that he was uncertain about his decision, but was nonetheless committed to it.

“If you'll excuse me, Captain, Commanders... I must attend to my wife.” With that, he turned and skipped briskly up the stairs and out of sight. Garrett looked longingly after him for a brief moment, but was startled back to reality by a deep rumble that carried up through the floor and into her legs.

“Captain, we should go,” Marta said softly. She had already unlocked the door and stood poised to open it. Onovan looked into the captain's sad eyes, silently urging her until finally, she nodded and turned to exit. Marta pulled open the door and they reluctantly filed out, one by one. Onovan and Garrett cautiously stepped down a few steps as Marta locked and closed the door tightly shut behind them.

Complete darkness had fallen on the city now and strange constellations twinkled in the night sky above. A slightly brighter star that they knew to be the *Enterprise* stared down and watched over them as they surveyed the city. Large fires burned out of control now, casting a dreadful orange glow on the entire valley. Meanwhile the telltale

flashes of phaser fire still dotted the landscape. Garrett clenched her teeth and shook her head in frustration. Disillusioned, she reached up and touched her commbadge.

“Garrett to *Enterprise*... three to beam up.”

“*Aye, Captain,*” Stadi responded. “*Standby for transport... wait... Captain, we’re detecting incom...*” Stadi’s voice was lost in a sea of static.

Garrett was about to try her commbadge again, but was involuntarily forced to cover her head and cower as an earsplitting projectile screamed overhead. She immediately recognized it as an antimatter shell — less than a milligram of antimatter magnetically encased in a sphere that would fit into the palms of both hands.

The shell descended on a darkened house a few blocks up, and across the street. There was a blinding white flash, then an explosion that shook the ground and shattered windows all up and down Anastasia Street. A ball of flame shot up high into the air and ignited several houses in a billowing conflagration that instantly seared away the darkness.

The trio stared in astonishment as the fire spread rapidly. Garrett again attempted to try her commbadge, but was halted once more by the sickening screech of another shell, this one heading directly for them. With a decisive, instinctive move, Marta leapt from the top step and plowed with outstretched arms into Garrett and Onovan. Despite her slim frame and diminutive stature, she was successful in forcing them face-first to the sidewalk below. Bruised and bleeding, they covered their heads as the shell came closer and the shriek became unbearable.

Garrett, unable to stand it any longer, let out an unheard scream. She shuddered as the shell slammed through the tile roof of Zarya House with a tremendous clatter. The house itself let out a terrible moan as the shell pierced yet deeper into its very heart. Then, there was a blink of silence that stretched on for an eternity. The captain could smell the sweet grass beside the sidewalk. She could feel Marta’s comforting arm draped protectively over her shoulders. She could hear Onovan whispering some form of prayer in his native tongue. It was strangely peaceful. *Is this it?* she thought.

The magnetic seals on the shell decayed and the antimatter at

last made first contact with the outside world. The captain perceived a white flash, brighter than anything she had ever seen; almost like being *inside* a lightbulb. Her whole world began to dissolve around her. Marta and Onovan, the grass, Zarya House, her own body, even the cold hard sidewalk beneath her. *So peaceful*, she thought. The white light enveloped her, made her body tingle. All she had ever known was gone now, replaced by that soft white light.

“...begin Chapter Seven.”

Her body ceased to tingle. The soft white light that enveloped her dissipated. *Am I alive?* she wondered. *It's awfully quiet.*

Captain Rachel Garrett found herself lying not on the cold hard sidewalk as she expected, but instead on the soft carpeted floor of the *Enterprise* sickbay. Onovan still lay next to her whispering a prayer, and Marta was still protectively draped over them both.

The next twenty-two minutes were a disorienting flurry of nurses and doctors, tests and scans. The three injured comrades were hoisted onto biobeds, and each administered to by expert care. Marta Batanides was the worst hurt, with shards of glass and wood splinters embedded in her back and legs, while all had abrasions and lacerations on their face and hands from their impact with the sidewalk. Indeed, it was some time before any of them knew exactly where they were or how they'd even gotten there.

Garrett lay on her back and stared at the ceiling. All she could think of was Razin's sweet little nieces with the bright eyes and long bouncing hair. She hoped the nanny had been able to get them to the safety of the tunnels before the shell hit. Razin and his wife on the other hand had most certainly been killed in the blast. The girls were once again orphaned. The captain couldn't help but wonder at what kind of future they could ever hope to have growing up in the dark tunnels beneath a destroyed city. She wished she had more firmly insisted that the children be brought to the *Enterprise*, she wished she'd had more time. *Natasha and Ishara...* she must not forget, something told her she must remember.

By and by, Spencer Stadi entered Sickbay and glanced around the room at his injured colleagues. With a relieved sigh to see them all safe, he proceeded to his captain's side. He could immediately see the grief in her eyes, the troubled look of someone not only in physical pain, but also in mental anguish as well. With nothing more than her silent blink of approval, he reached into her mind. Saw there a frail old man lost in the vestiges of his own mind. Saw another man consumed by grief, weary and beaten by forces he could not control. The view of a once beautiful city now sent burning out of control at the hands of its

own people. And as a consequence, two little girls destined to a life of pain, sorrow, and hardship. *Natasha and Ishara*... they must be remembered.

Stadi looked at Garrett with understanding. Nodded his head lightly and smiled only faintly. She was his *Imzadi*, his beloved, a soulmate beyond the realm of physical love. Two minds linked by years of close contact and a common conception of all the hopes and fears that make a person a person. She knew Stadi understood and somehow, that always comforted her. She made a feeble attempt to sit up, but decided against it and lay back down, wincing at the pain in her bruised ribs.

The Captain rarely found any need to verbally debrief her first officer, especially in a one-on-one situation such as this. Over the years, they had both learned to make efficient use of his telepathic abilities. Even for her it had almost become second nature to keep him informed in this manner. Yet, it had always been her regret that her mind had never reached the level where she could also sense his thoughts. There were only those rare fleeting images, gone in a heartbeat and leaving her hollow and in want of more.

“Report, Commander,” she said aloud.

“You are all lucky to be alive, Captain.” Stadi was momentarily silenced by another wave of relief. “We had to overload the confinement beam to pull you out.” He moved in closer, face grim. “Zarya House, the Governor’s Palace, and the Directorate Building have all been obliterated. The city is in flames. Mr. Castillo has moved us into a higher orbit as a precaution.”

Stadi glanced around the room in search of prying eyes and ears, then dropped his voice to a whisper. “The *Starship Intrepid* has been dispatched from Starbase 234 with two thousand peacekeeping troops... do you really think it’s possible that the Klingons are responsible for all this right in the midst of an historic peace summit?”

“I don’t know, Commander,” Garrett answered, “but I intend to find out. Set course for the Klingon world H’atoria just across the border.”

“H’atoria?!” Stadi exclaimed. “Do you really think it’s wise to go charging unannounced into Klingon space?”

“We are afforded full rights to unrestricted travel within their

space by the First Khitomer Accords, Commander...”

“Well yes, in theory, but I don’t think anyone’s ever tried it.”

Stadi gave her a curious look and smiled. “We will prevail, Captain?”

She returned his smile and he sensed her determination. With the death of Razin and the re-orphaning of his nieces, the nature of their mission had now become far more personal — to try and find an answer to that single most important question: *Why?* Stadi adjusted his uniform, then tapped his commbadge.

“Stadi to Bridge...”

“*Castillo here, Sir.*”

“Lieutenant, set course for H’atoria. Warp Eight.”

“*Excuse me, Sir, did you say H’atoria?*” The confusion in Castillo’s voice was apparent, causing Stadi to smirk and look at his captain.

“You heard the order, Lieutenant,” Garrett called out. “We’ll join you on the Bridge shortly... Garrett out.” She smiled and thought of a Bridge now set abuzz with speculation. She also thought of Dr. Grey’s advice that the crew be kept well informed as to the varying aspects of this mission. She would have to set emotion aside and brief the senior staff on the recent events witnessed down on Turkana IV.

Stadi nodded at the captain, then turned and crossed the room to chat with Onovan. The counselor seemed to be in good spirits and recovering well despite a broken arm and several other less serious injuries. Garrett gazed in the other direction towards the surgical bay. There, a sedated Marta Batanides lay motionless on her stomach. Dr. Grey and several assistants worked feverously with magnifying devices and scanners to remove the glass and wood splinters from her back and legs.

The true realization of how closely they’d come to being killed finally began to sink in. Garrett’s confidence started to shake right down to the core of her soul. She struggled to maintain some measure of emotional control. Apprehension and foreboding again crept up on her like a knife in the dark. The safety of the crew and the burdens of command began to press in on her like a smothering pillow.

Something still felt terribly wrong about this entire mission. Maybe charging headlong into Klingon space was not such a good idea after all? *No*, she thought, *I can’t afford to start second-guessing*

myself. If there truly was a new Klingon threat, she knew it must be exposed before the anger, fear, and unrest seen here on Turkana could spread to other worlds — or worse, before this brave new peace summit could be crushed by the hands of but a few shortsighted radicals.

Garrett could imagine fifty years of peace unraveling right before her eyes. The *Enterprise* must prevail, she knew, or face the prospect of decades of bitter war all because one little ship had failed to act.

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“Excuse me, Sir, did you say H’atoria?” Cicely could see a confused and somewhat concerned look grow firmly on Castillo’s face as he responded to Commander Stadi’s order from Sickbay. She glanced around the Bridge and saw a similar look pass over the faces of most of the other officers and crewmen.

“*You heard the order, Lieutenant.*” Profound relief settled on the Bridge as Captain Garrett’s voice filled the command center. “*We’ll join you on the Bridge shortly... Garrett out.*” Despite the flood of relief, there was still an air of bewilderment regarding their new course change. Cicely had never heard of H’atoria, but decided it must be a world of some importance to provoke such a response.

Ignoring the pointless speculation that now encircled the Bridge, she turned instead to her computer screen. Only vaguely aware of Lt. Castillo’s orders to get under way, Cicely was much more interested in the text before her.

The screen displayed a short love poem that had been written on Earth over 300 years ago. Its author was an obscure, unknown individual whose name had long since been lost to the sketchy history of the time period. Cicely silently voiced the words as she read over the work a second time:

*One Look  
for C.  
An everlasting moon stares,  
Into an endless night.  
Silent eyes piercing the darkness,*

*Like a warm touch reaching into an empty soul.  
Darkened skies of the heart are cleared,  
By the light of a soft and tender smile.  
The sweet caress of a delicate hand,  
Wipes away the quiet pain of loneliness.  
One look sends the soul to another time.  
One look sends the heart beyond the mind.  
One look, just one look,  
From a love that can never be mine.*

As she finished reading, Cicely became aware of a presence behind her, someone reading over her shoulder. She allowed Castillo sufficient time to finish the passage, then swiveled in her chair to face him.

“What are your impressions of this verse, Lieutenant?” she asked.

“Well, like most poetry, it’s full of a lot of emotion, metaphor, and hidden meaning. Who wrote it?”

“Author unknown... it was written on Earth during a period of time known as the ‘new millennium’. Records from that era are somewhat vague.” Castillo nodded his head, absorbing the information, still scanning the lines.

“Interesting, why are you studying it?” he asked finally.

“In my continuing attempts to understand human culture, emotion, and interpersonal relationships, I decided to direct my research toward this time period. The human race was still in its infancy, but slowly approaching a new enlightenment brought on by the psychological impact of the ‘new millennium’, and of course the Bush Jihad on Terror.” Cicely turned back to the screen and began to read over the passage a third time.

“Interesting,” Castillo said again. “And what have you learned from this particular work?” He had learned long ago that Cicely’s point of view often offered an entirely new way of looking at the most ordinary of things in life. He sat down in the chair at the station next to hers. She sighed and remained silent a moment.

“I must admit,” she said at long last, “the entire concept of love puzzles me.”

“Really?!” Castillo was genuinely surprised. Ever since he’d met her, Cicely had always been such a kind and caring individual. Cicely continued to stare at the screen, not really reading, simply remembering. She spoke quietly, distantly.

“On my homeworld, lower-class Orion males and females are trained from birth in the arts of sexual pleasure. The erotic desires of a hundred species engrained into our psyche. The concept of love never enters into the equation. At the age of twelve, we enter service as highly skilled slaves.”

“Twelve?!” Castillo immediately regretted his sudden outburst of shock — tried to conceal his disdain for what he was hearing by looking away from her sparkling brown eyes. “Why yes, Lieutenant,” she replied a little too matter-of-factly. “Not all the peoples of the galaxy share the moral and ethical beliefs of a handful of Federation citizens and Starfleet officers.” Even so, he detected a note of pained bitterness in her voice. She continued nonetheless, still staring blankly past the words of love printed on the screen.

“The ages of twelve through sixteen are the most popular among the clients of course. Then at age seventeen, the most desirable females are chosen to be bred with the genetic stock of the most desirable males. As I said, love never enters into the equation.

“The majority who are not chosen are sterilized, then conscripted to the offworld market. Possessing no desire to be the captain’s wench on some dingy old *Antares*-class freighter, I escaped.”

“I’m sorry,” Castillo said sheepishly. Stunned speechless, he could think of nothing else to say. He had, of course, heard of Orion slave girls... and boys... but had never stopped to consider the subsequent horrors involved in such a practice. Cicely swiveled in her chair and faced him with sad eyes.

“You have no need to apologize to me, Richard, unless you have participated in, or in any way condone the Orion slave market?”

“Oh no... no Sis, come on, you know me better than that.” His face held a pained look, and she now wished she hadn’t pinned him down with such a harsh challenge. His use of her affectionate nickname, *Sis*’, only served to remind her of the personal connection they both shared. As much as she thought of Captain Garrett as a mother figure, she thought of Richard Castillo as a kind of surrogate

brother. Perhaps love was not as elusive as she had imagined. It can come in many forms and on many different levels. *An intriguing thought.*

“Tell me about love, Lieutenant.” Cicely turned back to the screen and the poem. “This short verse is full of so many confusing images.”

“Love is not such an easy subject to describe...” Castillo paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. *How do you detail the many facets of love to someone who has no concept of it?* He also thought that perhaps she knew way more than she was revealing.

“There are many forms and many different levels,” he began to explain, and she smiled inwardly to herself. “It can be painful and exciting all at the same time. It can strike suddenly, or grow slowly, quite unnoticed. It can also be gone just as suddenly, or too, fade away just as slowly and as unnoticed as it came.”

Cicely gave him a perplexed frown. “How do you humans cope with such an unpredictable and confusing emotion?”

“Oh, the best that we can.” He gave her a soft smile. He could tell that, rather than clearing the air, he was muddying the waters. He decided instead to break the poem down and try to describe some of its imagery.

“I still do not understand,” she said frustrated.

“Take another look at the poem. *An everlasting moon* represents her, this young woman ‘C’ who acts as a bright spot in *an endless night*, his dreary life. *Silent eyes... piercing an empty soul.* In these two lines he is saying that when ‘C’ looks at him, it uplifts his spirit and in some way makes him feel a little less empty.” Cicely was staring intently at the screen, visualizing every word. Castillo smiled and continued.

“Lines five and six and seven and eight are pretty self-explanatory.” She nodded as she read them, then waited like an expectant child for Castillo to continue. Castillo smiled again.

“*One look sends the soul to another time.* When she looks at him, he forgets all the troubles and hardships of his life and thinks only of his love for her.”

“And the last line?” Cicely asked. She then turned and looked at Castillo with bright brown eyes filled with a growing understanding.

“The last line is interesting indeed. There could be any one of a

hundred reasons why they couldn't be together. It's really quite sad actually..."

"Interesting indeed," Cicely echoed. "It is unfortunate that we will never know." Cicely now recalled something else that she'd learned in her studies. That of all the billions of individuals in the galaxy, each had their own background, their own hopes and fears, their own story to tell. She would've liked to have met 'Author Unknown' and heard his story. We all have a story to tell, and we've all lived a life full of lost love and regret.

"Excuse me, Lieutenant Castillo?" the young Andorian, Ensign Enyo, called nervously from the helm. She had a vague look of uncertainty implanted in her eyes.

A brief wave of vertigo passed over Castillo as he rose and looked from Cicely's bright green face to Enyo's bright blue one. He made a conscious effort to conceal his embarrassment at being caught so off guard. He'd been so wrapped up in his discussion with Cicely that he'd completely forgotten that he was acting commander, and thus responsible, for the massive starship.

Walking around to the command chair and trying to sound as authoritative as possible, he finally responded. "Yes, Ensign, what is it?"

"Sorry to interrupt, Sir, but we are approaching the Klingon border. ETA at present speed... five minutes. What do I do now, Sir? Slow down? Stop?" The uncertain look in Enyo's eyes had grown to a worried look all across her face. Even her twin antennae seemed to twitch with concern.

"I don't know," he replied absently, distantly. Queasy anxiety rising in his abdomen, he plopped down in the command chair and tapped the comm touchpad on the armrest.

"Bridge to Commander Stadi..." he called.

*"Stadi here, go ahead Lieutenant."*

"Sir, we are approaching the Klingon border. Request instructions... do we contin..."

*"Maintain course and speed, Lieutenant. The Captain, Onovan, and I are in a lift enroute to the Bridge. We'll be there momentarily... Stadi out."*

“Aye, Sir,” Castillo voiced quietly, without emphasis or conviction. His rising anxiety made him perspire slightly. Staring at the warp stars on the viewscreen, he suddenly became aware that all of the junior members of the Bridge staff were in turn staring at him, looking for some sign, some confirmation, that what they were about to do was alright, that in the end they were all going to be okay.

He tried to think up a few brave words, a rousing anecdote, anything, but his mind came up blank. Just then, the turbolift doors opened and Garrett, Stadi, and Onovan filed out onto the Bridge. With them came a tide of confidence and reliance that had so eluded Lt. Castillo just a few short seconds before. Even he felt it. He rose and faced Garrett.

“Welcome back, Captain,” he said with a sigh, then smiled and relieved the still nervous Ensign Enyo at the helm. Relieved to be relieved, she crossed behind the party to step up and stand at one of the aft science stations. There, she began a routine sensor scan, grateful to be free of the ‘big command decisions’.

The role of a ship’s counselor had not, as of yet, been completely defined by Starfleet Command. As a result, Onovan was required, like Garrett and Stadi, to be familiar with the operational controls of every single station on the Bridge. He crossed now to relieve Dardanelle at the tactical station adjacent to the helm, hence filling in for a still recovering Marta Batanides. He rubbed furtively at the dull pain in his right arm for a moment before setting to work reviewing the tactical status of the ships weapons systems.

From their central position ahead of the command chair, Onovan and Castillo had a nearly unobstructed view out the large, parabolic main viewscreen. Only the waist high Auxiliary Control Pedestal just ahead of them blocked this breathtaking sight. The warp stars seemed to streak right past their heads, and it was easy to imagine oneself as being seated right on the ‘front bumper’ of the mighty starship.

Garrett sat down on the edge of the command chair. Though she tried to conceal her discomfort, her bruised ribs gave her the distinct impression that someone was standing on her chest. Stadi took up his customary position on the upper level, to the left, and slightly back from the center seat. He leaned forward, hands grasping the railing that separated the aft stations from the command level. From here, the

commander could monitor Ops, and if necessary, quickly move in to take over any other station on the Bridge.

“Status, Mr. Castillo,” Garrett said.

“We will cross the border in one minute, thirty seconds, Captain. We will then reach the outer limits of the H'atorian System in fifty minutes.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Mr. Onovan... Yellow Alert. We may be friends with the Klingons, but we haven't exactly been invited to play in their sandbox.” Everyone on the Bridge broke into a broad smile even as a warning tone sounded and the alert status lights began to blink yellow. That was the true art of command; the ability to lighten a heavy situation without undermining its seriousness.

*I still have much to learn*, Castillo concluded. Cicely stared with wonderment at the streaking stars on the main screen. She realized now why she had never heard of H'atoria and began to sense the anxiety that everyone else felt. They were actually crossing the Klingon border, something no other Federation ship had ever done. She knew it was foolish, but as Castillo counted down, she wondered if the ship would shudder, or the lights dim, or if some visible line would streak past the screen. Again, she smiled inwardly at herself.

She held her breath as the countdown reached zero. Nothing. Just beautiful warp stars and black space. She exhaled and smiled openly now. The age-old irony had played itself out once again. From space, there are no boundaries. In the minds of men, however, there are. She was startled as the communication monitor at her station began to beep and blink frantically.

“We are being hailed, Captain,” Cicely called across the Bridge.

“It is the Klingon monitoring outpost Morska.” Forgetting her injuries, Garrett twisted in her seat to look at Cicely. She was immediately seized by a crushing pain that felt like the Klingons had kicked her right in the gut for her impertinence. The captain stood up abruptly in an attempt to catch her breath. Stadi began to make a move for her but was warded off by a raised hand and a supplicant thought from his commanding officer to stand down. She quickly regained her composure, casually smiling at her first officer and hoping no one had noticed.

“Right on schedule,” Stadi said with a smile. Garrett nodded,

then turned to Cicely.

“On screen, Ensign,” she said somewhat breathlessly. The captain faced the main screen and put on her sternest face. The rest of the Bridge crew gained strength from her determination and stared at the screen, each playing their part to look as fierce as possible.

In an instant, the beautiful warp stars were replaced with the hideous image of a gnarly old Klingon warrior. He had yellow and black teeth, an alcohol-induced bulbous red nose, and an opaque crossed eye. His good eye narrowed as he studied the image on his own screen... an upstart female Starfleet captain and her spindly, degenerate band of weakling officers.

*“Federation ship Enterprise. You have violated Imperial Klingon Space. State your intentions.”* The Klingon's harsh, guttural voice wavered slightly with a hint of intoxication.

“In accordance with the stipulations of the First Khitomer Accords, we are traveling to H’atoria on important diplomatic business.” The captain had attempted to use her deepest, sternest voice; she hoped it had been convincing enough. Perhaps she should have given Stadi the Bridge and listened from her Ready Room?

*“I am aware of no such business.”*

“I was not aware that Governor Mogh was required to consult you in these matters.” Garrett glared at him with agitation. The warrior’s good eye narrowed again as he studied the captain. His opaque eye wandered around its socket in a drunken form of nervous uncertainty.

*“Governor Mogh expects you?”*

“I have no time for your ignorance. Mogh will tolerate no delays.” The captain stood resolute as the mind of the warrior wandered aimlessly, trying to get a grip on the situation. Finally, he bared his teeth and growled.

*“Morska out!”* His image blinked off, replaced by the tri-axis standard of the Klingon Empire. The words END TRANSMISSION flashed in Klingon script beneath it. Garrett sat down on the edge of the command chair and released a long-held breath through tight lips.

“Thank the Great Bird of the Galaxy,” she sighed, “that all they ever do on Morska is drink.”

Stadi let out a giggle. “I think the crew of the *Enterprise-A*

would've agreed, Captain. Let's just hope our intoxicated friend doesn't decide to contact this Mogh character before we actually have a chance to meet him." She rolled her eyes and smiled as Onovan turned to face them.

"Captain," he said, "have you advised Starfleet of our intentions?" Onovan looked at her with raised eyebrows. Garrett snapped her fingers and slapped the palm of her hand on the armrest.

"Whoops!" she exclaimed, "I completely forgot." The junior officers and crew on the Bridge all gave each other puzzled looks. The senior officers, on the other hand, knew full-well that if there were ever any trouble that led to an inquiry, the crew would all be exonerated due to the captain's failure to follow protocol.

"Ensign Garrett," the Captain carefully called over her shoulder, "establish a subspace commlink with Relay Station Forty-seven."

"Link established, Captain."

"Send my regards to Admiral Stillwell, Starbase 105. Inform him that we are enroute to Klingon world H'atoria to investigate possible conspiracy. Will continue to advise." Cicely finished typing the message, then applied Starfleet's latest encryption code.

"Message encoded and sent, Captain." Garrett nodded silently, then slowly eased herself towards the back of the command chair.

*Let Stillwell stew on that for a while, she thought. After all, it was his orders that started us on this mission in the first place.* She thought back to what Director Razin had told them. She thought too of his poor nieces left hovering in a dark tunnel beneath their burning city. She was convinced that she had to be doing the right thing here. Now all she had to do was convince her crew. She steadied herself as she prepared to inform them of what, exactly, had transpired down on Turkana IV.

## “...begin Chapter Eight.”

There was a rare moment of silence on the Bridge that seemed to stretch out interminably as the *Enterprise* in seconds paced out the light hours to H’atoria. Stadi took this moment to puzzle over the captain’s recent thoughts about Admiral Stillwell — had her previous apprehension now turned into bitterness? Though not dangerous, if unchecked, it could eventually grow into anger, and ultimately even recklessness. He sensed that, mentally, she was on dangerous and uncertain ground. Stadi quickly concluded that he’d have to inform Onovan, and perhaps together the two could convince the captain that maybe it was time for another walk.

“Commander,” Garrett broke the silence, “staff briefing in my Ready Room in five minutes.”

”Yes, Ma’am,” he gulped, startled from his reverie. Garrett slowly eased herself out of the command chair, then crossed the Bridge in silence. She entered the ready room without so much as a reverse glance, the doors closing tightly behind her. Onovan looked after her, then briefly at Stadi. He too could sense the vindictiveness in her mood, the uncertainty in her soul.

Minutes later, as summoned, Lt. Commander Skyl appeared on the Bridge. With his arrival, a carefully choreographed exchange of officers began as junior crewmembers assumed the positions of their seniors. Onovan, Skyl, Castillo, and Cicely then gathered behind Stadi at the door to the ready room. They all waited there a moment for Dr. Grey, but when she did not immediately present herself, Stadi parted the doors and the five officers filed into the small room without her.

Garrett eyed her senior staff, her friends, for a few brief seconds as they all took up their customary seats around the room. She was about to speak when the doors suddenly parted again, this time to reveal a haggard-looking Marta Batanides assisted by the supporting grip Doctor Ann Grey.

“I have a patient here who insists on coming to the Bridge.”

“Permission to join the briefing, Captain?” Marta offered a broad smile to accompany her request. The smile was mirrored by

bright grins from all those around her.

“Permission granted, Commander. Welcome back,” Garrett said with a respectful nod. She allowed herself a brief smile despite the seriousness of the subject she was about to discuss with them.

With Ann’s assistance, Marta slowly eased herself into a chair. Her discomfort in the effort seemed to equal or rival the captain’s own concealed malaise. Ann then seated herself, self-conscious as always of the perceived hold-up she was causing in the briefing. She tremulously gathered up her hair and passed it behind her ears, before casting a sidelong glance at Skyl.

With occasional additions from Marta and Onovan, the captain then began to detail their visit to the surface of Turkana IV. She told of their maddening sojourn with the insensate governor. The vacant streets and the phaser fire. She expounded nearly verbatim the discussion with Razin that ultimately led to the possibilities of a new Klingon threat. And she lamented the fate of Razin’s nieces, and possibly hundreds more, left to cower in the black labyrinths beneath their burning city.

When she’d finished, Garrett paused a moment to let the information sink in. The captain had left the most startling detail for last and withheld it now until the silent reasoning’s of her officers had brought them to each their own preliminary conclusions. At long last, she dropped the bomb, so to speak.

“I recognized the warheads being used in the bombardment,” she said levelly. “They were type three antimatter shells.” Everyone except Dr. Grey and Cicely gaped in astonishment. The captain had hidden this information even from Stadi, who now smirked inwardly at her cleverness.

“Antimatter shells?!” Castillo exclaimed. Cicely looked at him and frowned.

“I don’t understand,” she admitted.

“Following several accidents,” Skyl explained, “type three antimatter shells were deemed unstable and subsequently banned by the Federation in 2265.”

“Their weak magnetic fields,” Castillo continued, “were so susceptible to phase variances, that they could, quite literally, detonate on a whim.”

“I remember reading about them at the Academy,” Marta mused.

“The first starship to be loaded with these devices was so heavily damaged by an onboard explosion, that it spent weeks in a dry-dock being rebuilt.”

“So,” Cicely offered, “we can conclude that the Klingons did indeed supply weapons to the Turkanans.”

“Not necessarily,” Garrett countered. “The Romulans have also been known to use this technology on occasion.”

“Now there’s a surprise,” Castillo chimed in, comment largely ignored.

“But Captain,” Onovan interjected, “why would the Romulans involve themselves in the politics of a somewhat obscure former Federation colony?”

“You can expect the Romulans to be involved in most anything, Counselor,” Castillo half-muttered. He was beginning to look agitated, and his voice carried a tone of bitterness. The captain raised both her hands, palms toward her officers, in a calming gesture.

“We can’t pretend to know or understand everything going on behind the scenes here. That is why we are traveling to H’atoria... to try and get a few answers to a vast array of questions.”

“I love a good mystery,” Castillo droned on nonchalantly. Garrett eyed him unamused. Through Stadi, she’d gotten wind of Castillo’s somewhat heated confrontation with Onovan in the Starboard Café. Apparently, it was time for the young lieutenant to get another good talking to from his commanding officer. It’d happened a time or two before.

“Captain,” Stadi frowned, “these devices have few components and can be easily manufactured. How do we know that the Turkanans didn’t just build them themselves?”

“If I may, Captain?” Skyl offered. She nodded lightly and he continued. “Whether or not they built them is irrelevant, Commander. Type three antimatter shells use duotronic microprocessors to control their operation. Now obsolete, it would be quite difficult to obtain these components in the Federation. The Klingons and the Romulans however, still employ this technology on most of the vessels in their aging fleets.”

“And let’s not forget,” Marta added, “Director Razin did have strong suspicions that there was an outside influence at work within the

government.”

“So,” Cicely said with her usual smile, “our mission seems clear.”

“Right,” Garrett nodded, “now that you are all aware of our objective, our mission should be quite clear.”

“*Bridge to Captain Garrett... we are approaching the H'atorian System.*” Dardanelle’s even-toned voice filtered through the comm system as if this were just another routine layover at a starbase.

“Acknowledged, Lieutenant,” Garrett responded. “Slow to impulse, we’ll join you momentarily.” With that, they all began to rise, both the captain and Marta gritting their teeth as they pushed themselves out of their chairs. For her part, Dr. Grey had remained strangely quiet throughout the entire briefing and Onovan had keenly noticed her shifting restlessly as the others talked. He now held her back as the group filed out onto the Bridge.

“Is everything all right, Doctor?” he asked with genuine concern, her somewhat quirky behavior was not altogether unusual, though this time it did seem a bit ‘different’.

“Uh, yes Counselor,” she answered nervously. “Yes, everything’s fine... it’s just that sometimes I, um, I feel, you know, out of my league at the staff briefings. All of that technical stuff...”

“I understand,” Onovan smiled. He knew she was telling the truth, but still, he sensed that something more. Decided not to pursue. Together, they walked out onto the Bridge to join the others, both harboring their own hidden feelings of uncertainty.

The Bridge remained mostly quiet in the short time it took the *Enterprise* to pass through the Oort cloud and Kuiper belt. Castillo banked the ship in a tight turn around one gas giant, then spun around a second. This gravitational boost sent the ship screaming in at just a little over half the speed of light towards the only terrestrial planet in the system.

Pulled down into her chair by a force of over two Gs on the last turn, Garrett shook her head. “Mr. Castillo,” she said warningly. He swiveled to face her with a smile.

“Merely conserving fuel, Captain.”

“Time dilation gives me a headache, Lieutenant,” she responded

dryly. She then broke into a narrow smile in spite of herself. They had this conversation just about every time the ship entered a star system. The more gas giants in the system, the happier Castillo was about it. The more complicated the planetary orbits, the wilder the ride.

The rest of the crew regarded his piloting skills with mild amusement. Anytime there was a slight variation in the onboard gravity or inertial dampening fields, the catchphrase ‘Castillo must be at the helm again’ would echo throughout the ship. Remarkably, even Lt. Commander Skyl approved of his maneuvers, using each opportunity to actively test the stress levels on numerous key systems. It was a harmony that came only after years of service together. A sense of teamwork, trust, and more importantly, a sense of community, that bound the crew together in curious and unseemly ways. In all of history, there had never been an experience as unique and as rewarding as life aboard a starship.

The *Enterprise* nestled itself into orbit high above H’atoria. It was an above average size planet circling a below average size star, and the weather of this sun-starved world reflected this fact accordingly. Great pastel-colored clouds swirled in intricate patterns all across its face, creating an ever-changing portrait set against the deep blackness of space.

“I got kicked around at the last stop, Commander,” Garrett called out. “This one’s yours. Assemble your away team.” She looked at him with a twinkle in her eye and cast him a final devilish thought. *Don’t forget your Maypole*, she shrugged. *Just to let them know there are no hard feelings!*

Stadi playfully gave his captain the evil eye for a brief second, then responded: “Aye, Captain. Commander Skyl, Mr. Castillo... you’re with me.” Castillo jumped up with verve and followed his seniors to the forward turbolift. As a lower ranking officer, it was a rare privilege for him to participate in away missions. On occasion, he was left in command while the others went planetside, an honor to be sure, but often not quite as exciting as actually going along.

Garrett watched the lift doors close, then returned her gaze to the main viewscreen. She stared at the tiny pinpoints of light with great interest. In one small spot in particular, the stars seemed to shimmer as

if their light was passing through a drop of water. At length, the captain rose from the center seat and squinted at the screen in a feeble attempt to determine a cause for the strange distortion.

“Away team has transported safely to the surface, Captain,” Cicely called forward from her aft station. But the captain ignored her, concentrating instead on that miniscule quaver in the seamless fabric.

“Marta, do you see that small area of distortion?” Garrett pointed to the spot in question as it slowly grew bigger. Before Marta could answer, the wavering stars were replaced by a blurry brown and green mass. The mass quickly solidified into a Klingon bird-of-prey; small, but lethal.

“Report, Commander.”

“Three *B’rel*-class birds-of-prey in standard attack formation.” The two other vessels snarled at the *Enterprise’s* port and starboard flanks.

“Weapon’s status?”

Marta quickly glanced across her console. “All offensive weapons appear to be at our equivalent of a yellow alert, Captain.” She swiveled to face Garrett. “Shall I raise shields?”

“Not yet, Commander,” Garrett said as she sat back down on the edge of the command chair. “We’re all supposed to be friends here.”

Ensign Enyo, at the helm since Castillo’s departure, stared ominously down the throat of the lead bird-of-prey. The parabolic projection on the main screen engulfed her in star-studded blackness and placed the craft, literally, on the tip of her nose. With dual antennae beginning to wilt, the Andorian’s skin tone flushed bluer, almost to the point of florescence, and her anxiety rose as she longed to be back at her quiet science console.

Garrett tapped the comm touchpad on her armrest. “*Enterprise* to away team...”

“*Stadi here, Captain...*”

“We’ve got company, Commander. It would appear that our inebriated comrade at Morska decided to make a few house calls after all. I suggest you introduce yourself to Governor Mogh post haste.”

“Acknowledged, Captain.” Stadi braced himself against the biting wind and the driving snow. “That’s easy for her to say,” he

muttered to his companions. He cursed himself for not having the foresight to check the environmental conditions before beaming down. At least then they could've thrown on their field jackets. Stadi glanced behind him at Skyl and Castillo who looked strangely out of place here after so long aboard ship.

Skyl's face bore a blank stare as the Vulcan tried his hardest to resist the temptation to shiver. Snow was virtually unheard of on Vulcan, where the mean temperature was at least fifty degrees centigrade warmer than it was here on H'atoria. Despite his best efforts, Stadi could see that Skyl's shoulders were already beginning to shudder faintly.

Castillo on the other hand, was thoroughly enjoying himself. Not only was he happy to be off the ship, but the climate of H'atoria was also so radically different from the care-fully controlled environment of the *Enterprise* that it was almost exhilarating and refreshing to be there. He gave Stadi a broad grin as a swirl of snow blanketed their red uniforms.

Stadi smirked, then turned and began leading the small troop up the main avenue towards what the transporter chief had confirmed as the governor's fortress-like compound. While they trudged through the foot-deep snow, Stadi took note of his surroundings — all up and down the street, the native people darted sullenly about on their day-to-day business. The H'atorians were a short, round, furry people living in abject poverty under Klingon rule. They had large round eyes, a flat triangular nose, and a small round mouth. Two wide buckteeth parted their lips and extended down below a nonexistent chin.

Decades ago, the H'atorian Global Alliance had designed and built their first warp ship. As the small craft left orbit for its trial run, a Klingon attack cruiser decloaked and destroyed it. According to the Klingon version of the Prime Directive, the H'atorians at that point were considered to be fully warp capable and thus open for conquest, even if their first attempt at warp flight had been a little less than successful.

An unfortunate victim of a bygone empire-building era, these poor broken people now toiled away in abject misery, preparing their planet's modest resources for offworld shipment. With the destruction of Praxis, the Klingons had demanded more and more from these

browbeaten worlds to help bolster an empire stretched too thin, and to support an economy shattered by the mismanagement of the very resources it exploited. In short, the empire was dying a slow and agonizing death and dragging all else down with it.

Thus, the H'atorians paid dearly for the last breaths of a brutal empire they had once dreamed of exploring. *This could've been Betazed*, Stadi thought. He shuddered, possibly from the cold, possibly not. Just light hours away, the United Federation of Planets was experiencing what historians were already calling a Golden Age. Just by chance, fate, or divine intervention, this world had suffered while Betazed and her people flourished at the center of one of the greatest interplanetary unions of all time, a union that was now growing at such a phenomenal and unexpected rate that it was doubling its knowledge in *all* subjects every six months. Regardless of any treaties, the Klingon Empire had been engulfed decades ago, and they were now surrounded without anyone ever firing a shot.

Abandoning forever in 2323 the shackles of tariffs and currency, the Federation had embarked on a new era of interplanetary trade. With the *free* exchange of goods *and* ideas came a rebirth of culture as worlds diverted vast resources from former economic concerns, to the greater glory of the Federation. It was a grand realization of the age-old adage, 'from the haves to the have not' and in this vast cyclical trading network, everybody benefited.

At the Antares Shipyards alone, four *Excelsior*-class starships a week were being launched into this vast domain. The workhorses of the Fleet, these vessels were creating a strong base for the quickly expanding trading network. Crews for these ships were being graduated from universities all across the Federation in unprecedented numbers. New worlds petitioned for membership on a regular basis. Three had joined in just the last eight months, bringing yet another fresh new influx of goods and ideas. Cyclical trade created cyclical growth in endless cycles, with no apparent sign of abatement. Even the fierce Romulan Empire had begun to tremble in deference to this seemingly unstoppable force.

At last, Stadi and company climbed the four stone steps to the heavy steel gate of the fortress. Somewhat shielded from the wind and snow by massive stone abutments, they huddled there a moment while a

Klingon guard crossed the grounds to ‘greet’ them.

Stadi’s thoughts of the Federation helped him realize the importance of their mission here. If Turkana IV was representative of a new Klingon or Romulan offensive, he knew that the Federation’s Golden Age could quickly be brought to its knees by an interstellar war.

Were they prepared? Were all these new ships with non-Starfleet crews, with limited or no combat training, a vulnerability to the defensive capabilities of the Federation? Had the Klingons or the Romulans — or perhaps both — realized this and concluded that the time was now ripe for an all-out assault? These prospects startled Stadi nearly as much as the Klingon guard’s loud bark from behind the gate.

“We must speak with Governor Mogh,” Stadi said firmly. The guard grunted once.

“No one speaks to Governor Mogh,” he growled. Much to everyone’s astonishment, Skyl plopped down in a snowbank and began to whimper.

“But we have come such a long way under such horrible conditions,” he whined. The guard let out a boisterous guffaw.

“You make me laugh, Vulcan,” he chuckled. With another grunt, he lifted a gigantic key up from his belt and placed it into a tired and rusty lock. With a heavy metallic *cha-chunk*, the lock released and the guard slowly pulled the gate open, a deep groan coming from both until it at last clanked against the stone abutment.

Surprised, Stadi wasted no time with formalities. He passed through quickly and began to wade up the path to the fortress door with Skyl and Castillo hot... er, cold on his heels. They did not dare look back when they heard the massive gate slam shut against its frame, and then the foreboding *cha-chunk* of it being relocked.

Like the snow around him, Stadi allowed his mind to drift again. A number of questions still plagued him. Why would the Klingons be plotting against the Federation, and at the same time be participating in the new peace accords? It was only with the Federation’s assistance after the First Khitomer Accords that Qo’noS was saved from its ecological calamity, rather than evacuated and abandoned as originally planned.

Furthermore, why would the Romulans suddenly act after thirty years’ isolation following the Tomed Incident? What was the catalyst

for these sudden new border skirmishes? At that moment, Stadi was forced to conclude that there had to be much more going on here than anyone understood. Perhaps a conspiracy not unlike the one General Chang and Lt. Valeris had masterminded all those many years ago to disrupt the first Khitomer Accords? There was very little originality in history, and thus it was doomed to repeat itself.

As they approached, the tall steel door of the fortress opened as if directed by some unseen force. Stadi hesitated for a moment at the threshold, then stepped over to the other side. Once inside, not a soul, Klingon or otherwise, was anywhere to be found — just a long, dark vaulted corridor made of damp stone that ostensibly extended into oblivion.

Unhappily, the temperature inside was only slightly less frigid than outside, and the silence was crushing except for the howling wind just beyond the open door. And then seemingly, out of nowhere and everywhere at once, a voice cracked like thunder.

“COME FORWARD!” it boomed, rumbling down the corridor. With a skull-rending resonance, the massive steel door slammed shut behind them, and the magnetic locks clicked ominously into place. Both Stadi and Castillo went stark white. Even Skyl seemed momentarily startled. Finally regaining a modicum of composure, the trio started down the long passage, practically arm-in-arm, all three now trembling from more than just the cold.

“I apologize for my behavior at the gate, Commander,” Skyl said at length. “Extremely cold temperatures have been known to have the effect of causing varied states of delirium in Vulcans.”

“Sure,” Castillo quipped with a broad toothy grin.

“I understand, Mr. Skyl,” Stadi said, suppressing a smile. “Actually, you may have assisted in our gaining entry.”

“Indeed,” Skyl remarked, raising an eyebrow. The three continued side by side down the damp hallway. Suddenly, Castillo stopped and nervously glanced all around him.

“What is it, Lieutenant?” Stadi asked urgently.

“Somebody pulled on my uniform,” he replied rather forlornly.

“You did it yourself, Lieutenant,” Skyl said with an almost obvious frown.

“Oh,” Castillo said nervously. Then, with a smile: “Where’s

Toto when you need him?” Stadi and Skyl stared at him blankly. As far as humans went, Castillo was one of the more baffling members of the species. Stadi briefly reached into the lieutenant’s mind and saw an image of a beautiful young human female in a blue and white checkered dress. In one arm she held a small furry animal called a ‘dog’, and in the other, a wicker basket. To her right and left were humanoid forms Stadi had never before seen in the Federation... one appeared to be a robot of some kind, the other, animal-like with golden hair and a long tail.

The third was strangest of all. It appeared to have cloth-like skin, while a coarse, dried form of hair poked out from every seam where the creature was apparently joined together. *The human mind is such a cluttered place*, Stadi thought. Which one was Toto? Why had Castillo’s mind conjured up such an image? Was the woman someone he knew?

Stadi shook his head in confusion. Reading a human’s mind often presented far more questions than it answered. Perhaps this was their defense against telepathy; an ability they did not possess, and were often rather vociferously uncomfortable with.

They at last approached a double door at the end of the long passageway. The doors swung open automatically, apparently activated by hidden sensors somewhere in the wall. Beyond lay an immense chamber with a soaring roof high overhead. Cautiously, Stadi crept in, followed by Skyl and Castillo. Before them hung an enormous Klingon head, replete with deep ridges and long brown hair. With a whoosh, a billowing ball of flame ballooned out and obscured the scowling face for a moment before drifting to the ceiling and dissipating.

Beneath the massive painting, a Klingon, dressed in regal red robes, sat, legs flat out, dusting off his hands in front of a soot-covered fireplace. Seconds before, he had been thrown back from a crouching position by the searing conflagration as it had erupted from the malfunctioning gas burner therein.

Sitting up with a whole string of Klingon curse words, the proud warrior grabbed a large wrench, and then mercilessly assaulted the hapless unit with it. As if in protest, the burner let forth another explosion, spewing another blast of soot and flame upon the enraged warrior. Protest made, the burner then settled down into a nice warming

fire.

Standing up, the Klingon threw the wrench over in the corner, then disgustedly dusted himself off. Only then did he notice his visitors.

“Wretched damn planet,” he growled. “You and your officers must have Klingon blood to come to this damn place, Commander... er, Commander?”

The Governor was not at all what Stadi had expected. He was a clean, well-kept man; except of course for the soot. He seemed to have an almost amiable personality, and his thoughts bore no outward signs of hostility towards the Starfleet officers. *He seems almost civilized*, Castillo thought most humanly. Stadi found himself grudgingly agreeing.

“Commander Stadi, Sir, of the *Starship Enterprise*. My officers... Lieutenant Commander Skyl and Lieutenant Castillo.” Stadi gestured to them each in turn.

Mogh sat down behind a large metal desk. He then eyed the first officer levelly, studying him curiously. “Are all Federation captains so bold, Commander? My warships have your vessel outflanked and outgunned. And yet, here you are.”

“We have come,” Stadi said, “on important diplomatic business, Governor. If you would call off your ships...”

Mogh glared at him a moment. He then touched a computer terminal and barked an order into it. In orbit, the port and starboard vessels moved off and cloaked. The lead vessel powered down its weapons... but still remained behind to ‘escort’ the *Enterprise*.

“Now tell me, Commander,” Mogh said, “what business could possibly be so important that the flagship of the Federation would risk crossing the border to come to this miserable damn planet?”

“The civil war on the nearby Federation world of Turkana Four,” Stadi said, offering no more information. He wanted to gauge Mogh’s physical and emotional response to the mention of Turkana and see where it led.

“Don’t bother, Betazoid,” he responded. “My thoughts will reveal nothing because I know nothing of this civil war.”

“Curious,” said Skyl, “that you know nothing of the events transpiring on a planet only zero point one five light-years away.”

Mogh let out a short guttural laugh. “Why would it concern me? I spend my days here, in this office, trying to figure out how this miserable dying rock is going to meet next month’s quota-call from High Command.”

A dying rock was an apt description. Despite its small sun, H’atoria had once been a somewhat lush tropical world, until harsh overmining practices by the Klingons had polluted its atmosphere to the point of near nuclear winter. In a little over two centuries, the planet was expected to be uninhabitable.

“With all due respect, Governor,” Stadi admonished, “perhaps it should concern you. The *Enterprise* has uncovered evidence that suggests a Klingon involvement in this civil war.” Mogh’s lack of seriousness turned to sudden interest. He leaned forward, placing his arms on the desk. His eyes issued a warning even before he spoke.

“An... *interesting* allegation, Commander. Just what is this evidence you speak of?”

“Well gee, let’s see,” Castillo blurted out, “the weapons would be the most obvious fact, I guess...” Stadi could sense Castillo’s pride in making himself heard. Unfortunately, the lieutenant still had much to learn about tactical maneuvers in relation to delicate discussions such as these.

Still, Castillo had achieved something. Even the unexpected revelation about the weapons failed to cause any change in the thoughts of Mogh. As far as Stadi could tell, the governor really did have no knowledge of Turkanan politics.

“Weapons, Commander?” It was Klingon custom not to acknowledge a junior officer. Mogh cut out the middleman and glanced at Stadi directly. Stadi, for his part, would not have his officers disregarded such. He turned his eyes toward Skyl.

Taking the nearly imperceptible cue, Skyl stepped forward. “Type three antimatter shells, Governor,” he stated. “Banned and obsolete in the Federation, but composed of technology still readily available in the Klingon Empire.”

“And in the Romulan Empire as well, Vulcan,” Mogh countered. “Can you deny Romulan involvement, Commander?” Surprisingly, he was more inquisitive than defensive about the allegations against his homeland.

“No,” Stadi answered truthfully. “A member of the Turkanan government did, however, make a direct reference to possible Klingon involvement.” Mogh leaned back in his chair, hands clasped at his chest. He sat in this position for many long seconds, apparently deep in thought. Finally, he leaned forward and spoke.

“Klingon involvement is certainly a possibility, Commander... but we cannot yet discount Romulan involvement as well. Many are, and have been, against the Klingon-Federation alliance from the very start, and the blood of many has been brought to a boil over the convention of yet another *peace* accord.” Mogh let out a deep weary sigh. He leaned back again, steely eyes staring at the desktop, carefully forming his next thoughts.

“Unfortunately,” he continued at last, “I am not, as of late,” he admitted ruefully, “privy to all of the official... *and unofficial*... activities of my government. I do, however, still have a few friends left on the High Council... and Chancellor K’mpec owes me a favor or two.” This he mused mostly to himself. He then leaned forward earnestly. “I will begin an immediate investigation, Commander. I already have a few suspects...” he finished absently, staring blankly at the floor. Stadi eyed at him silently, speculatively, then spoke.

“Your *covert* assistance will certainly be appreciated by my captain, Governor. But what of your duties here?”

Mogh jumped up and pounded his chest. “This frigid damn planet will go nowhere, Commander.” He let out a boisterous guffaw. “Besides, it will be good to be in space again.” He slammed his fist down on the steel desk and broke into a sharp, toothy grin.

As if in agreement of his words, the small gas burner belched out a ball of flame, then petered out. Mogh eyed the burner with wrathful disdain and growled. “It *will* be good to be in space again,” he repeated. “Where will your vessel travel next, Commander?”

“A rendezvous with the *Starship Ajax*. They reportedly have information pertinent to our investigation.”

“Very good... but first, head to the Klingon world Beta Thoridor. Meet there with a Governor Ja’rod.” Mogh spat out the name as if it had left a bitter taste on his palate. “There have been reports of recent malcontent in his government, perhaps it is related. I will make all the necessary arrangements for your unhindered transit

through our space.”

“Understood, Governor,” Stadi said with a nod.

“I will contact you when I have more information.” Mogh then crossed to the front of the desk. The prospects of conspiracy and intrigue had, in some ways, reinvigorated the aging warrior. He made a broad sweeping gesture toward the giant painting behind him.

“Are you familiar with the teachings of Kahless, Commander?” he said. Stadi gazed up at the deeply furrowed brow and long curly hair of Klingon history’s greatest warrior.

“Only vaguely I’m afraid, Governor.”

“Unfortunate,” Mogh reproved. He then stood up strait and proud and tugged the regal red robes into place around his broad shoulders. “Kahless once said: ‘Conspiring with one enemy to defeat another enemy is like play wrestling with a targ... eventually the targ grows weary of it and bites back.’” Stadi and Castillo both smirked at the basic wisdom of the statement. Even Skyl raised an eyebrow and nodded imperceptibly. Mogh sat on the edge of his desk and continued.

“The Romulans have a much greater agenda here than we presently see, Commander. The Romulans always have an agenda, never forget that. And they ally themselves with no one.” He threateningly clenched a leather-clad fist closely in front of Stadi’s nose.

“I have little doubt that the Romulans are behind this, and anyone, Klingon or Federation alike, who thinks that an alliance with them will be beneficial, was born, and will die, a fool.” Mogh’s detestation for the Romulans permeated the large chamber — in fact, Stadi could sense the unbidden and flagrant emotions with an almost painful tangibility. Perhaps more disturbing however, was the fact that he could also readily sense Castillo’s own strong but silent agreements with the governor’s stern words of warning. Could these thoughts reach a level someday that could ultimately lead to reckless or unpredictable behavior?

Stadi nodded an acknowledgement to Mogh’s grave counsel, then said: “By your leave, Governor? We have much to discuss with our captain.”

Mogh stood up abruptly. His thoughts betrayed a brief flash of disappointment. Only then did Stadi realize that the governor had actually enjoyed their conversation. Stadi sensed the loneliness of

spending days on end here, rifling through stacks of acquisition requests in this cold, dark chamber.

He wondered if Mogh had any family. And even as he wondered, the telepathic regions of his brain searched out and found the sought after information. Stadi saw a wife, tall, proud, and noble by Klingon standards. He saw too a young boy, Worf, Mogh's most ultimate pride, already being groomed as a stern and honorable warrior in his own right.

“*Qapla'*, Commander,” Mogh saluted them in traditional Klingon. “My regards to your brave and honorable captain.” He then broke into a hearty laugh. “That certainly was an interesting move at Morska... that old space targ Gorda thought the invasion had finally begun!”

Mogh's laughter continued to bellow throughout the immense chamber, offering its own warmth against the growing cold.

## “...begin Chapter Nine.”

CAPTAIN’S LOG

OLD FEDERATION STARDATE 41003.37

NEW GALACTIC STARDATE 21333.39

AT THE BEHEST OF GOVERNOR MOGH, THE *ENTERPRISE* IS ENROUTE TO THE KLINGON WORLD BETA THORIDOR WHERE WE HAVE BEEN ADVISED TO MEET WITH A GOVERNOR JA’ROD. SENSOR READINGS SUGGEST THAT WE ARE FLANKED BY AT LEAST TWO CLOAKED VESSELS, UNDOUBTEDLY SENT, COURTESY OF MOGH, TO ENSURE OUR ‘UNHINDERED TRANSIT’ THROUGH KLINGON SPACE.

TENSIONS ABOARD SHIP CONTINUE TO MOUNT AS THE SCOPE OF THIS MYSTERY BROADENS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF HOSTILE INVOLVEMENT DEEPENS. MANY OF HISTORIES OLD WOUNDS HAVE BEEN REOPENED, AND THE EFFECTS ARE ONLY JUST NOW BEGINNING TO BREAK THE SURFACE.

Rachel Garrett sat placidly behind the ancient wooden schoolteacher’s desk that dominated her small oval ready room and studied its polished surface. The desk had been a congratulatory gift from her grandfather nearly twenty-two years ago when she was promoted to captain and placed in command of the *Enterprise* on its maiden voyage.

Considered by some to be a bit eccentric, the beloved old man had devoted nearly sixty years of his life to the education of young minds. The captain often thought that the only things in life that were truly important, the things that really mattered, had been conveyed to her by this one single person. She would not be where she was today if it had not been for his guidance.

The desk continued to be a constant reminder of that. Embedded in its upper right-hand corner, a small brass plaque bore the immortal inscription:

*TO: CAPTAIN RACHEL C. GARRETT  
STARDATE 26591.2  
YOU ARE HEREBY REQUESTED AND REQUIRED TO TAKE  
COMMAND  
OF THE USS Enterprise, NCC-1701-C,  
AS OF THIS DATE.  
SIGNED: FLEET ADMIRAL PAVEL CHEKOV ~ STARFLEET  
COMMAND*

Since that time, the desk had been witness to the *Enterprise's* two-year shakedown cruise, and her four subsequent five-year missions. It had participated in countless debates, briefings, and meetings, and had traveled to every corner of the Federation and beyond. As a silent observer to Garrett and her senior staff, the desk had grown with them as they developed into the finely tuned unit, the family, they had become. Indeed, it too had become part of the family.

The captain turned all of this over in her mind as she sat and next studied the Bajoran Renewal Scroll that lay perched in its special ornate brazier on the upper left-hand corner of the desk's polished surface. As part of their Gratitude Festival, the Bajorans would write their problems on these simple paper scrolls, then burn them in the sacred brazier in hopes that their troubles would turn to ashes along with the scroll.

Garrett wondered if there could possibly be any hope left on that beleaguered world after its long and arduous Cardassian occupation. The symbolic scroll and brazier had been a gift from Stadi upon their visit to Bajor during the ship's shakedown cruise over twenty years ago; shortly before the Occupation decimated that peaceful world and its people.

'Just in case the need ever arises', he had said. The captain let out a long sigh. She had her doubts as to whether all her troubles would even fit onto that tiny little scroll. "For all the good it would do," she

said aloud... *the fire suppression system would probably put the small blaze out anyway.* The thought of this made her smirk.

She winced at the lingering tightness in her ribs as she rose and slowly crossed the room to the wall-mounted food replicator. "Computer... hot cider," she said warily.

The computer issued its usual string of compliant chirps before responding: "*There are currently twenty-two varieties of cider on file. Please choose from the following selections... Andorian tuber root, Tellarite pear, Vulcan snow orchid...*" Garrett smacked the palm of her hand on the computer terminal in mock agitation.

"Infernal damn machine, we go through this every time. Sometimes you're a bigger pain in the ass than you're worth." In truth, food replicators were a relatively new invention and very few starships had been privileged enough to have had them installed. As it was however, there were still a few kinks in the system.

"...*Centauri fizz...*" the computer paused in its dissertation for a brief moment to issue several more chirps; this time of the negative variety. "*Ass is not currently on file. Please make another selection, input the correct chemical formula, or submit a sample for chemical analysis.*" Exasperated, the captain exhaled a half-laugh, half-growl and resolved that she would not be deterred.

"Computer... give me one cup of: Hot... Terran... Apple... Cider." Without further ado, a green mug of steaming brown liquid appeared before her in a glimmering conversion of energy into matter. "Thank you. Now store this selection for future reference." Quite pleased with herself, the captain took a sip of the soothing sweet cider and turned towards her desk.

The computer chirped again. "*Ass has been stored for future reference.*" The distinctive female voice never wavered even as Garrett nearly spit a mouthful across the room, and indeed spilled half a glass down her sleeve. She spun around to stare at her nemesis with shock on her face and fire in her eyes.

"Computer... er, uh, delete my previous request..." More negative sounding chirps.

"*Unable to comply... previous request has been removed from the transition chamber. Please return the selection for dematerialization cycle.*"

“Oh, for the love of... now you listen to me... oh hell, just forget it!” The computer offered the captain a number of confused and dejected sounds, then resolved that perhaps it would be best to simply stand by for further instructions.

Garrett placed the back of her hand on her forehead, closed her eyes, and shook her head. She then made several steps towards her desk before being startled by the door chime. Rolling her eyes and shaking her head some more, she took another sip from the now half-empty mug, then leaned against the front edge of the desk.

“Come in,” she said with a sigh. The doors parted and Lt. Castillo stepped in smiling.

“You wanted to see me, Captain?”

“Yes, Mr. Castillo... please, sit down.” She gestured to a chair directly in front of her. “Can I offer you anything to drink, Lieutenant?” She made reference to her own mug as she held it up towards the replicator. Castillo inhaled deeply, then took a seat.

“That smells like hot apple cider... perfect after a cold away mission to a ravaged planet.” He smiled, but soon wondered what he’d said wrong to bring on such a sudden change in his captain’s demeanor and facial expressions.

He became even more puzzled as Garrett sheepishly crossed over to the replicator like a beaten dog approaching its master. She then squared her shoulders and took on a sudden new look; that of a predator about to pounce on its prey. A thin smile slowly spread across the good captain’s lips. The thought had struck her so suddenly that she could not have possibly resisted its evil temptation.

“Computer... give me one cup of steaming hot ass for Mr. Castillo.” Castillo’s mouth fell open and his eyes grew to the size of two full moons. Without so much as a sound, the computer complied and a second green mug of steaming hot cider was presented for the captain’s inspection.

“Ha!” she screamed out loud. “The magic words... take that, infernal damn machine.” She dropped a fist on the computer terminal for emphasis. The computer dispensed a string of warning tones before making its rebuttal.

*“Please do not strike the user interface panel.”*

“Oh, had to get the last word in, eh? Why, of all the insolent... I

should have you thrown out an airlock!”

“Um, Captain?!” Castillo stared at his captain with uncertain disbelief. Garrett jerked her head around suddenly, seemingly surprised by the presence of her guest. Seeing for the first time the disturbed look on her helmsman’s face, Garrett had no choice but to break into a rare fit of laughter.

Afraid the replicator might change its mind, she snatched the mug from the chamber and carefully delivered it to Castillo. Still uncertain as how to react, the lieutenant gave his captain a twisted smile and muffled thanks. She laughed again at his obvious discomfort.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant,” she said as she moved over and sat in her own chair. “I assure you, I am not insane. I have been fighting with that wretched machine since the day it was installed and I’ve only just now realized how ridiculously bizarre it must’ve looked all these years.” She chuckled again as Castillo silently inspected, then sniffed the brown liquid simmering in his mug. He took his first trial sip before a broad grin slowly swept across his own face. He too couldn’t resist the temptation.

“Best piece of…” he began.

“Lieutenant!” Garrett’s own mouth hung open now, eyes wide with shock. Castillo’s mischievous grin began to recede even as a similar one began to reform on his captain’s lips. She chuckled again at the conflicting emotions that raced across his twisted brow. There was a brief pause as they both smiled, then sighed in unison. Finally, Garrett broke the silence, this time in a much more subdued tone.

“Do you have any regrets, Lieutenant?” Castillo sat dumfounded for a moment, uncertain of the context in which he should frame his response.

Garrett smiled warmly at him. “In general, I mean. Do you wish that you had done some things differently in your life?”

“Well, sure, I think that we all have that wish, Captain. That we could travel back in time and relive a moment, change it to better our future.”

“Why do you suppose we have that drive within us, even though we know it is an impossibility?” She ran her index finger in a half-moon round the rim of her mug. They both sat in silence for a few moments with only the nearly subliminal background thrum of a

thousand different systems to mask their thoughts.

At length, Garrett finally sighed with a smile and spoke in a soft voice. “It comforts me,” she said, “that you do not have a quick answer for that either. I have been wrestling with that question for nearly two months and have yet to come up with one truly definitive conclusion that satisfies me.”

Castillo offered his captain a meek smirk. He still felt a certain level of unease at the unusual interchange taking place between them. It was rare for any captain to act in such a familiar manner with a subordinate officer, members of the senior staff included. Distance was the norm when command decisions could easily put lives on the line and regularly tested the bonds of friendship. Garrett had been no different than any other commanding officer. Even after fifteen years, she remained distant, aloof.

Another brief silence passed as Castillo shifted restlessly in his chair. Using the extrasensory techniques she had learned from Stadi, the captain received a vague empathic impression of what her helmsman was feeling. It filled her with both pride, and even a little sadness, that she was still such an intimidating force to her officers. Like those that had come before her, Garrett had been successful in creating the lonely aura of ‘Starship Captain’ — an evil necessary to command, but lonely, nonetheless. She sighed.

“Relax, Mr. Castillo,” she said, again with a comforting smile. “I have not been replaced by some malign alien intelligence.”

“Whew! That’s a relief, Captain. I was about to call Marta and have you detained.” His mischievous grin returned as he flashed a threatening look at his superior.

She returned his smile. “Do you remember when you first came aboard the *Enterprise*, Lieutenant?”

“Of course, Captain, how could I forget? A third-year academy student pulled from class and assigned to the Bridge of the Federation flagship.” He shook his head as if still not quite believing. Garrett took a final relaxing swallow of the warm cider and raised an eyebrow. Very few of us know of the hidden forces at work on the backgrounds of our life.

“And do you know why you were brought aboard?” She knew all too well that there was always more to a story, always much, much

more.

“Well, I knew...” he paused and smiled, “...heck, *everyone* knew the *Enterprise* was ready to ship out. But to be honest, Captain, I guess I’ve always been afraid to ask why they chose me to fill the helm position.” Sparkling blue eyes flashed a look of vulnerability with the admission of such a long-held insecurity.

Garrett set her empty glass aside and leaned forward, elbows on the desk, hands clasped. It seemed like only yesterday that the fine officer before her had been the trembling young cadet gingerly piloting his first starship out of spacedock. The captain cringed inwardly at the thought of an advancing age that placed ‘only yesterday’ at fifteen years plus. She’d been in command here for over twenty. *When did I grow so old?*

“You are aboard this starship because *I* asked for you, Mr. Castillo.” Again, Castillo’s eyes widened to full-moon status. “Admiral Uhura couldn’t decide whether to assign you to an *Antares*-class freighter, or just boot you out of the Academy altogether.”

The lieutenant began to noticeably squirm as his captain continued. “Poor admission scores, mediocre performance in the Preparatory Program, poor grades in nearly every class... and need I mention the disastrous results of your *Kobayashi Maru* simulation? A full-scale war that probably would’ve decimated Starfleet and destroyed the Federation.”

Castillo met Garrett’s fierce look with a mixture of disbelief and embarrassment. He certainly hadn’t expected a complete dressing down from his commanding officer, and it caught him completely off guard. He glanced down at his slowly cooling cider, then back up to her burning eyes. His throat felt as dry as parchment. He attempted to speak, then tried again.

“Then why,” he finally croaked, “why did you request my assignment here, Captain?” It was a difficult question that left him with a crushing feeling and a knot in his throat. Garrett admired the mustered strength it had taken for him to ask it.

“Because,” she replied, “when I looked at your records, I saw a struggling young man fighting a battle against expectations. The only surviving son of the ‘Heroes of Salem One’, desperately trying to live up to the legacy his father had left for him.”

At the mention of his father, the hair on Castillo's neck began to bristle and the heat began to rise up under his collar. The captain sensed the years of bottled-up bitterness and anxiety welling up inside him, the rage even. If she had been Onovan, the Lieutenant would've no doubt stormed from the room by now. But as it was, he wouldn't dare pull such a stunt on his commanding officer. *Or would he?*

Garrett looked squarely at Castillo for a long moment as he simmered in his chair. She could sense a great deal of pain buried beneath all that defensive anger. These feelings had been with him a very long time, torturing him even when he didn't realize it. Her hardened look softened and her shoulders slowly relaxed. Her voice, cool and reassuring, soothed his heated senses.

"After your *Kobayashi Maru* simulation," she said quietly, "I sat down and had a long talk with Admiral Uhura. We both agreed that if you were ever going to make it in Starfleet, you needed to be pulled out of the general crowd and placed in a more, shall we say, nurturing environment."

"I never asked for special treatment, Captain," Castillo blurted out defensively.

"We all need special treatment from time to time, Lieutenant, whether we want it or not. That's the nature of life. Be grateful you got it."

The man let out a long sigh, as if all the years of pent-up angst suddenly poured out of him. His brow furrowed with the onslaught of new thoughts and feelings that crowded his mind. His eyes darted about the room as his brain processed this flood of new information. At length, his gaze fell upon the captain, eyes full of sadness and uncertainty.

"I don't understand why you had such a special interest in my career, Captain," he said sheepishly.

She smiled at him softly and tilted her head slightly. "The *Enterprise* looks after her own, Mr. Castillo. Always remember that."

The simplicity of the statement carried with it a weight of immense proportions. The legendary resolve of all the *Enterprise's* and all her crews was known throughout half the galaxy; past, present, and probably far into the future. Where the needs of the one outweighed the needs of the many. Where character, not skill, remained the true judge

of self-worth. And where worth itself was judged not by where you came from, but by how good a person you were, and indeed, what you were willing to do to make the best better for the good of all.

“My intentions are to promote you to Lieutenant-Commander upon our return to Betazed,” Garrett said matter-of-factly. “You’ve earned it, Lieutenant, especially in these past two years.” It took considerable effort for Castillo to suppress an exclamation of stunned amazement. From a dressing down, to promise of promotion; an intense cyclone of emotions swirled around him as he managed to muffle a thanks through a half-hidden grin.

“Sometimes it pays to give someone a second chance,” she added with a quick smile, thinking indeed of those past two years. The Captain allowed Castillo a brief moment to soak in his glory. But she did not permit sufficient time for the moment itself to undermine the point she was trying to get across to him.

“Lieutenant-Commander is as far as I or anyone else can take you, Mr. Castillo,” Garrett said with a warning glare. “Any promotion beyond that is completely dependent upon your ability to move beyond this paralyzing wall of bitterness and anxiety that you’ve built across your path.”

Castillo began to make a motion of protest, but resigned instead to offer a simple “Yes Ma’am.” The full measure of what it was to be an officer was slowly becoming startlingly clear to him. It was the ability to look objectively at all problems, including your own, and reason through them, rather than just shove them ‘safely’ aside.

*Perhaps it is time to reexamine my career; Castillo thought. Maybe even take a few chips out of that wall.* With a nod to Garrett, the Lieutenant rose and began to move towards the door. Mid-stride, he was halted by a final comment from his captain.

“Incidentally,” she called out, “it has always been one of my regrets that I did not take the time to get to know my officers better.”

“There’s always tomorrow,” Castillo said with a smile. “Goodnight, Captain.” With that, he turned and was gone.

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“Garrett to Commander Skyl...”

“Skyl here, Captain.” The chief engineer stood in his office adjacent to the warp core and studied the peculiar readings he was getting from Deck Eighteen.

“The replicator in my Ready Room is on the fritz again. Can you please take a look at it in the morning?”

“The fritz, Captain?” The Vulcan frowned at the human colloquialism, then glanced over the current alignment configuration of the Dilithium Crystal Articulation Frame. His acute hearing registered a barely audible sigh from his commanding officer.

“On the fritz, as in not functioning properly, Commander.” He raised one eyebrow in silent regard to the tone of her voice. She did tend to let some of this technology get the best of her, especially as she aged. His eyes briefly flashed over a nearby scheduling padd.

“Understood, Captain. I will reconcile the matter at precisely 0737 hours tomorrow.”

“Wonderful... Garrett out.”

Skyl puzzled for a moment over her choice of closing words. The captain’s response did not seem to denote excitement. *Terrans*, he thought, *a most contrariant species*. His thoughts returned to the DCAF. With a few short keystrokes, the engineer made a seven-micron adjustment to the alignment of the crystals; then watched as engine efficiency rose zero-point-eight-seven percent.

Satisfied with the new readings, the Vulcan returned his attention to the data stream coming from Deck Eighteen. Pressure and humidity: conforming to Betazed norm. Temperature: slightly elevated. Portside EPS coupling: functioning within normal parameters. Starboard coupling: expected variations in magnetic fields. Lifesigns: One...

Skyl brought up the coded ID signal that every commbadge on the ship emitted. *Intriguing*, he thought. He hesitated for an instant, deciding on a course of action. *Most intriguing indeed...*

“Lieutenant Commander Skyl to Commander Batanides.” There was an unusually long pause before Marta’s response filtered through his commbadge.

“Yes, Skyl,” she said with a hint of weariness.

“Could you please join me in Engineering, Commander?” Another pause. Acute hearing registering another quiet sigh. Humans.

“Can’t this wait until morning, Skyl? I’ve had kind of a rough day.”

“It is a matter of some urgency, Commander.” There was a final pause before Marta’s voice finally resigned itself to compliance.

“On my way, Batanides out.”

Some minutes later, a slightly disheveled Marta Batanides appeared in Engineering. Her dark hair was loose, flowing down to her shoulders in great black waves that rippled as she walked. The red jacket of her uniform hung open, revealing the tight-fitting grey under-shirt that hugged her slim and shapely frame. Her eyes reflected the same hint of weariness that had been evident in her voice.

“Well, what do you have?” Marta asked as she stepped into the Vulcan’s overly warm office. She spread open her jacket and placed petite hands on her hips, clearly annoyed.

“I believe you will find this most interesting, Commander.” Her shoulders sank and she tilted her head slightly to one side. The Vulcan took notice of the human’s gaze with some interest. *She may actually strike me*, he thought.

“Skyl, it’s late,” she huffed with the urgency of a mother scolding her child.

“I am detecting a life sign on Deck Eighteen,” Skyl responded with no particular emphasis. Marta suddenly straightened her shoulders and took another step into the small room. A great frown now creased her forehead and curled her upper lip.

“At this hour... who’s?”

“A commbadge ID trace identifies the individual as Doctor Ann Grey.”

“Annie’s?” The security chief moved over to the computer console and highlighted the coded signal contained within the data stream. She then cross-referenced it with a security log from the same deck. Both confirmed the intruder to be Dr. Grey.

“Now, that is most interesting...”

“Indeed.”

“...has she made any subspace calls?”

Skyl accessed the subspace transmission logs on a nearby monitor. “Transmission logs indicate that Dr. Grey has placed several

subspace calls to the planet Dulisian IV in the past thirty-six hours...” he raised one eyebrow and looked at Marta, “...all from her quarters. There has been no activity from Deck Eighteen since your conversation with the *Stargazer*.”

“Then why the hell...” Marta still scanned the readouts, brow still deeply furrowed, looking for some missing clue.

“Shall I contact her, Commander?” The Vulcan gazed at Marta as if nonchalantly glancing at a stranger. She paused for a moment, then looked up at Skyl and responded with an uncertain smile.

“No, it’s probably nothing. She may have lost something when we were up there together yesterday.” Her blue eyes stared unfocused at the warp core, then back to Skyl. “I’ll look into it in the morning.”

“As you wish, Commander,” he said as she turned to leave. He watched her take a few steps out of the small office before returning his attention to the computer monitors. The engineer was about to conduct an analysis of gravitational flux differentials when he was interrupted by Marta’s return.

“On second thought,” she said, “it is *your* move, Skyl...”

“Commander?” His puzzlement was evident, even for a Vulcan. Marta smiled brightly at him and explained.

“Ann made the first move by asking you to dinner. Now it’s your turn to call her... that’s how it works.” Skyl’s Vulcan composure nearly cracked upon recall of his last encounter with the erratic human doctor. He cringed inwardly at the slight irritation that still persisted below the belt.

“I suppose,” he said, “in the interest of ships security...”

“Skyl,” Marta interrupted with a sigh, “this isn’t science, it’s courtship. There is a difference.” She cocked her head slightly and offered a twisted smile in emphasis of her point. The Vulcan paused briefly in quiet contemplation, then spoke aloud as if still half in thought. He too stared unfocused at the warp core.

“The Doctor and I did have a generally agreeable evening together.” He looked now into Marta’s expectant eyes. “Perhaps I will indeed do as you suggest, Commander.”

“That’s great, Skyl.” She was again smiling brightly. “But remember to keep it light. Let me worry about Deck Eighteen for now. You know what they say, never mix business with pleasure.”

That last sentence was thrown over her shoulder as she flew out the door, leaving the Vulcan to stare once again in absolute bewilderment.

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“Wonderful, Garrett out.” The Captain stared for a long time at the pile of padds that lay scattered across her desktop. There were still several more in the half-open drawer to her right. She let out a long sigh and blinked her tired eyes.

“A Day in the Life of a Starship Captain’ by Captain Rachel Garrett,” she said aloud, in reference to the mess. The various padds contained daily reports from her officers, reports to be sent to Starfleet, time and energy requests from the science departments, and of course, the myriad of other mundane events that transpired on a day-to-day basis.

She picked up one of the units and held it before her eyes. SICKBAY REPORT was emblazoned across the top of its small screen. “Ensign Malfoya broke his wrist playing Parrises Squares. Wonderful.” Garrett shook her head. “Lt. Comstock spent two days in Sickbay with the Thelusian flu.” She tossed the padd back into the pile. “Ah, the burdens of command.”

The sudden chirp of the door chime made her jump. *God, am I really that on edge?* she thought to herself. “Yes, come in,” she said aloud. The ready room doors parted and Onovan peered into the dimly lit room. “Yes, Counselor, what can I do for you this evening?”

The El-Aurian took a step across the threshold and let the doors slide shut behind him. “Sorry to bother you this late, Captain, I know you’ve had a busy day.” He took several steps closer before sliding into the chair that had been silently offered him. He made a quick glance at the chaos strewn across Garrett’s desk, then up into her almond eyes.

“I believe, Captain,” he began, “that a member of the crew is having a little trouble adjusting to our latest assignment.”

Garrett leaned forward in her chair and waved a dismissive hand at her counselor. “I’ve just had a nice long chat with Mr. Castillo. I don’t believe you will have any more trouble with him.”

“Actually, Captain, I was referring to you.” Onovan looked her

squarely in the eyes. “You have seemed a little melancholy... even a little on edge these past few days.”

“Oh, I’m just a little tired is all.” Another dismissive wave of the hand.

“Ma’am, it’s my duty as counselor to see to the emotional wellbeing of everyone aboard this ship. That includes my captain.”

Onovan’s words flowed with a relaxing hypnotism that only hinted at his nearly 400 years of collected wisdom. “We have been friends for many years,” he continued, “now please tell me, what’s truly been on your mind lately?”

In that moment, the weight of the entire universe seemed to rest itself upon the very soul of Rachel Cecilia Garrett. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. “I’ve grown very tired, Counselor. More tired than I ever remember.”

She opened her eyes and leaned forward, making a haphazard gesture toward the scattered disarray of padds. “In the blink of an eye, another five years have passed. We’ve been so many places and done so many things...”

She sighed. “But now I am feeling the need to just take a step back for a while and study what I’ve accomplished... and indeed, come to terms with where I’ve failed.” She paused and looked up at the ceiling, thinking of Ethos, of Directoria. “Throughout my career, I have watched the Federation grow at a phenomenal rate, but lately I have become increasingly fearful that it has grown too far, too fast, and that it may become too difficult to maintain.

“We’ve gotten too complacent with the Romulans, invested too much faith in the Klingons, and we let the Cardassians take Bajor without even a fight.” The captain threw her arms up and glared at Onovan. “And need I mention those nasty little first contact incidents with the planets Ethos and Directoria?”

Garrett stood abruptly and moved to the aft-facing viewport; her back now to Onovan. The warp stars streaked away from her at a blinding speed. “Counselor, I don’t want to see all that we’ve helped to create crumble before us.” Onovan rose, silently moving to her side. For a quiet moment, they both paused, each staring longingly as the warp stars raced by them, seemingly just beyond their reach.

Finally, Onovan turned and in a quiet voice said: “You have banked a considerable amount of shore leave, Captain. When we return to Betazed... *use it*. Go back to Earth and the great forests of New York. Relax. The *Enterprise* will still be here when you’re ready to come home.”

“Home...” Garrett whispered to herself. She was no longer entirely certain where that even was anymore. She had spent the past twenty-two years of her life aboard this starship. But was it home? Or was home Betazed? Over half the crew, and even the *Enterprise* itself hailed from that beautiful alien world. So had that become home, or was it the place of her birth? Earth. The captain turned to Onovan, mirroring his soft voice.

“I have given it a considerable amount of thought,” she said, returning her gaze to the blackness of space, “and I have been entertaining the possibility of early retirement.” Onovan took a step back nonplussed. He stared at her briefly, then back out into the void.

“Have you discussed this with Commander Stadi?”

She looked at him puzzled. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your careers, and indeed your very lives, are inexorably linked, Captain. Any decision of this magnitude will invariably affect him. Betazoid compassion and human desire can create a powerful bond. Are you prepared to walk away from twenty-two years of close telepathic contact?” Garrett backed away slowly, then turned and plopped heavily into her chair. Onovan could sense her embarrassment. He could also sense the suppressed love that lay beneath. The feeling was not confined merely to Spencer Stadi though, but it also encompassed every other member of the senior staff, the rest of the crew, and even the ship itself. Onovan remained by the viewport, but turned and faced Garrett’s profile.

“You both may retire to Betazed,” he continued, “or to Earth, or even make a glorious return to Ethos... but I don’t believe that that’s what you really want, nor will it make either of you very happy.” The rainbow streak of warp stars stretched back to infinity as several minutes of silence passed between them. Finally, Onovan crossed over to the front of the desk and took a seat, looking Garrett straight in the eye.

“It will be some time,” he said, “before we reach Beta Thoridor,

Captain. I suggest you take a break. You have a staff that can take care of all this..." he waved an arm over her desk, "...all of this clutter."

The captain broke into a broad devilish smile. "You're quite right, Counselor. I do need a break." She stood up and looked down at him. "Commander Stadi and I are going to take tomorrow off," she said with decisive finality. She then passed around the edge of the desk, throwing a glance at the stack of padds, then back to Onovan.

"I'll inform Commander Batanides that she has the Bridge. I'll leave this mess to you." Garrett looked at her counselor with another devious grin. Onovan's shoulders sagged slightly and he barely suppressed a groan. He then mirrored her smile.

"It would be my pleasure, Captain." She chuckled lightly despite her weary eyes. Shaking her head, she made several steps toward the doorway. "And Captain..." he called after her, "try to relax."

She smiled and nodded to herself, then stepped out into the corridor, leaving Onovan alone to toil in the mundane.

“...begin Chapter Ten.”

For thirty-six hours, life aboard the *Enterprise* progressed with its usual ordinary precision. Garrett and Stadi enjoyed their customary light breakfast together, then spent the rest of the morning taking a nice leisurely walk in the arboretum, all the while talking about the future and what it possibly held for them both. After a quick brunch in the Starboard Café, they parted company and used the afternoon hours to relax, each in their own way, taking advantage of the rare opportunity for a break.

Skyl and Ann shared another fine evening together, this time avoiding any serious injury. They toured a few little-known hot spots related to Engineering before finally joining Marta and Castillo for a late-night dinner in the Café. No mention was made of the doctor's mysterious presence on Deck Eighteen, and by night's end, it had all but been forgotten. All-in-all, it was a fairly routine day aboard this, the most remarkable starship in Starfleet.

It was well known, however, that life aboard the *Enterprise* rarely remained ordinary for more than thirty-six hours. It was also well known that, if you wanted to drive a certain starship captain nuts, you gave her a day off. Thus, it came as no surprise to the all-Betazoid night staff when Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett made her appearance on the Bridge *very* early the next morning. She said nothing and bothered no one, instead sliding softly into the command chair to study Marta's reports from the previous day. These largely nocturnal officers regarded her as merely an abstraction as they carried on with their routine business in the dim light of a simulated night.

It was eerily quiet on a Bridge where telepathic minds only occasionally broke the silence with the muffled sounds of laughter. The third watch was somewhat of an elite group, often overseeing the night-to-night operation of their sleeping giant with very little top-level supervision. It was thereby with respect to their position that Garrett made no comment throughout the nearly thirty minutes that it took for her to glance through Onovan's completed reports from the previous day's activities.

Finally, as the hour of 0600 approached, she motioned for the

duty officer to come stand by her side. Like Stadi, the young man was also a Betazoid and full telepath, but the captain would never allow the same level of mind-sharing with him that she regularly shared with her first officer. Instead, she spoke in a soft voice as he leaned in close.

“Lieutenant, please wake the senior staff. Inform them that I would like them to report to the Bridge one hour early this morning. Also, have the helm initiate a gradual downwarping. I want to come into the Thoridor system nice and easy... no need to ruffle the Klingons feathers any more than we have to.”

“Understood, Captain,” the lieutenant said with a smile. He gave a respectful nod, glanced at the helm officer, then crossed over to an upper-level communications station. Garrett noted that the helmsman was already making the necessary adjustments to their speed. She often wondered if her crew knew their orders long before her own mind even became consciously aware of them, simply waiting patiently for her verbal okay to proceed. It was just another example of what a finely-tuned unit this crew had truly become.

One by one, over the next forty-five minutes, the senior staff slowly trickled out onto the Bridge. Arriving first, Dr. Ann Grey (hair dangling in eyes) and Lt. Commander Skyl made a brief and cordial appearance, together, to check in. They greeted the captain and surveyed the aft science stations before descending into the bowels of the ship to attend to their own respective duties. Marta, Stadi, and Onovan soon followed, then Cicely, and at long last, with a whoosh from the doors and a smartness in his step, Castillo was the last to emerge, just as the clock struck 0700. His dark blonde hair had an ever so slightly mussed look to it, and his face bore a hint of day-old stubble.

“Good morning, Captain,” he said softly, then stifled a yawn as he slid into his chair at the helm.

Her lips pinched a smile, and she shook her head slightly. “Status, Mr. Castillo?”

“Uh, yes, Captain.” He cleared his throat and glanced over the helm console, getting a feel for the ship. “We are currently at Warp Two and falling. Arrival at Beta Thoridor estimated at just under fifteen minutes.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” She glanced to his left at Marta. “Commander Batanides?”

“Sensor disturbances in our aft quarters still suggest two cloaked vessels flanking us...” Marta leaned forward and touched a few controls on her interface. “Still too far away to get a clear long-range scan of the star system though, Captain.”

Garrett glanced up over her left shoulder at the Ops station. Cicely had anticipated the move and was already looking towards her captain. Commander Stadi stood behind her and looked at the station readouts with astonishment.

“Captain,” Cicely reported, “I am monitoring an extraordinary amount of subspace communication beaming to and from the Thoridor system.” She turned and faced her screen. “None of it seems to be directed at us... though key words indicate that a great deal of it seems to be *about* us.”

Garrett faced the viewscreen with a puzzled look, then rose and passed between the helm and tactical stations. She stepped down to the lower level and walked up to the Auxiliary Control Pedestal at the front of the Bridge. There, she brought up the Ops displays and stared in amazement at the readings as Stadi came up beside her.

“That,” he mused, “is either a major hub in the Imperial Defense Network, or a planet full of very talkative people.”

The captain bit her lower lip and sighed. “Why would Mogh send us here? Is it a trap...”

“If it is a trap,” Castillo muttered behind them, “we’ll be dust before we realize it...”

“...or is Mogh attempting to flush out the collaborator by stirring up a hornet’s nest?” Stadi quietly finished Garrett’s thought, staring past her soft almond eyes and deep into her mind.

“Captain,” Marta interjected, “I am now getting preliminary readings from the Thoridor system.” Stadi and Garrett both turned to face her as Marta blinked at her findings in surprise. She looked up at her two commanders and continued with a voice of disbelief. “Subspace echoes indicate at least **150** ships of various design in orbit of the sixth planet.”

Castillo whistled beside her and rolled his eyes, looking off to the right at the floor. His console offered a few short tones and he looked back at his captain. “Now entering the Thoridor system,” he announced, his voice carrying a hint of feigned doom.

Garrett stepped up between Marta and Castillo, then turned to face the main viewscreen. “Drop to impulse, full sensor sweep,” she said, voice barely a whisper.

Stadi passed beside the command level and climbed the three steps to join Onovan at the upper-level railing. Both stared at the viewscreen with anticipation as Garrett backed up slowly to stand just ahead of the command chair. There was a moment of breathless silence that permeated the air with a near palpable heaviness.

With a sudden hail of warning tones from her console, Marta’s fingers and eyes raced across the display panel. In an elevated but clear voice she proclaimed: “One Klingon battle cruiser and four birds-of-prey decloaking dead ahead...” she paused as her head spun around to shoot an urgent look at Garrett. “They’re arming all weapons!”

Garrett didn’t have a chance to speak before more warning tones recaptured Marta’s attention. “Our escort vessels have just decloaked... all weapons fully charged!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Garrett exclaimed. “Mr. Castillo, full stop, *Now!*”

The two birds-of-prey sailed past the *Enterprise* in her unexpected maneuver, then stopped up short like two snarling dogs on a short leash. Ahead of them, three streaks of green superheated energy erupted from each of the battle cruiser’s twin disruptor cannons.

“Shields!” The anger in Garrett’s voice was evident as the Bridge glowered red and the alert klaxons wailed. The entire ship shuddered slightly and Garrett steeled herself for the worst before realizing that it had just been a warning shot across their bow.

“Dammit,” she hissed, wiping a bead of sweat from her upper lip. “Cicely, hail those bastards!”

Cicely, startled by the captain’s tone, keyed in the necessary sequence, then responded levelly. “Hailing frequencies open, Captain.”

“This is Captain Rachel Garrett of the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. We are on official diplomatic business and must enter this system.” She tried to sound authoritative, though her confidence may have been a bit lacking.

On the viewscreen, the head of a Klingon appeared, blown up to immense proportions. The ridges of his forehead were not quite as

pronounced as was common, giving him a slightly less menacing look. He could've been considered as almost handsome, if his yellow-stained teeth hadn't been barred in a most disagreeable half-growl.

His dark olive eyes bore a look of sheer contempt. *"Enter this system and be destroyed,"* he sneered. A curled twist of his upper lip suggested he meant it as more of an invitation than a warning.

"The Khitomer Accords give us full..."

"The Khitomer Accords," he snarled, *"are an endangered species, as are humans. The Federation has no business here, woman. Take your ship before I blast it out of the stars."*

"This ship, Sir, will remain in this system until I have talked with Governor Ja'rod **in this system.**"

"**I** am Governor Ja'rod," the Klingon bellowed with indignation. Garrett flashed a look back at Stadi who confirmed the man's identity with a nod. She looked back at the screen with a certain sardonic pleasure.

"Good then," she smiled, "we have much to discuss, Governor." He glared at her in barely concealed disbelief. But there was something more there too — the slightest beginnings of a miniscule grain of fragile respect that offered its own little doorway for dialogue.

"We are investigating the recent outbreak of civil war on the Federation world Turkana Four."

"Meaningless to me, Captain," Ja'rod growled. Stadi could sense the defensive shields going up within the Klingon's mind. He nonchalantly slipped out of sight of the viewscreen, then descended to the forward corner of the Bridge. There, he could surreptitiously guide his captain through the interchange without the governor's knowledge.

"You are wasting my time," Ja'rod barked.

"We have evidence," Garrett continued, "that suggests Klingon involvement. Now surely, Governor, that must hold some meaning for you." Stadi winked at her.

"And why should it?" Ja'rod roared. *"I am warning you, Captain. I will not sit idly by and listen to your false accusations."* Stadi could sense the posturing. Could sense the urgency and the deceit hidden beneath it. With hand gestures, he prompted Garrett to press the governor further.

"Your own Governor Mogh," she said, confidence building, "has

even speculated at a Klingon-Romulan conspiracy...”

Ja’rod’s growing anger had now worked itself into a rage. “*Do not speak the name of that p’tahk in my star system...*”

“...a conspiracy that could threaten the stability of the entire quadrant.” Garrett did not hesitate as she placed her hands on her hips. “Surely, Governor, even you can see the dangers of such an alliance to the peace...”

“*Enough,*” Ja’rod spat out in frustration. “*I will begin my own investigation into these outrageous claims against the Klingon Empire. But hear me now, Captain... these are dangerous waters that you so playfully sail your vessel in.*” With a foreboding glare in his eye and a contorted look of pure menace, Ja’rod’s image remained on the viewscreen but a moment more, then mercifully blinked out of existence.

“Lieutenant Castillo... Now would be a good time for Warp Eight.”

“With pleasure, Captain!”

The *Enterprise* turned briskly on her heels, then leapt with a vengeance into interstellar space.

“I do not,” Onovan said balefully, “want to know how close we just came to being vaporized.”

“Close, Counselor, much to close.” Captain Garrett collapsed into the command chair in a heap. “Mr. Castillo, set course to rendezvous with the *Ajax*... oh, and uh, reduce speed to Warp Five.”

Marta and Castillo both smiled at each other, then Marta turned to the captain. “Shall I stand down from Red Alert?” she asked with a glint in her eye.

“Methinks not just yet, Commander. Perhaps once we are safely on our side of the border.” Garrett rolled her eyes at her security chief, then faced her first officer. “Well Commander, what is your assessment of our little visit with Governor Ja’rod?”

“One thing’s for certain,” Stadi replied, “we were *damn* close to being vaporized.” Everyone on the Bridge laughed faintly at this, strangely relieving some of the tension. He took several steps forward, then one more up onto the command level.

“The governor has much to hide, Captain,” he continued, once

again serious. “That in itself reveals much. His mind went immediately on alert when you mentioned Turkana Four... and the suggestion of Klingon involvement nearly sent him into a panic. But what really got his trigger finger to twitch was Mogh’s Romulan conspiracy theory. *That* is a very dangerous man, Captain,” Stadi pointed at the viewscreen as if the governor’s image still lingered there, “and we should take his threats *very* seriously.”

“So,” Marta asked, “do you believe this Ja’rod is the one behind the Turkanan civil war?”

“At the very least, deeply involved,” he replied.

“And the Romulans?” Castillo shot back. “Are they in on this too?”

“It is impossible to be certain...”

“But nonetheless likely,” Garrett concluded. “And judging by the number of ships in that system, we could be looking at a very serious problem in the weeks to come.”

“Message coming in from Starfleet, Captain,” Cicely called ahead from the Ops station. “Text only, from Admiral Stillwell, Ma’am... two-hour delay in transit.”

Garrett sighed. *Now what?* she thought, then aloud: “This should be interesting. I’m sure word of our adventure is already filling the halls of Starfleet Command... Let’s hear it, Ensign.”

Cicely smiled, then began to read: “PREVIOUS MESSAGE RECEIVED AND ACKNOWLEDGED. AVOID CONTACT WITH KLINGON WORLD BETA THORIDOR PENDING RECOMMENDED RENDEZVOUS WITH USS Ajax, NCC-11574 AT EARLIEST POSSIBLE CONVENIENCE. BE ALSO AWARE OF KLINGON FLEET BUILDUP AND INCREASING ROMULAN ACTIVITY. I TRUST THIS WILL ADVISE. WITH REGARDS: ADM. STILLWELL, STARBASE 105.”

“Why is it,” Onovan snorted, “that Starfleet always seems to be two steps behind us?” He leaned on the upper-level railing and looked down at his captain.

Rachel Garrett let her head fall back against her chair and stared forlornly up at the ceiling. “I don’t know,” she whispered plaintively, “I just don’t know.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Dr. Ann Grey paced her quarters even more so than usual that evening. The silence was only occasionally broken by quiet murmuring as she tried to reason through the jumbled thoughts that always raced through her jumbled mind. She often shook her head in frustration, only to tuck unruly strands of hair back behind her ears and chew some more at her shattered fingernails.

Ann once again read over the latest message her father had sent from Dulisian IV. Her lips moved as she studied each paragraph; carefully examined every word. The outlook for her homeworld was beginning to look grim... and it was getting even worse as the latest Khitomer Accords progressed towards their completion.

How can I be so torn? she continued to wonder. *After all, the Enterprise is just a ship, and friends, well friends come and go.* For her family and for her homeworld, Ann already knew what she had to do. She let out a long sigh.

“Computer,” she called towards the general area of the ceiling. The computer let out its usual string of cheery chirps to let the user know that it was listening.

“Tell me about the, um, the warp core.”

Several negative sounding tones, then: *“Subject matter in that field is extensive. Please specify...”*

Ann thought about this a few moments, then remembered her anatomy classes at the Academy. “Computer, is there a, uh, a cross-section image of the warp core?”

“Select menu: Design Specifications or Prototype Schematics.”

“Hmmm, give me an overview of Design Specifications.” Ann waited while the computer cycled through a mini chorus of chirps and tones as it looked up the file. Finally, the ancient, distinctive female voice returned.

“File contains end-stage drafting room designs and specifications for the Ambassador-class warp engine core. Drafting Room Seven of the Galatea Space Center, Betazed. Old Federation Stardate 25941.”

“That’s great computer,” Ann said as if she were talking to another person. “Display this file on my, um, screen.” On her personal

viewscreen embedded in the wall, an image of the warp core appeared next to a selection menu. She studied the menu for several long minutes before a puzzled look passed over her face.

“Computer,” she called again. “I’ve noticed that the, uh,” she leaned closer and squinted, placing her fingers on the words, “the, um, Dilithium Crystal Chamber has a different file number?”

“Affirmative, the Dilithium Crystal Chamber was designed at Pluto Outpost Seran-T-One. Old Federation Stardate 25775.”

“Okay, display that file on my screen.”

The Dilithium Crystal Chamber was the heart of any warp core. Contained within it were the delicate dilithium crystals — the only known substance in the universe that did not react explosively with antimatter. Without the governing control of the crystals, there would be no warp core. And without warp cores, there would be no warp drive. Every planet in the galaxy would be completely isolated by the inconceivable vastness of interstellar space.

Again, Ann chewed nervously at her fingernails and paced her quarters. She knew what had to be done. Still, her mind wrestled with the consequences. After a somewhat rocky start, her relationship with Skyl was slowly beginning to progress. She found the Vulcan’s emotionless, no-nonsense companionship to be soothing to the chaotic storms that raged across her own mind. She knew too that Marta had become one of the closest friends she had ever known, and she felt more comfortable aboard the *Enterprise* than she had ever felt anywhere else. She ran her fingers through her hair, then squeezed her face between the palms of her hands, thinking back to all those awkward years that had come before.

What am I going to do, she thought. “Computer, download these two files into confidential crewmember Medical File number 661.”

“Download complete.”

Ann thought once more of her father and her homeworld. A single tear traced its course down the soft features of her cheek. *Dear God, forgive me for what I’m about to do.* “Computer,” she paused as an image of Skyl stared back at her from the deep recesses of her mind. She shoved him aside.

“Transmit in its entirety Medical File number 661 to Sir

Brandon Grey, Lumina City, Dulisian Four.”

“Subspace link established... Transmission complete.”

Ann stared at the ceiling for a moment before being startled by the door chime. Panic suddenly gripped her and she felt as if she might throw up. The chime rang again, seemingly louder this time. “Just a minute,” she pleaded. She ran to a nearby mirror and tried to straighten her tangled hair. She wiped the tears from her eyes and slapped her pale face to bring back some of the color. She however, could do nothing about the knot in her throat, or the dark rings under her eyes.

Ann nervously picked at imaginary pieces of lint on her blood-red shirt before calling: “Come in.” A brief shudder shook her from head to toe before the doors parted and Marta Batanides took a step into her cluttered quarters.

“Hi!” Marta said cheerfully. She wore a white, single-piece sport suit that hugged every curve of her slim body. “I thought we could go play a nice healthy round of tennis before sup... my gods Annie, are you alright? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

Ann attempted a smile and shrugged her shoulders. “Oh, oh, Marta, it’s, uh, nothing. I was just talking to my, um, father.” She shrugged again. “You know how parents can be... always trying to ruin your life.”

“Oh,” Marta said uncertainly. “Would you like to talk about it?”

“No, no. Listen Marta,” Ann smiled, “tennis, uh, tennis sounds great. I’ll go change.” Ann fled off to her adjoining bedroom before Marta could even respond.

Marta stared after her, puzzling at the doctor’s behavior. Just when she thought she had that woman all figured out, something totally new and unexpected would challenge everything Marta ever felt she knew about her friend.

Marta rolled her eyes and shook her head, passing the experience off as just another quirk in the doctor’s bizarre personality. At the very least, Ann was undoubtedly one of the most strangely interesting people Marta had ever met. Still, the young doctor held a certain childlike innocence that appealed to Marta’s strict sensibility.

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Richard Castillo lounged in his quarters on a plush recliner that he had obtained some years ago from a merchant on Risa. He was engaged in his favorite off-duty pastime: watching ancient Earth motion pictures. At some point during the evening's presentation, he had dozed off and now snored faintly as the end-credits scrolled lazily up the wall-embedded viewscreen. Suddenly, the Lieutenant was startled awake by the door chime and lurched forward into an upright position, tossing a half-eaten bowl of popcorn off onto the floor in the process.

"Awww, shit," he muttered under his breath, then called out: "Who is it?"

"*It's Cicely.*" Her soft voice filtered through the commpanel by the door like a whisper on the wind. "*May I come in, Richard?*"

Castillo stood up, brushing kernels off his T-shirt and straightening his briefs. He then gingerly tiptoed his way over the scattered popcorn to the viewscreen, switched it off, then took two more steps towards the door and opened it. Cicely peered in and, for a moment, eyed the mess Castillo nonchalantly tried to cover.

"Is this a bad time?" she asked, her upper lip barely curling into a half-hidden smile. Beyond the popcorn lay a minefield of dirty socks, rumpled black trousers, and several days' worth of gray T-shirts. His red Starfleet jacket hung precariously on the edge of a chair next to a small table littered with dirty dishes.

"I swear, Richard," Cicely said, breezing in under his extended arm. "All you have to do is put this stuff in the replicator and push a button."

"Of all the human emotions to master," he countered defensively, "why did it have to be sarcasm?" He let the door close, then turned to Cicely with a widening grin.

"Perhaps I've just found it to be the most useful," she clucked. She removed the comm badge from his jacket before neatly folding it and placing it into the replicator chamber. With the push of a button, the jacket vanished into pure recyclable energy. "There," Cicely said turning, "see how easy that was?"

Castillo gaped at her. "I was going to wear that tomorrow," he said aghast. Cicely rolled her eyes and shook her head. She loved to study human behavior, especially human men. Most of the time

however, they seemed impossible to understand.

“Computer, please replicate one complete uniform for Lieutenant Richard Castillo.” This time the swirling energy solidified into a custom-fit tailored outfit, replete with fresh socks. Cicely’s green fingers deftly snatched the clothes from the terminal and then, quite unexpectedly for her, threw the entire lot at Castillo.

She laughed out loud as the underwear smacked him in the face and the black trousers and red jacket dangled from his shoulders. The socks and T-shirt joined their companions in the minefield below. Castillo feigned irritation as she continued to giggle. It was rare for anyone to see this former slave girl so giddy with laughter. This was Cicely at her best and Castillo loved her for it.

While she continued to giggle, he unexpectedly lunged after her. She squealed as he threw her over his shoulder and spun her around several times. They both laughed now as he raced across two rooms and crashed them both into a heap onto the bed. He then grabbed one of his dirty undershirts and tossed it in her face.

“Gross!” she exclaimed and shoved him off onto the floor. Castillo smacked his head on the bedside stand, then curled up into a ball.

“Ouch!” he said, still laughing, “that really hurt.” Cicely peered over the edge of the bed with a stricken look on her face.

“Are you alright, Richard? I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Castillo still chuckled, till he saw the terrorized look on her face. The fear in her eyes. He sat up and gazed at her intently.

“No, Sis, it’s okay, I just bumped my head... I’m fine, really.”

“Well maybe we should refrain from rough housing in the future lest one of us should get seriously hurt.” Castillo couldn’t help but laugh again, still rubbing at the growing lump on his head.

Cicely was trained in the sexual techniques of a hundred worlds and could show Castillo pleasures he couldn’t even imagine — yet to him, she was as virtuous as a baby sister. The thought of ever taking advantage of her made him cringe. He stood up and plopped onto the bed next to her. They both stared at the ceiling and couldn’t help but laugh again for a few more moments.

After another minute or so, Cicely raised herself up on one elbow and stared into Castillo’s warm blue eyes. “Tell me more about

love, Richard.” Her brown eyes blinked with a childlike innocence that belied the knowledge hidden beneath. Castillo let out a long sigh.

“Why this sudden interest in love?”

“There are so many odd relationships amongst the crew that I do not understand.” She too let out a long sigh. Her face bore a mixed look of confusion and frustration.

“Such as?” he asked smiling. She pushed herself up and sat cross-legged next to him.

“Such as the close relationship between Captain Garrett and Commander Stadi.” She tilted her head to the side. “And the growing relationship between Skyl, a Vulcan who suppresses all emotions, and Doctor Grey, a human whose emotions are erratic to say the least. And then there is you, who spends a great deal of time with Commander Batanides, but who does not seem to pursue any form of romantic involvement with her at all.”

“Hmmm...” Castillo lay there thinking, trying to figure out where and how to begin. He wasn’t entirely sure he understood the subject any better than she did. He suspected, in fact, that she might even have a better grasp of it than most.

“Well,” he said at last, still pondering, “love comes in many forms and with many different feelings, and it is not always restricted to just the romantic aspect. There is also the love of family, the love between friends, and the love that grows from years of service together... and it can stem from hate, jealousy, or compassion. It can be genuine or imagined, lustful or caring...”

“Okay,” she said, “what is genuine love?” Cicely stared out the small oval porthole at the warp stars. Her eyes held a certain sadness that was reminiscent of the life fate had doled out for her.

Castillo thought some more. “Genuine love...” Another brief pause. “Genuine love is a common bond of shared experiences; it is a sense of comfort and a feeling of freedom to be yourself.” He sighed deeply. “It is a sense of trust that comes when you can share your innermost thoughts and feelings with someone and can be respected for them. And it must be mutual, or it does not work. There can be few things more sinister than a betrayal of the trust that you have placed in someone else’s care.”

Cicely stared out the porthole for a long time in silent reverie.

Castillo lay there quietly and studied her features while she thought. Her elfish looking green face, eyes that matched her brown flowing hair, and long willowy arms that ended in graceful hands with their long, slender, twig-like fingers. *So alien*, he thought, *and yet, so beautiful*.

“Have you ever been in love, Richard?” Her question caught him off guard and he stammered for a moment trying to put together an answer.

“Oh, I,” he stuttered, “I’ve had a lot of crushes and a few brief flings on starbases, but never anything serious.”

“Crushes?” Cicely’s nose and brow wrinkled at the peculiar use of the word.

“Yeah, a crush is when you like someone, but they don’t necessarily know that you like them.” He paused as if reliving some memory. “And you may or may not *want* them to know that you like them...”

“Why not?”

“Well,” he continued, “there is a certain fear of rejection in all relationships, plus the revelation of such feelings can quite often change a relationship completely... sometimes for the better, but almost always for the worse.”

“And do you have such a crush on Commander Batanides?”

Her face still bore the look of childlike innocence that put anyone talking to her at ease. She now looked down at him as his face took on the faintest hint of crimson and he began suddenly to feel a bit warm around the collar.

“You and your questions,” he said stalling. “I did have a crush on Marta many years ago,” he admitted awkwardly, “when we first started serving together on the *Enterprise*, but we soon became best friends instead and that’s where it stands today.”

“Ah,” Cicely said, still not quite convinced. Castillo eyed her with speculation. He often thought she knew much, much more than she ever let on to. He gave her a shrewd smile to counter the innocent-not-so-innocent expression that graced her cherubic features.

“It took me a long time,” he added at length, “to realize that you could love someone deeply without being deeply *in* love with them.”

“That seems perfectly logical, Richard.” She again stared out

the oval porthole at the endless parade of warp stars. Many minutes passed in the lost silence of thought. Finally, Cicely laid her head down on Castillo's chest.

"I love you, Richard," she said quietly. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed tightly.

"I love you too, Sis, I love you too."

~ ~ ~ ~

*Anxiety is illogical*, Lt. Commander Skyl repeated to himself yet again. His encounters with the erratic human doctor Ann Grey had thus far been generally agreeable. But he could not deny that brief, fleeting sensation that there was something more, something he was missing. The humans would perhaps call it a 'gut instinct', and he wondered now if this is what they had so often meant. He found the doctor's sudden interest in the ships operations to be curious, but he had been assured by Marta that this was simply Ann's way of 'connecting' with him. Perhaps — but there was still that something more.

It was late in the evening aboard the *Enterprise* and Skyl had always found this time to be the most conducive to work. The night shift was little more than a skeleton crew that merely monitored the mighty giant as it slept. Only a handful of crewmembers were stationed in Engineering at this late hour and it offered the Vulcan an opportunity to focus, with very little distraction, on the monitors before him. He had brought up the cross-sectional diagrams for the warp core and now stared at them intently. The *Ambassador*-class engines were the epitome of modern propulsion design — and still considered in many respects to be largely top secret.

Throughout their recent tour of the *Enterprise*, Ann had asked him many questions and shown a keen interest in virtually every key system, but her primary focus had always been in some way the warp core. This intrigued him, even more so now that he saw that she had accessed these very same files only hours earlier. *Anxiety is illogical*. And what of her unexplained presence on Deck Eighteen just a few short days ago? Largely forgotten, this curious intrusion vexed him now anew. For a brief moment, Skyl considered calling Marta back to Engineering, but then decided that perhaps his misgivings were

unfounded.

By all accounts, Ann Grey was a model Starfleet officer. She was quite renowned for her medical successes, and despite the flaws in her personality, she was well received amongst the crew; and noted especially for her kind and compassionate nature. Privately, Skyl would have to admit that he had been quite taken with her. His initial trepidation had been quickly mollified by her easy-going charm. Despite the disastrous events of their first date, she had proven herself to be remarkably calm, and surprisingly intelligent. Their several conversations had been both engaging and stimulating.

So why this continuing sensation of anxiety? It was not logical. The Vulcan quickly decided he would have to mediate on this. Structure. Logic. Function. Control. *I am in control.* Once again studying the cross-sectional images of the warp core, Skyl was disturbed by the level of variation in its operation. Perfection can be everything for an engineer, especially for a Vulcan engineer. He thought of the senior staff's jocularly at the initial mission briefing regarding his comments about core damage. They did not see what he saw. The Battle of Ethos had left many deep scars, and this extended patrol into hostile space was putting them all at increasing risk.

Risk. He had learned from humans over the years that risk was a large part of being in love. He had always wondered why they continued to engage in such perilous and unpredictable behavior. He had seen many times in his career the results of its shortcomings and failures. It was not logical. *Anxiety is illogical.* Trust was also of foremost concern in a relationship. Did he trust Ann Grey? Skyl found himself without an answer. He stared out through the alumglass at the rhythmic pulsing of the warp core. Visually, on the surface, its operation appeared to be flawless; but looking back down at the internal readings, he knew otherwise.

He had no choice but to trust Ann. Her unusual behavior was remarkably not that unusual, for her. Her character was flawed. She did not fit within the parameters of normal human behavior. These established facts could not be disputed by her insignificant random acts of intrusion into the internal workings of this vessel. Perhaps Marta's conclusions were correct, perhaps this was simply the young doctor's unusual way of 'connecting' with him. And perhaps this was what

appealed to him. She was intriguing to say the least, and she seemed genuinely interested in him.

*Anxiety is illogical*, Skyl continued to repeat to himself.

Meanwhile, far off, on the not-too-distant world of Dulisian IV, Sir Brandon Grey studied with great interest the most recent subspace message from his daughter, Ann. The cross-sectional images of the *Ambassador*-class warp engine core would prove most useful indeed. The *Starship Enterprise* was playing right into their hands, and the Rhotemian Revival would soon crush the Federation-Klingon Alliance once and for all.

## “...begin Chapter Eleven.”

The *Starship Ajax* hung like a shimmering jewel in the blackness of interstellar space. But it soon took up the aspect of a candle next to a blowtorch as the great hulk of the *Enterprise* slowly shouldered up alongside. The two vessels took a few brief seconds to settle in, side by side, then cruised onward together at one-half impulse speed.

The *Ajax* was an *Apollo*-class border cutter, similar in size and design to her cousins of the *Constellation*-class. However, instead of the awkward standard of four warp nacelles, the *Apollo*'s were equipped with only two, much more powerful, smartly upswept nacelles that extended from an enlarged aft section. The *Ajax* was indeed fast and maneuverable and moderately well-armed for her size.

Still, her power did not compare to the sheer sense of presence evoked by the *Ambassador*'s, the largest and most complex starships ever built by Starfleet. The *Enterprise* and her many sisters went nearly unrivaled in the known galaxy. It was with this in mind that Commander Corey Zweller stared in reverent wonder at the sight that graced his viewscreen.

His green eyes and red hair were cradled in a broad mischievous grin that made him look like he was still a nineteen-year-old academy cadet. Corey reached over and slapped his Tellarite helm officer on the shoulder. “Ain’t she a beaut?” His eyes danced over the viewscreen like those of a nineteen-year-old academy cadet who had just received the keys to his first new flight trainer.

The Tellarite let out a snort. “I bet we could outrun her.” He then let out a high-pitched squeal of laughter that made his snout twitch. Corey too let out a big open-mouthed laugh; not so much at the joke, but more at his squealing helm officer who was always the life of any party.

“Ensign Corday,” Zweller called over his shoulder, “open hailing frequencies.” He looked back at the viewscreen in disbelief. “Jeez,” he whispered, “I’ve waited my whole life to see an *Ambassador*-class starship... and here we are running neck and neck with none other than the *Enterprise*.”

The ship was quickly replaced with the image of a dark-haired

woman with warm almond eyes. She was older, yet attractive, and carried with her a sense of presence almost as large as her ship. Corey gaped for a moment, then swallowed hard. “Uh, greetings *Enterprise*, this is, uh, Commander Cortin Zweller, First Officer of the, uh, *Starship Ajax*.”

The helm officer let out a quiet squeal in response to his commander’s botched introduction. Corey squeezed him on the shoulder in a ‘I’ll-deal-with-you-later’ gesture. The Tellarite let out another snort. The woman offered a warm, all too knowing smile.

“*Commander Zweller, good morning. I am Captain Garrett. Is Captain Narth not available? I had hoped to see him again.*” The confidence and command in her voice seemed much too big for the small confines of the *Ajax* bridge.

“I am afraid Captain Narth is off on assignment, Sir... a matter of some importance that I believe we need to discuss.” Zweller’s face took on an uncharacteristically grave expression, then a slightly sheepish one as Garrett curled a corner of her upper lip at him.

“*Despite Starfleet’s archaic protocols, Commander, I would prefer to be addressed as Captain or Ma’am.*”

“Uh, yes Ma’am,” he stuttered. “Of course.” The heat slowly rose up around his collar. Garrett eyed him for a moment, then gave him her usual wry smile.

“*Ms. Batanides has been looking forward to seeing you again, Commander. We will beam aboard the Ajax shortly. Garrett out.*” Her image blinked off the screen and was replaced by the sleek lines of the *Enterprise* set against the star-studded blackness of deep space. Corey backed up slowly, then plopped heavily into the command chair.

“Aw, shit,” he said, sinking lower, “they’re coming *here?!!*” The Tellarite let out yet another snort.

“What is that human expression?” He looked at Corey with dark, deep-set eyes that sparkled with hidden mirth. “Something about first impressions?”

“Oh, be quiet,” Corey muttered as squealing laughter once again filled the Bridge.

“I really do think you enjoy that, Captain,” Onovan said as the image of a red-haired, *very* red-faced young man vanished from the

viewscreen.

“Believe me, Counselor,” Stadi quipped, stepping away from the Ops station, “she enjoys it far *too* much. I believe you may want to have a talk with her about that.”

Garrett smiled devilishly as she sat down in a very satisfied sort of way and crossed her legs. “Well Commander Batanides, do you believe that I have successfully introduced the fear of God into that so-called ‘brash’ young friend of yours?”

Marta turned from the tactical station smiling brightly. “I do indeed, Captain, I do indeed.” She paused, then smirked again. “I’d better take my phaser along; he might try to kill me!” There was a brief moment of sinister laughter all around the Bridge before Garrett finally rose up from the command chair and tugged her uniform jacket into place.

“I think,” she said, her devilish smile returning, “we’ve given them enough panicked time to prepare for our arrival... Commander Stadi, you have the Bridge.”

“Aye Sir,” Stadi replied, stone-faced. The Bridge went suddenly quiet as everyone looked awkwardly towards the captain. Yet, she didn’t even face him, merely shook her head and began walking towards the turbolift.

And as the lift doors were closing, she flashed him a smile of pure menace and cast him a final dark thought... *Oh, Spencer my friend, you’re going to pay for that one.*

“I’m going to kill her.” Cortin Zweller pulled at the collar of his tightly clasped dress uniform. He fussed yet again with the polished silver and gold rank insignia on his right shoulder, then straightened the stylistic commbadge pinned to his left breast. He stood fidgeting in the transporter room with his highly exasperated operations officer, Ensign Corlina Corday, and there seemed to be no end to his misery as he pulled at the imaginary wrinkles of his carefully pressed jacket.

“With all due respect, Sir,” she finally said, “relax.” Corday was a Denobulan, about the most relaxed and personable species in the galaxy. She looked under her ocular ridges at Zweller as he continued to fidget.

He tugged again at his collar. “I am about to meet the legendary

captain of the flagship; plus become reacquainted with an Academy friend I haven't seen in fifteen years... and you want me to relax?"

Corday just shook her head and rolled her eyes. "You'll be fine. These are Starfleet officers, just like us. Simply be yourself. It is, after all, what you do best."

"Gee, thanks," Corey managed to mutter just as the unmistakable whine of the transporter began to fill the small room with two shimmering columns of light. Corey took a deep breath and put on the best nineteen-year-old smile he could muster. At last, the two shimmering columns began to coalesce and solidify into humanoid form, and then all at once, as if by magic, two living, breathing people materialized on the transport platform.

Captain Garrett was at least a head taller than the petit Marta Batanides. Both had on their standard-issue, everyday uniforms, which were unclasped in the more relaxed and casual style that revealed a crisp diamond patch of white across their chest.

"You can relax, Commander," Garrett said in regard to Zweller's stiff, painted on smile. "I will forgo the court-marshal this time." She offered him the trademark smile that was known so well aboard her own ship, and it immediately softened the mood.

Corey blinked, then looked over at Marta who was simply beaming at his obvious discomfort. She winked at him. He had expected the great *Enterprise* captain to be formidable, but he had not expected her to be personable as well. A sneaking suspicion that Marta had been behind all this began to make itself readily apparent.

Ensign Corday cleared her throat, rather loudly, then glanced at her commander. Knocked from his reverie, Corey gathered himself up and reflexively transformed his face into that nineteen-year-old grin he himself was so famous for.

"Captain Garrett, *Commander Batanides*, it is my pleasure, and indeed my honor, to welcome you both aboard the *Ajax*." Marta was tempted to break out into a round of applause but decided this might be pushing it a little. She followed Garrett as the captain stepped down off the transport platform.

"The pleasure is ours, Commander," Garrett said, smiling warmly.

"May I present my Operations Officer, Corlina Corday."

“Ensign,” Garrett nodded, then gestured towards Marta. “I believe you know my Tactical Officer.”

“All too well,” Corey smiled brightly. “Marty, it’s nice to finally see you again.”

“You look great, Corey,” she beamed, sizing up his dress uniform with a pinched smile. Then, to his much-chagrined surprise, she came forward and gave him a peck on the cheek and a tight hug. Once again, the heat rose beneath his collar and his face took on the faint crimson that so nearly matched his hair. Garrett looked at Corday with a tight-lipped smirk.

“Ah, the burdens of command,” she said quietly, shaking her head.

Some moments later, the entourage clanked heavily down the narrow corridors of the *Ajax*. The metal deckplates were a far cry from the plush carpeted floors of the *Enterprise*; yet they still held a certain nostalgic grace that paid homage to those early days of deep-space exploration when one could see the very bolts that held the ship together.

“I must admit, Commander,” Garrett ventured, with a hint of giddiness. “This truly is a treat. It reminds me of my early days as an ensign aboard the *Hathaway*.”

“Ah yes, Captain,” he nodded, turning a corner. “*Constellation*-class. The *Apollo*’s may be fast, but they’re not quite as stout as the old *Constellation*’s.”

“Don’t be too quick to begrudge the *Ajax*, Commander,” Garrett admonished. “She’s a fine ship with a lot of heart.”

“Oh no, of course not Sir, never,” Corey countered, “she’s one of the best in the fleet.” Ensign Corday again audibly cleared her throat and shot a sidelong glance at Zweller.

“Er, Ma’am,” he floundered. “My apologies, Captain.”

“It’s quite alright, Commander, I understand. Sometimes change is a long-time coming.” The group rounded another corner, then turned and entered a small briefing room... again, far different from the finely furnished observation lounge of the *Enterprise* with its large, graceful viewports and plush cushy chairs.

This room was deep inside the heart of the *Ajax* and had a

squarish shape, with little or no architectural embellishments. In the center, it held a simple metal table surrounded by strictly functional simple metal chairs. The neutral light gray carpet did little to accent the cream-colored, sparsely adorned walls.

On the table, a fine crystal pitcher of ice water with its matching slender glasses seemed out of place in the starkness of the room. Yet, the starkness did serve an important purpose; it immediately placed the small group in the right frame of mind for the serious discussions that were about to follow.

“Let’s get to it, shall we?” Garrett said as she sat down and poured herself a glass of water. Marta, Corey, and Corday all followed suit and soon the group were all settled in for the task at hand. Captain Garrett began, arms folded on the table, looking earnestly at Zweller.

“Commander, in your communications with Marta, you suggested that the unrest we are beginning to see along the border may be only a small part of a much larger problem. Can you elaborate on this?”

Corey, by this time, had relaxed and switched to full professional mode. “Captain,” he responded levelly, “I believe it best if we begin with Captain Narth.” Garrett nodded at this and he continued.

“Two weeks ago, Captain Narth and our Tactical Officer, Lt. Commander Fitzgerald Kahanamoku, were ordered by Starfleet Intelligence to infiltrate the opposition forces plaguing the government of Davlos Three.”

“My research,” Marta interposed, “revealed Davlos to be a somewhat rough and tumble world?”

Ensign Corday nodded. “Yes, Davlos has had several political upheavals over the past two decades. The current administration, as of late, has been cracking down quite heavily on the opposition forces.”

“The catalyst of this,” Corey continued, “has been the sudden resurgence of an obscure revolutionary group known as the Rhotemian Revival.”

Garrett frowned. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“And my research did not uncover it either,” Marta added.

Corday blinked and tilted her head slightly. “That is not surprising, Commander. The Rhotemian’s are a highly secretive society shrouded in unknowns. They exist on the fringes of nearly every

populated world along the border.”

Garrett sat upright and stared at Zweller. “And what are the goals of this society, Commander?”

“Uncertain, Captain.” He let out a long sigh and placed a hand to his chin. “Captain Narth and Commander Kahanamoku were sent there in hopes of determining just that.”

“And their findings?” Marta queried.

Corey’s hand fell from his chin and dropped into a fist on the metal table. “To join is to join for life. They are fiercely loyal and will use any clandestine means at their disposal to achieve their goals.”

“And there is still no indication as to what these goals may be?”

Garrett’s face was a growing sea of worry. Reflections of the past began to crowd her subconscious mind.

“As was said, Captain,” Corday answered. “Little is known.”

Corey shook his head. “About all we have to work with is a relative certainty that they initially formed on Dulisian Four after the Kenzie Rebellion in 2322. What they have grown into in the twenty-odd years since then is anyone’s guess... as are their latest intentions.”

Marta frowned, deep in thought. “Corey, you said that these Rhotemians have shown a sudden *resurgence*. Do you know why?”

“Marty, there seems to be no apparent indication.”

“This is beginning to take on frightening similarities to Turkana Four, Captain.” Marta’s face now matched the ocean of worry that washed over Garrett’s features. The captain let out a deep sigh, then covered her nose and mouth with a trembling hand. Memories of the Kenzie Rebellion now pushed themselves out of her subconscious and fell again with a vengeance right into her recalcitrant lap.

Commander Zweller and Ensign Corday both looked at them with a mask of puzzlement that said it all. Marta and Garrett stared at each other for a blinking moment, and then Garrett offered her chief of security a sick and barely discernable nod. Marta stared into the puzzled eyes of her friend.

“You know of the civil war on Turkana Four?” she said quietly.

“Of course,” he answered, “news travels fast.”

“Well, we have uncovered incontrovertible evidence that certain Klingon factions were behind it.” In unison, Zweller and Corday’s eyes went wide and their shoulders visibly sank.

“And that’s not all,” Garrett added breathlessly. “Governor Mogh of H’atoria has even suggested Romulan involvement...”

“Governor Ja’rod,” Corey seethed under his breath. The mention of the name shocked the captain and she sat up, back stiff.

“You know of him?!” she gasped.

Zweller’s eyes narrowed. “We have had several run-ins with Ja’rod and those factions loyal to him. He is as dark and sinister as they come, Captain. I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him.”

“What can you tell us about him?” Marta asked.

Corday answered. “He has been a long-outspoken detractor of the treaty. Ja’rod is powerful and influential in the Klingon government and has been most verbal in his objections to the convention of a second Khitomer Accord.”

“Captain...” Corey’s mind leapt suddenly out of deep thought. “Nearly five days ago, we lost all contact with Captain Narth and Commander Kahanamoku. They appear to have vanished without a trace.” Garrett, startled from her own reverie, closed her eyes and let out a short sigh as Zweller continued.

“The intelligence they have may be vital to this investigation, but we have been unable to begin a search for them. Starfleet has ordered us to maintain this position and monitor the Klingon fleet build-up at Beta Thoridor. Could you...”

The Captain immediately reached up and touched her commbadge. “Garrett to *Enterprise*...”

*“Stadi here, Captain.”*

“Commander, set course for Davlos Three, maximum warp. I want to be underway the instant we beam aboard.”

*“Understood, Captain. Stadi out.”* Garrett nodded at Zweller, then stood up. The others stood as well just as Garrett started to make a turn to leave.

“Uh, Captain,” Corey said, now strangely sheepish. Garrett paused and eyed him speculatively. “I have one other request, if I may?” He threw a quick sidelong glance at Corday.

“Go ahead...”

“We have a diplomat from Betazed aboard.” He shot another glance at Corday. “She is, or was rather, traveling from the Interplanetary Olympics on Nimbus Three to the Khitomer Accords

when she was inadvertently stranded here with us.”

“Okay,” Garrett said cautiously, still wondering at the increasing strangeness of his behavior. Corey swallowed hard, his face taking on the barest hint of crimson.

“The *Ajax* is ill-equipped to entertain a diplomat of her, um, of her status, Captain... especially now. Is it possible...” He tilted his head and tossed up a short shrug. Her eyes narrowed and she looked at him for a long moment before reaching up and once more tapping her commbadge.

“Garrett to Stadi...”

“*Stadi here...*”

“Commander, amend my previous order. We will be taking on a passenger. Please meet us in the Transporter Room and instruct Mr. Castillo to have us underway as soon as the transfer is complete.”

“*Understood.*”

The Captain again narrowed her eyes at Zweller, and especially at the peculiar grin he was now trying to conceal. The heightened psi regions of her brain could sense a vague feeling that he was hiding something, something almost sinister. The odd smile had now passed over to Ensign Corday as well, and it was becoming unnerving. The captain looked briefly at Marta, who shrugged, then back to Corey who had turned his gaze conspiratorially on Ensign Corday.

Garrett rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Come on,” she sighed like an exasperated mother to a flock of children, then passed out the doorway and into the corridor. Corey Zweller almost skipped.

~ ~ ~ ~

The tiny access space in the small control room was hot and cramped. Each time the turbopumps surged to life, the nervous and overheated occupant would let out a startled yelp and jump; banging some other part of her body against the tangled metal framework that surrounded her.

The heat and noise would then be almost unbearable until the pumps finally went silent again and cycled through another cooldown and realignment phase. The entire process repeated itself over and over again like precision controlled clockwork. But soon, if everything went

according to plan, the precision would be lost. The clockwork would falter.

“Damn,” Doctor Ann Grey muttered as the turbopumps roared to life again, this time causing her to smack her right elbow, rather hard, on an ODN interface. She silently counted out the seconds till the pumps at last went offline, then continued with her clandestine operation.

In her right hand, she held a padd containing the schematic of the system surrounding her, while her left manipulated the small device that she was using to tinker with the circuitry controlling that system. The system in question was the port-forward reaction control thruster; one of the four engines surrounding the primary hull that maintained steering control of the *Enterprise* during station-keeping, orbital, and impulse speeds.

As she worked, Ann continued to mutter quietly to herself. “Dammit Dad, I’m a doctor not an engineer. You could have made these instructions a little easier to follow...” With the deftness of a surgeon, she used the small device to alter the appropriate circuit pathways, exactly as her father had dictated.

With a screech, the turbopumps came back online. This time Ann struck her knee on a bulky supporting cross-member. “Damn,” she said again, nearly dropping the small, pencil-like device. “I’m still not convinced this Boris Rhotemious was all he was cracked up to be anyway,” she sputtered. “And certainly not worth all the bother.”

Finally, the incessant racket abated, and Ann was again able to work. Like the surgeon she was, she was meticulous and precise, her hands delicate and graceful. Her father would have it no other way. Sir Brandon Grey had taught all his children, oft times harshly, to be strict and accurate in everything they did. He had drilled into their minds time and again that careful and well-defined strategy was the only way in which the Revival could hope to succeed.

With a resultant hail of sparks, Ann touched an improper circuit and sent a tiny power surge throughout the entire system. “Shit!” she hissed and quickly realigned the pathway; but she knew the surge had already triggered an alarm in Engineering. It was only a matter of time before Skyl sent someone to investigate.

Once again, the turbopumps screamed, once again Ann Grey

jumped, this time banging her head. Still, she continued to work feverishly, despite the ear-splitting noise and waves of nauseating heat. She quickly altered several more key circuits, then adroitly manipulated a few others to cover her tracks.

“Done,” she said with a relieved sigh. Ann glanced briefly over her adjustments one final time, then to the chrono strapped to her wrist. “Awww krap,” she muttered, “I’m going to be late for my date!” She quickly squirmed and wriggled herself out of the tight access space, then shook off the cramps. Blessed silence returned.

The doctor’s hair was tangled and matted with sweat. The tight gray jumpsuit she wore was dampened in a deep V between her breasts and down her back. Ann slipped the padd and the device into a zippered pocket on her thigh. She was just hoisting herself into a Jeffries tube when the door from the main corridor slid suddenly open.

She lay there breathless and still as an engineer stepped in and began to make a quick survey of the small room. The young man pulled a tricorder out of his utility belt and started scanning the very system Ann had been tampering with only moments before. Her heart stopped. She bit down hard on the knuckle of her left index finger.

He continued to scan for several more interminable seconds but was cut startlingly short by a blood-curdling scream. The turbopumps came back online like fine clockwork. The man was involuntarily forced to cup his hands over his ears and cower.

Cautiously, he let his hands down and took a few more readings. He frowned and shook his head for several more seconds, wincing at the deafening roar. Apparently satisfied with the results, he finally turned and fled into the quiet coolness of the corridor.

Ann let out a nearly orgasmic sigh of relief. Trembling, she turned herself around and began crawling down the long narrow access tunnel towards her quarters. Yet sadly, the screaming turbopumps continued to haunt her long after she was out of earshot.

~ ~ ~ ~

Commander Spencer Stadi stepped through the doors of the transporter room just as the energy patterns of Captain Garrett and Commander Batanides took solid form. He had already clasped his

uniform jacket in the more formal style in anticipation of the arriving mystery visitor. Someone new was always a treat in the tight-knit community of a starship.

“Welcome back, Captain.” He smiled warmly as she and Marta cleared the platform.

“Anything to report, Commander?” She stared up into his coal-black eyes and their minds touched briefly. Hal Kenzie and his Rebellion. But this wasn’t the time to compare notes; there was far too much to discuss.

“All systems go, Captain.” He smirked and winked at Marta. “Mr. Castillo has laid in a course, and his finger stands poised to engage. Any information on our forthcoming guest?”

“All we know is that she is a diplomat from Betazed.” Garrett turned and faced the transport platform. She reflexively reached up and clasped the chest flap of her own jacket to match the formality. Marta did the same, also adjusting the gold clasp that held her hair tight. Privately, she was convinced that the transporter never did get that part quite right.

“Interesting,” Stadi mused as the familiar whine of energy conversion started to fill the room. The trio stood perplexed as not one, but three distinct forms began to coalesce before them. The one on the right appeared to be a small female child. Behind her, next to a mountain of luggage, stood an exceptionally tall, blue-skinned male.

But the most prominent of all was the woman taking shape in the forefront. She sported what appeared to be an enormous wig, and her elaborate dress was barely contained within the confinement beam. The entire entourage together filled almost the whole of the transport platform.

“Transport complete,” the chief called from the console behind the three officers. Garrett experienced the momentary sensation of vertigo that was typical when a starship made the sudden transition into high warp. She was happy to note that Castillo was right on top of things. However, she was troubled by the sudden groan escaping from her first officer. She glanced at his pale face, the flutter in his eyes.

The woman on the platform let out a sudden gasp of surprised dismay. “Oh, Little One!” she cried out. “The fools have transmogrified us into a closet!” The little girl looked forlornly up at

the woman, then let out a sigh that was far too deep for her age.

“Turn around, Mother,” she said with exasperation. She then looked at the three stunned officers and rolled her bottomless ebony eyes. With a flourish, the woman spun around, upsetting a tiny colorful bird that, incredibly, fluttered around inside a small cage intricately woven within the enormous wig.

“Oh, there you are!” she exclaimed.

“Madam, I am Cap...”

“Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett, and that is Marta Susan Batanides. Yes, yes, yes, I know all that.”

“Mother, don’t be rude,” the little girl clipped crossly.

The woman ignored her daughter and continued. “Spencer Darling, it has been far too long. Aren’t you going to introduce me to your captain?” Marta nearly laughed and Garrett herself was not too far from it. They both looked at Stadi who was now red-faced and appeared to be growing even more ill.

“Er, uh,” he sputtered, “Captain, may I present Lwaxana...”

“Lwaxana Troi,” the woman again interrupted. “Daughter of the Fifth House, Holder of the Sacred Chalice of Rixx, Heir to the Holy Rings of Betazed.” The fabulously tall, blue-skinned man gave a deep slanted nod in reverence to her. The little girl let her head fall back on her shoulders and stared in dismay up at the ceiling. The tiny bird continued to flutter and chatter wildly.

“It is a pleasure...” but Garrett was again halted.

“Of course it is. My, my, my Spencer, this captain of yours certainly does have a highly developed psi-region, doesn’t she?” Lwaxana paused to catch her breath. “This is my daughter, Deanna, and my valet, Mr. Homn.” Again, the blue man gave a deep nod in silent deference as Lwaxana gestured haphazardly towards him. “Ugh, you should hear some of the outlandish thoughts that man throws my way!”

For once in her life, Rachel Garrett was speechless - but that didn’t seem to be a problem. Lwaxana chirped up again. “Now Little One, show your respects to Mr. Stadi, Son of the Second House, Holder of the Sacred Stone of Destiny, Heir to the Divine Swords of Betazed.”

Deanna gave a polite little curtsy, and yet again, the blue man offered a deep nod of solemn reverence. Marta and the captain both

looked at Stadi with obvious amusement. Then, surprisingly, they both curtsied in unison. Again, the blue man nodded. If there had been a rock within five light-years, Spencer Stadi would've surely crawled under it.

"Uh, Captain," Lwaxana called from the transport platform. "My daughter and I have been trapped aboard that tiny little rust bucket for weeks..."

"Mother..." the little girl chided.

"Well, it seemed like weeks," Lwaxana continued undeterred. "At any rate, we are anxious to reach Khitomer. Is it possible that you could get this fine ship of yours underway?"

"Mother!" the little girl admonished.

Garrett snapped to attention and clicked her heels. "Of course, Madam. With your permission, Commander Batanides and I will see to it at once."

"You may go," Lwaxana said with the flippant wave of a hand.

"Thank you, Madam." Garrett gave a respectful bow, followed by Marta. "We will leave you now in the capable hands of Commander Stadi." The Captain shot Stadi a devious glance, then breezed past him towards the door. Marta nearly fell over herself in her haste to make her own escape. "*Now Spencer Darling, where were we?*" Lwaxana Troi was heard to say as the two women passed out into the corridor. Spencer Stadi was certain he could hear laughter as the doors closed behind them.

In fact, he could hear it in Garrett's mind long after she had boarded a lift and was well on her way to the Bridge.

~ ~ ~ ~

Lieutenant Commander Skyl was puzzled. He stood in the corridor outside Ann's quarters with his hand poised to activate the door chime. But he hesitated, and that was what puzzled him. That moment of hesitation had become almost habitual, a fact that had gone unnoticed until now; and he did not know why. *Anxiety is illogical*, he attempted to stress within his mystified mind.

He recalled the brief sensation of anxiety he'd experienced the first time he had called upon the young doctor. But that had quickly

passed, *so why still the hesitation?* Although Ann Grey was prone to erratic fits of behavior, Skyl on the whole had found their time spent together to be agreeable. Their relationship was progressing smoothly and deliberately and there was no apparent cause for apprehension.

Yet, if he were human, Skyl concluded he would have to say that something about the doctor just did not ‘feel right’. But Skyl was a Vulcan and the facts at hand simply did not support any cause for concern. *Anxiety is illogical.* Without any further deliberation, he touched the sensory pad that activated the door chime.

There was an uncharacteristic pause before Ann answered with a somewhat jittery ‘*come in*’. Skyl touched the adjacent sensor that opened the doors, then took a step into her dimly lit quarters. She emerged from her bedroom wearing only a towel, working furiously with a second towel to dry her tangled hair.

“Oh Skyl,” she practically pleaded, “I’m so sorry, I’m running a little bit late.”

“There is no cause for concern, Ann,” he replied levelly, raising an upsweped eyebrow at her scant attire. “We have sixteen hours of off-duty time at our disposal before we must report back for our next shift.” She stopped and looked at him from under the towel. Several unruly strands of damp hair hung down over her eyes. Ann started to laugh as she reentered the bedroom.

“And they say Vulcans don’t have a sense of humor,” she called out, still laughing.

“I have consulted with the Captain on several occasions,” he called after her, “about reducing the off-duty time in order to better utilize available personnel.” He paused, then added: “The Captain was somewhat resistant to the idea.” There was more laughter from the bedroom where Ann was no doubt dressing herself.

In fact, Vulcans did have a very keen sense of humor, albeit dry. It however, was very guarded, and one had to observe them very closely to detect it. But an unfortunate reality was that few people ever paused long enough to make the observation. To most, the Vulcan people were often regarded as a cold and callous race — a misguided preconception that was far from accurate, and indeed, the Vulcans did little to dissuade the notion.

As he waited, Skyl took a methodical survey of Ann’s quarters.

The room was neat and tidy, but the décor in some ways reflected her personality. The various artworks adorning the wall were scattered and uneven. Many hung unbalanced. The furniture was functional, but arranged in a haphazard and bulky manner.

A small table had been placed by the door in such a way as to surely catch the wrist or thigh every time someone exited. On it, several items were arrayed with a slightly off-center flare to them. A vase containing the chameleon carnations he had previously brought her. A small dish bearing musty smelling potpourri.

Her commbadge had been tossed there too. Next to it lay the small pins denoting her rank of lieutenant and chief medical officer. *And something else.* Something unexpected and completely out of place. It was a small pencil-like device used by engineers to alter circuit pathways.

Skyl actually *frowned*, then slowly raised an upswept eyebrow as he picked up the device and examined it. Puzzlement again occupied his thoughts. Ann came rushing out of the bedroom brushing her dark, damp hair. She was wearing the same black dress she'd worn the night of their disastrous first date. At first, she did not notice his perplexed look.

“I thought that we might go to the cetacean tanks this evening before we eat.” She turned to him enquiringly, then caught sight of what his hands held before his eyes. It was only by sheer will alone that Ann’s sudden sense of panic did not overwhelm her. In fact, she was so successful in concealing it, that Skyl was not consciously aware of it.

At times however, the subconscious mind can be a powerful force. “I am curious, Ann,” Skyl intoned, “as to why you would have a CMD in your possession.” Ann cursed herself for her carelessness. Fortunately, she had taken the padd (with its incriminating data) into the bedroom with her to review her work before jumping in the shower. Her mind now raced frantically to come up with a plausible explanation. Again, the turbopumps screamed within her ears.

“Uh, is that what that is?” she said stalling. “I was, uh, wondering that.” It had taken every effort for her to suppress her nervous tendencies. “I, um, found that in the, uh, in the corridor earlier... earlier this afternoon... someone must’ve dropped it.”

“Curious,” Skyl said again, rolling this information over in his

mind.

“What’s that, uh, what’s that little gizmo for anyway?” Ann queried, hoping to draw him further attention away from any suspicion.

He averted his gaze from the object for a moment and stared into Ann’s blue eyes; eyes that curiously always seemed to be elsewhere. After a moment’s thought, he responded.

“It is a device used, in most cases, to alter the circuit pathways contained within the ships subprocessors.”

“Interesting,” she mused.

“I sent Ensign Malfoya to investigate a power surge in the port-forward RCS thruster this afternoon,” Skyl finally concluded. “As you have stated, perhaps the Ensign misplaced it in the corridor.”

“Perhaps,” Ann agreed, hoping his investigation would stop there. Then, as was consistent with her nature, the doctor did the completely unexpected. She took several steps forward and embraced Skyl, giving him a long passionate kiss on the lips. The Vulcan was briefly caught unawares, but nonetheless responded in kind. After a moment, she backed away and gazed intently into his narrow eyes.

“Shall we go?”

“Indeed,” he said, raising an upswept eyebrow in wonderment. As she brushed past him and out the door, Skyl absently slipped the CMD into his breast pocket. Consciously, his investigation had been stopped dead in its tracks.

At times however, the subconscious mind can be a powerful force.

## “...begin Chapter Twelve.”

CAPTAIN’S LOG

OLD FEDERATION STARDATE 41011.86

NEW GALACTIC STARDATE 21346.35

AFTER NEARLY TWO DAYS AT HIGH WARP, THE *ENTERPRISE* HAS ARRIVED AT DAVLOS THREE. UPON REVIEWING DATA FROM THE *STARSHIP AJAX* AND INFORMATION STORED IN THE LIBRARY COMPUTER, WE HAVE FOUND THIS WORLD TO BE ONE OF CONTRADICTIONS.

THE PLANET CONDUCTS NEARLY NINETY PERCENT OF ITS TRADE WITH THE KLINGON EMPIRE, YET A SIGNIFICANT PORTION OF THE POPULATION HAS CONTINUED TO REMAIN IN STRIDENT OPPOSITION TO THE FIRST KHITOMER ACCORDS.

THIS FACT, AMONG OTHERS, HAS LED TO DECADES OF POLITICAL STRIFE AND NUMEROUS GOVERNMENT UPHEAVALS. CURIOUSLY, THE CAPITAL CITY HAS EVEN BEEN SECTIONED OFF INTO SO-CALLED ‘SANCTUARY DISTRICTS’ – AN ANACHRONISTIC HOLDOVER FROM THE CHAOS OF MID-TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY NORTH AMERICA ON EARTH.

COMMANDER BATANIDES AND A DISCRETE SECURITY DETAIL HAVE BEAMED DOWN TO DISTRICT C, STRONGHOLD OF THE OPPOSITION FORCES AND SUSPECTED HOME TO A CELL OF THESE MYSTERIOUS ‘RHOTEMIAN REVIVALISTS’. HER MISSION: TO LEARN THE FATE OF CAPTAIN NARTH AND LIEUTENANT COMMANDER KAHANAMOKU – WHILE MINE SHALL BE TO TRY AND HOLD THIS GOVERNMENT TOGETHER AGAINST A STORM OF GROWING PERIL.

Governor Zan Glin-daro was a fat man stuffed into a small suit. His bulbous throat looked strangled by the too short a necktie that hung

down to the middle of his great belly. The governor's dark, deep-set eyes seemed nearly swallowed by round pudgy cheeks. They darted around continuously with the restlessness of caged animals.

The big man heaved a heavy sigh across his desk, then tried again to fix his gaze upon the holo-image hovering before him. The Starfleet captain was rather a stern looking woman, which did not sit well with a stomach so prone to its excesses. His restless eyes were once more forced to look away from her steady stare. *I'm hungry*, he thought.

The woman looked agitated and to the governor, that always meant talking, lots of talking. He really hoped that this wouldn't turn into a debate. With a fat thumb, he squeezed a small button on the desktop, activating a return signal to the starship orbiting high overhead.

"Captain," he smiled pleasantly. "This is Governor Glin-daro. How may I be of assistance?" The pleasantness was a mask, of course. His thoughts were much more engaged in deciding just what to have for lunch.

"*Governor,*" the woman said with startling authority, "*I am Captain Garrett of the Enterprise...*" Glin-daro straightened and choked down a gulp thinking: *The Enterprise? Dear God, what have I done now?*

She continued, "*...We are attempting to track down the source of a growing instability along the Federation-Klingon border. We hoped you might be able to provide us with some information.*"

*Big words*, he thought. *Why do these Starfleet captains always have to use such big words?* "Of course, Captain. I'll be more than glad to help in any way I can." The mask of pleasantness came so easily that he rarely put any thought or effort into it anymore.

"*Are you aware of the recent outbreak of civil war on Turkana Four?*"

"Of course," the governor answered matter-of-factly. "Who isn't?" He was bored, but that would all change before long. The captain seemed to be growing strangely impatient with him.

"*What is not generally known, Governor, is that our investigation has uncovered substantial evidence of Klingon involvement.*"

“Not surprising,” he said nonchalantly. His answer *had* surprised her though. Glin-daro found this fact to be the first intriguing part of their entire conversation. *Is it possible, he wondered, could Starfleet Intelligence really be that out of touch?* If that was the case, then the captain certainly was in for a surprise.

*“I’m afraid you have me at a bit of a loss, Governor.”* Her look was one of puzzlement. He liked that. He sized her up, then shifted his massive body forward, putting more strain on an already seriously overworked chair.

“Captain Garrett, my administration has suspected for some time that the opposition forces on this world were receiving aid from the Klingons. Trade is one thing, but aid will not be tolerated.” He wagged a finger at her like a scolding high school principal.

Garrett stared at him; somewhat too crossly, he felt. *“You had suspicions of a new covert threat from the Klingon Empire, and you did not report this to the Federation Council?”*

Glin-daro himself was now growing impatient. “There is nothing new about this threat, Captain. We are dealing with it now just as we have always dealt with it since the first days of colonization.” He glanced at a chrono on the nearby wall. *Very soon now.* He continued, “For four decades the opposition has been eliciting aid from the Klingons to gain its independence from the shackles of the Federation. In return, they must disrupt the border enough to start an extended conflict.”

*“But to what end, Governor?”* The captain’s face was now wrinkled with concern. *Good, he thought, it’s about time.* Glin-daro sat back. An excruciating groan of protest came out of the chairs withered joints. His restless eyes settled on her with a certain measure of irritability.

“In case you haven’t noticed, Captain, the First Khitomer Accords were not very well received out here. The Second Khitomer Accords have only served to accelerate a growing storm.”

Garrett mirrored his own irritability. *“I am very well aware of that, Governor,”* she said contentiously, *“and believe it or not, I am trying to stop that storm.”* There were several moments of silence as the two great leaders stared at each other across the vast distances that separated them. He was slowly beginning to trust in her sincerity.

*Something happened at Turkana Four that upset her,* he deduced. His tone softened. “Look, Captain, this type of underhanded dealing has gone on for decades. Small but outspoken groups on both sides of the border have fought against peace since before you and I were born. Things on Turkana Four just got a little out of hand and it led to civil war.” He glanced again at the wall chrono. *Almost time.* He dropped a fat fist heavily onto his desk. “I do not intend to let that happen on my planet.”

“*What are you suggesting, Governor?*” Garrett’s brow was again crumpled with concern.

“My operatives have determined that a cell of these revolutionaries has set up shop within the very walls of my own capital city, Captain.” His eyes narrowed. “Even as we speak, my militia is preparing a pre-emptive strike against these insurgents.”

Garrett’s face went white. “*When?*” she whispered. He glanced again at the wall chrono, then did some brief imaginary calculations.

“Oh,” he rolled his cagey eyes, “in roughly five minutes, give or take.” The fat man was clearly proud of himself. “That is, of course, if everything is on schedule.” Garrett’s holo-image wavered briefly as she apparently stood up and took several steps forward.

“*Where?*” she said hoarsely.

“I beg your pardon?” Glin-daro was again intrigued, this time by the look of near panic racing across Garrett’s features.

“*Where are they preparing to strike, Governor?*” she insisted hotly.

“Why, Sanctuary District C, of course.”

“*You must stop them,*” she shot back before he had a chance to even think.

“Stop them?” Glin-daro let out a short, disbelieving laugh.

“Why, Captain, whatever for?”

Garrett’s voice was practically pleading. “*I have a security force in that district attempting to locate two missing Starfleet officers.*”

“Then I suggest you beam them out at once, Captain.”

“*But Governor, if you would just...*” She was cut off as Glin-daro gave her a sort of sickening, self-absorbed smile.

“I’m afraid, Captain,” he said condescendingly, “that this particular storm cannot be stopped, for it has already begun to rain.” To

his surprise, the holo-image abruptly blinked out. *Just as well*, he thought, *I was tired of her anyway*. His fat thumb flattened another button on the desktop, and he shouted into an adjacent receiver.

“Send in Colonel Chen immediately. I want to know what’s going on.” He released the downtrodden button and paused, then flattened it again. “And get me something to eat for Crissake!”

For Garrett, Cicely couldn’t terminate the link fast enough. The fat face lingered there before her for a few more moments, then mercifully blinked out of existence. Her fury was held in check only by a quickly increasing concern for the away team.

“Dammit,” she hissed. “Pig-headed, narrow-minded old fool. *Enterprise to Away Team!*”

A hushed voice barely permeated the Bridge. “*Batanides here, Captain.*” Garrett took a breath, then lowered her voice. It was obvious the away team was in a delicate situation.

“What’s your status, Commander?”

*“We have been able to glean unsubstantiated evidence that Captain Narth and his security chief are, in fact, dead, Captain. But we have no idea who or why or even if there are any bodies to be recovered.”*

“Understood,” Garrett said anxiously. “Prepare to return to the ship at once.”

*“But Captain...”*

“At once, Commander,” Garrett countered sternly. “The government is preparing a pre-emptive strike on your position as we speak.” The Bridge speakers relayed the muffled sounds of distant explosions, followed by a rising chorus of screaming people.

*“Oh, my gods,”* Marta was heard to say. *“It’s already begun. COMSTOCK, SAVAR... GET OVER HERE NOW! Enterprise, standby to trans...”* Her voice was cut off by a sickening screech, then the broken hiss of static.

“Away Team,” the Captain almost shouted, “come in!” She spun around and zeroed in on Cicely. The Orion girl’s twig-like fingers flew over her board as her head began to shake more conclusively.

“It’s no use, Captain. The government has set up a scattering field. It’s blocking all ground-based and orbital communications.”

Garrett spun back around to face the viewscreen. “Bridge to Transporter Room Three... do you have a lock?”

*“Negative, Captain. The scattering field is disrupting their comm signals.”* Garrett’s mind raced. With lightning speed, she tore through her options. She felt time slipping further away from her with every microsecond of hesitation. Her voice was now resolute, focused.

“Mr. Castillo, take us down. Transporter Room... increase power to the annular confinement beam.”

“Captain...” At the tactical station, Onovan studied his readouts with ever-increasing dismay. “Government forces are continuing to fire projectiles into Sanctuary District C.” The console emitted several warning tones. “The district is now returning fire, Captain.” He paused, then faced her with alarm. “Type Three antimatter shells.”

The Captain gritted her teeth. “Transporter Room Three... DO YOU HAVE A LOCK?”

*“Negative, Captain. There is still too much interference.”* Garrett twirled to her right and looked Stadi squarely in the eyes.

“Get down there, Commander... see what you can do.” He nodded as she turned back to Castillo. “Lieutenant, take us lower.” Castillo’s hands wavered over the panel for a faint instant before keying in the proper commands. The tactical station raised several more alarms.

“Hull temperature increasing,” Onovan said woefully. Everyone’s attention was then captured by a frantic electronic wail from the Operations station.

“Captain,” Cicely called ahead. “Engineering reports an increase in manifold pressure... port-forward reaction control thruster.”

“I can feel it,” Castillo chimed in. “I am having difficulty maintaining lateral control.”

*“Stadi to Bridge... Signal resolution at forty-five percent. We need at least another ten percent to attempt transport.”* Garrett’s heart sank. She began slowly to acquiesce. *NO, DAMMIT. I WILL NOT LOSE THOSE OFFICERS!* She reached forward and placed a hand gently on Castillo’s shoulder. She lowered her voice to near a whisper.

“Mr. Castillo, the safety of this ship and the fate of those three officers now lies solely in your hands. Only you can make the determination... Can you take us lower?” Castillo’s entire life seemed

to converge on this single moment. Over eight hundred people. Three doomed officers. *Marta*. His mind was a whirlwind of images and Garrett's voice was an echo. *Do you wish that you had done some things differently in your life, Lieutenant? Relived a moment, changed it to better your future?* What was the true art of command? Do the needs of the few truly outweigh the needs of the many?

With the skill and the deftness of over fifteen years' experience, his fingers gracefully danced across his console. "You might want to take a seat, Captain... going sub-orbital, dropping below one hundred kilometers." A sudden and eerie stillness began to blanket the Bridge. Garrett squeezed his shoulder, then backed away slowly. She sat down quietly in the command chair and listened silently as the reports of their increasing peril filled the Bridge.

"Hull temperature rising... twelve hundred degrees."

"Port-forward manifold pressure approaching critical. Engineering recommends immediate shutdown."

"Steady," Garrett said calmly. She admired Castillo's resolve, the unwavering concentration as he struggled to maintain control of the bulky starship in the thickening air.

"Captain," Onovan spoke quietly, though the growing terror in his voice rang clear. "Sanctuary District C has fired two antimatter shells in our direction. Shall I raise shields?"

Garrett raised a single finger to hold him at bay. Transport through the shields was impossible. The entire ship began to shudder and groan. Sparks sprang from an aft science station, causing Ensign Enyo to let out a yelp. Beads of sweat began to roll down Castillo's forehead as his fingers moved faster and faster, trying in vain to stay ahead of the course corrections. Garrett pursed her lips and whispered a silent prayer.

"Bridge to Transporter Room..." she pleaded in desperation, closing her eyes.

"*Energizing now, Captain.*" She unconsciously crossed her fingers.

"Hull temperature exceeding tolerances... we have scorching along the leading edge. Antimatter shells will impact in fifteen seconds."

"Thruster manifold pressure at critical mass. Overload

estimated at T minus ten seconds.”

“*Transport complete...*” Stadi’s voice heralded in like a lark. Still, Garrett could tell by his tone and inflection that something had gone terribly wrong. But that would have to wait. Garrett jumped up just as the Bridge lurched violently to the left. She fell to one knee, then quickly regained footing. An aft station exploded, sending Lt. Dardanelle flailing backwards and over the upper-level railing.

“Shields up!” the Captain shouted above the rising din. “Mr. Castillo, full impulse. Get us into orbit!” The deck continued to roll beneath her. She felt a sudden surge of power. Hope began coursing through the shuddering spaceframe.

With concussive sonic booms, the *Enterprise* leapt forward, tearing its way through the upper atmosphere. The antimatter shells sailed into the sudden void. Finding there no purchase for which to cling, they made two great parabolic arcs and began their long, lonely descent back to the surface.

The captain stood on the Bridge drained and speechless. Atmospheric ionization flared off the forward shields as Castillo continued to work; frantically trying to coax the overtaxed thrusters into pushing the *Enterprise* back into space. Fortunately however, gravity must ultimately give way to sheer, unadulterated power. With one last momentous surge, the great ship managed to shove itself into a stable orbit.

With a few final keystrokes, Castillo at last turned control over to the computer. He then sat back in his chair trembling, obviously shaken. Garrett brought a hand up and wiped the perspiration from her upper lip.

“Well done, Lieutenant,” she whispered. He remained immobile, head back, eyes closed. She reached for Dardanelle, pulled him to his feet, held fast to his forearm.

“Hull temperature returning to normal, Captain.” Onovan let out an audible sigh of relief.

“Engineering reports...” Cicely paused with regard to her sizzling console, “...port-forward reaction control thruster has been taken offline. All other thrusters have been adjusted to compensate.”

Garrett merely nodded. She released Dardanelle at last, then bolstered herself up for the next question.

“Transporter Room Three... report.”

Stadi’s voice quietly entered the Bridge. “*Commander Batanides and Commander Savar are safely aboard, Captain. They have been taken to Sickbay.*” There was a long, deafening pause. “*I am sorry to report that Lieutenant Comstock was dead on arrival.*”

“Understood,” Garrett said levelly. She took two steps back and sagged into the command chair. Again, her confidence had been shaken to its very core. Again, she struggled to maintain emotional control. Apprehension and foreboding returned, coupled with the smothering burdens of command and the safety of the crew.

Safety... one had been lost. Fifty years of peace... the *Enterprise* must prevail. One little ship against the prospect of decades of bitter war. *One had been lost! Do we run, or do we turn and fight?* Garrett gritted her teeth with determination.

“Mr. Castillo,” she said with resolve. He turned to face her and for a moment, their eyes locked. She sensed a newfound confidence growing within him. A new understanding of command, and more so, a sudden compassion for her and her difficult position. His strength became her strength, and it rekindled a fire within her. She rose with an intensity of purpose.

“Nearest starbase please, Lieutenant.”

“Starbase 234.” His eyes twinkled. “The *Starship Intrepid* left there five days ago with 2,000 peacekeeping troops.” The captain nodded, then turned to Cicely.

“Ensign, I want to talk to the highest-ranking official on that starbase immediately.”

“Aye, Captain.” Cicely had already faced her console and was placing the call. “That will be Admiral Ganino, commanding the entire Second Fleet.”

“That’ll do,” Garrett said darkly. “Counselor Onovan, please report to Sickbay and deliver your ministrations to our wounded.”

Onovan nodded solemnly, then rose and moved towards the lift. A still slightly dazed Dardanelle crossed the Bridge to assume the tactical station. Just as he was taking a seat, Cicely’s console emitted several positive sounding tones.

“Admiral Ganino responding, Captain.” The ensign’s slender finger sat poised to activate the link. Garrett adjusted her uniform

jacket and ran a hand through her tousled hair. Her hand covered her eyes, then pinched her nose.

"I'm not familiar with the Admiral, but he's about to get a first-class introduction to me... on screen, Ensign." An older man appeared on the parabolic viewscreen. His dark skin was wrinkled in a weary-worn fashion that was a testament to his years of service. Gray hair blended well with his tight black curls.

"*Ah, Captain Garrett,*" he said warmly. "*It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance.*"

"Forgive me if I forgo the pleasantries, Admiral. I just lost a damn good officer, and I very nearly lost my ship."

"*I see,*" the Admiral responded levelly. He had heard of the famous captain's legendary resolve if pressed into a corner and decided to allow her a small degree of latitude. "*How can I be of service, Captain?*" The inflection on the word 'captain' was intended as a reminder of her position in relation to his. Garrett took note of it, but would not be swayed.

"I will be frank, *Admiral* (she added a respectful nod), your fleet needs to be on the border **now** to counter this growing instability. Another world has just erupted into violence beneath us and the threat of chaos continues to spread."

Ganino looked at her with measured understanding. It had been quite some time since he'd served out there, on the frontier, in command of a starship; but he hadn't forgotten what it was all about. He admired her strength and tenacity.

"*Well, Captain,*" he said casually, "*since the gloves are off, let me be frank with you. Fifty years of peace has left **our** fleet spread pretty thin. I am doing my best to pull our ships together to counter the Klingon buildup at Beta Thoridor... but it takes time, Captain.*"

"Time is no longer our ally, Sir." Garrett had softened her tone with the realization that Ganino was a man she could work with; a high-ranking officer that, for once, could be trusted to understand the situation. "Admiral," she continued, "I respectfully request that you dispatch a peacekeeping starship with all possible speed to Davlos Three."

Ganino nodded his concurrence and consulted a padd. "*The Fearless is already enroute to Turkana Four. I will order them to divert*

*at once.*” He looked at her with a reassuring smile. “*Two-thousand peacekeeping troops will be on Davlos in less than twenty-four hours, Captain.*”

“Thank you, Admiral.” She smiled at him warmly, then added with sincerity; “I do look forward to our next encounter, Sir.”

*“As do I, Captain, as do I. Remain vigilant, Enterprise, you are my eyes and my ears in the dark. Ganino out.”* With that said, the warm image of a man was replaced with the black coldness of deep space. Garrett let out a deep sigh that puffed out her cheeks. She was about to sit down when the Ops station emitted another string of chirps.

Cicely studied her screen, then swiveled to face the expectant Bridge. “Message from Governor Mogh, Captain. He requests an immediate rendezvous at Gamma Eridon... a Klingon world.” Garrett closed her eyes, then tossed a hand in the air.

“Ensign, inform the governor that we are already on our way... Mr. Castillo, lay in a course and engage at Warp Eight.” She was finally able to ease herself into her chair even as the *Enterprise* threw off the last shackles of gravity and plunged headlong into the unknown.

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Onovan stepped into Sickbay just as a sullen Marta Batanides swung her feet off of a biobed and onto the floor. She paused there a moment, waiting for the dizziness to pass, as Onovan moved smoothly over to offer his quiet assistance. They stood there together for a time waiting for Dr. Grey to give her final prognosis.

“It looks like you’re going to be fine,” Ann said at last, still scanning. “I want you to take it easy for a couple days though. The dizziness will continue to linger for several hours. Remember, only fifty-five percent of yourself came back from Davlos, so it’s going to take some time for your body to adjust.” She offered her patient a faint but comforting smile.

“Gods,” Marta sighed, placing a hand to her forehead. “I hope I didn’t lose anything important... and what about this Warp Ten headache?”

“It’ll pass with rest.” Ann smiled again at her friend, then nodded to Onovan. The counselor placed an arm through Marta’s, and

together they made a few pre-emptive steps. Marta paused and shook her head, then took a few more steps.

“Join me for lunch, Counselor? I’m strangely hungry.” She offered him a slight smile despite the pounding within her skull.

“It would be my pleasure, Commander... Starboard Café?”

“Lead on,” she gestured towards the door, and they passed out and into the corridor. They trudged on slowly through several intersections before reaching a turbolift station. While they waited there, Onovan turned to her with all the compassion of his profession, as well as his friendship.

“Would you like to tell me what happened?” he said quietly. His eyes, indeed his entire demeanor, were a soothing presence to most everyone. The El-Aurian’s age and wisdom far surpassed even the oldest of Vulcans. His experiences spanned centuries and he exuded that with humbleness, not arrogance. It surrounded him like an aura.

“Well,” Marta began, leaning against the wall for support, “when the militia stormed the district, I tried to pull the Away Team together for transport. But the street was crowded and the panic spread quickly.” She paused when the lift doors opened. She started to chew at her thumbnail as they entered and continued to do so while the small cab picked up speed in the dark labyrinth of tunnels crisscrossing the ship.

“Go on,” Onovan urged. He always found it fascinating how different members of the crew reacted to his probing. Marta was always open-minded and willing to explore her feelings, while Castillo on the other hand... well, he was usually a bit less than cooperative.

“At first,” she went on, eyes focused on the memory, “the three of us got separated in the crowd. By the time we managed to pull back together, communications had already been lost.” She looked Onovan briefly in the eyes, then back to the memory.

“I knew the *Enterprise* would be trying to get a lock, so I decided our chances might be better if we isolated our bio-signs from the general population swarming around us.”

“Creative thinking, Commander. And how did you accomplish this?” His gentle coaxing came in response to a pause on her part. Marta again steadied herself and placed a hand to her throbbing temples.

“Well,” she continued, “we were eventually able to work our way onto the roof of a nearby building. Unfortunately, that’s when the shells began to drop.” The lift slowed to a stop and the doors opened. The couple stepped out, then took a right towards the Café. She swayed there for a moment, just outside the entrance, before pressing forward again.

They entered on the third tier, and fortunately, the Bridge’s night staff had long-since dissipated so they had the small overlook entirely to themselves. Nearing midday, however, the second and first tiers were already bustling with activity below them. They peered over the edge a moment and smiled as the laughter and voices carried over. After glancing out the huge elliptical windows at the warp stars beyond, Onovan helped Marta into a chair, then sat down himself as her story resumed.

“When the shells started to fall, it was chaos all around us. I really didn’t think we were going to make it out of this one.” Marta paused with the sudden thought of Lt. Comstock, one of her boldest and bravest security officers. A tear began to roll down her cheek. Onovan gave her a moment to reflect. He knew the rest of the tale would come of its own volition.

She wiped the tear away with the palm of her hand and let out an embarrassed sort of laugh. “Before we could even react, a shell plunged through the rooftop almost at our feet. We were all thrown back several meters and then everything began to dissolve around us. The last thing I remember was seeing Comstock’s battered body lying on the far side of the hole.” She paused and looked again out the massive windows.

“There was no way I could get to him, no way I could save him.” Many more tears were falling now. She shook her head in sadness. “There was a soft white light... and then I woke up in Sickbay.”

“And Savar?”

“Oh, Savar,” she sighed matter-of-factly. “You know Vulcans... he’s already back on duty while I sit here crying.”

“Hmmm, I do know Vulcans,” Onovan said thoughtfully, “and I am certain that Commander Savar will grieve in his own way.” They sat in silence for a long time, speaking only to place their orders to the

third-tier attendant. Onovan let Marta's feelings evolve naturally — only time and patience can cure a wound, despite all the wonders of modern medical technology.

Marta played in her food for a while, suddenly not very hungry. It was obvious that she was becoming increasingly agitated. "I was scared, Counselor," she finally blurted out, "more scared than I've been in a long, long time. I honestly thought that I was going to die." She threw her hands up in the air. "I mean, damn, that's twice in less than a week."

She looked into his eyes with a certain panic. "You know that old human expression, Onovan... third times a charm..."

"You *will* die, Commander," he said flatly and she looked at him aghast. "But," he finished with assuredness, "it will not be for a very long time."

"How can you be so certain?" Marta countered plaintively.

"Please," he said grinning, "I didn't get to be three hundred seventy years old without knowing a thing or two."

"Oh, you're incorrigible," she laughed at him. There was another human expression Onovan knew of: 'Laughter is the best medicine.'

And Marta Batanides was already well on her way to healing.

~ ~ ~ ~

Captain Rachel Garrett sat at her desk almost in a daze. The ready room lights had been lowered to two-thirds Betazed standard intensity. This always seemed to allow her to think more clearly. She continued to roll her conversation with the fat governor over and over in her mind. *Things on Turkana Four just got a little out of hand*, she remembered him saying.

"That certainly wins my award for understatement of the year," she muttered. The door chime offered a small chirp of concurrence. "Come in," she called to the unseen guest; though her mind had already felt Stadi's presence long before he'd reached the entry. The twin doors parted with a quiet whoosh and the Commander took a step in. He paused there a moment to allow his eyes to adjust, then stepped up to the wooden desk and held up a padd.

“My report on the incident at Davlos, Captain,” Stadi said grimly. He then laid the padd down gently on the desk, knowing full well how the clattering sound they made always made her head hurt. Garrett nodded her silent acknowledgement as he continued.

“According to Marta and Savar, Lieutenant Comstock was already severely injured when we began transport.” He looked out the viewport at the receding warp stars. “There was insufficient signal strength to sustain him in his weakened condition. Maybe if we’d had another five percent... I don’t know...”

Stadi sat heavily into a chair facing the captain. She knew what it was like to be in his position. To have someone’s life slip away literally right at your fingertips knowing that there was nothing that could be done. The helplessness, the despair. He could sense her thoughts, and she his. In the telepathic mind, ‘misery loves company’ was taken to a whole new level, and they both drew some measure of comfort from it.

Garrett let out a long-held sigh. “And the port-forward reaction control thruster?”

“Engineering is analyzing the sensor data and checking the hardware. There, as yet, remains no indication of what caused the malfunction.”

“Curious,” Garrett frowned for a few moments, then held up a padd of her own. “I myself am reviewing my talks with the fat governor and with Commander Zweller, trying to pull the pieces together.”

“And what have you found?” Stadi was happy for the subject change. He’d just spent the last two hours dissecting the death of a fellow officer. A somewhat grisly task to say the least.

“Well first off,” Garrett began, “after the Kenzie Rebellion, I’m a bit dismayed that tensions along the border have been allowed to escalate to this level without some kind of intervention from the Federation Council.” Still highly classified, these events of twenty years ago and their subsequent purge had largely been forgotten except by those intimately involved. Stadi nodded solemnly as the shared memories of their near-death experiences flooded their collective consciousness. They both sighed in unison before he pressed an important point.

“The Prime Directive would seem to apply,” he countered with a tip of the head.

“Yes,” the captain conceded, “but you and I both know that you can’t always hide behind the Prime Directive... use it as a shield, an excuse, not to act when a particular situation truly warrants it.”

Playing the devil’s advocate, Stadi countered again. “So, tell me, Captain, who decides? Who makes the determination? Where do the rights of a central government end, and the rights of its member states begin? Who draws that line?”

Garrett smiled at him. “You know,” she said, “my ancestors of North America fought a very bloody civil war over just that same question.”

“And?”

“And the federal government won.” The captain sat forward and looked her first officer deeply in the eyes, then spoke earnestly. “The United Federation of Planets is not just some ragtag collection of autonomous worlds, Commander. Each and every planet joined to be a part of the larger whole — to stand together as one through the good times *and* the bad... and it’s the central government’s responsibility to hold this union together, to counter any threats to its integrity, both internal and external. If a government cannot maintain control, then chaos quickly ensues.”

Stadi frowned at her. “But certainly, there must be some limits to this control.”

“Certainly.” She tapped on the desktop for emphasis. “Control of the government rest solely in the hands of the people it governs. And the people of the Federation should’ve been made aware of this threat long before it reached its present levels. Only they can guide the Council on how it should proceed.”

“But they weren’t,” Stadi recognized.

“But they weren’t,” Garrett repeated, “and that places Starfleet in a very difficult position. Now captains like Picard and Narth, and indeed, myself, are forced to make decisions without guidance from the overall whole.” She threw a hand up, then gestured to the receding starlight. “Men like Admiral Ganino must scramble together a fleet because they can’t afford to wait for the Council to make the necessary appropriations.” She pointed at him. “And once they have that fleet,

they have no choice to deploy it as they see fit.”

Garrett sat back in her chair and looked at Stadi gravely. “That puts dangerous power in the hands of the military, Commander. Romulus... Cardassia... both ruled by a strict military regime, both very dangerous.”

“Fortunately for Starfleet,” Stadi smiled, “they have captains like Picard and Narth and Garrett that do not grossly abuse their power.”

“Fortunately,” Garrett agreed. “But that does not mean it is not outside the realm of possibility.” She now wagged that same finger at him. “Admiral Cartwright abused his power at the First Khitomer Accords. How many unseen forces are at work here now? Can you say? Continued peace with the Klingons, the success or failure of the Second Khitomer Accords, the integrity of the Federation and of Starfleet... all this hinges on the stability of the border. What we do here now, how we act, will have dramatic repercussions for perhaps decades to come.”

“One little ship, Captain?” Stadi raised an eyebrow in an almost Vulcan way.

“One little ship, Commander.” Garrett stood and faced out the viewport. She spoke in a hushed tone. “Fifty years of peace, fifty years of complacency. Fifty years of unprecedented growth and prosperity — and now it all hangs in the balance. The security of an entire quadrant now rests in the hands of one little ship.”

“They couldn’t have made a better choice, Captain,” Stadi said cheerily. Garrett turned to him and smiled. She had always admired his optimism. It was the crown jewel in the persona of the Betazed people. A trait that humans could do well to emulate.

“Right you are, Commander, right you are,” she said smiling finally. The Captain sat back down deliberately and consulted her padd. Stadi watched intently as she made several entries and glanced over some data. She then looked up into his expectant eyes.

“I will contact Admiral Ganino again,” she said. “He seems to have a fairly tight grasp on the situation. I will strongly urge him to get every available starship on the border as soon as possible. It’s time we show these revolutionary groups that Starfleet takes peace very seriously.”

“And the Klingons?” Stadi queried. “Won’t they view our buildup as a potential threat?”

“That’s your job, Commander.” She offered him her usual wry smile. “You have already established a certain rapport with Governor Mogh... you must convince *him* to convince the High Council that our starship movements are intended only to serve as a stabilizing influence in an increasingly unstable region. They are there to keep the peace, nothing more.”

“Understood,” Stadi said. At times like these, he was still somewhat in awe of Garrett’s command presence. She could be quite a formidable force when pressed into a corner. He held a small measure of pity for the unsuspecting Admiral Ganino.

Garrett once again consulted the padd. “Hmmm,” she issued, smiling again. “Also, I believe we can use this Lwaxana Troi to our advantage...” Stadi groaned. She ignored him and continued. “It says here that she is with the Betazed Diplomatic Corps. If I am not mistaken, she is enroute to Khitomer?” Stadi nodded. His shoulders sagged slightly.

“Good,” Garrett continued. “You must impress upon her the seriousness of this border situation. It will be her job to use her ‘influential presence’ to convey these concerns to the assembled delegates at Khitomer. They must be made aware and do their own part to avert this crisis.” Stadi felt sick, but nonetheless nodded his compliance. He then looked at Garrett, puzzled.

“And what of our friend Governor Ja’rod?”

“Ah-ha,” the captain exclaimed, sitting forward. “That will fall upon the award-winning smile of Commander Cortin Zweller. I am granting him a field promotion to Captain. It will be his job to stall or otherwise diffuse the growing threat at Beta Thoridor.” The commander stared at her agape. He wasn’t entirely certain she had the authority to promote anyone to captain.

He decided not to argue that point and instead asked: “Is it wise to place that much responsibility on such a young officer, Captain?”

“It’s all we’ve got, Commander,” Garrett responded levelly. “I really feel that timing is critical here. We must act now,” she emphasized, “there can be no further delay... the future may be unraveling right before our very eyes.”

Stadi nodded quietly as Garrett continued to lay out their plans for the coming days. He had to admire her resolve, but he too began to wonder about its intensity. There was an almost fanatical nature about her now. How long could someone go on at this pace, under this much pressure, before something had to give? How much of this had to do with her unresolved emotions regarding Hal Kenzie and his rebellion?

He thought back to their conversation about the dangers of placing too much power in the hands of the military. Could this legendary captain in her noble quest to maintain the peace, somehow become a threat to its very existence? Where was that line? And who must decide when it had been crossed?

For the first time in his over twenty years of service with Garrett, Commander Spencer Stadi felt completely alone.

“...begin Chapter Thirteen.”

The voice of Lwaxana Troi entered Commander Stadi’s mind long before he reached her quarters. In fact, it rang in as clear and as true as a church bell on a frosty winter morn. Among the Five Great Houses of the Consensus, Lwaxana was renowned for her exceptional telepathic prowess. Her unfettered forwardness was considered to be equally as legendary.

Ah, Spencer Darling. I’ve been expecting you. Please, do come in. The commander rolled his eyes and stepped up to her door. Thank the gods she didn’t have X-ray vision! With a thumbprint to the touchpad, the doors opened and he entered with a blank face and carefully concealed trepidation.

The expansive VIP quarters seemed overstuffed with the various trappings of Lwaxana’s extensive wardrobe. The enormous wig sat perched on a nearby stand. Within its small interwoven cage, the colorful little bird fluttered and chattered restlessly. Stadi could sense from it an all-around dislike for space travel in general.

He surveyed the several large rooms with a smirk. “Are your quarters satisfactory, Mrs. Troi?” Lwaxana stood in front of a large mirror and twirled from side to side, frowning at the wildly extravagant dress she wore. Her dark hair had been cropped short, no doubt to allow for the placement of the immense wig. Again her voice resonated within his mind.

I suppose they will have to do, she sighed, looking at him through the mirror. *Why do you insist on that bulky vocal communication?*

“A mixture of habit and protocol, Lwaxana.” Stadi smiled at her as she made one last forsaken glance at the dress. Without further consideration, she let it drop from her shoulders to the floor, then kicked it into a pile with several others. Her naked form was thin and supple. Her skin soft and tight. Lwaxana faced him with ample but firm breasts.

Oh, Spencer, she thought with exasperation, *do be a darling and fetch me that dress behind you. I simply have no idea what I shall ever wear to the Captain’s state dinner this evening.*

She turned back to the mirror. *This would all be so much easier if everyone went exactly as nature intended.* Stadi allowed himself an instant to stare at her classic beauty. Nudity was common practice on Betazed where telepathic minds quite literally had nothing to hide. Even so, after thirty plus years of military service offworld, Spencer Stadi had been caught somewhat unawares.

He quickly turned and fumbled with an elaborate emerald-green gown. Lwaxana could sense his latent embarrassment. *Oh, Spencer Darling,* she chided him, *you have grown far to accustomed to this human lifestyle.* She let out a laugh as he sheepishly handed her the dress, his face bearing a faint crimson.

Perhaps, he thought, also thinking of Captain Garrett and how close they'd become over the past twenty-two years. Lwaxana pulled on the large flowing gown, then looked at Stadi again through the mirror. She gave him an all-to-knowing smile as he zipped the back for her.

“Ah, yes,” she said aloud, then thinking: *I sensed your bond with her the moment I beamed aboard. This captain of yours has an extraordinarily developed psi region. No doubt you have encouraged this within her?* Stadi nodded quietly as Lwaxana examined her latest candidate for attire. She clapped her hands together with excitement.

“This will do quite nicely, don't you think?” She smiled and twirled as her mind threw out another errant thought. *Of course, Ian and I shared a much greater bond. I had never thought it possible a human mind could carry so much compassion, so much strength of character.* Lwaxana's whole demeanor changed and her reflection became an image of sadness, loss, and even a little fear.

Stadi's ebony eyes softened and he spoke with quiet sincerity. “I was greatly saddened to hear of Lieutenant Troi's death. I regret having been unable to attend services back on Betazed. As you know, we were far out on the frontier.”

Oh, Spencer, I miss him so much. I miss his presence. I miss his thoughts. I even miss the sound of his warm, soft voice. Stadi placed his hands on her shoulders to comfort her. “Do you know,” she said aloud, turning, “I could even sense him when he was working at that damnable space center orbiting so high overhead...”

“And poor little Deanna, she was absolutely crushed. But she is

far stronger than I am... in fact, I admire her for her strength... she gets that from Ian I suppose.” Stadi could sense the anguish in her mind. The constant torment. And indeed, how close it had come to breaking her. He gave Lwaxana a tight hug, then surveyed her vast quarters with puzzlement.

“Where is Deanna?” he said finally. Lwaxana shook her head disapprovingly and crossed over to the replicator. She rapped on the interface lightly with her knuckles, then leaned in very close.

“Er, uh, hello? Miz Computer?” The computer chirped. “Good, you’re there... Oskoid please.” The computer chirped again as the leafy Betazoid delicacy materialized in the small chamber. Lwaxana nodded approvingly, then patted the interface with the palm of her hand as if it were a faithful pet.

“Deanna insisted on seeing the dolphins, so Mr. Homn has taken her below to the cetacean tanks.” Lwaxana deftly removed the oskoid from the replicator, then turned to Stadi with a darkly amusing thought. *Do you know, there are times when I think the dolphins are the smarter of the two Terran species.*

“Now Lwaxana,” Stadi admonished her with a stern voice.

“But really Spencer.” *How do you cope with the mental isolation of being so far away from your own people?*

Lwaxana, over half the crew is from Betazed...

Yes, but the senior Bridge staff are all non-telepaths.

It is as Captain Garrett prefers it, Lwaxana. There are security issues to be considered.

“Hmmm, I suppose,” she said aloud. She sat down at a small table and began to nibble at the oskoid. She gestured towards the opposite chair, but Stadi remained standing, practically at attention. Lwaxana could sense a slight irritation from him and it made her smile. She licked her fingers before rubbing them on a cloth napkin.

She let out a short laugh. *Please Spencer Darling, I really am trying to be understanding, but the Consensus needs you... the Betazoid people need you, especially in these troubled times.*

This was a tired old argument that Stadi had been forced to confront ever since he’d made his outlandish decision to join Starfleet. Over the past thirty years, nearly every member of the Consensus had attempted to dissuade him from his chosen career. It was considered

‘too common a lifestyle’ for a Son of the Second House; a judgment Stadi found to be utterly ridiculous.

“My brother is fully capable of representing the interests of the Second House in the Consensus...”

“Yes, but Luther has neither your wit nor your charm.” She let out a long sigh, her bottomless black eyes meeting his. *The Consensus has grown stale, Spencer, the Battle of Ethos has left us weak. The Legislative Assembly is gaining favor amongst the common people. We could use your strength and your leadership.* Stadi looked with dismay at the pitiful bird trapped within the enormous wig. The entire contraption was an outdated relic from a bygone era whose time had long since passed.

“Lwaxana,” he finally said quietly, “we have all known for nearly a century that the Great Houses must eventually give way to common rule. There is nothing that I or anyone else can do to stop this.”

“So, what,” Lwaxana shouted, “do we pass into extinction like the ancient Royal Families of Old Earth?” She then clicked her tongue, spoke softly. “Elizabeth the Third, what those people did to that poor girl, and after all that tragedy...”

Stadi stared at her calmly, coolly. “Every living thing must learn to accommodate change, Lwaxana... as must the Great Houses of the Consensus. We need not fall into oblivion, but we must begin to adjust to a more common way of life.”

Lwaxana shoved the half-eaten oskoid across the table. The colorful little bird chirped and fluttered wildly against the bars of its cage. Lwaxana eyed it with disdain. “I suppose I could start with that damnable bird... this ship has a rather sizable arboretum, does it not?”

“It does indeed,” Stadi said with a smile.

“And I suppose that dreadful wig might pass as a fairly comfortable nest if the cage were removed, wouldn’t you say?”

“I dare say that it would.”

“Well, thank the Great Goddesses that that nonsense is finally over. Now, let’s get down to business, shall we?” The tiny little bird settled quietly down now onto its perch as a newfound sense of peace slowly entered into its tiny little consciousness.

Freedom, it seems, can come in many forms and in many

different sizes.

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Lt. Commander Skyl stood in his comfortably warm office and examined the sensor readings he was getting from inside the warp core. He touched several buttons and the monitors switched to show him the less than nominal readings coming from the massive twin nacelles. The *Enterprise* had spent days at high warp and it showed.

Various waste particulates and errant static energies had already begun to build up throughout the entire Warp Propulsion System. Engines as complex and powerful as these required constant maintenance to stay at peak efficiency. The *Enterprise* was long overdue for a scheduled and much needed overhaul.

Skyl made several minute adjustments to the subspace field to counteract the slight but growing oscillation in the starboard nacelle. He then altered the deflection angle of the dilithium crystals to stabilize their structure and reduce harmonic vibration. There was little else he could do until the great ship reached its homeport of Betazed.

Next, the Vulcan picked up a padd and examined the engineering report for the port-forward reaction control thruster. There seemed to be no logical pattern to the string of events that had occurred. The exhaust manifolds had simply frozen in a half-open position. As Mr. Castillo applied more power to the small engine, the pressure of the superheated gases within had little choice but increase exponentially.

An engineering team had puzzled over the problem for the better part of the day. A route to any possible cause had left them baffled and they were finally forced to abandon the search. Skyl did not like it, but he was left with little choice but to concur. He reached up and touched the commbadge pinned to his left breast.

“Lieutenant Commander Skyl to Bridge...”

“*Castillo here, Sir, go ahead...*”

“Lieutenant, we have been unable to determine a cause for the recent thruster malfunction...” Skyl glared at the padd, still hoping to find that hidden clue. “I am reluctantly forced to bring the thruster back online despite the lack of a definitive conclusion.”

“*Understood, Commander,*” Castillo replied. “*I will inform the*

Captain and instruct the helm to keep an eye on it.”

“Very good, Skyl out.” The chief engineer continued to scroll through the data for several more moments. Putting the padd down, he took several steps to the left, then proceeded to key in the restart sequence. His brow furrowed in bewilderment as the entire port-forward Reaction Control System surged back to life without the slightest impedance.

The corner of his eye caught a flash of red near the warp core, but it did not immediately grab his attention. Skyl continued to study the readings from the port-forward thruster. The turbopumps were all functioning properly. Exhaust manifolds all operating within normal parameters. Again, a flash of red. Skyl suddenly stopped and stared out his office window at the pulsing engine beyond.

Doctor Ann Grey stood next to it wearing a short, sleek, form-fitting red dress that left little to the imagination; and a lot to the desire. Skyl swallowed and his heart rate leapt up a couple points. Logic told him that this sudden arousal was an illogical emotional response to seductive visual stimuli. But his eyes kept telling him that this was not going to be any ordinary evening with the unpredictable young doctor.

The Vulcan attempted briefly to calm himself. The highly erotic sexual desires of the human female were of legendary interest to the Vulcan people... males especially. The Vulcan Science Academy had conducted no fewer than one hundred forty-seven independent studies on the subject. They, indeed, were no closer to understanding it... but research was still, of course, ongoing.

The small office felt suddenly overwarm. With a deep breath, Skyl finally managed to gather himself up enough to take several exploratory steps out into the large engine room. It too seemed warm. Ann draped herself seductively over the dilithium crystal chamber.

“Why hello there, Mister Chief Engineer,” she said softly. “Mind if I touch your warp core?” Her long supple fingers traced their way around the hard oval edge of the blood-warm chamber hatch. Her palm came to rest on a stiff latch that held the large, armored cover firmly in place. The engine continued to throb beneath her with the deep rhythmic pulses of a heartbeat.

Skyl swallowed again, throat suddenly dry. He glanced around the rest of the large facility and found it curiously devoid of any other

personnel. He turned back to Ann and watched with some interest as she continued to stroke the chamber hatch in a decidedly sensual way. “Wh—where is the rest of my staff?” was all the Vulcan could manage to muster.

“Oh,” she said casually, “I gave them all a medical leave of absence. Looks like it’s just you and me.” The young doctor bit the tip of her left index finger, then let it slide out over her chin and down her neck to the deep furrow between her breasts. Her right hand kept caressing the hatch and fingering its stiff reinforced latches.

Skyl gulped again before taking another deep calming breath. He raised an upswept eyebrow at her. “This is most unusual, Doctor. It is unwise to leave Engineering unattended in this manner.”

“Oh Skyl,” she pouted, “I just wanted to surprise you. The mid-shift will be on duty in just a few minutes.” Ann took several silky steps toward him and snaked her right arm around his waist. Skyl glanced distractedly at the chrono on a nearby monitor.

“Indeed...” he said hoarsely before Ann silenced him with an index finger to his lips. She then reached up and rubbed the tip of his pointed ear. A heightened Vulcan sense of smell detected a hint of mock-orange laced with jasmine. Her soft blue eyes locked with his for an instant before she pressed tightly into him in a long, passionate kiss. She then delicately gripped the nape of his neck, pulling him in closer, her voice soft like breeze through shimmering trees.

“I booked us a *very* exclusive session in the spa this evening.” She backed up and again gazed deeply into his narrow dark eyes. “I’ll be waiting there for you... don’t be late.” She cast him a final smoldering stare before turning and moving back towards the warp core. Skyl watched as her soft, supple fingers danced over the hatch one final time. She then drifted around a corner and out of sight.

Ordinarily, Vulcans only succumb to the instinctual sexual drive to procreate every seven years. It is called the *Ponn farr*, a deeply emotional, animalistic mating ritual that evolved within the Vulcan psyche eons ago to counteract their fiercely logical, non-emotional way of life. Without the release of the *Ponn farr*, they would surely all go insane.

Although Skyl had undergone his latest *Ponn farr* several years ago, he was still fully capable of a purely physical performance; if for

no other reason than to satisfy the insatiable sexual whims of an erratic human doctor. All it required was a simple manipulation of the proper chemical endorphins. Skyl began to do just that as he thought: *It is going to be a most intriguing evening indeed.*

The arriving mid-shift did little to distract him from his task.

Undetectable to the naked eye, and indeed to most sensory equipment, the damaging chemical handprints left by Ann Grey had already begun to do their dirty work. The dense molecular structure of the chamber hatch was breaking down, the critical latches, losing cohesion. It was only a matter of time before severe metal fatigue led to failure.

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To travelers, Gamma Eridon would have been a paradise — that is, if it hadn't been located deep inside the Klingon Empire. It was a warm overgrown world filled with all manner of plant life. Still in the early stages of planetary evolution, animal-life had not been expected to develop here for many millions of years. But then the Klingons came.

And with them came all the evils of a modern industrial society. Pollution, the overmining of resources, a flagrant disregard for the native flora, and worst of all, the destructive introduction of non-native flora *and* fauna into the delicately balanced ecosphere. The face of Gamma Eridon had been irrevocably altered forever.

From space however, the planet looked as serene and as placid as any other Class-M world. The Federation Starship *Enterprise* drifted along high overhead, led in its orbit by the all-new *Vor'cha*-class attack cruiser *Con'daHr*. Both vessels were of equal size and firepower, but fortunately, fifty years of peace had never allowed a demonstration of this fact.

It was early, and Commander Spencer Stadi had never been particularly fond of mornings.

He stifled a yawn as he and a burly Klingon guard clanked heavily down yet another dimly lit corridor deep inside the belly of this monstrous metal beast of a ship. He was grateful he hadn't had time for breakfast as the stench within the interminable bowels of this

miscreation made him involuntarily gag at almost every turn.

“Beautiful morning, wouldn’t you say?” he half-heartedly asked the big oaf of a man lumbering before him. Despite any previous praise by Captain Garrett, Betazoid optimism was being stretched to its very limit. Stadi gagged again as he stepped in something gooey and tracked it along down the musty passageway.

“Not quite as cold as H’atoria,” he said to the guard, smiling.

“Shut up, Human,” the guard growled. Stadi raised a finger to correct him, but thought better of it when the Klingon bared his sharpened yellow teeth at him. They rounded one last corner, then waited as two heavy metal doors ground open with a terrible screech. “Wait here, Human,” the guard grunted.

Stadi was inclined to agree with the suggestion, if not the appellation. He took a step into the small wardroom and surveyed his surroundings as the sturdy metal doors clanked shut behind him. It was stark and unfurnished. Several large wall monitors displayed the surrounding area of space, while numerous red dots moved slowly about the simulated stars. No doubt they represented Imperial fleet movements.

He could see a large cluster centered around Beta Thoridor and a smaller cluster converging on Beta Lankal. *Curious*, he thought. With a labored grind, the doors opened again. This time Governor Mogh marched in bearing a great smile. He was still dressed in the regal red robes of his station, and he seemed to fill the small room with his very presence.

“Commander Stadi,” the Klingon said heartily as he walked up and pounded on the Commander’s shoulders. “We meet again old friend.” Mogh stopped and sniffed, then his smile slowly faded as he glanced down at Stadi’s boots. He let out a menacing growl and pulled a communicator out of his sleeve pocket.

“I see you have stepped in the targ shit, Commander. The wretched beast belongs to the first officer of this mismanaged vessel.” Mogh curled his upper lip before pressing a button on the communicator. Stadi was not entirely certain what Mogh did say to that officer, but he did recognize a string of relatively potent curse words that seemed to relate to the officer’s mother wearing combat boots. Moments later, a blaring alarm sounded.

After about thirty deafening seconds, an intense hissing sound came from the corridor beyond the heavy doors. Noting Stadi's confused look, Mogh explained: "The passages are being steam-cleaned, Commander. It will take only a moment." Several more seconds passed before all was blissfully quiet again.

"Now," Mogh said, "we have much to discuss." Stadi could sense how the past week in space had enlivened the aging warrior. He seemed to be fully in his element now. He moved over and gestured to one of the wall monitors. Stadi came up beside him.

"As I am sure you already know," Mogh began, "Governor Ja'rod is amassing a large fleet here at Beta Thoridor." He pointed at the little pinprick of light surrounded by the cluster of red dots.

"We did, uh... discover that, yes." The memory of their near fatal exchange with Ja'rod was not easily forgotten. Aware of the Commander's hesitation, Mogh acknowledged it with a nod and continued.

"I am attempting to assemble my own fleet here," he pointed to the star with the converging dots, "at Beta Lankal. But I am having difficulty finding loyal commanders. Many in the High Council remain undecided."

Stadi furrowed his brow. "Forgive me, Governor, but I do not understand." Mogh crossed over to another monitor that showed the Federation border. A few scattered blue dots were all that Starfleet had managed to muster. Mogh let out a deep sigh.

"A very serious situation is developing within the Empire, Commander. The High Council still remains fiercely divided over peace with the Federation. Governor Ja'rod has turned the Second Khitomer Accords into a war cry against our 'continuing appeasement' to human idealism. There is little doubt on the Homeworld that he is behind the destabilization of the border worlds."

"But why are you assembling your own fleet, Governor?" Stadi insisted with growing concern. Mogh faced him with grave honesty.

"Due to his vast influence, the High Council was willing to turn a blind eye to Ja'rod's activities along the border, *BUT*... my sudden accusation of a possible Romulan conspiracy has brought uproar from every corner of the Empire."

Stadi felt sick. The only race the Klingons hated worse than the

Federation was the Romulans. His voice betrayed a hint of anger. “Need I remind you, Governor, we still have no direct proof of a Romulan...”

“Proof is of no consequence, Commander,” Mogh countered with a toothy growl. “The mere mention of a conspiracy has brought the Empire to the brink of civil war.” If there had been a chair within the small room, Spencer Stadi would’ve surely fallen into it. As it was, he swayed uncertainly.

“Civil war?” he managed to whisper.

“Now you can see the seriousness of this situation,” Mogh said sternly. “For the good of the Empire, Chancellor K’mpec may have no choice but to disavow any Romulan involvement and capitulate to Ja’rod.”

“B-b-but if K’mpec,” Stadi stammered, “if K’mpec sides with Ja’rod, the Khitomer Accords will fall apart...”

“...And,” Mogh continued, “you can be certain Ja’rod will move for an invasion and annexation of the long-disputed border worlds.” A long silence passed between the two men as this information rolled over and over within their minds. Civil war or invasion, both possibilities held terrifying consequences for the entire quadrant.

Finally, Stadi spoke, somewhat choked. “Surely, Governor, something can be done to avert these calamities.”

“Perhaps,” Mogh replied. He touched a control button on the monitor before them. The display scrolled downward until Starbase 234 came into view. Nearly a dozen blue dots were converging on its position. Mogh placed his finger on the starbase’s location.

“I see you are amassing a small fleet of your own, Commander.” Mogh eyed him with a disturbing grin. Stadi took on the stricken look of a spy caught in the middle of his enemy’s own headquarters.

“Ah, yes, Governor,” he said, trying to sound non-defensive, “but it is important that I impress upon you that our fleet movements are intended merely as a stabilizing influence on the Federation side of the border.” Mogh offered a sharp, toothy grin at the commander’s well-rehearsed explanation.

“Chancellor K’mpec and I suspected as much. We believe this to be the first step towards our salvation.” Stadi gulped then began to wonder at their logic. *How could putting two powerful fleets nose to*

*nose hope to solve anything?* Mogh sensed the man's doubt. He continued to explain.

"You see, Commander, the presence of a large Federation fleet along our border will have many in the Empire second-guessing any call for invasion. Despite all our posturing, we continue to remain ill-equipped to sustain any form of long-term conflict. Since Praxis, the collapse of our infrastructure has left us wholly dependent on continued Federation assistance. Few would deny this, though not all would appreciate it."

Stadi nodded in resigned agreement. His thoughts reflected on Admiral Ganino's continuing efforts to pull any available starships into this sector and too, on Lwaxana Troi's impending mission to garner support at Khitomer. The commander offered his own toothy grin to Mogh.

"Then perhaps it will comfort you to know, Governor, that plans are already underway to double, if not triple, Starfleet's presence along the border." The Klingon actually looked relieved. K'mpec had invested a lot of faith in Mogh's ability to rally the Federation fleet. The balance of power within the entire Klingon Empire rested on this last-ditch effort to secure the border and to gain the influential support of the *Enterprise*.

"Excellent, Commander," Mogh said as two more blue dots appeared on the fringes of the wall monitor. He heaved another great sigh. Securing the fleet had turned out to be the easy part. Now he had to persuade the *Enterprise* to go on a daring and dangerous mission on behalf of the Chancellor of the High Council. Simple enough to be sure.

Stadi's mind could sense that there was much more to Mogh's plan than simple fleet support. "Governor," he said, "you indicated that our continued buildup was just a first step? Please explain."

"My father always told me, 'Never trust a Betazoid,'" Mogh mused. The Klingon paused for a long moment, smiling to himself. He then looked Stadi directly in the eye. "Amassing starships along the border is only a short-term fix to a long-term problem, Commander. Eventually, mistakes will be made."

"That would seem logical," Stadi agreed. He thought of Cortin Zweller, the young and inexperienced new captain of the *Ajax*.

*Mistakes could very easily be made*, he concluded.

“Your captain’s bold exploits into Klingon space have already become legendary, Commander, as I suspected they would. Her brave face-to-face confrontation with Ja’rod has earned her a place of respect within the High Council.”

“Go on,” Stadi said with growing intrigue. It was becoming obvious that the Klingon governor had been using the *Enterprise* as a pawn from the very beginning. *Very clever indeed*, he thought, *and an interesting gambit*. Mogh moved over to a third wall monitor that showed the Romulan-Klingon border. Numerous green dots clearly indicated that the Romulans were mobilizing a small little fleet of their own.

“Despite their apparent clandestine dealings with Ja’rod, the Romulans continue to make day-to-day raids on our outposts and research stations... here and here.” Mogh’s finger drew an imaginary line under several points of light that were situated perilously close to the hotly contested border. Stadi gave him another puzzled look.

“Forgive me again, Governor,” he said, “but I fail to see how this relates to the matter at hand.” Mogh pulled himself up to full stature and gripped his robes tightly.

“Commander, I bear an official request from the Chancellor of the High Council that the *Enterprise* honor treaty stipulations and conduct a defensive patrol run of the Romulan-Klingon border.”

Stadi took a step back and stared at Mogh in disbelief. “Governor,” he said with doubt, “you cannot be serious.” Even though he said it, Stadi could sense telepathically that Mogh was indeed dead serious. The Klingon’s entire mind was devoted to this outlandish plan. It was clear that he could see no other option — and admittedly, neither could Stadi.

“Let me elaborate, Commander. If the right-honorable *Enterprise* is seen to be nobly defending Klingon interests against this new Romulan aggression, support for Ja’rod in the High Council will quickly begin to fall away...

“Don’t you see?” he continued earnestly, stabbing at the wall monitor. “The Romulans are *trying* to make the High Council jittery. They are *testing* the Federation to see just how far it will go in its obligation to aid in the defense of the Empire. And they can do nothing

but *gain* from an extended conflict between our two peoples.”

Mogh seemed winded by his impassioned plea. He walked away from Stadi and stood at the far side of the room. Stadi’s mind reeled at the long-term consequences of what had just transpired within this small chamber. He suddenly found himself at the center of history, and it made him feel uncomfortable. The fate of perhaps billions of people literally hinged on this single moment. He thought back to all of his recent discussions with Captain Garrett.

“One little ship,” he said quietly to himself. He started to smile at the irony of it all as Mogh turned to face him with bewilderment.

“Commander?” The deep ridges of Mogh’s forehead seemed furrow just a little bit deeper. Stadi merely smiled at him. He had to admit that it was a bold plan... if it worked. If it did not, the ensuing war would be the proverbial war to end all wars. The entire quadrant would be plunged into chaos and billions upon billions would die.

“One little ship, Governor,” Stadi repeated and tilted his head. “My captain and I were just commenting yesterday on how the fate of the entire quadrant seems to rest on the actions of our one little ship.”

“*Not* little, Commander,” Mogh countered, “but *great*. The *Enterprise* is a great ship with an honorable captain and a brave crew.”

“Only history can be the judge of that, Governor.” Mogh let out a hearty guffaw. He stepped forward and again pounded Stadi’s shoulders. His face bore the sharp, toothy grin that Stadi had come to expect from this unusual but extraordinary Klingon. Mogh stepped back and pulled his regal red robes into place.

“Ah, Commander,” he said heartily. “Remember Kahless who said: ‘A warrior’s honor does not wait for history, a warrior’s honor becomes historic the moment it is forged.’” The governor’s eyes twinkled as Stadi broke into another broad grin. The two men stood and laughed at each other, for a moment driving back the peril that was slowly closing in around them.

History too had been forged here, and now one little ship had to stand up for its honor.

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CAPTAIN’S PERSONAL LOG

STARDATE 21350.3

WITH EACH PASSING DAY, I FIND MYSELF INCREASINGLY PREOCCUPIED WITH TIME... AND I DON'T KNOW WHY.

MY MIND STRUGGLES FOR AN EXPLANATION. I FEEL AS IF TIME IS CLOSING IN AROUND ME. SMOTHERING ME. SURROUNDING ME WITH DARKNESS.

I'M AFRAID THAT SPENCER WILL SENSE MY FEAR, MY WEAKNESS, AND THAT IT WILL DIVIDE US IN THIS, OUR CRITICAL HOUR OF DARKNESS BEFORE THE DAWN.

I AM ALSO FEARFUL OF THIS CAT AND MOUSE GAME THAT MOGH PROPOSES WE PLAY WITH THE ROMULANS. IT IS A DANGEROUS PLOY, BUT I MUST ADMIT THAT I TOO CAN SEE NO OTHER ALTERNATIVE. THE KLINGONS VIEW HONOR ABOVE ALL ELSE. IF WE MAKE A DRAMATIC STAND HERE, ON THEIR SOIL, AGAINST THE ROMULANS, IT MAY JUST BE THE CATALYST THAT PRESERVES THE PEACE BETWEEN OUR TWO PEOPLES.

BUT WHAT WILL BE THE ROMULAN RESPONSE? THEY REMAIN THE WILD CARD HERE. WE STILL HAVE NOT ADEQUATELY EXPLAINED WHAT THEIR MOTIVES MAY BE.

WHEN WE ARRIVE AT DULISIAN FOUR, HOME BASE OF THESE RHOTEMIAN INSURGENTS, I MUST FIND THE ROMULAN CONNECTION.

Late in the evening, Rachel Garrett could be found in the one place that she spent the least amount of her time. Her quarters. After another long stressful day, the captain wanted nothing more than to just plop on her couch and relax. She lay there now in her plaid flannel pajamas, staring absently out the oval viewport at the endless parade of warp stars sailing by overhead.

Mogh's outlandish, albeit daring plan continued to roll over and over in her mind. The shrewd-minded governor had interpreted the

treaty in a very non-traditional, but most convincing way. The Klingons had never before had cause to call on Starfleet to help defend their border. This was clearly an important step forward in the unsteady relationship between the two great superpowers.

But the captain still could not help but wonder at what the Romulan response would be. Would they view this as a dangerous new Federation offensive; a potential new threat that should be dealt with by swift defensive action? Or were they merely testing Starfleet's resolve as Mogh suggested? How long could they be expected to remain in isolation?

Garrett knew that if the *Enterprise* was forced into defending a Klingon outpost, the Romulans could use it as an excuse to start a full-scale war. Then, instead of the Klingons, the Federation in all its complacency would have to defend itself against a much more powerful Romulan invasion force. The captain shuddered at the thought of the destruction that that would bring.

She was just considering getting up and crawling into bed when her door chime rang. Garrett let out a long deep sigh. It never seemed to end some days, and she couldn't imagine what the problem could be this time. Swinging her bare feet off onto the floor, the captain sat up and ran a hand through her tousled brown hair.

"Come in," she said, barely masking the weariness in her voice. The doors parted to reveal the much brighter light of the corridor beyond. Then, almost as an afterthought, Cicely peered sheepishly around the edge of the doorway into the darkened room.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Ma'am," she said softly. "May I come in, or should I come back another time?" Garrett stood up with a smile and rounded a small coffee table, taking a few steps towards the door. She always enjoyed any visit from the young Orion girl.

"No sweetie, come in. You know you're always welcome anytime." Cicely padded in wearing her own flannel pj's complete with the pink bunny slippers of Earth notoriety. Once the doors slid shut, Garrett walked up and gave the young girl a tight hug. She then moved over to the replicator.

"Computer... two cups of hot Terran apple cider, please." The Captain had been certain to be specific as well as sufficiently polite. She gestured for Cicely to have a seat before picking up the steaming

mugs and transferring them to the coffee table. They both then curled into the couch facing each other.

“So what’s on your mind tonight, young lady?” The captain had spent many a sleepless night with Cicely helping her explore her new life, free of its former slavery and servitude. Cicely hugged her knees and looked into Garrett’s soft almond eyes.

“I don’t understand, Ma’am,” she said softly. “We’ve spent days and days crossing vast oceans of empty space to visit all these Federation and Klingon worlds... there seems to be more than enough to go around, so why the constant need to possess more?”

The captain sighed. Cicely had always looked at the universe with a child-like simplicity. A simplicity that was quite often difficult to argue with. It was such a strange contradiction to the vast information that was actually stored within her keen mind. Like Castillo, Cicely could show Rachel Garrett pleasures beyond all imagination; but again, that was something that went without even the slightest consideration.

“Well,” Garrett began, then paused. “Resources would have to be the primary driving force, I suppose. But the underlying root cause would always have to be ego.”

“Ego, Ma’am?”

“Yes, a self-centeredness or self-absorption... whether it be by the leaders of a nation or by the nation itself.” Cicely gave her a puzzled look. Garrett continued. “You see, many cultures or races think that they are superior to those around them. As such, they feel it is their sovereign or divine right to conquer and subjugate these so-called inferior species as they see fit.”

“And how do resources fit into this scheme?” As was her nature, Cicely continued to stare at her captain like an expectant child waiting for a beloved fairy tale to continue. Garrett pondered her question for a moment. She knew better than to treat Cicely anything like a child, despite the innocent nature of the young officer’s questions.

“Without resources,” Garrett answered, “a nation cannot grow and operate as a unified force... but it’s a double-edged sword. As a nation continues to grow, it requires more and more resources to continue to function.”

“I see,” Cicely said with the excitement of understanding. “Once a nation has reached the limits of its own resources, it begins to

look elsewhere.”

“Exactly,” Garrett said, smiling thoughtfully. She knew Cicely was the closest she would ever come to having a daughter. The scruffy little thirteen-year-old stowaway of more than a decade ago had certainly come a long way; and looking at her now, Garrett was filled with both pride and profound relief.

“But,” Cicely added with growing dismay, “where does a nation or its leaders get the right to conquer and subjugate those around them?”

“Most simply take it upon themselves to do so... unless the subjugated or some other nation stands against them. But most often, they continue to conquer unhindered.”

“That doesn’t seem quite fair,” Cicely said with a frown. She then shook her head. “Where does it all end? What stops this seemingly limitless growth?”

“Well,” Garrett paused again. “Eventually, a large powerful nation will grow beyond its own ability to maintain itself. Then it begins a long spiral of decay from within.” Cicely nodded, absorbing the information; drawing conclusions.

“Is that what happened to the Klingon Empire?” she asked.

“Yes,” Garrett replied. “Only in their case, the Federation was there to bail them out.”

“And the Romulans?”

“Nothing is certain about the Romulans. Their extended isolation may be a sign that they were smart enough to take a step back and regroup.” The captain let out a long-held sigh. “And if that’s the case, then they may have grown far more powerful than the Klingons ever will be.”

“And the Federation?” Cicely was renowned for being both thorough and methodical when it came to asking the tough questions.

“The Federation...” Garrett answered solemnly, “is equally as vulnerable to the problems of growth and maintenance. I fear we are heading into very dangerous times, especially when it comes to the defense of our borders.”

Cicely looked down and examined her pink bunny slippers. “Then perhaps,” she whispered, “it is time for the Federation to take a step back and regroup.” The simple wisdom of the statement hit Garrett

like a ton of bricks. It was quite possibly the soundest advice that she had heard in the whole of the past week.

Could it really be that simple? While the *Enterprise* patrolled the Romulan border and sealed the breach with the Klingon people, perhaps the Federation in all its glory should take the opportunity to reexamine its long-term plans. The vast empire had been built, now it must be maintained to be preserved.

And this perhaps, was the most important mission of all.

## “...begin Chapter Fourteen.”

“*Bridge to Captain Garrett...*” The captain put down the padd she had been wading through and shook her head in frustration. This was the seventh interruption since lunch, and it was beginning to look like another one of those days. She drew in a calming breath, then looked up toward the ceiling to address the comm.

“Yes, Commander, go ahead.” Garrett would often retire to her darkened ready room in the mid-afternoon hours to conduct the day-to-day business of command. That, however, did not guarantee she would ever have more than fifteen minutes peace and quiet. Stadi understood this and tried to keep distractions to a minimum, but he too rarely seemed to have much success.

“*It is now 0830 local time, Captain. I was able to secure you an appointment with the Viceroy for 0900.*” She swiveled away from her desk and faced out her aft viewport. The planet of Dulisian IV filled almost the whole of the tall oval window. Half of the immense globe lay shrouded in a cloak of darkness. Directly below, the intense lights of the capital city were quickly losing their luster as dawn spread itself over the sprawling megalopolis.

“Well done, Commander,” she replied, swiveling back around to her desk. The captain glanced at the chrono on the replicator interface panel... 1317 hours. One of the more persistent problems of space travel was the tricky little matter of time. The *Enterprise* had been in orbit nearly three full hours now simply waiting for the city below to wake up. Garrett again shook her head.

“Has there been any word yet from the *Genesee*?”

“*Negative, Captain, though they are still several hours from the Klingon border.*”

“Very well, Commander, keep me posted. Garrett out.” The captain would’ve preferred that Lwaxana Troi and company had been on Khitomer the day before, but the *Enterprise* had simply been too far away. Now much closer, they had dispatched the Betazoid diplomat on their fastest warp shuttle. Marta Batanides and the *Allegheny*-class runabout would have the entire entourage on Khitomer in a matter of hours. Events were moving much too quickly to afford any further

delay.

Garrett glanced over the padd she had been reading and tried to pick up where she'd left off. Most of the text therein had the outward appearance of gibberish. It contained Lt. Commander Skyl's highly detailed account of the planned engineering upgrades when the *Enterprise* finally docked at the Galatea Space Center on Betazed.

She found her place and was about to continue reading when the door chime shattered the silence and again broke her concentration. This time, the captain's deep calming breath was only mildly successful. Frustration now turning to irritation, she sat back and released a heavy sigh.

"Yes," she said tersely, "come in." The opening doors seemed to startle Ann Grey, causing the young woman to jump back a step. The doctor nervously tucked a wild strand of hair behind her ear, then peered sheepishly into the dim light of the ready room.

"Ex-excuse me, Captain. May, may I speak with you for a moment?" Ann chewed nervously at her fingertips, still unwilling to step into the small room. Garrett flung the padd into a half-open drawer to her right, then offered the doctor a painted-on smile.

"Yes, Doctor, by all means, do come in."

"Am, am I disturbing you, Ma'am?" Ann took a single, frightful step across the threshold, then jumped again as the doors slid shut behind her.

"Not at all, Doctor. Just trying to catch up on some..." Garrett glanced forlornly at the overflowing drawer, "...on some paperwork. Please come in. What can I do for you today?" She gestured to a chair, but the doctor seemed reluctant to venture any closer to the large antique desk. The captain began to sense an unusual panic in the young woman... unusual even for Ann.

Ann's tendency towards nervousness had always made Garrett feel a little uneasy. Perhaps it was the captain's heightened psi abilities that made her more vulnerable to the erratic whims raging through the minds of those around her. She often wondered how the Betazoids with their full telepathy ever coped with it all, especially when it came to their human friends.

Garrett couldn't help but smirk. Stadi had told her once that the Betazoid people had been afraid of humans at first. They feared the

intensity of thought and emotion that regularly poured out of the human psyche. It was just such intensity that the captain was sensing now. In fact, it bordered on dangerous.

But that was ridiculous, Garrett knew. The timid young doctor was well known for her compassion. Her service record aboard the *Enterprise* was exemplary and some of her ‘medical miracles’ were already becoming legendary. She had come highly recommended from the highest levels of Starfleet Command. By all accounts, Ann Grey was a model Starfleet officer. Still, at the moment, she had the appearance of a caged animal.

“Doctor, are you alright?” The question had startled her, but Ann quickly recovered, taking on a sudden air of calm. Garrett found this to be equally as curious.

“Captain,” Ann said coolly, “I need... er, I mean, I would like to request to transport to the surface to visit my family.”

Garrett frowned and leaned forward. “I sympathize with you, Doctor, I know five years is a long time, but...”

“Captain, *pleeease...*” Ann’s sudden plea this time startled the captain. Garrett could sense the panic again; could see it in Ann Grey’s wild eyes, her wild hair, her disheveled uniform. She gave the young doctor a peculiar look.

“Ann,” she said softly, “we all miss our families. Life on a deep-space starship can be lonely, but frankly, this is not the best time for you...”

“Ma’am,” Ann whispered sadly, looking at the floor, “if you will recall, my mother passed away two and a half years ago while we were out on the frontier. I would like to pay my respects to my father.”

Garrett was hit by a sudden wave of understanding. “Ah yes, Doctor,” she said with carefully measured compassion. “My apologies, I had forgotten. You may beam down immediately. But you must be prepared to return to the ship at a moment’s notice, is that understood?”

“Yes, Ma’am, of course.” The young doctor offered her commanding officer a heartfelt thank you, then turned and left the room bearing a strange new sort of smile.

This smile too gave Garrett an uneasy feeling. She could still sense a certain panic in the young woman, and it was now coupled with fear and anxiety and confusion. The doctor’s nerves seemed stretched

to the limit and the captain did not like it. She leaned back in the chair, sighing heavily, then reached up and tapped her commbadge.

“Garrett to Lieutenant Commander Onovan...”

“*Onovan here, Captain.*”

“Counselor, may I see you in my Ready Room for a moment?”

She was still frowning at Ann’s unusual behavior.

“*Yes, Captain, of course.*” It was only a matter of moments before Onovan had made the short trip from the Bridge to her adjacent small office. He came into the darkened oval room with a bright smile and had already taken a seat before noticing his captain’s perplexed and troubled frown.

“Is there something bothering you, Captain?” Onovan’s face now mirrored hers. She was still looking past him towards the door.

“I’m not sure, Counselor,” she said, then let her glance fall on his dark eyes and even darker features. “I just had a visit with Doctor Grey and she was acting very peculiar.” Onovan scrunched up his face and gave the captain a curious look out of the corner of his left eye.

“Peculiar, Captain?” His voice held just a hint of humor and Garrett could understand his feigned confusion. But the uneasy feelings Ann Grey had just left her with did not allow for wit or witticism.

“She had an almost wild look, Counselor, like a caged animal.”

Garrett was staring past him again at the doorway. He was beginning to feel her uneasiness too. His frown deepened as the captain continued.

“As you may recall,” she said, “the Doctor lost her mother several years ago while we were in deep space... during the Directoria incident, as I recall,” she mused, squinting back through the pages of time. “Our extended absence from home may have upset the young woman far more than we realized. She has transported to the surface to visit her father...”

The captain paused, then looked Onovan squarely in the eyes. “Counselor, I would appreciate it if you would have a talk with her when she returns.”

“Yes, Captain, of course,” Onovan nodded, rising from his chair.

“Is there anything else, Ma’am?” He did not like the captain’s uneasy, uncertain look. It was unusual for her to be so visibly unnerved, especially by such a seemingly mundane matter as this. She did not

answer him for several distracted moments before suddenly snapping back to attention.

“Uh, no, Counselor,” she smiled. “Thank you, that will be all.” Onovan gave her one more sideways glance, then turned and walked uneasily out of the room.

Somewhere deep in the captain’s mind, alarm bells were sounding, and she did not know why. The word *dangerous* continued to roll around in her psyche without a logical base to cling to. The doctor’s wild eyes and near panicked behavior had unsettled Rachel Cecilia Garrett in ways she had not ever quite before experienced.

“*Bridge to Captain Garrett...*” She was startled from her reverie by Stadi’s clear voice filtering through the comm. It took her a moment to pull herself together and respond. But not before a chill ran down her spine and caused her to shudder. She cleared her throat and sat forward.

“Yes, Commander, go ahead.”

“*It is 0900 local time, Captain. Viceroy Jamkhandi is hailing you on subspace.*”

“Ah, yes, Commander. Will you please route the call through to my Ready Room?” She had one final fleeting thought of Ann Grey as another shiver ran down her spine. *Dangerous*. But it simply didn’t make any sense. The doctor was nothing more than a harmless child, while the security of the Federation was a far more pressing matter.

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The sun was just beginning to set behind the hills surrounding the small rural village of Lumina when Ann Grey materialized on the front steps of her childhood home. She was dismayed to find her mother’s once beautiful rose garden was now unkempt and overgrown. Even the trellis under which she stood had a slightly wild flair to it.

Ann looked out over the shimmering hills so unchanged by the passage of time. The blood-red sunset was as breathtaking as any she could remember. A cool evening breeze blew freshly across her face and chilled her bare arms and legs. She inhaled deeply and shivered, her small breasts dimpling the thin fabric of the dark, sleeveless blouse she wore.

*Home*, she thought, looking up at the bright twin evening stars staring back at her from the western sky. Ann took in another deep breath of the crisp autumn air before turning to face the sturdy old oak door that had stood fast against the changing seasons for over a hundred years. She smoothed a wrinkle out of her short black skirt, then reached up and turned the cool brass knob.

Unlocked, just as it had always been. She paused a short second, then gave the heavy door a shove. The old oak giant cast forth a familiar withered groan, which had always satisfied Ann immensely. She was halted by a moment's hesitation before passing one high-heeled shoe across the threshold, followed by another.

The shoes made an awkward clacking sound when they hit the well-used hardwood floor of her mother's kitchen. Ann was again dismayed to see that the once pristine kitchen was now cluttered and untidy. Dirty dishes lay piled all around the ancient steel and ceramic sink, while encrusted pots and pans stood stacked atop the great old gas cook stove.

Ann let out a deep sigh. Her father never had done much in the way of house-keeping. Her mother had wearily tended to it all for over fifty years. The old way, just as Sir Brandon Grey had insisted. No replicators, no microwave redipacs, not even the convenience of an automatic dishwasher. It was quaint yes, but such a tedious and toilsome way of life.

She took several steps across the kitchen, trying her best not to disturb the silence. When she reached the graceful archway that led into the living room, she spun on the balls of her feet and peered into a room frozen in time. Everything was just as she remembered. It was a cozy room, framed in heavy oak beams and filled with ancient Earth antiques.

Nestled within a stone hearth, a fire snapped and popped, adding to the nostalgia of the scene. On the mantle above, the pendulum of a five-hundred-year-old clock swung and ticked, swung and ticked, just as it had done throughout the ages and across the light-years that had brought it here to Dulisia. Antiques were Brandon Grey's specialty; and as the decades passed, they had slowly become his own way of life.

Ann's sharp blue eyes detected movement in a high-backed chair that faced the fire. As children, Ann and her brothers had sat

around that chair for hours, listening to their father's stories, his lectures, and oft times, his scolding's. He demanded perfection in everything they did, and he demanded obedience. Ann shivered involuntarily.

"Hello, Daddy," she said to the unseen occupant. There was a long silence broken only by the steady ticks of the loyal old clock. It was seemingly the only thing in the entire room that had marked the passage of time. Finally, a gruff, faded voice reached out of the past and clutched at her.

"So, the celebrated *Star*-fleet doctor has finally returned to her humble beginnings." There was long-held bitterness in the voice. Ann's decision to join Starfleet had opened a rift within her family that had never entirely been healed. It had flown in the face of everything Sir Brandon Grey had tried to teach his children. It simply was not the Rhotemian way.

"How have you been, Daddy?" Ann chewed nervously at her fingertips. She was afraid to step out of the sanctuary of the kitchen. She could feel her mother's protective presence there and was reluctant to let go of it.

"You missed your mother's funeral."

"I know, Daddy," Ann said with sadness, tears welling in her eyes.

"She called for you in the end, you know." Ann choked back a sob and tried unsuccessfully to pin a wild strand of hair behind her ear. She continued to chew at her fingertips.

"My starship was in deep space, Daddy, there was no way for me to..."

"BLOODY DAMN *STAR-SHIPS*," the old man shouted, "TO HELL WITH THEM ALL!" He slammed a feeble fist on the adjacent end table, rattling an ornate, early 20th Century lamp and upsetting a steaming cup of tea. Ann's whole body shook. She could taste blood coming from what was left of a shredded fingernail. Her father's faded old voice had now reached its former glory and it scared her just as it always had.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," Ann said, tears streaming down her cheeks. She practically leapt from the protective confines of the kitchen, then fell to the floor at her father's feet. She buried her face deep in his lap

and began to sob. The old man clenched his fist, but then let it slowly soften so that his brittle fingers could stroke his daughter's unruly brown hair.

"There, there Annie-girl," he said quietly. "It's alright sweetheart. Daddy's not going to hurt you."

Presently, Ann raised her head and looked up at her father's tired old face. In the end, it too had marked the passage of time. His hair had gone all white; deep lines traced the dual courses of age and grief. Even the once sharp blue eyes had lost some of their luster.

"I wanted so much to be here," Ann whispered, rolling back and sitting at his feet like the expectant child of her memories. Time, for a moment, seemed to reverse itself twenty years.

"I know sweetheart, I know." Her father's bony hand patted her on the shoulder, stroked her frizzled hair. Ann's mind was filled with the forgotten images of childhood. Life in the Grey household had been strict and demanding, but there had been a deep and binding love there too.

"I'm so sorry, Daddy," Ann said again, wiping tears from her eyes.

"It's alright Annie-girl. What's done is done. It can't be helped." His voice was soothing and hypnotic. Full of the hidden manipulations that had been perfected long ago when Sir Brandon Grey had himself been but a young man. Ann stared up at him, entranced by his every word.

"We now," he continued, "have far more pressing matters to attend to. Have all the necessary preparations been made aboard your *star-ship*?"

"Yes, Daddy, exactly as you specified," Ann answered obediently.

"And did your work go unnoticed?" Ann fidgeted slightly. She tried again to pin back her unruly hair.

"To the uh..." she said nervously, "to the best of my knowledge, I, uh, I was not detected." The conflicting emotions of loyalty began to race across her features. Starfleet versus home, her family over the love of friends, her career or the cause. Her father's sharp blue eyes pierced at her from the past.

"That's my good girl," the old man said, his voice flowing over

her like a poisonous fog. “As we speak, Jamkhandi is feeding your captain false information with the intention of drawing your *star-ship* away from the Klingon border...”

“False information?” Her brow furrowed with puzzlement.

“Your captain is being led to believe that there is evidence of a new Romulan incursion at Galorndon Core. Our forces will strike the *Enterprise* there, and you my sweet girl, you must be ready to act on cue. The timing will be crucial.”

Ann’s father clenched his withered old fist and stared at her with an intensity she had never before seen. It was a dangerous, wild look that scared her; made her want to back away. She was again torn between the conflicting forces of loyalty. A fleeting image of Skyl brought forth a sudden surge of wanton emotions that threatened to overwhelm her.

“Strike?” Ann said fearfully. “But, but Daddy, I thought you only wanted to disable the *Enterprise*.”

“There, there, Annie-girl,” the old man chided, patting both of his bony hands on his thin and brittle thighs. His voice was again soothing and hypnotic, and again, time seemed to reverse itself. Ann rose up and turned, then settled into his lap. In an instant, she was thirteen again. His cold hand moved slowly up the smooth skin of her inner thigh. Passed under the thin fabric of her short skirt.

“Your captain,” he said softly, smoothly, “has become far too meddlesome in the private affairs of our little border community...”

“B-b-but they’re my friends, my, my colleges,” Ann said faintly, voice shaking. The hand probed deeper, but she knew better than to flinch.

“Now, now, my sweet, sweet girl. Your friends will be safe, I assure you.” His voice continued to sooth her, entrance her with every word. “As I said, the *Enterprise* will only be disabled, but it must happen far from here lest certain suspicions should become... *aroused*.”

His cold bony hand slid deeper, finding its mark. Ann’s insides quivered, her past and present collided. Images of Skyl flashed through her mind. Her first day at Starfleet Academy. Growing up on Dulisia. Playing games by the fire with her brothers. Her first day aboard the *Enterprise*. Her mother. All were a raging flood that pulled her under, gasping for air.

“I, I understand, Daddy,” she said absently, distantly; her voice flat, emotionless.

“That’s my good girl.” The probing fingers swirled a bit, then withdrew; slithered up the inside of her blouse and cupped one of her small breasts, kneading it softly. “You were always my favorite, Annie-girl, always my favorite. Never forget that, never forget.”

“Yes, Daddy,” Ann said flatly. “I remember, I will always remember.”

The glimmering starlight bathing the Dulisian night reflected brightly off the tears that streamed down Ann Grey’s face. She stood in the overgrown rose garden and stared blankly into the endless void of outer space. The twin evening stars stared back at her, piercing her soul, finding nothing there but infinite darkness.

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“Galorndon Core?!” Spencer Stadi said with an unlikely frown. Garrett nodded in response to her first officer’s well-founded skepticism as he stepped down off the Bridge’s command level. Her interview with Viceroy Jamkhandi had taken an unexpected turn and she could make no sense of it either. She moved to the auxiliary control pedestal at the front of the Bridge and punched up several displays.

“Nevertheless,” the Captain said as Stadi slid in beside her, “the evidence the Viceroy provided me with clearly shows the possibility of a Romulan incursion at Galorndon Core.”

“But it doesn’t make any sense,” Stadi said, mirroring his captain’s thoughts. Garrett shook her head slowly. They had come to Dulisia to find the Romulan connection behind the sudden tensions along the Klingon border. Instead, they were presented with an unforeseen invasion plan of staggering proportions.

“Cicely,” Garrett called over her shoulder, “bring up everything we know about Galorndon Core.” The young Orion faced her Ops console and began to submit the query into the library computer. Within moments, anything anyone could ever want to know about the planet appeared on her screen. Her keen mind automatically condensed the vast information for the benefit of her captain.

“Class-L, marginal,” she began reading. “Only planet of size orbiting a small M-type star. Barely habitable by humanoid standards. The atmosphere is plagued by severe electromagnetic storms making transport difficult and rendering most sensory devices inoperable.”

“Hardly the optimal place to locate a hidden base,” Stadi said, staring into Garrett’s almond eyes.

“Can you be so sure?” she responded. “Cicely, historical data please.” The ensign quickly scrolled down the screen, pulling key facts from the pages of text.

“First surveyed by the Earth Starship *Discovery* on OED 16 April 2156. The Romulans suffered a crushing defeat there during the Romulan Wars. The establishment of the Romulan Neutral Zone placed it less than one-half light-year *inside* Federation space. Since then, it has gone virtually unnoticed.”

“The Romulans never did forget a fight,” Castillo said, “especially one they lost.”

“No,” Garrett muttered. She let out a heavy sigh as the unexpected warnings from Jamkhandi rolled again through her mind.

“This could be a diversion,” Onovan offered from the tactical station, “to draw us away from the Klingon-Romulan border.”

“Mogh did say,” Stadi added, “that the Romulans were testing our resolve when it came to honoring our treaty obligations. By fabricating this threat, they may just be trying to draw us away.”

“Excuse me, Commander,” Cicely called from Ops, “but how can we be sure that the Romulan raids on Klingon outposts aren’t the diversion? If we concentrate all our attention on the Klingon border, then who watches the Romulans?”

“Excellent point, Ensign,” Garrett said with a small amount of pride. *Leave it to Cicely to see both sides of the coin*, she thought. The captain stepped up onto the command level and passed between Castillo and Onovan. She then looked at each of her officers in turn.

“We can’t afford to ignore this new information. It hardly makes any sense to let the Romulans sneak in the back door while we’re nailing shut the front... *Enterprise* to Doctor Grey...”

“*Grey here, Captain.*” Such sadness in her voice. Garrett hated to do what she was about to do next.

“My apologies, Doctor, but I must ask you to return to the ship

at once.”

“*I’m, I’m already on board, Captain,*” the doctor answered with her usual nervousness. Garrett frowned. Something else quite unexpected had apparently occurred on Dulisian IV. She looked at Onovan who nodded slightly.

“Very well, Doctor,” the Captain said cautiously, “Garrett out... Mister Castillo, lay in a course for Galorndon Core...”

“Excuse me, Captain,” Onovan interrupted, swiveling to face the tactical console. “Another starship has just entered the system.” The captain frowned at Stadi who was already frowning back at her. The Dulisian System seemed to be teeming with surprises today. The commander turned and consulted the displays on the ACP, then turned back.

“It reads as the USS *Repulse*, NCC-2544. Captain Ryan Sipe, commanding.”

“We weren’t expecting...” Garrett half said to Stadi, both shaking their head no. “Cicely, hail...”

“Receiving a hail, Captain,” Cicely interjected, “text only...”

“Let’s hear it,” Garrett said, throwing her arms up in the air.

“Message reads: ADMIRAL GANINO SENDS HIS REGARDS. HOPES THAT THIS GIFT OF A STARSHIP AND 2,000 MORE TROOPS WILL MEET WITH YOUR APPROVAL. WE STAND BY TO ASSIST. SIGNED: CAPTAIN RYAN SIPE, USS *REPULSE*.”

“Bless you, Admiral!” Garrett said to the starfield on the viewscreen. “Cicely, send my regards to Captain Sipe. Inform him that we are turning this planet over to his watchful eye with full faith that he will guard it well... Mister Castillo, is your course laid in?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he answered with a smile. “Warp Eight?”

“Warp Eight it is, Lieutenant. Let’s go check on the Romulans, shall we?” She sat down in the command chair, pulled the wrinkles out of her uniform jacket, then pointed to the stars. “Engage, Mister Castillo.”

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It was late in the afternoon before Onovan was finally able to make his way down to visit Dr. Grey in Sickbay. When the counselor entered the large medical facility, he was somewhat surprised to find it free of any personnel. His eyes scanned the main ward for a few moments, then he turned and walked through the small alcove that led into Ann's office.

He found the young doctor slouching behind her desk, staring unfocused at some bit of unseen data on her computer monitor. Her head was propped up on one elbow while her other hand had seemingly lost interest long ago and now lay curled up in a loose ball before her. She did not stir even as Onovan moved directly in front of the desk. He cleared his throat.

"Uh, yes, Counselor," Ann said finally, "may I help you? Are you feeling alright?" Her voice was hollow and emotionless, her eyes vacant and empty. She sat up, letting her left arm fall over her right. She then leaned back into the deep chair, dragging the lifeless limbs off the desk and into her lap. This was certainly not the caged animal Captain Garrett had so recently described.

"Actually, Doctor," Onovan said coolly, "I came to see if you were feeling alright. The Captain was concerned that you may be unsettled by the extension of our mission." He tried to choose his words carefully, but the mention of Captain Garrett had almost startled the young woman. She sat up suddenly and slapped the base of the computer monitor, switching it off.

"The, the uh, Captain?" Ann choked, quickly becoming agitated. Onovan noted her rising panic. His dark hands automatically went up into a non-confrontational gesture.

"It's alright, Ann," he said calmly, "I'm only here to help. The Captain just thought you might need someone to talk to." The absent, vacant look of a mere moment before had indeed been replaced by that wild look of a caged animal. Ann's eyes darted frantically about the small room searching for an escape. She began to chew nervously at her fingers.

"I, I'll admit, I was, uh, a little bit upset earlier, Counselor, but, but I'm feeling much better now that I was, uh, was able to visit my father. Now, if, if you'll excuse me, I, uh, I have some work to finish up." Before Onovan could respond, Ann Grey jumped up and bolted

from the confines of her small office.

Onovan spun on his heels and watched her go, momentarily dumbstruck by her sudden rise to panic. Something was seriously wrong with the young woman and Onovan began himself to feel strangely unsettled. The word *dangerous* entered into the back of his own mind, but he knew that that was ridiculous.

Ann Grey was a harmless child, especially when compared to his 370 years of wisdom and experience. She couldn't possibly be dangerous. He knew that even the most disturbed minds held a window of possibility. All one had to do was find it. Onovan bolstered himself up with confidence, then marched out into the main ward.

Ann stood in front of the wall-sized display monitor that normally showed the vitals of the primary patient in care. But the sickbay was empty and the screen blank. Ann nonetheless studied it and tried to ignore Onovan as he came up beside her. She pulled her hair back and chewed nervously at her fingertips.

"Ann," he said softly, "please, tell me what's wrong... I only want to help." She twitched involuntarily, but still managed to ignore his presence. Tears began to well up in her sharp blue eyes and her hands started to tremble slightly. Onovan took this as a sign that the ice was breaking.

"Ann," he said again, his voice soothing, almost hypnotic. "It's alright, I'm not going to hurt you. Please, help me to understand."

At that moment, something did indeed break inside the mind of Ann Grey. It was as if the floodgates had suddenly been thrown open after days of torrential rain. Pure, raw, human emotion flowed out of her with a frightening intensity. She turned on Onovan with a feral, savage look; the tip of a pale white finger just inches from the end of his coal-black nose.

"Understand?" she almost shouted. "You will *never* understand!" The finger jabbed at him like a knife, causing him to flinch. He took a step back in fear of her. The word *dangerous* again flashed through his mind as she continued.

"You don't know what it's like, Counselor. No one can know what it's like. My mind never stops... it's always locked in a constant battle for control." She stabbed at her temple with two fingers. "Voices, so many voices screaming at me from the past. My own

conscience, old songs, unbidden memories... conflicting emotions. The present, all the possible futures... it's all a constant whirlwind racing through my brain and *I CAN'T MAKE IT STOP!*"

Ann smacked the palm of her left hand repeatedly on her forehead for emphasis. The screaming turbopumps, the pulsing warp core, her father's voice, the *thump-thump-thumping* of the starboard power coupling on Deck Eighteen. All were a raging cacophony that threatened to shatter her brittle mind. And through it all, through the heart of this raging storm, Skyl stared placidly back at her with all of his Vulcan peace and composure.

Again, the forces of loyalty tore at her psyche. Her homeworld versus the *Enterprise*. Her father versus Captain Garrett. The Rhotemian Revival versus Starfleet. Skyl or her mission to cripple the legendary starship? She turned away from Onovan and walked across the room to stand next to a biobed.

Onovan trembled; again dumbstruck, albeit longer this time. He had vastly underestimated this nervous young girl. In fact, he feared that the entire senior staff had underestimated her. She was indeed dangerous and now the question that remained to be answered was just how dangerous was she, either to herself or to those around her?

Onovan drew in a deep breath. He tugged at his uniform jacket, smoothing out bunches in the heavy fabric. He cautiously began to approach Ann, trying his best to appear non-threatening; his hands raised in their standard non-combative gesture. When he spoke, his voice held its usual casual confidence.

"Ann," he said coolly, "I can help you if you'll let me... I can schedule some appointments, arrange for some extended off-duty time... perhaps maybe even confine you to quarters so you can get some rest."

Onovan knew instantly that he had just made a fatal mistake. The word *confine* seemed to be the catalyst that created the chemical imbalance within Ann Grey's mind. For the first time since his homeworld had been destroyed, the El-Aurian had a sense of real fear. He sensed it not only from himself, but curiously, from Ann Grey as well.

"I can't allow that to happen," Ann said darkly. The fear was in her eyes and it reflected his own. With the deftness of a surgeon and

the speed of a mountain lion, she brought up a hypospray and pressed it to his neck. Before the counselor could react, he slumped unconscious onto the biobed.

It was only a matter of minutes before Ann Grey had removed his uniform and arranged him neatly under a thermal blanket. She then crossed to the display monitor and brought up the vitals of the primary patient in care. Within moments, the biosigns had been appropriately altered to reflect a man as critically ill as he.

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“Time, Mister Castillo?” Captain Rachel Garrett paced nervously in the short space between her chair and the helm. She had done so for the past thirty minutes, and it was beginning to wear thin on the rest of the Bridge crew... especially Mr. Castillo. He pulled anxiously on his uniform collar before answering.

“Five minutes, thirty-five seconds, Ma’am.” Garrett nodded and reached up to wipe the perspiration from her upper lip. She then spun and took the few short steps back to the command chair. She briefly considered sitting, but ultimately decided against it. She glanced up at Stadi who stood with his characteristic ease at the upper-level railing.

Their eyes met briefly and for a moment it calmed her. The deep telepathic bond they shared allowed her a breath of peace from the thoughts that swirled within. The Betazoid mind was a much more quiescent place than its human counterpart, and they both knew it.

“Captain,” Cicely called from the Ops station, “I am receiving a message from Governor Mogh...” Garrett eyed Stadi for a second longer before turning to face the young Orion. Seeing that she had the captain’s attention, Cicely turned back to her screen and began reading:

“The Governor reports that the Romulans have raided three more Klingon outposts. He states that the High Council is becoming increasingly agitated and he wishes to know our status.” Cicely turned her head and blinked at her captain.

“Damn,” Garrett muttered, looking down at the floor. She then spun and faced the tactical station. “Lieutenant Dardanelle, nearest starship please.” The sandy-haired young man studied his readouts,

then raised an eyebrow in an almost Vulcan way.

“The *Starship Repulse* is sixteen hours behind us and our sister ship, the USS *Adelphi*, is nearly two days away.”

“Damn,” she said again. “We are spreading ourselves *way* too thin.” She turned and looked up at Stadi hoping he might have a creative suggestion. The commander stared into Garrett’s almond eyes for a few moments, then out the viewscreen to the streaking warp stars.

“Cicely,” he finally said, “inform the Governor that we have been slowed by an engine imbalance. We are making all possible speed for the border... that should buy us some time,” he shrugged, looking at Garrett.

“Let’s just hope,” she sighed heavily, “that this little trip turns out to be just a fool’s errand after all, or we’re all going to be in a heap of trouble.”

“Approaching Galorndon Core, Captain.” Castillo seemed almost relieved to be finally making the announcement. The tension level that already permeated the Bridge though shot up even higher as everyone stared expectedly out the viewscreen.

“Slow to impulse, Mister Castillo. Make course for standard orbit. Lieutenant Commander Onovan, report to the Bridge please...” The captain was about to order Yellow Alert when she was halted by something that did not happen very often... No response. She tapped her commbadge to be certain.

“Counselor, respond please...” There was an eerie silence as everyone paused and began to listen for the familiar evenness of the El-Aurian’s voice. But the response was not even at all. It was instead the nervous imperfection of Dr. Ann Grey.

*“Captain, this is, uh, Doctor... Doctor Grey. I am afraid that Counselor Onovan is not well, Ma’am. He, he came into, uh, Sickbay complaining of a headache and fell unconscious shortly thereafter. It’s, it’s a particularly virulent strain of the Thelusian flu, Captain. I am doing my best to treat him.”*

Garrett tried her best to conceal the look of shock that flashed across her features. Her eyes zeroed in on Stadi who looked equally as stunned. With the exception of Onovan, no one else on the Bridge knew of Ann’s earlier, very peculiar behavior in the Ready Room. The captain decided to keep it that way for now, the tension was high

enough as it was.

“Understood, Doctor,” she said cautiously. “Keep me posted. Garrett out.” The word *dangerous* again entered into the captain’s mind and this time it crossed over into Stadi’s as well. They both exchanged a troubled look. Thelusian flu could indeed induce unconsciousness, but the likelihood that Onovan had been exposed to it was negligible at best.

“Entering standard orbit, Captain.” Castillo’s report quickly brought more pressing matters back in hand.

“Thank you, Mister Castillo,” Garrett said quietly. “Lieutenant Dardanelle, Yellow Alert... begin a full sensor sweep of the system. Look for anything that might indicate a hidden base, cloaked or otherwise.”

“I am receiving a Priority One hail from the *Genesee*, Captain!” The frantic tones coming suddenly from Cicely’s station reflected the urgency of the call. Garrett’s shoulders sagged as she tilted her head slightly and gritted her teeth. *What was that old adage*, she wondered, *it never rains, but it pours?*

“On screen, Ensign.” The petite face of Marta Batanides appeared instantly on the main viewscreen. Her narrow lips were pierced tightly shut, her brow furrowed in concentration. Her usually vibrant blue eyes were now fraught with worry.

“Commander?” It was all Garrett could say without stating the obvious. Clearly there was a problem and the concern was quickly growing on the captain’s face to mirror Marta’s own.

*“Captain, we’ve crossed the Klingon border. Three birds-of-prey have just decloaked dead ahead and they are refusing to answer our hails.”* Garrett knew *Allegheny*-class cruisers were fast, maneuverable, and moderately well-armed; but the small runabout would be no match for a single bird-of-prey... much less three.

“Understood, Commander,” Garrett responded, her mind again a whirlwind. “We’ll do everything we can from here. Lie, cheat, steal... do whatever it takes, Commander, but you *must* get Lwaxana Troi to Khitomer. Our very future hinges on it.”

*“I’ll do my best Enterprise... Genesee out.”* With that, Marta’s beautiful image was replaced with a hostile view of Galorndon Core. Even from orbit, the bluish, cloud covered world looked about as

inviting as a tank full of electric eels. The roiling clouds flashed with intense lightning as raging storms raced across ninety-five percent of the planet's surface.

"Dardanelle, report," but the Captain hardly needed to ask. A base here would be next to impossible to maintain. A cloaking device would be rendered useless. With all the electromagnetic flux in the system, even an orbital facility would have trouble operating.

"It's as expected, Captain," Dardanelle answered. "Any electronic devices would be totally inoperable. Even from this distance, the sensors are reading thousands of ghost images. Judging by these flux levels, the humanoid Central Nervous System would suffer permanent damage in a matter of hours."

The Captain let out a deep sigh. It had turned out to be just a fool's errand after all. And now the *Enterprise* was far from the Romulan-Klingon border, and far, far out of position. The diversion had worked. Garrett only hoped that the delay here would not prove to be a fatal mistake somewhere else. Their very future may indeed well hinge on it.

"Commander Stadi," she said with earnest, not willing to waste another moment's time. "Dispatch a Priority One message to Mogh and apprise him of Commander Batanides' situation. And tell him we're on our way for God's sake. Also, contact the *Repulse*..."

"Captain!" Dardanelle interrupted suddenly. This time, his one-quarter Vulcan heritage had no hope of suppressing an unexpected surge of human emotions. The young man was startled, and maybe even a little scared, and it was proving highly contagious. His voice continued in a rising crescendo.

"Three vessels have just emerged from the far side of the planet, Ma'am... they're in standard attack formation!"

## “...begin Chapter Fifteen.”

“Shields up, Red Alert!” Commander Stadi’s voice rang out clear, but calm. Picking up on his voiceprint, the computer automatically raised the deflective energy fields surrounding the ship’s hull and activated the alarm klaxons. The lights on the Bridge dimmed, then glowered red, while all over the rest of the vast starship the crew scurried to battle stations.

“Nice and easy, Lieutenant,” Captain Garrett said calmly. “Analysis of the approaching vessels please.” She knew Dardanelle was a damn good officer, but he was also young and inexperienced. Overexcitement could lead to mistakes and at times like these, the captain relied on everyone to stay calm.

Drawing on his inherited Vulcan composure, Dardanelle relaxed and began scanning his readouts. “Size and design are consistent with that of *Bandit*-class Orion Raiders. Limited weapon and shield capabilities. However, due to the electromagnetic interference, I am unable to get a clear scan.”

“Orion Raiders?!” Garrett said with puzzled amazement.

“They’re no match for the *Enterprise!*” Stadi finished the captain’s unspoken thought and brought voice to the opinions of the rest of the Bridge crew. All that is, except Cicely, who now sat at her Ops station gripped with fear. *What if they’ve finally come for me?* she fretted.

Since they had achieved warp drive several centuries ago, the ragtag group known collectively as the Orion Raiders had been nothing more than petty space pirates. Only the Romulan Empire was known to grant them safe harbor, mostly because they knew it irked the Federation so. But as Starfleet had grown in both size and power, the Raiders had become less and less bothersome in recent decades, finding fewer and fewer places to hide.

“Time to intercept... fifteen seconds.” Dardanelle looked up and had to squint to see the tiny craft against the backdrop of space. Their dark colored hulls barely glinted in the dim Galorndon starshine. Garrett too squinted, then turned to face her first officer. *Okay*, she thought with a thin smile, *now what?*

Stadi paused, also smirking, then gave his answer aloud. “Ready phasers. Lieutenant Castillo, prepare for evasive maneuvers.” The commander looked down at his captain and offered her a short shrug. She smiled at him, wider this time, then turned back to the menace closing on the viewscreen.

On the phaser order, Dardanelle’s finger touched the appropriate spot on his interface panel. The tiny sensory crystals registered the input, then relayed the signal to the main computer. The main computer sent word to the engineering computer, which in turn contacted the plasma flow subprocessors.

Within milliseconds of Dardanelle’s delicate touch, these subprocessors sent a massive surge of the superheated energy into the port and starboard EPS conduits. This surge raced upwards at a phenomenal rate, instantly triggering the small device that Dr. Ann Grey had previously attached to the starboard power coupling on Deck Eighteen.

The damage caused by this tiny bomb was insignificant when compared to the havoc wreaked by the ruptured plasma conduit. The superheated gases and resultant fire quickly engulfed a full third of Deck Eighteen, and wasted no time in burning a hole through to Deck Seventeen above.

On the Bridge, Dardanelle had just lifted his finger from phaser control when the muffled sound of an explosion emanated from somewhere deep inside the bowels of the massive starship. The deck beneath Captain Garrett’s feet shuddered slightly and then sheer pandemonium encircled the Bridge.

“Report!” The Captain had to shout above the blaring alarms and the cascade of downward whines that signaled numerous systems going offline. Every lighted display panel on the Bridge flickered erratically with the sudden loss of power. Cicely answered first, struggling to be heard over the steady din.

“Sensors have registered an explosion on Deck Eighteen!”

“Starboard phasers and shields are offline,” Dardanelle exclaimed.

“The Starboard Power Coupling has ruptured,” Cicely continued, “we’ve lost all power on the starboard side of Decks Four through Eighteen!”

“Captain!” Lt. Castillo shouted, “the Orions are opening fire!”

The sound was unbelievable. In her twenty-two years aboard the *Enterprise*, Garrett had never heard anything like it. The entire ship seemed to roar as it’s unshielded hull was hit time and again by bolts of pure directed energy. The once steady deck beneath her feet now shook so violently in every conceivable direction that it was nearly impossible to remain upright.

And then there was an earsplitting boom that could only mean one thing — a massive, explosive, decompression somewhere in the decks below. The ship lurched suddenly, savagely, to the left, throwing everyone to the floor with incredible force. Garrett slammed her shoulder hard into the deck, just inches from Castillo’s chest.

For a moment, the young lieutenant appeared dead, but he soon opened his eyes and blinked at her several times. A short circuit somewhere in the ceiling sent an explosion of hot sparks raining down on them both. Slowly, they helped each other up and, as Castillo sat back down at the helm, Garrett’s attention was drawn to the Bridge’s upper level.

There, Commander Stadi crouched on his knees, clutching his head as if in great pain. Garrett could sense it too, but fought to block it out. All over the ship, dozens of Betazoid crewmembers were dead, dying, or severely injured, their telepathic minds crying out, unintentionally assailing the senses of their fellow brethren with a cascade of hurt.

And then, all was quiet, save for the sizzling circuitry and the incessant tones of a half-dozen different alarms. Garrett tugged her uniform jacket into place and brushed the hair out of her eyes. She then made a quick survey of the Bridge. Everyone was a little battered, but otherwise alive... for now.

“Damage report.” The captain looked back at Cicely as the poor young woman tried to sort through the vast amounts of incoming data. As she began to recite, her voice cradled disbelief and shock.

“Sickbay reports heavy casualties. There is a hull breach on Decks Seven, Eight, and Nine... Starboard Café. An uncontrolled plasma fire on Decks Seventeen and Eighteen... fire suppression systems are offline. And we are venting drive plasma from the starboard nacelle... the computer is automatically gimbaling thrusters to

maintain attitude control.”

Garrett knew from experience that that was Cicely’s highly condensed version. Without the shields to protect them, the damage to the ship had to be extensive; especially considering the weapons used.

“Lieutenant Dardanelle,” the Captain said turning, “analysis of the Orions weapons.” Again, from experience, she already knew the answer.

“Energy signatures and blast patterns are consistent with Romulan type-four disruptors.”

“We were set up all along,” Stadi muttered from an aft science station. Garrett was happy to see her first officer back on his feet, though she could also see how drawn and withered he looked. The mental barrage had perhaps taken more out of him than the attack itself.

“Captain,” Dardanelle summoned, “the Orions are coming around for another pass.” Garrett spun around and gritted her teeth, anger beginning to build.

“Oh no you don’t,” she said venomously, “you bastards aren’t going to get away with it this time... Mr. Castillo, present portside minimal aspect. Mr. Dardanelle, load torpedo bays, ready portside phasers. Target all weapons on the lead vessel and prepare to fire on my mark. Commander Stadi, see if you can reroute power to the starboard shield array.”

On her orders, the great ship began to turn and bear its formidable weapons upon their tiny adversaries. Ordinarily, it would be like an elephant swatting a fly. But the circumstances were less than ordinary. Captain Garrett sat down in her command chair and studied the miniature tactical readouts on her armrest. Just a few more seconds...

“Fire!” she shouted. On the viewscreen, she watched as golden streaks of pure energy flared out towards the approaching lead ship. She heard the deep thrum of the torpedo launchers and an instant later saw three dazzling globes hurl into their attacker’s path. Dardanelle’s aim was true, each projectile hitting its mark head-on.

Overcome by superior firepower, the lead vessel did not even bother to split apart; it simply vaporized under the onrush of sheer force. Dardanelle fired phasers again, inflicting heavy damage to a second Raider. But the small craft were swift and agile. They quickly

outflanked the wallowing giant and did a sharp pirouette over to her starboard side.

The unbelievable roar returned as the Orions once more laid waste to the *Enterprise's* unprotected hull. Already singed and sizzling, overloaded circuitry all over the Bridge began to explode in a horrific pyrotechnic display. Ensign Enyo's aft science station blasted apart, sending Commander Stadi crashing to the deck, and launching the young Andorian woman up and over the upper-level railing.

Her lifeless body landed in a smoldering heap right next to the command chair. Garrett's first instinct was to jump up and help the poor girl, but one look proved otherwise. She instead turned to check on Stadi. The commander had just forced himself to one knee, but the pain on his face was evident and it told Garrett that besides Enyo, still yet more crewmembers lay dead or dying below decks.

The captain fought to block the sensory overload. She returned her attention to the viewscreen and watched in amazement as another Raider blew apart under a fresh new onslaught of phaser fire. Only then did she realize that Dardanelle and Castillo had coordinated their own assault strategy. Finally, the Bridge fell blessedly silent again as the one remaining craft moved out of range.

"My compliments, Gentlemen, well done." The Captain's praise did little to comfort them however. Beneath their fingertips their control boards sizzled and smoldered. The entire Bridge was a scene of frightful destruction. They could only imagine what the rest of the ship must look like amongst the din of smoke and blaring alarms.

"Captain!" Cicely called fearfully. "I am monitoring an increase in manifold pressure in the port-forward reaction control thruster..."

"Confirmed," Castillo acknowledged. "It's the same situation as before."

"Dammit," Garrett hissed, jumping to her feet. "Take that thruster offline. Adjust all others to compensate." Castillo frowned at his readouts with increasing dismay, which quickly turned to worry.

"Unable to comply, Ma'am... the computer is still gimbaling the engines." He turned to face his captain. "They're locked in cycle, I can't shut them down!"

"Manifold pressure approaching critical," Cicely reported. Garrett was about to call Engineering when another muffled explosion

made the deck shudder and set off a half-dozen more alarms. The ship lurched suddenly from the uneven balance in thrust. The computer seemed to be at a loss as to what to do next.

“Mr. Castillo, go to manual attitude control,” Garrett ordered.

“The port-forward thruster has been completely destroyed...” Cicely’s voice trailed off and her mouth hung open now in disbelief. She could only sit in stunned silence and stare at the fresh new damage reports that continued to pour in. Stadi looked over her shoulder and, sensing her state of mind, continued reading where she had left off.

“Toxic levels of radiation are flooding the port-forward sections of Decks Seven, Eight, and Nine, including Sickbay. No word yet on casualties.”

Garrett’s heart sank. Her next order was the hardest any starship commander would ever have to give and her memories immediately flashed back to her own frightful Commander’s Test so many years ago aboard the *Starship Ambassador*. Only this time it was for real. She stared down at the floor and blinked back tears. But time was precious and she could no longer hesitate.

“Captain...” Stadi urged.

“Radiation Protocol, Commander,” she announced. “Seal off those sections immediately. No one gets in... or out.” The captain had no idea how many she had just consigned to their death. Sickbay itself was certainly filled to capacity. But she knew she could not endanger the lives of hundreds more in the surrounding areas by letting the flood of radiation spill outwards.

*Endanger.* The word quickly rolled around inside her head to become *dangerous*. An image of Ann Grey suddenly flashed into her consciousness. The doctor’s strange behavior, her insistence that she beam down to Dulisia — Onovan’s sudden and mysterious illness.

*Dangerous.*

Garrett spun around to face Stadi. He had already picked up on her train of thought and now stared back at her wide-eyed. *How could we have been so blind?* Their minds said this in unison as the scattered details began to fall appallingly into place. The doctor’s own homeworld was the suspected home base of the Federation’s most

*dangerous* revolutionary group for Crissake! The security issues should have been obvious, yet they all had missed it!

“Captain,” Dardanelle summoned. “Sensors indicate that the remaining Orion Raider has been joined by three more vessels of similar size and design.”

Garrett looked at Stadi an instant more. Fighting an enemy from the outside was one thing, but fighting one from the inside was a *Kobayashi Maru*, a no-win scenario. Who knew how many accomplices Ann Grey had aboard ship? And who knew how many more surprises they had in store for the embattled vessel? The captain faced the viewscreen with a certain sense of defeat. This was one instance where the *Enterprise* must go back.

“We can’t win this one,” she said plainly. “Mr. Castillo, get us out of orbit... full impulse. Bridge to Engineering... Lock down that starboard nacelle, we need warp drive now!”

*“That will be extremely difficult to achieve, Captain. Engineering has sustained extensive damage.”* Skyl’s voice filtered through the comm as if it were just another day at the park. Judging by the background noise, however, Garrett could tell that Engineering hadn’t fared any better than the Bridge. There was an intense hissing of venting gases and the clamor of numerous voices shouting repair orders to the damage control teams.

“Do whatever it takes, Commander. That’s an order.” Garrett’s mind went back to the crewmembers now sealed in the irradiated sections of Decks Seven, Eight, and Nine. *Like a tomb*, she thought gravely. And now Skyl may be forced to make a similar decision. It was the accepted risk of serving aboard a starship and they all knew it. But in the end, when the numbers were tallied, that seemed to offer little comfort.

“Enemy vessels closing, Captain,” Dardanelle announced.

“We are being hailed,” Cicely called out surprised. “Audio only.” Garrett spun to face her operations officer and paused a moment, frowning.

“Let’s hear it...”

A gruff, slightly garbled voice entered the Bridge, full of menace. Its message was short and to the point: *“Return the slave-girl to us and we will not destroy your ship.”*

Cicely's face was overcome by sheer terror. She knew this day would come eventually. Her career in Starfleet had simply been too good to be true; she had always known this intuitively. Her friends, her service aboard the *Enterprise*... it had all been an impossible dream that had now turned into a living nightmare.

The Captain did not even deign to give them a response. Without hesitation, Commander Stadi reached over and punched Cicely's control board, immediately severing the commlink. Garrett gave them both a solemn, comforting nod, then faced the viewscreen with angry determination.

"Mr. Castillo," she said clearly, "evasive pattern Delta-three... maximum available thrust. Lieutenant Dardanelle... ready all weapons. Hit those bastards with everything we've got as soon as they're in range." Her voice was savage, unyielding. She sat down in the command chair and gripped the armrests until her knuckles turned white.

"Coming into range now, Captain."

"Fire at will..." She switched the viewscreen to an aft angle and watched with an evil, almost sadistic pleasure, as her starship lashed out at their attackers with a vengeance. First one Raider and then another erupted into a cloud of phosphorescent gas. But the mighty starship was again overcome by the simple factors of speed and agility.

One of the upgraded little ships swung in perilously close to the *Enterprise's* hull and began to fire its Romulan disruptors directly into the Bridge's already overworked shield array. The roar inside the assailed command center was even more deafening than before. Garrett gritted her teeth in fury.

"Damn the Romulans," she shouted with rage.

"Shields failing..." Dardanelle yelled in desperation.

"Captain," Castillo said with a glimmer of hope, "I have an idea!"

"Do it!" Garrett ordered without question or hesitation even as Castillo's hands began to move swiftly across his board. There was a sickening screech that signaled the collapse of the Bridge's shield array. Under Castillo's careful guidance, the great ship began to turn over in a tight barrel roll.

The Bridge fell eerily silent for an instant before being filled

with the familiar whine of a transporter beam. Garrett jumped to her feet and turned just in time to see Cicely vanish into a swirling cloud of energy. And then the ship was rocked by a jarring impact that knocked her to the floor.

Caught unawares by the *Enterprise's* sudden deathroll, the Orion Raider slammed headlong into the portside shields. The tiny craft made a valiant effort to bounce away, but the abrupt transference of kinetic energy proved to be too much for its own shields to handle. Under incredible pressure, its hull imploded, then flew apart into hundreds of fragmented pieces... taking Cicely along with it.

Garrett rose up slowly and stared out the viewscreen at the twirling bits of metal. "Commander Stadi?" she said hoarsely.

"She's gone, Captain," Stadi answered quietly, and Richard Castillo blanched.

Dazed, Garrett sank heavily into the command chair, hardly aware as Dardanelle quickly dispatched the final Orion vessel.

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#### CAPTAIN'S LOG

OLD FEDERATION STARDATE 41020.7

NEW GALACTIC STARDATE 21359.8

IT HAS BEEN THIRTY-SIX HOURS SINCE OUR BATTLE WITH THE ORIONS AT GALORNDON CORE.

WARP DRIVE STILL REMAINS OFFLINE, AS DO MOST PRIMARY SYSTEMS ON THE STARBOARD SIDE OF DECKS FOUR THROUGH EIGHTEEN. REPAIR EFFORTS HAVE BEEN HINDERED BY THE UNCONTROLLED PLASMA FIRE THAT CONTINUES TO RAGE AMIDSHIPS.

THE FIRE HAS MANAGED TO SEVER ALL LONG-RANGE COMMUNICATIONS. AS SUCH, WE DO NOT KNOW THE FATE OF COMMANDER BATANIDES AND THE *GENESE*, NOR DO WE KNOW WHAT EVENTS MAY HAVE TRANSPIRED WITHIN THE KLINGON EMPIRE DURING OUR UNINTENDED ABSENCE.

I HAVE ORDERED THE *ENTERPRISE* ON A RETURN COURSE FOR THE ROMULAN-KLINGON BORDER...

BUT UNTIL WARP DRIVE CAN BE RESTORED, WE CAN DO LITTLE TO ASSIST GOVERNOR MOGH IN HIS EFFORTS TO SAVE THE EMPIRE FROM THOSE WHO WOULD DESTROY IT.

ON A MORE PERSONAL NOTE, CREW MORALE HAS REACHED AN ALL-TIME LOW, ESPECIALLY ON THE BRIDGE WHERE THE DEATH OF TWO YOUNG ENSIGNS HAS HIT ESPECIALLY CLOSE TO HOME. AS CAPTAIN, THEY ALL TURN TO ME FOR GUIDANCE. BUT AT TIMES LIKE THESE I FIND MYSELF WONDERING: TO WHOM DO I TURN?

For some time, Captain Rachel Garrett sat in her ready room and stared blankly at that last sentence of her log entry. The past thirty-six hours had stretched on interminably, leaving little time for sleep for a weary, shell-shocked crew. Repairs had proceeded slowly, and the captain had overseen them all, hoping the distraction would draw her mind away from Cicely.

But it hadn't worked. Memories of Cicely's life flowed through Garrett's mind like the ceaseless waves of an ocean. Her discovery as a stowaway in the belly of the ship, surviving for weeks on stored ration packs. Her carefully nurtured emergence into a world of freedom. Her entrance into Starfleet Academy. Her graduation. All this and more, capped by an extraordinary five years in the prestigious position of Operations Officer aboard the Federation's legendary flagship.

*Not bad for an Orion slave girl*, Garrett thought. She sighed wearily and laid the padd down on her desk, realizing it was the second time the door chime had summoned her. Too tired even to speak, she mentally instructed Commander Stadi to enter; the doors parting to reveal his careworn face. His salt and pepper hair had seemingly gained a little more salt, but he still tried to cling to his optimistic smile. He had been close to Enyo, and the pain still showed despite all his attempts to the contrary.

"I have the final casualty reports, Captain," he said, holding up a padd. He walked into the small room and stood before her desk. The

captain eyed him with dread a few brief moments, not wanting to hear the terrible numbers, but knowing she must.

“Let’s hear it,” she said glumly.

“One hundred ninety-six dead, one hundred eight injured... nineteen critically, including Doctor Grey.”

“She still lives?” Garrett sat up and balled her hands into fists. Her voice had carried disdain, and maybe even a little disappointment. She glanced at Stadi with the eyes of a starship captain betrayed. The deep wells of his own eyes saw through her anger to the cavernous pain that lie beneath.

“Not for long,” he said ruefully. “Medical teams were finally able to enter the irradiated areas a half-hour ago. They found Doctor Grey administering to patients with her usual care and compassion.”

The captain sat back and closed her eyes, relaxing her fists. *How could we have been so blind?* she thought again.

“Ann Grey was no stranger to strange behavior,” Stadi answered aloud. “I truly do not believe we could have foreseen this, Captain.”

“Are you so certain?” Garrett shot back bitterly, then immediately regretted it. Her features softened in an unspoken apology. “And Commander Onovan?” she whispered.

“I am sorry to report that the Counselor died several hours ago of acute radiation poisoning. Doctor Blaine performed a complete autopsy. There was no indication whatsoever of the Thelusian flu...”

“God Dammit,” Garrett shouted, slamming her fists against the indomitable desktop. “We should have seen this, Spencer, it’s a ship full of telepaths for Crissake. Why the hell didn’t we see this? Your investigation must have found something. What the hell did Skyl have to say for himself?”

Stadi paused briefly and stared into his captain’s weary, beaten eyes. He could not ever recall her being so drawn out and discomposed. Her temper was indeed as legendary as her name, but even that had slowly simmered over the past twenty years. Until now, that is. His compassion and understanding for her ran as deep as their mutual souls, but her mind had crossed into an area that his could not now follow.

“I, uh, I conducted an extensive interview with the Commander. It would seem that our Chief Engineer was the victim of a carefully

choreographed sexual seduction. Ann Grey apparently used her womanly wiles to slip in under Skyl's Vulcan veneer."

Garrett raised her eyebrows at this. Ann Grey must have been good, damn good. As a general rule, Vulcans were not known to be swayed by anything; especially by the illogical sexual whims of an erratic human female. Perhaps Stadi was right; perhaps they could not have foreseen this.

"Is there enough evidence to nail her to the wall?" Garrett asked sadistically, causing Stadi to suppress a deep sigh.

"There is enough incriminating data to place the doctor at all of the key areas in question. There is also a computer log of an unusual number of subspace communiqués between the doctor and her homeworld, including the complete download of an entire medical file."

"A medical file?" Garrett furrowed her brow and gave Stadi a puzzled look. Stadi too furrowed his brow, looking equally as puzzled.

"This information," he responded, "left Commander Skyl and I confused as well... Medical File number 661 was copied and transferred to Dulisian Four on Stardate 21339." The captain raised her index finger to issue pause, then looked up towards the ceiling.

"Computer..." she called. "Please list the contents of Medical File number 661." The computer cycled through several negative sounding tones before making its reply.

*"Unable to comply... Access to all medical files is restricted to the Chief Medical Officer."*

"Computer," the captain sighed, "list the crewmember assigned to Medical File number 661."

*"Ensign Cecilia Renee Garrett... Chief Operations Officer, USS Enterprise."* Overcome with rage, Garrett grabbed the padd containing her log entry and flung it violently across the room. The book-like device struck the replicator interface panel and shattered, causing an explosion of sparks from both. She jumped up from her chair and spun to face her viewport, slamming her fist against the alumglass.

"I should have that bitch thrown kicking and screaming into space!"

"Rachel!" Stadi said with shock, taking a step back.

"How long before she dies?" She faced her first officer and glared at him harshly, almost maniacally.

“A matter of hours, perhaps less.”

“I want to see her.”

“Are you sure that is wise, *Captain*?” He carefully measured his disapproval by stiling his emphasis on the word captain. He had a sense that he was treading on dangerous ground. Continued to wonder at her state of mind.

“I want to know why, Spencer. I have to know why she did this to us.” Garrett turned to face out the viewport once more. For the first time since he had entered the small room, Stadi sensed a true sadness coming from his captain. Not only for the damaged ship and lost crew, but for Ann Grey as well.

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Fatal radiation exposure can be a horrific sight to behold, worse yet to experience.

Upon entering the *Enterprise's* primary sickbay, Captain Garrett and Commander Stadi were at first caught unawares by the facility's stark emptiness. It was only with a sick feeling that they then realized that anyone who had been in this section had long since perished from the effects of acute radiation poisoning. Save for one...

Attended by a single nurse, Dr. Ann Grey lay motionless on a biobed; glazed blue eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. Her pale skin was drawn and waxen, her temples sunken and black. Matted clumps of her once beautiful brown hair now encircled her balding scalp in a gruesome Medusan halo. Her labored breaths were shallow and raspy as her withering body slowly drowned in its own fluids.

The captain's initial reaction was to turn and flee. To get as far from this place as the fastest warp drive could possibly take her. She recoiled from the stench of death; took a step back and buried her shoulder into Stadi's chest. Cowered there in his presence. No one should have to suffer like this, she realized, not even the traitorous doctor.

Attempting to regain some composure, Garrett tugged at her uniform jacket. She rolled her head, stretching the tense muscles of her neck. She was about to speak when Ann's body jerked spasmodically,

caught in the throes of a violent cough. A tiny rivulet of mottled black blood spilled out of the corner of her mouth and traced its course down her sallow cheek.

“Doctor Grey,” the Captain croaked. Realizing the words had not escaped her lips, she cleared her throat and tried again. This time, Ann tensed at the sudden sound of her commanding officer’s voice. She then slowly relaxed and turned to face them with blind eyes. More reddish-black blood spilled out of her mouth, joined now by a fresh trickle from her left nostril.

“Cap-Captain, is that you?” she whispered hoarsely.

“Yes, Doctor, I’m here,” Garrett answered quietly.

“Oh, Captain,” Ann pleaded. “I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry. I had no idea they were going to attack; I swear it. And Cicely. Oh God, poor, poor Cicely. And Enyo, oh God...” Ann’s body was again racked by violent, spasmodic coughing. Partially coagulated globs of blood splattered her face and neck. Her eyes bulged frightfully out of their sockets and turned red as a million tiny blood vessels burst at once.

Not dissuaded by the horrific sight, Rachel Garrett’s ferocious anger was all-too-quick to make its return. Seemingly ready to strike out at what was left of Ann Grey, the captain balled her fists and clenched her teeth. Commander Stadi was forced to place his hands on her shoulders in fear of what she might do next. But instead of fists, the captain struck out with words.

“You gave them detailed information on our weaknesses and weapons capabilities, yet you did not know they would attack?! I find it hard to believe that even you could be that naïve, Doctor!” Her voice was a rising crescendo as she continued.

“You’ve betrayed your captain and your starship and caused the death of scores of your fellow crewmates. I should have you burned alive for your treachery! But unfortunately for you, you’re going to burn in hell for your ignorance.”

It was the most hateful thing Rachel Garrett had ever said or done to anyone. And she immediately wished she could take it all back. Wished she could erase the whole of the past five years. Urged Cicely to serve within the safe confines of a starbase. Refused Ann Grey’s request for transfer to the *Enterprise*. Taken back all of the command decisions that had led them all to this one horrific moment.

Great tears began to roll down her cheeks as she took one final look at what her fury had wrought upon the shattered mind of Ann Grey. The good doctor had her eyes clenched tightly shut and her mouth locked open in a silent, desperate wail. Blood began to ooze from her eyelids to mix with her own great tears. Her body shook violently with heart-wrenching sobs.

And then the convulsions began. The captain swayed nauseously as Ann wretched and spewed globs of blood all around her. Unable to endure it any longer, Garrett turned and fled from Sickbay even as the doctor gurgled and choked on impassioned apologies and pleas for forgiveness.

Frozen in place by an onslaught of human emotions, Stadi could do naught but watch his captain go; then continue to watch as the nurse rushed over to inject a painless neurotoxin into Ann Grey's circulatory system. It took only seconds for the powerful euthanagen to take hold, but for Stadi, those seconds lasted a lifetime.

With all the telepathic awareness of his Betazoid heritage, Commander Spencer Stadi had no choice but to watch as Ann's life flashed before her mind's eye — curiously, not from beginning to end as expected, but from end to beginning. Images began to blink by with ever-increasing speed, like the flickering scenes played out on an ancient motion picture projector.

Her clandestine acts of betrayal. Her request to transfer to the *Enterprise*. The death of the President. Her years in Starfleet Medical School. Growing up with her brothers on Dulisian IV. The verbal abuse. Even her birth, witnessed with the understanding of a lifetime of knowledge and experience. But through it all, there was a dark spot, a stain on Ann Grey's mind that, for some reason, centered around her father.

This stain encircled him, then continued to grow outward from him. Stadi had first sensed this dark spot the moment the young doctor had transferred aboard the *Enterprise* five years ago. Every human mind held such a dark spot, but Ann's had always been just that much bigger. It somehow troubled him that this dark spot was now beginning to consume her shattered consciousness with a frightful intensity.

It continued to grow within her until it had encompassed the whole of her being. But it did not stop there. It did not stop until it had

swallowed her up completely, pulling her under kicking and screaming. And it threatened to take Spencer Stadi along with it. His mind began to recoil against the swelling tide.

Instinctual safety nets automatically started to go up, systematically detaching his psyche from that of Ann Grey's. He felt her last, fearful, dying moments as she clutched and clawed for life.

Clutched and clawed against that awful darkness. Clutched and clawed for someone to help her. His mind fought to pull away; fought for its own right to survive. Fought against that awful, awful darkness.

And then she was gone.

When Spencer Stadi emerged from Sickbay some time later, he found Rachel Garrett waiting for him in the dim light of the corridor. She stood propped up against a bulkhead, her skin pale and waxen, her eyes distant and vacant. He had never seen her look so old. They gazed into each other's eyes for several long moments before he finally spoke quietly.

"She's gone, Captain..."

"Yes, I know, I felt her go... Felt her slip into that awful darkness."

"There is one thing I do not understand," Stadi said, clutching his chin, staring at the floor in quiet contemplation. "In all of you humans there is a dark spot within your mind that seems to govern your entire existence. You seem to live out your entire lives in fear of it. It is a darkness that we Betazoids simply do not understand.

"Our telepathic minds are unable to penetrate this dark spot and we have always wondered why. There are so many things about humans that make us wonder why. Why does it exist? Why does it make you do the things you do? And why do you continuously live in fear of that inner self?"

A silence fell between them as wide as any chasm. For the first time in their twenty-two years of service together, they felt truly separate from one another. They both had grown up literally worlds apart, and now they stared at each other across all those light years and saw only the face of a stranger staring back.

"There may be no simple reason why," Garrett answered

plaintively. “The complexities of our lives from the day we are born create the why’s. And the why’s too can create complexities all their own. The why’s are who we are. They are the definition of our very existence.”

She stood up straight and adjusted her uniform. Her eyes fell on his with a certain sadness as she smoothed the ruffles out of her jacket and straightened her hair. Her voice held an almost inner calm as she continued.

“Every emotion that we experience, every feeling that alters our path has a cause. Somewhere down there deep in that darkness are the reasons why; and those reasons why have reasons all their own buried still yet deeper. Perhaps we should not be in fear of the dark, for it is there that lies the true meaning of self.”

With that, the Captain turned and left her first officer standing alone in the dim light of the corridor, alone there in the darkness to ponder his own dark inner thoughts.

“...begin Chapter Sixteen.”

The *Enterprise* was again at high warp, though the great ship still remained plagued by the savage fire below decks. The entire vessel seemed to tremble as it limped across the vacuum of interstellar space on its badly misaligned starboard nacelle. At 1,024 times the speed of light, even the slightest misstep in power could have disastrous consequences for them all; tearing the ship in two at its centerline and spilling its helpless contents out into the neverending void.

Yet, it was a risk the captain knew they had to take if they were ever going to be of any use to Governor Mogh. The deck continued to shudder beneath her feet as she made her way down the dimly lit corridors of night. As she walked, her mind wandered with her, reviewing the events of the past week.

The disturbances along the Federation border. Unrest within the Klingon Empire and an almost inconceivable threat of civil war. The clandestine involvement of the Romulans. Ann Grey. The death of Cicely. Captain Garrett knew it all had to fit together somehow, like the pieces of some gigantic interstellar jigsaw puzzle.

But the only piece that did not seem to fit well at all were the Romulans. “What could the Romulans possibly hope to gain from all this?” she wondered aloud. She rounded one final corner and came to a halt within arm’s reach of a quiet, unassuming doorway. She was about to place a thumb on its door chime, but was interrupted instead by a comm call from Engineering.

“Yes, Commander,” she answered with a quiet sigh, “go ahead.”

“*Captain, the plasma fire on Decks Seventeen and Eighteen has been extinguished. My apologies for the delay, but the ongoing hydrogen fluoride reaction proved most difficult to neutralize.*” Garrett rolled her weary eyes at the ceiling. Days without sleep, and the Vulcan engineer still remained as trying as ever.

“Well done, Commander. Pass my congratulations on to the rest of your team.” She paused in momentary thought. “How long before communications can be restored?”

“*Unknown, Captain. Damage assessment has only just begun.*”

“Make that your number one priority, Commander,” she said

with some earnest. “Keep me advised, Garrett out.”

So many things depended on long-range communications that it made the captain’s head spin. The unknown fate of Marta Batanides and her entourage aboard the *Genesee*. Coordination with Starfleet Command. Contact with Governor Mogh. Continual updates from other starships along the border. All this and much, much more had been lost to the *Enterprise* since Galorndon Core.

She shook her head at it all, then returned her attention to the darkened doorway before her. She tugged at her uniform jacket, then with no further ado, reached forward and placed her thumb upon the touchpad. It was some time before the doors finally parted to reveal a dimly lit room and one slightly startled occupant.

Captain Rachel Garrett had only rarely ever had cause to visit the personal quarters of Lt. Richard M. Castillo. Yet, on this occasion and under these unwonted circumstances, she seemed drawn there somehow. Her mind of late had felt detached from Stadi’s calming touch, and it now needed a presence to fill that void; a human presence.

“Captain,” Castillo said with surprise. The young man wore a simple T-shirt and loose-fitting flannel pants. His hair was mussed and his eyes puffy and slightly bloodshot. This could’ve been from lack of sleep, but the captain knew that there had more likely been some private tears shed here on this quiet night.

“My apologies, Mister Castillo. Am I disturbing you?”

“Oh no, Ma’am. Please, please come in.” She found the lieutenant’s quarters to be uncharacteristically clean, free of the usual clutter so prevalent in past visits. Even the dishes had been recycled, and the whole room seemed oddly sterile.

“Can I offer you anything, Captain?” Castillo said as the doors slid shut behind her. “Coffee perhaps?”

“No, Mr. Castillo, but thank you. It would probably keep me awake.” She offered him her usual wry smile, but it too seemed sterile. “I have found this interminable shudder to be wholly unnerving. I would talk to my chief engineer about it, but I think he may be a little on edge about the subject.”

Castillo smiled as the Captain walked past him to stare out a viewport at the warped starlight. A long silence passed between them that oddly seemed to say it all. At length, Castillo picked up a padd

from his dining table and studied it for several quiet moments before finally speaking softly.

“The ship is quiet, isn’t it?”

“Hmmm, too damn quiet. Almost as if all the life has been sucked right out of it.” She turned slowly to look into his sad blue eyes, then down to the padd in his hands.

“What’s that?”

“It is a poem Cicely gave to me to look at the night before she died.” His arm reached out to her, almost like a lifeline, and offered the device for her inspection. The captain hesitated for a moment before stepping forward and taking it from him. She then turned back to the stars and began to read softly to herself:

*Fury
for Tia
I am standing alone,
The storm passes through me.
My mind is a whirlwind,
A constant battle for control.
I watch as the fury,
Swirls ever around me.
I watch as all my days,
Pass into the dark of night.*

*And that’s where I find you,
There, in that darkness.
Your hand stretched out,
Sharp eyes piercing my soul.
Tempest tossed yet clearly,
I hear your ethereal call...*

*Walk with me love,
Through the forest in the twilight.
Run with me swift,
Among the moonbeams in the meadow.
Fly with me love,*

*Upon the wings of distant starlight.
Come, come my love,
Into the mists of a dawning new day.*

*Hear love, my ethereal call,
But heed this, my bitter warning.
Dare not whisper a breath,
Upon the midsummer's breeze.
For fear of shattering the hope,
That echoes through the trees.*

Author unknown.

Garrett looked again at the streaks of starlight, allowing a single tear to glide slowly down her cheek. "Pretty much says it all, doesn't it?"

"Unh-huh. I am, uh, I am certainly going to miss her."

"As am I, Mister Castillo, as am I." These statements too seemed sterile, but little else could be said that was not already evident in the silences between them. Sometimes words can be clutter where silence has lease and quiet contemplation gives pause.

"I suppose there is no point in asking why," he added woefully, after a time.

"We can ask," she said, turning to face him, "but we are unlikely to find an answer that will satisfy us." He nodded at this, bowing his head as if in prayer. There was another long pause, broken only by a menagerie of tiny rattles caused by the still trembling deck. Castillo heaved a big sigh before speaking again.

"We are at a critical turning point in the affairs of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants, aren't we, Captain?" It was said as more of a statement than a question, and Garrett was impressed by Castillo's astute assessment of the situation.

"By my calculations," she answered gravely, "if the Romulans continue to undermine the treaty in this manner, the Federation-Klingon alliance will collapse in less than six months' time."

She sighed and looked at the ceiling in thought. "What I can't

figure out is: What are the Romulans trying to gain from all this? Since the Tomed Incident, the Treaty of Algernon has kept the peace for over thirty years. Why are the Romulans making a sudden move now? What's the connection?"

"Perhaps we're looking at this from the wrong perspective, Captain." Castillo took the several steps needed to place him next to her at the viewport. "We've spent all our energy trying to determine what the Romulans hope to gain from all this..." He turned to face her. "Perhaps what we should be asking ourselves is: What do the Romulans really have to *lose*? A Klingon civil war, or a Klingon war with the Federation... either scenario can do nothing but benefit the Romulan Empire."

Garrett's almond eyes looked into his with an intensity of understanding. "The only other alternative is peace," she said quietly, "and quite often peace comes at too high a price."

They both sighed in unison, then turned to face the stars. Castillo thought a bit more before continuing. "The Romulans are an angry people, Captain. They were exiled from Vulcan for their beliefs. Spent decades wandering through space looking for a homeworld. Spent centuries more fighting to build an empire.

"And then along comes the peace and prosperity of the Vulcan-Terran Federation and their newfound friends, the Klingons — archenemies of the Empire. I know I'd be pretty pissed off, wouldn't you?"

Garrett looked at him with a broad smile. Although perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek, Castillo's short narrative did in fact bear a small amount of truth. Having never abandoned their violent, raging emotions as their Vulcan cousins had done so many centuries before, the Romulans were indeed a very angry people. And passionate too. Certainly a force not to be trifled with by any reckoning.

"*Bridge to Captain Garrett...*" The captain let out a long-held sigh, then turned her head towards the ceiling.

"Garrett here, go ahead."

"*Captain, we're receiving a distress call from the Klingon border outpost at Narendra Three. They say they're under attack.*"

"And so, history begins," she said quietly, glancing back out at the stars. Castillo could sense a frightful hint of premonition in her

voice and it caused him to shiver involuntarily. She had already turned and was making her way towards the door before calling out:

“Red Alert, all hands to battle stations! Helm, lay in a course and increase speed to Warp Nine.”

~ ~ ~ ~

The slight shudder of before had now turned into near violent shaking as the *Enterprise* raced towards the Narendra System at its maximum rated speed. Captain Garrett had to steady herself against the doorframe for a moment before stepping out onto the Bridge. She quickly swayed her way up to the command level to stand next to Stadi.

“Status of communications, Commander,” she said quietly to her first officer. The deck lurched and forced her to place a hand across his forearm. There was a familiar spark there in that simple touch, and for a moment, their minds reunited and all was forgiveness.

If we survive this, she thought, *dinner’s on me*. Stadi smirked, then answered her query.

“Only the ship-in-distress beacon is online, Captain. All other communications are still unavailable.”

“Which means we can send or receive distress calls and nothing else. But if *we* send out a distress call, every Romulan and Orion ship across three sectors will know exactly where we are.”

Stadi nodded at his captain’s assessment, then responded to her unspoken orders to man the Operations station. Garrett turned away from him and faced Castillo, who had just emerged from the turbolift in a fresh new uniform and was now valiantly trying to make his way to the helm.

“Mr. Castillo, take a seat,” she said, tilting her head. “Commander Stadi, what do we know about Narendra Three?” Stadi had just reached the Operations console and now began reading the situation report aloud.

“A scientific research facility devoted primarily to cloaking technology. Limited defenses, mostly civilian population. They say they are under attack by a single Romulan warbird. We are the only ship in range...”

“Surely not a vital star system,” Garrett mused.

“Could be another trap,” Castillo said darkly, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

“Engineering to Bridge... The warp field is becoming increasingly unstable, Captain. I strongly recommend that the Enterprise drop out of warp immediately.”

“Negative, Commander. You must maintain speed.” She was forced to sidestep several paces as the great ship heaved over like an ancient Earth sailing vessel. “Mister Castillo, ETA please.”

“Seven minutes... if she holds together.”

“She’ll hold, she’ll hold...” The captain said this quietly, almost to herself as she sat down in the command chair, her knuckles turning white from their tight grip on the armrests. “Tactical status, Lieutenant.”

Dardanelle sighed heavily as he read over the grim statistics. “Aft shields showing eighty percent, forward shields... sixty-five. Starboard phasers still offline... port and aft, ninety percent. Full complement of torpedoes and...” he paused, studying the readouts, “I am getting a preliminary tactical scan of the Narendra System.”

“Let’s hear it,” Garrett said, taking note of his concerned tone.

“Well, Captain, I am a little confused by these readings...” He frowned, still trying to correlate the data. “It is... it is definitely a Romulan warbird, but these sensor readings must be incorrect. The vessel reads as well over twice the size of the *Enterprise*.” He swiveled to face the captain; his features still deeply furrowed.

“It’s true then,” Garrett said, standing slowly and facing Stadi.

“It would appear that way,” Stadi answered glumly. The rest of the officers on the Bridge joined Dardanelle in his confusion. Despite her own fear, Garrett knew that they too had the right to know just what it was that was awaiting them at Narendra III. It was a battle they would not likely survive, but that made it no less necessary. She cleared her throat and spoke plainly.

“Starfleet Intelligence has identified these vessels as a new and highly advanced warbird classified as the B-type. They are indeed well over twice our size and armed accordingly.” She sighed heavily. “We will be significantly... outgunned.” All on the Bridge was silent, save for a cacophony of tiny rattles and squeaks brought on by the shuddering spaceframe.

“Then we must, we must turn away.” This finally from Ensign Malfoya, a young and unseasoned officer who had been brought up to the Bridge ahead of his time to replace the late Ensign Enyo. Captain Garrett let out a deep sigh of compassion. Since Galorndon Core, so, so many young officers had been asked to fill shoes that were not their own. Too many.

“No, Ensign, we will not turn away. We will fight. And if necessary, we will die. We are, in this moment, standing at a great precipice in history. What we do here today, what we sacrifice, will shape the course of the future for the next generation, and for all the generations to come. At this moment, we are the future of the Federation. Let us not forget that, and let us make sure that history never forgets the name... *Enterprise*.”

~ ~ ~ ~

The sound was unbelievable. The *Enterprise* did indeed manage to get off a few lucky potshots by coming out of warp nearly on top of the warbird; but now the Romulans were fighting back with a vengeance. The great ship groaned as the shields tried to cast off another barrage of intense Romulan disruptor fire. For the second time in as many days, the Bridge was a scene of frightful destruction.

“Captain,” Stadi shouted from the Ops station, “the Romulans are trying to outflank us. Bearing zero-nine-zero mark two-zero.” The Commander held a tight grip on his console, making every attempt to remain in his chair. But another jarring impact nonetheless sent him to the floor.

“Mr. Castillo, full stop and reverse at one-quarter,” Garrett ordered. She too had a white-knuckle grip on the command chair. “Bring us around to zero-two-four mark three-five. Ready phasers and fire on my command.”

The captain felt an almost sickening pull in her gut as the *Enterprise* came to a sudden stop, then immediately began to back up and spin around to face their adversary. For their part, the Romulans too made a sharp turn and met the Federation flagship head-on. Garrett watched as bolt after bolt of highly destructive energy slammed into her starship’s shields.

“Dardanelle, fire at will!” The captain gritted her teeth as another disruptor blast tore through the starboard shields. There was an incredible, terrible shriek of tearing metal as the greenish energy dissipated in the hull and created a Strong-force disruption at the subatomic level. But beneath that horrible sound was the more welcome sound of the *Enterprise’s* own phasers and torpedoes lashing out at their attackers with their own ruthless intensity.

“Captain,” Dardanelle shouted, forehead covered in sweat, face covered with soot. “I am reading shield fluctuations in the warbird’s port nacelle.”

“Mr. Castillo, full impulse. Ninety-degree rotation to starboard, ready all ventral phasers...” The *Enterprise* leapt forward and tipped over on its side; every phaser strip along its belly sending forth streaks of pure, directed energy. And as they passed the warbird by, the aft torpedo launcher sent three red globes hurtling rearward just for good measure.

“Direct hit,” Dardanelle announced. “Their port-forward shields have buckled and they are venting drive plasma.”

“Yes!” Garrett exclaimed, jumping to her feet and pounding the air with a fist. “We’ve got them... Mister Castillo, bring us around and close to ten thousand meters. Lock phasers and photons on target and hold for my mark... Commander Stadi, hail them.”

“Wait,” Stadi said with uncertain concern. “Three more vessels are decloaking on an intercept course!”

Garrett turned towards her first officer bearing a face of hesitant disbelief. “Klingon?” she said to him with a glint of false hope in her eyes.

“Romulan warbirds,” he replied vacantly, shaking his head slowly from side to side. “B-type... all weapons fully charged.” There was a hollowness in the man’s voice that carried with it a feeling of certain doom. Captain Garrett’s entire being seemed to sag with her shoulders as she turned to face the viewscreen. In the distance, the final warbird was just shimmering into reality, blotting out the stars. They might’ve stood a chance against two... but four...

“Captain,” Dardanelle shouted, “the original warbird’s shields are coming back online... they’re targeting all disruptors!”

“My God,” Castillo gasped, “it was all just a ruse to lure us in

closer...”

“Holy shit,” Garrett hissed, plopping into the command chair. “Lieutenant Castillo, get us the hell out of here now. Full evasive maneuvers. Lieutenant Dardanelle, fire everything we’ve got!”

But it was too little, too late. All four warbirds bore down on the *Enterprise* like a pack of snarling wolves; their collective weapons tearing away the starship’s shields with their first volley. Sections of scorched hull plating, random bits of debris, and even a few bodies spiraled outwards from the ship and plunged headlong into the depths of interstellar space.

The Bridge was dark as pitch and thick with smoke. What little light there was was flickering and erratic, and came from a host of small fires that danced about from console to console. The occasional flash from an overloaded circuit was like lightning. In place of thunder, there was a continual hiss of venting gases and sizzling, shorted out electronics.

And then there was a chorus of coughing as everyone seemingly regained consciousness all at once. Captain Garrett pushed herself off the floor and slid into the command chair. “Computer... emergency lights,” she called out into the darkness.

Nothing.

“It’s alright, Rachel, I’ve got it,” Stadi said from somewhere behind her. She felt an unbelievable wave of relief wash over her at the sound of his voice. *You’re still alive*, she thought with a full spectrum of emotions. She made a quick survey of the Bridge as the dim lights slowly came online. Remarkably, they were all still alive.

“The Romulans?”

“Circling like vultures at fifty thousand meters. They are ordering us to surrender.”

“Any sign of the Klingons?”

“Three battle cruisers approaching at high warp.” Stadi let out a deep sigh of despair. “They will not arrive for at least another five minutes.” Almost an eternity, they both knew.

Garrett could feel Stadi’s comforting presence in her mind, and somehow it made everything seem all right. *One little ship indeed*, she thought. *We won’t make a difference, Captain, we are the difference*, Stadi had said that day in the arboretum. *We will prevail* had been

Onovan's response. That entire day now seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Gentlemen," Garrett said, rising and stepping forward to place her hands on the shoulders of Castillo and Dardanelle. "Do you think that you can save our collective asses for at least another five minutes?" The two slowly turned their heads to look at each other, then smirked up at their captain.

"Making my course one-three-zero mark two-five-zero. Speed: two-thirds impulse."

"Charging phasers, loading all torpedo bays. Targeting lead vessel."

Garrett squeezed their shoulders and nodded her head. She took several steps back and planted herself firmly in the command chair. "Very well then, Gentlemen, have it your way. Engage and fire at your discretion."

The great ship was once again in motion. And once again, the Romulans struck back with full force and blistering depredation. The Bridge was rocked time and again by jolt after terrible jolt. More circuits exploded, more fires burned; the thick gray smoke became even heavier, making it harder and harder to breathe. The defensive energy shields surrounding the ship's hull were now virtually nonexistent.

Yet, throughout all the chaos, the captain began to notice something odd. All the smoke on the Bridge was drifting with ever-increasing speed towards the right front corner of the battered command center. Her eyes followed this gray river to the base of the forward bulkhead near the floor. There, her eyes could barely discern the outlines of a fissure that became ever so slightly larger each time the Bridge was rocked by another Romulan disruptor blast.

From the very first days of space-travel, this was every astronaut's greatest fear realized. The hull was cracked, their precious atmosphere escaping outwards into the endless vacuum of deep space. Another disruptor blast shook the Bridge violently and the crack became wider. Garrett held her breath as the outrushing of gases now became audible above the din.

"Mr. Castillo," she ordered, "seal that crack before it becomes a breach. Ensign Malfoya, take the helm." Without hesitation, Castillo jumped up and headed for a tool locker near the starboard turbolift doors. He quickly retrieved a canister of epoxy bonding agent and a

plasma torch, then set immediately to work.

The Bridge was rocked again and for a brief instant, Garrett had a dark vision of Castillo's doom. If the hull blew outward now, there would be no hope for the young lieutenant, even if the rest of the crew were somehow saved by an emergency force field... that is, of course, assuming that the Bridge didn't suffer a catastrophic failure altogether and sheer itself away from the splintering hull entirely.

"Shields collapsing," Stadi cried out, startling the captain back to reality. "Structural integrity is failing and I'm getting odd power readings from the warp core."

"Bridge to Commander Skyl..." Garrett shouted. "We're getting strange readings from the warp core... Report!"

"Stand-by, Captain," Skyl responded levelly. The Vulcan barely seemed to notice as the deck heaved upward beneath his feet, then dropped suddenly. He steadied himself for a brief moment before picking up a tricorder and stepping out of his office. The engineer moved to stand directly in front of the warp core, raising the small palm-size sensory device to take readings.

Skyl was like the face of a mountain against a growing storm. Engineering was littered with smoldering debris, wrecked hardware, and even the occasional body. All around him, crewmen scurried like ants through the smoke and the purging gases, trying in vain to hold things together. The deck heaved again, and the warp core strained against its moorings.

Skyl watched as the entire seventeen-story structure vibrated like a gigantic guitar string. At first, his tricorder scans did not find anything out of the ordinary. But then, his sharp eyes caught a very peculiar reading coming from the dilithium crystal chamber hatch itself. Its dense molecular structure was breaking down; the critical hatches holding it in place were losing their cohesion.

But this cannot be, Skyl thought to himself. He adjusted the tricorder to make an even more detailed scan. What he saw just did not make any sense. At some point in the past week, someone had applied a highly corrosive chemical to the armored cover and its reinforced latches. *But who?* Why would anyone want to sabotage their own ship in such a potentially disastrous sort of way?

Skyl adjusted the tricorder once again and this time came up with a very startling conclusion. The signature of the damaging chemical was held within a very definable outline... handprints. Ann Grey's to be precise. Skyl's chest was gripped by something he had never before experienced: *Fear*. The Vulcan recoiled inwardly as the feeling began to wash over him completely.

He now remembered that night of extreme passion that had started right here on this very spot. Ann's seduction had been cunning, her deception complete. Skyl suddenly felt hollow inside, could feel the pangs of love and betrayal coursing through his very veins. Yes, he had loved her, and yes, now he *hated* her. His entire Vulcan being fought against this storm surge of wanton emotions. Fought against her image as it stared back at him from the great beyond.

"Commander Skyl, report please!" It was the last thing he would ever hear.

With concussive sonic booms, the hatch cover blew off and hit the Vulcan engineer squarely in the chest at nearly twice the speed of sound. His lifeless body was propelled backwards at a phenomenal rate; the smoldering corpse with its imbedded hatch cover landing neatly on the tabletop display console. And then everything in Engineering slipped into darkness.

The explosion sent an energy wave racing outwards from Engineering at near lightning speed. Deck by deck, relays fused, subprocessors overloaded, light panels and replicator terminals burst into flame, and every major subsystem went offline. There was not one single thing that was spared from the carnage.

At the Ops station, Commander Stadi had a brief glimpse of the energy wave as it approached. He wanted to shout a warning, wanted to dive to the deck for cover; but its arrival was almost instantaneous. Every control panel on the Bridge burst forth at once. Wild arcs of electricity spread across every conductive surface. The sudden burst of light was blinding.

For Dardanelle and Malfoya, death by electrocution was immediate. The two junior crewman at the aft science stations met a similar fate; their sizzling bodies flying backwards at odd and unnatural

angles. The stench of scorched flesh and burning plastics was overwhelming. Stadi fought against the darkness, fought against his mind's desire to give up consciousness.

“Engineering, report!” Captain Garrett shouted above the chaos.

“There’s been an explosion in Engineering,” Stadi cut in. “The warp core is offline, I’m reading no lifesigns.”

Garrett was on her feet now and turned to face him. “What do we have left?”

“Nothing,” Stadi replied conclusively. “Main power has failed and our shields are gone. Weapons are not functioning. I’m also reading massive fluctuations in life support and the gravitational field.”

Just then, and almost as if on cue, the Romulans fired another cheap shot at the *Enterprise* and Stadi found himself quite suddenly floating weightless, nearly two meters above the Ops console. In that brief instant, time seemed to stand still. The commander glanced all around him at a scene of wild wonder. Captain Garrett floated as he did, a full two meters above the command chair.

Fortunately, Castillo had just finished his repair efforts, and he too now hovered near the ceiling, just inches above the ship’s dedication plaque. Almost comically, the lifeless bodies of Malfoya and Dardanelle looked like sleeping marionettes as they drifted over their own respective consoles. It was only now with a slow sickening understanding that Stadi began to realize that this was likely the end for them all. In a matter of minutes, he himself, and all his closest friends and colleagues, would all be dead.

He could not help but turn away. All of his senses were overloaded by the scenes surrounding him. The curious liquid dance of the various fires as they leapt from panel to panel. The hundreds of bits of dust particles and debris that spun and twirled in the smoky air, each according to their own whims. And the smells of death and destruction that formed a dense, smothering fog, filling his lungs.

He closed his eyes and tried to force the images out of his mind. His telepathic paracortex reached out to find his *Imzadi*, his beloved, his soulmate. The thoughts of Rachel Garrett acted as an anchor against a swelling sea of despair. He clung there, to her mind, even as the gravitational fields returned and he went crashing to the deck. And he clung there still as a great beam fell out of the ceiling, crushing his

skull.

The mind of Rachel Garrett could feel Spencer Stadi's calming touch just moments before she too found herself in free-fall. It gave her an almost giddy feeling, until she landed across the armrests of the command chair, crushing her right arm and fracturing several ribs. She rolled off onto the floor and laid there for several endless moments gasping for breath.

She felt a sudden, sharp pain pierce through her skull and knew immediately that Spencer Stadi was dead. The stark emptiness was staggering. Her mind reeled against the void that his death left behind. She fought against a growing despair and concentrated instead on remaining conscious. In twenty-two years, she had never felt so alone.

With incredible effort, the captain forced herself up off the floor and slid with great pain into the command chair. She clenched her teeth, determined not to black out. Everyone else on the Bridge appeared to be dead. Even Castillo remained motionless, buried beneath a mountain of debris that had crashed down on top of him from the ceiling above. She truly was alone after all.

Her breaths became shorter and more labored as her lungs began to fill with fluid. She could smell the stench of death all around her. Burning hair, sizzling flesh. The Romulans continued to fire potshots at the hull, and she did not care. None of it seemed to matter anymore. She was all alone now, and her once mighty starship was in ruins.

So, this is it, she thought. The great ship shuddered again, and then all became eerily silent. The captain perceived a white flash, and her whole world began to dissolve around her. *So peaceful*, she thought. Her body began to tingle as the strange light slowly started to envelop her. All she had ever known was gone now, replaced by that soft white light.

Part Two

2366

today

“...begin Chapter Seventeen.”

Captain Jean-Luc Picard sat on the Bridge of his starship and stared with wild wonder at his android second officer. Lieutenant Commander Data was a testament to the thousands of years of human ingenuity that had brought them all to this place, a *Galaxy*-class starship; in itself the culmination of everything that humanity had become.

Picard could think of no greater honor than to be here, in his place, at this great moment in history. Two hundred years ago, the human race had been instrumental in the forging of the most unprecedented interplanetary union of all time. The United Federation of Planets was the realization of a once thought impossible dream. A dream that had at one time been seemingly forever out of reach.

Now, two centuries later, nearly two hundred worlds, nearly two hundred distinct and diverse alien cultures lived together in peace and in harmony. Joined together in a union devoted to the common good, devoted to exploration, both within its borders and beyond. It truly was a Golden Age; not only for the whole of mankind, but for the billions of other peoples spread across eight thousand light years of interstellar space.

Picard shook his head at it all. He had never been happier in his life. He couldn't help but wonder sometimes at all of the millions of tiny events in history that had brought him here, to this place, with these people. He was captain of the Federation's legendary flagship whose name echoed down throughout all the ages. The *Enterprise*, NCC-1701-D... but whatever the letter, the name truly stood for greatness.

“Now, Data, listen carefully...” Commander Will Riker, ships first officer, was the embodiment of everything human. Tall and

handsome with warm blue eyes and a dark beard; and a devilish smile to compliment his sharp sense of humor. He loved to tell a good joke, and curiously, he often chose the android Data as his straight man.

“I am listening, Commander. In fact, I am currently detecting twenty-seven distinct sounds on the Bridge alone. They range from...”

“Data,” Riker interjected, “listen carefully to the *joke*...”

“Ah yes, Sir. I am... all ears?” Riker took a step back from the Ops station and stroked his beard in frustration. Picard couldn’t help but smirk at the interchange taking place between them. He’d seen it played out a hundred times in their nearly three years of service together. He found the commander’s undeterred persistence to be remarkable. The android’s persistence was equally as remarkable, although in a much different way.

“Okay, Data,” Riker said with a serious look in his eye. “A man walks into a bar and says: Ouch!” Picard rolled his eyes and pinched his dimpled chin. *This should be interesting*, he thought. Data looked up at Riker’s twinkling eyes for a moment, then out the viewscreen at the warped starlight. His brow furrowed, the android approximation of a man caught in deep thought — though deep thought for him meant millions of calculations per second.

“Commander,” Data finally said, “I fail to see why humans continue to view personal injury as humorous.”

“Data,” Riker exclaimed, slapping the android on the shoulder, “you got it!”

“Got it, Sir?”

“The joke, Data,” Riker said with exasperation. “You got the joke.”

“The joke? I got the joke?” Data’s brow was again furrowed. “Would now be the appropriate time to laugh, Sir?”

“Oh, by all means,” Riker replied, beaming from ear to ear.

“Perhaps later, Mister Data,” Picard cut in just as his second officer was spreading his mouth open wide. Data promptly closed his mouth, then turned to the Ops panel, looking on as if the entire incident had not even taken place. Riker smiled again before crossing the expansive Bridge to sit in his own wide chair to the right of Picard’s. As he sat down, the captain leaned in closer.

“You know, Number One,” he said quietly, “someday you’re

going to overload his neural net... and then he's going to be yours to babysit." Riker's eyes went wide and his devilish smile returned as their mutual attention was captured by a tone from the Ops console.

"What is it, Mr. Data?" Picard called out.

"Incoming subspace call... for you, Sir." Picard cast Riker another warning look, then jerked his uniform tunic into place with a smile.

"Patch it through to my Ready Room," he said standing. "And Mr. Data... *you* have the Bridge." He glanced back at his first officer and gave him a tight-lipped, sardonic smile.

"Me, Sir?" Data said, swiveling to face the center of the spacious Bridge. Riker glared back at him with a stern face.

"You heard the man," Riker proclaimed, rising and stepping forward. The last thing Picard saw as he entered his ready room was his smiling first officer sitting down at the Ops station, while his android second officer moved uncertainly towards the center of the Bridge.

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"And Mr. Tarses, the next time you feel the urge to run screaming down the corridors in the dead of night, try some of the relaxation techniques I taught you."

"Yes, Ma'am," the young man answered, somewhat embarrassed. Counselor Deanna Troi offered him her usual soft smile and patted him on the shoulder.

"I'll see you next week," she said as he stepped out of her office into the corridor. After the doors at last slid shut, she let out a quiet laugh. The quarter-Vulcan young crewman was having a very difficult time adjusting to life within the confines of a starship. It was fortunate for him that he'd been assigned to a *Galaxy*-class starship and not to one of the smaller class vessels like the *Ambassador's* or the *Excelsior's*.

Deanna placed a hand to her neck and moved her head from side to side, trying to work out some of the tension. It had been a long day and now all she wanted to do was relax. She moved across the room and plopped headlong onto the soft sofa. For a moment, she considered a brief nap, but was interrupted instead by a comm-call from the Bridge.

“*Ops to Counselor Troi...*” Frowning, she reached up and touched her commbadge, then let her arm fall off the edge of the couch to the floor.

“Yes, Will, go ahead.”

“*Deanna, you have an incoming subspace call from Betazed... It's your mother.*” She closed her ebony eyes and shook her head. She figured this day had been too easy.

“Thanks, Will,” she replied, frowning again. “Will you please route it through to my office?”

“*Will do... Riker out.*” Deanna couldn't figure out why in the world Will would be at the Ops station. Where was Data? She let out another sigh, then rose and crossed to her desk. She slid wearily into her chair and pressed the activation button on her desktop computer monitor.

“Hello, Mother.”

“*Ah, Little One... that Will Riker is so charming. I still don't know why you let that one get away...*” Deanna's insides quivered. It was true that she and Will had once had a relationship many years ago back on Betazed, but the fresh young academy graduate could not provide her with the commitment that she'd needed. They both had been way too young, and they both knew it. Perhaps someday she would be with her *Imzadi*, but not today.

“Mother, have you called just to torture me?” Deanna pierced her lips tightly, holding back a thin smile.

“*Oh, Little One, you're so prone to theatrics. I just called to see if your spaceship was still on schedule for its arrival at Betazed.*”

“Mother,” Deanna sighed, shaking her head. “The Trade Agreement Conference is not for another three months. I've already told you, I can't guarantee that the *Enterprise* will be there.” Lwaxana Troi threw her arms up in a wild gesture of consternation. *And she says I'm prone to theatrics*, Deanna thought.

“*Well, I guess I'll just have to talk to Jean-Luc...*” Lwaxana shrugged her bare shoulders, but her own ebony eyes glinted with a faint twinkle of underlying humor.

“Mother,” Deanna chided, “Captain Picard is very busy and you mustn't bother him. He already knows about the conference and will get us there if at all possible.”

*“Oh, Little One,”* Lwaxana said with a soothing laugh. *“You really are wound too tight my Dear. Use that hollow-deck-thingy of yours and visit the mudbaths of the Parallax Colony... they’re simply divine.”* Deanna let out a deep sigh. Her mother was, of course, right. She did need to relax.

“Oh, Mother,” Deanna said softly, “I do look forward to our return to Betazed. Perhaps a perfect opportunity to use up some shore leave...”

*“And bring that charming Will Riker along with you...”*

“Goodbye, Mother.” Lwaxana merely smiled, then blew her daughter a quick kiss just as her image blinked off the screen. Deanna let out another weary sigh. A mudbath didn’t sound like a bad idea after all. Perhaps she would even call on Beverly and persuade that fun-loving, redheaded doctor to come along on the adventure with her.

Feeling suddenly reinvigorated, Deanna jumped up and headed for the door; her floor length blue dress and long dark hair billowing out behind her. As the doors parted and she stepped out into the corridor, her dark eyes caught a momentary glimpse of a gray jumpsuit. And then she found herself sitting flat on the floor.

“Wesley?!” she blurted out with some measure of alarm. The young acting-ensign sat across from her in a daze, still trying to shake the collision out of his mind. He blinked several times, then tried to focus on Deanna’s face.

“Oh, Counselor Troi,” he stammered, “I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t even see you.” He jumped to his feet, then grabbed her by the right forearm and yanked her off the deck. Deanna didn’t know which shoulder to rub first; the one that had been slammed into, or the one that had been wrenched out of place. She instead straightened her dress and pulled the tangles out of her hair.

“Ensign Crusher,” she said sternly, “just where are you headed off to in such a hurry?”

“Uhhh,” he stuttered, “the Bridge, Ma’am. I’ve finished with my studies and would like to put in some time at the helm.” He smiled up at her sheepishly. His smooth, round face bore no sign of ill will and his thoughts carried only the usual mutual feelings of deep respect and latent sexual attraction that were common to a human male teen of his age.

“Would you like to walk along?” Wesley offered, breaking Deanna from her empathic musings.

“Why thank you, Wesley,” she answered, smiling down into his expectant eyes. “I was just going to see your mother, but it can wait. There’s a small mystery on the Bridge that I’d like to solve first.”

“Mystery, Ma’am?” His brow was furrowed in its famous look of childlike puzzlement. She smiled down on him again, then draped her arms over his shoulders.

“Come on,” she said presently and together they headed off for the Bridge.

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“Tea, Earl Grey. Hot.” Picard continued to smile at the recent interchange on the Bridge as the replicator produced a steaming black mug, replete with matching saucer. He took a trial sip of the ancient, musty-smelling tea before crossing over to his large, curvilinear desk. Taking a seat in front of the desktop computer monitor, he pressed its activation button and smiled even wider at the surprise image before him.

*“Hello, Johnny.”* The voice was soft and sweet.

“Well, well, well...” Picard answered. “Captain Marta Batanides, how is life aboard the *Starship Trieste*?” Marta offered a wide smile to mirror his own. Picard couldn’t help but notice a few silver streaks coursing through his former classmates’ once black hair. A few lines spreading out from her eyes. He self-consciously ran a hand over his own bald scalp as she replied to his query.

*“Not quite as luxurious as life aboard your monstrosity, to be sure, but we do manage to get by somehow. How is that dysfunctional robot I loaned you, giving you any trouble?”* Picard laughed out loud; not so much at her joke, but more at the exchange that had taken place out on the Bridge just moments before.

“You should’ve never given him up, Marty. He has become an indispensable member of my crew.”

“Why?” Marta said drolly. *“Did you teach him how to make toast?”* They both laughed together for several long moments before Marta spoke again. *“How long has it been this time, Johnny?”* Picard

let out a sigh and squinted his hazel eyes, looking backwards through time.

“Ohhh,” he breathed, shaking his head. “It couldn’t have been two and a half years ago already? At Utopia Planitia I suppose, just before I took command of the *Enterprise*.”

“*Well, at least your memory hasn’t left you yet, old man.*”

“As you can see,” he said wryly, rubbing his bald scalp again, “other things *have* left me. Now, Captain, what can I do for you today?” He gave her an all-to-knowing smile.

“*Since your recent encounters with the Romulans at Galorndon Core and at Nelvana Three, Starfleet has gotten a little jittery about our neighbors across the way... they’ve ordered me to take the Trieste to the Klingon world Beta Lankal for an intelligence gathering conference with Special Emissary K’Ehleyr.*” Marta pretended to play coy with him. It had always worked in the past, Picard mused, so why not again. Only this time, he decided he would beat her to the punch.

“And I suppose,” he said dryly, “you would like all the information we have on these events.”

“*Well,*” Marta responded, “*anything pertinent at least.*”

“I will have Commander Data prepare a complete report for you at once.” He could not help the dark smile that slowly spread across his features.

“*Oh, good Lord,*” Marta sighed. “*Will I be able to understand it?*”

“Surely you must have a Vulcan or two aboard that ship.”

“*The two do not compare, Captain,*” Marta replied with a thin smile. She reached up and touched her own display screen. “*Thanks, Johnny... until our next encounter.*” With that, her image was gone and Picard felt a momentary pang of regret. He knew a relationship in their younger years would’ve been impossible... but why not now? Nooo, he realized, it was still a dream that would always remain just that, a dream, and always just beyond their reach.

She had her ship and he had his. Who would give up their command for the other? Picard smirked at the conundrum. Even a long-distance relationship would be foolhardy. It had been two and a half years since their last encounter. When would they meet again? Picard let out a heavy sigh. In this line of work, he concluded, ‘perhaps

never again' was always a constant possibility. *Marta Batanides... the sole survivor, the so-called lucky one.*

He took another sip of his now lukewarm tea, then set it down on the polished black surface of his desktop. Rising, he turned slowly and took the several steps over to his personal viewport. He watched quietly as the warped stars stretched slowly away from him into the infinite darkness of deep space. From this vantage point, he would often imagine himself as looking back into the distant recesses of the past.

A choice here, a small sacrifice there. A million tiny events that had brought him to this place and to this time. So many moments that could've gone wrong, and so many more that had gone right. Regrets... a few. But on the whole, he'd been overwhelmingly satisfied with the course his life had taken him. He was the captain of a starship. What other thing could be finer?

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Ten Forward, the luxurious lounge that sat perched on the leading edge of the *Enterprise's* enormous, oval-shaped primary hull. From here, the crew were afforded an unparalleled view of the starry night sky that was deep space. Only now, instead of the myriad of little white pinpoints, the great curved windows revealed a thousand streaks of rainbow-colored light flashing by with incredible speed. A starship at warp.

At times, the breakneck velocity almost made Worf feel giddy. Almost. The Klingon sat alone, staring out the large center window with a satisfied sort of half-grin-half-growl curl to his upper lip. *Once*, he thought, *just once* he would love to stand face to face with the alumglass and roar at the onrushing warp stars. But honor, and a little bit of Starfleet training, would not permit it, so he was resigned instead to just sit and dream about it.

Most were intimidated by the Lieutenant's glower veneer, and as such, he was rarely approached in Ten Forward and often sat alone. But the Klingon did not mind. He often found the crews everyday prattle to be wearisome and uninteresting. The great warrior often missed the company of his own kind, where conversation regaled in glorious

battles of assured victory and great honor.

Yet, the only Klingon to have ever served in Starfleet still felt strangely happy here. There was a great respect within the Empire for the guardians of the Federation. Starfleet had helped defend the Klingon border time and time again from Romulan incursions. Had rendered aide to the outposts laid waste by Romulan disruptor fire. Had worked hand in hand with the High Council to rebuild a devastated economy.

Even Worf himself had been rescued by Starfleet when the Romulans virtually destroyed Camp Khitomer, killing his father and mother. Governor Mogh had been one of the alliance's most ardent supporters. Worf was proud to serve in Starfleet, not only to honor his father's legacy, but to honor his human foster parents as well. Without Starfleet, there would be no peace, and Worf would not likely be alive.

Worf considered all this as the lounge's enigmatic hostess approached him with two small glasses of dark purplish liquid. Very little was known about Guinan's mysterious past. She was an El-Aurian, an exceptionally long-lived species whose homeworld had been destroyed centuries ago in an undisclosed calamity. These quiet, thoughtful people ultimately found refuge in the Federation, but only after having been scattered across half the galaxy.

"All right," Guinan said, proffering one of the glasses to Worf. "Try this..." She slid into the chair across from him and waited with the expectant eyes of a child. Worf picked up the glass and studied the dark liquid for a moment. He was dismayed to hear and feel the *Enterprise* slowly drop out of warp. The dazzling rainbow streaks were quickly replaced by the more familiar sparkle of starpoints.

"What is it?" the Klingon asked, curling his upper lip.

"Just try it," Guinan insisted. She watched the warrior hesitate slightly, then reluctantly take a trial sip. His glower features immediately changed to reflect a mood of pleasurable interest.

"You see," she admonished. "It's an Earth drink... prune juice." Worf studied the liquid again, then took on his usual half-grin-half-growl.

"A warrior's drink," he almost whispered to himself. Guinan looked down at the table with a half-hidden satisfactory smile. Her dark face and dark hands were all that were visible beneath the wine-

colored headdress and robe she wore. Her soft round face was typical of an El-Aurian with the complete absence of eyebrows or any other form of facial hair.

“You know,” she said cautiously, “you always drink alone. It wouldn’t hurt you to seek out a little...” she shrugged sheepishly, “...companionship.” Worf eyed her for a moment before answering.

“I would require a Klingon woman for... companionship.” He tilted his head slightly. “Earth females are too fragile.” He stated this matter-of-factly, as if it were common knowledge. Guinan sat back nonplussed as Worf took another heavy swallow of the prune juice. She then leaned forward with a certain gleam in her eyes.

“Not all of them,” she countered. “There are a few on this ship that would find you...” she paused, searching for the right word, “...*tame*.” Worf threw his head back and let out a great hearty laugh that was reminiscent of his long-dead father’s. He eyed Guinan with doubt.

“Impossible,” he said, sipping at the glass.

“You never know till you try,” she answered plainly. Worf studied the liquid again, marveling at its intense flavor. He then looked up into Guinan’s dark eyes and gave her an uncharacteristic smile.

“Then I will never know.”

“Coward,” she quipped, taunting him with an almost schoolteacher reproach. Worf began to pick up on the game now and stared back at Guinan with a defensive, warning glare. If it had been anyone else, the Klingon would’ve probably killed them where they sat for the blatant insult to his honor. But this was a Federation starship, not a Klingon bird-of-prey, and Worf had grown accustomed to its less restrained lifestyle.

“I was merely concerned for the... *safety* of my crewmates.” Guinan nodded and choked back a laugh. She blinked once and tilted her head, piercing her lips.

“Drink your prune juice,” she said shaking her head. Worf smirked, bringing the glass to his lips; but he was halted by something strange out of the corner of his eye. Frowning, he lowered the glass and stared out the great arched window with a mixture of confusion and growing concern. Guinan eyed him for a moment, then followed his perplexed gaze out to the star-studded blackness of space.

“Lieutenant Worf...” Riker called. *“Report to the Bridge.”*

“On my way,” the Klingon announced with a slap to his commbadge. His eyes darted briefly to meet Guinan’s before he jumped up and headed for the doorway. As he left, Guinan glanced again out the huge window. At first, she did not see it; only the sparkles of starlight filled her view. But as the rest of the relaxing crew members began to take notice, she moved out of her chair to get a closer look.

Standing now at the edge of the alumglass, she could just make out the splotchy, greenish-black outline of the vortex as it slowly grew to blot out the stars. She stared into its black heart and started to get a sickening sensation right down to her very soul. Some-thing about it just did not feel right. She began already to notice the quantum-level changes that she knew no one else on the ship would even be aware of.

“No,” she said, squinting at the phenomenon. The statement was a mixture of disbelief and the desire to stop what was about to happen. But she knew that stopping it would be impossible. She instead concentrated on trying to remember the way it was; the way it should be. It would solely be up to her, and her alone, to make things right. She must remember. The future depended on it.

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“Analysis, Mr. Data.” Picard sat in the command chair and frowned at the phenomenon displayed on the main viewscreen. To his right, Commander Riker’s face held a similar look, as did Counselor Troi’s seated to his left. He heard the turbolift doors swish open behind him and knew without looking that Worf had entered the Bridge. He always felt strangely comforted by this.

“Sensors are reading gravimetric fluctuations, Captain,” Data replied. “Most unusual ones.” The android’s adroit fingers continued to fly across the Ops panel as his positronic multiprocessors tried to make heads or tails of the phenomenon.

“Unusual in what way? Specify.” This from Riker who sat on the edge of his chair, always ready to act at the first sign of trouble. Data’s face crumpled in the android approximation of a confused frown.

“Nothing I have seen before,” was the only answer his neural net could come up with. This brought Picard up out of his seat. If Data had never seen it, chances were, no one had. Picard began to step forward with a growing amount of fascination. Their primary mission was to explore strange new things, but something about this phenomenon portended caution.

“Is it a wormhole?” Picard asked doubtfully.

“Yes and no,” Data replied. “Like a... time displacement. But it does not have a discernable event horizon.” He glanced up at Picard with an uncharacteristic look of confusion painted on his white face. His yellow eyes then darted over to the helm console to his right. Acting-Ensign Crusher stared at his own board equally as perplexed.

“Sir,” Wesley said, “ navigational subsystems are unable to give coordinates on the object.” Data glanced back at the Ops panel and tapped in several commands. Picard now stood in the narrow space between them and continued to stare at the billowing vortex, caught as he was in an almost hypnotic trance. Something inside him still urged caution as he listened to Data’s continuing analysis.

“Confirmed,” Data said in regards to Wesley’s findings. “The phenomenon does not have a definable center or outer edge.” Riker glanced at Deanna briefly, then jumped to his feet. He began to walk forward to join Picard at the front of the Bridge. As he walked, his voice carried a tone of questioning disbelief.

“Are you saying it is, and yet it isn’t there?” He now stood just behind Picard and placed a hand on the back of Wesley’s chair. Data’s face was still frozen in its confused frown. His fingers continued to fly quickly across the Ops panel, still not producing the results that his cybernetic relays wanted. He was finally forced to one conclusion.

“I do not have sufficient information to make an analysis as yet, Commander. The dynamics of the radiation patterns...”

“Captain,” Worf called from the raised tactical station at the rear of the Bridge. Picard slowly awoke from his hypnotic trance, then turned even more slowly to face his Klingon security chief. He had a dangerous feeling of foreboding as the caution growing within him now reached a fevered pitch. Something was not right. There was real danger here.

“Something’s happening,” Worf continued, “a new change in

sensor readings.” He looked up at Picard, who in turn slowly moved back around to stare at the growing threat on the viewscreen.

“Mr. Data,” the captain said with trepidation. His sharp eyes could barely discern an object at the black center of the vortex. A ship? It couldn’t be, he realized. They were the only vessel within a dozen light-years. So what was it?

“Scanning sensors,” Data replied, his face still bent in a frown. His fingers continued to work frantically on the problem as the object became more and more clear to the eye.

*The quantum-level temporal shift registered on no sensors and was felt by no one. The oscillating wave moved backwards and forwards through time and spread across the entire universe simultaneously. It made a slight change in the timeline there, a small alteration here; and a shift in the course of events at one critical moment in particular.*

*The temporal shift left no stone unturned. Entire worlds were destroyed, and new ones created. Lives once lost were reborn; and similarly, lives that once held breath, now ceased to exist. The shift became the embodiment of the ultimate paradox: The future creates the past, the past the future. And now the future and the past were about to collide.*

Picard turned back to his chief of security now that it had become increasingly evident that the object in the center of the vortex was indeed a ship. The dimly lit Bridge was awash with activity as the various armed crew members moved from one tactical station to another. It was their job to continually monitor enemy fleet movements and make battle readiness reports to the captain. They weren’t going to win this war by complacency.

“Lieutenant,” Picard called out. “What are the sensors reading? Is that an enemy vessel?” Lt. Tasha Yar glanced down at her control panel and keyed in several commands. The chief of security then shook her head in frustration.

“I’m getting too much interference, Captain.” Her blue eyes glanced back up at Picard who was slowly turning back around to face the viewscreen. He still did not like this. Could this be some new

enemy weapon to quickly transport their ships from point to point? He briefly considered ordering the ship to Red Alert, but something told him to wait just a few more moments.

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Back in Ten Forward, Guinan stared at the phenomenon for another brief instant before turning back to her work. Her blue robes billowed out behind her as she moved about the crowded lounge. All around her, armed crew members scurried about. They all had very little free time and tried to make the most of it.

Overhead, the overworked comm network was constantly making announcements. For most, it had become an almost subliminal way of life. *Now hear this... Fleet formation briefing in main wardroom at fifteen hundred hours. Doctor Joshua Kim... report to Cetacean Ops. Ensign Thomas... please report to Combat Information Center. Ensign Thomas to CIC.*

Guinan moved from table to table, picking up empty glasses and dishes as she went. But as she walked, an inescapable feeling began to wash over her. There was something she was supposed to remember. She stopped abruptly and started to take notice of the commotion around her. Something about it just didn't feel right. It gave her a sickening sensation deep down inside, right at her very soul.

"This isn't right," she whispered to herself. "It's changed."

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On the Bridge, Picard watched as the vessel emerged fully from the phenomenon. Thankfully, it was not an enemy warship after all. He turned and took the several steps up to sit at the lone command chair just ahead of the primary tactical station. Behind him, Tasha began to make an updated report. Riker stood to her right, looking at the approaching vessel with a menacing stare.

"It's clearing now, Captain," Tasha stated. "Definitely Federation starship... accessing registry."

"Looks like they had a rough ride," Riker thought aloud. Picard didn't feign to give his first officer a response. The pompous ass was

notorious for stating the obvious. Still, he was a damn good officer and Picard knew all too well that good officers were becoming harder and harder to come by these days.

“N-C-C,” Tasha began to announce, “One-Seven-Oh-One... *C.*” She paused now in stunned amazement as everyone else on the Bridge turned to face her. She, for her part, looked out at the approaching starship and spoke in disbelief. “USS *Enterprise.*”

## “...begin Chapter Eighteen.”

MILITARY LOG  
COMBAT DATE 43625.2

WHILE INVESTIGATING AN UNUSUAL RADIATION ANOMALY, THE *ENTERPRISE* HAS ENCOUNTERED WHAT COULD ALMOST BE CALLED A GHOST FROM ITS OWN PAST.

THE *ENTERPRISE-C*; THE IMMEDIATE PREDECESSOR TO THIS BATTLESHIP.

The activity on the Bridge had resumed as Picard made his rounds from tactical station to tactical station. Despite the strange occurrence, there was still a war on and there was always much to be done. He slowly moved back towards the command chair as Data prepared his updated analysis. Picard began to sense a growing uneasiness coming from within regarding their new visitors.

“Sensors confirm design and specifications, Captain,” Data stated. “Analysis of hull and engine materials conform to engineering patterns and methods of that time period.”

“But that cruiser,” Wesley said, shaking his head, “was destroyed with all hands over twenty years ago.” He looked over at Data who looked back at the young ensign with the flat, emotionless features of an android.

“Presumed destroyed,” he countered. “The *Enterprise-C* was last seen near the Klingon outpost Narendra Three exactly twenty-two years, three months, and four days ago.” Picard stepped down off the command level to stand between them. He continued to have a sense that there was still something not quite right about the entire situation.

“Now they’re here,” Riker added from the rear of the Bridge.

“Has it been adrift for all those years,” Picard mused, “or has it traveled through time?” Data’s neural net began a calculation of probabilities and came up with some startling conclusions.

“Time travel is a possibility, Captain,” Data answered, still accessing the historical data stored within him. “If that hypothesis is

correct, the phenomenon we have just encountered would be a temporal rift in space.”

“A rift?” Picard asked, facing his second officer.

“Possibly the formation of a Kerr Loop from superstring material. It would require high-energy interactions in the vicinity for such a structure to be formed. The rift is certainly not stable, Captain,” Data warned. “It could collapse at any time.”

“Captain,” Tasha interjected. “I am able to scan the interior of the ship now, Sir.” Picard turned and climbed the four steps up to the command level. He then moved around behind the command chair to join Tasha and Commander Riker at the primary tactical station. He glanced down at her readouts as she began a list of her findings.

“Heavy damage to warp field nacelles and hull bearing struts. Internal spaceframe...” She paused as a new reading captured her attention. “Lifesigns, Captain,” she said with growing excitement. “Readings are sporadic... it looks like they have massive casualties, but some are still alive.”

“Bridge to Sickbay...” Riker announced, looking up at the ceiling, “emergency teams... standby transporter rooms.” It was all wartime shorthand, but each member of the crew understood it. They had heard it all time and again throughout this entire bloody campaign. But what they heard next, they never expected to hear.

“Belay that order, Doctor,” Picard almost shouted. Riker and Yar both looked at the captain with shock. But it was the commander who responded with consternation in his usual sharp piercing tone.

“Respectfully,” he began, voice rising, “if I may suggest, regardless of where they came from, they are here now and they need our help.” *Such a pompous ass*, Picard thought, *so brash and quick to act*. He needed leavening. But unfortunately, the nature of this war would not allow time for such handholding. Perhaps if things had been different, Riker’s zeal could’ve been channeled in more productive ways.

“Commander,” Picard intoned, “if that ship has traveled into the future, we could be dealing with variables that will alter the flow of *our* history.” It was a stern but simple warning, and he hoped that it would sink through his first officer’s thick skin of arrogance. They both glared at each other a moment before an alarm from Tasha’s console re-

attracted their attention.

“*Enterprise-C* is sending out a distress call, Sir,” Tasha reported. “Audio, only...”

“Unh-huh,” Picard grunted as a frail, but still confident female voice entered his Bridge. He listened carefully to her every word.

“*This is Captain Garrett of the Starship Enterprise to any Federation ship... We have been attacked by Romulan warships and require immediate assistance. We’ve lost warp drive... life support is failing.*” It was a desperate plea, and Picard knew now that he had no choice but to act. A distress call was a distress call, no matter what the risk.

“There’s no record of the Romulans ever assaulting the *Enterprise-C*,” Riker stated with a puzzled look on his face. Picard took this, and so many other things, into consideration as he moved around the arched tactical station and stepped over to the command chair. He still could not shake the feeling that this all seemed wrong somehow.

“Voice message has ended, Captain,” Tasha announced. “I’m only receiving their automated distress signal now.” She looked down at her captain who looked back at her, silently weighing his options. He had little choice but to act, albeit reluctantly.

“Open a hailing frequency,” he instructed. A tone from Tasha’s station signaled an open channel. “This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Federation...” *damn*, he thought, then corrected himself, “...of, uh, a Federation starship. Standby to receive emergency teams.”

He then looked at Riker and spoke softly. “Commander, we will handle this one step at a time. Stabilize their power systems, attend to their injured... and *avoid* all discussions of where and *when* they are.” Riker nodded as Picard turned to look out at the heavily damaged starship on his viewscreen.

“Aye, Sir,” Riker stated. “Lieutenant,” he said to Yar. She nodded and secured her station, then began moving across the Bridge to join the commander at the turbolift.

“Captain,” Wesley called from the helm. “Message coming in from Starfleet monitor stations. Enemy battle cruisers headed towards this sector.” Picard let out a sigh. They were in a vulnerable position and he didn’t like it. It was far too dangerous to stay in one place for

very long. But they couldn't just abandon the crippled ship and its hapless crew. Time truly was of the essence here.

“Battle alert, Mister Crusher. Condition Yellow.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Commander Will Riker had been in many battles, but he had never seen such woeful destruction on a starship. He could smell the scorched flesh even as his body materialized on the darkened Bridge of the *Enterprise-C*. Fires burned all around him, and the air was thick with smoke. What little else he could see was death. Maimed bodies were spread around the command center at odd and unnatural angles. None were moving.

He continued to look around as the rest of the away team fanned out. The redheaded doctor, Beverly Crusher, began to scan the various bodies looking for someone... anyone who might yet be saved. But Riker knew already the prognosis would be grim. He stepped up onto the slightly elevated command level and approached the captain's chair. He was surprised to find its occupant still breathing, albeit faintly.

“Captain Garrett?!” He moved in closer, shining his palmlight down over her features. It cast dreadful shadows across a careworn face that had seen much devastation. Her nose was bleeding, her face smudged black with soot. Her body moved spasmodically, fighting for air.

“Yes,” she said faintly, turning her head, seemingly surprised to hear the voice of another living being.

“I'm Commander William Riker. Our emergency teams are onboard your ship... Doctor,” he called, glancing through the smoke and darkness to Beverly as she approached. She immediately knelt down next to Will and began scanning the captain with her tricorder. They were not a moment too soon, she quickly realized.

“The rest of the Bridge crew is dead,” Beverly reported grimly. The Commander could see Captain Garrett's entire body wilt with the news. He could not imagine the horrible despondency of being the only one left alive. The guilt, the remorse, the utter sense of loss. There was certainly contention aboard his own starship, but he never wished for ill will to come to any of them.

“She has a bad fracture,” Beverly stated, “and serious internal injuries... I’m gonna have to get her back to the *Enterprise*.” She continued to take readings as Garrett twitched involuntarily.

“To where?!” the Captain said with a whisper.

“We’ll explain that later,” Riker answered, trying to cover for Beverly’s flub. If they were lucky, the captain in her state of shock would likely forget the comment.

“You’ll explain now, Commander,” Garrett ordered, not to be dissuaded.

“We’re from a Federation starship. We answered your distress call. Your ship is in good hands, but we need to get you to *our* Sickbay.” He hoped that that would be enough to comfort her long enough for them to get her off the ship. By the look on Beverly’s face, Riker could tell that the captain had very little time left. If necessary, he knew they would have to transport her against her will.

But instead, Garrett nodded. “Very well,” she whispered, resigning herself to the care of others. Wasting no time, Beverly quickly rose to her feet and tapped her commbadge.

“Crusher to Transporter Room... two to beam directly to Sickbay.”

“*Standby to transport...*” Riker stood back as the two women began to shimmer into two separate columns of energy, then disappear. Satisfied, he moved over to join his chief engineer at the forward tactical console. Even despite the fires, the temperature of the shattered command center was already dipping towards the freezing mark, the air becoming stale. Before long, the icy depths of deep space would render the ship uninhabitable.

“It’s pretty bad, Commander,” Geordi LaForge said, shaking his head. “Looks like they were in a hell of a fight.”

“If you can’t stabilize life support, we’re going to have to evacuate the ship.”

LaForge shook his head. “Nah,” he said, “I think I can do it. I’ll have to get to Engineering though.” Riker always admired Geordi’s optimism. Throughout every bloody campaign, the engineer had always managed to piece their own *Enterprise* back together somehow. Riker had no doubt that LaForge would do no less than the miraculous here as well. He just hoped there was enough time.

“LaForge to Damage Control Team Alpha... meet me on Engineering Level Three.” Geordi nodded to Riker, then quickly moved across the Bridge to the turbolift. As he left, Riker bent over and tried to recover some of the tactical readouts. But it was no use; there was still no power, and the computer was more than likely fried. Frustrated, he straightened and turned to Tasha who approached him at a jog.

“Commander,” she said with concern, but their mutual attention was suddenly diverted by a muffled cough coming from the front corner of the Bridge. Turning quickly, they both moved through the smoke to that section. Using their palmlights, they scanned the darkness in vain, looking for any signs of life. But at first, all they could see was a large pile of rubble and debris that had fallen down from the collapsed ceiling.

Presently however, the rubble shifted slightly; and then someone began to push their way free. Without hesitation, Tasha and Will jumped in, pulling huge chunks of twisted metal and plastic away from the latest apparent survivor. Finally, the hapless individual crawled out into the open. Placing a hand on the young man’s shoulder, Riker introduced himself first.

“Commander William Riker...”

“Lieutenant Castillo,” the man gasped. “Helmsman.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Geordi LaForge emerged from the turbolift on Deck Twenty-six; two decks above Main Engineering. There, his damage control team waited patiently. This was Team Alpha, Geordi’s own handpicked elite. They were the best at what they did, and today, they were certainly going to have to live up to that claim. The *Enterprise-C*, from stem to stern, was a certified disaster area.

The *Enterprise-D* had itself been in a number of serious engagements, the most recent at Archer IV, where they had barely escaped with their lives. Their losses had been heavy, the damage severe. Still, it did not compare to what Geordi was seeing here aboard the *Enterprise-C*. If the ship had remained in battle but another few moments, the destruction would’ve quite literally been complete.

“All right,” Geordi said to the assembled members. “You all know the drill... Life Support is our first priority, followed by the shields. Then we’ll concentrate on the weapons and main power.” Everyone nodded in unison. There were ten members in the group, each with their own specialty. Ensign Sonya Gomez was an expert in warp drive, and was also Geordi’s favorite rising star. As the rest of the team spread out, he moved over to join her at a diagnostic station.

“Wow, Commander,” Sonya said. “I’ve never seen anything like this. The hatch on the dilithium crystal chamber just... *failed*.”

“I’ve seen it,” Geordi nodded solemnly, “just once before, and it was messy. How long until we can get down there?” Sonya typed in several commands, then studied the readouts.

“It looks like radiation levels have dropped below the maximum safe range... but I would recommend limited exposure.” She turned to face him. “No more than a half-hour.”

“Okay,” Geordi nodded, “let’s go.”

When they stepped out of the turbolift into Engineering, Geordi’s VISOR assailed his visual cortex with an electromagnetic storm. Blind since birth, the device fit over his eyes like a pair of sunglasses, transmitting visual and spectral data directly to his brain. And Engineering was awash with such data. He staggered for a moment as his mind struggled to sort through the noise. Sonya grabbed his arm, but he waved her off.

Gingerly, they began to pick their way through the damage and destruction. A body here, a twisted hunk of metal there. They could both feel the ambient warmth on their skin from the radiation, almost like a tingling sensation. As they rounded a corner, they came face to face with a grisly discovery. Splayed flat out on the master systems display table, a charred and blackened corpse still smoldered and smoked, gruesomely pinned beneath the armored hatch cover from the darkened warp core.

Startled, Sonya jumped back and buried her face in Geordi’s chest. He too was forced to look away briefly. Gathering themselves, they finally stepped forward and skirted around the edge of the table. They could feel an intense heat emanating still from the heavy hatch. The explosion must’ve been extraordinary. At long last, they made their

way to the chief engineer's office and slipped inside.

"Well," Sonya said, tapping at some displays. "It looks like antimatter containment is stable for now... but I don't know for how long." Geordi nodded in agreement.

"We better get somebody down there right away," he added. His fingers passed over a few different displays and then he felt the air become suddenly cooler and seemingly, a little fresher. "Looks like Lieutenant Dax was able to stabilize life support," he mused.

"I can get us partial power in about fifteen minutes," Sonya reported, "but the warp core could take days."

"What about the computers?"

"The engineering computer has been completely burned out, but it shouldn't take long to bring the primary computer back online."

"Good," Geordi nodded. "And the weapons and shields?"

Sonya let out a great sigh through tightly pinched lips. She studied a few more readings, then shook her head conclusively.

"I think," she smirked, "I'll leave that in Commander Tuvok's capable hands." Geordi smiled down at her as she smiled up at him. If things had been different, if there hadn't been a war on, Geordi might have considered dating the pleasant and attractive young woman. But neither one of them knew from one day to another where death would strike next. They were living in very uncertain times.

Geordi glanced out through the alumglass at the darkened and lifeless warp core. Next to him, Sonya studied more readings, then tried to reroute power from one of the ship's fusion reactors. As she did so, Geordi slowly moved out of the office and cautiously approached the dilithium crystal chamber; a great frown growing on his face. He reached up and adjusted his VISOR, trying to get a better take on just what he saw.

"Sonya," he called. "Come and take a look at this... and bring a tricorder." In a matter of moments, she appeared by his side, arm outstretched, scanning device at the ready.

"What is it, Geordi?" she asked frowning.

"Scan these latches," he said, peering closer. "Tell me what you see." She immediately began passing the tricorder in front of the now torn and brittle latches. As she scanned, her face began to show an increasing level of confusion. It matched the very look coming from

Geordi.

“What the hell?” she whispered. “Those look like... *handprints*. They carry a damaging chemical signature that is weakening the molecular cohesion within the latches. What the hell happened here, Commander?” she said, glancing around behind her at the destruction and the still smoldering corpse.

“Damned if I know, Ensign,” Geordi said softly, “damned if I know. But if I didn’t know better, I’d say that this looks like sabotage.”

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Picard stepped out onto a Bridge that was always filled with activity. At least a dozen armed officers stood watch at all times inside the expansive command center of the Federation’s largest and most powerful battleship. Strategy took coordination, and coordination took a lot of people. They all worked together to bring well-planned strategy to realization. It was becoming increasingly obvious that they could not win this war by any other means.

“Away team reporting in, Captain,” Data announced as Picard breezed by.

“On screen,” he instructed, bounding up the four steps to the command level. He spun on his heels and seated himself as a yeoman handed him a tactical report. “Go ahead, Commander,” Picard said, scanning over the report. He did not even bother to look at the viewscreen; simply knew that his first officer’s stern image would be there sneering at him.

“*We’ve stabilized life support,*” Riker responded. “*Mr. LaForge is working on restoring the main power coupling, but that’ll take time. It’s a real mess down here, Sir.*” That last statement was made with an even sterner voice in hopes of gaining his commanding officer’s attention.

“Survivors?” Picard intoned, still reading over the report.

“*One hundred twenty-five.*”

“Recommendations?”

“*I’d hate to have to scrap her,*” Riker answered plainly. “*Starfleet could certainly use another ship... even if she is old.*”

“Agreed,” Picard nodded, looking up for the first time. He

handed the report back to the yeoman, then looked Riker squarely in the eye. “But we can’t stay in this area too long. You have nine hours. If you can get her underway by then, we’ll escort her to Starbase One-oh-five. If not... we’ll evacuate the survivors and destroy the ship.”

“*Understood, Sir,*” Riker replied. But Picard could tell by the cock of his head and the gleam in his eye that his first officer didn’t like that last order. With every passing hour though, Picard knew that their options were dwindling. It would only be a matter of time before enemy warships zeroed in on their position. Staying in one spot would mean certain death for them all.

“Keep me posted... Picard out.” Riker’s image vanished and was replaced by the badly damaged *Enterprise-C* set against a backdrop of stars. Picard studied its blackened shape, so reminiscent of the graceful forms and lines of his own starship. It *would* be a shame to scrap her, but the shattered hulk was too big and its spaceframe far too brittle to be towed at any measurable warp speed. Either sitting still or hardly moving, the two vessels would be an easy target for the scores of marauding enemy warships.

Picard let out a heavy sigh. He was about to study another report, but his attention was drawn instead to the front corner of the Bridge. There, Guinan had just stepped off the turbolift and now looked all around the room in great confusion. Her face also held a little bit of fear, coupled with a deep intensity of purpose. It alarmed him, not just because of her strange behavior, but also because she had never before had cause to set foot on the Bridge.

“Guinan?!” Picard said with a questioning stare. His mind was filled with a mixture of emotions, from confusion, to surprise, to continuing alarm. She looked up at him and for the first time acted as if she knew someone. She quickly glided up the four steps and moved within inches of his chair. Leaning in close, she spoke in a hushed, guarded tone.

“We need to talk,” she said, still glancing around her. “Somehow this... this is all wrong. This is not the way it’s supposed to be.”

~ ~ ~ ~

“Nine hours?!” Sonya let out a deep sigh and looked at Geordi. They now stood on Deck Eighteen; at least what was left of Deck Eighteen. A plasma fire had incinerated everything except the duranium bulkheads and the underlying floor grating. She found it eerie to see the skeleton of the ship exposed in such a way, plus be able to look up through and spy on the other crew members working above her on Deck Seventeen.

“Apparently,” Geordi answered, “the Captain feels that we’re in danger if we stay here too long... and he’s *probably* right.”

“Yeah, but nine hours?” she countered. “Does he have any idea what kind of damage we’re looking at over here?”

“Ours is not to wonder why, Ensign, ours is but to do or die.”

“Well I can do without the dying part,” she said with a smile. Geordi smiled back, but inside, they were both hiding the grim reality that was the war. Thousands *were* dying every day on bloody battlefields all across the Federation. And as their defenses weakened, new adversaries cropped up almost daily to share in their own part of the spoils. The losses were already staggering.

“How long before you’re finished here?” Geordi enquired as Sonya struggled with a jammed maglock.

“Actually,” she grunted as the device came free, “we should be ready now... With your permission, Sir.” Geordi nodded and they both took several steps back. Sonya looked things over one final time, then reached up and tapped her commbadge.

“Ensign Gomez to *Enterprise-D*... Transporter Room Three.”

“*Go ahead, Ensign.*”

“We are ready for transport.”

“*Understood. Coordinates locked... standby.*”

“Wait!” Geordi almost shouted, adjusting his VISOR. He stepped forward and began to study more closely the gaping hole in the side of the starboard power coupling. For the second time since he had boarded this ship, confusion washed over his face. Glancing at him with concern, Sonya moved in closer, looking now at the torn casing.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I’m seeing... what looks like... ultritrium residue.”

“Ultritrium?” Sonya said skeptically. “But that... that’s an explosive!”

“Exactly.” Geordi spoke clearly so there would be no mistake.

“Something very strange is going on here, Commander.” She looked at him with a questioning stare. He nodded faintly, still studying the coupling. This too was clearly a case of sabotage. But sabotage aboard a Federation starship, especially of this era? It was almost beyond the realm of possibility. At that time, the galaxy was in a state of relative peace – the *Golden Age* they called it. He couldn’t even begin to comprehend a possible motive.

“Better send this to Cargo Bay Eight for analysis.” Sonya nodded lightly, equally at a loss as to what to think next. It simply did not make any sense. She tilted her head up and spoke clearly.

“Transporter Room Three... Did you copy that?”

“We copy, standby for transport...” Sonya and Geordi both took a step away as the entire power transfer conduit began to dematerialize before them. In a matter of seconds, it was gone, leaving only an empty channel within the bulkheads of four full decks. Nodding with a smile, Geordi looked down at the young ensign with a certain amount of pride in his eye. She winked, tapping her commbadge.

“Gomez to Replication Center Five...”

“Ensign Hayes here.”

“How you guys coming with my new conduit?” Geordi couldn’t help but smirk at Sonya’s unique approach to things. Every member of the engineering staff simply loved to work with her. Her easygoing charm and wit had made her an instant celebrity. Her out-going personality was warm and comfortable — a welcome relief from the horrors of war.

“It’s all set, Ma’am. Take it away.”

“Transporter Room Three... Do you have a lock?”

“Confirmed.”

“Energize.” Geordi smiled again as a gleaming new conduit appeared within the empty channel, looking strangely out of place in its scorched and blackened new home. Sonya immediately stepped forward and snapped the maglocks into place, then brushed off her hands in a satisfied sort of way. She smiled up at Geordi and blinked several times.

“Well done, Ensign,” he said, smirking and shaking his head.

“Now you better get to work on that warp core.” She cast him a withering, dark stare, then bent down and picked up her tool kit. Standing and turning to leave, she tossed a teasing look over her shoulder.

“No rest for the remarkable,” she said with a laugh.

“*Lieutenant Dax to Commander LaForge...*” Chuckling, Geordi reached up and tapped his commbadge.

“Go ahead, Jadzia.”

“*Sir, we’ve just completed our analysis of the area surrounding the port-forward reaction control thruster.*”

“And let me guess,” Geordi inferred, “you’ve come up with some very startling conclusions.”

“*Uh, yes, Sir,*” Jadzia answered, somewhat mystified. “*The blast patterns are not consistent with Romulan disruptor fire. In fact, all of the data seems to suggest that the thruster was destroyed by some kind of forced internal overload.*”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Please join Ensign Gomez in Engineering... LaForge out.” By this time, Sonya had stopped and was facing Geordi with that same puzzled stare. They both looked at each other for several long moments sharing in each other’s confusion. Someone had played a dangerous game aboard this starship and had obviously won. And now Geordi had every intention of finding out whom... *and why.*

~ ~ ~ ~

“But you must have some idea how things have changed.” Picard and Guinan now stood in his ready room. Surrounding them, numerous tactical displays showed the position of the entire Federation Starfleet. And encroaching from all sides, the enemy had already laid claim to nearly half the worlds once considered free. It was a grim reality that men like Picard had to face every day. It had never been easy being on the losing side.

In front of him, Guinan was trying to explain the strange feelings she was having. But each time she tried, she came up short. Her eyes kept darting about the room, and her face bore a heavy frown. She almost had the look of a caged animal, and it was beginning to

worry the captain. They'd been friends for many years, and he had never once seen her like this. She continued to speak with increasing frustration that bordered on panic.

"I look at things, I look at people and..." she glanced around the room again, "...they just don't *feel* right."

"What things? What people?" Picard insisted. Guinan let out a sigh and looked him in the eyes.

"You," she said plainly. "Your uniform... the Bridge."

"What's the matter with the Bridge?"

"It's not right!" she answered, shaking her head in continued frustration. Picard was becoming agitated, mostly because of his own increasing frustration.

"It's the same Bridge," he stated tersely. "Nothing has changed."

"I know that," Guinan said flatly. "I also know that it's wrong."

Picard sighed heavily and glared at her, trying to be understanding. He'd always trusted Guinan's instincts in the past; it had even saved his life a couple times. But what she was saying now was completely beyond his comprehension. Why now, after all these years, would everything be so suddenly wrong?

"What else," he said, deciding to indulge her. She gave him a strangely curious look before answering.

"Families... there should be children on this ship."

"*What?!?*" Picard almost laughed. He looked at her as if she were daft. "Children on the *Enterprise*? Guinan, we're at *war!*"

"No we're **NOT**," she shot back, then softened. "At least we're not *supposed* to be. This is not a ship of war," she said quietly, "this is a ship of peace."

Picard began to turn, then glanced quickly back into her eyes. Turning away again, he took several steps forward considering what she'd just said. *Peace*... now that was a word he hadn't heard in a very long time. Could it be possible that all of this was a result of the *Enterprise-C*'s arrival here? And if peace was a possibility, wasn't it worth taking a few risks? He spun back around and approached her with a quizzical stare.

"What you're suggesting..."

"I'm **NOT** suggesting," she said sternly. "That ship from the

past is *not* supposed to be here... It's *got* to go back.”

“...begin Chapter Nineteen.”

Doctor Beverly Crusher was worried. But that was increasingly becoming a state of mind for her as the war raged on and on and on and the daily casualty reports continued to mount. These day-to-day accounts often listed the dead in the *millions*. Their enemy did not take prisoners; the populations of entire worlds were simply exterminated from orbit. The losses had gone far beyond staggering for far too long.

But she knew — everyone knew — that little else could be done except fight... fight or face extinction. The once fun-loving carefree doctor was now finding it harder and harder to keep her hands from trembling. The ravages of war visited her sickbay far too often. It was but recently on Archer IV alone that death had come to no less than ten million and the *Enterprise* herself was forced to flee in defeat.

As Chief Medical Officer, Beverly had had the grim honor of signing nearly a thousand death certificates that day... a full one-sixth of the crew. Yet, in spite of all this, she still had much greater cause to worry. Her son Wesley had only just recently completed the accelerated Combat Training Program at Starfleet Academy. At the harrowing age of seventeen, he was now a Bridge officer on the front lines; a dangerous position to be sure... their enemy did not take prisoners.

Beverly's heart screamed against her mind that her only son was still far too young to participate in these, the horrors of war. To her, he was still little more than a child. But her mind also knew that millions of young men and women just like him were fighting for the survival of the Federation on a battlefield that stretched across thousands of light-years. They were all fighting for their very existence. All of them, young and old alike... it was fight or face extinction.

Yet, deep down, Beverly felt that Wesley should somehow be excluded from this living nightmare. He was her son, her only son, and she didn't know if she could stand to lose him just as she'd lost Jack. Killed in the line of duty. There was nothing more ominous or more terrifying, especially now... the losses had gone far beyond staggering for far too long.

And now her sickbay was again filled to capacity. This time with the crew of a starship that did not even belong to this time. A crew

that knew not of the ravages of this war. A crew that in their time had enjoyed nothing but an era of peace. She pitied them now in their newfound predicament and hoped that perhaps a way could be found to send them all back. Wistfully, Beverly wished that she could send Wesley back with them. Back to peace.

Face fraught with worry, the hapless doctor now stood over the biobed of the fortunate captain of that misplaced starship. It had been a close call with this one. Garrett had arrested once on the operating table, but was now awake and alert and full of questions. With the wonders of modern medicine, the formidable woman was making remarkable progress and was already anxious to leave her bed. Beverly had left the surgical support frame in place over her patient for just that very reason.

“Boost the level of tricordrazine,” she said to Nurse Sanchez, then dropped her blue eyes down to the captain’s face. “Try to relax.”

But the captain still continued to squirm against the overlying support frame. Overhead, the beleaguered comm network continued to work overtime. *Doctor Selar... Report to null-G ward, STAT. Doctor Selar... Report to null-G ward, STAT. Chief O’Brien... Please report to the Battle Bridge. Chief O’Brien to the Battle Bridge.*

Beverly turned her head as the Sickbay doors parted to reveal the captain of this particular starship, Jean-Luc Picard. The captain and doctor had known each other for many years – in fact, Picard had even introduced the young Beverly Howard to an even younger Jack Crusher in what now seemed like a lifetime ago. As one time First Officer and best friend, Jack’s death had hit especially close to home for Picard as well. It was a morbid bond that Beverly and Jean-Luc would share for the rest of their lives.

Picard glanced briefly around the overcrowded facility before treading warily over to join Beverly beside the biobed of her restless patient. Sadly, the two close friends rarely spoke anymore. Months upon months of deprived sleep and long hours had left them both weary, with little time nor desire for socialization. They were slowly growing apart and were too tired to care. Still the morbid bond remained, and with a brief glance, each could see it in the other’s eyes.

Picard then gazed into the almond eyes of his counterpart from another era and another *Enterprise*. He could see there a kindred spirit,

could sense a common bond based upon experience. They were commanders of a starship. But not just any starship. Whatever the letter, whatever the time period, the *Enterprise* was legend, and her captains legendary. For a moment, Picard was speechless.

After an instant of awed silence, he finally managed an introduction. "I'm Captain Jean-Luc Picard..."

"Rachel Garrett... how's my ship?" The woman's face was still covered with soot, her upper lip encrusted with dried blood from her nose. She continued to push against the surgical support frame as if trying to break free from some sort of criminal bondage. Even so, like any good captain, her primary thoughts were concerned only with the safety of her starship. Picard respected this as he moved in closer.

"The support systems are being restored... we are continuing repairs."

"Where did you come from?" she asked. "We weren't picking up any other Federation ships in this sector." Picard glanced cautiously at Beverly, whose worried eyes were trained on her patient. When Garrett followed Picard's gaze, Beverly quickly looked away. But the caution was evident in her eyes as well, and this did not escape Garrett's sharp scrutiny. She looked back at Picard, demanding answers.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Picard asked this with carefully measured trepidation. Garrett looked at him as if he were daft.

"We were answering the distress signal..."

"Distress signal?"

"You must have heard it," she said matter-of-factly. "From the Klingon outpost... Narendra Three." Garrett's brow began to furrow in confusion. She glanced at Beverly, whose face remained impassive, then back to Picard. Slowly, she began to come to a sickening realization. These people had no idea what she was talking about. The captain began to feel suddenly very alone. By habit alone, her mind reached out for Spencer, only to come back with emptiness.

"But you didn't, did you," she whispered. She glanced up at the ceiling, then around the rest of the expansive medical facility. "This... this Sickbay, I've never seen anything like it, even on a starbase. And your uniforms..." she paused. "What ship is this, Captain?"

Picard again gave Beverly that cautious look. He had not even considered the obvious differences in their uniforms. Garrett wore the

old-style red field jacket with black trousers that had been the Starfleet standard for nearly seventy years. Picard and Beverly now wore the modern, one-piece jumpsuit that was both more comfortable, and more practical. Even the age-old design of the communicator had changed in the last fifteen years. Indeed, there had been many changes since Garrett's time.

Beverly gazed into Picard's war-weary eyes for an instant, then blinked softly. She felt sorry for her old friend in what she knew he now must do. Inform a proud and legendary starship captain that her life and career had been displaced by twenty-two years of history. It was almost as if the poor woman had just awoken from a two-decade long coma, only to find that everything she had ever known had passed with time.

Beverly stared into Garrett's eyes with compassion. "Please, try to be still," she said softly, then turned and moved away. Garrett's frustration quickly turned to anger. She raised her head up fully off the biobed and shot Picard a sharp, piercing look.

"I must insist," she said hotly, "what ship?" Picard breathed a heavy sigh, then sat down on an adjacent stool and leaned in even closer.

"You are aboard the *Enterprise*, Captain," he said gravely, "one-seven-oh-one... *D*." Garrett dropped her head back onto the biobed and drew in a sharp breath of air. She felt a quiver growing inside her that she could not stop. The quiver nearly became a panic as Picard continued.

"You have come twenty-two years into the future."

"Twenty-two years..." she whispered. She rolled her head over and closed her eyes, not wanting to believe. But it all made perfect sense. She knew of Picard, of course. He had been a close friend of Marta Batanides. And now here he was in the flesh, only much, much older. It had been only but two weeks ago that his name had come up during that fateful staff briefing. *Two weeks ago*, Garrett thought. Now it was twenty-two years and two weeks.

"Does my crew know yet?" she asked, opening her eyes and turning back to him.

"No."

"I must tell them," she said softly. "I owe them that."

“If you wish,” Picard answered with obvious reservations, “I could see that they’re informed.”

“Is there some reason they should not be told?” Her voice carried a slight edge to it that Picard was quick to note. He knew that there could be nothing but complete truth with this woman. Would he expect any less? He hoped he would never have cause to find out. He tried to answer her as succinctly as possible.

“I am concerned that, if you return to your own time with knowledge of the future...”

“Return to the battle?!” she almost shouted, cutting him off. “We barely escaped with our *lives*. If we returned, we’d be destroyed.” Maybe for Picard, she knew, the attack at Narendra had been twenty-two years ago. Just another page in history. But for her, the memories of her starship burning in space were less than two hours old. For her, nearly everyone she had ever loved had literally been killed right before her very eyes just moments before she found herself here.

“Have you any idea how this happened?” Picard asked. Garrett shook her head and narrowed her eyes, not really wanting to relive the memories as they flashed before her mind’s eye. Her voice began to quiver as she tried to answer him. There was still a piercing emptiness in her skull where Spencer Stadi had once been.

“There were...” she whispered faintly. “There was... a fierce volley of photon torpedoes. We were hit. A... bright light, and then here.”

“It is possible,” Picard explained, “that this exchange of fire was the catalyst for the formation of a temporal rift. History has no record of your battle with the Romulans.”

“We were responding to a distress call,” Garrett said desperately, her head again raised up off the biobed, “from the Klingon outpost on Narendra Three. The Romulans were attacking it. *We engaged them*, but there were four warbirds...” The captain’s eyes were wide with a mixture of fury, frustration, and near panic. She continued to push against the surgical support frame in her desperation. Picard looked down on her sadly.

“The Narendra Three outpost was destroyed.” He let out another deep sigh. “It is... regrettable... that you did not succeed. A Federation starship rescuing a Klingon outpost might have averted

twenty years of war.”

Garrett closed her eyes and let her head fall back onto the biobed. She could not help but wonder how they had gone wrong. Her entire crew had worked so hard and sacrificed so much just so this catastrophe would never take place. And now, here they were, with their worst nightmares realized. Fifty years of fragile peace had unraveled all because her one little ship had failed to act.

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Back aboard the *Enterprise-C* things were already looking a whole lot better. Main power had been restored and the air cleansed. All over the ship, the gruesome task of collecting and cataloging roughly five hundred bodies had been conducted with remarkable efficiency. It was another grim fact of war: the *Enterprise-D* morticians were experts at what they did. They unfortunately had had much practice.

On the Bridge, even the scattered piles of debris had been cleared away and most of the computer monitors were functioning normally again. In a routine spacewalk, the hull fracture near the front corner of the command center had been permanently sealed, as were similar cracks throughout the rest of the heavily damaged spaceframe. In the modern era, damage control had become a carefully practiced art.

Commander Will Riker sat in the command chair and studied the reports from the various repair teams scurrying about the ship. He was pleased to see that Geordi was, as usual, far ahead of schedule and the ship could possibly be underway within a matter of a few hours. He was, however, troubled about the damaged warp core. The chief engineer would not elaborate over the comm network but insisted instead that he talk to the commander about the problem in person; and in private if possible.

So, with some irritation, Riker was resigned to just sit and wait. Something he did not do well. Behind him, on the Bridge's upper level, Lt. Tasha Yar had been overseeing repairs to the ship's tactical systems. After a brief checkup in Sickbay, a soot covered Richard Castillo had been more than eager to assist the attractive security chief

in her endeavors. He was not entirely successful in hiding his almost immediate attraction to the woman either.

Like him, her eyes were a piercing blue. And he had always had a weakness for blondes, though this time it somehow felt different. Tasha was strong and vibrant, with a spark that did not seem to give up. Over the past hour and a half, he had strangely found himself hopelessly falling for her. But she continued to remain distant, and kept him at arm's length. It had been but moments ago that he had finally found out why.

"I still can't quite make myself believe it," he said to Tasha. "Twenty-two years?!" Tasha pretended not to hear as she turned away from a science console to face him.

"I'm reading forty percent on forward shields," she stated. "What do you have on aft?"

"Forty percent," he answered, glancing over his shoulder at Cicely's console. Tasha shook her head with dissatisfaction.

"That won't cut it," she said under her breath, then turned to face the front of the Bridge. "Commander," she called to the center seat, "advise Lieutenant LaForge that shields are below minimum."

"Acknowledged," Riker nodded. Tasha skirted around Castillo and moved over to the Ops station. Kneeling before it, she began working on its internal circuitry. It was taking her every effort not to make eye contact with the dashing helmsman. With the exception of a twenty-two-year hiccup, they were both the same age, and she was already finding his personality irresistible.

But she had lost so much in her life that she'd slowly become afraid to let anyone else in. And it was an inherent problem with time travel that any one person could be here one day, and quite literally gone the next century. No, she concluded, she would not let him in either. It was far too risky and she did not know how much more she could stand to lose. Still, as he knelt down beside her, she felt a warm chill flash up her spine.

"We'll never see our homes again..." Castillo continued, seemingly not missing a beat, "our families..."

"How do you know that your family's not still alive?" Tasha countered. She tried to concentrate on a circuit board to avoid looking into those baby blue eyes.

“You’re right,” he nodded, pinching his lower lip. “I don’t. But imagine coming home after twenty-two years. Would I even recognize them?”

“What are the stats on the main phaser banks?” *Focus Lieutenant*, she thought, *keep your mind, and your eyes, on the job*. Castillo glanced up at the Ops readouts and keyed in several commands.

“Emitters available,” he reported, “sixty percent forward, fifty-two percent aft.”

“Good,” Tasha nodded. She reattached the circuit board and jumped to her feet. “Let’s take a look at the torpedo launchers.”

Tasha turned and stepped down, making her way toward the tactical station at the front of the Bridge just ahead of the command chair. Castillo remained kneeling there beside Ops for a moment as a memory of Cicely played through his mind. It seemed like a lifetime ago now... indeed, perhaps it was. *Twenty-two years*. With a sigh, he rose slowly and made his way forward.

Tasha continued to focus on the task at hand and Castillo almost felt as if he were getting the cold shoulder. He came up behind her and placed a foot up on the console’s base. Without a glance, Tasha handed him the padd that they had been recording their findings on. He began to take down the torpedo data as she brought up the information on the tactical display. Even so, he kept one eye trained on Tasha at all times.

“I guess I’m lucky to be alive at all,” he said at length as memories of Cicely, and now the rest of the crew, again filled his thoughts. Tasha gave a not-so-certain shrug.

“You may not like the future,” she stated quietly. “It’s been a long war... the Federation has lost more than half of Starfleet to the Klingons.”

Castillo stared down at her in confusion. “We were negotiating a peace treaty when I left.”

“A lot of changes, Lieutenant,” she countered. “A lot of changes.” This last bit was said with a certain amount of melancholy. Perhaps it was morbid curiosity, but Castillo was finding Lt. Tasha Yar to be more and more interesting with every passing moment. There was a fire within her that he found fascinating, and he wanted to understand. But it was not a raging fire... oh no... but a smoldering one, and he felt

its energy slowly beginning to flow between them.

“When we get a break,” he said cautiously, “maybe you could fill me in on some of them.” *Don't look at the eyes*, Tasha told herself, *don't look at the eyes*. But it was too late. With an instant's nuptial of blue on blue, the bond was created. She cursed herself and looked quickly away, trying to cover by reading verbatim the obvious from the tactical displays.

“Photon banks are depleted,” she uttered. “Auxiliary fusion generators are down.” Castillo merely smiled.

Behind them, Geordi had arrived and was now standing next to Riker at the command chair. The chief engineer's dark face and yellow uniform were smudged with soot, while beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. He had obviously been crawling all over the ship's Jeffries tubes for hours trying to piece together the vessel's battered systems. Although he'd found no further evidence of sabotage, what he had initially found still plagued his stunned consciousness.

No member of the original crew had made any references to a saboteur, nor had they even alluded to a possible mutiny. As far as Geordi could tell, not even the senior staff had known of their betrayal from within. Unwilling to incite any further chaos, Geordi had ordered his elite Alpha Team to remain strictly silent on the subject, at least until he could discuss it with Riker. Perhaps together they could convince Captain Picard to glean some enlightening information from the legendary captain recovering in their sickbay.

He waited quietly while Riker slowly finished reading over the Engineering report. The commander's stern frown continued to deepen as the trail of sabotage became more and more evident. When he finally reached the detailed description of the damaged warp core, the first officer's mouth actually fell open. He eyed his chief engineer for a long moment before speaking in a hushed tone.

“Geordi, are you certain about these findings?”

“I'm telling you, Commander, something very strange went on aboard this starship just before their battle with the Romulans.”

“And who else knows about this?” he asked furtively.

“Only a few members of Alpha Team... and I've ordered them to strict silence.” Riker nodded at this, then glanced around the rest of

the Bridge. At every station, *Enterprise-D* crewmembers worked side-by-side with their *Enterprise-C* counterparts. Together, they were slowly bringing the ship back up to near perfect working condition. Riker again spoke in a hushed voice.

“Has the remaining original crew made any allusions to these apparent acts of sabotage?”

“As far as I can tell, Commander, the original crew knows nothing about it.” Riker sighed and cast a withering stare at the helmsman, Lt. Richard Castillo. He and Tasha were now laughing at some unheard comment made by a young technician sitting at the helm. The commander’s frown deepened further and he leaned forward, close to Geordi.

“And what of the senior staff?” he whispered.

“Well,” Geordi answered, “only Lieutenant Castillo and Captain Garrett remain, and so far, the Lieutenant has made no indication that he was aware of any sabotage either.”

“Agreed,” Riker mused, “so that only leaves Captain Garrett.” He narrowed his eyes and sat back in the command chair, turning it all over in his mind. Sabotage aboard a Federation starship was almost a contradiction in terms. What could possibly bring a Starfleet officer to that level of treachery? Along with mutiny, sabotage was considered a mortal sin residing almost beyond the realm of possibility. It simply was not done.

“Keep this quiet for now until I’ve discussed it with Captain Picard.”

“Yes, Sir,” Geordi nodded.

“So, what is the prognosis on the warp core?”

“Well,” Geordi said, tilting his head, “Ensign Gomez has already gotten a good start on it, but without the assistance of a starbase, it’s not going to be easy. We weren’t expecting to have to change out the entire reaction chamber.”

Riker let out another deep sigh. “Make it your number one priority, Mister LaForge,” he said levelly.

“Yes, Sir. But there is one other thing we should consider, Sir. It is entirely possible that the saboteur could still be aboard.”

Riker’s shoulders sagged as he reflected upon this. He glanced again at the activity taking place around him. And once again, his eyes

narrowed in on Castillo. *Could it be him?* It could quite possibly be any one of them, he concluded. And if that were the case, then all of this would be for nothing. Suddenly, the specter of danger seemed a whole lot closer at hand.

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Captain Jean-Luc Picard, his mind a war-weary whirlwind, stared out his personal viewport at the infinite darkness of deep space. Twenty-two years ago, aboard the *Stargazer*, when there was peace, he used to gaze upon the silver starpoints with all the wild wonder of youth. Now all he saw was the blackness between. Exploration had been his passion, but exploration had long since become a luxury they could not afford. Instead, they fought and they fought, fought for their very survival.

But the unexpected arrival of the *Enterprise-C* had raised a sudden new parade of possibilities. The captain's thoughts were torn between the options and the implications. Guinan had insisted that the ship be sent back. Her passion and conviction had startled Picard like never before. Yet, sending them back had the potential to be far more disastrous. The consequences for meddling with the timeline were dangerously unpredictable at best.

The debate within his consciousness did not deal simply with the mere handful of people on these two starships. It dealt instead with the fate of entire worlds and billions upon billions of lives. It dealt with the very survival of the United Federation of Planets. Any decision he made today could potentially affect many generations to come across many thousands of light years.

Picard felt as if he were standing on the precipice of a great nexus, a principal moment in the history of the universe. And one false step at any indeterminate moment in particular could drastically alter the past, present, and all the possible futures. It was a weight he did not wish to bear, but for some unfathomable reason, fate had chosen him for this almighty task.

"Data to Picard..." The captain allowed his tired eyes to close for a moment, though he was surprised that he had gone on for this long without some interruption. He often ate sparingly and slept even less.

There did not seem to be a single moment that did not require his undivided attention. He wanted so much to be able to simply fall asleep without being jarred awake by the impact of disruptor fire or a comm call from the Bridge.

Absently, he reached up and touched his commbadge. “Go ahead, Mr. Data.”

“*Captain, I have completed my analysis of the phenomenon, Sir.*”

“Very good, Commander. I’m on my way... Picard out.” All in all, Picard couldn’t help but like his android second officer. He was not programmed to be the pompous ass that Will Riker so often was. Data’s cybernetic relays were not governed by petty greed or prejudice. His actions were not motivated by self-absorption or personal gain. He was content to simply be the best officer he could be, no matter what his station or rank.

Picard thought on this as he stepped out of his ready room into an always crowded Bridge. In some ways, the *Enterprise* was oft times more of an enemy target, not only because of her name, but too because of Data. The Klingons did not take prisoners, save for one. The one-of-a-kind android would make any commander a fine trophy to take back to his superiors on Qo’noS.

Still, Data fought alongside his human friends like any other living person would. And accordingly, the crew of the *Enterprise* fought all that much harder to protect Data from the unthinkable. It was a camaraderie inherent to human nature. Any one person would give their life to save another, and Data was no different. This Picard respected above all else. He often wondered how different his crew might be if there had been peace. Perhaps in one of those many possible futures he and Riker could even be friends; perhaps they all could be friends.

“What do you have, Commander?” the Captain said as he approached an aft science station. Data studied his readouts and made a few minute adjustments before speaking.

“I am detecting quantum-level fluctuations and elevated levels of verteron particles that would be consistent with a wormhole, Captain, but variations in the gravimetric flux density, coupled with high-energy chroniton radiation, would more properly attribute this phenomenon to

a temporal vortex.” Picard merely sighed and studied the readouts for himself.

“Mr. Data, how long could we expect this rift to remain open?”

“Judging by the decay rate of the chronometric field, I would estimate that the rift could collapse in no less than six hours, Sir.”

Picard continued to study the oscillating energy patterns as his mind again went over the options and the implications. He reached forward and placed a finger on the display screen.

“Data, I’ve noticed that these regions of the rift seem to have a negative flow pattern to them. Almost as if the chronitons are circulating between past and present.”

“Yes, Sir,” Data said with the android equivalent of surprise. He was often amazed by his captain’s keen ability for scientific reasoning. “There is a high degree of probability that the temporal rift is symmetrical, Captain.”

“Then what would happen if the *Enterprise-C* were to fly back through it?”

“Back, Sir?” Data said, again with surprise. Although the android possessed no emotions, he was continually fascinated with human behavior. He had come to rely on the ancient axiom ‘expect the unexpected’ and Picard had just asked the unexpected. Data looked down and made a few thousand calculations in conjunction with the main computer before answering.

“The *Enterprise-C* would emerge in her own time at almost the same instant she left.”

“Right in the middle of the battle with the Romulans,” Picard postulated.

“Yes, Sir,” Data answered as they both turned and walked over to the primary tactical station. On the viewscreen, the *Enterprise-C* hovered before them with the swirling energy vortex set as an ominous backdrop. The captain again considered the options and the implications. One misstep could spell their annihilation, and doom twenty-two years of history. Yet, there was a potential there too; a potential for a better history, a better future... not only for them, but for the whole of the Federation as well.

Picard studied the ghost ship for a moment more before raising a rhetorical question. “Is there any possibility she could survive?” He

said it half to himself, not really expecting an answer. Still, Data did an instant's calculation of infinite probabilities and answered his captain plainly.

“None, Sir.”

Picard looked directly into the android's yellow robotic eyes. Saw there no emotion, but still, there was a certain level of compassion. Even despite the long terrible war, the captain had tried to cling to his own compassion. Without compassion, the Federation would quickly disintegrate against the onslaught, and humankind would more than likely take to fighting amongst themselves again. Picard shuddered at the thought.

With compassion reflected in his words, he said simply this: “Then sending them back would be a death sentence.”

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*Keep talking, Lieutenant. Maybe if you bore him to death, he'll lose interest.* Tasha kept repeating this to herself as she and Lt. Castillo made their way through the crowded corridors of the *Enterprise-D*. After a long and arduous shift aboard the *Enterprise-C*, they had decided to take a little break; as well as a little tour. Castillo had followed her around like a puppy dog and clung to her every word, while Tasha for her part tried to conceal her own interest by remaining chatty and seemingly disinterested.

It obviously was not working. With every passing moment, the binding energy between them was asserting itself with an ever-increasing tenacity. She had never before felt such a spark from anyone. Still, she was reluctant to let him in; reluctant to let down the façade she had created to keep people away. It was a wall built to protect her innermost feelings from that which she feared the most. Being alone. She had lost so much in her life that she was afraid to lose again.

First her parents, then her beloved aunt and uncle as their home disintegrated around them in a ball of fire. Tasha had spent half her life clinging to survival in the dark tunnels beneath a war-torn city. When she'd finally escaped to freedom, she found out there only more war and more bloody destruction. She had watched friends die by the

dozens, and watched as her own life slowly curled up again into its little ball of fear.

And now here was Richard Castillo and suddenly she felt that fear slipping away and this scared her. How ironic that she should find peace and contentedness in a man that did not even belong in her life.

*Or did he?* Tasha could not help but wonder at the myriads of tiny events that had to have transpired to bring them both together at this particular moment in time. Time... was it really only an illusion as some claimed?

*Lieutenant Barren... You have an incoming subspace call from Andoria. Crewman Tarses... Please report to Med Lab Four. Crewman Tarses to Med Lab Four. To all personnel, all decks... We remain at Battle Condition Yellow. Battle Bridge... Please submit your battle readiness report.* The comm network continued to work its magic as Tasha and Castillo rounded another corner. Ever chatty, Tasha went on with her dissertation undeterred.

“She was the first *Galaxy*-class warship built by the Federation. Forty-two decks. Capable of transporting over six thousand troops.”

“How long have you been on board?” Despite his fascination with this magnificently huge and complex new starship, Castillo was still far more interested in Tasha’s smoldering personality.

“Four years,” she answered, glancing at him with a proud smile. “Straight out of the Academy. I was... lucky to get the *Enterprise*.”

“Yeah, me too,” Castillo said, then realized the irony. “I mean, my *Enterprise*.” Tasha gave him a sharp smile. But Castillo found himself unable to return the smile as a fresh flood of memories inundated his consciousness. It had only been days before that he’d received a fresh dressing down from his commanding officer. It had brought back hard feelings from his academy days and all the years hence that he’d spent fighting against unwanted expectations.

And now, here he was, and none of it seemed to matter. The *Enterprise*-B, Station Salem One, his father... all had long since been forgotten by the people of this time. He found himself standing in a future vastly different from what he’d ever expected, talking to a woman that he was quickly falling hopelessly in love with. Indeed, nothing else did seem to matter. Perhaps the greatest irony of all though, was that time in almost every sense was working against them.

*Triage Team Two to Main Shuttlebay. Triage Team Two to Main Shuttlebay. Nurse Alyssa Ogawa... Please report to Stasis Control. Nurse Ogawa to Stasis Control. Doctor Tate... Deck Six, Section Ten, STAT.* They had now entered Sickbay and walked side by side to stand at the foot of Captain Garrett's biobed. Doctor Crusher took a few final readings, smiled at Tasha, then went about her business, tending to her more serious patients.

"Lieutenant," Garrett said with some surprise. "How's the ship?" The captain really wanted to jump up out of the bed and give the young man a hug — especially considering she thought him dead! The last time she saw Castillo, he'd vanished beneath a pile of burning rubble on a shattered Bridge teetering at the brink of complete destruction. Now here they were, reunited after 'twenty-two years'. Her mind still reeled at the prospects.

Castillo stood at attention and delivered his report. "We've restored minimal shields and the forward phaser banks. Still no photon launchers or warp drive."

"Concentrate on the weapons systems," she ordered. "From what Captain Picard told me, the Federation can use all the help it can get."

"And soon," Tasha interjected. "Our sensors have picked up Klingon warships in this sector, Captain."

"Why wasn't I informed, Mister Castillo?" Garrett gritted her teeth and sat up, then swung her feet to the floor. She had to fight against a momentary surge of dizziness. The strangely familiar, blond-haired blue-eyed lieutenant grabbed her by the arm just as she was about to tip off onto the floor.

"Captain, you shouldn't..." Castillo tried to warn, but Garrett continued, not to be dissuaded.

"As First Officer, I want you to be my liaison to the *Enterprise-D*. Coordinate with Tactical."

"That's me, Captain," Tasha offered as Garrett slowly rose to her feet. She stood there uncertainly for a moment, leaning on the edge of the biobed. She closed her eyes briefly as another wave of vertigo washed over her. She tried to cover for it by pulling the bunches out of her uniform jacket. Meanwhile, all the commotion had not escaped the scrutiny of one Doctor Beverly Crusher.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Beverly scolded as she rushed over to stand in the path of her patient.

“I am resuming my duties, Doctor,” Garrett answered plainly.

“Captain,” Beverly insisted, placing her hands on Garrett’s shoulders, “you need at least another twenty-four hours.”

“Nonsense,” she said flatly, “doctors always overprotect their patients...”

“And captains always push themselves too hard,” the Doctor shot back hotly. But for Captain Garrett, the treachery and betrayal of Doctor Ann Grey was still burning fresh in her mind. For Captain Garrett, hundreds had died and her ship was in ruins because she hadn’t pushed hard enough. Their mission had failed because she hadn’t pushed hard enough. Decades of war had devastated the Federation because she hadn’t pushed hard enough. Garrett looked Beverly Crusher squarely in the eyes.

“Doctor,” she said with fierce determination, “my ship and my crew need me now. Twenty-four hours might as well be twenty-four years.” With that, she stood fully, brushed off the doctor, and marched out of Sickbay.

## “...begin Chapter Twenty.”

War. Often glorified, its horrors are more often softened for the delicate civilian eye. But Captain Jean-Luc Picard knew war in all its horrors. He had been the commanding officer of a frontline starship throughout the fiercest fighting in the history of many, many worlds. One by one, he had watched former classmates — former friends — die horribly, and knew that someday, his number too would be up. There were days when it seemed as if that might actually be a welcome relief.

This was one of those days.

He stood at his desk and stared in disbelief at the Daily Situation Report he'd just received from Starfleet Command. He knew that war-weary desperation could make strange bedfellows, pit friends against friends, neighbors against neighbors. But he could not believe what his eyes were now reading. The very fabric of the United Federation of Planets was unraveling as the Five Founding Worlds slowly began to pull away from each other... and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

Just days ago, Andoria had cut off all diplomatic ties with the Vulcans. And now the unthinkable had occurred. After three hundred years of peaceful coexistence, Vulcan itself, humankind's most loyal friend and ally, had abandoned Earth and signed a mutual defense pact with the Romulans. It was expected that Vulcan and Andoria would be at war by week's end. Only Tellar, Earth, and Alpha Centauri remained; and Tellar was already expected to capitulate to the Klingons at any moment.

Picard's head swooned at the losses. Nearly *sixty-five-thousand* starships missing or destroyed. *Billions* of lives lost. Dozens of worlds decimated or all out obliterated. And fresh new attacks coming in from all sides as scavengers began to smell the rot of Federation defeat. Defeat. The word echoed in Picard's mind like a death knell. In a year's time, Earth and all of humankind would be wiped out of

existence forever.

But suddenly, an unexpected new factor had entered into the equation. The *Enterprise-C*'s arrival had filled the captain's mind with a cloud of possibilities, all of them dangerous and unpredictable. He wished now that he had more time, but they all were out of time in so many ways. Klingon warships were fast approaching. What was left of the Federation was plunging into chaos and civil war. The temporal rift was quickly collapsing.

A decision had to be made. Morally, Picard knew what the logical answer must be. This was no time for chance determinations that depended on mere hopeful suppositions. Chance was not a game to be played with lives, billions of lives. Chance was simply too unpredictable and too dangerous. Still, against all odds, chance held all those possibilities that Picard could not just simply ignore.

"I need more." This he said to Guinan as she entered his darkened ready room.

"There is no more," she answered quietly. "I wish there were. I wish I could prove it, but I can't." She crossed the small office to stand opposite him at the desk. Picard still clung to the Situation Report like a lifeline. He stared into Guinan's dark eyes.

"Then I can't ask them to go back."

"You've got to," she whispered. Picard slammed the dense plastic padd against the desktop in angry frustration. He stood up straight, took in a great breath of air, then spoke to her levelly.

"Guinan, they will die moments after they return. How can I ask them to sacrifice themselves based solely on your intuition?"

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. "But I do know that this is a mistake. Every fiber in my being says this is a mistake. I can't explain it to myself, so I can't explain it to you. I only know that *I'm right.*"

Her passion and conviction was tearing at Picard's moral sense of obligation, both to the crew of the *Enterprise-C*, and to the integrity of the timeline. To go with chance, to go with the possibility of a better future at the sacrifice of over a hundred people? The good of the many outweighs the good of the few? But *which* many... this present or that other possible future?

"Who is to say," Picard argued, "that this history is any less

proper than the other?”

“I suppose I am,” she said plainly.

“Not good enough dammit,” he shouted, “not good enough! I will not ask them to die!”

“Forty billion people have already died!” she shot back, their eyes now locked. “This war is not supposed to be happening. You’ve got to send those people back to correct this!”

“And what is to guarantee that if they go back, they will succeed?” Guinan looked down finally and heaved a heavy sigh as Picard continued. “Every instinct is telling me this is *wrong*, it is *dangerous*, it is *futile*!”

Guinan looked up slowly and spoke softly. “We’ve known each other a long time,” she said coolly, “you have never known me to impose myself on anyone, or take a stance based on trivial or whimsical perceptions. *This timeline must not be allowed to continue*. Now, I’ve told you what you must do. You have only your trust in me to help you decide to do it.”

She looked into his eyes an instant more, then turned and left him to stand alone with his equivocal thoughts.

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Talking. Still talking. Tasha and Castillo were now in Ten Forward, staring out the great windows at the smaller *Enterprise* hovering nearby. Tasha had still refused to let down her guard, yet he waited and listened patiently. He was now hopelessly enamored with her and the more she talked the more so he became. Her voice was a melody, her words an all-too-telling song. He yearned to feel the fire smoldering within her. Yearned to feel her passion.

Even his unexpected elevation to First Officer had failed to impact him the way that he knew it should. Starfleet had been his life, and like so many other young officers, he had often dreamt of command. But now all there was was Tasha. He could not explain it. It was a connection that seemed to have no logical basis in reality, but yet still felt so eternally right. Eternity though, was a problem.

Time was too much a factor here. It was a variable that could not be controlled. And in its handbag, it carried fate. The fates of his

crew... yes, they were partly his crew now. The fate of countless worlds and their peoples. The fate of history. The fate of Tasha Yar, and indeed even his own. Time was an open road with fate behind the wheel. *And where would fate lead them next?* He couldn't help but wonder.

*Crewman Lauren... Armory inventory due at sixteen hundred hours. Lieutenant Dax... Fighter pilot briefing at oh-seven hundred. Lieutenant Dax... Briefing at oh-seven hundred. To all hands: Daily Casualty Reports are now on file in the main computer.* Tasha paused momentarily at this last announcement. She dreaded that part of the day when the lists of the dead began flooding in from every subspace relay station. The numbers were all too often horrific.

She caught a glimpse of Castillo's baby-blue eyes and nearly choked on the knot forming within her throat. Would he too be a casualty? If not here, then surely back in his own time. This was a new thought that she had not considered. The sudden possibility of losing him gripped her with fear. For an instant, she nearly embraced him. She wanted so much simply to be held by him. Disconcerted, she quickly turned from the great windows and headed for the bar, talking again as she went.

"I mean, deflector shield technology has advanced considerably during the war. Our heat dissipation rates are probably double those of the *Enterprise-C*, which means we can hang in a firefight a lot longer." She shrugged as they leaned up against the bar.

Behind her, Castillo could see an El-Aurian woman enter the lounge through its wide double doors. This brought back another sudden flashflood of painful memories from the *Enterprise-C*, and he thought briefly of Onovan and the fight they'd had that day in their own Starboard Café. Castillo had always intended to apologize; but now, he realized, it was much too late for that. Regrets were normal, he knew, and so he pushed the thought, and the memories, from his mind.

Ten Forward's apparent hostess, the El-Aurian passed behind the bar and walked up to face both Yar and Castillo. The whole time, Castillo was quick to note, she never once took her eyes off Tasha. And now standing there, her face held an expression of fear-filled confusion. It was almost contagious, and as Tasha slowly took notice of it, her face too began to change.

“Guinan?” Tasha said with a small measure of alarm.

“Have you ordered yet, Tasha?” Still, the eyes were locked in that dreadful trance.

“No, not yet,” Tasha answered cautiously. “Is anything wrong?”

“Not a thing.” But the response was transparent and unconvincing. “What can I get for you?” This was said with a hollow laugh.

“Just a couple of T-K-L’s. We’re in a hurry.” She paused, caught up in Guinan’s hypnotic stare, before finally turning to Castillo. “Oh,” she said, “this is Lieutenant Castillo.”

Guinan merely nodded, then locked eyes with Tasha one final time before moving away. Curiously though, she did not head for the replimat but instead passed around the far end of the bar and began collecting up empty glasses from the crowded tables as if still caught up in a daze. Tasha looked longingly after her for a moment before breathing a heavy, world-on-the-shoulders sigh.

“First time for everything,” she whispered to herself.

“First time?” Castillo intoned and Tasha suddenly came back to him as if she’d just returned from some far-off place. For the first time, she looked at last into his baby-blue eyes and held their soft and gentle gaze. Her own blue eyes wanted to stay there, married to his, but she forced herself to shake off this trance as well. She closed her eyes and shook her head, then spoke softly.

“It’s just that... I’ve never seen anything bother her before.” Castillo simply nodded and smiled.

“What’s a T-K-L?” he asked in an attempt to change the subject. Tasha paused for a moment more, then finally returned his smile.

“Standard rations. Food replicators are on minimum power so everything else can be diverted to the defensive systems.” With those simple statements, all of those old walls that had been built to keep people away went back up and Tasha was again back to talking. “So where was I?”

“You’ve told me more about tactical in an hour,” he said with a smirk, “than I learned in my last year at the Academy.”

“You’re going to need it, Lieutenant.” But this was finally the last straw for Castillo. *Enough talking*, he thought. They had no more time for these coy little games.

“Hey,” he said, throwing the gloves off, “I’ve known you a whole day now, *Lieutenant*. I won’t salute of you won’t.” He paused and smiled with a hint of embarrassment. “What did she call you... Tasha?”

“Yeah,” Tasha answered, smiling awkwardly and looking away. But their eyes soon locked again in their blue-on-blue communion and this time they stayed. Castillo smiled sheepishly, his face growing a faint crimson.

“Most everyone calls me Castillo,” he said, then grew slightly redder. “My mother calls me Richard...”

“Okay, Castillo,” Tasha nodded.

“No,” he looked down and paused. “I think maybe I’d like it better if you called me Richard.” Again, their eyes sent them up into that elevated plane. It brought a sudden co-mingling of souls, both terrifying and exciting at the same time. And for an instant, time, all of it, seemed to stand still.

“Richard,” Tasha whispered and the walls within at last came tumbling down. The smoldering fire became a raging inferno. The heat and energy radiated between them like nothing either of them had ever felt before. Its aura surrounded them with a force beyond their control. In her eyes he saw a yearning and he longed to be her protection. She longed to be his passion, and in his eyes, she saw an open road.

In this soothing flood of souls, there was a sudden peace in their togetherness. They each felt the essence of the other’s consciousness. In the warmth of their bodies, in the faint beating of their hearts, there was newfound comfort and they were companion to its belonging. They both clutched to that quiet moment lost for an instant in time, forgetting everything that they had once been as one.

*“This is the Captain... Senior officers will report to my Ready Room immediately.”* Look down, blink and sigh. They were consumed again by the passage of time. Still, the simple bond yet remained; and once created, it could not be broken.

“So much for lunch,” they both said in unison, then smiled at each other. But as they turned to leave, Tasha felt a sudden chill run down her spine. Stopping, she pivoted to face Guinan who still seemed locked in that same hypnotic trance.

For a moment, their eyes met and Tasha felt almost as if Guinan

were looking straight through her like she were nothing more than a spirit or a shade. Tasha's skin tingled and she fought the urge to shiver. Her mind leapt to the Daily Casualty Reports, and she could not help but wonder. She suddenly felt the breath of time across the nape of her neck and it caused her to turn away in fear.

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Chance. Captain Jean-Luc Picard read the situation report over yet again. *Vulcan had abandoned Earth!* And then he sat down and read the Daily Casualty Reports. Nine and a half million dead. *Nine and a half million!* Seventeen starships reported missing or destroyed. Forty billion people had already died. *Forty billion!* Picard shuddered to think at what that number might be in another year's time. *65,000 ships gone! My dear God.*

Chance. Defeat was inevitable and in another year's time, Earth and all of humankind would be wiped out of existence forever. *Defeat*, but also a chance. He had considered Guinan's words very carefully and had finally come to realize that the *Enterprise-C* was truly their only hope. He found it ironic that the fates of so many should all rest upon the actions of so very few. One little ship tossed in a sea of chaos. And that sea was time.

Picard had always viewed the past as static and unchangeable. An immutable constant that always remained locked against the future's wild unpredictability. But now they had found a key, and once unlocked, the past would no longer be that constant. Humankind would be given another chance. One hundred twenty-five would die to save forty billion. It was their fate to do this and it was his to see that they succeeded.

"Captain, are you suggesting that we let them return and attempt to complete their mission?" This from the worried face of Dr. Beverly Crusher. Picard now stood before his assembled senior staff and tried to make his case, or more appropriately, make sense of it.

"I am, Doctor," he said emphatically.

"Based on Guinan's intuition?!"

"That won't accomplish anything, Sir," Riker blurted out. "There's no way they can save Narendra Three." *Such a pompous ass,*

Picard thought, *such a narrow-minded fool*. Tasha spoke next with a passion the captain had not heard from her in a very long time.

“Captain Garrett said there were four Romulan warbirds. The *Enterprise-C* would be outmanned and outgunned...”

“Unless,” Geordi interjected, “we were to rearm them with modern...”

“We can’t do that,” Picard shot back tersely. “If we send that ship back with new technology, we’ll be altering the past.” Riker looked as if his head were about to burst. His voice carried that all-too-familiar tone of agitation that Picard found so infuriating.

“But that’s what you’re talking about anyway, isn’t it?” he said. “Altering the past.”

“We’re talking about restoring the past,” Picard countered.

“But how could Guinan know that history’s been altered,” Geordi intoned, “if she’s been altered along with the rest of us?”

“Perhaps,” Data offered, “her species has a perception that goes beyond linear time.”

“There are many things about her species that we can’t easily explain,” Picard mused. “Yet, it is very possible that she is correct,” he now argued. “A ship from the past has traveled through time. How can we know what effect those events will have on the present? Indeed... we shall never know for certain if Guinan is correct, but I have decided the consequences of that possibility are far too grave to ignore.

“Dismissed,” he said curtly, sitting down. But the senior staff all remained seated and stared at him thoughtfully. All, of course, except Riker who now glared at his captain with disdainful contempt. His arguments were always as predictable as the tone of his voice.

“Sir,” he jabbed, “if you’d like my opinion...”

“I think I’m aware of your opinion,” the captain quipped. “This is a briefing. I’m not seeking your consent.”

“With all due respect, Sir,” Riker stated without any, “you’d be asking one hundred twenty-five people to die a meaningless death.”

Damned fool, Picard thought again, *narrow-minded, hotheaded, pompous ass of a fool!* But ultimately, it was Data who came to his captain’s defense.

“Not necessarily meaningless, Commander,” Data said plainly.

“The Klingons regard honor above all else. If the crew of the

Enterprise-C had died fighting for the survival of a Klingon outpost, it would be considered a meaningful act of honor by the Klingon Empire.” *Yes! Data!* If there was any one person on this ship that Picard knew he could count on, it was Data.

“Even their deaths,” the Captain added, “could have prevented this war. If the *Enterprise-C* returns to the battle and their mission is a success, history will be irrevocably changed. This timeline will cease to exist, and a new future will have been created...”

“I’ve considered the alternatives,” he stated flatly, thinking of the nine million fresh new casualties. “I’ll go with Guinan’s recommendation... Dismissed.” This time the order was final and even Riker did not balk at it. In unison, they all rose and turned toward the door. As they filed out, Riker continued to shake his head and mutter to himself while an always-worried Beverly Crusher turned to Geordi for one final comment.

“If she’s right, we may not even be in an alternate timeline.”

“Who knows if we’re even dead or alive?” Geordi shrugged.

Behind them, Tasha paused in sudden shock. She again felt the breath of time dance on the back of her neck like the specter of death. She again fought the urge to shiver. And again, she thought of the omen that was the Daily Casualty Reports. She could not shake the haunting image of Guinan’s stare, looking through her as if she no longer existed. Or was it: *had never existed?* Turning away in fear, she entered the waiting turbolift with Data.

“Engineering,” Data announced to the computer as the doors closed. But sensing another occupant, the car refused to move. At length, Data finally turned to Tasha, who still faced the back wall, almost as if in a trance.

“Is Engineering your destination as well?” Data queried.

“What?” she said, turning finally. “Oh, Deck Six. Sorry.” Data eyed her speculatively as the car began to move downward. Despite the long war, Data had still tried to maintain his daring study of human behavior. Processing a dozen calculations at once, his neural net decided to take a crack at it again.

“If I interpret your facial expressions correctly, you are preoccupied with something unpleasant.” Tasha was startled from her mortal reverie. But the feelings were too complex, too overwhelming

to explore, so she tried to cover one fear with another.

“No, I...” she stammered, “I was just thinking about a lot of things. I’ve... I’ve been working with one of the officers on the *Enterprise-C*. You know, he’s...” she looked down embarrassed, “he’s nice. I like him. I’m just worried about what’s going to happen to him.”

“We may never know what happens,” Data answered with the flat, emotionless face of an android. “If they succeed, we will not even realize that these events occurred.”

And again, Tasha was haunted by the specter of death.

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Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett stood in her own ready room and stared with heartbroken dismay at the charred remains of what had once been her beloved schoolteacher’s desk. At some point during the battle, probably when the warp core overloaded, the damnable food replicator had exploded and enveloped the ancient wooden desk in a brief but raging inferno. It had been reduced to cinders long before the damaged fire suppression system could’ve ever hoped to squelch it.

Rachel approached it, what was left, and the black coals crunched under her feet. Crouching, she slowly ran her hand over the rubble, imagining, for a moment, its smooth and polished surface. Her fingertips grazed something metal and she paused. Sliding her fingers beneath it, she pulled free the brass dedication plaque inscribed by her long-dead grandfather. Disturbed from its slumber, the Bajoran ceremonial brazier also fell from its bed of ashes and rolled to her feet.

For the first time, Rachel allowed herself to think fully of Spencer Stadi. His death had been like an open wound she’d chosen to ignore. But now the hollowness surrounded her and she could ignore it no more. Dropping the plaque, she picked up the ornate brazier and let it roll between her fingers. The paper renewal scrolls had long since been incinerated and Rachel now wished she’d written her problems on them after all.

She still wanted to deny the undeniable fact that Spencer was gone from her forever. But his voice no longer sounded within her

mind. His comforting mental touch had been torn out like a limb would be torn from the body. She felt hopeless and alone. Felt as if she had failed him somehow. Had failed the crew. One hundred twenty-five survivors out of eight hundred forty. Seven hundred and fifteen people had died under her command.

Yet, this somehow seemed insignificant to what she was now hearing. Picard had lost a thousand at seemingly the same time she had lost her own. But he had also watched the extermination of an entire world. *Ten million people*. And those ten million had been preceded by *billions* more. Sixty-five thousand starships missing or destroyed?! And all because her one little ship had slipped out in the middle of a fight? It did not seem possible that her *Enterprise* could've ever been so important. It was almost like an unwaking dream.

The hollowness left in Spencer's wake though assured her that this was indeed not a dream. Somehow, despite all the present losses, Rachel still felt as if she had somehow sacrificed so much, much more. Selfish, she knew, when compared to the lives of billions, but for her, there was only one life that mattered. And now that life was gone and only the hollowness remained. Rachel wanted to shout, wanted to play loud music — *scream* — anything to mask the silence that now reverberated within her skull.

*"Castillo to Garrett..."* Look down, blink and sigh, she welcomed the distraction, and the relief. Dropping the brazier and brushing off her hands, Rachel reached up and touched her commbadge.

"Go ahead, Mr. Castillo," she said rising.

*"Sorry to disturb you, Ma'am, but Captain Picard has arrived and wishes to speak with you."*

"On my way, Mr. Castillo," she replied absently. *Tired, oh so tired*, she thought. But she knew her work here was not yet done. Glancing down at the blackened rubble one final time, she turned slowly and walked over to the burned-out replicator terminal. Dropping a fist on its darkened display panel, she stated merely this: "Looks like you finally won after all you miserable piece of shit."

On the Bridge, Tasha and Castillo were making a few last-minute preparations for departure. Though to where — or even to when — they were departing for, Castillo was not yet entirely certain. Tasha

had remained curiously enigmatic on the subject since her return from the briefing and even Captain Garrett had been strangely quiet throughout her own homecoming inspection tour. As new First Officer, Castillo felt that he should somehow know more, but was somewhat unclear as to how to find out.

One thing he was clear on however, was that he still had a lot to learn about command. Unfortunately, he was getting a crash course on the subject in the most alarming way. In just minutes, after an extraordinary effort, the warp core was about to be brought back online. Juggling this, and about a dozen other progress reports from below decks, Castillo was beginning to feel a bit overwhelmed. He longed for those few quiet moments that he'd shared with Tasha back on the *Enterprise-D*.

But after so soon finding her, he feared that he would now lose her. A great majority of the remaining crew was surprisingly adamant about returning through the rift, and he had felt that desire growing within him as well. The thought that their arrival here had been the cause of all this, this terrible war, and all those deaths, was frightening to him. How could he live in this time knowing that he was partly responsible for its demise? His own selfishness did not seem reason enough for them to stay.

“Do you believe this Guinan?” Garrett said to Picard. He had just told her everything and was preparing to make his case one final time. He had to convince the captain that his was the right decision to make; even if the uncertainties still echoed within his own mind. He looked into her almond eyes as she paused near the front of her Bridge.

“I discovered long ago,” he answered, “that she has a special wisdom. I’ve learned to trust it. I could arrange for you to speak with her, if you wish.” His hazel eyes held only honesty and she looked down briefly, preparing to dispense her own bit of honesty.

“Captain, I would be lying to you if I told you there was a chance in hell of us coming out of this alive. Why doesn’t your ship come back with us?” she nearly pleaded. “The Romulans would be no match for your weaponry.”

“I can’t do that,” he answered without hesitation.

“No, I suppose not,” she mused. It’d been a question she

already knew the answer to. Look down, blink and sigh. “You don’t belong in our time any more than we belong in yours. To be honest with you Picard,” she said, looking up into his hazel eyes, “a significant number of my crewmembers have expressed the desire to return even knowing the odds...

“Some because they can’t bear to live without their loved ones, some because they don’t like the idea of slipping out in the middle of a fight.” This was said with a sly smile, but her features quickly returned to grim. “But I have told them that, in the here and now, the Federation needs another ship against the Klingons... and we’d better get used to being in the here and now.”

Picard admired her for her courage, her strength, her legendary resolve. Finally meeting her had become the highpoint of his career. Besides James T. Kirk, no other Starfleet captain had been so influential in the affairs of the Federation. And if only she would take her ship back though the rift, then he was certain she would be remembered as one of humankind’s greatest heroes... hopefully in the eyes of the Klingons as well. All he had to do was convince her that their sacrifice would not be in vain. That their death’s would count for something.

“If you go back,” he now argued, “it could be a great deal more helpful.” Picard scanned the Bridge for prying ears, then dropped his voice to a whisper. “The war is going very badly for the Federation — far worse than is generally known.” He sighed heavily. “Starfleet Command believes that defeat is inevitable. Within six months, we may have no choice but to surrender.” Garrett’s eyes glistened and a knot formed in her throat.

“And you’re saying,” she whispered hoarsely, “that all of this may be a result of our arrival here?”

“One more ship,” Picard said gravely, “will make no difference in the here and now, but twenty-two years ago, this *one little ship* could’ve stopped this war before it started.” She looked down at the floor with understanding, the type of understanding that only comes with being a starship captain. She then glanced back up into Picard’s hazel eyes and raised her voice.

“Mister Castillo...”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Inform the crew. We’re going back.”

“Yes, Captain,” he responded with some noticeable relief. Eyes still locked with Picard’s, Garrett lowered her voice and spoke with newfound determination.

“The Romulans will get a good fight,” she said with her characteristic wry smile. “We’ll make it one for the history books.”

“I know you will, Captain,” Picard pronounced with admiration. Their eyes remained locked for a moment more before he finally looked to Tasha. “Lieutenant Yar,” he called out.

“Permission to remain a moment, Sir?”

“Granted,” he nodded knowingly. Together, the two captains of the *Enterprise* crossed the Bridge to the turbolift. And as they waited there, Garrett moved in close again, and again, she dropped her voice to a near whisper.

“Just one more thing, Picard. I believe you knew my Tactical Officer, Marta Batanides?” He nodded only slightly. “Then perhaps I could enquire as to her fate?”

Picard’s heart sang a silent lament for long lost friends. Along with Jack Crusher, Marta had been but the first of many to fall. Corey Zweller’s ship had been destroyed at Beta Thoridor in the early days of the war. And indeed, there were many more. Donald Varley, Tryla Scott, Walker Keel, Onna Karapleedeez. Sometimes it seemed as if only he and Beverly remained. Picard considered Garrett’s question carefully, and decided it could do no real harm to indulge her.

“Marta Batanides,” he sighed, “and her entire entourage were detained for some weeks by a Governor Ja’rod of the Klingon world Beta Thoridor. They were eventually tried on charges of espionage and executed.”

“Even the little girl?” Garrett said aghast, her almond eyes once more glistening.

“Even the little girl,” he answered faintly. “Betazed called for an immediate declaration of war. When they did not get it, they defied council orders and sent ships of their own. Their entire armada was annihilated at Beta Thoridor. The rest is... *history*.” He paused. “You see, Captain? The battle... *your battle* at Narendra Three is a nexus in the timeline. History begins there and so history must be made there. There can be no other way.”

With that, the turbolift doors opened and Picard stepped in. And with but a final exchange of eye color, he was gone to leave her alone with the full weight of history.

“Permission to remain a moment, Sir?” Tasha asked her captain, suddenly aware that they were out of time. At his allowance, she jogged quickly from the Bridge’s upper level around and across to join Castillo at the helm. She now regretted wasting their last few moments together worrying about her own fate. His fate was now certain, and that troubled her now beyond all imagining. The *Enterprise-C* and crew were doomed, and Tasha would lose another person she loved... this time for *all* time.

“I, I just wanted to say good luck,” she stammered.

“I’ll try to put some of your tactical briefing to good use when we get back,” he answered, unable to look into her eyes.

“Your ship has much more maneuverability than the Romulan counterparts of that era. Actually, if you could just isolate...” Finally, Richard looked up into her eyes and she stopped talking. Blue on blue molded into one and they again felt the comfort in their togetherness. “You’ll do fine,” she said with a soft voice and a soft smile. His face was a mirror of hers, as was his voice.

“If you get back to Earth and you see a man, say in his late fifties, taking a hard, long look across a crowded room...” They both laughed quietly. “Hey, you never know,” he finished with a sheepish grin. The blue became an ocean that slowly began to separate them. Caught in the waves, Tasha reached out for him.

“Goodbye, Lieutenant,” she whispered as he clutched her hand, unwilling to let go.

And then there was a sickening screech that sent them crashing hard against the deck. Tasha recognized the sound immediately as a Klingon disruptor blast. Instinctively, they both jumped up and headed for their respective positions. He sat down at the helm, she at tactical, as Captain Garrett made the order for Red Alert.

“Shields are up,” Tasha announced, “and functioning.” *Now that was something.*

“Initiating evasive maneuvers,” Castillo shouted above another

blast. “Gamma sequence.” Garrett sat down in the command chair and was forced to hold on. Modern Klingon weapons apparently packed quite a punch. She stared at the single bird-of-prey heading straight for them on the viewscreen. They had obviously detected the weaker ship of the two and now intended full well to take advantage of that fact.

“Ready phasers,” she ordered. “*Enterprise-D*, has your Captain returned safely?”

“Acknowledged,” Riker responded as Picard stepped out of the turbolift onto the Bridge. “Captain Picard is safely aboard. Fire phasers,” he ordered.

“Firing phasers,” Data intoned.

“Report.” Picard sat down in his own command chair as Riker leapt over the rail to the primary tactical station, filling in for Tasha. He quickly assessed the readouts and announced his procurement.

“One Klingon bird-of-prey off the starboard bow.” They could only watch as the warship concentrated all of its fire on the weaker *Enterprise*. The *Enterprise-D* phasers continued to lash out at their foe, joined only by intermittent bursts from the C. It was quite clear that they were getting knocked around quite badly. Picard knew that they could not, neither one of them, afford any further damage to that ship.

“Mr. Crusher,” the Captain roared, “place us in a defensive position relative to the *Enterprise-C*... we must protect that ship at all costs. Ram them if you must,” he ordered solemnly. “Load all torpedoes and fire at will.”

“Firing phasers,” Tasha intoned. The Bridge was shaking violently and circuitry, already battle-weary, was beginning to sizzle and smoke. The spaceframe and power systems simply were not designed to withstand firepower of this modern magnitude. Despite their best efforts to both target and evade the Klingons, it was about all Tasha and Castillo could do just to stay in their seats.

“Load torpedo bays,” Garrett ordered. The battered command center was rocked again and this time the alarms signaled a hull breach below decks. And again the Klingons fired — *and again*. Castillo and Tasha flew up and collided, then fell back into their seats. Another blast sent Garrett out of her chair and to her knees. Quickly recovering, she

sat back down and gripped the armrests against the next assault.

And when it finally came, somewhere, to the Captain's right, there was an explosion. She perceived a white flash brighter than any nova sun. Her body began to tingle as this soft white light slowly began to envelop her. *At last*, she thought, and then all became eerily silent. For a moment, she could hear Spencer's thoughts within her mind again; feel his presence.

*I've been so tired for so long*, she said to him. *I know, my Imzadi*, he replied, *let it go, just let it all go*. She again could feel the peace in their togetherness. And still her body tingled as that wondrous white light formed its final shell around her. *At last*, she thought again. A lifetime flashed by in but a few brief heartbeats, and she was satisfied. Then, at long last, all she had ever known was finally gone, replaced by that soft white light.

And then there was only darkness.

After a ferocious volley of torpedoes and a few fresh blasts of phaser power from the *Enterprise-D*, the bird-of-prey finally began to move off, but not before hitting the *Enterprise-C* with a final lethal barrage of disruptor fire. Apparently satisfied that they'd done enough damage for the time being, the Klingons vanished in a shimmering display of light, no doubt still circling in the darkness out there, somewhere, awaiting reinforcements.

"The Klingon vessel has recloaked, Sir," Data reported. "I have no readings."

"Captain Garrett..." Picard called into the comm network. "Damage report." And then there was an eerie silence that chilled the captain to the bone. He waited but an instant more, then called out again, almost pleading... "Captain Garrett?!"

Still the silence, and then, at long last, an open channel...

*"This is Lieutenant Yar, Sir... Captain Garrett is dead."*

## “...begin Chapter Twenty-one.”

“I need to see Captain Picard at once.”

“Why yes, Sir, of course. He’s with Commander Riker and Lieutenant Yar in the Main Observation Lounge... Deck One.”

Acting-Captain Richard M. Castillo nodded at the kindhearted Irishman, then stepped down off the transporter pad and made his way for the door. *Acting-Captain*. He still couldn’t quite get used to the sound of that. What a wild and winding road the past two weeks had been. And what incredible sacrifices Captain Garrett had made all for the sake of peace. She had lost so much... Stadi, Onovan, Marta, Skyl, Dr. Grey... Cicely. Ultimately, even her own life.

Yet, after a moment’s thought, Castillo realized that he too had lost these things, these little parts of himself. But somehow, his sacrifices did not seem to be half as great. Captain Rachel Garrett had been an icon. She’d been the capstone of a great pillar that had no choice but to watch as her foundation slowly crumbled away beneath her. Ultimately, she fell, not because of any weakness or ineptitude, but because a structure simply cannot stand without its foundation.

It was a hard lesson, and the acting captain knew now that it was his job, his duty, to start building his own foundation. That had to start here, aboard the *Enterprise-D*. He had to prove to Picard that he had the strength, the same legendary resolve, as all those who had come before him. He owed it to Cicely and Marta, to Commander Stadi and Captain Garrett, and to all the other crew members of the *Enterprise-C*. And he owed it to the future too. Peace was now in his care.

“As a result of the Vulcan succession, the *Enterprise* has been ordered to fall back to Wolf 359. We are to take command of the Third Fleet in defense of Earth and Alpha Centauri.” Picard had hoped that this briefing would not be necessary. Had hoped that by now the *Enterprise-C* would’ve been through the rift and that this terrible war would now be over. But now it seemed that all hope had been lost; and that meant that the war must go on and on and on.

“They can’t be serious,” Riker said hotly. “If we fall back to Wolf 359, we’ll be opening up nearly seven full sectors to Klingon

advancements. Regulus, Beta Rigel, Deneva Prime... all would be left defenseless.”

“Captain, shouldn’t we at least try to make a stand at Starbase Twelve?” Tasha was clearly exasperated. ‘Fall back’ had seemed to become the catchphrase at Starfleet Command these days and those on the front lines were quickly growing tired of it. Picard let out a heavy sigh. He agreed with his officers but was nonetheless consigned to follow orders.

“If...” he started, then corrected, “...*when* Andor and Vulcan go to war, we will be cut off from our supply lines. Our troop transports and frigates will be caught in the crossfire. We simply do not have the resources to maintain two fronts, we must fall back.”

Nothing more was said for they all knew this to be true. With its foundation washing away, the Federation was crumbling like a giant pillar. Ultimately, like a great capstone, Earth too would fall and they knew there was nothing they could do to stop it. It made them angry, it made them desperate, it made them feel helpless. The *Enterprise-C*’s arrival had given them some hope, but Captain Garrett’s death had robbed them even of that. Now they had nothing left but despair.

With a quiet whoosh, the doors to the observation lounge slid open and the young helmsman from the *Enterprise-C* marched in with the full confidence of an admiral. Picard could see it in him immediately, and suddenly some small part of that hope returned. The lieutenant’s face bore a legendary resolve that the Picard hadn’t seen since the early days of the war. He quickly realized that the spare key now stood before him. He cursed himself for not seeing it sooner; they had so little precious time left.

“I’m prepared to lead the *Enterprise* back myself, Captain Picard,” the young man said with forcefulness.

“Sir,” Riker interposed, “Lieutenant Castillo is the last surviving senior officer. He will have limited support from Ops, no tactical, reduced staff in Engineering...”

“I have good people willing to do their best.” This was said with such conviction that Picard nearly shuddered.

“Certainly,” Riker continued, “history never meant for this ship to go into battle without her captain.”

“I can’t speak to that point, Sir,” Castillo conceded, “But I can

get us back to where we're supposed to be. I believe that's what Captain Garrett would want me to do."

"*Commander Data to Captain Picard...*" Dammit, Picard thought, *not now Data!*

"Go ahead," he said, slowly moving around the end of the conference table.

"*Sir, sensors are showing additional instability in the time rift, possibly the result of the battle with the Klingons.*" Damn, Picard thought again. *Damn, damn, dammit!*

"Any signs of other Klingon vessels?"

"*No, Sir,*" Data answered, but they all knew they were out there, somewhere, cloaked and just waiting for the right moment to strike. Their options were narrowing and the time was now.

"Our coordinates have been transmitted to the Klingon Command, Sir," Tasha warned. "We mustn't remain here." He turned to her, then back to Castillo as the young man continued his argument.

"Sir, it is my *intention* to return, unless you order me not to."

The command presence in the man's voice left Picard in momentary awe. That pompous ass Riker could learn a thing or two from this most remarkable lieutenant, Picard concluded. He'd left things to chance before and now he was certain that this young man was their *last* chance — perhaps *humanity's* last chance — for survival. The captain walked up and stood nose to nose with this, the newest member of the club.

"How soon can your ship be ready?" he almost whispered.

"We sustained moderate damage in the attack. I think we can be underway in a few hours." Picard could tell that this freshman captain was not being entirely honest with him. The young man was inexperienced, but Picard sensed that somehow, in some way, that ship would indeed be ready. He admired Castillo for his confidence. It was a deep and profound confidence that seemed to radiate from his very soul.

"Make it so," Picard ordered. "We'll give you cover." The two men stared at each other for a brief moment with a kindred spirit, and then Acting-Captain Richard M. Castillo marched out of the observation lounge with perhaps slightly more confidence than he'd marched in on.

As if drawn by some unseen force, Tasha quickly followed Richard out like a feather caught in the wind. This left Picard alone with Riker, a condition that the captain never found quite enjoyable. Their personalities seemed to function on almost two different planes. Picard was thoughtful, quiet, cautious; while his first officer was headstrong, stubborn, and quick to act without proper consideration. The man needed leavening.

Unfortunately, it was the nature of war that he would not get it. Picard regretted this and so much more. He now wondered if they would be friends in this new future that was about to be created. Perhaps in that time, Riker would get the guidance that he needed. He would have time to learn patience and respect, compassion and understanding. Perhaps in that time he would find love, find humor, *and not be such a damned pompous ass.*

“With all due respect, Sir,” again, said without any, “I believe you’ve made a terrible mistake by allowing that ship to return... especially now without her captain.”

“You are... entitled to your opinion, Commander.” He rubbed his war-weary eyes and let out a deep sigh as Riker continued with his diatribe.

“The Lieutenant is young and inexperienced, his ship is in ruins, and all he has left is a poorly trained, ill-prepared skeleton crew. Their return will be pointless, that ship should be evacuated and destroyed now while there’s still time.”

“Now really, Commander,” Picard said harshly, “I am beginning to grow weary of your constant objections. The decision has been made, there’s no turning back...”

“Are you forgetting, Sir,” Riker still argued, “that there may yet be a saboteur aboard that ship?” Picard inhaled deeply and bit his upper lip. *The damn narrow-minded fool*, he thought. The Captain took several steps forward and came to within inches of his first officer. This was as close to anger as Picard would get, and generally, it was plenty close enough.

“Commander,” he began, “let’s be perfectly clear on this. It is entirely possible that at any given critical moment, any single person... whether it be Lieutenant Castillo, a junior crewman, or this supposed saboteur... can profoundly alter the course of the future...”

“If there is yet a traitor onboard that ship, we must let history be the judge of that person’s actions... *our* history, Commander. But it is not *ours* to dictate how events should unfold to create *our* history.”

“If you insist, *Sir*,” Riker responded, gritting his teeth. “I guess in this case, history will have to be the judge of who is right... *and who is wrong*, here today.” With that, the commander turned and started to leave. Picard almost let him go, but there was still one other important matter to attend to. Reluctantly, the Captain called after his first officer.

“Will...” he said, startling the commander to a halt. It was only rarely that Picard called him by his given name, and this left Riker puzzled... and also a little worried.

“Sir?!” he said, turning.

“Please, Commander, have a seat for a moment.” Riker eyed his captain speculatively for a brief instant, then somewhat unwillingly complied. He was afraid that maybe this time he’d pushed it too far, had finally forced Picard’s hand in some way. The two men stared at each other uncomfortably for a moment more before the captain finally spoke with a gravelly voice.

“My good friend, Captain Donald Varley, was recently killed during the Cardassian invasion of Betazed...”

“I’m sorry to hear that, *Sir*,” Riker said blankly, somewhat mystified.

“Will,” Picard continued quietly, “you’ve been offered command of our sister ship, the *Yamato*, to take his place. You will be in direct command of the Tenth Fleet defending Trill against any further Cardassian aggressions.”

“You’ll understand, *Sir*,” Riker croaked, “if I wish to take some time to consider this?” He was obviously overwhelmed. He would be taking on a tremendous amount of responsibility and Picard was not entirely convinced that Riker was ready for it. But the captain also knew that Starfleet was fast running out of experienced officers.

“Time is no longer our friend, Commander,” Picard said levelly. “Starfleet Command needs an answer soon.”

“Yes, *Sir*,” Riker nodded, but Picard was worried that the narrow-minded fool was again, not seeing the big picture. He wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him; make him see that defeat was no longer a possibility... *it was an inevitability*. Time was running out

for them all.

“Will, Starfleet needs good captains now more than ever. You’re ready.” He still was not convinced that Riker was indeed ready, but knew that the pompous ass still needed to hear the words anyway.

Picard also knew that he needed to hear this as well: “The name *Enterprise* no longer has any meaning, Commander. The Federation needs you elsewhere to help save what is left.”

“Are you telling me to leave, Sir?” Riker spit out hotly. Picard paused and let a few long moments pass between them. It was time now for the plain and simple truth. Unlike Riker, Picard could see the big picture, and it was as clear as the proverbial writing on the wall.

“This ship...” he said distantly, “will *not* survive the coming months, Commander... Please, I’m asking you, take this chance before it’s too late.” Finally, as if the right switch had at last been found, the lights came on and Riker could for the first time see. There would be no more ships named *Enterprise*, there would be no 1701-E. His arrogance had prevented him from understanding that they could not... would not, win this war. It was a harsh reality to awaken to, but harsh realities were the grim truths governing their lives. There would be no more victories, only defeat... *and eventual extinction*.

~ ~ ~ ~

Like a feather caught in the wind, Tasha continued to drift along beside Richard until they had made their way all the way back to the transporter room. Throughout the course of their journey, they had said nothing, simply enjoying the peace in their togetherness. Of all the losses Tasha had been forced to endure in her life, this was and would be the hardest. After what seemed like a lifetime together, all that was left was to say goodbye.

“One to beam to the *Enterprise-C*,” Richard said to the kindhearted transporter chief, then turned to Tasha. “We keep saying goodbye, don’t we?” She at first did not face him. Her heart simply could not look into those baby blue eyes and know that it was for the last time. Her soul wanted to reach out and cling to his and not let go. Her mind wanted time to stand still so they could share an eternity together.

“I wish we had more time,” she whispered, looking at him finally.

“More time?” he said with a quizzical grin. “I think we have all the time we can handle as it is.” They both laughed awkwardly at this, then at last stared wistfully into each other’s eyes. There was a sudden depth of feeling there that neither one of them was prepared for. They quickly slipped in over their heads and felt sudden fear. A fear of separateness, of being alone. A fear of being lost and drowning in this suffocating sea of time. He reached for her, she for him, and they fought against its inevitable tide.

And then there was the kiss. In the twenty-two years of history that separated them, there had never been such passion in a single kiss. It spanned generations, it pushed back all fear, it shattered any remaining sense of loneliness. For a moment, it even held back the tide as time was swept up into this whirlwind exchange of souls. No longer two, but one... one heart, one soul, one mind... all coalescing into a single state of energy. They were companion to this belonging.

And then, like a leopardess, time struck back with a vengeance and they were torn away, bleeding one for the other.

“Lieutenant,” Richard whispered, then turned and climbed up onto the transporter platform. She continued to look longingly into his soul, even after his body had dissolved into a swirling cloud of energy. Alone again, Tasha could feel the specter of death haunt her once more. She shivered at it; but this time, she would not turn away in fear. This time, she would stare death right in the face and demand answers.

~ ~ ~

“I never thought we’d be back here so soon.” Ensign Sonya Gomez stood in the engine room of the *Enterprise-C* and stared with dismay at its darkened warp core. As little as an hour ago, she’d had the massive seventeen-story structure purring like a kitten. But during the skirmish the computer had automatically shut the behemoth down and locked it into safe mode. Apparently, modern-day Klingon weapons had proven too much for its aging circuitry to handle.

“How bad is it?” Geordi asked, looking down the column into the very depths of the starship.

“Well,” Sonya said, consulting a tricorder, “Matter Injector Three is fused, but I think I can bypass it and run off the other five. There’s also a crack in the starboard power transfer conduit, but that’s a quick fix.”

“How long?”

“No more than an hour...”

“Good,” Geordi nodded turning and moving into the chief engineer’s office. He began scanning the other engineering data as Sonya came in and stood next to him at the main console. She’d made an impact on him over the course of the last day and he was now beginning to think that perhaps time was too short to pass up the opportunity. The *Enterprise* had been ordered to fall back to Wolf 359, which meant the war was going far worse than anyone had realized. So why not spend what little time they had left, together?

“Geordi,” Sonya said quietly, “what do you think will happen when this ship passes back through the rift?” He sighed and looked into her face. His VISOR showed her features as an impressionistic sea of color; her lips and nose in reds and whites, her cheeks in shades of blue and green, her eyes a deep purple. She was certainly beautiful.

“I don’t know,” he answered pensively. “Captain Picard thinks that a new future will be created... but how do we know that that future will be any better than this one?”

“I guess we don’t,” Sonya sighed.

“I mean,” Geordi continued, “because of the war, exploration has virtually stopped, so we have no idea what else might be out there. There could be a race of cyborgs waiting for us just around the next corner, hell-bent on conquering the universe. Or maybe even some vast dominion who’ll want our extermination even worse than the Klingons do...” Sonya looked up at him glumly, then perked up with a smile.

“Or maybe,” she said, batting her eyes, “there will be peace and harmony throughout the galaxy, with the Klingons, Romulans, and Cardassians all sitting around our council fire.” Geordi laughed at her; not because of her comment, but because of her eternal optimism. It was perhaps her most endearing feature. Hope. Again his mind couldn’t help but think there was no time like the present... for this future or the next may never be.

“Sonya,” he said coyly, “do you like Italian food?”

“Like it?” she answered with a playful smile. “Wait till I make you my fungilli.”

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Ten Forward was usually dark and quiet at this late hour, but tonight, a lone occupant stood and stared out the great windows at the *Enterprise-C* drifting silently nearby. There once had been someone she cared for very deeply aboard that ship, someone she'd known since before Earthlings were even venturing beyond the orbit of their blue little world. They had been friends, they had been lovers — she smirked — they'd even been married for a while.

But Onovan was gone now; he'd been gone for twenty-two years, and Guinan was finding that she truly had missed her good friend and companion. Twenty-two years... nearly a quarter of the fragile human lifespan... but just a small fraction of an El-Aurians near millennial existence. Still, that did not decrease the degree of the loss. Life was a special gift, even for those who lived so long, and death was equally as permanent and painful.

When the ship had first appeared, Guinan had been surprised to feel hope welling up within her chest. She also knew that it felt wrong; forty billion precious lives told her it was all very much wrong. Yet still there was hope, and ultimately sadness, when she'd finally learned for certain what she'd always known anyway. Onovan was dead. Like so, so many others, he was gone forever; a brief but brilliant flame radiating for a time in the infinite darkness of the cosmos.

Guinan heard the quiet whoosh of the doors behind her and knew without looking who the visitor would be. Guinan had been expecting her for some time now, and at long last, she'd come. This moment had been twenty-two years in the making and Guinan was still not certain what, or how much, she should say. She knew all too well that playing with time was a tricky and dangerous game, especially when so many lives were at stake.

“Can I get you something, Tasha?” Guinan said this to the ghostly reflection in the alumglass, then slowly turned to face the living breathing form of this sweet young girl.

Tasha hesitated for a moment. She still wanted to turn away in

fear as Guinan continued to look through her as if she were nothing but the image in that darkened glass. She again felt the breath of time wash over her neck and she shivered. Twenty-two years flashed by in a blink if you we're watching. Somehow Guinan had been watching.

"Guinan, I have to know something... What happens to me in the other timeline?" Guinan pretended to busy herself by collecting up a few empty glasses. Her voice was low and stilted.

"I don't have alternate biographies of the crew," she said, breezing by. "As I said to the Captain, it's just a feeling." Their eyes met briefly, and again Tasha felt the haunting specter of death.

"But there's something more when you look at me, isn't there?" she countered. "I can see it in your eyes, Guinan. We've known each other too long..."

"We weren't meant to know each other at all!" Guinan blurted out. Her back had been to Tasha, but now she faced her with that same piercing stare. "At least that's what I sense when I look at you... Tasha, you're *not* supposed to be here." Tasha stood for a moment in stunned silence. She half smiled, then shook her head. Finally, she spoke with a questioning tone and a disbelieving glare.

"Where am I supposed to be?"

"Dead." The answer was plain and simple and it left Tasha feeling hollow inside. The hollowness quickly began to fill with confusion and desperation. She was drowning now after all, in a near panic.

"Do you know how?" she whispered painfully.

"No," Guinan answered, mirroring her pain. "But I do know it was an empty death... a death without purpose."

Tasha's face now looked stricken as she glanced first at the floor, then back up to Guinan. She began to speak, but instead swallowed it, nearly choking. The specter of death closed in on her with its suffocating shroud and her soul shivered against time's cold breath. *An empty death?* She felt like she'd been shortchanged somehow. Like her entire life had carried no meaning, had made no impact on this, even their own small corner of the universe. Instead of fear, a deep sense of emptiness began to take hold of her.

Without another word, she turned, knowing now what it was she must do. And as Guinan watched her go, she herself could not shake

the feeling that the future had already been somehow altered. Changed again from what it was supposed to be. Time was a tricky and dangerous game and they had just played it. She only hoped that they had played it well, for one small misstep could change the course of generations.

~ ~ ~ ~

“Wesley, are you certain that this is what you want?” Beverly Crusher stood before her son and with a trembling hand, picked an imaginary piece of lint off his shoulder. Now at least a head taller than his mother, Wesley had grown up to look so much like his father. She wished Jack were still alive to see the young man all dressed out in his red and black uniform. A full ensign at seventeen! A remarkable achievement, even despite the necessities of war.

“Mom, I am the only officer in Starfleet who has to serve aboard the same starship as his mother.” He said this with a somewhat exasperated tone and she knew that it had been a difficult adjustment for him. But it worried her already worried mind that he would be moving so far out of her protective reach. Since Jack’s death, her biggest fear had been that she might lose Wesley too. Beverly did not know if her war-weary mind could cope with the loss of both the men she had loved so dearly.

“I know it’s been hard, Wesley,” Beverly pleaded, “but we may not see each other again for months, if not years.” She was afraid to say ‘*or never again*’ because of its morbid permanence.

“Mom, I need to do this for myself,” he said with sad eyes. “Commander Riker says he wants someone aboard the *Yamato* he can count on. That really means a lot to me and I think that this will finally give me the chance to be in a place where I can truly be myself.”

“And find yourself,” Beverly finished for him with a wistful sigh. “Oh Wesley, a lieutenant and a senior officer... your father would be so very proud.” She reached up and gave him a firm hug, then backed up to look him deep in the eyes. “And I’m proud of you too, Wesley. Never forget that.”

“Does that mean you’ll approve my transfer?” He looked back into her eyes with a playful, boyish grin. She shook her head at him

and sighed.

“I’ll sign the order with Captain Picard in the morning.”

Beverly had a sickening premonition that she had just signed her own son’s death certificate; but knew too, for his sake, that it must be done. Whether aboard the *Enterprise*, or aboard the *Yamato*, the young man’s life was likely to be brief and she hoped that perhaps out there he would be able to find some small measure of happiness before the end. *The End*. The words seemed impossible to believe, but the Federation was quickly collapsing, and humans on many fronts were now considered to be an endangered species.

With another great hug and whispered *I love you’s*, Wesley finally turned and left the protective care of his mother. And as he left, Beverly’s worried mind had no choice but to begin coping with the loss.

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Captain Picard held his log entry in both hands and scanned its contents with tired eyes. He knew he should be trying to get some rest at such a late hour, but there was always so much to be done. On top of the present situation with the *Enterprise-C*, he now had to pull together and try to coordinate what was left of the Third Fleet. The list of available starships was getting slimmer by the day. Add to that a vast shortage of personnel and things were beginning to look very grim indeed. Some starships even sat parked in spacedock; there simply weren’t enough people left to run them. *Forty billion had already died!*

The captain could not help but to look at his log entry and think how futile it now seemed. If only they could get the *Enterprise-C* underway and through the rift, then none of this would matter anymore. Every single moment of the past twenty-two years would be erased with one clean swipe. Admittedly, this did give Picard a few misgivings. It hadn’t all been bad. There’d been many good and happy memories too over the past two decades... but he would gladly sacrifice all those memories to put a stop to this bloody war once and for all and save each one of those forty billion.

With a quiet sigh, he was resigned finally to continue with his work. If this bold chance were not successful after all, then the war would go on and life would trudge forward. And if he persisted in

using the *Enterprise-C* as an excuse, it would leave him even more hopelessly behind than he already was on all the mundane day-to-day tasks of commanding a starship. So with tired eyes, the captain again consulted his log entry, trying to piece together the day's events.

So absorbed was he in this task, that he did not hear the door chime until its second attempt. Without looking up, he called into the comm receiver. "Come!" And as Tasha Yar moved slowly into his darkened ready room, Picard glanced up only briefly to acknowledge that it was her. "Yes, Lieutenant?" he said, looking back down at his work.

"Captain," Tasha whispered, "I request a transfer to the *Enterprise-C*." Only then did the captain look up and see the scared and empty look on the lieutenant's face. Only then did he sense the sheer and utter loss, the near hollowness.

"For what reason?" he asked with uncertain concern.

"They need someone at Tactical."

"We need you here," he countered matter-of-factly. The captain knew her answer to be bogus and he had no time nor patience for these beat-around-the-bush games. Tasha's sudden romance with this Lieutenant Castillo was, he felt, poor judgment on her part and now it must end. He went on with his work considering the matter closed.

"I, I," Tasha stammered, "I'm not supposed to be here, Sir."

Picard's mind was then a sudden flood of realization. Tasha's scared and empty look; the sense of loss that gave her face that hollowness. It could only mean one thing, and it wasn't as simple as lost love. He laid down the padd once and for all and sighed.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," he said softly, and slowly she complied.

Once seated, Picard looked into her soft blue eyes. "What did she say to you?" Tasha hesitated for a moment, then spoke nervously.

"I don't belong here, Sir." She paused again. "I'm, I'm... supposed to be dead." Picard looked at her with weary eyes and a rare level of compassion. But this unexpected turn troubled him beyond all imagining. He felt sick.

"She felt it necessary to reveal that to you?"

"I felt it was necessary," Tasha answered and he understood.

There had obviously been several unusual interchanges between Guinan and the Lieutenant in the past twelve hours. For Guinan to be

confronted by a ghost, and for Tasha to see that in her face, must have been disconcerting for them both. Picard now felt a certain amount of pity for his tactical officer. As if the poor girl's tragic childhood hadn't been enough...

"I see," he merely said quietly, then drew in a deep breath. "You realize," he argued, "that it is very possible the *Enterprise-C* will fail. We will continue in this timeline, in which case, your life, *hopefully*, will continue for a long while."

"I know how important it is that they don't fail, Captain," Tasha countered. "That's why I'm requesting this transfer."

"You don't belong on that ship, Lieutenant," Picard said plainly.

"No," she said vehemently, "Captain Garrett belongs on that ship, but she's dead. And I think there's a certain logic in this request..."

"There's no logic in this at all!" Picard interrupted hotly. "Whether they succeed or not... the *Enterprise-C* will be *destroyed*." He said the last with a whisper, but he was already beginning to sense that her passion would not be so easily swayed.

"But Captain," she continued to argue, "at least with someone at Tactical they will have a chance to defend themselves well. It may be a matter of seconds or minutes, but those could be the minutes that change history."

She paused, changing gears, then continued. "Guinan says I died a senseless death in the other timeline. I didn't like the sound of that, Captain. I've always known the risks that come with a Starfleet uniform... If I'm to die in one, I'd like my death to count for something."

Picard knew the consequences for meddling in the timeline could be disastrous. But he also knew that this hollowness, this lack of meaning, would haunt Tasha for the rest of her life. In the end, everyone should feel that their life had counted for something; that they had made a difference. He could sense her passion, her need, and her desire, to do this. His mind told him absolutely not, but his heart told him that, in the end, the *Enterprise-C* would be destroyed and none of these events would've ever occurred. What harm to grant her this, her final request, so near to the ultimate end of everything?

"Lieutenant..." He then paused, brushing off the feeling that he

was about to make a disastrous mistake. When he finally spoke again, his voice was distant, uncertain... "Permission granted."

With that, Tasha rose slowly and stood at attention before her captain. "Thank you, Sir," she whispered. And after a moment more, she turned and was gone. Though it still troubled him beyond all imagining, the decision had been made. He'd made this one small change, this minor alteration, and Picard hoped the future would be able to forgive him for it... for the sins of one man can affect many generations to come.

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Aboard the *Enterprise-C*, all of the 'D' personnel had been evacuated, and the ship was making its final preparations for departure. The Bridge was awash with junior crewmembers, all scurrying about under Acting-Captain Richard M. Castillo's patient guidance. After some initial trepidation, Richard was finding himself falling into his new role with remarkable ease. With a comfortable command style Rachel Garrett would've been proud of, he knew he had his former captain to thank for everything he'd learned.

Turning away from Cicely's aft Ops console, Richard leaned on the upper-level railing and tapped his commbadge. "I'm showing phaser banks at seventy percent efficiency. We've got an hour left, let's see if we can get them up to ninety."

"*Aye, Sir,*" came the active response from Engineering, and the acting-captain thought they might actually be able to do it. The remaining crew had rallied behind him with an incredible sense of purpose. He could sense their near fanatical fidelity to Rachel Garrett, and this gave him the confidence he needed to realize they would succeed. But what Richard did not realize, was that confidence came from the top down. The crew was as much following his lead as they were living up to the memory of Captain Rachel Garrett.

"Parker, you've got Ops," Lieutenant Castillo ordered a very young-looking ensign, then walked over and patted an even younger looking ensign on the shoulder. "Fredericks, take the helm," he said to this man, who nodded back with intense loyalty.

"I'll handle Tactical," a familiar female voice called out from the

front of the Bridge. Richard's heart nearly stopped as it leapt into his throat. "Lieutenant Natasha Yar reporting for duty, Sir," she finished as he bounded down off the upper level to meet her. He quickly came face to face with her and stared into her soft blue eyes.

"You're not part of my crew."

"I am now," she answered plainly. "Captain Picard approved my request for transfer." Richard glanced around the Bridge for prying eyes and ears, then grabbed her tightly by the elbow, drawing her closer.

"This isn't a joke, Tasha," he whispered. "We're going into the rift... into battle. We're *not* coming back."

"I know the mission," she countered. "These are my orders, Lieutenant."

Richard drew her in even closer until their bodies were in contact with each other. Again he could feel the heat and energy radiating between them. He felt that sudden peace in their togetherness and he did not want to let go. Blue eyes once more molded into one as they began to coalesce into that single state of being. Yet, he knew this wasn't just some paperback novel, this was life; and it was a life full of harsh realities.

"But I don't want you here," he whispered painfully.

"You need me here," she said, knowing just what to say. "Show me someone in your crew who can do the job better than I can."

And he did indeed need her, he realized, but not just for that reason. He needed her for her support, and to feel that comfort in their togetherness. For the first time, he understood the complex and close-knit relationship that had existed between Captain Garrett and Commander Spencer Stadi. They had needed each other too. And with their deaths, and the loss of Marta and Cicely, Richard had also lost that support group that he so sorely needed... especially now. The road ahead was going to be a difficult one.

"Welcome aboard," he conceded with a lump in his throat. He then stepped away from her and stood at attention. "Take your station, Lieutenant," he ordered.

"Aye, Captain," Tasha acknowledged with a smile and a gleam in her eyes. And as she sat down at tactical, Captain Richard M. Castillo eased himself into the command chair and prepared to make history.

“...begin Chapter Twenty-two.”

MILITARY LOG: SUPPLEMENTAL

LIEUTENANT NATASHA YAR HAS TRANSFERRED TO THE *ENTERPRISE-C*, WHERE SHE HAS TAKEN OVER TACTICAL DUTIES. MEANWHILE, OUR LONG-RANGE SCANNERS HAVE PICKED UP KLINGON BATTLE CRUISERS ON AN INTERCEPT COURSE.

“Number and type of ships, Mister Crusher?” Riker called ahead from the primary tactical station. The *Enterprise* was set at Red Alert and over five thousand people now stood poised for battle. On the main viewscreen, they watched the *Enterprise-C* slowly turn towards the rift and lumber away; at least she was under her own power. With Data’s expert touch, the image then switched to show their adversaries approaching from the opposite direction. The menace was palpable and enslaving.

“Three *K’vort*-class battle cruisers, Sir,” Wesley answered from the helm. He had brought the bow of the *Enterprise* and its formidable weapons to bear on the greenish, winged vessels that were zeroing in fast.

“They’re not even troubling to cloak themselves,” Picard muttered at Riker’s side. The commander puffed up his chest and faced his captain.

“They shouldn’t be so confident,” he said with arrogance, “after the pasting we gave them on Archer Four.” *Damn fool, narrow-minded pompous ass.* Ten million people had died at Archer IV and the *Enterprise* had only barely escaped with her skin intact. Someday, Riker’s overconfidence would be his downfall. The captain touched the panel for a ship-wide comm channel.

“Attention — All hands,” he said clearly. “As you know, we could outrun the Klingon vessels, but we must protect the *Enterprise-C* until she enters the temporal rift... and we must succeed. Let’s make sure that history never forgets the name... *Enterprise*. Picard out.” The captain by this time had moved around to the command chair and now

sat down and consulted his own tactical displays embedded within the armrests.

And then, with three simultaneous thunderclaps, the Klingons were upon them. “Mister Data?” Picard called out over the racket of shield impacts.

“Shields are holding, Sir,” Data announced.

“Hold fire,” Picard ordered, studying his readouts. “Mister Crusher, come about to course one-four-eight, zero-zero-three.”

“Aye, Sir,” Wesley acknowledged and Picard could immediately feel the great ship begin to turn. The young man was good, very good, and fast too. The captain regretted that he would soon be losing him to Riker and the *Yamato*, but felt fortunate that Commander Data would presently be moving up to become his new First Officer. Riker had been a continuous challenge, and Picard looked forward to some welcome relief.

“Photon torpedoes ready,” Riker called out. He was temporarily filling in for Tasha until a replacement could be selected. The commander had nearly boiled over of course when he’d heard of her transfer. He knew Picard was daft, but he never thought him foolish until now. After all that nonsense about meddling in the timeline, and then Picard had committed the greatest blunder of them all!

“Dispersal pattern... Sierra,” Picard ordered. “And... fire.”

From Riker’s fingertips, they all watched five shimmering red globes hurl forth at their attackers. They each in turn struck the lead vessel head-on and made its shields flicker erratically.

“One enemy target hit, Sir,” Data reported. “Moderate damage to their forward shields.” Another cacophony of thunder filled the Bridge as the Klingons returned the favor. Everyone was thrown forward by the impact, but still remained somewhat upright. “Our shields are still holding,” Data announced. “Minor damage to secondary hull.”

One bird-of-prey now swooped overhead at a terrifying speed. Its two partners closed in tightly and unleashed bold disruptor blasts against the *Enterprise’s* shields. The Bridge shook violently and the noise was unbelievable. That had been a close and costly shot, Picard realized, as the two ships swooped away to port and starboard. He consulted his readouts and made his next move.

“Course one-four-eight...” He squinted at a strange maneuver the lead vessel was making, then spoke again. “Correction... course one-seven-zero mark zero-one-four.” But Wesley this time hesitated, seeing the Klingon ruse that Picard had just missed.

“Sir,” he called out, “one of the ships is breaking off and going towards the *Enterprise-C*.” The lead vessel had been a lure and Picard cursed himself for being so easily duped. He did a silent hats-off to Wesley; the boy was good, damn good. It was indeed a shame that he was going to lose him to this transfer, the boy had the potential to go very, very far aboard the *Enterprise*. *Why, he himself might even be first officer before too long*, the captain thought morbidly.

“Mister Crusher,” Picard said levelly, “keep us within two hundred kilometers of the *Enterprise-C*.”

Wesley nodded and Picard could again feel the great ship turning. “Coming to two-one-seven mark one-one-five,” Wesley announced. “Increasing to two-thirds impulse.” On the viewscreen, the *Enterprise-C* came into view, still fleeing towards the deceptive safety of the temporal rift. The Klingons managed to get off a few lucky potshots into its shields before the *Enterprise-D* was able to move into range. Picard hoped no serious damage had been done, while Riker drew their fire with a few nicely timed phaser blasts.

All three Klingon vessels then concentrated their full faith and intentions on the *Enterprise-D*. The great starship shook from side to side, back and forth, and seemingly up and down, all at the same time. There was an intense rumble, followed by an earsplitting shriek that signaled a hull breach somewhere below decks. Both Data and Wesley gave each other an all-too-knowing glance. The war had just claimed its newest victims.

“Damage Control Teams... Deck Fourteen,” Riker shouted into the comm system. His voice was followed immediately by Geordi’s.

“Engineering to Bridge... Starboard Power Coupling is down... Containment Field Generator Three is damaged. Attempting to bypass.”

“If we lose antimatter containment...” Riker whispered over Picard’s shoulder, but he was cut off by another crash of weapons fire. Everyone was thrown off the deck six inches and came down with a painful jolt. As was usual, Picard did not feign to give his first officer a

response for stating the obvious. *Damned fool*, Picard thought, *such a pompous ass*.

“Acknowledged, Mister LaForge,” Picard shouted above the blaring alarms and the shuddering deck. His attention was then captured by a worried report from Wesley.

“Sir, the Klingons are flanking us, attempting to draw us away from the *Enterprise-C*.” While Riker was whimpering about the obvious, Wesley had picked out the not so obvious and acted on it. Picard felt the great ship roll and turn again. *Well done, Mr. Crusher*, Picard thought, *such a sharp young man*.

“Hold course, Mister Crusher,” the Captain ordered. “Continual fire... all phasers.” At Riker’s determined touch, an extreme arsenal of lethal energy erupted from the *Enterprise’s* hull. Coming from several locations at once, it all converged on the lead vessel and began immediately to dismantle its shields. After flickering valiantly for several breathless moments, they finally collapsed. And with one last blast, the vessel’s hull shattered, sending the million or so pieces scattering aimlessly throughout space.

“One enemy target destroyed, Sir,” Data said with the flat, emotionless voice of an android. But it was a hollow victory as the two remaining birds-of-prey systematically dealt out their cold revenge. From years of experience, they knew exactly where to hit a Federation starship to make it count. With disruptors at full tilt, both vessels converged on the *Enterprise* with an intensity that made Picard shudder. The damage would be severe.

All around the Bridge, stations exploded with a deadly hailstorm of sparks and debris. The sound of ten ancient freight trains reverberated within Picard’s skull as he watched officers fall to the deck like dominos. There was another sickening shriek as the hull again caved outward at some other undisclosed location amidships. More war victims were sent spinning out into the abyss. The captain gripped the armrests tightly until all was at long last quiet again. He hated to ask the question, but knew he must.

“Damage report.”

“Heavy casualties in the secondary hull,” Riker answered grimly. “Navigational sensor array... inoperative.” Monitoring the comline, Geordi also answered with grim statistics.

“Antimatter containment fields are failing. If I can’t stabilize them, I’ll have to dump the reactor core or she’ll blow.” Picard could hear the venting gases and blaring alarms through the commline. Engineering was in serious trouble. The ship was hit again, and again, and this time the Bridge went momentarily dark. The lights flickered back on just as Data made his report.

“Shields buckling, Captain. They will not...” Data was cut off by another heart and body pounding blast. Several fires burst forth at once from ruptured conduits and Picard knew that the end was now near. They had just passed the point of no return and he hoped that their sacrifice would not be in vain.

“LaForge to Bridge... I can’t hold the antimatter containment fields. Initiating emergency shutdown...” With that, Picard heard a ferocious explosion in the background, followed by the sound of an F-5 tornado tearing through Engineering. He knew the prognosis before Geordi could even say it.

“Coolant leak, Bridge, we’ve got a coolant leak in the engine core. I can’t shut it down. I estimate two minutes to a warp core breach.” Another explosion and another tornado... *“Come on, get out! Go, go, go, go, go!”* ...and the commlink was severed.

“How long before the *Enterprise-C* enters the rift?” Picard shouted above the noise of multiple disruptor blasts, and multiple hull breaches.

“Fifty-two seconds, Sir,” Data called out. Picard had heard of cutting it close, but he feared that this time they might’ve cut it a little too close.

“All remaining power to the defensive systems,” he ordered, but Data was quick to announce the unlikelihood.

“Power couplings severed in forward phaser banks. Attempting to bypass...” A sickening pause. “Controls not responding.”

Picard sat helpless as his Bridge slowly filled up with toxic smoke. Another earsplitting shriek shook the ship with uncontrollable spasms. He felt a rain of hot sparks down the back of his neck and was forced to cower as the primary tactical station exploded behind him. He heard a pained shout and a deep thud and looked back to see Riker lying dead, his neck torn open by a fatal wound. *Pity*, he thought with some regret, as a comm channel opened.

“*Federation ship Enterprise,*” a gruff, guttural voice growled, “*surrender and prepare to be boarded.*”

The ship continued to shudder, mostly now from internal explosions, and Picard stared out the viewscreen at the now far distant *Enterprise-C*. The legendary starship was just entering the fringes of the anomaly. In a matter of moments, the outcome of their mutual sacrifice would become history. The *Enterprise-D* was just seconds away from a warp core breach, the *Enterprise-C* was just seconds away from a battle that could quite possibly erase all of that and create an entirely new future.

One little ship out to make a difference. And if by chance they did not succeed, then Captain Jean-Luc Picard intended full well to make this battle one for the history books in their honor. *Surrender?* “That will be the day,” he muttered to himself, jumping up. With a strength and agility he had not felt since his youth, he leapt over the primary tactical station. And with his fingertips sizzling on the burning controls, the captain sent everything they had left at the Klingons.

The quantum-level temporal shift registered on no sensors and was felt by no one. The oscillating wave moved backwards and forwards through time and spread across the entire universe simultaneously. It made a slight change to the timeline there, a small alteration here; and a shift in the course of events at one critical moment in particular.

The temporal shift left no stone unturned. Entire worlds were destroyed, and new ones created. Lives once lost were reborn; and similarly, lives that once held breath, now ceased to exist. The shift became the embodiment of the ultimate paradox: The future creates the past, the past the future. And now the future and the past had become somehow rectified.

“Report, Lieutenant.” Picard turned back to his chief of security now that it had become increasingly evident that the object in the center of the mysterious vortex was in fact receding away from them. Lieutenant Worf glanced down at his control panel and keyed in several commands. The Klingon then shook his head conclusively.

“Readings fluctuated momentarily,” he said. “It appeared to be

a ship, but then it vanished.”

“The phenomenon is closing in on itself, Captain,” Data announced.

Picard turned back to the viewscreen with Riker still protectively by his side. He was grateful for the man’s presence, though thankfully that dangerous feeling of foreboding from just moments ago was now quickly subsiding. He wondered at the strange sense of caution he felt, even as it slowly drifted away. Something at first had not seemed quite right, but now it was obvious that there was no real danger here. The captain smirked at these false misgivings, smirked at himself for his misguided apprehension.

“Very well,” he stated. “Prepare a class-one sensor probe. We’ll leave it behind to monitor the final closure.” With that, both he and Riker turned and crossed the spacious, well-lit Bridge to join Deanna Troi at the three central command chairs. As they sat down, Picard called ahead to Wesley: “Mister Crusher, lay in a course for Archer Four.” But before he could make the order to engage, he was interrupted by an unprecedented commcall.

“Captain, this is Guinan. Is everything alright up there?”

Picard gave Will Riker a puzzled look. Guinan very rarely had any cause to call the Bridge. This portended a new sense of caution within the captain’s mind.

“Guinan?” he whispered to his first officer, then spoke clearly into the comm network. “Yes, Guinan, everything’s fine. Is something wrong?”

“No...” she answered with obvious relief in her voice. *“No, everything’s fine. Sorry to bother you.”* Picard and Riker still exchanged their puzzled looks, then slowly smiled. Guinan was well known aboard ship for her mystique and deeply pensive personality. Like the wise old sage of ages past, many of the crew often turned to her for advice. Satisfied that nothing more was apparently amiss, Picard curiously thought briefly of Marta, then raised his right hand and set the great ship in motion.

“Tell me, Number One,” he said at length, turning to Will, “have you ever attended the Garrett Day celebrations on Archer Four?”

“Ah, Captain,” Will replied, “the Klingon food festival is an absolute must do... the stewed *gagh* is fantastic.”

“Stewed?” Jean-Luc said with reproach. “I only eat my *gagh* fresh, Commander.” Deanna nearly gagged, while behind them, Worf merely growled as the two friends sat back and laughed together as one.

At the helm, Wesley Crusher’s boyish face broke into a broad grin as he looked over at Data. Puzzled, Data looked back at the young acting-ensign with the flat, emotionless features of an android, then contorted his face into a perfectly calculated smile.

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“Feeling better now?” Doctor Beverly Crusher asked her primary patient in care. Seated on a biobed, Geordi LaForge looked strange without his VISOR. Yet, it was not his white colorless eyes that looked out of place, but rather the fact that he was so rarely seen without the sensory device covering them. The data ports at his temples flashed rapidly, searching in vain for a signal that was not there.

“Yeah,” Geordi said, staring blankly ahead. “Much better, Doctor, thank you. I don’t know what came over me. For a moment it felt like Engineering was crashing down around me. It’s a good thing Ensign Gomez was there to catch me, it’s a *looong* ways down to the bottom of the warp core,” he whistled.

“Well, I see nothing wrong with your VISOR,” Beverly replied, removing the device from a nearby scanner. She held it up to the light, then polished it off with her sleeve. “I have it on good authority,” she said at last, “that this anomaly is putting out tremendous amounts of highly unusual radiation. I suspect it’s interfering with the data transfer.” With soft slender fingers, she placed the device back into his expectant hands.

“Thanks,” he whispered, slowly bringing it up and setting it on the bridge of his nose. Snapping the VISOR into the data ports, his visual cortex was immediately awash with an impressionistic sea of disorienting shapes and colors. “Whoa,” he said, swaying uncertainly. Beverly quickly pressed a hypospray to his neck.

“This should help with the dizziness,” she said with a sweet smile.

“Boy, Doctor,” he whistled again, “the feeling is difficult to describe, but it is fading... They’re almost like ghost images. I even

thought I saw Tasha there for a second..."

Beverly glanced involuntarily over at the surgical bay where Tasha Yar had passed away just two short years ago. The vibrant young woman had died such a senseless death. The evil creature Armus had literally sucked the life right out of her simply for sport. There was nothing the doctor could do. It had proven to be one of the most heart-wrenching losses of her entire career. Everyone wants their life to count for something, and every Starfleet officer wants their death to have meaning; but Tasha's death had been an empty one, a death without worth. Beverly thought now of Jack, and in turn, her son Wesley.

"It's gone now," Geordi said conclusively, startling Beverly back to the present.

"Good," she said brightly. "Now, like any good doctor, I would prescribe lots of rest... But first, go to Ten Forward and have a drink on me."

"Okay, Doctor," the chief engineer laughed, sliding off onto the floor. "Thank you," he said in his usual heartfelt way. She patted him warmly on the shoulders with the palms of her hands as he marched out of Sickbay. Once gone, she turned and entered her small office. Sitting down at her computer console, she brought up an image of days long-since gone when she, Jack, and Picard had been much younger aboard the *Stargazer*. *Those were the days*, she mused. The fun-loving carefree doctor didn't usually dwell on the past much, but the thought of Tasha had brought up many long-forgotten memories.

"I shall have supper with Wesley tonight," she said conclusively; though she knew it would take some considerable arm-twisting on her part to get her teenaged son to agree. Still, she was grateful to have him aboard and so near at heart.

*"Counselor Troi to Doctor Crusher..."*

"Go ahead Deanna," Beverly said with a smile.

*"Meet me at the holodeck in fifteen minutes... and bring a towel. A relaxing mud bath awaits us,"* Deanna enticed, *"not to mention a very handsome young masseuse."* Beverly Crusher could do naught but toss her red hair back and laugh.

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“No, everything’s fine,” Guinan said to Picard, glancing around Ten Forward at the laughing and happy crewmembers. “Sorry to bother you.”

She took one final look around the crowded off-duty lounge, then gathered up her wine-colored robes and sat back down at the table with Geordi. They had just begun to reminisce about the past when a strange feeling of foreboding had suddenly come over her. But now, just as suddenly, everything about this moment had started to feel just right again.

“Geordi,” she said with a mysterious smile, “tell me about... Tasha Yar.” Geordi simply tilted his head and gave her a most quizzical stare. The past sure did have a funny way of presenting itself.

Epilogue

2345

tomorrow

The shattered hulk of the *Enterprise*, NCC-1701-C, lay forever imprisoned in the center of Victory Square, planet Romulus; the unexpected spoils of a carefully orchestrated sneak attack on the Klingon outpost at Narendra III.

It had taken the Romulan sculptors nearly a full cycle to painstakingly reassemble the Federation's mighty flagship, beamed down one giant piece at a time, from the orbiting spacedock high overhead. Her Victory Day unveiling, being watched by billions upon billions all across the empire, was an event unlike anything ever seen, even on the homeworlds.

Tears of angry frustration welled in the eyes of Lieutenant Richard Castillo as he watched the local broadcasts of the momentous event from his cell deep within the Imperial War Prison on neighboring Remus. This helm officer turned acting captain would never have lived to see this day if not for Lieutenant Tasha Yar. She'd bought the lives of him and his remaining crewmates by becoming the consort of the victorious Romulan Commander who had brought the wrecked *Enterprise* back to his people. It was her sacrifice alone that had saved them finally in the end.

As the almighty commander gave his Victory Day speech, Castillo could see Tasha, now seven months pregnant, standing silently by his side looking shamefully at the ground. Simply another prize to be paraded before the peoples of the empire. Castillo winced, then flicked off the screen. He could bear to watch no more.

He'd taken some small measure of comfort over the past year or so in his writings. Tasha had managed to slip him a small recording device with which he now transcribed his thoughts. He wanted to make sure that history never forgot the name *Enterprise*. Never forgot her brave crew. Never forgot the sacrifice they'd made for the cause of

peace. He breathed a deep sigh, then brought the device up to his lips.

“Computer... begin Chapter Thirteen.” Castillo paused and gritted his teeth. It had become increasingly harder for him to tell the story, their story, knowing full well the horrific fate that had befallen all those he’d grown to love. The rest of his life spent in solitary confinement stretched out before him like the blade of a knife slicing deep into his soul.

Helpless.

Alone.

Worse were his thoughts of Tasha, prisoner in her own right. Forever regarded as a prize won in battle. Paraded before dignitaries and diplomats, and other commanders with prizes of their own standing silently by their side.

Intolerable.

Inescapable.

Escape though was the only answer. Not only for Tasha and himself, but also for the twenty-two or so other surviving crewmembers penned up like animals all over this immense fortress. He was their captain now. Their savior. And he must not let them down, no matter what the cost.

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It gave Tasha some small measure of satisfaction when the first drops of rain began to fall right in the middle of Commander Zethus Tomalak’s highly exaggerated speech. Still, the thousands remained. A single moving mass stretching out to the farthest reaches of the square. It was an awe-inspiring sight, even in spite of the circumstances.

The rain fell harder now, only heightening the crowd’s excitement; that is until an unexpected blue-green bolt of lightning struck the *Enterprise’s* starboard nacelle. An ear-splitting crack of thunder quickly sent the fringes of the mass scurrying down the numerous main thoroughfares in search of any dry and relatively safe haven from the growing storm.

Tasha looked up at the great belly of the once great ship far above her and smirked. The Federation’s flagship, this mighty Romulan prize, was now nothing more than a gigantic lightning rod in

the center of a square that was nearly as large as her home city on Turkana.

Another bolt of lightning struck the primary hull and seared down through the massive support framework that held the *Enterprise* rigidly in place. The polycrete base exploded as the charge made contact with the ground and a barely audible groan came from everywhere as the entire mass shifted with this sudden loss of support.

By now, the dispersing crowd was showing signs of extreme concern as the storm rapidly increased in intensity. Another blue-green bolt raced down the port nacelle pylon, shattering its own polycrete base, and sending deadly chunks of shrapnel sailing out into the now fully panicked crowd. The great ship began to groan even louder, almost as if alive.

Screaming to be heard, aides and security guards were violently clearing a path as the commander and Tasha made their way towards a nearby shuttlecar. Tasha could barely hide her amusement as bolt after bolt tore through the framework, and the *Enterprise*, not designed for a gravity environment, slowly began to twist and buckle under its own weight.

The seriousness of the situation then became startlingly clear, and all too real for Tasha. She watched in horror as the port nacelle, over one million metric tonnes of verterium cortenide and duranium alloys, wrenched itself free from its support pylon and came crashing to the ground, crushing hundreds to death on impact.

The crowd had now reached an uncontrolled frenzy as huge sections of the support framework began to shoot off in all directions like unguided missiles. Several more bolts of blue-green lightning lashed out, ripping through the ship and tearing ever widening fissures in the primary hull, cracking it open like a Ktarian egg.

Tasha tried to pull herself free from the commander. “Damn you, Tomalak,” she screamed in desperation. “We have to help these people.”

“Tasha, there’s no time. The warp core could go at any moment.” The commander’s voice was nearly lost in the terrible cacophony of thunder, twisting metal, and screaming people.

“The warp core?!” Tasha gasped in disbelief.

“Yes, the warp core. It was left intact to provide power for the

restaurants, hotels, and shopping centers being built throughout the ship.” A deafening roar signaled yet another bolt of lightning and the simultaneous explosion of yet another polycrystalline base. More screams of agony, still more groans from the enormous shifting mass above them.

“You idiot,” Tasha screamed, nearly in tears. “Nearly a million of your own people are going to die here today and it’s all your…”

“Yes, yes, yes, and it’s going to be a million and three if we don’t get out of here! Now come on!” he shouted, and with that, the commander shoved Tasha violently into the shuttlecar and dove into the seat beside to her.

“Well?!” Tomalak shouted. “What are you waiting for?! Fly you moron!”

With a decidedly agitated look, the pilot hit the controls for a full-speed ascent and lifted off at maximum thrust. The wash from the shuttle’s fusion engines seared the flesh off everyone within ten meters, including the commander’s own aides and security guards.

Moments later, as the shuttle banked towards an orbital trajectory, Tasha helplessly watched as the starboard nacelle slowly twisted free and then pierced deep into the heart of the secondary hull.

In less than the blink of an eye, the Federation’s flagship, this mighty Romulan prize, the legendary USS *Enterprise*, disappeared in a flash of ultra-white light.

Victory Square, once again vacant and quiet, passed out of Tasha’s sight and into her memory forever; there never, never to be forgotten.

The End.