

# STAR TREK: YESTERDAY'S ENTERPRISE

## The Kenzie Rebellion



by WCS Marsh

*Star Trek*

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*Yesterday's Enterprise*

*"The Kenzie Rebellion"*

*W.C.S. MARSH*

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

## **Brief Historical Note**

The American Space Shuttle fleet had the following construction numbers:

*Enterprise – OV-101*

*Columbia – OV-102*

*Discovery – OV-103*

*Atlantis – OV-104*

*Endeavour – OV-105*

*Challenger* bore the construction number *OV-099* and was built from various test components...

*\*\*Authors note: I completed this novella on 1/28/2023... Challenger Day.*

"In reviewing the history of armed rebellion, it has been proven that terrorism is in fact an effective means to promote political change. There are numerous examples where it was successful, for instance: the Independence of the Mexican state from Spain, the Irish Reunification of 2024, and the Kenzie Rebellion. It would appear that terrorism is acceptable when all other options for a peaceful settlement have been foreclosed."

Lt. Commander Data  
*'The High Ground'*  
(TNG episode 3:12)

"Not since Heinrich Himmler has anyone in the history of mankind had the ruthlessness and cunning of Vladimir Henry Kenzie. His penchant for death, misery, and destruction goes unrivaled by even the most heinous of Klingons, and his devious nature has surpassed even the shrewdest of veteran Romulan commanders."

*After Action Report*  
Ensign Jacob Amasov  
*USS Prince of Wales*

# | P |

The memories were often distant and faded,  
but the dreams were as vivid and sharp as a tack...

Never in his career had Commander Pavel Chekov ever heard such a thunderous shriek coming from a spaceframe as he was hearing right now. He had to give the Starfleet engineers credit – the *Enterprise-B* was shaking off a hellacious pounding that he knew from experience the original *Constitution*-class ships could've never handled. Minutes ago, on the Bridge, he had deputized two dumbfounded reporters to become nurses, and was now down in Sickbay trying to tend to the dozens of injured and screaming passengers from the stricken transport ship *Lakul*. But the shaking was so intense that he had to fight hard to maintain his own footing, say nothing of helping anyone else. *Who's going to rescue us?! he thought, as another horrifying shriek tore through his skull and made his teeth sing. "It's going to be alright,"* Chekov tried to soothe the panicked passengers that were thronged all around him. "Ve're going to help you, ve are going to help you," he kept repeating to no one in particular as yet another frightful shriek ripped through the bulkheads and pinched at his ears. *My God, who is going to help us?! His mind flashed to thoughts of the Titanic as the Enterprise shook off yet another, thunderous gravimetric shockwave. Maiden voyage indeed.*

Over to his left, he heard one man in particular crying out above all the rest as the two deputy 'nurses' fought in vain to get him into a biobed. His silvery hair was awash with blood, and crimson rivulets ran down over his brow and around his eyes. The look on his face was one of sheer desperation coupled with panic. "You don't *understand*," he shrieked, "let me go *back*, let me go *back*, let me go *back*!" he kept shouting over and over again. Chekov hated to do it, but he quickly grabbed a hypospray from an

open locker and charged towards the man as his protests became more and more violent, to the point of becoming dangerous.

"Please!" the poor old fool pleaded as Chekov forcefully injected him with a sedative. *Go back to where for pity's sake?* Like the *Robert Fox*, the *Lakul* had most surely been destroyed by now... if the *Enterprise* was only just barely holding her own, then there was no way that the two tiny *Whorfin*-class transports could've ever hoped to survive this. He hated to break it to the old man, *but there was nothing left to go back to!* The *Enterprise* lurched hard to the right and Chekov had to sashay several steps to the left to stay on his own two feet. Out of the corner of his eye, he suddenly spied a younger woman clinging to a bulkhead all by herself, and something told him to go to her. The draw was almost unnatural, like somehow it was a convergence of events that had at last culminated at this one true moment. Pushing his way through the moaning crowd, he felt suddenly that this and this alone was now his one and only mission. He must protect her, and he must do it now, lest all of time become unraveled.

"Can I help you?" he asked gently, placing both his hands on her shoulders to help steady her. As she turned, he was taken by the peculiar stare on her face, the blankness of her dark eyes. "It's going to be okay," he said softly, taking her by the hand and wrapping an arm around her shoulder. "You'll be alright, you just need to rest. Come over here," he coaxed her, hoping to get her to lie down. The ship was struck again by a gravimetric sheer and the horrendous shriek returned; the harmonic intensity of it threatening to implode all their skulls. The shuddering of the deck continued unabated as Chekov struggled to push the poor dazed woman through the grief-stricken and terrified crowd.

Her dark, round face was careworn, and like all El-Aurians, devoid of any body hair.

She looked at Chekov distantly, blankly, then suddenly her features awakened as if she recognized him. *But he had never met her before in his life!* Still, the recognition was as genuine as if she had stumbled upon a long-lost relative. They stopped, and slowly she brought a hand up and placed it on his chiseled squarish jaw.

"He was there," she said faintly, "your friend." And Chekov was chilled to the bone, not even knowing for sure why.



"I, I, I don't underztand..." he murmured, feeling suddenly faint. What she'd said had given him a sick feeling deep down inside, almost like the oppressive force of an omen. The room grew strangely quiet, almost as if they together were detached from it. Time became an abstraction. The past, present, and future began to merge.

"*Enterprises* on a string, D, C and B," she whispered, looking away. "One looking back, the other forward, the third one full of ending." Chekov managed to boost her up finally onto the edge of a biobed and she once again looked him in the eye. "Picard in the future, Picard in the past... snakes in San Francisco... Christmas on Veridian Three..." she inhaled sharply, then shook her head. "But it's all wrong now, it's all out of order! The future is wrong... *forty billion*," she whispered. "You must fix it!" She clutched Chekov's face and he thought for a moment that he was going to have to sedate her too. But something stayed his hand; that same something caused him to give pause and listen. Fate was knocking, and an unseen force told him he'd better take heed. Everything depended on it. Absolutely *everything*.

"The girl, you must protect the girl!" she pleaded with him now. "She's a nexus and a divergence, the beginning and the end. D and C together, beginning with B..."

"I, I, I don't underztand," Chekov muttered again, trying desperately **to** understand. He felt in his soul that the entire future of the human race now hinged on this basic simple understanding, but of what? "*What girl?*" he begged of her.

"Rachel Garrett... captain of yesterday's *Enterprise*... the one yet to come... yet also the one of tomorrows past... she will save us all someday... her destiny has been written in the sands of time..." and she trailed off becoming weak, more incoherent. The shriek and shaking of the ship resumed with vengeance, but at the same time Chekov could also sense new motion... they must be breaking free. *Bless you Scotty!* He desperately stared into the woman's face, but she seemed to have slipped into a trance. Frustrated, he was about to lay her down when the ship was hit so suddenly, and with such force, that the entire room was tossed on its side.

He awoke several moments later, half under a pile of squirming, moaning bodies. He thought for a panicked instant he

might suffocate as he struggled to break free. Glancing all around him, he searched in vain for the woman, but she was nowhere to be found amongst the sea of writhing, wailing figures.

*"Bridge to Commander Chekov... Commander Chekov, it's urgent, meet Captain Scott on Deck Fifteen at once!"* He didn't know Demora Sulu all that well, but he knew her well enough to know something was horrifically wrong. With a violent shove he regretted, he was on his feet and climbing over bodies as gently as he could. An unidentifiable panic within him told him to hurry, but his built-in humanity also caused him to go slow. Gingerly picking his way to the door, he felt sick to his stomach, but knew not why.

In what seemed like an eternity, Chekov finally arrived on Deck 15 and charged with reckless abandon out of the turbolift and into chaos. It was immediately clear that this part of the ship had taken a direct hit from a gravimetric sheer. Emergency lighting only just barely lit the littered corridor, and a hiss of escaping gases made the air almost toxic. Picking his way over debris, he had to move no less gingerly here than he had in Sickbay just moments ago as wires arced wildly overhead, and circuits popped and sizzled. It'd been a long time since he'd seen such destruction aboard a starship, and he wondered at the structural integrity of the *Enterprise's* hull. He felt bad for the ship's new captain... Harriman was green, that much was obvious, but to have his ship torn to shreds on her maiden voyage, now that was a kick in the pants to be sure that no one deserved.

Up ahead, he saw Scotty and Harriman enter a control room with both its doors askance and partly ajar. The damage seemed centered here, and as he rushed forward, he braced himself for the worst. He knew not what he'd find inside, but what he did find was quite literally *nothing*. He stopped up short just inches from a shimmering forcefield and stared with mouth agape out into empty space.

"My God, waz anyvun in here," he exclaimed without thinking. He looked at Harriman, then caught a glimpse of Scotty's sullen expression.

"Aye," was all the Scottish engineer said as Chekov turned his head and looked back out at that infinite blackness. Sometimes words can be clutter where silence has lease and quiet contemplation gives pause.

Chekov awoke with a start and sucked in a sudden breath of pure clean air. It took a few moments for the old man to get his bearings. Sometimes the memories can be distant and faded, but for some reason, the dreams were always as vivid and sharp as a tack. Thirty years was a long time, but still the dreams persisted. In fact, he didn't think they'd ever go away. Sometimes he prayed for merciful death.

In all his years aboard various starships and their varied missions, nothing had rattled him quite as much as that one single day aboard the *Enterprise-B*. The nightmares had lasted for weeks, and the despondency had lasted even longer. He'd spent three sleepless days aboard the *Saratoga* combing empty space for the body, but to no avail. He'd howled at the admirals over subspace when the search was called off. And he'd spent another six weeks in a shuttle picking through the wreckage until finally the Admiralty threatened him with arrest. Kirk was quite simply *gone*. That perhaps had unsettled Chekov even more than anything else. There is very little closure in death when there is nothing tangible to hold onto, and indeed... when there is even less to let go of.

*"Bridge to Admiral Chekov... we're approaching the Falcon... ETA... five minutes."*

Chekov sucked in another deep breath, then rose from his chair to look out of the forward-sweeping viewports at the onrushing warp stars. They seemed to take on a beautiful new hue aboard this, Starfleet's newest and most advanced starship. Yet, as exhilarating as that may be, he also let out a long, melancholy, bittersweet sigh. He'd waited a long time for this moment, and the moment had finally come at last. Almost thirty years, and now,

Lieutenant Commander Rachel Garrett was less than five minutes away.

~ ~ ~ ~

Meanwhile, at the door of the Federation Defense Arsenal on Qualor II lay two dead bodies. The Marine guards of this remote jungle world had been hit simultaneously by disruptors *not* of Starfleet design. They never saw their attackers approach, and they never tripped any of the security nets... they just appeared out

of thin air and fired. What they took were three tri-cobalt devices, the most destructive weapons in Starfleet's arsenal.

*What they wanted was war.*

# | 1 |

The sleek, graceful lines of the Federation Starship *Falcon* slipped quietly through the boundaries of subspace like an arrow slicing through the crisp autumn air; her elegant nacelles trailing along behind her like the two outstretched legs of a raptor as it dove headlong into the abyss – trying, forever trying, in vain, to keep up with the curved and rounded hulls just ahead of them that were ever seemingly just beyond their reach. In truth however, these two powerful engines were actually the ones pushing the whole of the rest of the gleaming vessel through the vacuum of deep space at a little over a thousand times the speed of light; a starship at warp. At first thought to be Starfleet's greatest failure, *Excelsior*-class ships were now undeniably considered to be the undisputed workhorses of an ever-expanding exploration and trading network that spanned nearly 8000 lightyears of free space. They were the foundation of a structure that ostensibly could not fall, an edifice that seemed impregnable.

The United Federation of Planets was entering what many historians would someday regard as the Golden Age of peaceful expansion out into deep space. In the decades following the Khitomer Accords, and since the Tomed Incident of 2311, a relative calm had begun to settle over a vast region of the galaxy, allowing for a budding greatness to develop that had never before been seen by many cultures both far and wide. At the vanguard of this unparalleled alliance, Earth; with the other four founding worlds caught up in the wake of her swelling undertow. Even the Vulcans, once the standard-bearers of peace and order in their own right, had begun to fall into the shadow of humanity's mesmerizing glow. But certainly, humanity was not overshadowing these other great worlds... no, not at all, humanity was instead the cement holding this great new pillar of civilization together; the glue that binds.

Naturally, Starfleet too – an affiliation loosely based on Earth's Navy – had evolved and morphed into something totally

new; a structured organization dedicated to peace and stability in the galaxy. In the early days it had certainly been more of a wild west show, where starship captains flew by the seat of their pants and had very little oversight from command. But here, now, at the earliest beginnings of the Golden Age, a relative calm had also begun to settle in over the fleet as well. As the era of wars and conflicts slowly subsided, men like Kirk and Garth of Izar slowly began to pass into the realm of legend. A new, more thoughtful, less impulsive breed of starship commander gradually rose up through the ranks, steadily supplanting bravado with a realization that aims could be achieved in other ways; that the wisdom of the Prime Directive superseded the whims of bold men striking back with quick, impulsive action.

This was perhaps why Lieutenant Commander Rachel Garrett sat so often on the Bridge of the glistening *Falcon* with her nose involuntarily scrunched up like something stunk. As first officer, she served under a man that still clung to that old way of thinking, whose quick impulsive actions often flew in the face of her more refined, revised sensibilities.

Commander Mark Ross Jameson was no picnic, but at least he was straightforward, and you could always count on just where you stood with him... he was in command, you were not. That also perhaps is why Rachel Garrett so often smirked. It was little understood that in Starfleet, much like Earth's ancient Navy, the commander of a ship *rarely* held the rank of Captain. Often called Skipper, these honorary captains always seemed to be reaching, forever reaching... and this is why Rachel Garrett smirked; she knew how much it irked a man like Mark Jameson to *Not* hold that coveted rank of captain that had been so imperiously held, in ages past, by much greater men than he.

But the *USS Falcon* was just one of 75,000 other Federation starships plying the vast dark empty spaces between the stars. This number was certainly staggering, but the absolute size of the Federation was staggering. Its sphere of influence now dwarfed the Klingon and Romulan Empires combined, and this was not without envy by some who would dismiss it. Many starships, and many more commanders, had their own claim to fame. The *Falcon* herself had gained some notoriety following the Mordan IV hostage crisis, but this was just one of many 'brushfires' that Starfleet

extinguished on an almost daily basis. Yet, to a man like Mark Jameson, whose mind could not quite grasp a new younger age of reason, he still reached, forever reached for that loftier goal... determined in his resolve that it was what he deserved by sheer right alone.

Mordan IV. Deep in pensive thought, Rachel Garrett began to realize slowly that perhaps it was then that her nose had begun its upward climb, as if itself sensing from the very beginning that something foul filled the air. It had been a little over two years ago that the Federation starliner *Mary Celeste* had gone down and stranded her passengers on that war-torn backwater world. It did not take long for the tribal leader Karnas to realize the true value of these fallen stars, and he quickly took 63 passengers of the stricken liner hostage before Starfleet could arrive. Two top-level negotiators were killed before Mark Jameson somehow managed to rather unexpectedly broker a peace and secure their release. Consecrated a hero, Jameson was emboldened now to do even bigger and better things, reaching, forever reaching, for that coveted rank of captain. But for Rachel Garrett, something had never felt quite right about the entire situation on Mordan; the miracle was somehow deceptive in its appearance, it was flawed in a fundamental way just beyond her own reach, and this was perhaps what irked her.

Breaking the trance, she jumped up suddenly from the captain's chair and began to pace the compact circular command center. When she'd served as a lieutenant aboard the *Starship Hathaway*, Captain Kenicki would often scold her for this, but it was a habit that had remained undeterred by her climb through the ranks to first officer of the *Falcon*. Her junior officers had become accustomed to it, but Jameson – in the rare moments when he would actually occasion the Bridge – would glower at her menacingly. But Rachel was not a woman who sat comfortably. She was not one to sit idly by, and it had taken some measure of personal training on her part to make that transition from follower to leader. As counterintuitive as it may seem, her restraints grew with her rank, and she had to learn to let others do their work without the constant scrutiny of her staring over their shoulders. This was the structure of command that was an art only slowly

perfected, and one only came close by the experience that comes with time.

Restlessness? Perhaps. But it had been some weeks since anything interesting had happened aboard this ship – the true reality of deep-space travel. Even at a thousand times the speed of light, the black, empty space between the stars was just that: black and empty. The entire crew was restless, and their irksomely impatient ‘Skipper’ – sequestered away in his Ready Room – all that much more. He was not a man to sit idle either, though his reasons were perhaps more pedantic and less academic. His meteoric rise to the top was hampered only by each new day held at bay by the fundamental reality of simply getting from A to B.

Almost as if on cue, an insignificant beep from the Ops station broke the silence, and everyone on the Bridge came suddenly to attention as if that tiny little tone might somehow bring forth something new to break the nearly relentless boredom of a long eight-hour shift.

“What is it, Ensign?” Rachel chirped, only carefully hiding the rising excitement in her voice. Almond eyes narrowing at the back of the blue man’s bald scalp, the Bolian seated just ahead of her paused to confirm his readings.

“Long-range sensors have detected an approaching ship, Ma’am,” he said at last, his pause lasting perhaps longer than was necessary – all part of the cat-and-mouse game Rachel Garrett so often played with her officers to relieve the endless boredom. “It appears to be on an intercept course,” he finally concluded, turning his face in her direction.

“Interesting,” she whispered, looking briefly at the viewscreen at the rainbow streak of warp stars. Glancing back down into the man’s grey eyes, she frowned. “Size and type, Ensign?” she urged, tilting her head slightly in feigned annoyance, but not without her usual wry smile. Very literal, and quite often missing the subtleties of human humor, the Bolian spun around and tapped somewhat frantically at his console.

“It’s big, Commander, type unknown...”

“Federation... or otherwise?” Rachel prompted the man further. Again, the Bolian paused, but this time he was awaiting more conclusive readings. Though the Commander could not see it directly, the ensign’s bifurcated features were wrinkled now at the



almost bizarre readings his console were presenting to him. As his silence lingered longer than expected, Rachel's instincts began to get the better of her. She was about to order Yellow Alert to combat this unknown alien intruder when the man finally spoke.

"Now receiving a Starfleet ident code, Commander... definitely a Federation starship... but..."

"But?" she queried, stepping forward finally and placing a soft hand on his steady shoulder, casually looking over the readings for herself.

"Type still unknown, Ma'am... and the registry reads only as hull number One-oh-One."

"Bizarre," Rachel whispered softly, then with command: "Helm, slow to impulse... Captain to the Bridge," she called out into the comm network. She could have gone the whole rest of the day without seeing Mark Jameson, maybe even the week, but a little protocol – and a large amount of ego on *his* part – required her to summon him to the Bridge nonetheless. On the viewscreen, the rainbow streaks of warp stars quickly dissolved into the familiar pinpoint pricks of normal starlight. Almost as quickly, a blur dead-ahead resolved itself into a ship nearly twice the size of the *Falcon*. Undeniably Starfleet in design, with twin nacelles and a circular forward hull, it was still unlike anything Rachel had ever seen. "My God," she whispered as the doors to Jameson's Ready Room whooshed open.

"Yes, what is it, Commander?" Jameson barked in his usual way before he'd even stepped out of the small office. *Grouch*, Rachel thought, her nose scrunching up in that involuntary way that always smelled of disgust. His gruff voice chafed her senses, and always made him sound much older than he actually was. She often thought it just an act though, like most everything else the man did; his exaggerated swagger in her direction, she contended, was merely posturing to cover for a slight frame that held none of the tone and strength typical of a Starfleet officer of rank. His sandy brown hair was characteristically disheveled and stuck up at unnatural angles, and the day-old stubble on his chin and cheeks always made him look barely half put together. At age forty-six to her thirty, he was fast coming up against that middle-aged wall when life becomes an endless frustration and time becomes an annoyance.

"A mystery ship, Captain," Rachel merely replied to his query, preferring to let his own uninteresting eyes draw their own blank conclusions. She refused to call him 'Skipper', and only used the honorific title 'Captain' when absolutely necessary to satisfy the barest obligations of protocol. Respect – and Commander Mark Jameson commanded none; she couldn't quite say for sure when he had lost hers, but each month that went by under his authority had become an ever-increasing challenge for her. Still, she respected the sacrosanct chain of command, and thus deferred to his leadership. *Hey, maybe someday he might yet surprise me?* It was entirely possible, she quietly concluded, that Jameson, as a command level officer, might already have prior knowledge of this new mystery ship, so she watched him very closely to gauge his reaction.

Disappointed as usual however, she watched his eyes go wide as he turned to face the viewscreen. "Helm, full stop," he barked. "Well, well, well, what do we have here?" he then muttered, mostly to himself. It was plainly clear to Rachel that he was as much in the dark as everyone else.

This really made her ponder sometimes what indeed was the true benefit of having one's own command? More commitment, more responsibility, more nights without sleep... and worst of all, *more paperwork!* She often searched in vain for hidden clues in Mark Jameson's behavior that might hint at an incredible choice of hidden perks, or a wealth of top-secret information that might make it all worthwhile... but nothing of the sort readily presented itself. On the flipside however, Rachel more often wondered if Starfleet intentionally kept this headstrong man out of the loop, so to speak. Mordan IV seemed to haunt him, but she knew not why – and perhaps never would. Mark Jameson was a man with a complex history and a complicated destiny.

"Still receiving nothing more than hull number One-oh-One, Captain," the Bolian offered cautiously as the great new starship coasted to a stop in front of them. Rachel could see Jameson licking his lips now... this, *this* was the prize he had been so-long reaching for.

This was the pearl that would transport him at last to all the heights of avarice he desired.

The longing was almost palpable, and her nose once again rose up to meet the smell.

"Hail them," Jameson whispered.

"Receiving a hail, Captain," the Bolian countered, and Rachel could sense her commander's growing impatience with all things *not-human*.

"Well open a channel then, Ensign," the man growled, on the verge, she surmised, of slapping the anxious young man on the back of his bald blue scalp. She involuntarily smirked at the interchange, sensing that Jameson's sudden growth had been... if only for yet another moment... somewhat stunted by that ever-challenging act of just getting from point A to point B.

On the viewscreen, the glistening new ship was replaced by the aged face of a man that was an image of history itself. His hair, though still black, was flecked with grey, and his immaculately clean-shaven face bore those care-worn smile lines that indicated a personality of joy and a lifetime of contentedness. Rachel's mouth fell open, and even Jameson fell back a step. Not only was this the highest-ranking officer in Starfleet, but he was also a living legend; and he was smiling at them now with a square toothy grin that belied his years.

"Admiral Chekov," Jameson managed to croak out of a dry throat. He then paused as if stunned; the famed 'deer in the headlights' look of ancient Earth yore. Again, Rachel smirked, this time at the man's obvious discomfort. She was tempted to take those few steps forward and present herself to the Admiral instead but knew she would pay for such insolence later if she even so much as breathed.

"Admiral, Sir," Jameson finally choked. "To what do we owe the pleasure?" In all his foundering, the commander had momentarily forgotten about the massive new starship that lay glistening just a few hundred yards off the *Falcon's* bow. There was another long silence that deafened the Bridge and put Mark Jameson on the verge of a convulsive fit.

Finally, Chekov spoke in that heavy Russian accent that was known throughout half the galaxy. "Commander Jamezon," he said methodically, and Rachel thought she imagined just a hint of condescension in his tone, "it'z bean vay too lung." Again, the square toothy grin. "I would like to come over to discuss certain...

how you say, certain personnel transvers.” He tilted his head slightly and offered a slight shrug that only just hinted at his even more legendary sense of humor. For all Jameson’s quavering, Rachel instead felt giddy. This was, hands down, *a treat!*

“Of course, Sir, of course,” Jameson bobbled like a half-spun top, “we shall receive you at once!” *Oh brother*, Rachel thought, *receive you at once...* like the Admiral was the bloody King or something! Chekov’s image blinked off and Jameson turned on her almost as if he’d been somehow listening in on her mind’s own wicked impertinence. “Lieutenant Commander Garrett,” he ordered in that gruff, grating voice of his, “report to the transporter room at once. Escort the Admiral to my Ready Room at his earliest possible convenience.”

“Me Sir?!” she replied nonplussed, but he chose not to hear her. Absently salivating and lost in a world of his own design, Mark Jameson was again sizing up the rounded lines of this gigantic new mystery ship like a teenager coveting the keys to a brand-new car. Personnel transfers, eh? *Hmmph*, Rachel Garrett speculated as she slowly moved towards the back of the Bridge and the turbolift, *now **that** would certainly be a welcome change!* She had been first officer aboard this ship for almost five years now – and ever since Mordan, been increasingly discouraged. A stagnation had slowly settled over her in the past couple years that was only just now challenging her to step outside the bounds just a little. Perhaps command wouldn’t be so bad after all? She found herself readier than she thought! The *Falcon* was no doubt a fine ship, and at any rate, she finally concluded with a self-satisfied sort of smile, at least she’d finally be rid of Mark Jameson!

A short time later Rachel Garrett was standing several decks below in the transporter room awaiting the arrival of a man that had done more before she was born than most men do in a lifetime. In fact, Fleet Admiral Pavel Chekov had joined Starfleet long before even her mother had been born. While Mark Jameson had caved in to a near panic, Rachel Garrett on the other hand was still filled with that giddy feeling of before. She would be meeting here, in the next few moments, a living legend. Kirk’s crew wrote half the book on Starfleet, and saved humanity more times perhaps than history could count. Coupled with all this, Chekov was also the

highest-ranking officer in the Fleet, second only to the President. Rachel suddenly got a queasy uneasy feeling that tied her throat in a knot. *Oh my God, there should be an honor guard!* She should be in dress uniform for cripes sake! The acting-captain of this gol-blamed tug should be here to 'receive' him, not her! She quickly reached up and clasped shut the bright-white flap on her uniform and hastily fixed her hair just as that familiar whine of transport began.

A second later Pavel Chekov stepped down off the pad with an outstretched hand and smiled at her warmly. "Lieutenant Commander Garrett," he said in that accent that seemed even larger than life in person. She grasped that strong hand, not at all hiding her surprise that the Admiral of the Fleet even so much as knew her name. "Vat, no honor guard?" he smirked with that characteristic half-shrug that marked his remarkable personality.

Rachel's face began to burn and she felt the resultant heat rise up in her collar. "Sir..."

Releasing her hand, he waved her off. "Bah, let's valk instead, yes?" He smiled and turned, and just like that they were friends. Rachel, in her moment of shock, had to double-step to catch up to the seventy-seven-year-old man as he wheeled out into the corridor with surprising agility. "*Excelsior*-class," he continued, "Scotty hated dem... ve couldn't pry Zulu out uv da chair," he laughed. "You like dis ship, yes?" His head and shoulders turned together to eye her response and she felt the weight of that stare like a schoolgirl caught in the hall by a principal.

"Uh, yes Admiral, she's a fine ship," she answered quickly. Too quickly? Rachel's mind immediately jumped to the subject of personnel transfers. Giddy and half-nauseous at the same time, Rachel was again contemplating the unexpected prospects of her own command. Oh, the changes she would make aboard this ship once she was free of Jameson's constraints! The *Falcon* and *her* crew would morph into something new that mirrored her own personality rather than his almost paranoid temperament. *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* she inwardly quoted an ancient Earth children's author, Dr. Theodor Suess. And the places they **would** go, if only...

"Uhura sendz her regardz, uv course," Chekov said casually, again catching Rachel off guard as they stepped up to a turbo stop and waited. She had a strong sense now that he was sizing her up

in some way. Perhaps there was more to these 'personnel transfers' than she was seeing? There was a depth to this admiral that she had not expected. She liked him.

"From zee Academy," he reminded her, making her feel dumb in her silence.

"Yes, Admiral, of course... I am just surprised that she remembers me is all," Rachel admitted in a rare moment of introversion. Her Academy days had been an awkward time for her, a time of low self-esteem and even lower self-worth. Her teenage years had been colorful to say the least – her young adult years equally so – and as Commandant of Starfleet Academy, Admiral Nyota Uhura had stepped in, it seemed just when Rachel Garrett had struck her lowest. The turbolift doors opened with a whoosh and Chekov ushered her into the cab with an outstretched arm. Rachel tried to hide her own characteristic wry smile as Chekov announced *Bridge!* and the car started to move... just who was escorting who, she began to wonder? The Admiral seemed to know this ship like the back of his hand... but then, Rachel had to remind herself – *he has after all been serving aboard starships for nearly sixty years now!*

"Zee Admiral instructed me to keep a zharp eye on your career," Chekov intoned, wiping his middle finger across the imaginary dust along the car's frame. "And she can be a wary perzvazive voman," he added wryly, inspecting the finger now and rubbing it against his thumb. "*Korabl' Dzheymsona gryaznyy,*"<sup>1</sup> he remarked absently with a somewhat odious frown. He then did that head and shoulders turn towards her – the only thing that was indicative of his age. "You'll find Uhura haz a zingular knack fer uncowvering da vons dat vill go far." The turbolift came to a whirring halt, allowing the doors to burst open onto a brightly lit Bridge. Without further comment, Chekov breezed out, leaving Rachel Garrett once again standing in shock, this time seemingly unable to move.

Commander Mark Jameson's ready room was always hot and stuffy, and for some reason, it always hurt Rachel's eyes to enter. The harshness of the lights dizzied her and made her head pound.

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<sup>1</sup> "Jameson's ship is dirty."

And there was always that strange heavy smell... almost like the suffocating feel of an overly humid natatorium tinged with a touch of cafeteria. Perhaps this was why her nose was always scrunched up in that most unforgiving way? Jameson was seated at his severe metal desk and did not immediately stand when Rachel and the Admiral entered the room. An antiquated form of bravado Rachel surmised – almost as if Mark Jameson was in some way trying to prove that he somehow had the upper hand in this situation? This was his ship, he was in command... not Rachel, not Pavel Chekov, and not even Starfleet Command for that matter. She cringed to think of this man promoted to Captain – and placed, no less, in command of that massive new mystery ship out there. *Absolute power breeds absolute corruption...*

"Commander Mark Jameson," Rachel announced with full command presence in her voice, "may I present Fleet Admiral Pavel Chekov."

Jameson at last stood and extended forth a dry hand in the clammy air, reaching out as if he were already accepting that promotion he so covetously desired. It was a miraculous show that defied the senses; somehow this man always managed to reinvent himself in ways that perpetually confounded her. Just moments ago, he had been a quivering stuttering fool on the Bridge, and now he was 'king of the castle' again, attempting to loom over a living legend as if he were monarch... yet not realizing how ridiculous his slight frame looked, bent as it was, half-way over that harsh metal desk, reaching, forever reaching. Until this very moment, Rachel had never fully realized how childish this man truly was, standing there like a fool in the nearly divine presence of one of the great admirals of history.

Pavel Chekov met him just less than half-way, forcing Mark Jameson to reach out just that little bit more. Rachel tried in vain to hide her always devilish, wry smile, but failed. "Thank you, Lieutenant Commander, that will be all," Jameson barked at her, his gruff voice exaggerated even more than usual by the density of the air between them.

"Actually, pleez remain, Commander," Chekov countermanded, causing Jameson to stiffen a little. Chekov did that head and shoulder turn towards Rachel and offered her a sideways toothy grin. "Dis duz concern her as vell," he added with the

slightest nod, and Jameson imperceptivity quaked. In all his selfish reasonings over the past half-hour, Rachel Garrett had not once played into the bold machinations of his upward climb. What part could she possibly have to play in this, the rocket ship ascent of his career? Hull number 101 was calling to him somewhere out there in the darkness, and it had deafened him to the thought of anything else.

"As you wish, Admiral," Jameson said coolly. "May I offer you some vodka, Sir?" The commander, grinning like a fool, moved around his desk to a small table near the viewport.

"I was able to procure a bottle from a friend in Moscow the last time we docked at Earth Station McKinley." He then clanked noisily with the bottle and glasses as he poured a dram.

"Vsegda s vodkoy, oy!"<sup>2</sup> Chekov muttered, then bowed to Jameson with a stilted smile.

"Thank you, Commander," he then added as he accepted the proffered glass. Rachel was quick to note that Chekov made no motions to take a sip of the clear fire water even as Jameson, without ceremony, downed his own in one solid gulp. She was also quick to note that, like herself, Chekov refused to call Jameson 'Captain', which brought forth another wry smile on her face, much to Mark Jameson's bewildered consternation.

Perhaps fueled by the vodka's fire (how many prior glasses she knew not), Jameson now began to pester the Admiral for information. "That's a mighty fine ship you have out there, Sir. Does she, uh, does she have a name? I must admit, I'm not familiar with the design..." he added as bait.

"It is uv a new top zecret dezin," was all Chekov would offer, "to combat zee Womulan threat." After the Tomed Incident of eleven years ago, the Romulans had practically gone into hiding, allowing for an almost eerie stillness to settle over the Federation borderlands. It made Starfleet uneasy, so Rachel was not the least bit surprised that they would commission an even bigger and better class of starship to counter it. Fear promulgates growth.

"Interesting, Sir," Jameson smiled. Rachel could see now the effects of the alcohol on his blushing face and wondered how bold he would go. "And I suppose she'll be needing a captain?" he

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<sup>2</sup> "Always with the vodka, oil!"



queried with wide expectant eyes, so sure was he that his 'ship' had finally come in. His once gruff voice (all part of the act as she had always suspected) was squeaky now like the wheels of a cart. Rachel cringed, embarrassed on his behalf. *What a fool*, she thought, *what a childish fool*. And reaching, always reaching... and for what? Nothing.

"She already has one," Chekov clipped and turned to Rachel, leaving Jameson wanting.

"Lieutenant Commander Rachel Garrett, I am hereby transverring you to zee Galatea Space Center for zpecial azzignment... vit zee Commander's approval, uv course," he added as a barely acknowledged sidenote, turning back to Jameson. Visibly ill now, Mark Jameson at first could not speak as all of his hopes and dreams were dashed in that one single moment. His face slowly blanched as he hardly had cause to protest. As said before, Rachel Garrett had not once played into the bold machinations of his upward climb to glory and therefore he had no comment to make. He merely nodded weakly as Chekov turned away for the last time.

"How zoon can your belonginz be tranzferred to zee *Am...*" he stopped up short and smirked inwardly, "...to zee *One-oh-One?*" he finished off deliberately, intentionally leaving Mark Jameson starving behind him for any further scrap of information. Such mysteries abounded!

"I pack light, Sir, no more than an hour," Rachel answered, her giddiness slowly returning. She would be free on this day of Mark Jameson after all! ...though it was not quite what she had expected to be sure. The words 'special assignment' intrigued her – maybe not as alluring perhaps as her own command, but still exciting, nonetheless. She was also beginning to sense from Chekov that there was much more to this transfer than he was about to share with her in front of her former commander. 'Former commander' – boy did she ever like the sound of that! Without so much as a goodbye, she began to turn to lead Admiral Chekov out of the room when something unexpected gave her pause. It was an errant wistful thought that left her nearly as intrigued as the prospects of this 'special assignment' itself. Sometimes it seems, the subconscious mind can speak volumes, and it only does so in a

whisper. Stopping, she spun on her heels and faced Jameson for one last time.

"Commander... *Admiral*," she deferred, with a tilt of the head, "I would like to request that Lieutenant Spencer Stadi be transferred along with me... if of course that is at all possible Admiral," she hastily added, realizing suddenly that she still knew nothing of the details in this 'special assignment'. Chekov, his back still to Jameson – and perhaps as a final dig to the man's hubris – consented to Garrett's request with nothing more than his renowned half-shrug. Jameson for his part jumped up out of his chair, fairly ready to burst. Rachel had expected nothing less, and for good reason.

"What?! That royal Betazoid half-breed?! Whatever for?!" he bellowed. "Oh, on second thought," he plopped back down into his chair, winded, "take him... I'll be glad to be rid of his imperial pompous ass anyway," he whimpered like a child. Chekov merely waved the man off from behind, then, with one outstretched arm, enfolded Rachel Garrett into his solemn security and led her out of the room and into her uncertain future.

Barely a half an hour from when she had first greeted Fleet Admiral Pavel Chekov in the transporter room, she was back there again bidding him a brief farewell. They had said very little to each other in the lifts and corridors that had brought them back to this small chamber, almost if there was some great secret they were both trying to keep. With a toothy smile and a slight wave, the admiral dissolved into a column of energy, leaving Rachel at last alone with her own thoughts. Like all major changes in life, this was a bittersweet moment for her. She had been aboard the *Falcon* for nearly five years now, and it certainly hadn't been *all* bad. She'd made many friends, and had many adventures, but in the end, she knew that all things must change – either that or stagnate. Ever since she'd left her shattered family back in New York, she'd never since been one for planting roots, or even for long goodbyes. It was time now to move on. It was time to move forward.

First however, she was making a beeline for Spencer Stadi's quarters far below decks. Rachel wasn't quite sure just how the young lieutenant would react to this rather abrupt transfer but suspected that he would be just as happy to be free of Jameson as

she was. Like her, he'd had a somewhat colorful past too. The royal families of Betazed had been stunned to say the least the day Spencer Stadi announced to the Consensus that he'd be joining Starfleet instead of joining them. Oh, the uproar! And then he'd clashed with Commodore Hawk almost every day thereafter. By the time Spencer Stadi had graduated from the Academy and come aboard the *Falcon*, he had been all but broken. In the days long before ships counselors, it was the first officers' job to see to crew morale, and that is exactly where Rachel Garrett had stepped in. Though not necessarily close, a certain friendship had been kindled that had only been strengthened by the events of Mordan IV.

They were both kin and kith to the strangeness of it.

As a full-blood Betazoid, Spencer was, of course, fully telepathic, and Rachel often wondered what secrets that keen mind of his held. She had tried once or twice to pry a few hard facts from him – especially about Mordan – but bless him, the man always kept this, and so many other things, under tight lock and key. It was the Betazoid morality; and perhaps it kept the peace more often than not. As to all officers in Starfleet, the chain of command was sacrosanct, and Spencer Stadi would not break that trust under any circumstance. That was the oath he had taken with himself if he was to serve; and especially if he was to serve so closely with humans. They, more than any other species, had their secrets to keep. Rachel couldn't help but laugh now at her haste... not only did he likely know that she was already coming, he probably even knew *why* she was coming. She would keep no secrets from him to be sure.

She marched up to his door nevertheless and placed a thumbprint on the pad, half expecting the doors to whoosh open before the chime could even sound. She was surprised by a lengthy pause however; maybe even a little anxious. At long last the doors parted to reveal Spencer standing opposite with a barely concealed grin. He had been playing her all along and she could barely hide her own wry smile. His bottomless ebony eyes met her own almond ones for but an instant before he turned to the side to allow her access. Rachel breezed in, that schoolgirl giddiness all too eager to bubble again to the surface. His quarters, compared to hers, were cramped and sparse. He a junior lieutenant, she First Officer, they lived worlds apart on this ship, much as they had growing up. But

very soon Rachel Garrett would change all that. She would level the playing field for Spencer Stadi once and for all – something in her heart told her to do this. Something about it felt like it was the right thing to do.

“Well, are we going to talk about this?” Rachel breathed.

“You know the old Betazoid adage, Commander,” he said levelly, “no thought gains substance without physical form.” In a world of telepaths, only the spoken word was binding.

“Are you okay with this transfer?” she chirped, realizing now how bold she’d been to even suggest it... especially without his prior knowledge or approval! “I know I spoke out of turn with the Admiral, and I’m sorry for that,” she added, nervously rubbing together two sweaty palms.

There was a long moment of silence between them now, and in Rachel’s memory she could hear the ticking of her grandfather’s ancient clock on the mantle of his study back home. After a protracted silence, she had the sudden keen awareness that he was playing her again, and she placed her hands on her slender hips, eyeing him levelly. The young man stood nearly a foot taller than her, yet she was still able to stare him down somehow. She was determined that, from this day forward, they would always be on level ground, and Spencer could sense this from her, and he nodded almost imperceptively. A secret pact between them had just been forged and a profound respect had just been earned, and it was reciprocal. She shook her head now and smirked, her neck-length dark hair swishing from left to right.

“What transfer?” Spencer finally said, grinning somewhat bashfully.

“Ugh, you know I can’t hide anything from you!” Rachel blurted out, turning away from him and facing the side wall somewhat exasperated.

“That is something we will have to work on,” Spencer assured her, “especially if we are to become a team.” He had sensed her embarrassment – and frustration – in that simple challenge. They had often spoke of the latent psi-factor that lay dormant in every human mind. With proper training, especially from an adept telepath like Spencer, this region of her brain could be slowly awakened. In that case, it could (or would) be imperative sometimes for her to hide her thoughts from him, especially if she

climbed much higher up through the ranks of Starfleet's crusted upper echelon. As the commander of a starship, there may be many things she would have to hide, or completely block, from his naturally probing paracortex. This would protect her as much as it would him. There were always secrets to keep, *and secrets she had many*.

Spencer's mind reached out for a moment searching, and there he found it at last. Always hidden, always veiled in the darkness and the mists of the deep sub-conscious, every human being had one. Though Rachel's was small, it was there, nonetheless. He could sense it now, that dark spot, that unfathomable stain on the very fabric of her mind. It was the one thing about humankind that he and the rest of his Betazoid brethren had never quite understood about these deeply passionate people. It seemed to govern their entire existence, and each and every one of them in some form or another lived out their entire lives in *fear* of it. The Betazoid mind had never quite been able to penetrate this primal shadowy spot, and they had always wondered why. There were so many things about humans that made them wonder why. Why did this stain exist? Why did it make them do the things they did? And why did they continuously live in fear of that all-too-important inner self?

For a moment, a silence fell between them as wide as any chasm. They both had grown up literally worlds apart, and now they stared back 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, he concluded at last. The complexities of their lives from the day they were born create the whys. And the whys, too created complexities all their own. The whys were who they were. They were the definition of their very existence. Every emotion that they experienced, every fleeting feeling that altered their path, had a cause, somewhere down there deep, in that darkness. These were the reasons why; and those reasons probably had reasons all their own buried still yet deeper! Perhaps somewhere down there in that dark, perhaps somewhere down there deep, lay the true meaning of self? We are all victims of our own demons; an infallible truth that he himself could not deny, for secrets too he had many. But it was he that must bridge the gap.

"I don't even know if we will be a team," Rachel confessed, startling him from his trance. "I don't know a thing about this special assignment they've offered me," she further admitted, and it took him a second to catch up, "so if you wish to decline, I understand... I just didn't feel it was right to... oh, I don't know..." she stammered at last, again flustered, and maybe even slightly more embarrassed than before.

Spencer's telepathic paracortex was now sensing a longing, deep down in her dark subconscious, that he please, please, please, just reveal to her, once and for all, the whole of her future, right here and right now. But how little these humans understood of the burden of being able to delve so easily into a person's soul! ...especially a human person's soul. The insecurities, the uncertainties, the tangled knots of love and vengeance. Layers upon layers upon layers; it was all right there, and it was all so changeable and so malleable, and based on such errant whims! Her mind was an ocean, the feelings but waves. *She didn't feel it was right to what?* What was right, and what exactly was *wrong* here in such a vast sea of emotional changeability? *Was it right...* "...to leave me here?" he chuckled. "Oh, I would muddle through somehow," he muttered with a faked sigh.

Even without telepathy, Rachel could still sense the hidden pain beneath his nonchalance. Between the Academy, and his thankless service aboard this accursed ship – Mark Jameson's ship – Spencer Stadi had had a pretty rough go of it so far. Again, something in her heart told her she must change all of that if she could. She had never before noticed that Spencer's cramped quarters had no window... just another one of Jameson's cruel little tricks. The Commander had never taken a shine to Stadi simply because of the poor man's noble heritage; and perhaps the recriminations of an innocent senior prank gone awry. Spencer had been ostracized right from the start, even despite Rachel's best efforts to the contrary, mostly thanks to Hawke and Jameson and the rest of the 'good ole boys' club. Hell, it was also only because of the simple fact that Spencer held the rank of lieutenant that he hadn't been forced to share a room with some lowly crewman!

"If I accept," Spencer continued, "we will have to set down a few ground rules first." He looked at her solemnly now, and she sensed his urgency.

"Go ahead," she allowed, thinking she knew what he was about to say.

"First, I'm not an oracle, I cannot predict the future..."

"Okay..." Rachel nodded deliberately, somewhat mystified why anyone would think...

"Second, all thoughts are open to interpretation... yours, mine, Admiral Chekov's... a Romulan Commander with full weapons to bear..."

"That stands to reason," she conceded, with a tilt of the head this time.

"And finally, Betazoid ethics have developed over many centuries..." he paused and looked away, choosing his next words carefully. "We cannot forcefully remove thoughts, we cannot pry," he eyed her again, bottomless ebony eyes boring into her soul. "Likewise, I cannot implant thoughts, I cannot control minds." His head dropped to the floor, thinking of the Twins.

"And most importantly," he finished, "I cannot interfere with free will... *we are not gods.*" He turned away now and faced the back wall of his quarters.

Rachel's eyes glistened, and she knew not why. The depth of feeling pouring out of the man was palpable, almost as if his telepathic paracortex had somehow switched into reverse, projecting a complexity of wave-tossed thoughts on Rachel with an intensity that strangely overwhelmed her with emotions. And then it just *stopped* as the control returned, leaving her feeling empty and in want of more. Levels upon levels – and on some unconscious level, her mind's eye realized now that that hidden region of her brain had somehow just been awakened. Her psi-awareness was pushing out of its envelope, and though the road ahead may be uncertain, the journey had begun right here and right now with but an instant's nuptial of eye color, almond on black.

"Well, Commander," and the trance was broken, "we both have a lot of packing to do... and very little time left." He smiled broadly at her, and she snapped to attention.

"Er, yes, Lieutenant, of course," Rachel stammered. She glanced over Spencer's shoulder at the chrono near his bed. Noticed that his cramped space did not even have a replicator... another sure sign of Jameson's cold-heartedness. Yes, many things would change. "Meet you in the Transporter Room at 1600?" She

returned his smile now and he acknowledged her with a slightly tilted nod of the head. "Very well then," she declared as he passed by her and applied his thumbprint to the door controls.

With that schoolgirl giddiness all too quick to return, Rachel Garrett skipped out into the corridor with a lightness of step that was all-too-indicative of her youth. At age thirty, she was in the prime of her life; even if Spencer Stadi was still almost five years her junior, his deeper wisdom made them a well-matched set. A team indeed. He had a strong sense now that they were destined to go far together, from this point forward, come hell or high water. He knew no more than she regarding this 'special assignment' the Admiral had offered, even in spite of his telepathic prowess, yet he was still able to glean enough from Chekov's mind to know that their time here aboard the *Falcon* was concluded... they would *not* be coming back. So, let Mark Jameson be damned, and he turned and began to quickly pack what few belongings his sparse and empty quarters would hold.



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As Rachel Garrett walked down that last corridor towards the transporter room, she couldn't help but wonder where her send-off party was. Where were the lines of officers standing at attention, the piper sounding her departure, her commanding officer shaking her hand and thanking her for all her years of loyal service as his first officer. Not so on Jameson's ship. *It's been an honor, Sir*, she thought... and the honor would be hers to depart the *Falcon* now, once and for all. The transporter chief had already transferred her few meager belongings over to 'Hull number 101' and now all that was left was for her to rendezvous with Spencer and just be gone.

She did have to admit to a small amount of guilt though. There were many aboard this ship that she would miss, and perhaps more than she knew that would miss her; but no goodbyes though... not only was there no time, but it really wasn't her style anyway. Rachel had a certain knack to turn melancholy into resolve, and her resolve had hardened now to throwing itself full-on into this new assignment, whatever and wherever it may be.

The doors to the transporter room parted with a whoosh and her heart leapt for an instant that there might actually be a few members of the Bridge crew here at least to give her a proper send-off. But there was no one, only Spencer. *Fair enough*, she concluded... he was all she needed anyway – and she could have no idea how true that would become over the coming decades. Spencer was standing at the control console, and it did not take a great leap in her reasoning to conclude that Jameson had even dismissed the chief as well, leaving the two alienated officers to make their own way off the ship. So be it.

"Lieutenant," Rachel nodded.

"No time like the present, as they say, Commander," Spencer returned. "I have received coordinates from the One-oh-one's transporter chief... autosequence engage at your command." He

eyed her with a certain amount of sadness that mirrored her own. Five years aboard this ship, and for what? One lonely departure.

"Or a stepping-stone," she sighed, catching him somewhat unawares with the sudden and exponential growth of her psi-region. But she was right... the *Falcon* was just a waystation on their road to much bigger and better things. Both of their careers would blossom from here; they could sense it in the very air around them and in the electricity that arced in the ether between their mutual synopsis. The future began now, all they needed to do was step forward.

"Let's step on to the next one then, shall we?" Spencer nodded towards the transporter pad and Rachel smiled. Without hesitation, or any further ado, she jumped up the few steps onto the pad and awaited a fingerprint's touch to activate their future. Her schoolgirl giddiness had returned, and it was infectious, especially to a full-blood telepath like Spencer. His fingers swiped upwards, and the countdown began. With all the energy of their combined excitement, he swiftly rounded the control console and leapt up on to the transporter pad to stand at Rachel's side. In but a moment more, together as one, they watched the *Falcon* dissolve into the dog-eared pages of their tattered past.

Their future materialized in a transporter room that was much larger and newer than the *Falcon's*... brand new in fact. It still bore the smells of new carpet and fresh composites and had an airiness that was both inviting and welcoming. Even before she fully solidified, Rachel could already sense an innovation in the design that spoke of the future. This was the next generation starship, and she was immediately in awe of its obvious complexity. Fully solid now, she turned her head and glanced at Spencer, both exchanging looks of stunned amazement. Standing below them was a Vulcan officer of about their age, relatively speaking of course, who commanded their attention straight away, as Vulcans so often do.

"Lieutenant Commander Garrett, Lieutenant Stadi," he spoke, "I am Lieutenant Skyl... on behalf of Admiral Chekov, it is my privilege to welcome you aboard the *Starship Ambassador*." Rachel and Spencer both laughed together and exchanged devilish looks. So, the great mystery ship *did* have a name after all, and it

left them with a satisfied sort of feeling to know that they were both now privy to this information... *and Commander Mark Jameson was not!* Skyl eyed them both speculatively. Vulcans found humans to be somewhat unnerving – Betazoids doubly so.

“Have I said something amusing, Commander?” Skyl queried, scowling at them now as his overly analytical brain tried to process.

“Uh, no, Lieutenant,” Rachel answered in kind, stepping down off the pad and extending a hand. “Our apologies (eyeing Spencer with her usual wry smile), we were just under the impression that this ship bore no name other than “Hull number One-oh-one”.”

Rachel smiled directly at the Vulcan this time, but the gesture was lost to his stern countenance. Instead of grasping her hand, Skyl merely raised his own in the traditional Vulcan salute. Inwardly he cringed. Very few species understood that Vulcans were touch-telepaths, and any skin-on-skin contact awakened within them awkward and fleeting flashes of thoughts and memories from the other person. Feeling awkward now herself, Rachel dropped her hand and wiped a clammy palm on her hip.

“Hull Number One-oh-one is merely the yard number of the vessel,” Skyl explained. “In the interest of security, very little about this ship has been disseminated to the general populace.”

“Very little?” Spencer grinned, stepping down finally himself. “I’d reclassify that as: absolutely nothing!”

“Indeed,” Skyl intoned, “much of the design and construction of the *Ambassador*-class has been classified Top Secret.” He winced almost imperceptibly at the onslaught of psionic waves that were emanating out from this Betazoid lieutenant like radio waves from a subspace tower. Even without touch, Vulcans still had to shield themselves from the adeptness of the Betazoid psyche. It was a closeness they simply were not comfortable with.

“So now that we’re aboard,” Spencer egged him on further, “what more can you tell us then?” Vulcans were certainly harder to read than humans, and Lieutenant Skyl was proving to be even more so. Like a kid at a safe though, Spencer kept turning the dial. Rachel merely sighed. She had learned long ago that it was fruitless to taunt a Vulcan.

Much to their surprise however, Skyl answered them: “The *Ambassador*-class was first conceived following the destruction of

Station Salem One... the design and construction process was then accelerated following the Tomed Incident. Starfleet concluded that a larger class of vessel was required to counter the Romulan threat."

Rachel nodded; it was much as she had suspected – though it was certainly no small irony that no one had heard from the Romulans in over a decade since that incident. But history had proven that a prolonged Cold War rarely bred stagnation. The *Ambassadors* were here to stay. Fear promulgates growth.

"Have you worked closely with the development process, Lieutenant?" Rachel asked him honestly.

"I am presently lead engineer for the *Ambassador's* deep-space trials," Skyl answered her plainly, with no hint of pride or hubris. "I have also spent much time aboard the *Horatio* attempting to resolve certain class-wide technical concerns with the propulsion system."

"You mean there are two of them?!" Spencer blurted out, looking down at Rachel with wide, ebony eyes. He liked surprises, and for a Betazoid, surprises were hard to come by.

"Perhaps more," Skyl replied rather cryptically, piquing their interest even more. He paused for a moment as their eyes went wide. "I believe a brief tour is in order?" he offered, breaking the curious silence. Rachel and Spencer both nodded in unison as their Vulcan guide turned without ceremony and escorted them out into the expansive corridors beyond.

The two new arrivals were simply without words for the next roughly twenty minutes as Skyl led them down the almost endless hallways that honeycombed the ship from stem to stern.

There was something to be said for 'smelling the fresh paint', even in the twenty-fourth century, as Rachel and Spencer inhaled deeply more times than they could count, marveling at the newness of the ship, the sharp lines, the crisp edges, the wide-open spaces – and the feel of airiness the entire vessel projected – it was carried from the framework right down through to the finest details. The *Ambassador* truly was an architectural wonder in every sense of the word... and it humbled the two officers to think that this remarkable behemoth was at the same time in motion, plying

through the cosmos as easily as a living creature might glide through the ocean or the air.

"Very impressive, Lieutenant," Rachel remarked at long last as they clanked on the deck grating just a few turns from Main Engineering. The populated circular primary hull far above them had been plush and carpeted, but here in the secondary hull things were a bit more utilitarian, yet certainly not without its own sense of style. Here the white corridors and high-squared ceilings lifted the spaces and made it feel less claustrophobic than the engineering sections of the older class ships in the fleet. Starfleet had learned a lot of lessons over the past hundred years or so about crew comfort and mental stability, especially when many of these deep-space exploratory vessels could be away from their home port for upwards of five years or more.

"Captain Eccleston will give you a tour of the Bridge later this evening," Skyl intoned casually, unimpressed or indifferent, one could never tell.

"So, the ship *does* have a captain," Rachel mused, hopes of her own command (and by extension, Spencer's) only somewhat dashed. Eternally optimistic though, she preferred to think of the *Ambassador* as well as just perhaps another steppingstone along the journey. She was kidding herself, she realized now, to think that her first command would ever be as ambitious as this! She was certain that there must be an *Oberth*-class science vessel docked at Galatea with her name on it... maybe even something as large as a *New Orleans*-class frigate, but nothing more than that. Hell, she realized, she might not yet even advance beyond first officer! A melancholy glance at Spencer suddenly reminded her that there was still that little question of a 'special assignment' that Chekov had used as bait. Indeed, their journey here was not yet complete. Spencer smiled down at her with a comforting stare that cautioned patience and she resolved herself again to keep her eyes on the open road.

"Certainly," was the only reply Skyl would offer to her ocean of wonder.

"Will we see Admiral Chekov again..." but her words were cut short by her first glimpse of engineering, and particularly, the warp core. Her mouth fell agape, and Spencer inadvertently bumped into

her as she came to a dead stop. Rachel had never seen anything like it. It was beautiful, and the core itself pulsed before her like a lighthouse beacon in the night. The pure and raw energy it produced, even at idle, held her in awe. The warp core was the heart of any starship, and Rachel could almost feel its beating heart now as her own slowly synchronized to its pulsing rhythms. Stepping forward at last, she looked down first... far, far down... then up, up, up into the very rafters of the ship. This quietly growling dragon spanned a full 17 decks from top to bottom; seventeen stories of pure and unadulterated power, just sitting and waiting for permission to be unleashed.

"An impressive design, Mr. Skyl," Rachel couldn't help but proclaim, spinning and eyeing him levelly, clearly vying for more information.

"Yes Ma'am," Skyl acceded. "I was stationed at Outpost Seran-T-One on Pluto while the dilithium crystal chamber was being developed. Some of the Federation's top engineering minds aided in its design."

"Ah, you're too humble, Skyl," Spencer jibed, "you must be very proud of her."

Stadi winked at Rachel who in turn looked back at Skyl. The man was **indeed** proud of his work, though it took a very keen eye to see it. But she knew better than to taunt a Vulcan... any attempt at humor would leave you mired in a never-ending bog of logical indifference. She instead returned her gaze to the pulsing colossus that lay just a handsbreadth away. She could feel its warmth, could sense it straining against its restraints like a draft horse pulling at its traces. The thing was ready to move... like her, it wasn't comfortable just sitting around. "Why are we still at idle, Lieutenant?" Rachel asked frowning, taking a last look, then turning toward the Vulcan engineer with a certain gleam in her eye.

"As I mentioned," the man replied (somewhat forlornly), "there has been an ongoing, class wide technical issue with the propulsion system. I have had limited success correcting the problem aboard the *Horatio*, but the *Ambassador* has proven most... (he sighed) ...*stubborn*." He then raised an upswept eyebrow and waited patiently, almost as if hoping for some small measure of fresh insight into the conundrum. Rachel was somewhat surprised by his use of human vernacular, but she could also sense

his keen frustration. Clearly Skyl had been working on this problem for quite some time now, and without result.

"Interesting," she mused, "Is it a software problem, or a hardware issue?"

"Uncertain, Commander," he admitted. "There remains an imbalance in the power transfer conduits that defies explanation." He looked away. "Engineering teams both aboard ship and at Galatea continue to work on the problem."

"Ah, I see," Rachel replied solemnly, respecting his carefully concealed ignominy. "Perhaps the Lieutenant and I can be of assistance?" Again, she spoke out of turn for Stadi, and this time she physically winced – *she would have to stop doing that!* But with a glance, she could sense from Spencer his own willingness to get into a little hands-on work aboard this most remarkable ship. She grinned, and before Skyl could object, she cut him off, knowing full-well that his carefully concealed pride was certain to lodge a protest.

"Strangely enough," she added coyly, "I specialized in power transfer conduits in my senior year at the Academy." She proffered this as a peace offering to assuage the Vulcan's misgivings. She was excited to do something other than just tour this ship endlessly like some moldy old admiral.

With a few moments' pensive thought, Skyl at last acquiesced. "That would be acceptable, Commander," and he gestured to a large rectangular control console at the focus of the much larger control center. Rachel eyed Spencer for but an instant before the duo took station opposite Skyl. Her schoolgirl giddiness had returned in spite of itself, and Spencer was once again caught up in its intoxicating glow. Other junior crewmembers began to scurry around engineering now, sensing perhaps that at last the great ship was about to move. Skyl obviously ran a tight department, and it showed by the clockwork precision in which everyone attended to their own uniquely important responsibilities. He had honed these Starfleet officers to perfection and Rachel was duly impressed.

"Engineering to Bridge..." he called out smoothly.

"Go ahead, Mr. Skyl," an older man answered... Captain Eccleston perhaps? Definitely not the all-too-familiar Russian accent of Fleet Admiral Pavel Chekov.

"We are prepared to engage the warp engines, Sir," Skyl pledged. "Lieutenant Commander Garrett has offered to assist the engineering teams in recalibrating the power transfer conduits." He paused and waited patiently as those on the Bridge obviously mulled over the offer...

*"Very well, Lieutenant, proceed... oh, and Skyl,"* the man called out, almost as an afterthought, *"try not to tear us all in half... Bridge out."*

Skyl let out a baleful sort of sigh. Linear disassociation was a very real threat in twin-nacelled warp drives, but despite generations of engineers working on the problem, it still remained the only practicable way to create a stable warp field for ships of this size... one misstep however could spell disaster. If one engine should fail, one-half of the ship would fall back into normal space, and the rest – still at warp – would wrench itself free in a most horrifying way. Perhaps hiding some form of primal anxiety, Skyl spoke quietly to Rachel and Spencer now without looking up from his side of the console.

"Setting course for Betazed," he advised, "warp factor two." To Rachel's left, the warp core began to thrum and pulse with a new sense of purpose. Rachel and Spencer both couldn't help but be distracted, indeed marveled, by its mesmerizing glow. She envisioned that fire-breathing dragon now as it prepared to blast superheated plasma down the two power transfer conduits that spoked out from the rear of the dilithium crystal chamber. Colliding within the boundless facets of the crystals themselves, the matter and antimatter streams annihilated each other in the classic form  $E=mc^2$ , instantaneously creating an almost unfathomable surge of raw plasma that had to go somewhere. It was humbling to think that the power transfer conduits in all their modesty were even able to contain this ribbon of primordial energy at all, much less direct it.

"Reactions per unit time remaining steady," Skyl reported, returning their focus forward. Out in space, the two huge engines sent forth soft little tendrils of energy that reached deep into the mysterious realms of subspace, slowly pushing the ship forward at ever-increasing factors of the speed of light. On a logarithmic scale that was particular to the *Ambassador*-class starship, warp factor two just happened to correlate to just a touch over ten times the



speed of light... or roughly 6.8 billion miles per hour in normal space. Slow by all accounts of interstellar travel, but still enough to get you going. But as the mighty new vessel began to settle into this new reality, a tiny anomaly began to creep into the warp field that caused the ship to take on a slight shudder. Spencer Stadi froze, Rachel Garrett came to life. This was where she shone.

"I see it," she proclaimed, tapping frantically at the control surface of the console. The tiny imbalance in the plasma stream was practically unnoticeable, but it was still just enough to throw the perfectly timed engines out of sync. Spencer looked as white as a ghost.

"And this happens every time you go to war?!" He directed at Skyl.

"Yes, Lieutenant," Skyl answered calmly. "Waveform analysis of the problem has proven inconclusive," he offered, more to Rachel than to Spencer. She for her part still tapped ardently at the control console, frowning deeply. She could understand Skyl's frustration now – the feedback anomaly she was seeing defied all sense of logic.

"Have you tried a component swap out with the *Horatio*?" she asked, glancing up for barely a second.

"Affirmative," Skyl answered. "Twice in fact."

"What the hell?" she muttered, her brow crunching up even more. "What if I try this..." she then said quietly to herself. The shudder increased dramatically, and alarms began to sound almost instantly. "That should not have happened!" Rachel blurted out, staring at Skyl now wide-eyed. Her fingers began to move even more swiftly than before as she tried to reverse her attempted corrections. "I don't understand!" she proclaimed, sweat beading up on her forehead and upper lip.

Spencer began looking around the control center now, either for an escape, or for something to hold on to, as the shuddering began to turn into a violent shaking. For his part, Skyl began to work feverously at this own console attempting to help counter the growing instability they were seeing in the warp field.

"Warp field destabilizing, Commander" he spoke plainly, "structural collapse imminent."

"F--k!" Rachel let slip, her youth betraying her Starfleet training. One hour aboard this ship and she'd already broken it!

*"Bridge to Engineering... Report!"* the voice from before shouted out over the comm network. By now the warp core itself began to thrash against its moorings as the shaking began to manifest itself in a myriad of tiny little rattles and the hissing sounds of escaping gases.

"Warp field destabilizing, Captain," Skyl half-shouted. "We may have to eject the core."

"God dammit," Rachel hissed as Spencer glanced down at a sudden red light on the tabletop directly below him.

"Commander," he reported, "an EPS tap in the starboard conduit has ruptured!" He tapped frantically now at his own console, slamming his hip against the edge of the table for stability. "Lethal radiation is flooding this deck from section nine forward." Normally benign, the EPS taps bled tiny amounts of energy from the power transfer conduits and fed it directly into a secondary network of power lines that snaked throughout the rest of the ship, fueling everything from the main phasers right down to the lights over their heads (which now began to flicker).

*"Bridge to Engineering... I need answers Commander!"* But Rachel had no answers to give. What was happening went beyond anything she had ever seen. There simply was *no* explanation for it. She fought a growing panic that threatened to overwhelm her senses.

"Radiation approaching Main Engineering," Spencer prompted, recentring her focus. She was more grateful than ever for the calming effect his telepathic mind had on her deep inner psyche. She looked up at Skyl, pleading now herself for answers, and for an escape, wishing someone would wake her up from this unbelievable nightmare. Skyl merely stared back at her with all the flat emotionless unconcern of his species.

"You are the ranking officer, Commander," he spoke plainly, "the authority is yours."

She glared at him with an anger that was unwarranted. He wasn't coping out, he wasn't passing the buck, he wasn't shouldering the burden on her out of fear or lack of resolve, he was simply stating a fact that fit within all the forms of logic. Rachel looked down at Spencer's readouts for herself. Within a matter of moments that wave of radiation would reach Engineering, would reach them, and then the ship would most surely be lost. But there

was still yet a chance (albeit slim) that she and Skyl, working together, could pull them all out of this mess... but only if...

"How many people?" she hissed.

"Reading twenty-seven lifesigns, Commander," Spencer answered solemnly.

"Emergency transport?" she whispered.

"Not possible, radiation levels are too high..."

*Damn.* "Radiation Protocol, Lieutenant," she ordered. "Seal off those sections... no one gets in... or out," she added with such a deep melancholy that Spencer's heart broke. But he knew that Rachel had done what she had to do. Her duty came first to the ship... it was the nightmare, no-win scenario that forever haunted anyone in a command position aboard a Federation starship. In deep space, the ship was life in a never-ending sea of emptiness. They must hold on to it till the bitter end to save all the other hundreds of souls around them that lay scattered throughout its honeycombed interiors. Twenty-seven would be sacrificed to save over eight hundred more. He watched a tear course down her cheek as she returned to her all-important work.

"Skyl," Rachel spoke quietly, despite the rising din, "the only way to stop this is to quench off the warp field controllers manually and vent the remaining drive plasma into space." The ship lurched so violently that she nearly fell to the floor – felt Spencer's comforting grip on her shoulders holding her firm. A release valve somewhere behind her blew off steam, blasting her neck with hot air and puffing her hair forward across her face. Her eyes narrowed with resolve.

"Agreed," Skyl stated, eyeing her levelly across the table.

"Wait," Spencer began to argue, "the warp field controllers are in the irradiated sections behind us," he protested, but his pronouncements went largely ignored by the two senior commanders that were now locked in a fateful stare-down across the vast space of that polished new control table. All sounds stopped, only the desperately blinking lights on its surface betrayed the continued passage of time. *You or me?*

"I'll go," Rachel stated at last, "I'm the so-called expert." *Some expert,* she thought morbidly... *I've already killed 27... and I'm not likely through with the killing yet.* Spencer Stadi sputtered, but she raised a single finger to silence him. She knew his

telepathic mind needed no further repudiation. Skyl said nothing, a true testament to his heritage. She expected nothing less. She couldn't bear to look at Spencer, instead just turned away from him and began her death-march aft. At least she had gotten him off of Jameson's ship and out of his reach. He might have a fighting chance now under the tutelage of Admiral Chekov, or maybe even this Captain Eccleston? As for her, there would be no honors, there'd be no statues or memorials... hell, she wondered if there'd even be a memorial service! She knew no one aboard this ship save Spencer, and the *Falcon* itself was already light-years away, not that anyone there would care either. Yet, every Starfleet officer wanted their death to count for something, and *God dammit*, Rachel Garrett was gonna make hers count. With newfound resolve, she squared her shoulders and rounded a corner, forever passing out of sight.

The next ten minutes of Rachel Garrett's life were nothing less than a runaway trainwreck into hell. All her senses were assailed by the sights and sounds and smells of destruction. The heat was staggering and the air thin, making her feel faint, and every hatch fought her at every turn. Radiation Protocol was designed to lock the ship down, and access wasn't made easy intentionally. After an arduous journey, half of it crawling, she was confined now, on her back, inside a small Jeffries tube making the final desperate adjustments to the warp field controllers. A closely-held secret, she had forever been stricken by the affliction of claustrophobia – it had very nearly derailed her Starfleet career in fact – and she tried to steady her nerves now by breathing through her nose and gritting her teeth, instead of gasping for air like she wanted to.

By this point, the ship's shaking had become so dangerously violent that she had multiple bruises, and a considerable amount of blood, to show for it. Just seconds ago, Skyl had informed her that time was short... within moments the warp field would collapse, tearing the ship into pieces. She had passed the point of fatal radiation exposure some time ago and was surprised that she felt nothing. In these last moments, Rachel was staring death square in the face, and she had only one regret... that she had brought this upon herself and tarnished the history of her career forever. An

intense screech and a boom signaled the end... she hadn't been quick enough. A soft white light enveloped her, made her tingle all over. *So, this is it, she mused, so be it.*

A quietness so sudden as to be startling enveloped her and made her release the breath she'd been holding. Instead of the cold, hard grating of the Jeffries tube, she was lying now on the soft carpeted floor of a large room with expansive viewports that looked out into darkest depths of deep space. Out the windows, the beautiful streaks of warp stars sailed by on quiet missions all their own. She could stare at those stars for hours. But instead, Rachel began to tremble all over, falling into some sort of shock. Her body tightened in a sharp spasm as a man suddenly looked down over her and smiled, scaring the ever lovin' shit out of her.

"You are bleeding on my carpet," the man proclaimed in a heavy Russian accent. He extended an arm, and before Rachel knew it, she was on her feet.

"Ad-ad-admiral Chekov, Sir," she sputtered. "Wh-wh-where-what..." She shook now even harder, shivering uncontrollably.

"Congratulations, you have pazzed zee tezt," he said nonchalantly, grinning even wider. But perhaps it was a little *too* nonchalant as he could readily see that it had sparked within her those first few embers of annoyance. Her face crunched up into a near sneer.

"T-t-test?" she spat out, "wh-what **test**?"

"Zee Commanderz Tezt," Chekov explained calmly, "you applied zum time ago, no?"

"Well y-y-yes," Rachel continued to stutter. Her head already ached enough without all the added confusion. "B-b-but Commander Jameson kept insisting that I-I-I wasn't ready." Her head began to swirl as she touched blood just above her brow, then rubbed furtively at her right elbow. She had taken all the written exams, sure – Diplomatic Law, First Contact Procedure, Prime Directive Precedence, Bridge Operations... all that remained was the Engineering Qualification, but Jameson had always stalled and prevaricated, almost as if he felt somehow threatened by her somewhat meteoric rise up through the ranks. "Glupyy malen'kiy

Dzheymsen,"<sup>3</sup> Chekov muttered. *Jameson would no doubt go far, but only on the backs of others.* But Chekov was determined that *She* would go further and do it faster. His foreign words, however, only served to annoy Rachel even more. She wondered if the old man had always reverted back to his native tongue. *Or was it simply the onset of senility that prompted his senseless murmurings?* Regardless, her irritation continued to mount. The Commander's Test was the final piece of the puzzle, and now that she'd finally taken it, Rachel Garrett was infuriated.

Her fists clenched. How could they subject her to such heart-wrenching fear?! Did they seriously do this to every single person that had ever attempted the rank of Commander? Or had they instead singled her out for some arcane reason – this so-called 'special assignment' perhaps? A small grain of respect for Commander Mark Jameson crept into her consciousness, magnifying her anger. She didn't *want* to respect him, God dammit! Chekov could sense that the nature of her trembling had changed, understood her anger, her misdirected resentment, her conflicting emotions. He too had taken the test once, at another age and another time, and it had scared the ever-lovin' shit out of him too. It also had made him equally angry.

"What about those twenty-seven?" she clipped abruptly, somewhat hoarsely.

"All zafe," he assured her. *Khorosho, khorosho,*<sup>4</sup> he thought. The good of others must always come first. The many must outweigh the few... or the one, for the safety of the ship.

"And obviously we're safely at warp?" Rachel murmured, more as a statement than a question. Her bloody knuckles rose up to flatten out on defiant hips as her eyes gazed out sullenly at those beautiful warp stars. The ship was cruising along as smooth as glass, no sign whatsoever of an engine imbalance, or any other distress. She was slowly becoming incredulous now to the whole event. She felt broken somehow but wasn't even sure how – decided here and now that she wanted a list of those twenty-seven

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<sup>3</sup> 3 "Foolish little Jameson,"

<sup>4</sup> 4 "Good, good,"

people, and that she would keep it with her always. Imaginary or real, they would become her anchor.

"Varp five steady, on courze to Betazed," Chekov replied to her query, mostly on deaf ears. He was waiting patiently for her mind to process, watched her emotions run the board.

"Why?" Rachel's eyes began to glisten now as the shivering continued. She was cold, perhaps as a reverse reaction to the heat? She half-smirked now in spite of herself... the radiation had clearly been faked, just like all the rest of it. She still couldn't believe the admiral had gone to such lengths, returned her gaze to his aging features and salt and pepper hair; studied his square chiseled jaw, his kind face, the smiling eyes. He in return was eying her softly, waiting for her willingness to listen to his answer. She relaxed slightly.

"Zee Commander's Test iz not a text uv your engineering skillz, Lieutenant Commander," Chekov explained, "it iz a text uv your rezolve."

"To order people to their deaths?!" she spat out testily, interrupting him.

"To prezerve, protect, and defend zee ship and zee greater whole, no matter zee cost," he finished. "Zometimes dat may even include zee sacrifice uv your own life."

Rachel squared her shoulders, dropped her arms to her sides to stand at attention. *Enough is enough.* She glowered at Chekov with a drilling stare, and he knew that it was time.

Rachel Garrett was not one to just sit idly by. Like the ship, she was ready to move. "Lieutenant Commander Rachel Garrett," Chekov announced, standing fully at attention now himself, "I hereby promote you to zee rank uv full Commander, vith all zee commenzurate responzibiliteez and privileges uv dat rank." He extended a hand and gently clasped her bloodied knuckles. "Congratulations, Commander Garrett," he said warmly.

Rachel's eyes glistened. The shivering stopped as she at last began to feel warm again.

She had waited so long for this! But life is a journey, almost an adventure even. It requires patience, and a resolve all its own, you just have to open your eyes to the possibilities. To do so, you must have faith in the strength of your own capabilities, and you must have the resolve to believe that perhaps you **can** do it after

all. To try is to follow the river instead of fighting it, and to hope is to let the heart sing all those things that the mind refuses to believe. She thought now of the archival footage of a very young-looking Ensign Pavel Chekov and the heady days of Captain James T. Kirk. Hell, she bet that the aged Admiral standing before her now had probably even been given his own test by the venerable Kirk himself.

Rachel wondered what the nature of that test might've been. Had it been as equally heart wrenching and fearful as hers? She would love to just sit now with the Admiral for hours and relive some of those days through his eyes, but she thought to ask might be too forward. She was sure that every Joe Blow that crossed his path probably wanted to sit and reminisce. Perhaps later on in their journey there would be time, but for now her head was full. She needed to decompress, tend to her wounds, come to terms with all of the experiences of the day... but first she would go deal with one Lieutenant Spencer Stadi.

As Rachel approached Spencer's quarters, she wasn't quite sure what she was feeling. A certain melancholy resolve had settled over her now that there was nowhere to go but up. Already this ranked as one of her top five craziest days on record, and she wondered what might happen next. Even so, now that the adrenalin had worn off, all she wanted to do was retire to her own quarters, crawl under a soft comforter, and sleep. But something was drawing her here first. What? It seemed almost unnatural now that she thought about it and paused for a moment at that last intersection reconsidering. She didn't want their relationship to become cloudy. The line between them must remain crisp. Should she have left him behind on the *Falcon*? No. But professionalism must prevail.

She pressed her thumb on the touchpad outside his door. *Silly girl*, she thought, once they arrived at Galatea, Spencer's own career path could diverge from hers like two roads in a country wood. She was worrying about nothing. Another long pause suggested to Rachel that again he was playing her – or perhaps his senses were not as keen as she thought?

Again, she began to reconsider just as the doors parted with a startling whoosh.

"Congrats, Commander," Spencer said, smiling.



"Oh, stow it," she growled, breezing past him. "How much did you know?" she demanded, turning at last to face him and those piercing, bottomless ebony eyes.

Spencer studied her stance for a moment, defiant hands placed on shapely hips, the curves of a well-toned body in the prime of life; young and so full of energy, almond eyes staring with an intensity that he knew better than to mess with.

"Nothing..." he answered honestly, "...at first..." He let the doors shut, then smirked. "Lieutenant Skyl was most adept at hiding his true motives from me. I suspect that's why the Admiral chose him..." he mused, trailing off, stroking his chin as if in pensive thought.

"And then?" Rachel pressed, not yet willing to soften her stance, or to let him off the hook. "And then I began to notice that his computer keystrokes were deliberately aimed at counteracting your own."

"You could have warned me," she shot back, angry and embarrassed. Rachel turned and faced the back wall – was quick to note that Spencer's guest quarters here on the *Ambassador* already far surpassed anything even she had known aboard the *Falcon*. She hoped he appreciated all she'd done... *indeed*, all she was doing for him.

"It would have compromised the integrity of the test..." he answered her plainly, and of course, she knew it just as well as he did. "Let us not forget the ground rules, Commander," he then said softly, yet still with just enough tone as to scold.

"You are most definitely not a god," Rachel chuckled, turning back to face him. She ran a hand through her matted hair, realized she hadn't even showered yet. She must look a hot mess, encrusted blood and a disheveled uniform, which was torn she might add, slipping her pointer finger through a hole near her waist. *How the hell did that happen?* She studied his lanky frame for a moment, at least a head and a half taller than her own and admired the vitality that even five less years can give to someone. Maybe not a god, but he sure did set the tone for a model Starfleet officer in peak physical condition. Her mind wandered for an instant and professionalism was abandoned before it was suddenly snapped back to attention by harsh reality. Their eyes met only briefly before both turned away rather demurely, their comfort level breached.

"Clearly we'll have to work on that," she muttered to herself facing again the wall.

"Clearly," Spencer croaked, turning away himself, studying the door. Rachel forgot for a moment that he was a full-on telepath, and this only served to augment her growing mortification. Like a peeping tom caught in the act, her path to freedom was blocked by the very quarry her mind's eye had just moments ago undressed. She groaned uncomfortably and he couldn't help but laugh at her.

"Oh, stow it," she reiterated, smiling in spite of herself.

"And yes, I do appreciate what you're doing for me." *Adept indeed*, she mused, *guess that answers that question!* Rachel turned and faced him with all the seriousness of an admiral now, and Spencer involuntarily straightened his lanky frame, coming to full attention.

Something deep inside him told him to do this, including a little Starfleet training.

"Lieutenant Spencer Stadi," Rachel announced, "I hereby promote you to the rank of Lieutenant Commander, with all the commensurate responsibilities and privileges of that rank." He wasn't quite sure she had the authority to do anything of the sort, but he felt pride swell up inside him, nonetheless. It had been a very long road indeed for him to get to this point. From the undercurrents of discrimination at the Academy, to the errant abuses of Commodore Xavier Hawk, and finally to the depredations endured under the command of Mark Jameson... it hadn't been an easy 'row to hoe' as the humans would say, and more than once Spencer Stadi had nearly washed out. But the day had come full circle. He fought back the tears, even fought back the urge to hug her, and instead held fast to the resolve that he would follow Rachel Garrett now to the very ends of time, if for no other reason than to honor her legacy that was not yet written. She was destined to shape the future from this point forward, and he would hold the mold.

# | 3 |

The Galatea Space Center hung like a shimmering jewel in the predawn skies over Betazed. This bustling hub was the second-busiest spaceport in the whole of the United Federation of Planets. In fact, this station was quite simply the largest orbital structure ever built; so large in fact, that it reportedly caused barely discernable tides on the surface waters of Betazed. Not unlike the great mushroom shaped *Spacedock* of Earth, Galatea was in fact an amalgamation of two of these colossal superstructures, and took on a shape more akin to a great, oblong dumbbell. Dozens of starships lay docked within, including Commodore Stillwell's legendary flagship *Prince of Wales*, and the venerated cruiser *Repulse*, recently returned from an unusual ten-year mapping mission beyond the Taurus Dark Cloud. There was even a rare *Janaran*-class corsair carrier, one of only six left in the Betazed Defense Force.

But her best-kept secret was of course the hidden bay containing the *Starship Ambassador* and an undisclosed number of her half-completed sisters. It had taken less than fifty years for this once ravaged, war-torn world, to become the center of the Federation, but they hadn't done it without a little help... rule number one of establishing a beachhead is to secure a base, and that was just what Starfleet had done when it constructed this behemoth over the skies of Betazed. More than just a hub of interstellar commerce, Galatea was strategically placed between three of the Federation's greatest adversaries... the Klingons, the Romulans, and the Cardassians. It was a completely logical decision for Ambassador Sarek to rush their membership, and even more logical for Starfleet to make this a center of defense. The *Ambassador*-class project was the vanguard of this. Fear promulgates growth.

Commander Rachel Garrett sat in an anteroom just off Admiral Chekov's expansive offices and pondered all this as she

awaited perhaps the most important meeting of her career. She'd had a somewhat fitful night's sleep aboard the *Ambassador* and had awoken early just as the ship was docking in one of the larger more general bays far up in one of the two bulbous heads of this monstrous station. She had hoped to see one of the sisters under construction but was disappointed when she realized that the *Ambassador* had moored, just like any other ship, to one of the hundreds of gangways that jutted out from the central core like branches from a dazzling Christmas tree. Rachel was humbled to realize that a top-secret project of this magnitude was way beyond her paygrade and was resigned instead to just sit patiently by and await her new assignment; *probably as a lowly adjutant to some upstart new commodore!* and she smiled inwardly to herself. Hopefully it wasn't Hawk.

Now that she had disembarked from the *Ambassador*, it was taking her longer than usual to get used to the rotation of this massive station, and so Rachel was trying to stave off nausea by keeping her mind occupied, idle as her thoughts may be. In a rare moment of persistent memory, she allowed her attention to ever so cautiously drift once more over the well-fit form of Lt. Commander Spencer Stadi just as the doors beside her parted with a *whoosh* and caused her to jump. Face turning scarlet, Rachel jumped up and tried quickly to compose herself as a woman much younger than even she spoke in a soft and sensual voice.

"The Admiral will see you now," the young adjutant said, and gestured into a glistening foyer that was even larger than the anteroom. Being Commander-in-Chief of Starfleet Command certainly had its perks, living legend or not! The inflection of the girl's voice reminded Rachel of Commandant Nyota Uhura's own soothing tones, and it filled her suddenly with warm memories. Rachel owed her career to Uhura, and she hadn't forgotten it. Her years at the Academy had been difficult times emotionally, and Rachel had nearly washed out more than once. It had been Uhura's delicate tutorage that had kept her not only on course, but on the straight and narrow as well. Even so, it had surprised Rachel to no end yesterday when Admiral Chekov indicated that the Commandant had perhaps been instrumental in this transfer.

"Through here," the young girl nodded and then padded away. Rachel thanked her with a whisper and crept slowly into a

darkened sitting room that was plush and carpeted and warm. It had only one expansive floor-to-ceiling window that looked out into a smaller docking bay, though 'smaller' was a relative term inside the belly of this twirling beast. She did not see them at first, as her eyes adjusted, the two sisters glimmering there under the soft light, but as her mind processed, her mouth fell open. Two massive skeletons sat side-by-side, mostly clad with silvery skin, lit from within with the otherworldly fires of dozens of plasma welders flashing in the dark. Breathless, Rachel pressed her forehead and fingertips against the alumglass and stood mesmerized, not even startled by the suddenness of a quiet voice from somewhere behind her.

"Zee vun on da left I have taken zertain liberteez to name zee *Zhukov*, after Russian General Georgy Zhukov... you know uv him?" Chekov queried with a straight grin.

Rachel merely shrugged. "And the one on the right?" she whispered, her breath fogging up the glass. She felt strangely drawn to it somehow, like it was calling to her across the vacuum of the bay and through the heavy glass that separated them. It was a connection as instant and as sure as anything she had ever felt before in her life.

"Zadly, az of yet, it remainz known az nothing more zan zimply Hull Number Vun-Oh-Four," Chekov replied wistfully. "Do you have any namez in mind?"

"Oh, a few," Rachel laughed before turning finally to face the Commander-in-Chief with a giddy grin that betrayed her youth. He offered her a kind smile in return and let her have a few more moments to stare out the glass as the tiny worker bees skitted ever here and abouts with new components to be welded into place.

"Zee *Starship Horatio* iz out on her zpace trialz in orbit of Trill," Chekov offered in an attempt to break her trance, yet still she looked outward. "Her power tranzver conduits are pervorming admirably now vit da data vee gleaned from yer tezt."

Rachel turned suddenly and glowered at him, forgetting for an instant that he was the supreme head of Starfleet Command, second only to the President. "That was a cruel trick, by the way," she half-scolded, half-pouted.

Chekov merely tilted his head and offered her his characteristic half-shrug.

"Why am I here, Admiral?" she demanded now, her youthful defiance getting the best of her; something her mother always said would be her undoing. *Perhaps I've just undone it*, she thought ruefully now, and her scowling features softened ever so slightly. There was no way they would put her in command of the 104, so why tease her with this sideshow? Rachel Garrett was not one to sit just idly around.

Her stubborn stance cooled a little as tall, aged Vulcan strode into the room and glowered at her with upswept eyebrows and vaguely Asian features. This was not a man that took a shine to the emotional fits of women and Rachel stood immediately at attention. "Commander Rachel Garrett, may I present General Seti, Chief of Federation Defense and Zecurity."

Rachel's head swirled. She now shared the room with two of the most powerful men in the galaxy. This went far beyond the 104 now, and she instantly let it go, humbled that her career was apparently being directed at this point from the highest levels of the Federation hierarchy, Uhura included. She half expected the President himself to walk into the room next and she steeled herself against the prospect. She suddenly felt very meek indeed and clammy all over in this hot and stuffy little room. This had now become the most serious meeting of her career, if not her life, and she swallowed hard in a dry throat.

Even as she thought of the President, another man strolled into the room instead and startled her with his toothy grin. The triad was now complete; Rachel knew him to be Commodore Alan Stillwell, in command of the entire Tenth Fleet... including the Galatea Space Center itself, and all the many light-years of space in between. He rubbed his hands together and continued to grin as General Seti cast him a withering stare, pointedly served with one raised, upswept eyebrow, and a schoolmarm reproach that apparently did little to dissuade the Commodore from his cheeky impudence.

"Soooo, what did I miss?" rolled off Stillwell's tongue, causing the General to roll his eyes and sigh.

Chekov's chest heaved in silent laughter as Rachel stood nonplussed, back to the alumglass, and most unsure as to where to turn. *Ugh*, she twitched, *I knew it... I'm to be nothing more than a lowly adjutant after all!* She stared at Stillwell and wondered what

sort of man he was. Certainly not a Hawk... or gods, please, not a *Jameson*... perish the thought!

"Commander Garrett," Seti spoke at last, in a voice deeper than she would've imagined, "are you aware of a group called the *Gladius Iacobi*?" He stared at her with that same schoolmarm reproach; only with an added intensity that bordered on recrimination.

"Hmmm," she mused after a pause, "the *Sword of James*..."

"Ah, wary good," Chekov acknowledged, "you are up on yer Latin."

Rachel screwed up her face in a sort of half-grin, coupled with a quizzical frown, that convinced the General almost instantly of her non-culpability. "My grandfather studied it," she offered up in response. She directed her next question towards Seti, more interested in what this was all about than she was in the Latin. "Who are they?"

"Known more simply as the *Iacobi*," the Vulcan sighed again, "they are a fringe revolutionary group operating in the Federation borderlands along the Klingon frontier."

"And their *modus operandi*?" Rachel half-smirked in the direction of Admiral Chekov.

"It would appear," Chekov intoned warily, not returning her smile, "dat day are driven by a quasi-religious fanaticism zparked by zee life..."

"...and the *death*," Stillwell added drolly.

"...uv James T. Kirk." Chekov paced up to the alumglass beside Rachel and stared out through the pages of history to an age long since passed. Her heart for a moment went out to him... he had been there she now realized, the day Kirk was killed aboard the *Enterprise-B*. She herself had been just an infant of course, but she had heard the stories, nonetheless, grown up with the legends, and knew intuitively that half the galaxy went nuts on the day that man died.

Fringe groups sprang up everywhere, conspiracy theories spread like pandemics that threatened to topple entire governments, and the once-steady foundations of Starfleet had been shaken right down to their very core. It even rippled through the Klingon Empire like waves on a stormy sea. Millions of lives had

changed forever on that day, none more so than this man standing right here beside to her now.

Chekov turned neck and shoulders together to examine her with glistening eyes.

"It's been thirty years, General," Rachel whispered, "surely this insanity has subsided by now?" Her eyes turned briefly from Chekov to focus intently on Seti.

"Not all of it, Commander," the General replied solemnly.

"So, what does this have to do with me?" she asked honestly.

"We believe these insurgents may be operating aboard this starbase, perhaps even within the *Ambassador*-class project itself."

Frustrated with the Vulcan's persistent ambiguity, Rachel directed her gaze back to Chekov. "To what end, Admiral?" she half-pleaded, "what are their goals... what are they hoping to achieve?"

"That's what we want you to find out," Stillwell said with a smartass grin.

General Seti fairly groaned, which was saying something for a Vulcan.

For the first time since the mention of Kirk, Chekov's chest again heaved in silent laughter as he brought a hand up to his chin and faced back out the alumglass.

*Boy*, Rachel thought with a smirk, *these three amigos must be quite the life of any party*. She too turned to look out the glass at the two sisters taking shape under the glimmering lights. Noticed for the first time that the Bridge modules had not yet been installed – still, the massive warp engines themselves had the appearance of being at least largely complete. As with any shipyard construction project, the *Zhukov* looked to be slightly ahead of her younger sister – the *104* – the number was growing on Rachel as a name all in itself. But what would an insurgent group want with a half-finished starship?! What her youthful naivete failed to realize however, was that sometimes it was not as much the *thing* itself that mattered, but the *idea* of a thing that could be of true significance.

"Your assignment, Commander," Seti now spoke gruffly, almost as if reading her thoughts, "is to attempt to infiltrate this group and report back to me as the situation dictates."

"And Commander Stadi?" Rachel felt her face flush again, still wondered what it was that kept drawing her closer to him... and



just what exactly was making her such an advocate for his wellbeing? She was surprised that Spencer's meteoric promotion to Lieutenant Commander had been approved. She'd certainly gone out on a limb on that one!

"It is fortuitous perhaps that you should choose a Betazoid as your companion," Seti replied most logically, eyeing her speculatively. "Make use of this man's *unique* abilities, Commander, I surmise he will be of great use to you before the end..."

"I am placing you in command," Chekov continued, "uv da *Vun-Oh-Four's* engineering teamz, under da ruze dat de power tranzver conduitz require yer zpezial attention. Ve have reazon to believe dat de inzurgency iz centered dare."

"Do they actually *require* my special attention?" Rachel laughed openly now, in spite of her lingering resentment towards 'zee tezt'.

"We have allowed that falsehood to perpetuate for some time now," Seti answered, "as a prelude to your insertion."

"So, my Commander's Test aboard the *Ambassador*..."

"...served two purposes," Stillwell finished for her, "to promote you, and to preserve the lie." He then explained: "There is a deep-seated computer program embedded within the control software of all four ships," he winked, "courtesy of our own resident computer expert, Lieutenant Skyl."

"Ah," was all Rachel was able to mutter. She was humbled by the time and the level of command presence involved in this operation. These wheels had to have been set in motion months (if not *years*) ago, and she wondered if her role in all this had been mapped out from the very beginning... or if she was just now becoming a new pawn to be placed at a whim upon the board. She dared not ask, wasn't sure she even wanted to know. Clandestine operations scared her... something else she dared not share! They had a funny way of having a beginning but no endpoint; and it was way too easy to get caught up in the intricacies of the plot, like a puppy chasing its tail, until all truth was lost in the shadows of intrigue. She would have to be careful; perhaps use Spencer as her anchor to reality.

"You will report to Lieutenant Skyl aboard the One-oh-four at the start of Beta-shift," Seti ordered, startling her from her reverie.

"Perpetuate the lie, Commander," he said sternly, "use Stadi to your advantage."

"But perhapz," Chekov mused in counterpoint, hand still cradling chin, "do not nezezzarily acknowledge your affiliation to him... maybe let da ting play out from different zides?" he then suggested with a palm up in the air.

Rachel nodded, the wheels slowly beginning to turn. *The shadows of intrigue indeed!* She caught herself already getting sucked into this and found it wholly unnerving. She would have to be *very* careful.

"And remember this, Commander, perhaps it's not a matter of *when* they will strike, but more the fact that they *can* strike," Stillwell served up in conclusion, unsettling her further. His demeanor had changed so completely from but a few moments ago that she could do naught but take him seriously. "The *Ambassador*-class project," he continued, "is a highly sensitive, highly classified step forward in Starfleet's defense strategy. Whatever their motives may be, plans for the *Ambassador* must not fall into the wrong hands. You understand me?" The latter was a statement more than a question, and Rachel nodded solemnly.

In silence, General Seti turned and left the room. Commodore Stillwell tilted his head downward once, then also passed silently out of the room. For his part, Chekov crossed his arms and faced once more out the alumglass and stared again at the twin sisters slowly taking shape in the deep expanse of the bay. Just in the time that it took them to have this brief meeting, his keen eyes could already see subtle changes. A beam there, another giant sheet of skin there, another huge, compartmentalized module slowly being lowered into place within the *Zhukov's* honeycombed interior; all this assisted of course by the weightlessness of zero-g. Like the Legos of his youth, Chekov watched these great new ships steadily snapping together one colorful piece at a time. Soon the *Zhukov* would join her two older sisters out in the dark, the 104 not too long after that.

"There are some secrets that not even the cold dark earth can keep buried," Rachel mused quietly next to him.

"Hmmm?" Chekov hummed, turning neck and shoulders together.

"A warning my grandfather once gave me," she murmured, fogging up the glass. "The truth shall seek you out."

"Perhapz," he whispered, then turned and was gone. Rachel continued to stare wistfully out at the 104. *Command of the engineering teams...* it was a start she supposed.

Just under five hours later, after a light lunch, Rachel Garrett clanked heavily down the gangway towards the airlock to the 104. The size of these ships became even more apparent from this angle as she glanced out the passing windows. The gangway connected itself to the thick neck between the bulbous engineering section and the circular primary hull rising far above her. She had decided to board before the shift change so that she could enjoy this quiet moment by herself. She wondered briefly about Spencer Stadi – had not seen him since last night aboard the *Ambassador* – figured that he too had probably had a similar debriefing this morning about their new assignment.

Clandestine operations still bothered her. They seemed almost 'un-Starfleet' to her.

Had they not progressed in three hundred years to a maturity level that transcended the need for secrecy and deceit? *Apparently not*, Rachel concluded. The Khitomer Accords had established a peace with the Klingons that the Federation had not enjoyed nearly since its inception. It had fostered a Golden Age that Rachel was fortunate to be a part of. But there were still those, Klingon and human alike, that sought to challenge the very tenets of that peace. It was impossible, it seemed, to satisfy everyone, even in the future. It frustrated her beyond belief that she had no clue whatsoever what the motives of this *Gladius Iacobi* might be. The *Sword of James...* even the name carried a thick air of dread.

With that, Rachel arrived at the edge of the great ship, and in a ritual that she had over the years slowly fashioned into a sort of tradition, she patted the thick hull plating adjacent to the airlock with the palm of her hand. It was perhaps a blessing, and a thank you at the same time; but it also made her feel connected to this *thing* that would hopefully keep her alive in the deepest darkest reaches of deep space, lightyears from any safe port.

The thick doors parted with a blast of cooler air, and Rachel took that first step aboard. She strangely felt like she was coming

home, but quickly banished the thought. She knew intuitively that this was only a temporary assignment – who could guess where the brass would send her next. The doors closed behind her, and the next set blasted her with another cool breath of air.

As Rachel made her way forward, she found the corridors and passages of the 104 to be much like the *Ambassador* – light and airy, and conveying no sense that you were in fact entombed within the honeycombed interior of a massive starship. Starfleet had learned their lessons well when it came to the psychological comfort of a crew trapped inside this tiny tin bubble of air for missions that could span years. One of the glaring differences she noticed right off however, was that some of the corridors she expected to traverse were sealed off instead with massive bulkhead doors, and it was only with some extended thought that she realized that this was after all a ship still under construction. Behind those varied doors was nothing but the skeletal framework and the empty vacuum of space. Despite the appearance of being largely complete, many modules had not yet been installed; and indeed, would not be installed until well after the planned two-year shakedown cruise where the 104 would undergo her rigorous deep-space trials. This compartmentalized design had served Starfleet well and would allow module swap outs for decades to come that would keep the 104 alive, perhaps even into the next century.

At last, she reached Main Engineering, later than she hoped, just as Beta shift was flurrying in to relieve those weary souls that had been on duty since 0700.

Unlike most Starfleet operations, construction of the *Ambassadors* had been a 24-hour undertaking, partly because of early delays (Rachel had since learned) in the approval and design process. Not only had Starfleet Research and Development pushed the envelope on size, but they had also raised the bar on defensive weaponry and warp engine supremacy. Some in the early stages had questioned the need for such a massive undertaking in an era of unprecedented peace, and Rachel too had to wonder, but as the Federation grew ever outwards into the farthest reaches of deep space, the distances traveled on exploratory missions had grown exponentially. The ever-present psychologists had begun to warn the brass with ever-increasing frequency of the need for larger

ships to confront the most basic problems of spaceflight... boredom and cabin fever.

Despite her rank, Rachel for a moment felt out of place here as Beta-shift slowly fell into their day-to-day routine. She recognized no-one and felt strangely awkward now about the idea of just stepping in and taking over. Other than the power transfer conduits that were pretty basic to any ship, she was grossly behind in both the knowledge and the operation of this brand-new class. She could've used more time to study, but apparently Chekov and Seti felt that time was no longer their ally. Sucking in a huge breath of air, she puffed out her chest and decided to just dive right in headfirst, marching authoritatively into the chief engineer's office. Her chest deflated into a sigh of relief at the sight of Lieutenant Skyl.

"Commander Rachel Garrett reporting as ordered, Sir," Rachel announced and everyone in the small office paused.

Skyl seemed rather nonplussed at first, then turned finally from his work to acknowledge her. Despite rank, he was in command here, and she would not tread on that until he accepted the transfer orders from Commodore Stillwell. She began to wonder for a moment if the lieutenant was even so inclined to do so, but finally he spoke. She listened intently for a tone of disappointment in the Vulcan's voice, but came up empty-handed – perhaps he too was in on the 'operation'? *Possibly*. She thought it highly unlikely that he could be in collusion with these so-called insurgents, that would seem to go against his very nature, but she had no way of knowing! She recalled that Lt. Valeris had conspired with the Klingons aboard the *Enterprise-A*, and very nearly derailed the Khitomer Accords before they even had a chance to get off the ground. *Stranger things...* Rachel mused.

"Commander Garrett," Skyl acknowledged. "I have received the transfer of command orders from Commodore Stillwell." He tilted his head towards the ceiling. "Computer," he called out, "transfer command to Commander Rachel Garrett, authorization Skyl-one-four-one-alpha-omega."

*Leave it to the Vulcans*, Rachel thought, *no pomp, and certainly no circumstance with these people!* She was still trying to gauge the tone of his voice as the computer acknowledged him. Was he hurt? Surprised? An insurgent? A secret ally? She

remembered during 'zee tezt' how Skyl had even managed to fool Spencer, and *he* was an adept telepath! Rachel was really beginning to wonder what she was even doing here. She didn't know the first thing about being a spy! The closest she had ever come to a clandestine operation was playing hide-and-go-seek!

Skyl nodded to her once, then spoke plainly: "I stand relieved, Commander." And Rachel caught her breath, fought a growing panic, began to wonder just where in the hell she was supposed to start. And where the hell was Spencer?! She needed him goddam it!

"Thank you, Lieutenant," she gulped. "I welcome any assistance you can provide as I transition into this new role." As Rachel looked around the small office, and then in turn around the rest of Engineering, she realized everyone was staring intently at her. Even despite their Starfleet training, an unexpected transfer of command could still breed contempt and resentment amongst a seasoned crew if not handled carefully. She wondered about giving some kind of motivational speech but decided against it. Like her grandfather, she was a doer, not a talker, so decided it best to just throw herself right into it.

"Alright, Rachel announced, "let's get to it shall we?" and she offered the group a warm smile as she strode out of the small office and walked up to the tabletop master display console. "I'm sure by now many of you are aware of my near-disastrous attempt aboard the *Ambassador* to correct the imbalance in the power transfer conduits." She was happy to hear a round of laughter encapsulate the room, even if it *was* at her expense.

*Perpetuate the lie.* "Let's look at the data and see if we can pick this thing apart, okay?" On her command, those nearest gathered around the console, and the others went about their work. *Good, she thought, I might just win them over yet before I get them all killed.*

As the data collated, she looked up to survey their faces, perhaps learn a few names. One person in particular caught her attention, and she studied his features carefully. With a start that she was barely able to conceal, Rachel realized suddenly that it was Spencer Stadi! He had been fitted with special contacts to change his colorless ebony eyes to a subtle shade of blue, and his dark hair had been lightened to a sandy blonde. All traces of his

Betazoid/telepathic heritage had been erased, and she had yet another, even deeper sense of just how seriously Seti and Chekov were taking this operation.

“Do I know you Lieutenant Commander...?”

“Jake Spencer, Ma’am, and no, I don’t believe we’ve ever met.” He smiled casually at her, and she nodded nonchalantly, moving on. Everyone else around the table seemed like ordinary average Starfleet officers to her. What an impossible task! How in the world could they ever hope to ferret out a group of insurgents that may or may not even be aboard?! She was grateful beyond belief that Spencer was once again by her side... perhaps together they could make some headway on a path that seemed littered with obstacles.

After a round of brief introductions, Rachel set them to work on a problem that was a complete fabrication all in itself. Perhaps some wondered at the strange smirk that covered her face, but none could know the laughter that was actually rolling around deep inside; save of course for one Lt. Commander ‘Jake Spencer’. Beneath his blue contacts, he too could sense the irony of it all.

Several hours later, much of the team in Engineering had rotated in and out of Rachel’s small group at the master display console and had ultimately left equally as frustrated. The imbalance in the 104’s power transfer conduits seemed particularly acute, and Rachel was exceedingly impressed at Lt. Skyl’s subtle computer wizardry. Every attempt to fix the imbalance was met with failure, and Rachel was doubly impressed with the proficiency of the officers she was working with here today. Starfleet Command had obviously dumped their top engineering minds into the *Ambassador*-class project. But as impressed as she was with the people, this did not compare to the awe she was now feeling towards the 104 itself. It was by far the most complex and ambitious starship project the Federation had ever undertaken, and each new tech manual she studied left her that much more amazed at the starship’s marvelous complexity.

Beta shift runs into a funny time of day, and Rachel caught herself yawning more than once in the waning hours of the evening. Sensing this, Spencer came up just as she was starting to feel a little hungry.

"Commander," he said with a warm smile, "a group of us are gonna go up and check out the Starboard Café in the primary hull... would you care to join us?" Rachel had to hide her smirk; Spencer had even altered his accent to reflect his new identity.

"Uh, yes Mister, er..." she stumbled, "yes Mister Spencer, I'd like that, thank you very much." She held back a laugh as she thought of the undercover nature of this operation and indeed, just how bad she was at it. While Starfleet may have assembled the best engineering minds for the project itself, they certainly had scraped the bottom of the barrel when it came to selecting an ideal secret agent for this hapless venture.

That point in particular still remained a lingering question in Rachel's mind as she moved towards the corridor with a small group of her colleagues... just why *had* they chosen her for this operation?! Certainly, there had to be more seasoned or better trained officers out there that could excel in this sort of thing, and she wouldn't even make the list! As the small group boarded the lift, she simply couldn't help herself, and spoke with a youthful cheekiness that her mother also said would be her undoing someday.

"Sooo, Commander Spencer," she said casually, "I swear I've seen you somewhere before... where are you from originally?"

"I was born on Luna, Ma'am," Spencer replied cordially.

"Oooo, a Lunar Schooner," someone in the back of the lift chanted, and everyone laughed. Even though she knew better, Rachel nevertheless pressed further.

"Nope, that's not it..." she mused, "maybe we served on a ship together?"

"I did do a tour on the *Rutledge*?" Stadi replied.

Rachel looked deep into Spencer's eyes at this point and sensed immediately that everything he was saying was all part of a complex cover story. *When the hell did they have time to do that?!* She even bet that if she looked up Lieutenant Commander Jake Spencer in the Starfleet database, she would find a complete biography for this fictional man that was standing right here before her now. *Perhaps it's time I take this a little more seriously,* she thought. General Seti had obviously gone to great lengths to make this ruse work, and she guessed she'd better start towing the line, lest she blow months of careful planning. A moments' awkward



silence followed that was fortunately broken by the lift's sudden stop. The group had traveled upwards the equivalent of nineteen stories in a matter of moments and Rachel was again awestruck.

They all filed out and turned to the right, laughing and joking as they went. In just a few more moments, however, Rachel was again struck dumb at the complexity of this most remarkable starship.

The Starboard Café turned out to be a luxurious lounge on the right-side rim of the circular saucer section. It was graced with massive elliptical windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, a full three decks from top to bottom. Numerous potted shrubs and bushes encircled the first level, while long-flowering plants cascaded over the edges of the terraced second and third tiers, giving the entire place a hanging-gardens-like appearance. It had been designed as a place for off duty personnel to come and relax after their shift, and to socialize with their fellow crewmates.

Although the lounge was open to everyone, it was already somewhat of an unwritten rule that the third tier was to be mainly reserved for the senior staff and other members of the elite Bridge crew. But, as the 104 didn't even have a Bridge yet, Rachel and her group landed here without compunction. Still struggling with a hint of vertigo, she approached the railing only cautiously, and gazed with some trepidation over the edge. She never thought herself much afraid of heights, but still, thirty plus feet is thirty feet, and it was a long way down; especially when Rachel had become so accustomed to the compartmentalized nature of life aboard a starship.

Outside the expansive windows she could see the twinkling lights of hundreds of viewports that looked out into the bay and upon the 104 itself. Rachel imagined that one of those tiny windows must be the small lounge that she'd sat in just a few short hours ago.

She couldn't help but marvel at this point at the complexity of life.

It was that age-old irony: some days were spent doing absolutely nothing... but rarely, on days such as these, so many sights and sounds can fill your mind that you begin to wonder if you'll ever be able to process it all. She thought briefly of the *Falcon*, and Jameson, and the rest of her former crew, sailing those

dark waters out there all alone, endlessly searching in vain for something to cling to. All those endless days at warp crossing the vast expanse, and she began to get a sense of just how important a ship like this was. The *Ambassador*-class project wasn't just about countering the Romulan threat, it was about the comfort of the people within her. And how could one not be comfortable in a lounge of this resplendence? Rachel quickly decided that she wouldn't trade this for anything. The 104 would be hers, she was determined now, let no man shadow her resolve.

For a little over a half-hour, the engineering team ate, drank, and were merry, until their mid-shift break was about over. Rachel hadn't laughed this hard in months, and she enjoyed challenging Spencer in his undercover role perhaps a little more than she should, but she was convinced now that none of them in this group could be insurgents. They were all far too good-natured, far too easy-going, and by far some of the finest that Starfleet had to offer. Each time she exchanged a glance with Spencer, her heightened psi-region only reinforced what she was feeling. They would find no nefarious plot amongst this team. In fact, at times Rachel couldn't help but feel slightly out of her league with this group. They were personable yes, but also brilliant. The complexity of this ship was only eclipsed by the complexity of the minds that had conceived it. The Golden Age sat before her, and their legacy surrounded her.

With a soft whoosh, the doors to the lounge parted and several men in orange suits filed in. Someone at the table snickered, and another whispered: "*Here come the knuckle draggers!*"

Rachel perked up and studied them, with perhaps a little more respect than most. This was Gamma shift, the night crew, and Rachel admired them for everything they did. Her father had worked third shift for years, maintenance, and he too had earned very little respect from those, his 'betters', that were supposedly above him. But her dad had been brilliant too, in his own way, and could fix anything from a food replicator to a fusion initiator just by ingenuity alone. And he was well-read, perhaps more educated than even some of the people at this very table... but life was about choices, and her father was a humble man that did an honest day's

work in a humble job. And *why*, she'd asked him once... *because he loved it*.

The engineering team rose together just as Gamma shift were taking a seat at a nearby table. "Here a little early, ain't'cha boys?" a smart-aleck ensign sang out with a playful smile. Rachel could judge that similar banter had happened here before and was surprised when it was more good-natured than she expected. A little Starfleet training had fortunately bled out most of the meanness of workplace bullying; and probably the impressionable young ensign knew at least one of the 'boys' a little more than she should.

"Lots to do tonight, Marlena," one of the men sang out, "somebody's gotta clean up that mess you brainiacs made of the engines. Figured we better get an early start..."

Everyone laughed, and Rachel couldn't help but smirk – she had no doubt in her mind that if anyone in this room could solve the engine imbalance, it would most likely be one of these so-called knuckle-draggers. If the undercover nature of this operation wasn't so serious, Rachel might've even proposed the challenge.

"Just as long as you stay out of our way," Marlena returned the jibe, offering the group a cheeky smile. "See ya later, Hal," she called out in parting, and Rachel couldn't quite tell if it was just cordiality, or more of a promise; we all know the type, and this cheeky young ensign was certainly the type.

Rachel was about to follow her own group out into the corridor when something caught her up short... *Hal*? Now that was a name she certainly hadn't heard in a very long time. And there was something about the voice too... it was deep and melodic, and its smooth resonance roused memories inside her skull that had long lain dormant. Year One, Starfleet Academy. Commander Rachel Garrett had been a cheeky young ensign too once, and before that, she'd been an even more precocious young cadet. *My God*, "Henry Kenzie," she said aloud, but only loud enough that Spencer Stadi heard her.

"Commander?" he said softly.

"Go on ahead without me, *Jake*," she said just loud enough for a couple others to hear, then in her mind: *Cover for me, please*. Spencer nodded, then looked back into the room at the group of men, zeroed in on their apparent leader, this Hal. His telepathic

mind reached out, but surprisingly was stopped dead in its tracks. Blocked.

Jealously? *Perhaps*. But there was something more... he wanted to whisper a warning to Rachel – *be careful* – but she had already turned away from him and was heading back inside. This Hal wasn't the same man she'd known back at the Academy.

He'd changed. But the heart doesn't always recognize panic in all its subtleties, and Spencer took his misgivings instead as a logical anxiety toward their new assignment.

*Gods, they've even changed my identity!* Already he'd discovered that there was something altogether thrilling and at once chilling about being an undercover agent. Were they in danger? Perhaps... and he knew intuitively that this was clouding his psi-awareness just enough to be distracting – plus some jealousy too, he supposed, which surprised him. He would have to keep that in check. The doors closed, blocking Rachel from his view, but he could still sense her stabilizing presence, nonetheless. And he could also sense that unfathomable force beyond, these, the first waves of rebellion... but for the moment these too remained obscured in the steely shadows withheld under a dark sea of discontent.

"Hal, my God, is it really you?" Rachel's youth once again got the better of her as she charged back into the room with a school-girl giddiness that betrayed her. Her face was simply beaming, her cheeks slightly flushed with the imprecise memories of a lost love from days long since passed. She reached the table in an instant and stopped at its edge, her chest thrust outward in a prominent display of her feminine attributes.

"Rachel, you can't be here," he said in a half-whisper, his eyes blinking in shocked disbelief. But Rachel, in all her blinded naiveté, mistook his rection as genuine surprise... rather than the warning that it actually was. She *was* in danger. He looked uncomfortably down at his colleagues for an instant before returning his gaze to her soft almond eyes. His own were an emerald green, flecked with yellow, and rare in the modern age, which was perhaps why Rachel always found herself so lost in them. Their love tryst had been the stuff of legends during her first year at the Academy... it had been

during Rachel's 'naughty girl' phase, when she'd finally broken out into the world from a broken home.

Home. What is in a word? Nothing had ever felt emptier to her than her childhood home after her brother died. It was almost as if some great force had simply sucked the life right out of it. There'd been a hollowness in that house too, as a family trying to cope with grief slowly fractured like a field of ice in a springtime thaw. Her father became absorbed in his work; left earlier, stayed later, almost as if being away was easier. Her mother became eccentric, unpredictable, disjointed; almost as if her mind had decided that detached was better. Even her beloved grandfather settled into a pattern of pensiveness that was not always approachable. Rachel spent much of her time alone, slowly letting the scar tissue bandage over what she'd done.

They had been warned to stay away from the river that day (it had not reached such a frenzied state since the Great Flood of '72) but still she persisted, and at last he followed. They'd been out playing all day, and she'd become annoyed with him she supposed, as siblings so often do. We all make mistakes, we all do things that we later regret, but sometimes the reasons for these things can become clouded by the persistent drag of time.

A family was destroyed, and Rachel started running. Maybe she never stopped. Starfleet took her away from all that hurt and pain as she ran far out into space, far away from that empty house, and as far away from the growl of that river as she could get. But at night sometimes she could still hear its rushing in her ears, she could still hear its almighty roar as it swallowed her brother whole. The pain lessens, memory fades, but the scars will always remain. The persistent drag of time... it pulls like a dark river under the ice.

Consequences; another word. A certain level of shock reverberated throughout the whole of that big, old hollow house the day Rachel announced she was joining Starfleet. Her mother went into one of her usual unpredictable fits, shouting from room to room, her detached disjointed thoughts switching subjects almost as quickly as she crossed thresholds. Sometimes she mumbled, sometimes she wailed, the makeup running down her face in thick black rivulets. Her father sat twitching at the kitchen table, sucking down great black gulps of bitter coffee and puffing

away at contraband Rigellian cigarettes. Little was said as those last threads of her family were slowly pulled apart.

Her grandfather became even more pensive than usual that afternoon, leaving Rachel once more all alone. Finally, she went for a walk, down to the river, and stood on the bank where her brother had gone in. She found herself suddenly hating him, and to this day this still filled her with a profound anguish. In fear, she fled – from the river, from New York, from Earth – and sometimes she really had to wonder if she'd ever truly stopped running since.

In her first year at the Academy, Hal Kenzie filled all this emptiness and more – and for a time perhaps, she did stop running... but only for a time. School-girl giddiness and blind naiveté can cloud the judgement of any young woman at a crossroads. Late-night parties, skipping classes – off-world chemicals to fog the brain – a legendary love tryst in every sense of the word, right down to the disciplinary actions. But buried beneath the covers, there was something hidden too.

Growth. They were on disparate career paths, he only enlisted, she officer in training. As the core of what Starfleet had to offer slowly began to sink in, Rachel became increasingly troubled by the vector she'd chosen. She also became increasingly troubled by the tangent *he* had chosen. The *hidden* began to grow inside him instead. The parties became secret meetings, and as their love morphed into anger, he began to mistreat her... especially when her views no longer meshed with his. His path became twisted, the direction ahead unclear, and Rachel could no longer follow. **He** became twisted, and so she ran, once again in fear, letting the imprecise memories fade.

Hal Kenzie and her 'naughty girl' phase had had a profound effect on Rachel. The disciplinary actions began to catch up with her, and they eventually caught the attention of Commandant Nyota Uhura. Rachel was put on probation, her career path threatened – it was either washout, or get her shit together. She spent much of that following Spring alone, slowly letting the scar tissue bandage over what she'd done. Her subsequent time at the Academy was spent catching up, and this time Commandant Uhura took notice.

Halfway through her senior year she was given a provisional posting aboard the *USS Hathaway*. Her visits to Earth became more

and more infrequent – an excuse perhaps, but also part of life in the service. Eventually the great house burned to the ground (a victim of her mother's unpredictability?) and over time her mother slowly withered away in an asylum. Her father, for his part, broken, relocated to Rigel X and died suddenly of a pulmonary embolism not many years later. Only her beloved grandfather remained, and she spoke to him only rarely. A family destroyed, and only the scars remain.

This was the woman Henry Kenzie had in some ways helped to create. As she stood before him now, his devious mind began immediately to capitalize on this. He was only enlisted, she an officer. She could be *used*. He looked casually down at his colleagues for an instant before returning his gaze to her soft almond eyes.

This wasn't the same man she'd known back at the Academy. He'd changed. He smiled, and she, she in all her blinded naiveté could not sense that unfathomable force beyond; the first waves of rebellion. Rachel had found the insurgents at last, but for the moment these too remained obscured in the steely shadows, submerged under a dark sea of discordant feelings, and clouded by the unforgiving giddiness of schoolgirl uncertainty. Vladimir Henry Kenzie had truly become a wonder of wickedness, an aberration of evil, a human dragon, a being so unthinkable that Rachel's wildest imagination could never hope to conjure up such a devious and dangerous monster. He was a level of evil that hadn't been encountered for generations, and he was about to unleash himself upon the very core of the United Federation of Planets, and indeed, on the very foundations of Starfleet itself.

# |4|

They talked long into the night, well after her shift was over and long into the start of his. He was as charming as ever, if not more, and she was immediately enamored with him all over again, just like the unformed adult she'd been way back in those first years at the Academy. It filled her with a giddiness that she hadn't experienced for a long while aboard Jameson's somber ship, and she was unaccustomed to the long-forgotten feelings that were quickly welling up from deep inside. Like a desert flower swallowing up those first few drops of springtime rain, Rachel was blossoming before him now with all of the sexual energy inherent to her youth. And Hal Kenzie was taking full advantage of it. He'd always had a certain and strange power over her, a mesmerizing allure that defied sensibility, and he'd always capitalized somehow on that dark side that she, and even the best of *us*, harbor deep inside.

After a few moments' idle and awkward chatter, she finally slid into a chair and was introduced, one by one, to his amiable comrades. They, perhaps, were as equally enamored with Hal's mesmerizing allure, and Rachel was very swiftly caught up along with them in the currents and the eddies of his mighty river. At once she became just another tributary to be swallowed up by the whole, a stream of no grand significance in the massive watershed that was Vladimir Kenzie's vision not only of himself, but of the larger universe that circled around him. When he talked, people were drawn into the flow, and to swim against this current was as futile as a fight against oxygen. They needed him, *she* needed him, as if his breath was the only thing left in an airlock punctured full of holes. And as the air he controlled seeped out, each gasp of him became all that more precious.

They were all enlisted men, unequal in rank and various in age. The orange jumpsuits they wore had earned them the eponym "knuckle draggers", though they really didn't deserve the lowly



standing that this implied. Each of them was as brilliant as any officer aboard the 104, they simply had chosen a different career path. Choices are made for various reasons, and the operators are just as important as the implementors, the streams of their lives had just taken them there by a different course.

To Rachel's right sat Yuri Antonov, a slight little man of blonde hair and soft features. He carried himself within a beaten-down frame that looked out at the world with eyes that darted. He and his bunkmate Sergey were barely twenty-one years old, and were so fresh out of RTC that their sheets were still crisp.

Sergey Rozhenko, for his part, was a robust man of deep European stock with a barrel chest and a pronounced Russian accent. His sly grin implied a simpleness that was but a soft cover for the deep-thinking man that lay beneath. Contrary to Starfleet protocol, his face supported a thick black beard that sat well on his high cheek bones and round face. Rachel wondered at it as his broad hand enveloped hers with a strength that was both threatening and soft at the same time. She immediately liked him; he was an honest and hardworking man, and this was readily apparent just by the way he carried himself. After grasping her hand, he ran his solid fingers through his heavy hair, eyes twinkling.

To Hal Kenzie's right, on the other hand, sat a man that was more than just a shade darker. His projected disposition was far less amiable, and his scowling brow was filled with both menace and a deep-seeded suspicion. It was clear he did not like outsiders, however serious Hal's past relationship with Rachel might have been. Boris Rhotemious was tall, more than six feet, and skinny as a rail. The thinness in his face coupled with overlarge squarish teeth gave him the sallow features of a wolf, with piercing eyes and a slight prick to the ears that suggested a taste of Vulcan blood many generations past; and Rachel immediately perceived that this irked the man in ways both subtle and mean. Whereas her heart went out to Yuri for his slight frame, and to Sergey for the robust strength of his character, Rhotemious filled her instead with the deep and instinctual feelings of a rabbit cowering down in the rain-soaked dark of a wide-open meadow. The eyes exposed her vulnerability, while the jowls tore at her mortality. Rachel held back a shudder, then smiled warmly at the others.

History would remember these men as The Big Four from Turkana IV, but for now they were nothing more than enlisted members of the gamma shift, Construction Team 9, Technical Group 7, currently assigned to Hull Number 104 of the *Ambassador*-class Starship Development Project. Nonetheless, at various points over the past ten years, they had each mustered from the city and district of New Moscow, on the Federation border world of Turkana IV. The colony itself was one hundred and sixty years old, one of the oldest – older even than the Federation. Reluctantly, these early pioneers had left their homeland – had left Earth – to find a new home that was far out of the reach of a bloated world government. They had fled a growing plague that threatened their entire culture, their very identity. What they fled was globalization, and something they called Americanization... but most of all, they fled the coming of the United Federation of Planets.

Eventually, the colonists settled on a backwater out-of-the-way world and began in freedom to build there a beautiful new city. They named it New Moscow to honor their homeland, and for nearly one hundred years it thrived with very little outside influence, until that is, the growing United Federation of Planets and the expanding Klingon Empire inevitably, and at long last, collided on their very doorstep. A human colony, Turkana IV was immediately annexed and reclassified as “a border world”, and it at once found itself caught up in a power struggle between two great superpowers. Like the Poland of deep space, Turkana fought to maintain its own identity against the tides of this broiling conflict, while at the same time maintaining, across a ‘neutral zone’, the thriving trade that had existed for generations with a species that were now declared their ‘enemy’.

The advent of the Khitomer Peace Accords only served to further complicate relations between Turkana and their Federation/Klingon neighbors. The waters became muddied as tariffs and border regulations became even more convoluted than they’d been before the dissolution of the Neutral Zone. The once united government of Turkana became heavily factionalized, and eventually broke into two strong political parties; all those pro-treaty became known as the Coalition, all those anti-treaty, the Alliance... but a little-known splinter group had only just recently exploded itself upon the scene.

The *Gladius Iacobi* purported a new course of action... *Independence*... not only for Turkana, but for all of the border worlds, Federation and Klingon alike. Many of the residents of these worlds not pleased with the stipulations of the Khitomer Accords were jumping onboard in droves, and it was making Starfleet Command understandably jittery. With two great slices, the *Sword of James* would cleave the border midriff, and in one fell swoop create a new union *independent* of the bloated governments of their two adjoining superpowers.

"Oh, Hal," Rachel laughed, "even after all these years you're still talking of your little independence movement?" She giggled and grinned as he smiled at her both coolly and demurely. Ten years ago, her cheeky flippant remarks would've sparked a firestorm of anger, but Vladimir Kenzie had learned to channel this primeval passion. Yuri gurgled a sympathetic and awkward chuckle as Sergey chortled in a deep and barrel-chested rumble.

Boris Rhotemious on the other hand fairly snarled. "Beta Lankal, Gamma Eridon," he threw up a boney hand, "Donatu, H'atoria," he growled, "Klingon worlds all prepared..." Hal cut him off with the simple act of placing a hand on his trembling forearm.

"Yes, I've heard it all before," Rachel still snickered, youth and giddiness clouding over the menace lurking beneath. "Archanis, Davlos Three, Dulisia..." she nodded and extended an open hand towards Boris, "...Turkana Four. The list hasn't changed," she snickered. "My ancestors fought for independence too, but surely in the twenty-fourth century we can achieve understanding without such uncivil violence?"

"Our ancestors instead chose the route of *revolution*," Boris presaged, scowling at her with eyes that pierced. Rachel missed the implication, still naively believing this to be nothing more than a decades-old philosophical discussion, instead of the real threat that it had become. Yuri shifted in his chair uncomfortably as Sergey still beamed. Insurgent or not, he wouldn't hurt a fly if the fly flew up his nose. Hal patted Boris's forearm once more and the man saddled sideways, leaning back in his chair with a defiant glare. Hal smiled softly, his infectious eyes softening the mood like an expert baker kneads bread.

"Perhaps you gentleman should report to Engineering while Rachel and I catch up." He molded the moment, making it more

intimate without immediately dismissing them – yet still implying it as an order, not a request. Yuri rose first, slightly bent like he had a bellyache; Sergey next, his barrel chest arching over the table. He smiled down at Rachel warmly as Boris jerked himself into an upright position with a barely concealed huff. Without looking at anyone he turned and marched out of the room, his lanky frame propelling him forward in earnest stabbing motions. For their part, Yuri and Sergey made cordial goodbyes and Rachel even grasped the latter man's strong hand one more time. As they passed through the doors, she gave a wry smile and tilted her head.

"They're certainly quite a crowd," she ticked.

"They serve me..."

Rachel stared at him quizzically, not understanding the intimation. "Interesting that you're all from Turkana Four," she mused.

"Birds of a feather..."

She laughed. "My God Hal, how have you been? I've missed you." She said this honestly, her heart reaching into the past, into the imprecise depths of memory.

"First Officer of the *Falcon*, you've done well."

"Jameson was a pig." She surprised herself. Officers didn't usually slam officers, especially in front of enlisted crewmen!

"I've watched your career..."

"Awe, ya big softie, you did miss me," Rachel laughed like a teenager and Hal couldn't help but mirror her giddiness. He fought back the urge to fall into the trap, keeping his focus instead on the end result. Her subconscious mind registered that he was looking through her instead of at her, but the heart sometimes clouds reality in a hazy mist of "coulda-woulda-shoulda-beens". She skipped over it, not willing to acknowledge that this Hal was not her Hal. The past clouds our judgement, for better or for worse.

"Do you remember that time at Farspace Starbase Earhart when that twerp ensign slipped in a pile of targ shit and fell in the gutter?" She laughed, then her conscience got the better of her. She wasn't the same person either. Her compassion had grown tenfold in those ten odd years since the Academy, and she felt embarrassed now for bringing it up.

"Ensign Skorra," Hal chuckled, then laughing, continued, "the little Vulcan fool almost swore."

"Skorra, yes! God, I haven't thought of him in years..."

"Killed in action," Hal said flatly, "stepped on a mine at Setlik Three."

"Oh..." Her heart broke and she felt the tears begin to well.

"Placed in command of the One-oh-four, eh?"

"Well, hardly," she grinned, face turning red.

"Tell me about the Commander's Test..."

"Can't, classified," and she giggled again like that teenager of ages past. She'd always loved the back-and-forth banter the two of them had mastered throughout the course of their steamy and stormy relationship. If nothing else, that's what she'd loved best, even towards the end when it started to turn angry.

"Well maybe you can finally straighten out those crooked PTC's the nimrods from Jupiter Station sent over."

"Ha, perhaps," she mused. "Seems to be a fleetwide problem?" she probed further, wondering how much he knew. *Perpetuate the lie...* those were her instructions. "What have your knuckle draggers uncovered? Anything I can use?" she asked demurely, twirling her hair and looking at him coyly.

"Only that they should've come from Antares," he said with a wink.

So, it continued until the chronometer on the wall said 23:47 – she'd missed the rest of her shift, and he was hopelessly late for his, but they didn't care. For the next half-hour they strolled aimlessly through corridors, some still blocked by the voids of empty space beyond the unfinished bulkheads. Rachel found it so unbelievably easy to fall back into step by his side that it scared her a little. They had been naughty together once, but now she was sensing a change. There was something more there that she couldn't quite put her finger on, and in love she missed the truth of the darkness that lay beneath the shadows. The imprecise memories were urging her in the direction of reconciliation. Perhaps in maturity their relationship could blossom in a new and more profound way? All love, after all, is based in hope, and hope was something that Rachel had always held in rare abundance. They arrived at last at a quiet, unassuming door and Rachel had to admit that she was completely lost... until she read the label: **Dk 07 | Rm 1806 Commanding Officer** "Wait, what?" she sputtered.

"Tradition," Hal stated slyly, "though I don't think Skyl was very happy to give them up," he added drolly.

"But my things," she protested.

"Can be transferred in the morning," he said with the soothing tones of a lioness.

"Hal, seriously, I can't..."

"Shhh-shhh-shhh," and he placed a finger on her lips. "You're tired, sleep here... me and the knuckle draggers down below will work on your little problem tonight... who knows, maybe we'll surprise ya..."

"I have no doubt of that," she half-laughed, then let out a lion's yawn. She *was* tired! She placed two balled up fists on her hips as a sign of one more silent protest for an honor she didn't feel was hers.

"If you'll unlock the computer, we'll probably have better luck," he said almost as an afterthought, his voice as soothing and as subtle as cough syrup. Somewhere far back in the deepest recesses of Rachel's mind an alarm went off, but she was too tired to acknowledge it. Still, her subconscious mind hesitated for the barest instant before he leaned forward and kissed her. It was soft and gentle, and little more than a peck, but still she melted. She was barely able to conceal the shudder that wracked her whole body and caused her entire nervous system to fire at once, directing all its energy towards her loins. "Computer, release command lockouts to Gunnery Sergeant Vladimir Kenzie..." In the back of her mind that persistent alarm continued to sound off and she added: "...for twelve hours only... authorization Garrett-one-one-four-seven-enable." She raised one scolding finger in front of his face. "You jelly-beans have twelve hours... *dazzle me.*"

With a wry and teasing smile Rachel took a step back and the doors parted with a quiet whoosh. Alluring eyes flashing him that same naughty look she'd given him a hundred times before, she backed up two more steps and the doors closed between them. The last thing she saw of his face was a devious smile that was utmost in its sly guile, but so strong was the perceived sexual energy between them that she mistook his Cheshire grin as a whisper of better things to come, a promise almost of a revisited passion that would burn down once and for all any and all past misconceptions

that their yearning desire for each other was not always meant to be, then or now or forever yet to come.

Rachel stared at those impenetrable doors for a few more moments before turning finally and pressing her head and back against the bulkhead, rolling her eyes to the darkened ceiling. He'd always managed somehow to exploit the deepest fires within her, and she hated it just as much now as then. But he was an addiction, a drug without an antidote, and the hope within her continued to fan the flames that maybe this time it would be different, that ten years of maturity on both their parts would somehow cause some kind of paramount shift in the orbits of their two independent worlds. *Oh, Rachel you fool*, she then thought, *you stupid little fool!* Up until now her career had been on the fast track, almost meteoric in fact... with a little help of course from some higher-ups. Why throw it all away now?!

She puffed out her lips, frustrated, surprised at how flushed she was. Unclasping the gold catch at her right shoulder, she ripped open her uniform top and began to survey the expansive quarters that spread out before her. Rooms of this size were only reserved for an admiral on smaller ships of the line, but this, this went above and beyond. Placing the captain's quarters on the leading edge of the saucer section was somewhat of a new concept unique to the *Ambassador*-class starship. Instead of being buried way down deep in the bowls of the primary hull, its positioning here gave broad sweeping views out into deep space and the onrushing of warp stars. She stepped forward slowly, almost solemnly, and looked out the centermost of a bank of large oval windows. The blueish haze of the construction bay bathed her face in soft light, and she let just the barest hint of a self-satisfied sort of smile pass over her face for the very first time since she'd taken command.

The door chime rang, and her heart skipped a beat. Once again, her entire nervous system fired at once, directing all its energy towards her loins. Catching her breath, she called out *Come in* as alluringly as possible, shocked at how ready she was for him to come charging into the room and take her right here, right now, on the carpet.

The doors parted and Spencer Stadi stuck his head into the dark. "May I come in, Commander? I know it's late..." In the dim

light Rachel flushed and hastily tried to button up her uniform jacket before finally saying, "The hell with it." Spencer was a full-blood telepath – she might just as well have been caught with her pants down, bent over the back of the couch. She sighed and he entered.

"Computer, lights to half," she called out.

"Phewwww!" Spencer whistled, taking a look around. "You should see my quarters," he moaned glibly. "I thought things were bad on the *Falcon*."

"Do you at least have a window?" she queried facetiously, taking her uniform jacket off once and for all and tossing it on a nearby sofa. Next, she ripped off the white turtleneck top beneath and tossed this, too, on the sofa. She was tired and it'd been a long day since the *Ambassador* had docked here just before dawn. In her sports bra now, she plopped down in a chair and kicked off her boots, looking at last at Spencer for the very first time. She was still caught somewhat unawares by his altered appearance; the bluish contacts and the sandy blonde hair made him look younger, almost boyish, and she was surprised to admit that she missed his colorless ebony eyes and dark hair. Her emotions were now thoroughly awash, and Spencer looked away awkwardly, trying to shield his mind from the waves of sexual energy that her overtired mind was throwing against his shore.

"Anyone miss me?" she said with a yawn.

"Not really," he said, smirking, "though Lieutenant Skyl did seem perturbed."

"Oh," she said with a half-laugh, then let her head fall back, eyes to the ceiling. "Well, this has been quite a day," she remarked with weary wonder.

"Glean anything from your Russian comrades?" he clipped somewhat curtly, but she missed it. He stared out the windows at the bluish haze – his emotions too were awash, and it was hard to tell this late at night where the passions of a telepathic mind ended, and the supposed sensibilities of a human mind began.

"Boy, I don't know how Chekov expects us to ferret out a group of insurgents on this ship," she huffed. "I think Seti has been feeding the old man a line of bull."

Spencer turned on her slowly, mouth open. Speechless, he couldn't decide whether to slap her back to her senses, or just say



screw it and beam home to Betazed. Fortunately, her eyes were now closed, or he may have been court-marshaled for the eyeroll he threw down at her.

"All the people I've met so far have been perfectly professional," Rachel continued rather flippantly, "it's actually kind of refreshing to be amongst civilized people for a change." She smiled, obviously referring to Jameson and his *Falcon*. She opened her eyes and raised her head, still smiling. But then she frowned. "What the hell's wrong with you?!"

The tiredness was contagious, and he snapped at her. "Are you too blinded by lust to see the danger staring you right in the face?!" She sat up rigidly and his paracortex sensed keenly that she was about to stand up and deck him, quite literally.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?!" she countered angrily.

"My gods, Rachel, that man is one of the most dangerous people I've ever met!"

"Who?!" He could sense that her ignorance was genuine, and he softened his blow.

"Vladimir Kenzie," he replied quietly.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," she rebuked, standing abruptly and flipping a hand at him. Spencer took two steps back as she breezed by him towards the washroom. He allowed her to cool for a few moments as she splashed her fingers wildly in the sink and then ripped a towel out of the drawer. Half-drying her hands, she threw the towel down on the counter and glared at him through the mirror.

"I have known Hal Kenzie since you were still in middle school, Mister... sure, some of his political views may be a bit off the wall, but I'd hardly call the man *dangerous*. My God, Spencer, I'm sure I don't need to tell you of all people what I've shared with that man... hell, we were *in love* for Christ's sake, we're still in love, and I think I oughta know better than anyone else that he's no threat..."

"Oh please..."

"You're just jealous," she shot back, twirling around to face him.

"Will you please..."

"That's enough Lieutenant Commander," she barked, and he balled up his fists and looked away. "You are dismissed," she said flatly and disappeared into the bathroom. For a few moments he looked after her until he heard the shower start, then he quietly turned and excused himself from her plush and airy quarters. For her part, Rachel paused just outside the shower door and thought briefly of going back out there to perhaps mollify the situation – she had always been quick to anger and equally as quick to cool – but when she heard the doors open and close with a quiet whoosh she thought: *Fine*. She was too tired to deal with it anyway, tomorrow was another day. Ripping off her sports bra and kicking her trousers across the room she stepped into the steamy jet. Guilt started to cloud her view as she reviewed the night. *She'd given him computer access!* But what could possibly happen in one night? She refused to believe that Hal Kenzie was any kind of dangerous, he'd always just been a little – *what?* – misguided.

She awoke several hours later to the sound of raindrops splashing against the windows. The room was pitch dark and spinning, and Rachel spun her legs out of bed and promptly threw up all over the carpet in front of her. *What the f--k?!* She sidestepped the mess and went directly to the center window, aware now, if but uncertainly, that she was still in the captain's quarters of the 104. But it didn't make any sense! What the hell was that plinking sound on the alumglass?! Why was it so dark... where was the chalky blue haze of the hanger bay? She fought the urge to throw up again as the room continued to spin in great big orbits around her. At the glass, she could just barely make out colors through the thick blackish-brown soup that swirled just inches from her face. *My God*, she thought, *the station has exploded...*

Just moments before, Fleet Admiral Pavel Chekov stood in his small observation lounge, just as he'd done twelve hours prior, and stared out at the twin sisters slowly taking shape in the cavernous work bay below him. The 104 had come a long way, just today, towards catching up to the *Zhukov*, and he was proud of the construction teams and all their hard work. His arms were crossed, and he had one hand pressed firmly to his immaculately shaven

chin. For some reason, he was thinking of Scotty (long since declared dead or missing). The old engineer had once said of the starship *Excelsior*: "Aye, and if my grandmother had wheels, she'd be a wagon." Chekov smirked... he wondered what Scotty would think now of these great new behemoths under construction out there that dwarfed even the *Excelsior* in their size and complexity. Perhaps something along the lines of: "I bet none of those brainy bastards over at the Design Bureau ever dropped a brick in a bucket just to see how it would fly?" His chest heaved a silent chuckle.

General Seti stood next to him and sighed. "You are playing a dangerous game here, Admiral." The Vulcan turned to his long-time friend and eyed him speculatively.

"Ve humans thrive on dangerous," and he offered Seti one of his trademark toothy grins.

Seti raised one upswept eyebrow and returned his gaze to the blue haze of the workbay. He did not like this, it gave him a most unsettling *feeling*. "And you are certain this girl is up to the challenge?" Seti eyed Chekov once more, this time with an almost pleading look carefully painted across his historically stoic features. Just then, in a blinding flash of light, the 104 evaporated into thin air. Fortunately, in the vacuum of the work bay, there was no sudden collapse of air... but still, this abrupt shift in the gravitational mass nonetheless caused the station to shudder like a wet duck shaking off the cold. The *Zhukov*, reeling at the unexpected loss of her sister, sashayed slightly to the right, crushing her gangways and buckling her hull against the cavern walls. As for the small observation lounge, it, too, trembled uncertainly at the perturbation before letting a crack flash across the glass from one corner to the other. For a moment, Chekov thought this might be his own end, but things finally fell back into balance as they must.

Seti stood in silence for a few short moments before stating matter-of-factly: "I will be departing aboard the *Prince of Wales*... I have an important security meeting back on Earth." With that, he turned and left with as little fanfare as when he entered.

"I hope you didn't just condemn that little girl to death, Pavel." Chekov didn't turn to acknowledge the soft and supple voice behind him, he merely continued to stare out into the blue haze at the little tugs and workbees that were now trying frantically to right the listing *Zhukov*. With the 104 gone, they certainly had a lot more

room to work with. Uhura stepped out of the shadows of the back wall and padded softly up to her aged comrade. She placed both hands on the back of his shoulders and rested her chin on his left. Their silver hair matched, and the careworn features of their tired faces were reluctant witness to endless decades of service to the Federation. They stared out together into the bluish haze, unfocused and glaring, as the reels of time unwound each of their individual threads into the convoluted fabric of their shared memory. The past was pages, the words... without end.

*"Lieutenant Skyl to Commander Garrett, respond please... Skyl to Garrett, do you copy?"* The Vulcan's voice was crackly and almost pleading, and at first Rachel didn't recognize it. Her head still spinning, she in truth didn't recognize much of anything. She knew visually that she was still in the captain's quarters of the 104, but as for the rest, she couldn't wrap her mind around it. If the station had exploded, how had the 104 survived? And why hadn't this perpetual cloud of gas and dust dissipated into the vacuum of space by now to reveal beyond it the tropical oceans and forests of Betazed? Did Betazed itself explode?! *My God.* Her head hurt and she wanted to barf again, but fought the urge, still feeling guilty about the mess she'd made just moments ago over by the bed. *Nice job Rach, brand new ship and you've gotta go and puke on the carpet!*

*"Stadi to Garrett, Stadi to Garrett... Rachel, are you alright?"* The crackly sound of Spencer's voice at last brought her somewhat to her senses.

"Yes, gentlemen, I can hear you... what the hell is going on?!"

*"Commander,"* Skyl crackled in, *"if you can make your way to Auxiliary Control in the central core, we will attempt to explain."* Auxiliary Control was buried way down deep in the heart of the primary hull and served as the *de facto* Bridge in the event of catastrophic damage... only in this case, since the 104 didn't even have a Bridge yet, it made perfect sense for them to muster there.

"Yes, of course, Lieutenant," Garrett said uncertainly, "I'll be right there." Rachel darted quickly into the washroom and pulled a fresh uniform out of the drawer she'd placed it in only a few hours before. She glanced briefly in the mirror and mussed her hair in frustration before rinsing her mouth in the sink. The taste of bile

still made her queasy, but she didn't feel she could waste any more time on the finer things. Dressing quickly, she called out: "Computer, where the hell is Auxiliary Control?" It distressed her that she knew so little about the layout of 'her' ship but took it with a grain of salt that she hadn't yet been aboard for twenty-four hours. The computer chirped.

*"Auxiliary Control is located on Deck Thirteen, Section Zero."*

Rachel looked reflexively at the map shown on the standard display screen above the replicator terminal, only to be surprised at the big hole in the wall where the appliance should be. So late at night when she'd come in, she hadn't even thought about the incompleteness of the room itself. She wondered what else was missing. *Such errant thoughts*, she mused with a wry smile as she breezed out through the door into the corridor.

In night mode, the hallways and alcoves of the ship were dimly lit and the bulkheads themselves cast long shadows that receded away from her like the dark streams of some cubist painting. Her haste was hindered by the stops and turns made necessary by the various uninstalled compartments still missing from the overall whole. This ship, she had to keep reminding herself, was still little more than a skeleton, clad intermittently with bits and pieces of skin that covered a loose amalgamation of barely complete organs. Even so, she managed to steer her way inwards towards the central core and at long last arrived at a spiral staircase that dizzyingly wound its way up and down, 15 full decks, top to bottom. Fortunately for her, she only needed to descend six stories, or so it seemed, until she reached the halfway mark and felt nauseated once again by the spinning in her head. Instinct, however, told her *not* to trust the turbolifts, so still she pressed on.

Taking far longer than she felt it should have, Rachel at last arrived at the compact command center and charged inside, out of breath and still fairly ready to barf. It was a square and uninteresting room, with a myriad of control consoles scattered about in a dull but functional arrangement. Two of the four walls held large viewscreens that showed naught but the white static of snow. It did, however, have the necessary centering effect on Rachel, and her mind switched immediately to full command mode. She fought the instinctual urge to hug Skyl, and then in turn

Spencer (despite their recent argument), but instead demanded a full report.

"We are no longer docked at Galatea," Skyl answered her plainly. But Rachel's confusion was no less mollified.

"So, where the hell *are* we, Lieutenant?" she demanded – admittedly, a little more harshly than she intended. "And what the hell is that soup swirling around outside my bedroom window?"

"Using interferometric data," Skyl responded levelly, "it has taken me great pains to determine that we are inside the Eagle Nebula."

Rachel stared at the Vulcan incredulously. If he were any other man, she would have flat-out called him a liar. Be that as it may, she still glared at him imploringly. "But Skyl, th-th-that's impossible," she half-scolded, "the Eagle Nebula is, wh-wh-what...?" She glared at Spencer now for help.

"...five thousand six hundred ninety-two light-years away," he finished for her solemnly. In shock himself, Spencer still spoke of the nebula as if were some far-off distant place, rather than the hopeless cloud they were now in fact encapsulated in.

"And how long will it take us to return to Betazed at maximum warp?" Her head hurt now, and her heart was racing and she didn't much feel like doing the math.

"Five years, six months, twenty-two days," Skyl answered her succinctly, and as frankly as any Vulcan could.

"That's only if we had any fuel," Spencer remarked glumly. Rachel had to remind herself again that the ship was only half-complete. She knew from their warp field tests yesterday that there was only enough antimatter and deuterium aboard to do the most basic of static engine checks. Hell, she wondered, did they even have impulse drive yet?! Again, as commander, she knew she should know all this, but... She brought four fingers up to two temples and rubbed in circular motions that did little to relieve her growing headache. *Think, you fool*, she demanded of her weary mind. If we got here, then why can't we go back the same way? *But how the hell did we get here?!* They must establish three more of the five W's. They needed more information.

She calmed herself and sighed. Looking briefly at Spencer with somewhat frightened eyes, she looked back to Skyl with newfound resolve. "Do you know yet *how* we got here, Lieutenant?"

She said this as evenly as possible, falling back to Spencer's comforting visage for support. More errant thoughts flashed through her mind as she wished they could have just five minutes together to hash out the differences between them – to help him see why she had such an unnatural connection to Vladimir Kenzie. But his face bore all, and the telepathic mind knows. She smiled softly at him, and he nodded imperceptibly.

Oblivious to all this, Skyl tapped away at his science console as he slowly formulated a possible explanation. "Analysis of subspace compression and subatomic baseline displacement suggests that this vessel has been subjected to an Elway Shift," he finally stated with profound certainty.

"Interdimensional transport?" Rachel scoffed with shocked disbelief.

"Precisely..."

"Guess that explains the nausea," she said glibly.

"Wait, forgive my ignorance..." Spencer interjected.

"In the mid-23<sup>rd</sup> century," Rachel explained, "a theoretical physicist named Richard Elway toyed around with the idea of folded-space transport." Spencer nodded his understanding. "His theories were ultimately disproven when the process was found to be fatal to organic tissue... it tends to eat DNA for dinner," she added somewhat morbidly, tilting her head slightly to the right with a tick of her tongue.

"Oh great," Spencer huffed with an incredulous half-laugh. Understanding now their predicament, he didn't quite hold the same hope he'd held just a few short moments ago for getting home by breakfast. Unlike her, his own nausea had made him strangely hungry. "Every scientist in their right mind gave up on this research more than fifty years ago," Rachel concluded, looking away at the snow-white static on the viewscreens.

"I do not believe, Commander," Skyl interposed, "that we are dealing with scientists, quote, *in their right mind*. I am reading microfractures in the warp field nacelle pylons, several hull bearing struts have been compromised, and the internal spaceframe is becoming increasingly unstable. Each jump will bring us closer to complete structural collapse."

Rachel looked deeply into Spencer's eyes now and couldn't help but feel that he was giving her that '*told you so*' look that

everyone loves to hate. But she just couldn't see it – Hal had always been outspoken in his beliefs sure, but a revolutionary?! *Come on*, she refused to believe it. What could he do with a half-complete starship six thousand light years away from home anyway? This was hardly an ideal place for a breakaway colony! And so much for their clandestine operations for that matter! It seemed pointless now for them to carry on this masquerade and she wanted to just reach over and rip the colored contacts from Spencer Stadi's eyes.

For his part, he sensed her misdirected anger of course and looked uncomfortably away. He felt a certain compassion for her torn emotions naturally, but he, sure as hell, wasn't going to take the fall for this one. He'd had enough of that crap aboard the *Falcon*. He needed to keep this, keep her, on track – they were Starfleet officers gods dammit – it couldn't get personal.

"Does the nebula pose any danger, Skyl?" Spencer asked, purposefully refocusing Rachel's attention, "should we try to raise shields?" She felt duly admonished.

"It appears," Skyl responded, still studying his readouts, "that all command control is centered in Main Engineering... somehow the Insurgents have managed to gain complete computer access. All we can do from here is monitor," he finished off conclusively.

"So, we must get to Engineering then," Rachel quickly concluded. She felt sick to her stomach again – she was obviously responsible for the predicament they were now in, and she let her gaze drop to the console, unable to look Spencer in the eyes. If she could just have five minutes now to sit down and talk with Hal instead, she was certain she could sort this whole mess out. Guilt began to slowly rack her senses that she hadn't been willing at least to hear Spencer out... he was a telepath for crissake, the whole point of her bringing him along on this clandestine operation was for the clarity his sixth sense had to offer!

"It would seem logical," Skyl spoke plainly, "that whatever device they used to get us here would be located in Main Engineering."

"Tactical analysis, what're we lookin at?" she half-growled through gritted teeth. Her guilt was quickly being supplanted by anger now. She'd get to the bottom of this one way or another. Regardless of Hal Kenzie's motives, he'd *used* her, just like he



always had – only this time she wasn't going to let him get away with it. He'd walked all over her, and her feelings, long enough. What maturity she'd gained over the past ten years had been briefly lost, sure, but she was getting it back now in strides.

However, what she saw as maturity Spencer Stadi feared was instead, revenge. He would have to stay close by her side from now on, he quickly concluded, lest she fall into the pit of angry retribution.

Skyl shifted to the left and brought up a new display. "I am reading only the three of us here in the primary hull..." he actually scowled... "and I am showing approximately 47 life signs in the secondary hull..." Rachel and Spencer together could sense something wrong (it didn't take a telepath) and they both looked at Skyl questioningly.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" Rachel said solemnly. It was unnerving to see a Vulcan shaken, in any situation.

"Like many modern Starfleet vessels," he explained, "the primary hull of the *Ambassador*-class is designed to be completely separable from the engineering section..."

"...so there's nothing stopping them from just leaving us here..." Spencer gulped sickeningly.

"Correct, and there are indications that the connecting dorsal is in complete lockdown, prepped for separation..."

"You are forgetting, gentlemen," Rachel stated, somewhat reluctantly, "right now the primary hull has one last connection that Hal Kenzie is simply unwilling to sever... *Me*."

Perhaps she was overinflating her own importance just a bit in the grand scheme of things (after all, he'd already gotten what he wanted from her) but she was banking on the fact that Hal wasn't yet quite ready to cut the cord. Intuition was telling her this, and she herself wasn't yet quite ready to give up on hope. They needed more answers, but they wouldn't get them here.

"Skyl," Stadi said glumly, "if the dorsal is in lockdown, how do we get to Engineering?" He'd been picking up on Rachel's train of thought, but she still wasn't thinking clearly. Her goal was Kenzie, but she wasn't thinking of the how's. They needed a plan. Three people couldn't just stroll into an insurgent stronghold and have a meaningful conversation about the finer points of national politics. This had gone beyond all reason, and they needed to start

thinking in military terms. What the situation called for now was a full-fledged counteroffensive. Sort out the details later, their first duty was to the ship.

"We must regain control of the One-oh-four," Rachel stated with newfound resolve, "whatever the cost." Perhaps it was the fresh memories of her Commander's Test, or perhaps it was her budding psi-awareness picking up on Spencer's own growing resolve, but regardless of the cause, they were determined now together to find a solution.

Just then, they heard a far-off metallic groan and the deck shuddered faintly beneath their feet. The three of them together locked eyes before Skyl at once looked down at his faithful console. "An *Antares*-class freighter just docked with the secondary hull... albeit badly."

"What the hell?" Rachel looked down and studied the readouts for herself.

"They must have brought it here too," Spencer shrugged, "but to what end?"

"It reads as the MS *Kiev*, reported as lost in the Hanoran System three weeks ago..."

"Wait a minute," Rachel said frowning, "I don't like what I'm seeing here, Skyl..."

Even Spencer was looking down now at the readings as Skyl confirmed what they all feared. "Sensors indicate no less than two-hundred photon torpedoes, and at least three tricobalt devices."

"By the gods..."

"I don't care anymore what their aims are, gentlemen," Rachel stated flatly, "we've got to stop this now before it even starts. Skyl, is there some way we can detonate the cargo?" She snapped her fingers in the air. "I don't know, maybe some kind of forced compression wave in the nebula? An EM pulse aimed at their main reactor?"

She looked at the Vulcan pleadingly knowing full well that she'd just pulled all that crap out of her hat. But they had to try something! This insurgent force, whatever their objectives, could not be allowed to return to Federation space. Who knew what sort of havoc they could wreak, especially with interdimensional transport! Her emotions ran the board now, from love for Hal to profound hurt and disappointment. From a growing respect for

Spencer Stadi, and everything his young potential had to offer. And even for Skyl, who she could already tell had a passion for what he did and was equally pained to have it all turned around against him. What do you do when your whole world comes unraveled right before your eyes? She was preparing now to destroy everything... to save so much more.

But Skyl's response was conclusive.

"I am sorry, Commander, but I'm afraid we're stuck here. They have complete control of the main computer."

Rachel's heart sank.

# |5|

Twelve hours. This was perhaps Commander Rachel Garrett's only saving grace. Shamed, she still had not told Spencer Stadi or Lieutenant Skyl that she'd turned over complete computer control to the insurgent group led by Vladimir Kenzie. She suspected though, of course, that Spencer's telepathic mind already knew of her disgrace despite her best efforts to hide it from him. Twelve hours... in twelve hours the command lockouts would automatically reengage; but who knew what havoc could be wrought upon the galaxy in that short period of time with two hundred photon torpedoes and three tricobalt devices! Rachel felt sick to her stomach again and her head was still pounding.

"Anyone else have a warp ten headache?" she said cheekily, but the mood was flat.

"It is a side-effect of dimensional transport," Skyl replied matter-of-factly, not looking up from his ever-faithful computer console.

For twenty minutes they had watched helplessly as the immense payload of weaponry was slowly offloaded from the stolen transport *Kiev* and stowed away in the cargo bays of the 104. In twenty more minutes, the 104 would be armed to the teeth – and with folded-space transport, they could instantly target anything from Starfleet Headquarters to the Klingon capital city on Qo'Nos.

But to what end?! Rachel and Spencer simply hadn't had enough time to glean the motives of this *Gladius Iacobi*. It obviously had something to do with the border worlds, but what could be gained from a full-scale Federation-Klingon war?

"Independence," Spencer said suddenly, startling Rachel. Skyl looked up from his console and eyed the telepath with a single upswept eyebrow. Rachel for her part stared deeply into his false-colored eyes and smiled.

"Of course, I must be blind." The irony was not lost as the words escaped her lips.

"Unfortunately," Skyl interjected, "this new insight into their motives still gives us no indication of target."

"We need to regain control of the ship..." Spencer reiterated, more in thought than in statement. They'd already spent twenty minutes hashing over options to no avail.

"I have to talk to him," Rachel finally admitted to herself.

"Rachel, please," Spencer scolded, though for not the same reasons as before.

"Have you ever read *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald?" she countered.

"Huh?" he scowled puzzlingly.

"In my younger and more vulnerable years," she quoted, "my father gave me some advice... always try to see the best in people..."

"Time," Skyl stated unexpectedly, and Spencer looked at him with sudden and newfound understanding. They must stall, prevaricate, scratch, and claw... every moment they spent in the Eagle nebula was one less moment out in open space. The longer the 104 could be held here, the less time Hal Kenzie had before he lost control of the computer. Every minute that Rachel Garrett spent talking was perhaps one more minute closer to Skyl's brilliant mind finding a solution that reached just a little bit outside the edge of possibility. Time was all they had to work with at this point and they would make the most of it.

"Garrett to Kenzie..." They held their breath and waited. Nothing. "Commander Garrett to Gunnery Sergeant Kenzie, respond please..." Still nothing. One last try: "Hal, *please*, can we talk? I think you owe me that much..." She felt naked and vulnerable, especially in front of a Vulcan and a Betazoid. This would not be easy for her.

"*We owe each other nothing.*" Fish on the line. Rachel looked at Skyl levelly and the engineer redoubled his efforts. Spencer could do naught but stand back as the man's hands flew across the console. It was a game of chess – moments of time, the pieces.

"That's not fair," Rachel answered, and Spencer caught just the barest hint of an eyeflutter. He'd cut her to the quick already... the man was more than just dangerous, he was *sadistic*. But

Spencer still wasn't convinced that Rachel truly understood what Hal Kenzie had become, what he had morphed into over these past ten years.

*"As they say, Commander..."* Indeed, life truly isn't fair.

*"There are other solutions, Hal, there are other ways."*

*"Sometimes it takes a revolution my dear..."*

"But Hal, destruction and violence... really? In all our discussions about history, about the wars and the revolutions that tore Earth apart... the insurrections of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that burned entire cities to the ground..."

*"History is doomed..."* much like their conversation, to repeat itself.

"Dammit, Hal," Rachel exclaimed testily, and Spencer had to calm her down with both look and touch. She sighed. "Listen, I don't know what you have planned, but if you wanted to make a statement then surely, you've made it... please, stop this now. We can go to Command, or to the Council, or even the press, whatever it takes..."

*"Oh really,"* he said, laughing darkly, *"whatever it takes? Maybe 'whatever it takes' sometimes has to be more than just talking? What if attention can only be gained by action?"*

"Attention to what? This so-called 'Sword of James'? You were many things my love, but you were never a religious extremist." She actually found herself smiling again and cursed herself for so easily falling once more into his magical allure. Skyl's fingers still raced across the computer console, but Rachel could easily tell by his countenance alone that he was making no headway into cracking the computer firewalls. They would have to find a different way. They would have to think outside the box.

*"The Sword of James is only the medium, Madam."* One could easily hear the hubris in the man's voice at his own cleverness. *"A bunch of religious fanatics really do come in handy sometimes though, y'know... just ask your Betazoid companion."* Rachel went white as she looked up into Spencer's now blown disguise. His false-blue eyes looked down at the tabletop. Their gig truly was up. *"Although,"* Hal continued, *"you really do have to admire James T. Kirk for his zeal... but in truth, if you study the man himself, I scarcely think he's really worth worshiping."*

Spencer winked at Rachel to encourage her further. One sure sign of a demented mind was their need to be heard, to have that audience, and as long as they could keep Hal Kenzie rambling on senselessly, it was less time he could hurt people. There was another deep metallic groan from somewhere down deep in the ship and the deck shuddered faintly for a second time. Rachel didn't need to look down at the graphics Spencer was pointing at to know that the *Kiev* had been cut loose. The 104 was now a fully armed fortress. She tried to dig deep to gain new resolve but found it lacking; decided instead to rely on the fine art of tangents.

"Fancy yourself a jihadist then, eh?" she said, half-smirking.

*"Whatever it takes..."* He chuckled disturbingly.

"And do you really think James T. Kirk would appreciate being placed at the tip of a sword for a religious war in his honor?"

*"His ego would've certainly appreciated it..."* Again, the disturbed chuckle.

"And it doesn't bother you that you're using a million other religious fanatics to serve your ends?"

*"James T. Kirk used millions to achieve his ends... and now he has an entire religion named after him... seems only logical to me, to quote your Vulcan ally."*

"So, is that your goal then Hal? Blow some shit up, become a messiah?"

*"Worked for Jesus..."*

Rachel tipped her head back and let out a big open-mouthed guffaw. She might be a little rusty on history, but she was pretty sure Jesus didn't blow anything up. She looked up towards the comms with a cheeky grin. "If you wanna be a martyr, we can end this right now and no one else needs to get hurt. Sounds to me more like an ego-trip than a calling anyway," she added with a spiteful grin. There was a long moment of silence now that gave Rachel that empty feeling way down deep in the pit of her stomach. She'd hit home with that one.

She looked up into Spencer's ebony eyes (he had at some point in the past few moments popped out the false contacts) and her own almond eyes held a growing scared look that perhaps maybe she'd finally pushed Hal too far? Their banter always seemed to have the same end result, both back then and indeed now – when she'd finally struck that right nerve, Vladimir Kenzie

would clam up tighter than an airlock on lockdown. Her gaze fell to Skyl next, and pleadingly she stared into his own dark eyes hoping he could at last break the stalemate. The Vulcan sighed. With one half-kiss, she'd signed away their entire freedom, perhaps even signed their own death warrants. Hal Kenzie was still in control... the 104 and all its vast armaments were on the brink, with a madman's finger on the trigger. She'd be hung right beside him as a traitor for sure!

*"It's funny actually that you should mention Jesus, darling..."* Hal said suddenly, and the trio breathed a collective sigh of relief... he was still on the line. *"Are you aware of the concept of 'the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost?'"*

"Vaguely," Rachel answered honestly, wondering where in the world *this* was going. There hadn't been much room for religion in her broken-down childhood home – things had always been a bit cold, especially after her brother had died. Believer or not, she'd always kind of blamed *Him* for that day, and she didn't much care which arm of the Trinity had had a hand in it, it just shouldn't've happened.

*"Let's have a bit of fun, shall we?"* Hal said ominously. *"Let's start with the Father..."*

"Hal wait!" Rachel shouted

*"Time's aww-up..."* he sang, and then there was a bright flash of light that left Rachel instantly disoriented. Fortunately, all she had this time was the dry heaves as she struggled to make her bearings. Spencer too was reeling around the small control room, heaving and spinning like he was a lost top in the dark hold of a ship caught in a hurricane. Even Skyl, once a solid rock for them to lean on, was down on his knees, clutching to his console like a lifeline as if he, too, was tossing uncontrollably in that same ocean that spun in great circles around their collective heads. At last, their wobbling brains compensated, and they were able, in stages, and each in their own time, to right themselves.

"Oh God..." Rachel coughed finally, for more reasons than one.

"Where the hell are we now?" Spencer spat out angrily using human vernacular.

Skyl was instantly on his feet. His fingers breezed across the computer console like a concert pianist, his brows furrowed, hiding



both pain and nausea. On the viewscreens, the snowy static had been replaced thankfully with a more welcoming starfield. He spoke levelly. "We are in open space..." More typing. "Picking up Federation subspace beacons... triangulating... edge of the Sol Sector, three-point-nine-seven light-years from Earth."

They didn't know whether to be relieved or concerned. They were home at least, but now they were within striking distance of a dozen Federation worlds. They all felt helpless. They had no control over this situation or what happened next. A single tri-cobalt device could devastate Earth... three would leave it a wasteland. Two hundred photon torpedoes would overwhelm all orbital defenses, starships included – but with folded-space transport, what good were defenses anyway? They could pop in and pop out in the blink of an eye.

"Why are we *here*?" Rachel said with a frown. It didn't make any sense for them to land out here in the middle of nowhere. To reconnoiter? "Is it possible Skyl, that they lack fine navigational control?"

"Uncertain, Commander, but certainly a possibility."

"But that would make no sense," Spencer interjected. "It seems like they would've had a contingency plan for that... extra fuel for instance for maneuverability."

"Still, an advantage for us if that's the case. I can't help but wonder though," she mused, "what did he mean by... 'let's start with the father?'"

Spencer merely shrugged... there was too much going on, and too much distance involved, for his telepathic mind to get a clear read on their adversary... not even mentioning the whole cross-dimensional jump thing stuck there right in the middle! His frustration was perhaps greater even than hers... they could gain a clear advantage surely if only he could read Kenzie's thoughts! But, with the room still spinning, he was fighting a splitting headache and a lingering nausea. There was not a thing he could do either, and it continued to fuel his anger, much like it did hers.

"Long-range sensors are picking up an approaching starship," Skyl reported casually, and Rachel's heart leapt into her throat. They had the potential here now to be saved from this nightmare if only they acted quickly. She was ignoring, however, the

astronomical odds against them that this deliverer was on approach simply by happenstance.

"Can you hail them, Lieutenant?" As usual, she was hopeful, but doubtful. "Can we at least flash some lights and somehow get them a Morse signal?" Skyl merely looked up from his console and stared at her, the closest a Vulcan could come to melancholy disillusionment. There was nothing they could do from here but monitor, period, and no other locale aboard the 104 would provide them with any better advantage either.

"They're dropping out of warp," Spencer relayed, studying his own set of readouts.

"It reads as a light cruiser, *Miranda*-class."

"The *Prince of Wales*," Skyl acknowledged, looking up and drawing everyone's attention to the svelte craft slowly resolving itself on the forward viewscreen.

"Commodore Stillwell's flagship?" Rachel queried rhetorically.

"Curious coincidence," Spencer mused ominously as a growing sense of doom settled in over the small control room. It was becoming increasingly clear that this was no coincidence at all.

Skyl breathed out through his nose, eyebrows scowling once more. "Indeed," was all he said at first, then: "Often used by General Seti and other flag officers to shuttle to and from Earth."

"Shit," Rachel expunged, "Skyl, there's got to be a way to warn them," she pleaded.

"They're coming within range," Spencer cautioned, "...running a sensor sweep..."

"Are their shields up?" she hoped again, but still that same sinking feeling, compounded by nausea; and fueled by the ongoing knowledge that she alone had set this chain of events in motion. She knew the answer of course, before he said it.

"Negative," Skyl reported stoically. "They are hailing..." Next, deep down in the bowels of the ship, there was a muffled thrum and a peculiar shudder that could only mean one thing – the 104 had fired not just one photon torpedo, but six. Out in space, and on the viewscreen as well, explosions rocked the *Prince of Wales* from stem to stern. The stout little cruiser spun over backwards and continued to tumble end over end, trailing debris, and venting a plethora of gases from innumerable fires and a dozen hull breaches. Rachel raised a hand and covered her mouth. The death

toll would, no doubt, be high. Her eyes fluttered and she looked at Spencer with anguish. *The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.*

What the hell did that have to do with *this*? It made her sick.

*"Are you ready, Commander, for part one of our challenge?"*

His voice shrieked over the comm like a piercing bullet, hitting her in the chest and causing her heart to quiver. The tone in his voice alone was enough to tell her that whatever came next was sure to be even more horrific than what she'd just witnessed.

"Hal, please," she cried out, but the commlink had been severed before her knotted throat would even release the syllables. In another blinding flash of light, the trio in an instant found themselves in an anteroom just off one of the smaller airlocks dotted throughout the ship. Rachel involuntarily screamed at the splitting pain that pierced her skull. Her body had had no time to recover from their last interdimensional jump before being subjected to another. Dry heaves wracked her body once more as she and Spencer fell into each other's arms, and by extension enveloped Skyl as well. The Vulcan shook it off more quickly than they to be sure, but it was still several long minutes before any of them could assay their surroundings.

At first there appeared to be nothing special about the room. There were a few arranged chairs, a small table, a hole in the wall where a replicator should be, and a rack containing six EVA suits: a standard airlock waiting room. Spencer was first to try the double exit doors that led to the outside corridor. Locked of course, just as he expected them to be. Rachel found herself lacking in command presence for the moment as she fell back into one of the chairs. She was thoroughly bushwhacked and wanted nothing else than a nice ice-cold glass of water. She'd trained in combat, been subjected to all sorts of mental and physical challenges in her career, but nothing had prepared her for this. Her mind still hadn't quite wrapped itself around the fact that Vladimir Kenzie was a bad, bad man. She still loved him as deeply as the first day they'd met, and her heart was as broken right now as her spirit.

Still clinging to hope, however, she arose with an unbroken resolve. Rachel and Spencer both were drawn now to Skyl who stood shakily at the small oval window looking out into the airlock itself. Slowly they approached and were mortified to see a man standing there within, a Vulcan, beaten and bleeding, clothing and

face sodden with greenish blood. He stood in the tattered remains of a Federation Security uniform. Encircling his chest were a complex set of immovable straps, and in the center a detonator (apparently) slowly counted down, one interminable second at a time, from one hundred. The man's face bore a sadness uncharacteristic of his proud race as he stared back through the glass at the three young officers.

"My God, that's General Seti," Rachel said breathlessly.

"Yes," Skyl mused, "my father." Rachel and Spencer both fell back nonplussed. *The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost*. The deviousness of this was frightening to them both. This entire situation, from Galatea to now, was a dark and mindless trap, and they merely rats to be toyed with at a whim.

"Tell me, Commander," Hal's voice filtered in, "*do you know why we humans love chocolate so much?*"

"Hal, enough..."

"*The melting point of milk chocolate,*" he interrupted, "*just happens to be between thirty and thirty-two degrees C... hence it melts slowly and most delectably on our thirty-seven-degree tongues...*"

"For the love of God, Hal, seriously, what the hell is wrong with you?!"

"*Attached to our most delectable General,*" he continued unabated, "*is a temperature-sensitive remote detonator...*" Skyl's shoulders visibly sagged as the rules of the 'game' became suddenly, and most startlingly, clear to him. Rachel and Spencer for their part were a little slower to catch up however, and their brows scowled into a frown.

"But I don't understand..." Rachel half-whimpered.

"The average Vulcan body temperature is thirty-two-point-seven-eight degrees C," Skyl stated audibly, though not necessarily to them. He was still staring with unwavering concentration out through the glass into the eyes of his father.

"*Indeed,*" General Seti's voice crackled in through the open comm-link, his stare too was as unwavering as his indefatigable son.

"The temperature of interstellar space is just two-point-seven degrees above absolute zero..." Skyl stated matter-of-factly, again, not necessarily to anyone. Rachel pushed in now and impulsively

scratched at the metal frame around the thick oval window. Next, she slid to the right and reflexively tried the controls to open the airlock door. And finally, at long last, desperately, she ripped open the access cover below the keypad and pumped furiously on the manual release lever. Nothing. Locked, or welded even, who the hell knew at this point. Her head darted back to the window; thirty-five seconds remaining.

"Commander, please," Skyl said softly behind her, and she fell away into Spencer's arms.

*"I have placed one of the tri-cobalt devices aboard the Prince of Wales,"* Hal Kenzie warned ominously, *"it's time for a decision Lieutenant... there are still eighty souls left alive aboard that ship..."* Skyl's stare remained fixed, as did General Seti's. Naturally, logic dictated the course of events over the next few moments, not emotion. Both men had spent a lifetime in the pursuit of *Kolinahr*, the process in which all emotion was finally purged from the mind, it was the cornerstone of their very society. Centuries of Vulcan teaching and discipline collided at this moment, and the silence was deafening; no one even breathed. Seventeen, sixteen, fifteen, fourteen...

"Jesus Christ, Hal *pleeease*," Rachel cried out in tears and Spencer had to grab her by the shoulders.

Slowly, as if passing through a thick syrup, Skyl raised up his arm and extended his pointer and middle fingers towards the keypad.

"Noooo!" Rachel wailed, though indeed no sound came out. Spencer pulled her in closer and wrapped his arms around her chest in a strong embrace. Automatic safeguards within his telepathic mind began switching themselves off as the timer on Seti's chest reached the ten-second mark. Out through the glass, Seti nodded almost imperceptively to his son, and Skyl nodded back with just the barest flutter of the eyes. With a decided jab, his fingers made contact with the touchpad and the empty silence was broken by a beep, and then the explosive thud of a violent decompression. Seti was gone, and in the distance, the *Prince of Wales* spun quietly and peacefully away into the silky darkness.

The next half-hour was a blur as the trio wandered aimlessly, and in silence, through the disjointed and honeycombed corridors

of the 104. They had no sense of when the double doors behind them had unlocked and opened, releasing them, nor did they have any sense of direction, only that they were slowly and methodically making their way back towards Auxiliary Control. Another jump of the ship had left them disorientated and confused, and their collective minds, in a trance on many fronts, couldn't think of any other logical place to go. Just short of their destination however, Rachel turned abruptly and passed mercifully and without word into a crew breakroom. It was the fully installed replicator though that had caught her attention, not the room itself, and she charged up to it like a morbidly dehydrated African wildebeest.

"Computer... ice water, one degree C," she ordered. Her fingers tingled as the glass just barely finished materializing right within her very hands. Double-fisted, she swallowed half at once in one great gulp as she stepped aside to let Spencer and Skyl order the same. The water felt like an orb of pure energy as it glided down her throat and settled coolly into her belly. She ordered a second glass through the mouthful of her second gulp, and half drained this one as well before finally feeling only partially satisfied. Wandering away, she plopped into a soft divan and closed her eyes, letting her head fall back, and draping an arm over her weary eyelids to shield the harsh lights. She wanted sleep but knew she mustn't.

He had to be stopped. Hal Kenzie had become a Khan... and she would become his Kirk.

"What are our options, Gentlemen?" she asked finally at length, becoming once again, even as she continued to cover her eyes, a resolute Starfleet officer.

She felt a hypospray against her shoulder and looked up just as Skyl was consequently applying the same shot to Spencer. The Vulcan engineer then placed the device against his own shoulder. "This will help counter the effects of the next jump," Skyl stated simply.

It hadn't yet occurred to Rachel that there would be a next jump (as surely there would be) and she was incredibly grateful now for his foresight. She sat up on the divan now, feeling somewhat refreshed, and looked stoically into the eyes of her comrades. Spencer looked down at her with ebony eyes full of compassion and understanding, whereas Skyl's bore a hollow

emptiness that betrayed the flood that was contained behind those unblinking shields. Logic or not, emotions or no, Rachel could sense from him an anger that threatened to consume her, him, Spencer, the 104 – indeed *all* – from within, including Vladimir Henry Kenzie.

“You hold on to that,” Rachel said unexpectedly, startling Spencer. He was duly impressed with the exponential growth of her psi-region in just the short time they’d been together. “Is there any way,” she mused now, still staring fiercely into Skyl’s angry eyes, “that we can use your hidden subroutine against them somehow?”

Skyl exhaled through his nose and walked away. “Intriguing premise, Commander,” he said at length as he stood now before the replicator, focusing on nothing in particular. The black panel stared back at him like the blackness of deep space outside that open airlock. Admittedly, he was not entirely focused on the task at hand. Over his left shoulder, the image of Rachel Garrett reflected in the panel suddenly vanished with a flash of white light, and he sighed. There would be no moment of rest, no silent repose to collect his thoughts and mourn his father. Instead, he and Spencer Stadi must carry on, for the time being, without her. But something in his mind told him that she’d be back. He and time and the 104, and Spencer Stadi too, would go on for many years to come under her command, he was certain of it... in fact, he could *feel* it.

“Care to join me for dinner, Commander?” Hal said soothingly after she’d gotten done falling all over herself. They were in an admiral’s quarters (still aboard the 104 she presumed), but with folded-space transport, who knew? They could be back on the Galatea Space Center for all she knew. Outside the sweeping windows, the sky was black with a sprinkling of bright stars. Inside, a rectangular table was gracefully appointed with a setting for two in the finest blue hues of Alpha Centauri China. Candles burned, and in the flickering light stood all the accoutrements for a fine roast beef dinner, replete with honey-glazed carrots and steaming baked potatoes. Rachel was starved beyond belief – but instead, she charged Hal and began pounding mercilessly on his chest with both fists.

“You son-of-bitch!” she cried, “you rotten son-of-a-bitch, how could you do that to that man?!” she yelled. Which man, she didn’t

specify, for the horror to both was perhaps equal... was there any less death for Skyl than for his father? Her fury spent at last, she turned away from him and marched up to one of the long, graceful windows that arched up over her head. Instead of the stars though, her teary eyes stared at his image reflected in the glass. You see, she knew Hal Kenzie right down to the core, and understood him far better than perhaps anyone else still living. Turkana IV was a barren world, and despite any allusions of grandeur, his parents were dirt-poor farmers from the steppes outside New Moscow. But he never laid claim to them though, nor to his heritage... he always felt that he was so much more, that he was destined for a future glory that went above and beyond these, his most humble beginnings.

The man Rachel Garrett knew was a man of impenetrable hope; the most hopeful man, in fact, that she'd ever known, and one with an incorruptible dream. As soon as he was old enough to venture into the city by himself, he began to ingratiate himself amongst the gang leaders of the various crime syndicates that dotted this rough and tumble border world. It was his strength and tenacity though that set him apart from all the other street urchins that used to filter in and out of the city from the wastelands that surrounded it.

Hal Kenzie had always had a knack for leadership, and it ripened here in those early years as he slowly rose to the top of the sludge heap. Talk of *Independence* had always been just that, *talk*, until that is, Vladimir Henry Kenzie turned it into a *movement*. The next logical step was to take this crusade out into the stars, and the only way for a young scrapper like him to get off world was to join Starfleet. He and Boris Rhotemious had enlisted together, and they were inseparable, a dark mirror to each other's souls, brothers in blood.

The side of Hal Kenzie that Rachel Garrett didn't know however, was Hal Kenzie the demigod. Somewhere, in his climb to glory, the vision that he'd created of himself, and indeed *for* himself, became twisted, and a little off-center. The vision began to not see Independence as a goal, but as a means *to* a goal. Every great civilization needs a leader, and he would become a great leader, a leader like James T. Kirk. A leader to be *worshiped*, a messiah.



However, there was more to it even than just that! Something else had twisted inside Hal Kenzie as well. His genius had slowly twisted itself around into the diabolical. The means to an end became less about the means, and more about the *mean*. His soul took on a darker side, a hurtful side, and the meanness at its heart slowly began to become *pleasure*. He *liked* to hurt people. Indeed, this certainly wasn't the same man that Rachel had known back at the Academy. Oh, no, he'd changed. Vladimir Henry Kenzie had truly become a wonder of wickedness, an aberration of evil, a human dragon, a being so unthinkable that Rachel's wildest imagination could never hope to conjure such a devious and dangerous monster. She shuddered involuntarily and turned.

*He smiled.*

"I could've helped you Hal," she whispered, then with cracked voice: "I am a commander in Starfleet now, we could've taken this to the Admiralty, or to the Federation Council," she reiterated as before, "but you've taken it too far now..." she sighed, added more tears, wiped her cheeks. "If you stop this now, maybe I can talk to Chekov, or to Uhura maybe..." She trailed off at this point, doubtful even of her own power to sway the opinions of giants. Stealing a top-secret starship, attacking another Starfleet vessel, forcing the murder of the head of Starfleet Security; these were treasonous acts that could earn Hal the equivalent of the death penalty. He would be sent to the Elba II Asylum to be sure. She shuddered again. Death might be better. The only gulag worse in the galaxy was the Klingon planetoid Rura Penthe.

"Come," he said soothingly, "sit down and eat." She stood defiant. He grinned. "Y'know, I've been thinking lately, perhaps God places sin in the road ahead to serve as learning experiences along our path to enlightenment."

"Oh, for the love of Peter," Rachel reproved, turning her back to him and placing fists squarely on hips. "No matter how much you try to argue with me, you can't justify this."

"Remember when I said: What if attention can only be gained by action? Well, this is action, *Commander*. You can take that back to Starfleet Command, or to the High Council if you wish, but I'm not stopping with just one man. I *will* have independence for my people."

"Independence, *pah!*" she scoffed at him, noting for the first time a slight twinge of anger in his otherwise tranquil voice. She turned on him like a lioness. "The independence of *your* people?" she reproached sarcastically. "I don't think this has damn thing to do with Turkana anymore, or with Archanis... or with Beta Lankal either for that matter," she accusingly huffed.

"Dealing with the Federation Council is one thing Hal, but you try some of this shit with the Klingons and they'll wipe *your* people right off the face of the map and use you as the mop!" She was trembling now, and her heightened psi-region could sense that his sure and calm demeanor was fairly ready to pop.

*Yet he merely smiled.*

"Keep smiling at me, you son-of-a-bitch," Rachel scolded, "because I know this isn't about your little band of freedom fighters anymore, this is about *you* and your self-satisfying, tiny little need for glory. The *Gladius Iacobi*, I should've known that you'd be behind some kind of cockamamie little scheme like that. Turn a bunch of religious fanatics into a group of simpering sycophants... brilliant!"

He raised a single pointer finger at her in warning.

"You're not a god Hal," she shouted at him "and you won't be remembered as one!"

The cork popped and in one violent motion he threw the table over with a horrific crash that sent China flying in a hundred different directions. She shielded herself from a blow that was sure to come next, but Hal merely growled at her instead and turned away, fixing his immaculately pressed hair with the scissor-like motion of two fingers. In all his thirty years, she had been his only weakness. Nothing had stopped his rise to glory, not his shiftless parents or their dirt farm, not the pitiless gang lords or their dirty city, and certainly not Starfleet and their vaunted values... only Rachel Garrett had ever been a threat to him, and his solid heart cracked just a little even now as she cowered there next to him in a field of shattered glass. *Damn her.* Glory was always just within his reach, he knew it, but the conscience of his twisted mind had always been anchored to this one woman and he knew, yes, he knew, that he would be anchored to her forever. He loved her.

But the sun must rise alone. There can be no glory behind the shadow of the Moon. To be eclipsed is to be lost, and he could

not afford to be lost, especially to her. Once his little deeds were done, once the Federation Council was forced into submission, once Starfleet was forced to cower and run, only then would he return to New Moscow with a hero's welcome. Only then would he dissolve the Directorate, and only then would his people at last have the *freedom* to elevate him to Supreme Chancellor... and the gang lords, yes, they too would be forced into submission, and he would make them pay for what they'd done. Oh, and the rape gangs? Ohhh yes, he would save *them* for last. He would skin their little dicks himself and have their scrotums sewn to their dirty little faces while their vile and disgusting women watched as their own entrails were nailed to a tree...

Her budding psi-awareness bursting, Rachel trembled involuntarily, and Hal looked at her with the possession of the devil. No, he could not afford to be lost, especially to her. Not now when he was this close. His sirens' call to glory resounded in his ears once more and he smiled again. Only this time the smile was demonic, it was unwholesome, and it left Rachel with an aftertaste of a feeling that her innards had just been chewed out by wolves.

She gave him a pleading look, and in a moment of final weakness, he touched his thumb to a small remote at his waste and she vanished. *Damn her.* There was no requiem for his sadness, only a melancholy resolve that right was right, and by the sureness of his will alone, God would finally, and at long last, rain down upon him all the glory that he so rightfully deserved.

"Greetings Commander," Skyl said nonchalantly even as Spencer Stadi jumped half out of his skin.

Rachel had appeared next to them in a flash of light, then pressed the fingers and thumb of her right hand to her temples. The tonic Skyl had given them in the crew lounge had certainly helped with the nausea, but it had done little to allay the near constant headache that now pierced her skull like a shard of broken China. The trio were back in the small control room but unfortunately, not much had changed. They were still locked out of the computer, and they were all beginning to carry that secret doubt that the lockouts would be released even after the twelve-hour timeout. Insurgency or not, there were still forty brilliant and

highly trained Starfleet engineers down below decks in the stardrive section.

"Any developments, Gentlemen?" she requested with a sigh, stifling a yawn. She was trying to hide from them with her casualness the horrific feelings that had welled up within her after her psi-awakening experience with Hal Kenzie.

"Actually, there is, Ma'am," Spencer said with a soothing smile. The telepathic regions of his brain had already delved deep into her thoughts and come out with that same sinking feeling for the state of mind of their nemesis. But he too put on a brave front. They must have the resolve to see this through to the end.

"To use a human aphorism, Commander," Skyl explained, "I believe I have found the insurgents' Achilles' heel."

"Go on, Skyl," Rachel said with growing intrigue.

"Whatever device they are using to power the Elway Shift, it consumes an incredible amount of energy."

She nodded, looking down at the console he was gesturing towards.

"As you can see, Commander, they are bleeding much of this energy off the fusion reactors here in the saucer section. Consequently, they cannot, as Lieutenant Commander Stadi so informally put it, cut us loose."

"That's excellent, Skyl, but how can we use this to our advantage?" Rachel asked plainly.

"For one, it buys us time," Spencer said cheerily.

"Indeed," Skyl acknowledged, "and it also offers us a back door."

"Explain..." For the first time in hours, she felt a reluctant hope, and was at the same time in fear of it. She was afraid to believe by this point that they could ever hope to win their way out of this one.

"As you suggested, Commander," Skyl continued, "we can perhaps use my embedded computer program as a potential way to control this situation."

"How?" She scowled with equal amounts of incredulity and that same reluctant hope.

"The interdimensional device is routed through the power transfer conduits," he indicated, "and into the warp engine nacelles. This is our back door."

"My God Skyl, that's brilliant!" she exclaimed.

"Wait, you lost me," Spencer admitted with just a shade of embarrassment.

"By manipulating the plasma flow in the conduits," Rachel explained, "we can throw off their next jump." Even as she said this though, there was a bright flash of light followed by waves of nausea and a reinforcement of that ever-present headache. They were too late! More disconcerting perhaps than how they felt, however, was the horrendous groan that now disseminated from every bone of the 104, right down to their own teeth. The deck shuddered and alarms sounded as the soft hiss of escaping gases began to fill the room.

"There is buckling to the internal spaceframe," Skyl half-shouted over the din. At last, the cacophony of noises subsided as the ship automatically righted itself. "Forcefields have engaged, hull integrity field stable," Skyl reported, "but each jump brings us closer to complete structural failure," he warned.

"Gentleman, this man is insane," Rachel finally admitted, more to herself than to either of them, "but I suppose I don't have to tell you that," she continued with more than a touch of irony.

"Do you know where we are now, Skyl?" Spencer asked, still rattled.

"Triangulating starfixes... consulting astrometric databases..." He looked up with as much concern as his emotionless Vulcan features could offer. "We are in the Beta Lankal System, Commander, a Klingon world."

"God damn that man," Rachel seethed, "I warned him not to screw with the Klingons!"

"What do we know about this planet?" Spencer requested as she turned around with clenched fists and walked several feet away.

"Consulting historical database," Skyl said, eyeing Rachel speculatively. His eyes then scanned the multipage document and quickly summarized. "It appears to be a hotbed of political intrigue," he construed with a single upswept eyebrow. "The ruling family have long been highly vocal supporters of the Khitomer Accords and remain yet a powerful influence on the Klingon High Council, even despite their pro-Federation sentiments."

"Oh, great," Rachel muttered, balled up fists on hips, still facing away.

"It is also one of the key munitions stores for this sector of the galaxy..." Skyl finished off with a grimace, looking up now at his colleagues with his fingertips still pressed uncertainly on the control interface.

"Naturally," Rachel exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air and turning to slowly rejoin her comrades.

"Can we manipulate a jump?" Stadi asked hopefully, "...get us the hell out of here before they start a full-scale war?"

Skyl began to work feverously again at his control console even as Rachel moved up next to him and tried to assist on an adjacent console. But Skyl was a computer genius, and in the end, much like Spencer, all she could do was watch as the expert engineer worked his magic, his fingers flying across the screen. The ship lurched suddenly with a loud thud and the trio was forced to hold on momentarily while the internal stabilizers arrested the shivering motion.

"Disruptor fire from a bird-of-prey," Rachel announced, the first to regain her footing. A sickening thrum from somewhere beneath them indicated with assurance that the 104 had fired back; not once, but again, six times. "It's been destroyed," she whispered with dismay. Then the lights flickered and this time the sound was different, it was the muffled *phew* of something much larger being volleyed towards the Klingons from some other place deep down amidships. The ship lurched from the differentiation in thrust. "They have fired a tri-cobalt device towards the munitions dump on the planet," Skyl reported stoically. "Thirty seconds to target..."

"My gods," Spencer gasped, looking at Rachel.

"That'll destroy a radius of two-hundred kilometers," Rachel cried out, mirroring Spencer's own look of stunned disbelief. They both then looked at Skyl as his ominous report continued.

"Perhaps more," the Vulcan added matter-of-factly. "In our present orbit we are in grave danger, Commander..." Just then, as the countdown approached zero – and almost as if on cue – the 104 jumped out of orbit with a horrendous shriek that sent them all scrambling for cover. They were certain that the half-completed spaceframe was going to splinter into a thousand pieces right before their very eyes as bulkheads cracked above their heads and sparks showered down on them like rain from the devil. Gases hissed everywhere, some entering from ruptured conduits, and

indeed, some escaping into the empty vacuum of deep space. The room went dark for a moment before those ever-present safeties at last kicked in and some of the din at long last subsided.

"Holy shit," Spencer whispered into the uncomfortable silence. Behind him, the double-doors parted, and a man entered, perhaps as much shaken as they were. He sported a black eye, and several other less visible contusions, and his countenance was one of someone that had been beaten unmercifully. It was Yuri Antonov, one of the Turkana Four, and he had come to help them.

# |6|

From a tactical standpoint, the 104 was still a heavily armed battleship... but structurally, it was a much different story. The half-completed spaceframe was a veritable train wreck; each new interdimensional jump brought the beleaguered vessel that much closer to complete structural collapse. As Rachel Garrett and Spencer Stadi looked on, Lieutenant Skyl's ever-present computer consoles were painting a grim picture of the future prognosis of this once mighty *Ambassador*-class starship. The classic compartmentalized design used by Starfleet for more than a hundred years certainly held things together very nicely when complete, but with so many gaps and open spaces in the internal framework of the 104, the skeleton – and its thin bits of skin here and there – were beginning to tear and buckle under a plethora of uneven stresses that the ramshackle hull simply was not designed to handle. Basically, the ship could not support its own weight and it was just a matter of time before it folded in on itself.

Rachel stared at the readouts with complete dismay. As commander, the ship and everyone in it were technically her responsibility, but she was at a complete loss. Without computer control, her hands were tied, and there was very little they could do but wait for an opportunity to present itself. Skyl had suggested using his embedded computer program to perhaps control their next jump, but Hal Kenzie had been very quick to install multiple firewalls that even the Vulcan engineer was finding hard to break. Add to this the damage that was increasing exponentially with every jump, and it was becoming all too evident that time was short. Computer controlled safeties and structural integrity forcefields aside, if this madness wasn't stopped, the 104 had mere hours to live.

When all hope seemed lost, this was when Yuri Antonov walked into the small control room and startled them all. He was a slight little man of blonde hair and soft features and carried himself



within a beaten down frame that looked out at the world with eyes that darted. He sported a black eye, and several other less visible contusions, and his countenance was one of someone that had been beaten unmercifully. He walked up to the three comrades very cautiously at first with his hands held out in front of him in a protective gesture that suggested that he expected full-well to be beaten here as well. But the trio merely blinked, uncertain if what they were seeing was even real.

"Please," he said shakily, with the hint of a Russian accent. "I've come here to help."

"He's lying," Spencer blurted out suddenly, causing Rachel to flinch. "Don't trust him, Commander."

"No please," Yuri begged, "you-you-you don't understand... h-h-he's gone mad. He's beating us to keep the ship together... t-t-torturing others just for sport. S-s-six of us are dead already..."

"Rachel, please," Spencer urged with disgust, his nose scrunched.

"Skyl," she said levelly, staring Yuri squarely in his bright blue, but sad eyes. "Lifesigns..."

"Sensors indicate forty-one lifeform readings, Commander," Skyl reported, looking up from his screen with a single upswept eyebrow, "down six since our last reading."

"Rachel, I'm telling you, he's lying. They could've been killed in the last jump." Rachel continued to stare into the man's sad blue eyes. She was hoping that her human instinct would tell her something; her gut was telling her that this shattered man was telling at least some version of the truth, but at the same time, Spencer was a full-blood Betazoid, an adept telepath, and she trusted him implicitly.

"He gave me s-s-some kind of s-s-shot," Yuri continued to argue, "to-to-to interfere with your psilosynine, I swear!"

"Oh please," Spencer spat out, "he told you to say that!" he said angrily. "You don't even know what psilosynine is, you little twerp! I can see right through your simple little mind..."

"That's enough, Lieutenant Commander!" Rachel shouted, turning away from Yuri and looking at Spencer with fire in her almond eyes. *As if things couldn't get any worse!* This was just what she needed. Her ship in shambles, her hands tied, and now her confidante, her 'first officer', was acting just as squirrely as

everyone else around here! This whole damn ship was a nuthouse, and she was ready to crack some heads. She was really beginning to wonder now if this was all just some kind of advanced Commander's Test, with Chekov and all the rest of them just sitting behind some glass mirror somewhere chuckling and watching it all unfold. She turned to the only sane man left in the room with gritted teeth and demanded a report.

"We are now in orbit of Dulisian Four," Skyl answered cautiously. "I am monitoring a great deal of subspace radio traffic, Commander."

"Th-th-that would be to S-S-Sir Brandon Grey," Yuri stated nervously. Spencer huffed and turned away. "He's the leader of the local insurgency here on Dulisia."

"I'm begging you, Commander," Spencer implored her, "do not listen to this, this, this *kid!*"

Rachel beseeched him back with fierce almond eyes reinforced with thought. *Clear your head Spencer, please! We need to stick together on this... it's just another one of Hal Kenzie's games!*

"My mind is *clear*, Commander," he seethed out loud, frustrated that her feeble human mind couldn't see what his saw – couldn't even receive his reverse thoughts back to her.

Skyl eyed them both speculatively, beginning to wonder himself if in fact *he* was the only sane one left. "If I may, Commander?" the Vulcan queried calmly.

Rachel sighed.

Eyebrows drawn together critically, Skyl asked: "Private Antonov, if you are indeed *quote*, here to help, then can you assist us with computer access? Communications? Future targets?" Very few could resist the pressure of being backed into a corner by a Vulcan, and Rachel mentally thanked her 'chief engineer'. Logic could almost always win the day; humans just weren't very good at it.

"Skyl," Spencer warned, and Rachel silenced him with a look that could melt duranium. Yuri approached the computer console very reluctantly and was halted almost immediately by a defensive stance on Spencer's part that partially blocked his access. Spencer glanced at his commanding officer with a look of such certainty that she almost believed him. Yuri, black eye and all, looked like a

scared street orphan and Rachel was again torn. He'd been beaten, clearly, but at the same time, she knew Hal Kenzie, and the Hal Kenzie she knew wasn't capable of this level of malice. That Boris Rhotemious on the other hand, now there was a man that could maim and torture, she was sure of it. The memory of him scared her anew with those piercing eyes and that slight prick to the ears, the thinness in his face coupled with those overlarge squarish teeth – it all gave him the sallow features of a wolf and it filled her again with those same deep instinctual feelings of a stark rabbit cowering down in the rain-soaked dark of a wide-open meadow. She held back another shudder.

"Rachel, please, I'm begging you, do not trust this man..." Spencer half-whispered one more time.

"For God's sake, Spencer, enough!" she shouted, "we're out of options!" It just about broke her heart as he wilted before her. With a shriek, the 104 jumped again and the control center only just barely survived this latest onslaught to its integrity. Alarms blared, conduits ruptured, gases hissed; circuits popped and sizzled as the lights momentarily went out and were replaced with the blood-red hues of emergency lighting. Skyl's elixir only barely helped this time to ward off the debilitating effects of nausea and did nothing to stop that steel spike of pain from penetrating their addled brains. It became frighteningly clear that the 104's built-in safeties were much slower in their response this time as the room stayed dark and recovery back to 'normal' took painfully longer than was comfortable. "We are in orbit of the Qualor Two munitions dump," Yuri announced as soon as some of the more persistent alarms had been silenced.

"Gods damn it, Rachel, I'm telling you, he's lying, don't believe him!" Spencer barked at her. He was adamant now and bordering on frenzy.

"Watch your tone with me, Mister," Rachel barked back, casting him a look and an errant thought that she was sure would remind him that she not only outranked him, but that she was also the one solely in charge here. *You will address me as 'Commander' or 'Ma'am'* she fired out in her thoughts, *understood Lieutenant Commander?!* It was done more in frustration than in anger, and he nodded solemnly even as Skyl confirmed Yuri's report.

"We are indeed in orbit of Qualor Two, Commander," he said to Rachel, then eyed Spencer with a single upswept eyebrow. "Perhaps, Sir, Private Antonov is correct, and Gunnery Sergeant Kenzie is in some way manipulating your psilosynine response..."

"I am pleading with both of you," Spencer responded with eyes closed, "this is all just part of another twisted mind game, don't believe him, don't trust him." Spencer backed away, actually breathless, befuddled and frustrated, and Rachel's heart went out to her long-time friend. He believed he was telling the truth with every fiber of his being, she could feel it... but so far, Yuri had just as equally been nothing but straightforward with them as well. *Of course, this was another one of Hal's games! Duh!* But her mind a splitting headache, she had no recourse but to admit that she just couldn't see through it. Her heart was still fighting her logic, and her love was still fogging her greater senses. She just couldn't bring herself to believe that her love (her soulmate even?) could be capable of this level of malice. It had to be that Boris Rhotemious, *he just had* to be behind it all, she was convinced of it now, it was the only logical explanation.

"There are two starships approaching," Skyl reported levelly. "Starfleet is undoubtedly on a sector-wide high-alert and attempting to discern a pattern in the attacks."

"He won't wait," Yuri warned. The lights flickered again and the sound of a muffled *phew* signaled that once again something very large had been volleyed from that secret place somewhere down there deep amidships. As the ship lurched, Skyl scowled with dismay. He did not like this helpless *feeling* any more than anyone else.

"A tri-cobalt device," the Russian said to no one, knowing full-well that the sound needed no explanation. The ship lurched a second time, and then a third as its shields easily absorbed the energy of distant phaser fire. The two starships were still too far off to be of any use. "Brace yourselves," Yuri cautioned moments before the 104 made yet another harrowing cross-dimensional jump. This time not even the emergency lighting came on, and Rachel found herself cowering in the dark like a whimpering child as her ship nearly shook itself to pieces. This time, no alarms blared, no lights flashed, it was just the shrieking of metal and the persistent escape of atmosphere out into the void between the

incomplete sections. There was a real danger now that they might all suffocate, but the only real thing on their collective minds was the brain-splitting headache that put all four of them into a fetal position.

At long last, the safeties somehow kicked back into place one more time and things slowly returned to 'normal'. As expected, Skyl was the first on his feet. Instead of grabbing for his console however, he grabbed a nearby tricorder. "Damage to your DNA is reaching critical levels, Commander," he reported, scanning past her teary eyes and down into her chest cavity. He then scanned Spencer, and then finally Yuri before crossing over to a nearby replicator. Rachel could do nothing but lay on the floor and wait until Skyl returned with an even stronger batch of his magical elixir. "Unfortunately," he said softly as he injected the shot into her neck, "this is only a remedy not a cure... we will all have to undergo reconstructive gene therapy at a starbase medical facility."

"Help me up," she ordered with obvious anger in her voice. "Private Antonov, on your feet, *now*," she barked. "Can you help us regain computer access?"

"I-I-I th-th-think so," he stammered, pulling himself up on the edge of a workstation. "A-a-at least partially anyway..."

"Nooooo!" Spencer shouted, struggling to regain some footing.

"God dammit Spencer," Rachel seethed, but before she could get another word out, her nearly crazed first officer grabbed a phaser out of a nearby tool locker and pointed it at the perceived threat. Pale, scared, and stricken, Yuri backed himself up against a bank of computer subprocessors and cowered there like a child about to be smacked with a belt. Rachel was stunned, speechless. Her heightened psi-region was picking up wave upon wave of psionic energy from Spencer's overwrought and beleaguered mind and it wasn't good. She could sense keenly that he was about to have a psychotic split as his hand shakily held the dangerous firestick aloft. *What the hell had happened?* She wished she was a telepath, even if only for a moment, just to gain a sense of his true state of mind. It was clear that his brain chemistry had been altered, but as to how would probably remain a complete mystery forever.

"Spencer please," she pleaded, "I do believe he can help us," she tried to reason.

"No, I'm telling you..."

"*Come out, come out, wherever you arreee...*" filtered in over the comms and Yuri whimpered like a beaten dog. It was Hal Kenzie, and even Rachel could sense now the mania in the man's voice. She saw Skyl back away out of the corner of her eye, and she too felt some instinctual need to follow suit. Even Spencer lowered the phaser and stepped back a few steps.

"*You've been a very naughty boy,*" the voice continued, and Yuri looked into Rachel's eyes with such a sadness that tears welled, and she brought a trembling hand up to cover her trembling lips.

"H-h-he is controlling your individual jumps through your communicators," Yuri whispered, perhaps as a final peace offering, entreating her to help.

"More lies..." Spencer whispered in her other ear, his assertion still of disgust. Yuri stiffened as the voice continued, his eyes imploring Rachel now to do *something*. "*Say goodbyeeee...*" the voice sang out, and with that, there was a bright flash of light – only Yuri didn't vanish as expected – instead, his body inverted in on itself, and then exploded with the energy of a stick of dynamite. The computer processor he was leaning against instantly erupted into a ball of flame that spread very quickly to the adjoining hardware. Within a matter of moments, a full-third of the control center was engulfed in a rapidly growing conflagration that filled the air with toxic smoke and sent the trio crawling out on hands and knees towards safety.

Ordinarily, automatic fire suppression systems would kick in and put the blaze out, but none of it worked now as the 104 wallowed half in the grave. Fueled by an ungodly mix of plastics and composites, and an ample supply of oxygen, the fire flashed over almost instantly and ignited the rest of the room all at once, causing Rachel and her comrades to jump up and dive out the double-doors into the corridor. Fortunately, the computer was at least able to seal the doors behind them, even as the three companions fell to the deck, smoking and scorched, breathless, and barely clinging to life.

The shock of the experience suddenly jolted Spencer's telepathic brain back to reality, and he began immediately to see

that Yuri *had indeed* been telling the truth all along. The emotional toll of this, as it slowly settled in, threatened to be almost as debilitating as the unreality itself! He had condemned Yuri to death by nothing more than false accusation, and this burned into his psi-region now like the fires that still burned behind those impenetrable sealed doors. It was becoming clear as a bell now that Hal Kenzie had engineered this entire scheme just to sow seeds of dissention and distrust amongst him and his two companions – and the actual reasons for *why* he had fallen for it were slipping through his fingers now faster than he could process. Laying on the deck, he coughed, sobbed three times, then buried his face in his hands in shame.

At long last he looked up and stared into the eyes of Rachel and Skyl who sat propped up against a nearby bulkhead. "Let's get that son-of-a-bitch," was all he said, as calmly and as coolly as one might say hello.

Her tattered uniform still smoldering, she turned her head towards her Vulcan engineer. "Skyl," she contemplated, "if he got here, then we have to be able to get there. How did he do it? Find a way!" she implored him finally.

Skyl paused for a long moment in thought before speaking cautiously. "I believe, Commander," he mused, "that Private Antonov may have provided us with a clue before his untimely demise..."

"Our communicators..." Spencer breathed softly, sitting up now himself in a swirl of grey smoke.

"So, we jump in?" Rachel intoned rhetorically, then wryly: "Not exactly an appealing prospect, Lieutenant."

"Still," Skyl stated matter-of-factly, "with no functioning transporters, I see little recourse, Commander." Of course, she would do it, Rachel concluded quickly, if not to save her ship, then to save the Federation from an all-out war with the Klingons. She thought again of Chekov watching her through a silvered-out window and couldn't help but wonder: what would he do? What would Kirk do? What would anyone of that 'older' generation do when faced with the prospects of a full-scale invasion? This was the Kobayashi Maru and the Commander's Test all rolled into one. The no-win scenario and that obligation of self-sacrifice that is required in order to serve the needs of the many over those of the one. The greater whole, the bigger picture, the need to take that step back

to see what is necessary to preserve, protect, and defend the preservation of peace at any cost. Of course, she would do it. She had sworn an oath.

"How many more jumps do you think we can make?" Spencer asked grimly.

"Two, perhaps three," Skyl speculated. They weren't referring to the integrity and safety of the 104 anymore by this point, but to their own health and wellbeing. The damage to their DNA was already beginning to present itself in a number of readily apparent ways. Thready heartbeats, clammy skin, and of course, that persistent nagging headache that simply would not go away. If they didn't do something soon, it didn't matter what condition the ship, all three of them would be reduced to drooling quivering idiots just short of a bowl of Jell-O.

"Communications is a minor subsystem," Skyl continued to venture, "I may be able to gain access..."

"But first we need a new base of operations," Rachel stated decisively, forcing herself to her feet by sliding up the bulkhead. "Come," she encouraged, offering two hands to both of her faithful comrades, "time is short, no rest for the wicked."

Skyl raised a single upswept eyebrow and stared at her speculatively as he was launched to his feet. Clearly, he hadn't heard that particular human euphemism and it caused him to give pause. "I don't believe that we are the offending party in this particular situation, Commander," he said finally with an award-winning Vulcan scowl.

"Let's go, Beelzebub," Rachel smirked, patting the soot off the back of his scorched and threadbare uniform. Behind them, Spencer laughed for the first time all day. Hope, it seems, often rises from the ashes of deep disillusionment and discontent... and sometimes perhaps, resolve can only be gotten from the fires of debilitating despair and depredation.

It was a well-known fact that Rachel Garrett was not one to just sit idly by... like her grandfather, she was a doer, not a talker, and had always decided it best to just throw herself headfirst into a problem. Sometimes this brashness had backfired on her a time or two to be sure – one can't always dive headlong into the abyss without taking a good long look first – but this brashness was



leavened somehow with certain knack of turning melancholy into resolve, and her resolve had hardened itself now doubly so into this renewed task of retaking her ship. Brash or not, she would do this at almost any cost. *Just what did an insurgent group want with a half-finished starship?!* she continued to muse to herself. At first, her youthful naiveté had failed to realize that sometimes it was not so much the *thing* itself that mattered, but the *idea* of the thing that was of true significance. As she continued to ponder, she slowly began to realize that even the dubious act of stealing this most top-secret thing had been overshadowed now by the sheer havoc its idea had wrought upon the galaxy. Fear not only promulgates growth, but also action. The Federation and Klingon Councils would no longer be able to ignore this border situation; they would have to act.

After walking for what seemed like endless miles down a maze of mismatched corridors, Rachel suddenly found herself at the site of her first restorative oasis, that light and airy crew lounge. "Ah, screw it, I'm hungry," she called out behind her, throwing up a flippant hand. Her small troop stopped for a moment and stared at each other as she wheeled into the small room and marched up to the replicator. "No condemned prisoner in the history of humankind has ever died on an empty stomach!" she proclaimed as she ordered a chicken salad sandwich and a tall, ice-cold glass of sweet tea. "Come, boys, eat," she commanded as they both eyed her speculatively, curious at her sudden change in character. "I expect," she finally explained, "that we have stopped... *wherever we are...* because they are ass-deep in repairs right now. Seem logical, Skyl?" Her eyes twinkled at him.

"Indeed, Commander," Skyl responded evenly with a single upswept eyebrow.

"Then eat!" she bade them once more, sveltely plucking her China plate and fogged up glass out of the miracle device. Starving himself, Spencer was quick to take her up on her offer before his Vulcan companion could object. Skyl's upper lip visibly curled as the Betazoid first officer turned away from the machine next with a huge bowl of oskoid, and an even taller glass of uttaberry juice. He followed Rachel to a nearby table and sat while Skyl still stood, flummoxed. At long last, he too finally caved into the pressures of fatigue and hunger and ordered plomeek soup and spice tea.

Grinning now, Rachel and Spencer looked on as he carefully pulled out his food items, then moved quietly to a nearby table.

"Oh, for God's sake, Skyl," Rachel scolded him as he was about to sit down. "We're over here." She waved, and Spencer chuckled for the second time that day. With a sigh that could've blown down a house, the Vulcan reluctantly gathered up his dishes and moved sheepishly over to their table. "Together again," Rachel said cheekily, holding up her glass, as he slid uncomfortably into his chair. Spencer merely grinned and began picking at the oskoid as Rachel took a huge gulp of tea and licked her lips with a gigantic *Ahhhh*.

"So, tell me," she said at length, after taking two huge bites of her sandwich, "is it true that you're a prince?"

Spencer gulped, caught somewhat unawares as he was slugging down a deep draft from his own glass. "Uh," he sputtered, "I guess so... the human equivalent of one anyway," he finished off demurely, his eyes darting about the room.

"Your Highness," she said with a tilt of the head, and his face turned a slight shade of crimson. Still, she wasn't like the others, her cheekiness was not condescending or rude, it was just an aspect of her character that Spencer could sense had certainly gotten the good commander into trouble a time or two before in years gone by.

"I don't know if I'd go quite that far." He smiled back at her softly, and she could sense now that she'd hit a sensitive spot.

"Sorry," she clicked, feeling a little red now herself.

"No, it's okay, Commander," he responded, wiping his mouth with a white linen. "You see, the five continents of Betazed are ruled by five very ancient families... I have no more social standing than any other member of these families." He casually plucked another leaf of oskoid out of his bowl. "I'm just not... how do you say on Earth... common?"

Skyl raised a single upswept eyebrow and looked at Rachel with a shade of astonishment that was obvious to anyone. She merely chuckled and took another bite of her sandwich. Spencer looked at Skyl, then back to his commander, his face turning even more crimson than before.

"Oh, my gods, Commander," he sputtered, his psi-region digging up images of Henry the Eighth and Whitehall, "I didn't mean to imply that you were common..."

"So, Skyl," Rachel smirked devilishly, "any royal impertinence coursing through your green-blooded veins?"

The Vulcan eyed her speculatively, unsure of the tack she was running in. He did not know this most peculiar woman as well as Spencer (not even taking into account the baffling and erratic whims of general human disposition as a whole) and thus did not immediately know how to respond. After a long pause, he sighed another deep sigh. "My mother, T'Lara, is the culinary maven at our district primary school... and my father, of course, was General Seti of Federation Defense and Security." He paused for a moment. "I should like to contact her," he mused, "but the present situation has not allowed me sufficient repose."

The room fell deathly silent, and Rachel's heart and breath stopped. It was her turn now to turn a shade, only this time it was not red, but a pallid white. She did not know what to say to the man. All emotions aside, the pain was still buried somewhere down there deep in the darkness. But Rachel was no counselor, and she certainly was no expert on the Vulcan psyche. She instinctively turned to Spencer, almost like a lifeline, hoping that in some way his telepathic paracortex could somehow soothe her own awkward disquiet. Then she laughed internally... how perfectly selfish of the human mind to want to internalize that ill-gotten comfort and wrap it around one's own dark mistidings! Spencer looked down at his plate of half-eaten oskoid and suddenly didn't feel so hungry.

"I am sorry, Mister Skyl," she said softly, placing her slender fingers on his wrist. "As you get to know me," she sighed, "you will find that my cheeky mouth is my own worst enemy."

Skyl merely pierced his lips in a thoughtful frown. Talk for the sake of talking was a purely human characteristic that Vulcans found somewhat difficult to reconcile against their own quiet contemplation. He wondered now how the Betazoids, with their full disclosure, were able to cope with not only the incessant chatter, but what must surely be a cyclone of erratic thoughts as well. A touch-telepath, the Vulcan recoiled imperceptibly from her gentle touch and cast Spencer a barely perceptible sideways glance.

In the awkward silence that followed, Spencer suddenly slid the half-eaten bowl of oskoid away from him and tossed his napkin down on the table. "I suppose it goes without saying that the third tri-cobalt device was never actually placed aboard the *Prince of Wales* in the first place," he said hotly.

"Likely not," Skyl said thoughtfully, also sliding away his unfinished bowl of rapidly cooling soup. Feeling sick to her stomach for what she'd started, Rachel gulped down sullenly the half-chewed morsel that still remained in her mouth, then followed suit and slid away the remains. Her head hurt, her throat was dry, and the meal had not refreshed her in the way she'd hoped. Her heart and soul were empty and her love for Hal continued to hollow her out like a gourd. She just couldn't bring herself to reconcile with what the facts were telling her, even as Skyl looked plaintively into her soft almond eyes.

"What happened?" Spencer pleaded, looking as well into those warm orbs of muted brown. In a rare moment of psi-clarity, she and Skyl both knew intuitively that the Betazoid was looking to Rachel now for answers, answers to the question of Vladimir Henry Kenzie and what made him tick. Like Hitler, though, or Khan Noonien Singh, answers often fell short. Evil doesn't always fit neatly into a college textbook, and psychology is an artform written only by the sane of mind. Evil is not simply some kind of quantifiable diagnosis; it is a morbid and unreasoning *need* that bleeds through the fabric of logic and stains the solid footing of rationality underneath. *What happened?*

"James T. Kirk happened," Rachel stated bluntly. "For all the man's failings, he commanded a fanatical loyalty from anyone that lived in his time."

"General Chang described Captain Kirk as insubordinate and unprincipled, with a history of violating the chain of command whenever it suited him..."

"Yes, Skyl," Rachel countered, "but we're not talking about Kirk the officer here, we're talking about Kirk the man."

"I don't understand," Spencer frowned, and she smiled.

"Half the galaxy went nuts on the day that man died," she explained after some careful thought. "Fringe groups sprang up everywhere, conspiracy theories spread like pandemics, and the once steady foundation of Starfleet was shaken right down to its

very core." Rachel puckered her lips and threw up a hand. "Hell, it even rippled through the Klingon Empire, causing them for once to give pause and take a breath." She smiled again, thinking of Chang and his unfortunate end. "Millions of lives were changed forever on that day," she concluded wistfully. "It was the end of an era, and the beginning of an uncertain future."

Spencer nodded, thinking of *The Twins* and the not-too-distant past of his own war-torn homeworld.

"Such fanaticism is illogical," Skyl stated flatly, forgetting for a moment the shredded past of his own battled-scarred ancestors.

"Perhaps," Rachel conceded. "But you have to understand, Skyl, when a man like that dies, he becomes more than just a martyr... he becomes a martyr to the *perception* of who people *think* he was and of what he believed in."

"So, based on what Admiral Chekov told us then," Spencer offered, "Hal Kenzie is a fanatic?" The statement was tendered more as an explanation than as a question.

"Hal Kenzie is an extremist," Rachel corrected, wagging a finger. "Do not mistake the two, his actions are carefully calculated." On this she mused quietly, understanding perhaps for the first time herself. She then blinked and warned: "Do not believe for a moment that he could fall into the trap of religious fanaticism... he is much too savvy for that."

"So, the *Gladius Iacobi*..."

"...is just a front," she stated conclusively, and Spencer and Skyl both nodded in sudden comprehension.

"They are just the means to an end," Spencer pondered thoughtfully.

"Exactly. He has capitalized on an insignificant religious movement borne on the fringes of a backwater little border world and molded it into a fighting cause. The cause itself however is irrelevant to his ultimate intent." She was only half as aware as her two comrades of the rare moment of psi-clarity that the trio were now sharing. Telepathic minds can do strange things when immersed in an ocean of deep thought, and the room was flooded with it. One of the successes of the Federation was this open dialogue that had developed between worlds that kept all in check and put the brakes on fringe extremism. There was simply no room for it in an advanced, multicultural society.

"Extremism of any kind is precipitously dangerous," Skyl counselled, "whether it be religious, political, or otherwise... and there are purposeful safeguards written into the Federation charter to protect against it."

"Yes," Rachel agreed emphatically. "Y'know," she then said with a cluck, "there was once a president on Earth in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century that commanded such a fanatical following that it led to insurrections and levels of unrest that nearly toppled the most powerful nation in history." She paused, dropping a half-curved fist on the table, thumb and pointer finger out like a gun. "History writes the future, if only the future will listen... extremism is a trap that pulls us all under like quicksand. The safeguards we enjoy today *did not* come easily."

"Unfortunately, none of our homeworlds are strangers to the cult following," Spencer submitted, thinking again of *The Twins*. "The *Gladius Iacobi*, the cult of James," he finished quietly, causing them all to give pause, for they all knew that religious extremism was the most dangerous of them all. It provided hope for the hopeless, a sense of belonging to the nameless, and it calmed desperation in the restless – and strangely enough, it drew in the wicked who required sanctified justification for their own heinous depravities – and the leaders born of this, well, they can become almost godlike in their own actions, which is why it's so dangerous... they command death at a whim, destruction at cost, and demand sacrifice without end – and no one ever questions it! Talk of *Independence* on the border worlds had always been just that, *talk* – until that is, Vladimir Henry Kenzie turned it into a *movement*. And he firmly believed that every great civilization needed a leader, and he would become that leader, a leader like James T. Kirk, a leader to be *worshiped*, a messiah to save the masses from their own inept complacency. But at the heart of it though, way beyond that abnormal need for glory, was something even more sinister. Something grievous and dark that had interwoven itself around the insides of Hal Kenzie. *A serpent*. And his genius in turn, had slowly coiled its own self around this diabolical menace within until even the evil itself had been supplanted by something more, a narcissistic need for control, and an uncontrollable need to control *everything*.

Rachel considered the situation. The man she had known in her youth was a man of impenetrable hope, no doubt; it was his strength and tenacity that had set him apart from all the other street urchins as he rose above the sludge heaps of Turkana IV. However, the side of Hal Kenzie that she *did not* know was Hal Kenzie the demigod, Hal Kenzie the *almighty*. Somewhere, in his fanciful climb to glory, the vision that he'd created of himself had become perverse, and a little off-center. It had morphed in on itself, and his soul took on a graver side, a hurtful side, and the meanness at its very core slowly began to become *pleasure*. He *liked* to hurt people. Vladimir Henry Kenzie had truly become a being of such unthinkable evil that her wildest imagination could never hope to conjure up such a devious and dangerous monster. Her subconscious mind shuddered involuntarily... this wasn't about his tiny little band of freedom fighters; *it never had been!* It was about his self-satisfying, tiny little need for justification. A lack of self-confidence and a low self-worth so debilitating as to be unrecognizable to what it had actually become. And as God-like as he thought he may be, all in his path would be crushed, including Commander Rachel Garrett. He would be in control at a cost beyond control, even at the cost of himself. He would be the ultimate force in the universe.

"And that, my friends, is the answer to the question of Vladimir Henry Kenzie," Rachel said, curtailing her thoughts bluntly, leaving out all the rest — leaving out the love, and the hollowing-out of her soul. She left out the betrayal and the heartache, and the instinctive need she still felt to help this man who had been so much a part of her life for so long, whether in it or out of it — that hidden force that lurks beneath. We all become a blurry image of who we're with, and even in the shadows of these images there is a sullen force that can still steer us in directions we may not always be aware of. But regardless, helping him was moot now, whether she knew it or not, and his destruction was the only thing left. He must be destroyed to preserve and protect everything she held most dear, everything she'd sworn an oath to, everything that mattered most across half the known galaxy. He must be destroyed to save it all, even if the cost was herself, her ship, and indeed, the fine men that now sat before her. They must be the force of reason that stands in the face of wanton destruction, the force that betrays

all sense of logic to extinguish evil in all its heinous manifestations, that force that gives all when no-one else will. They must be the force of right in a world overcome with wrongs. They would be the sacrifice.

"Weapons control," she said decidedly, breaking the silence, and immediately standing with newfound resolve. Skyl nodded solemnly even as Spencer rose slowly to meet the challenge. The destruction wrought upon Betazed by *The Twins* was still much to close at hand in the blurry realms of telepathic memory for him not to be moved to action.

"For my father," Skyl said finally, looking up sadly into their understanding eyes. He, too, rose just as Rachel Garrett vanished into that all-too-familiar flash of bright white light. Their force had been diminished by one, and their souls sang a silent lament for its unfortunate passing. A sacrifice had been given; God would be pleased.

*Drifting, aimlessly drifting. In the last few precious moments before her shuttle exploded, Lieutenant Rachel Garrett was just able to don a pressure suit before the rear hatch blew, sending her plunging into the abyss in a tight, head-to-toe spin. Dizzy and disoriented and out of control, she'd very nearly lost consciousness in those first scant seconds that it took to activate the airflow inside the suit. Uncomfortable and freezing now, she'd subsequently spent the next two harrowing hours with her eyes mostly closed, rallying against the rapidly swirling stars, fighting off space sickness, and barely clinging to life.*

Now she was drifting, aimlessly drifting, light-years from anything or anyone, and all alone in the dark. She'd had no time to send out a distress call from the shuttle, and the suit's comm relay was much too weak to reach anywhere beyond but a few hundred kilometers, and so there she was. Scared, oh yes, scared now beyond all belief as her oxygen grew thin and she began to anticipate death out here all alone in the endless dark between the stars – her body resigned for all eternity to just drift out here, all alone and lost forever, far, far from home and much further from everyone and everything that she had ever known.



Rachel had initially found comfort in her memories; her days growing up in the great forests of New York, along a placid river that meandered its way through a majestic park. But now that the air grew thin, her memories turned darker; more sinister. She opened her eyes and tried to focus *not* on the spinning stars, but instead on the dark and empty spaces in between. Caught in a trance, a near delirium even, her mind continued to flash back to those earlier times. She fought against it at first, but slowly, as death drew near, she began to look on it instead as a sort of reckoning. It seemed like so long ago now, and she was so very cold; the will to fight was slowly being drained from her like the tepid water from a cast-iron tub. Swirling, forever swirling down, down, down, into that cold wet dark.

Her academy years had been a challenge to say the least. A rural life dumped into the hot city like an under-done cake. A small sea of humanity swamped by an ocean of interplanetary multiplicity. She'd had no support from home, no happy party or celebrated send-off, she'd just been beamed in from the local recruiting office a half a world away; transported from a seemed antiquity to the world of tomorrow in barely the blink of an eye.

Hell, it'd only been the second time in her life that she'd ever been transported anywhere!

Lonely and alone, she spent those first few weeks at the academy lurking around the Presidio like some backwoods interloper, afraid of the bigness of the world and dreading the depth of deep space that now confronted her with its own dark uncertainty.

Regret? Perhaps. But then that 'change' slowly overtakes a person, and they realize for the first time that the big bad world isn't actually so bad after all – and then that first trip up to Spacedock opens up a brand-new world all its own. Unfortunately, however, the past still haunts, and the hurt of our childhood still hunts. It is a beast that continually follows us, forever in the shadows, and never really pouncing per se, just sort of prowling there and waiting for us to stumble. The past pulls and it pulls, and it leaves us to wonder and to want, and it blinds us to what we can't see... that the future is actually a road that we can steer. But the past is a fog as thick or as thin as we make it. Some push forward with reckless abandon, while some of us, we are drawn

backward, we know not why, ceaselessly fighting against that coiling snake of passed away time that is our history. Rachel's history was one of black and white in a future where color should've supplanted the seediness of basic human emotion and replaced it with the evolved sensibility of a healthy mindset. Earth was a paradise unparalleled, and its citizens happy.

Yet, an unexpected death can shake anyone's tree, especially when that death is a child. The branches of a family begin to shed their leaves, and without the support of healthy roots, the life within soon withers. Rachel was running, whether she knew it or not, running from that snake that twists forever tighter the further away we try to get. For whatever reason, some of us run faster than others, and for some, they are lucky enough that they don't need to run at all. The snake has lost its grip and they steer the course ahead unhindered by the fear and the anger that can hold the rest of us back. Rachel was running as much from her brother as she was from that river, and she was running from a family tree that was slowly ripping itself up by its own roots. Running blindly, though, can make us reckless, and in all her blind recklessness, Rachel ran straight into the saving arms of one Vladimir Henry Kenzie.

Hal Kenzie had not always been a demigod. He started out just like all the rest of us – a snot-nosed kid that didn't know wealth from poverty, nor privilege from the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Turkana IV was a barren world, and despite any allusions of grandeur, his parents were dirt-poor farmers from the steppes outside New Moscow. But he never laid claim to them though, nor to his heritage... he always felt that he was so much more, that he was destined for a future glory that went above and beyond these, his most humble beginnings. Unlike Rachel, his path ahead was clear. There was no fog obscuring his road and no snake convoluting his future. The snake had lost its grip long ago as he climbed above the sludge heaps and the gang lords of his past and pushed forward towards the path ahead with a reckless abandon that was always so foreign to her.

Their relationship had been stormy, full of love and hate, and angry words comingled with promises that neither could keep. We all become a blurry image of who we're with, and the dangerous side of Hal played itself out within Rachel in the form of off-world

drugs, raves, and sadly sinking grades. Hal though, he took nothing from her. So perverse was his internal self that all the good that Rachel had to offer was devoured by that beast within. Her own blurry image was shattered, and his evil self-supplanted it instead with the gnarled shards of the diabolical. He used her and used her until her soul had been bled dry. Yet somehow, like the hapless victim of a vampire, she held on to that last drop of blood in her veins, and with the help of Commandant Uhura, rebuilt herself from the dissolute remains of her fragmented past and managed to push forward... but the snake still coiled, and conscious of it or not, she was still running.

Out of breath now, she began to gasp for air, as much out of panic as suffocation.

And then the *Starship Hathaway* beamed her aboard... or so it seemed.

*But this was different.*

# |7|

This was not what it seemed. She awoke slowly, nauseous and bewildered. She tried to draw a hand up to her head to grip in vain at the piercing pain, but she couldn't move. She tried to force herself to sit up, but again, she could not move. Her vision blurred, her brain mired in a deep fog of confusion and hurt, she fought even to remain conscious. Indeed, she fought even to remember who she was! A closely-held secret, she had forever been stricken by the affliction of claustrophobia – it had very nearly derailed her career in Starfleet in fact. But this was no spacesuit. It felt instead almost like a coffin as it pressed tightly against every inch of her body. Her mind instantly flashed of course to those urban legends of being buried alive, and she began immediately to panic. How would she breathe?! How long could she last here so far underground?

Panting heavily and breaking out into a cold sweat, she remembered now. She was *Commander* Rachel Garrett of the *Starship 104*. Her vision clearing, all she could see was a faint bluish glow at first. All around her she could hear the whir and hum of dozens of tiny little gadgets. She could smell the ozone from the charge of multiple close-quarter electrical circuits. She could taste the bile in her mouth and feel the resultant knot in her throat from the endless hours of nausea and panic that had gripped her since their very first jump into the Eagle Nebula. She began to shuffle her shoulders and hips back and forth now in a vain attempt to break free. But the coffin held firm. She could only just barely wiggle her fingers at her sides, say nothing of anything else... escape was impossible. Her panic was now complete... panting and wriggling and soaked in her own sweat, she began to sob, unable to cry out for help or even to scream. Uncontrollable spasms wracked her body now as the tears flooded her eyes. She clenched them shut, sending coursing rivulets of anguish and fear down her temples and into her ears. She shook her head once and convulsed,

fearing she may drown instead. *Oh, dear God help me,* she pleaded, shaking her head and blowing snot out her nose. She inhaled once.

♪ *"What's the difference between a man and a monster? Is it somewhere between I can, and I want to?"* ♪ The tune entered her ears, and she released a breath. There was something about the voice. It was deep and melodic, and its smooth resonance roused within her memories of a past intertwined with the heartache of love and the languish of hate. ♪ *"Is it somewhere between the promises I made and the fact that I couldn't see something getting in the way?"*<sup>5</sup> ♪

"H-h-hal, is that y-y-you," Rachel croaked in an incredibly dry throat. Her voice was raspy and muffled inside the coffin and she wriggled again trying to break free. Her gut was telling her that she had to get out *now* at any cost.

*"Do try to be still, Commander, there is no escape..."* He continued to whistle the mournful tune, though it was a ballad she wasn't familiar with.

"Hal please," she squirmed and pleaded, "I'm sc-sc-scared... what the hell is going on?" She was startled suddenly by the appearance of his distorted face just inches above her own. She realized now that she'd been looking out through a poly lens at the ceiling above. Her almond eyes blinked at his overlarge and contorted image as it hovered there, just barely in focus. His own eyes were an emerald green, flecked with yellow, and rare in the modern age – which was perhaps why Rachel had always found herself so lost in them. She tried to thrash again against the sides of the coffin, but it was no use. Her instincts were telling her that she was now in mortal danger. "Hal please," she softened.

*"You are encased, my dear, within a photon torpedo,"* he said very casually. *"A gift for your Admiral Chekov and the starship Horatio."* His face backed away from the poly lens and he began whistling again, only this time the tune had changed. Like a bird without a song, Rachel tried to croak, but her throat had become so dry in the stale air that she could barely swallow. She pushed her feet frantically and tried to shuck back and forth, but the torpedo casing was so tight around her that she had mere inches

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<sup>5</sup> Song lyrics by Mike Shinoda – all rights reserved.

of play. At the risk of passing out, Rachel began to pant again, fighting back the overwhelming tears that would surely drown her if she let them escape into the realism of accepting the truth. She tried to twist in an attempt to roll over, but her shoulders met resistance at every turn. *Calm, you must remain calm!* She inhaled through her nose and held it.

*"Careful now love, I'd hate to have you set the thing off prematurely,"* he said in response to her thrashing.

"Why?" she whispered faintly, releasing the breath.

♪ *"I got demons inside me, so I'm faced with a choice... either try to ignore them, or I give them a voice..."* ♪ ...and he continued to whistle.

"Stop it you fool," she croaked angrily. "Why are you doing this?!" The tears of the past came at last and flooded down her cheeks in snaking new rivers. Oh, the love she'd felt for this man, and oh the betrayal... but still the love. It was a box without a key, a puzzle without a solution.

His face appeared again in the poly lens. In all his thirty years, she had been his only weakness. Nothing had stopped his rise to glory, not his shiftless parents or their dirt farm, not the pitiless gang lords or their dirty city, and certainly not Starfleet and their exulted values... only Rachel Garrett had ever been a threat to him, and his solid heart cracked just a little even now as she lay there in a puddle of her own effluent. *Damn her.* Glory was always just within his reach, he knew it, but the limited conscience of his twisted mind had always been anchored to this one woman and he knew, yes, he knew, that he would be anchored to her forever. He loved her. So, she must die.

*"Sometimes losing your mind is easier than accepting the truth,"* he said softly in that deep melodic resonance that had once won her over time and time again. *"You are a part of me that I left behind... I go now to a higher calling."* And his face vanished.

Rachel inhaled and held it, it was the only way she could speak. "You mean the *Gladius Iacobi*?" she gasped. "James T. Kirk would've blown you outta the sky, you insolent bastard. You shame his name."

*"In every revolution, there's one man with a vision."* Hal said cheekily and it angered her further, *"Kirk's final words to the Mirror-Spock."* He then paused in what appeared to be quiet

contemplation. *"I find the whole concept of a mirror universe intriguing, don't you Rach? Perhaps on the other side I'm a good man..."*

She could sense his voice trailing off there for a moment with just the barest hint of regret. In years past, she would've tried to capitalize on it, but her mind and body were sensing now that she'd played her last card. It is a calm that comes over the doomed, a grace in the face of death that grants safe passage to the soul, from Mary Queen of Scots right down to the terrorist, Timothy McVeigh. An acceptance that this is the time, the hour of my calling. It is a time we all must face in the end, a time where silence has lease and quiet contemplation gives pause. A time to at last be at one with the peace of knowing that mortality is fleeting, and indeed in the end, the snake will strike, no matter how far or how fast you've run. There are limits to forgiveness, and Rachel had nothing else to say. Let this maniac prattle on as he wished, she was alone and with herself now. He could no longer touch her; he could no longer hurt her. A few more moments of discomfort and then she would be vaporized against the hull of the *Horatio*. There was nothing she could do about that, or anything else, so just let it go. Eventually Starfleet would destroy Hal Kenzie, and he would be remembered, like all villains, only by name – and only in triplicate, to denote perhaps that they were just that little bit less than human. John Wilkes Booth – Lee Harvey Oswald – James Earl Ray – Mark David Chapman – Khan Noonian Singh – Vladimir Henry Kenzie.

All had been forgotten for who they were, they were only remembered for who they'd hurt. Rachel felt a thump and then sensed the torpedo casing begin to move. Out her little poly window she could see the bluish glow of the ceiling passing placidly by. It was merely the sky, she decided, and she closed her eyes to pray... something she had not done since the innocence of her youth – she prayed for Spencer, and for Skyl, for the men and women of the *Horatio* that she would shortly help to annihilate – and indeed for Vladimir Henry Kenzie who had not always been a bad man.

♪ *"Sometimes, sometimes you don't say goodbye once, you say it over, and over, and over again..."* ♪ she heard him sing as the photon torpedo passed into the darkness of the launch tube.

She perceived a bright white flash and knew intuitively that the 104 had just jumped into orbit of Trill to stand nose to nose

with her twin sister. Perhaps the *Horatio* might have a fighting chance? She couldn't worry about that now. It was interesting, she thought that she'd felt no nausea or discomfort during that last jump. It seemed Hal really *couldn't* touch her anymore. She had passed now way beyond his pitiful little plane of existence. *There are some secrets that not even the cold dark earth can keep buried*, she mused, a warning her grandfather had once given her. *The truth shall seek you out*. Hal Kenzie was a nobody. A ragamuffin little snot-nosed kid from a backwater border world, and as much as he fancied himself a God, that's all he would ever be, and indeed all he would ever be remembered for – the sickly son of a rock-poor dirt farmer. A brief aberration in the history of man that would soon be forgotten.

The torpedo lurched and she steeled herself for launch.

*"Commander Garrett, Commander Garrett, do you read?"*

Huh? Amazingly, she had been half-asleep. *"Commander Garrett..."* –the voice was Russian– *"if you cun hear me, I am getting you out uv dare."*

"Wh-wh-who, wh-wh-what?!"

*"It's Sergey Rozhenko, Ma'am, I'm going to get you out uv dare, but I have to wait until zee point of impact or elze he'll know."*

She actually rolled her eyes. "I'm not going anywhere Chief," she huffed. *This should be interesting*. At least if she were vaporized in the attempt, she'd never know it. *"Commander, you must remember zee number 8675309... it iz dee accezz code for zee communication zystem... 8675309... remember da code!"*

The torpedo launched.

The G-forces were astronomical as Rachel and the torpedo were shot out of the 104 like a cannonball. Screaming was impossible, she couldn't even breathe, so she just gritted her teeth instead. She just barely saw the underbelly of the 104 whiz by before it was replaced by the star-speckled blackness of deep space. For a moment, time slowed down.

She tilted her chin to chest and only scarcely caught a glimpse of the *Horatio*, (and beyond it, beautiful Trill with its purplish oceans) before the torpedo changed direction, sending her on an intercept course with her fate. For a few moments here and there, she had that giddy feeling of weightlessness (almost like being on a rollercoaster) that only altered when the torpedo



adjusted its heading and thus pressed her against the casing at different and unnatural angles. She couldn't help but strangely smile at the absolute insanity of it all. It almost went without words... the whole thing was just plain *nuts*. Time sped up now as she saw the underbelly of the *Horatio* flash by and then, perhaps even more strange, she felt an acute compression in her feet as the torpedo made contact with the hull. *Cutting it a bit close aren't we*, was her last parting thought before a soft white light enveloped her.

*My F\*\*king God!* She rolled over and sneezed, weirdly enough, which caused her to laugh. It was that giddy sort of laugh one gets when they've just cheated death, and only by the skin of their toenails mind you. Pushing herself up on her elbows she wiggled her toes, and then wriggled her nose, fighting back the urge to sneeze again. The giggling continued – it was almost orgasmic – as she tried to size up where she was and if indeed, she still had all the integral parts she'd woken up with this morning.

"It is agreeable to see you again, Commander," Skyl said, peering down over her with a single upswept eyebrow, wondering at her curious reaction to their worsening predicament.

"By God, Skyl," Rachel laughed, peering sideways up at him, "you engineers should spend more time out in the field instead of sitting around here behind your computers all day." The poor man actually looked dismayed. His arm was in a sling, and he had a gash above his right eye that trailed a small rivulet of coppery green blood. For once, the Vulcan was speechless.

For his part, Spencer, too looked like he'd been hit by a truck as he marveled at the giddy young woman lying at his feet. His uniform was in tatters, (still bearing the scorch marks of the fire in auxiliary control) and he also had several cuts and bruises here and there to denote that the two men had had quite a rough ride all their own. He stuck a long arm down and helped Rachel to her feet. She brushed herself off and smiled.

"Well," she huffed, pulling at her uniform jacket, "together again, eh? What's our status boys?" The giddiness of youth, the cheekiness of her personality, they were a trademark that would not be easily swayed apparently. The two aliens looked at this

human as if she would forever be foreign to them; an enigma that would likely confound them and their kin for generations to come.

Shaking his head free and clearing a raspy throat, Skyl spoke first: "We fought a pitched battle with the *Horatio* and lost, Commander..."

"It would appear they had advance warning of our arrival..." Spencer finished, looking hopeful for the first time in hours.

"Sergey Rozhenko," Rachel clicked her tongue. "That poor man just saved my life."

"Indeed, and perhaps many others," Skyl speculated, and Spencer explained,

"Many of the torpedoes launched from the One-oh-four did not detonate."

"Interesting," Rachel whispered. "So, by my reckoning, Skyl, there's still only one of the tri-cobalt devices left, correct?" She raised her eyebrows and peered at the Vulcan engineer for confirmation. He nodded. "Then his final target will be Galatea..."

"That is our conclusion as well, Commander," Spencer rejoined, walking away and moving towards a computer monitor. "But we'll be lucky enough if the ship even survives the last jump to launch it," he said, looking at the readouts now with dismay.

Rachel looked at Skyl with steely eyes and knew immediately that he knew. This would be the 104's last jump, period. "The only way to become a messiah," she spoke gravely, "is to become a martyr... Hal plans to jump back into the launch bay and destroy Galatea from within."

"That would seem logical," Skyl agreed. Spencer looked at them both and became suddenly pale and ill of heart. The Galatea Space Center was quite simply the largest orbital structure ever built. As this bustling hub was the second-busiest spaceport in the whole of the United Federation of Planets, dozens of starships lay docked within, with many more in orbit. Its destruction would mean not only the deaths of tens of thousands, but also a hailstorm of toxic debris that would rain down on Betazed for decades. It would be an environmental catastrophe of epic proportions... no one would be safe from this unpredictable barrage as it fell and fell and fell from the sky, day and night, and seemingly without end, for years to come.

"My gods..."

"Indeed," Rachel said before Skyl had the chance. "But there's always hope," she then reassured him with a raised pointer finger. She motioned to Skyl and together they moved over to join Spencer at the control console. "Let's see what we can do with this..." she whispered, bringing up communications and inputting the code 8675309. A puff of relief escaped her lips.

"Fascinating," Skyl this time whispered. "All jumps are controlled through subspace communications using the Galactic Positioning System... simple but ingenious."

"One could almost say 'diabolical'," Spencer argued, still not forgetting the potential ruin of his homeworld. His heartsick feeling of before was slowly being replaced now by real anger. Qualor II, Beta Lankal, even the *Horatio* – all had been an abstraction seen only from the sterility of orbit – but this, this was his home. The suffering on Betazed would be felt for a generation or more if this man was allowed to continue... *and so soon after The Twins...* how could his telepathic and deeply sensitive people ever be expected to go on after yet another global calamity brought on by hopeless insanity? He gritted his teeth with resolve. Hal Kenzie would be stopped even if Spencer Stadi had to do it with his own bare hands. All other considerations were secondary, he would die for his people, he would die for his homeland, he would die for their future.

Picking up perhaps on his silent thoughts, Rachel's psi-region moved her to action. She began to type in earnest on the computer screen. There was a keen sense by all that they were quickly running out of time. "Okay," she said decisively, "we have an advantage, now we need a plan." Her resolve was a mirror image of Spencer's own, and it shone in the eyes of Lieutenant Skyl as well. His father had been killed by this madman – not even mentioning the thousands of others on two different planets – it was only logical that he be stopped at any cost. "I believe our primary objective," Skyl mused, "should be the remaining tri-cobalt device."

"It's unlikely we'll get any further help from Mister Rozhenko in that department," Rachel offered somewhat morbidly, biting her upper lip and studying her readouts.

"You may be closer to the truth than you think, Ma'am," Spencer whispered gravely, looking guardedly over at Skyl. She

paused in her all-important work to stare at her two officers with a certain dread induced by psi-awareness.

"What? Tell me..."

"It would appear, Commander," Skyl said cautiously, "that Crewman Antonov was correct when he spoke of certain... *abuses.*" Her soft features fell with her shoulders. Watching that poor beaten kid implode right before her eyes was not a memory she would soon forget. It was more the fear in his eyes though than anything else that struck her.

"In our attempts to find you," Spencer explained, "we were finally able to monitor CCTV throughout the stardrive section... abuse does not aptly describe the torture we saw."

"Why," she sighed, mostly to herself, tears welling in her eyes.

"Apparently just for sport in most cases..." She raised a single hand to silence him. Further detail was not necessary. She just didn't understand *why*? Indeed, it was likely she never would. His kind had been seen before, and would likely be seen again, but that was of little comfort to Rachel. She had known Hal in the intimacy of love (in its many forms), and she was even still having a hard time bringing herself to accept the truth. *What is the difference between a man and a monster?* she thought broodingly. *The distance is closer than you think!* The only difference is just a tiny little bit of self-control. And in truth, the actual importance of morality is, well, negligible.

"How many are still alive?" she asked with gritted teeth.

"Twenty-three," Spencer answered solemnly. It didn't take a telepathic mind to keenly sense the loss of 24 lives, or indeed, to sense the increased resolve that this new information had imprinted upon Rachel Garrett's mind.

"Insurgents or not," she said with conviction, "those men and women are under my command. We will make every effort to save them, understood?" Herman Wouk had once described command as *the loneliest and most oppressive job in the world and, said of commanders: they are always teetering along a tiny path of correct decisions and [meandering] through an infinite gloom of possible mistakes... at any moment, they can commit a hundred manslaughters.*

Rachel was finding out first-hand now the true burdens of command, and she once again had a brief fleeting reflecting thought on Commander Mark Jameson. It would be easy for someone to cave in on themselves under the great weight of leadership, and though she had begun to loathe the man and his maddening peculiarities in those final years, she was only just now developing a begrudged respect for the intense responsibilities that daily lay upon his shoulders. By extension, the lives of hundreds of people literally hung on the threads of Rachel's next barest decisions, and whatever her weaknesses, she must make them count. *By God*, she resolved, she must declare her *independence* from Vladimir Henry Kenzie once and for all, and she must do it now.

"Right," she breathed, "Skyl, it'll be your job to get all of those people out of the secondary hull." She looked up at him and he nodded without argument. She then turned to her acting first officer. "Spencer my friend, you will have the unenviable task of neutralizing the tri-cobalt device, and then manually forcing a saucer separation. This will cut power and also serve as a lifeboat for the evacuees." He too nodded, but setting all telepathy aside, the look of concerned perplexity was written all over the poor man's face.

"But how..."

"If you will, Lieutenant Commander," Skyl said, issuing pause. He moved over to an adjacent storage locker and removed a spare communicator badge. "I believe," he then explained, "I can reprogram this communicator to respond to my commands... I can then use a set of precalculated GPS coordinates to transport the device off the ship."

"Precisely," Rachel smiled, glad that the Vulcan engineer was keeping pace with her. "And my job," she finished, "will be to jump into one of the power transfer conduits and adjust the warp field controllers. Hopefully this will manipulate the 104's last jump into a location of *our* choosing."

This time Skyl's Vulcan features actually lit up in barely concealed surprise. Perhaps he wasn't quite as in-step with her as she thought as his brow slowly furrowed into purely logical concern.

"But Commander," he started to argue, "you would be taking great personal risk..."

"It's alright, Skyl," she interrupted, "I've been killed four times already today, what's once more?" She looked at him with that cheeky grin that he and Spencer both were slowly beginning to expect from her, though they may not yet have grown entirely accustomed to it.

Spencer eyed her for a moment studying her mind, then winked. "And lest we forget, Mister Skyl," he added glibly, "we do have a hidden second advantage... Hal Kenzie thinks Rachel Garrett is dead." Skyl raised a single upswept eyebrow in contemplation of this, then nodded slowly. She would become their secret weapon, though the dangers of this may go far above and beyond the official call of duty. But then, neither Skyl, nor in fact Spencer, had yet to take the Commander's Test; it was like a secret pact that they were not yet privy to. Only Rachel understood fully that the ship, and indeed everyone and everything in it, was her responsibility to care for and she would do this at cost if necessary.

"We're not gonna win this one playing by the rules, gentlemen," she glowered at them, all-of-a-sudden serious. "If Hal Kenzie wants to play dirty, then we'll play dirty too... there's not going to be anything pretty about it either," she wagged a finger, "so get that through your heads right now. We must protect Galatea and Betazed at any cost, even if we have to bring this whole damn ship down on top of us." Rachel then twirled that same finger over her head and the two men blinked nonplussed. "Now," she said, "time is short, let's get to work."

Skyl immediately began accessing the communications program while Spencer for his part brought up the readings on power consumption. "We're running out of time, Skyl," he reported apprehensively. "Fusion generators in the saucer section are ramping up and the warp core is on active standby."

Skyl did not react, he merely continued to input commands into the communications subsystem. Anyone but a Vulcan would have no doubt broken into a sweat by now as the pressure mounted, but the chief engineer stood like the Rock of Gibraltar as the waves of time crashed against him.

Rachel crept up behind them and injected them both with the last of the magic elixir... there was none left for her, though she did not reveal this fact to her two comrades. Ever since her experience

in the torpedo casing, somehow, she felt, perhaps erroneously, that this last jump would not affect her.

Finally, Skyl held up the modified communicator, studied it, then tendered it without ceremony to Spencer, who in turn accepted it rather dubiously. He let a deep sigh escape out through his nose, then offered Rachel a half-hearted grin. In less than thirty-six hours he had gone from barely a junior-grade, below-decks lieutenant, to a full lieutenant-commander and thus acting first officer of one of Starfleet's newest and most advanced starships. No pressure there as his brow, unlike Skyl's, did indeed begin to bead up with sweat.

"Right," Rachel said, trying to be as comforting as possible. "Nothing pretty, get in and get out, there's nothing heroic about getting vaporized."

Spencer's shoulders sagged ever so slightly, then he stood up straight as if at attention. "Ready," he proclaimed in a dry throat. Skyl nodded but once, and then Spencer vanished in a flash of bright white light.

Rachel next stood up straighter than usual and stared at her Vulcan engineer with her steely almond eyes. She had known the man barely 24 hours now, but already thought of him as a friend. Her purely human emotions felt a convergence in their three career paths, almost like they were destined now to be a team forever, but her logical side knew she'd be lucky if she even survived the next half-hour. Skyl looked at her with that same steely stare, and she wondered what he was really thinking... and even in some ways, what he might be *feeling*.

"Unfortunately, Commander, due to interference from the propulsion system, I will be unable to transport you to a favorable position adjacent to the power transfer conduits. I have thus chosen a sequestered location nearby that should serve suitable to your needs."

"Awww, ya big softie," Rachel smirked, and he merely stared at her some more. She rolled her eyes. "Proceed, Lieutenant," she stated nervously, and the man unexpectedly raised his hand in the traditional Vulcan salute.

"Live long and prosper..."

"Well at least that's something," she chuckled, and then promptly vanished. Alone now, and just a little bit afraid, Skyl let out a deep audible sigh. All he could do was wait.

In the corridor outside the torpedo room, Spencer almost immediately ran into trouble. Dizzy and disoriented and feeling faint, he was just barely able to duck unseen into an alcove before two of Kenzie's henchmen rounded a corner and breezed past him. As a general rule, people rarely see what they don't expect to see, and keen observation is not always a strong suit in most. Despite being fairly visible, Spencer went largely unnoticed by the simple, guileless fact that he just plain wasn't supposed to be there. After a sigh of relief, and a fair shake of his addled senses, he was quick to note that neither one of the two men in question had been Sergey Rozhenko; so, either the poor man was dead, or he had been reassigned someplace far, far away from torpedo control. Some small part of him had hoped for help from this most unlikely of sources, but Spencer was forced instead to resolve himself to go it alone.

His telepathic mind sensed the thoughts of the two comrades, and this caused him to give pause. A brief moment of patience would reward him with an empty room. The two wary crewmen had been sent to arm the device, and then been given strict instructions to guard it with their lives... but Spencer knew intuitively that Kenzie had lost his grip on these two wayward soldiers of the cause... once they armed it, they were getting the hell out of there. The 104 was only barely being held together now by a smattering of flickering and underpowered forcefields, and this last jump was surely to be her last. Like any sensible person, these two men were headed for the nearest escape pod to wait the rest of this tragic melodrama out.

Spencer's heart went out to them. They didn't deserve what they were about to get. They had been lied to, probably from the very beginning. He wanted to warn them to launch that pod *before* the jump because they certainly had no idea that Kenzie was planning this last hurrah to be a suicide mission... but better sense got ahold of him, and he backed himself further into his darkened corner. Within moments, the two men emerged from the torpedo room chuckling and ribbing each other about the insanity of it all,



and walked right by Spencer, both staring blankly at the road ahead. For a brief instant, one looked directly at him, but again, the mind only sees what it intends to see, and the man saw only the darkness of the corner instead.

Spencer waited a few minutes more to make sure the coast was clear, then made his move towards the torpedo room. Down here in the stardrive section, he had a much better sense of the inner workings of the ship and could feel in the deckplates that the engines were being ramped up for a jump. He wondered how Rachel was doing far, far below him, but a flood of his own emotions, coupled with so many more, was washing out his telepathic prowess. He'd decided quite some time ago that this undercover business was for the birds, and this commando stuff was better left to the professionals. Sweat had soaked through the armpits of his scorched uniform and was now running down his forehead in great rivulets. He wiped his hand across his upper lip as the doors to the torpedo room slid open.

Even despite his sixth sense, he was relieved to find the room vacant, but still crept in like a thief into a jewelry shop. He hoped that Kenzie, or one of his goons, wasn't watching the CCTV or he knew for certain that this hapless adventure was sure to die a quick death. He marveled at the torpedoes stacked around the small room and thought again of Rachel. He doubted he would've had the presence of mind to remain trapped inside one of those tiny tubes without going berserk, or indeed, losing his mind altogether; not only that, but to be launched as well!

He shivered involuntarily, despite the heat of the room, and made his way around the stacks of casings towards the launch tube. A profound relief settled over him as he spied the tricobalt device at last. It was shimmering and silvery and it was easy to tell that this wasn't just some ordinary torpedo. He for a moment toyed with the idea of trying to disarm it, but Rachel had made it clear that this was not the time for grand heroics. He walked up instead to its blinking, glistening form and instantly attached the modified communicator to its silvery metal shell.

"Stadi to Skyl," he whispered, "package delivered..." Within an instant, it was gone. Spencer hadn't expected this to be the easy part as he now contemplated a twelve-deck climb to the separation plane. His head was pounding, and the heat of the room was

starting to make him sick. The thought of climbing twelve stories seemed an insurmountable task, but they had decided early on that to risk more than a few personal jumps would invite detection, so climb he must. He wasn't sure he could stand another jump anyway; his legs were already Jell-O, and the headache that plagued was beginning to feel like an implosion. He wondered at his DNA, could almost imagine the tiny strands as they became unraveled with each new assault to their integrity. So, climb he must, for Galatea, for Betazed, for Rachel and the 104 – indeed, for everything they stood for – for all that was good and whole in the universe, he would climb, lest it all should become unraveled.

For Rachel, her own jump had not gone off quite according to plan. As it turned out, she was not as impervious to the harrying side-effects as she thought, given that she immediately doubled over and fell to her knees. Without the aid of the magic elixir, the pounding in her skull turned into instant nausea, causing her to throw up all over the floor for the second time that day. For a moment, as she coughed through dry heaves, she thought this might be it. For a moment, she considered just lying down there and giving up; she even thought she might just die. She feared at this point that the damage to her DNA was probably irreparable anyway. Her career in Starfleet was at an end – would the record show she'd done her all? She thought not... the only reason the insurgents had control of the 104 in the first place was because of her.

After a time – she knew not how long – the effects of the jump slowly dissipated, and Rachel began to feel only slightly better. She felt embarrassed now about the mess, strangely enough (she thought it unprofessional) she chuckled, albeit weakly, in spite of herself. Grasping at the wall, she slowly pulled herself to her feet. Whether her DNA was permanently unraveled, or she was facing a court-martial, she had resolved herself some time ago that she would fight on, nevertheless. Her life was moot now when compared to the thousands of lives aboard Galatea, and indeed the millions more down on Betazed. Hal Kenzie must be stopped, regardless of whether or not Spencer had succeeded or not... the 104 must not be allowed to jump back into that work bay.

Clearing her mind, and clearing her throat, Rachel was at last able to take a survey of her surroundings. She ticked a silent hats-off to Skyl, not only for his accuracy, but for his finesse as well – the room she was in was barely larger than a broom closet. Now she just had to find out where the room was! Placing a thumbprint on the sensor, she cringed inwardly as the doors slid open with a whoosh. Opening one eye and peeking out into the corridor, she was relieved to see that it was a darkened side passage far off the beaten path. Another silent nod to Skyl. She crept out surreptitiously, looking left then right, then tiptoed down to the end of the hall. At the lighted intersection she was finally able to get her bearings: **Dk 28 | Sec 5 Stbd** (the arrow indicating forward was to her left).

Turning right, she prowled onward, in a direction *away* from Main Engineering, praying to God that she not only passed unseen visibly, but that no one would notice her on CCTV either. It went without saying that this whole gig would be up in an instant if she was discovered. Hearing voices, she was unexpectedly forced (much like Spencer far above her) into an alcove to hide, backing into a corner as far as was humanly possible. She felt like the Grinch now hiding from Cindy Lou Who and smirked inwardly as the two men passed. Again, the unexpected is largely ignored, and much like Spencer, she went largely unnoticed simply because she wasn't supposed to be there.

*Hell*, she thought, *I'm not even supposed to be alive!* A ghost perhaps? *Now ain't that sumthin to ponder...* She was quick to note the urgency in the men's passing – no doubt repairs had preoccupied much of the insurgent crew's time; but there was something more there, too... she had a keen sense that they were also running *from* something. If indeed what Spencer and Skyl had told her was true – that he had been torturing people just for sport – then they were likely running from Hal Kenzie, and this broke her heart. How could she have read that man so wrong all these years? Blinded by her wild-child phase apparently... but no, that was oversimplifying it way too much. As much as she had changed from those early years, he had changed too. Even before their graduation she had noticed a darkening within him, an unexplained malice that spread its maleficent tendrils out into every aspect of his life – and this, perhaps this alone was what had pulled her from

the brink and gotten her own life back on track. All support from Commandant Uhura aside, Rachel had done this for herself. Perhaps she, too, had been running from him, even way back then.

The corridor was quiet again and Rachel crept slowly out from her little alcove to reconnoiter the path ahead. She must move aft to Section 6 to gain access to the power transfer conduits, a distance of perhaps a hundred feet, and she began to pad softly now in that direction (as softly as she could, that is) on the metal deck plating. It was barely twenty-four hours ago aboard the *Ambassador* that she had made this exact same trek during the radiation lockdown of her horrific Commander's Test. Despite the damage to the 104 and its beleaguered spaceframe, she found this journey to be much more pleasurable, even despite the constant threat she faced from Hal's henchmen.

Within moments, she arrived, unmolested remarkably, and was about to enter the access hatch when she heard voices coming from an adjacent corridor. *Shit!* There wasn't time, so she jumped into another darkened alcove just a split second before Hal Kenzie and Boris Rhotemious rounded the corner. *Damn!* Rachel held her breath and steeled herself for the worst. If Hal found her here, and to still be alive, God knows what he would do to her this time. Never mind that Boris, with his wolf-like features, he downright scared her! She could fully visualize the man sinking his teeth into her throat and tearing the flesh from her trachea. Her knees trembled, and the continuous pounding in her skull threatened to overwhelm her as her eyes began to swim with stars. She was ultimately forced to release that breath – either that or pass out.

Hal and Boris both paused at the sound and Rachel's heart stopped. She'd been discovered. But a woman's voice distracted them at the last possible moment and they both turned away, albeit still within sight of her. It was the smart-aleck ensign from yesterday in the Starboard Café – the cheeky girl, Marlena.

"Sir," she approached hesitantly (she had that same beaten down look that Yuri had shortly before he imploded), "I still can't lockdown structural integrity in the connecting dorsal."

"Hardware or software?" Boris growled at her.

"Hell," she shrugged, "at this point, could be both," and she offered Hal a halfhearted grin. Hal grinned back... what the poor girl didn't know was that, at this point, it really didn't matter. This

would be the 104's last jump... forever. He took a step closer to her, rubbed the back of his two forefingers on her cheek just the way she liked. "It's alright love," he said slyly, cupping under her jawline now with both of his strong hands as if to kiss her. "Everything's going to be alright," he soothed, and with a quick flick of his mighty wrists, snapped her neck.

Boris's teeth showed as she went limp. Without ceremony, Hal tossed the body into the nearest corner. Rachel stifled a scream by drawing blood from her knuckle. She wanted to charge the men and destroy them both with her own bare hands. In all of her life, in all of her career in Starfleet, she had never seen anything so remotely shocking. Rage beseeched her to strike out, but sensibility urged caution. She would be no good to anyone lying dead on the floor next to that poor girl.

Hal and Boris clanked off unbothered, leaving Rachel all alone in the dark. After a few moments, she slunk out of her corner and knelt down before the girl, tears streaming in great rivers down her cheeks. There was nothing to be done for it except stop this – and stop this now. She touched the girl's cheek and rose. Wiping her face with the back of her hands, she turned away and entered the hatch to the PTC accessway. The heat inside was staggering – clearly another system offline and in need of repair – but she didn't let it bother her. Focused, she was on a mission now with seemingly nothing to stop her. Come hell or high water, she would do everything in her power to stop the 104 and stop it now.

*Unbeknownst to her, out in the corridor, Hal Kenzie paused, then bade Boris Rhotemious to continue on without him.*

*Turning, he retraced his steps, stopping at the body.*

*He sniffed the air but once... then casually entered the PTC accessway behind her.*

**Hell was coming.**

# |8|

For the third time in less than twenty-four hours, Rachel found herself enclosed within a space barely larger than a coffin. After an arduous journey, half of it crawling, she was confined now, on her back, inside a small Jeffries tube making the final desperate adjustments to the warp field controllers. Feeling the old demon of claustrophobia rising within her, she tried once again to steady her nerves by gritting her teeth and breathing out through her nose rather than gasping for air like she wanted to. But this time it wasn't working. The pounding in her skull continued unabated, and the constant nausea she felt was only amplified by the staggering heat. If she didn't get out of here soon, she feared she might implode of her own accord.

She was making headway though, albeit slowly; she still found many of her moves to be impeded by the mainframe lockout, and for the thousandth time that day, she scolded herself for her own stupid naivete in letting Hal Kenzie have full computer access. Whether it was her heightened psi-region, or her years of experience getting a feel for a starship, she was gripped by an urgency now she had never before experienced. She knew intuitively right down to her bones – right down to the very heart of her soul even – that they were mere seconds away from the kamikaze jump into the heart of the Galatea Space Center. Tricobalt device or not, the spatial displacement of a full-sized starship suddenly appearing anywhere within the confines of the station's superstructure would be catastrophic to say the least. The delicate balance between mass and gravity would be thrown to the solar winds. *"Lieutenant Skyl to Commander Garrett... it is urgent that you respond!"*

"Not now Skyl," she scolded through clenched teeth. The last thing she needed right now was to dither over details with a Vulcan engineer. And then she nearly jumped out of her skin as suddenly, at her feet, the bulkhead hatch slid open to reveal the face of one

Vladimir Henry Kenzie. Rachel could tell immediately by his cheerless countenance that he meant business, and that he certainly wasn't about to take 'No' for an answer to anything.

"Do try to be still, darling, there is no escape..." he glowered at her slyly.

"I don't have time for you either, *asshole*," she hissed... then, with one sharp kick of her heavy boot, he lay unconscious at her feet. "You and your whole damn planet can kiss my ass," she rebuked breathlessly, sweat pouring now from every pore.

"*Commander Garrett, you must make haste...*" was the last thing she heard before the entire ship screeched around her. The 104 had made its last jump.

## **Hell had arrived.**

Twenty decks above her, Spencer doubled over in pain as the ship made its final harrowing jump into the great unknown. He felt for a moment that he *had* imploded as the DNA strands in every molecule of his body did a backflip, then flipped back again. Racked with nausea, and tormented by a headache of unbelievable proportions, he could do nothing but lay on the floor in the fetal position and cry out to the gods for it all to stop. All around him, even here in the reinforced sections of the connecting dorsal, the ship was coming apart with a deafening shriek. The lights flickered and the hissing of venting/escaping gases sounded like the roar of an F-5 tornado. Even the steadiness of the deck had been replaced with a persistent and unnatural shudder that could only be brought on by a combination of explosive decompressions, and a general loss of all attitude and directional control. To top it all off, he also had a strange sense that they were somehow falling, which gave him a sick feeling that went even deeper than the nausea. The 104 was surely dying. "*Lieutenant Skyl to Lieutenant Commander Stadi... your status please...*"

"I'm here, Skyl," he groaned as some of the din slowly subsided. "Where are we?"

"*We are in orbit of Betazed, Commander, forty-seven kilometers from the Galatea Space Center.*" Thirty miles is a pretty fair distance on the ground to be sure, but in the densely packed airspace above Betazed, they had just barely escaped destruction

by the skin on their chins. Nevertheless, Spencer still had that queer feeling that they were falling, and something in the tone of Skyl's voice was telling him that this wasn't quite over yet. He braced himself now for what he knew was coming.

"We're falling out of orbit aren't we Skyl?" he croaked forlornly.

*"Main impulse is offline, Commander,"* Skyl answered matter-of-factly, *"the deadweight of the stardrive section is acting like an anchor, you must force a manual separation."*

"Well, that *is* why I'm here, Skyl" Spencer muttered under his breath, finally forcing himself to his feet at last. He had just climbed up twelve decks, at speed, in staggering heat, on legs that felt like licorice sticks, and with a headache to boot that felt, well, like someone had kicked him in the head with a boot. Somewhere, halfway up his climb, he had shed his uniform jacket and stood now in a grey undershirt that was soaked through with sweat. He even considered taking off his trousers! Impending doom aside, he'd give just about anything right about now for a nice, cold shower and just five minutes of peace and quiet. Looking around the room instead he saw three massive actuators that would each need to be primed with a long pump lever. Knees quivering on the unsteady deck though, he wasn't sure he had the strength left to do it. Resisting the urge to fall back down into the fetal position, he let himself cry instead. Once the ship was separated, Skyl would not have the necessary power available to jump him to safety (a small hitch in their plan), and without computer control, he couldn't be beamed out either. He supposed Rachel would have something comforting to say right now about 'going down with the ship', but he was having trouble finding anything comfortable about being incinerated as the 104 plunged headlong into the atmosphere. All things being said, he had decided now for certain, and without reservation, that this secret agent crap was for the birds. *Chekov be damned!*

"Time, Skyl?" he asked, even though he knew he shouldn't have.

*"You must make haste, Commander..."*

"Easy for you to say," he muttered again as he grabbed the first lever and pulled. Remarkably, the pumping action was easier than he expected... what proved difficult was pulling out the



actuator... and with both feet on the wall, he yanked at it with every ounce of energy he had left. With a slow and anguishing whoosh, it finally popped free, and Spencer fell to the floor, flat on his back, with a hopeless groan. *One down... may the gods help me, two to go*, and he began to pray.

*"Commander, time is short..."* Skyl almost pleaded. With herculean effort, Spencer forced himself up again and began pumping furiously on the second lever. With creaking bones and stars swimming in his eyes, he pulled, slipped, and fell. Staggering up like a half-dazed boxer, he planted two feet and pulled again... and fell. *Two down...* He had no recollection of the third, strangely enough, but as he regained consciousness on the floor, he was happy to hear the explosive bolts firing in sequence. The saucer section was free at last, though his own fate at this point was most surely sealed. Light suddenly flooded in a small porthole above him and he watched the saucer section slowly pull away. Within moments it had passed out of view and was replaced with the star-speckled dark of night.

For an instant he was a child again, lying in the lush warm grass of Betazed, staring up at the stars dreaming of exploration. The Great House Consensus had nearly come unraveled the day he announced he was joining Starfleet instead of taking his place at his father's side. Only Lwaxana Troi, Daughter of the Fifth House, had been supportive. He had left Betazed without ceremony, without even a goodbye; and every step since then had been an uphill battle. He had been stifled at the Academy by Commodore Hawk, and more or less squashed on the *Falcon* by Commander Jameson. Only Rachel Garrett had ever accorded him with any level of respect, and thus he owed her everything. Perhaps it was fitting that he'd be going down with her after all. Maybe, in this final blaze of glory, his childhood choices would be vindicated. Perhaps now, as he gave the ultimate sacrifice to save so many others, the people of Betazed would at last be proud of him, even his family perhaps? The stars were blotted out now with darkness and he sensed an ending...

*"This is Lieutenant Commander Chandra Shanthi of the Federation Starliner Amanda Grayson, standby for emergency transport..."*

Unconscious in the Jeffries tube, Rachel awoke with a start to find Hal lying on top of her. For a moment she thought she was in some kind of delirium. His face was so close as to be blurry, though she probably couldn't've focused anyway given her state of mind. That last jump had very nearly done her in for good – as such, she had a keen sense now that she was dying. At long last her DNA had taken all it could handle, and she could practically feel her internal organs slowly turning into one big gelatinous mass. Her heart was racing, her breathing shallow, and in the staggering heat she had soaked clear through her heavy uniform; she couldn't be sure, but she may have even wet herself. With a headache so intense as to be debilitating, focusing was way too much of a chore, so she simply closed her eyes instead. Life became but a distant fog beheld at the edge of infinity.

"Aw, come now love, don't give up on me now," Hal said with a soothing voice that had the consistency of grease on concrete. Rachel's eyes rolled around in her head for a few moments before she finally opened them up again. This time his face was a little clearer and she struggled ever so slightly. "Do be still darling," he pressed, "barely enough room for two..."

She almost couldn't believe any of this was real as she fought for consciousness. "*Commander Garrett, respond please... Rachel, if you can hear me, you need to get out of there now so we can beam you out!*" Spencer's voice seemed distant, almost like a memory even, calling at her from the past. It was comforting somehow, and it was only with some concentrated thought that it became even more comforting once she realized that the very sound of it meant that he was safe. She breathed a sigh of relief. That was all that mattered. The fact that Galatea was safe, Betazed was safe, and even that Skyl was safe, was intangible to her. She could hear the beginnings of a distant roar and translated that strange falling feeling she had into a fall from orbit. They were entering the atmosphere. The comms broke in again, but this time it was only static.

"Time for a quickie before we die a horrible death?" And he pressed his lips hard against hers, though it hardly qualified as a kiss.

"You sick f--k," she seethed with a voice as dry as parchment. She squirmed and he placed his hands on her shoulders pressing

her tight to the deck plating. The ship began to shudder as the atmosphere thickened.

"That's right baby," he said, "talk dirty to me," and he thrust his hips against hers. But the motion was just enough to give her an advantage and she brought up a knee to meet his groin. Crammed inside the tiny Jeffries tube, his body had no place in which to recoil and thus the effect was doubled as she arched her foot from heel to toe and back again against the solid deck plating. Crying out, he released his grip just enough for her to get both her hands up and under his chin. Crying out now herself, she began slamming his head into to the upper bulkhead with a ferociousness she didn't even know she was capable of. As his body went limp and fell down upon her, she thought of just dying. There was nothing in the world left for her, and naught else mattered. The love of this man had finally been the death of her, just as she always guessed it would be.

She thought of an ancient Earth love song she once liked and began humming it lightly...

*I will go down with this ship,  
And I won't put my hands up and surrender,  
There will be no white flag above my door,  
I'm in love and always will be... <sup>6</sup>*

The computer chirped once in her comm badge. "*Command lockouts expired.*" The statement was simple but effective, and it immediately breathed a new sense of life into Rachel's beaten down soul. She tossed Hal's blurry head off to one side.

"Computer," she cried out, "jettison the warp nacelles, authorization Garrett-one-one-four-seven-enable!" The computer chirped once more, and then the ship shook so violently that she could've easily been killed if Hal's limp body hadn't been there to cushion her. Perhaps in the end he'd been there all along just to save her? She smirked at the satirical irony of this. Outside, the two massive engine nacelles, almost six million metric tonnes *each*, tumbled away from what was left of the stardrive section as it began to sail placidly downwards now on its two remaining, wing-like support pylons. The ride inside the Jeffries tube became markedly smoother. Still cheek to cheek with Hal, Rachel reached

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<sup>6</sup> Song lyrics by Dido – all rights reserved

her hands up and began to type frantically into the overhead computer console.

"Computer," she cried out again, "begin firing retro thrusters in the following sequence!" By God, she might even get through this yet! But the ground was approaching fast and the 104's speed was still great. Eyes glistening in a mixture of fear, and a relief that this all soon would be over, she finally wrapped her arms tight around Hal and braced herself for impact. Oh, the love she had had for this man, and oh, the hatred! She squeezed even harder as the memories came washing in... the first time they kissed, the first time they made love, the first time they fought, and indeed, the first time they made up. The first time they broke up, the first time they reconciled, and the last time they said goodbye. It was a silent requiem to all they'd shared, from happiness to anger, and all the life in between, and Rachel prayed again for the second time that day... not for her own salvation, but for his.

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Sometime later, she knew not how long, Rachel awoke in a distant fog, at the edge of infinity, dazed and understandably confused. Her recollections of what happened inside the Jeffries tube were hazy at best, and she certainly had no memory of the 104's horrendous impact and slide out. Lucky for her, the ship's flight had leveled off just enough to make a landing of sorts, and even luckier, in an unpopulated area somewhere on a nice warm beach along the waters of a placid sea. Even so, the lower ten decks had been compressed or sheared off completely, and what remained of the stardrive section crumpled in on itself in one big collapsing, sliding mass. If Rachel had not been encased within the reinforced housing of the power transfer conduit, and had she not been wrapped in the protective embrace of Hal Kenzie's soft body, then she most surely would've been killed.

She shook her head and smacked her lips and tongue in a mouth so dry that it didn't even work properly. Raising up two feeble hands, she rubbed furtively at her eyes until things slowly began to come into focus. She was in a room by herself, and out the window, she could see the sparkling of hazy and barely focused stars.

"Ah, you're awake," a voice said somewhere off to her left. She turned her head and tried to focus on what appeared to be a Starfleet doctor, or a nurse, in his mid-40s. "You slept a little longer than we expected... but then, I suppose you needed it."

"Wh-wh-where am I?" She was barely able to croak, and he came up and held a straw to her lips. She could see now the black, colorless eyes of a Betazoid. Sipping from the straw, a cool stream of life-refreshing water filled her mouth, then glided down the back of her throat like a taste of liquid heaven. Nothing had ever felt so good.

"You are in the gene therapy ward of the Galatea Space Center.. you gave us quite a scare there at the beginning, but you're right as rain now." He smiled at her casually as she took another deep draw off the revitalizing straw.

"H-h-how long?" she whispered, still testing out her voice to see if it was still there.

"One month," and he offered her a downward, sympathetic smile, then raised his eyebrows. "Well technically," he added, "thirty-five days... but who's counting?" He tried to appear cheerful as she mouthed the words *one month* with understandable disbelief. "You needed that time, Commander," he tried to reassure her. "Don't begrudge your body's natural need to heal itself in undisturbed slumber."

"I-i-if you say so," and she closed her eyes and slept.

Several days later she was sitting up in bed and feeling much better and was finally able to ask that hard question that she didn't necessarily want the answer to – wanted, in fact, to forget that the entire sad story had ever even occurred. *Did Hal survive?* Her voice quivered and her eyes glistened. She had blurted it out right in the middle of a seemingly casual conversation with Spencer, and she had to wonder if secretly his psi-region was prompting her to ask the question as part of the ongoing healing process. Physical injuries aside, much of the mental anguish inside her would take much, much longer to mend.

"He did," Spencer said quietly, then softly: "After his own gene reconstruction, he was committed to the Elba Two Asylum for long-term rehabilitation."

Rachel knew without any further explanation that 'long-term' meant 'life', and her heart sang a silent lament for what once had been. She knew now that if she ever hoped to gain true independence from his hold on her, indeed from her very past, then she must forget him altogether and just move on. But Elba II... *my God*... few places in the galaxy were worse. Yet, for some, 'life' meant they could never hurt anyone else, and she decided to replace the word forget with *forgive*. Forgiveness is the purest form of love there is, and yes, Rachel still loved that man with all her heart, as unexplainable as that may be.

But sometimes the pain can be too much to bear, and sometimes, just sometimes, learning to forgive means learning to let go, as much as that, too can hurt... so she just let it all go at last... and then, in her pain, she quickly resolved that here and now, and forever yet to come, she would never love again. For indeed, in our lifetimes, many will come and go, and many more may be forgotten... but some, some that live way down there deep within the pages and histories of our lives, some of those precious few will be remembered. Rachel would remember Hal Kenzie for who he was, not for who he'd become, and she would forgive him with all the love her heart had to give. This, perhaps, left no room for anyone else, and perhaps that was for the best, for the hurt of today can affect many of our tomorrows yet to come, and for now Rachel's future was clear. She would focus on her career now and leave out all the rest.

Several more days later, Commander Rachel Garrett sat in the anteroom just off Admiral Chekov's expansive offices and pondered the great unknown, all the simple things like death, fate, and the far-off future. To lose an entire month to a coma was a humbling experience to say the least; and as to her future, well, upon a few days' silent reflection, that too was to remain uncertain. Behind her, a woman much younger than she spoke in a soft and sensual voice.

"The Admiral will see you now," the young adjutant said, and gestured into that glistening foyer that was even larger than the anteroom. The inflection of the girl's voice again reminded Rachel of Commandant Uhura's own soothing tones, and it filled her with a guilty melancholy. Rachel owed her career to Uhura, and she

hadn't forgotten it, but somehow, she felt she had betrayed this most unlikely of allies. It had been Uhura's delicate tutorage that had kept her not only on course, but on the straight and narrow as well. Her years at the Academy had clearly been difficult times emotionally, and Rachel had nearly washed out more than once, but now she felt that this whole sad business with Hal Kenzie and his little rebellion had tarnished her career forever. The destruction of the 104 ultimately traced back to her. She had been in command; she had given out the access codes.

"Through here," the young girl gestured again and then padded away. *An android perhaps?* A curious thought. Rachel thanked her with a whisper and then slowly crept once more into that darkened sitting room that she remembered to be plush and carpeted and warm. The expansive floor-to-ceiling window that looked out into the docking bay had been repaired of course, and Rachel paused some distance from it, fearful to approach. Finally, after several minutes' quiet contemplation, she advanced cautiously and breathlessly pressed her forehead and fingertips against the ice-cold alumglass. She did not see them at first, as her eyes slowly adjusted, the two sisters glimmering there under the soft light, but as her mind processed, her mouth fell open. Two massive spaceframes sat side-by-side, mostly clad with silvery skin, and lit from within with the otherworldly fires of dozens of plasma welders flashing in the dark.

The *Zhukov* had been repaired and was now nearly complete... *but another one, and so soon?!* "Admiral," she spoke softly, "how'd you get another one started so quickly?" *A month is a long time to be unconscious to be sure, but...*

The man walked up quietly beside her. "Hull number zero-nine-nine," he said casually. "Componentz vrom a previous tezt article arrived jutzt recently vrom Utopia Planitia and ver mated vit zee salvaged saucer section uv da Von-oh-four." Rachel stared at him nonplussed, then looked back out the window with eyes glistening. The old girl looked none the worse for wear, and somehow this touched Rachel in a way that she could've never expected. Her first command, thought gone forever, was right there before her, glimmering in the soft glow of the work bay, and looking practically brand new.

"Dare may be a few dentz in zee hull," Chekov added with his characteristic shrug, "but zee bonez are good." This he finished with his fabled toothy grin, before turning head and shoulders together to face her. Speechless, she could do naught but just stand there with mouth agape. "Inzidentally," he finally said at length in an attempt to break her stupefied silence, "zee Von-oh-four will need a name for zee official recordz..."

Rachel turned to him at last and stared at him incredulously. "Are you being serious, Admiral?" She had found already, in her brief dealings with Chekov, that he was proving indeed to be a very difficult man to read. Between his sly sense of humor, and that stern face made of chiseled stone, the only thing that gave him away was that certain Santa Claus twinkle in his eye that made you feel immediately at ease. He merely nodded at her, and she paused again for several more long moments of quiet contemplation.

"Well, I suppose, Sir," she said at long last, "if you truly are being serious, then I think I should like to name her the *USS Resolve*, if it pleases you, Admiral?" She cringed and ducked as if about to be struck. It filled her with a momentary wave of sadness to think of the larger bulk of the 104 laying down there in a crumpled heap on the shores of Betazed, slowly being cut up for scrap. Even the badly damaged nacelles would eventually be recycled for some other new ship farther down the line. But part of the ship's soul still remained, and this made Rachel glad again; though it seemed strange to name one half as dead while the other half was being rebuilt right there before her eyes.

Chekov nodded thoughtfully, then mouthed the word: *Reshimost'*. He admired this woman now even more than before. What she'd been through, indeed, what he'd put her through, had not only proven Uhura to her word, but more importantly, proven that Rachel Garrett had what it took to advance to the next level. Like James T. Kirk, she would be Captain. No other title in the history of humankind carried the same gravitas, no other rank, not even admiral, commanded the same respect. This, this had been the true Commander's Test... and that little deception aboard the *Ambassador* was nothing compared to the adventures ahead. She had been handpicked and groomed for a decade. Her destiny had been a written constant in the shifting sands of time. *Reshimost'* – Resolve – that word and that word alone had given her the fortitude



necessary to be the next captain of the *Enterprise*. He crossed his arms and sighed. *Oh, to be young again...*

"I have a confession to make, Admiral," Rachel whispered gravely, still looking out the alumglass, still feeling as if that far-flung future was as uncertain as her memories of those last few moments in the Jeffries tube with Hal. "I gave Vladimir Henry Kenzie the access codes to the *Resolve's* computers... without my negligence, Sir, he could've never stolen the One-oh-four." She looked at last at that stone-chiseled face, took no more solace in the twinkle of those Santa Claus eyes; doubted that even he had sufficient enough sly humor to counter her treasonous acts. Instead, he merely raised a hand to his squarish chin.

"We know," he finally said, looking away from her out the glass, then back: "You vill be given a ztrict refrezher courze on Command Zecurity," he said firmly, then softened. "But regardless uv yer actionz," he added thoughtfully, "a man like Hal Kenzie would've gotten zee accesz codez by any udder meanz nezzesary," and he glowered at her, not needing to remind her of the heinous acts of *torture* Hal Kenzie had visited upon his own faithful colleagues. If he were willing to go to such lengths with his allies, then who knew what he was capable of doing to his adversaries.

Rachel thought briefly of that poor girl Marlena whose neck had been snapped right before her very eyes; and indeed, even Yuri Antonov who had imploded right next to Skyl and been incinerated in a terrifying act of inhuman barbarism. A long quiet moment passed between them that was almost like a silent requiem to the dead. These two were but a few of the many that had been killed in the Kenzie Rebellion – not only on the 104 – but also the thousands more that had died on Qualor II and Beta Lankal. Hal Kenzie had tricked them all, especially her, and left nothing but a trail of death and misery in his wake.

"What of Sergey Rozhenko?" Rachel asked at length, her voice plaintive and weary. "If I may speak on his behalf, Sir," she then demurred to him with a nod, "*none* of us would've survived without his help..."

"Mizzter Rozhenko haz been ztripped uv hiz rank and vill return to zee Academy for hiz own refrezher courze on zee moral expectationz of zervice in Starfleet."

Rachel nodded and rested her forehead on the cool glass. At least that poor robust man had survived, and would escape imprisonment, even if he couldn't escape the stigma. She hadn't forgotten how he had saved her life from her own incineration, and she would keep an eye out for him in the future... that is of course if she had one... that adjutant's job to Commodore Stillwell hung even more darkly over her head now that she'd lost a ship. No other disgrace of such magnitude could befall a captain than to have their ship go down, and hers quite literally had gone down. Feeling her future ruined anyway, Rachel next posed a tough question that she could immediately tell filled the admiral's stony face with unease.

"I am curious, Admiral," she ventured somewhat boldly, "I find it somewhat interesting that the interdimensional jump drive was housed in the power transfer conduits, which also just happened to be *my* area of expertise." She didn't dare look at him, again cowered as if expecting to be struck. She also didn't dare mention the coincidence that the leader of this little rebellion just happened to have been her one-time lover. Her wheels turning, she likewise couldn't help but wonder: just how far back in time did this conspiracy to flush Hal out actually go?! In order to be effective, Skyl's errant computer program had to have been installed within the *Ambassador*-class's software packets at the very earliest stages of development. All things considered, Rachel couldn't tell *who* at this point had been more steered into the trap... herself, or indeed Hal Kenzie himself!

The strategic planning of all this went far beyond her poor power to add or detract, or even her wildest imaginations. She looked at him levelly, not really expecting an answer of any kind. "Zee *Ambaszador*-clasz project iz an important ztep forward in Starfleet's defenzive zstrategy," was in fact the only answer Chekov would offer her, and Rachel took that to mean that hard decisions had been made for the benefit of the greater whole. This whole damn mess went way beyond her paygrade, so she decided to just let it go. She'd been an officer long enough to know just what was her business, and indeed, what wasn't... and when to question certain decisions... and especially when *not* to. This was one of those times when keeping one's mouth shut was quite literally a benefit to the greater whole.

"I might add however," Chekov spoke quietly, surprising her, "zat vit Hal Kenzie az a diztraction, Federation Defenze and Zecurity, in a joint efvort vith zee Klingonz, vas finally able to vipe out zee *Gladius Iacobi* for good... zee Zword uv Jamez iz dead forever," he looked her square in the eye, "and vee both know that zee dead are better off left to lie."

Rachel thought briefly of her brother tumbling forever beneath the icy waters of the raging Genesee. It had taken a long time for her to just let him go. Thus, she knew intuitively that it was not the Sword of James that the Admiral was referring to, but James T. Kirk himself. As much as that man had been larger than life, it was time to just let him go, too. He'd done his bit for king and country, and now the time had come at last for him to simply rest in peace. Like Booth, Oswald, Chapman, and Singh, Kenzie would be forgotten, but Kirk's influence would live on forever. Eventually, the fanaticism would die away to be sure, but the legacy would remain, and for better or for worse, would mold many more generations yet to come. Most of us have to live content in the fact that we are merely a part of the history that surrounds us... a select few however, have the singular joy of making that history, of being history itself. It was what turned man into myth, and myth into legend.

"Tell me, Commander," Chekov asked her casually with a toothy grin, "have you ever read Zee Caine Mutiny by Herman Wouk?"

"Indeed, Sir," she answered with a wry smile, and she quoted: "'You can't understand command until you've had it. It's the loneliest, most oppressive job in the world... it's a nightmare...'"

"'You're forever teetering,'" Chekov continued, "'along a tiny path uv correct decisionz and good luck, meandering through an infinite gloom of pozzible miztakez...'"

"'And at any moment,'" Rachel finished, "'you can commit a hundred manslaughters.'" She eyed him with her own bit of twinkle. "It doesn't give you much hope for success does it, Admiral?"

"Perhapz," he shrugged, "or perhapz it iz a good leszon to remember az you take your next command."

Rachel's eyes lit up; she was still fully expecting to be downgraded to Stillwell's adjutant – *or perhaps worse* – and certainly didn't expect another command any time soon! Chekov

gestured out the window to the newest ship of the line, the 099. "She may have a few battle scars already, but she's yours if you want her..." Rachel's head turned, and she stared in awe at the glistening spaceframe slowly taking shape out in the soft glow of the work bay. Much had been done in just the brief time that they'd been talking. She was speechless, didn't know what to say, and then some wise words her grandfather once told her slowly came to mind. When you don't know what else to say, you simply say...

"Thank you, Admiral," she said softly, tears in her eyes... but then her characteristic wry smile got the best of her and with a grin she added: "I only have one request though, Sir..." and he eyed her speculatively, "...can you please have the carpet replaced in my quarters?" Chekov looked at her puzzled and she giggled, the giddiness of youth returning to her at last after a long hard emotional twist in her career that had nearly derailed it all. She pressed her head and fingertips once more against the glass, almost as if reaching out to the 099. To touch the intangible is to make it real, and she still wasn't sure any of this was real. Everything from the *Falcon* onwards had seemed like an impossible dream.

"Commander Rachel Garrett," Chekov announced suddenly, standing fully at attention, "I hereby promote you to the rank of Captain, with all the commensurate responsibilities and privileges of that rank." He extended an arm around her back and gently placed a hand over her shoulder in an old man's embrace to the young.

"Congratulations, Captain Garrett," he said warmly, squeezing her tightly. Rachel's eyes glistened. *Let Mark Jameson be damned!* This time no words would come, not even a thank you. Her life had been a long and twisted road – but she would never have described it as an adventure... until now that is. She knew now that her true adventure was just beginning, and she knew that with Spencer and Skyl by her side, the adventure was guaranteed to be a thrilling one to be sure. They had become a team already, and the kinship they shared had been forged in fire. They were amalgamated together now as something new, let nothing (save time) tear them asunder.

"She needs a name," Chekov nodded towards the 099, "have any in mind?"

"Oh, a few," Rachel mused quietly to herself. Her face bore a giddy grin that betrayed her youth and her eyes still glistened with the reflection of her future. The 099 was hers and hers forever... *Oh a few*, she thought, *a few indeed...* but one name in particular stood out above all the rest. It was a name that throughout history had slowly become myth, and that myth eventually legend. Few names in the history of humankind carried the same gravitas, no other designation, in fact, commanded the same respect.

Indeed, the ship below her – *her ship* – could go by no other name except...

***Enterprise.***

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"I promise you Pavel, that little girl will save us all someday... her destiny has been written in the sands of time." Chekov did not turn to acknowledge the soft and supple voice behind those words, he merely continued to stare out into the blue haze of the construction bay; watched as the work bees and spacewalkers steadily put the finishing touches on the glistening *Zhukov*. By weeks' end, this newest member of the family would be released out into the dark to begin her own space trials in orbit of Trill. By the end of the month, the 099 would be out there too, her completion accelerated by the hodgepodge assortment of spare parts she'd received from the dockyards of Mars and the proving grounds on Titan.

Uhura stepped out of the shadows of the back wall and padded softly up to her aged comrade. She did not like to see him so sullen; but his stone-chiseled countenance and brooding air made him a difficult person to read sometimes and Uhura often wondered what was going on in there buried way down in the deep. She wanted to think her friend was on the up and up, but sometimes his darker side scared her. She placed both hands on the back of his shoulders and rested her chin on his left. Their silver hair matched, and the careworn features of their tired faces were reluctant witness to their endless decades of service to Starfleet. They stared out together into the bluish haze and did not speak for many long moments, each lost in their own disparate thoughts.

"He's been dead for thirty yearz, yet I still tink of him every day," Chekov finally said with a melancholy sigh, and Uhura squeezed him gently. She knew that in all of his years aboard various ships and their varied missions, nothing had rattled him quite as much as that one single day aboard the *Enterprise-B*. The nightmares had lasted for weeks, and the despondency had lasted even longer.

"Well at least that ridiculous cult has finally been wiped out," Uhura said softly. She had known Kirk, the man, for the good *and* the bad, and it irked her to think of all those people worshiping the *idea* of a person they didn't even know. Hell, most of them hadn't even been born yet! She awaited a response from her old friend and was somewhat hurt when she didn't get one. He was in another one of his moods she could tell, and she decided to just let it go. This was one of those times when his darker side scared her. She sensed there was more to this Kenzie Rebellion than casually met the eye but had learned long ago not to push things. There were many wheels in motion, and the Federation was immense... she was content in her role as Commandant – instill a little peace in the cadets, let the real brass worry about all the rest.

Inwardly, for his part however, Chekov smirked at the irony: as spiritual as Uhura was, she never really grasped the messianic call that the Sword of James had inspired in its people. For a cause to succeed, there must be something for the blind masses to hold onto, and as much as Chekov had wanted to let go, they'd certainly held on. In some ways, this inspired a certain admiration within him for that religious call to glory. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost... this classic trinity was the basis for many religions on many worlds, and as such, Kirk and Kirk's son were both dead, no doubt, but the Holy Ghost had undeniably remained. It was only natural that certain resourceful fanatics had taken advantage of this concept to achieve their own aims – even Chekov at times had manipulated the facts to serve his own ends – but in the long run, Kirk was just a man, and his elevation to *Messiah* was nothing more than the fiction of others created to advance their own goals. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things and becoming legend.

Hal Kenzie on the other hand, now he was a resource that could not have gone unutilized. He was the means to an end and

had performed the role admirably... and his expendability had made him even more beneficial to the cause. *Pushechnoye myaso!*<sup>7</sup>

"Well," Uhura said suddenly, causing him to stiffen. He didn't like being on this world of telepaths – had to continually keep his guard up – forced himself to relax again in her presence lest he should arouse suspicion. "I'm off," she said cheerily, "have to weed through a fresh new batch of vegetables on Relva Seven," and she laughed.

He turned to her with a toothy grin, head and shoulders together, and nodded, causing her to give pause.

"Pavel, is everything okay?" she asked at length with genuine concern, scared again of that darker side. This latest business with the Sword of James had unsettled him, surely.

"Oh yes, yes, Nyota, everyzing iz fine, have a zafe trip."

She stared at him a moment more, wondering at those wheels. However, the Federation was immense, and she dared not imagine what the Admiral of the Fleet might have on his mind. *A lot, to be sure.* "Pavel," she said softly, placing a slender hand on his forearm, "call me any time, I mean it." They had spent much time together after Kirk's death, one consoling the other, both looking for closure that never came. They both then stared at each other, unfocused and glaring, as the reels of time unwound each their own individual threads into the convoluted fabric of their shared memory. The past was pages – the words unspoken and without end. They were companion to its belonging, and at once alien to its kinship.

"Gentlemen, a toast!" Sir Brandon Grey announced to the small gathering, his sharp boney fingers holding up a crystal wineglass. "In an unprecedented act," he grinned, "the Federation Council has granted Turkana IV its independence!" Then the rest of the men all hollered "*Here Here!*"

"Hopefully with many more of our border friends to follow," Boris Rhotemious added with a wolfy growl. His height of more than six feet, coupled with a thin face and overlarge square teeth did indeed give him the sallow features of a wolf. Governor Zan Glin-daro of Davlos III on the other hand, was a fat man stuffed into a

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<sup>7</sup> "Cannon fodder!"

small suit. His bulbous throat looked strangled by the too short 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 as they darted ever here and abouts with the restless motion of two caged animals. The eyes exposed his vulnerability and thus filled him with the deep instinctual fear of a rabbit cowering down in the rain-soaked dark of a wide-open meadow. The big man heaved a heavy sigh, then tried again to fix his gaze upon Rhotemious.

"That may prove difficult," he sighed, "the Council will not budge on freedom for the rest of our allies." His restless eyes were once more forced to look away from Boris's own steady and piercing stare. *I'm hungry*, Glin-daro thought, the darting eyes giving up at last and instead looking around the room for a tray of *hors d'oeuvres*, or something else to satiate his unfillable cravings.

"Then we must press them further," Viceroy Jamkhandi of Dulisian IV said forcefully,

"Hit them even harder!" He held up a balled-up fist, then pushed up his round spectacles. His shrill and silly Indian accent made Grey smile. His people had once subjugated this diminutive sub-culture, and for good cause. Let Jamkhandi shake his fists all he wanted; he knew the little man didn't have the balls to act.

"Blood wine!" a burly young Klingon shouted as he strode into the room. The ridges of his forehead were not quite as pronounced as was common, giving him a slightly less menacing look; he could've easily been considered as almost handsome, if his yellow stained teeth hadn't been bared in a most disagreeable half-growl. "This truly is a day of celebration," he laughed wholeheartedly, clutching the glass of wine from Grey's boney little hand. Downing the contents in one single, unceremonious gulp, he threw the glass into the corner with a crash and sneered at the taste.

"Governor Ja'rod, we weren't expecting you," Grey said casually with the best King's English he could muster, given the circumstances.

"We must have drink!" Ja'rod again shouted. "The High Council has granted Beta Thoridor even greater autonomy!"

"Autonomy, pah!" Grey countered, and the Klingon's dark olive eyes bore him a look of sheer contempt. A curled twist of his



upper lip suggested that he meant his smile as more of a warning than any true act of comradeship.

"It's not enough," Rhotemious growled. "We must have independence for all, and we must have it now!" Behind him, the fat man, Glin-daro, had finally found a replicator and was already licking his pudgy fingers as a huge plate of chicken alfredo materialized right before his darting eyes for their insatiable inspection.

"We must strike them harder!" Jamkhandi reiterated with even less conviction than before. He was already beginning to quaver, and Grey scowled at him.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh, gentlemen, please," a man said suddenly from the shadows. "Ve vill not vin dis fight vith brashness or vith dizconcordiant voicez." Ja'rod scrunched up his ridges at the big words, then backed up a step for the only man in the room that he held even the barest hint of respect for. Fleet Admiral Pavel Chekov stepped out of the dark and into the tight circle, wagging his pointer finger at his co-conspirators.

"Hal Kenzie was, shall ve say, too blunt," he admitted thoughtfully, placing a hand on his square chin. "Ve need zumthing a little zharper and to the point. Dare muzt be subtlety here, and subtlety takez time." He waved a hand at the adjacent foyer and a middle-aged man entered leading a young girl, perhaps seven, no more than eight.

"Commodore Hawk, how nice to see you again," Sir Brandon Grey nodded, then rumbled: "Ann, come to Daddy," and he gestured to the reluctant and obviously frightened child. She came up and leaned against him but would not wrap her arms around his boney frame. He was as foreign to her as the rest of the tall and sinister men in the room. "I am promoting Commodore Hawk to Rear Admiral," Chekov continued, "and placing him in command uv Federation Defenze and Zecurity..."

"And the girl," Glin-daro asked, suddenly interested. He licked his lips and forgot for a moment the plate of alfredo, thought instead of a different hunger.

"My daughter is our secret weapon," Grey answered ominously. And without even the slightest regard for the fear the child held, he turned her away from him, and boney hands clutching tightly at her shoulders, shoved her forward for inspection.

"A *child...*" Rhotemious growled, then stormed out with a defiant look of impatience that sucked all the fresh air right out of the room in his wake.

Chekov, in the stale lifeless vacuum, was the only one to look down on the girl and smile. *A child... what have we become.* Chekov backed away from the group as they resumed their idle bickering – talking over the child as if she was not there – and more importantly, over her as if she were not *listening*. Quietly, the Admiral crept up to the single viewport and stared silently out into the bluish haze of the work bay. The two sisters stared back at him, calling him, scolding him, threatening him. Life was simpler on the bridge of a starship, and he envied Rachel Garrett now as she was about to begin this newest adventure.

Regret? Oh, yes, and guilt too, for she did not know that she, too was part of the plan. She had been groomed for a decade – her destiny had been written in the shifting sands of time since before she'd taken the oath, day one at the Academy. Her introduction to Hal, her tutelage under Uhura, her postings since graduation – all orchestrated from the very beginning as an integral part of the plan. The Federation was immense, and there were many wheels in motion. But he had given her an escape clause at least... Spencer Stadi and Skyl, son of Seti, both would be her groundwork, for a structure cannot stand without a foundation. She would be the apex of this great pyramid that Chekov had built, and he knew that she alone would save them all from what time had in store for them. He intuitively knew that her actions would make no difference in the here and now, but twenty-two years from now, her actions would make all the difference. The future hinged on it.

The little girl came up and gently placed her hand in his.

Yes, they all had their part to play, even her.

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Captain Rachel Garrett sat behind the ancient wooden schoolteacher's desk that dominated her small, oval ready room and pondered all things past, present, and future. The desk had been a congratulatory gift from her grandfather nearly twenty-two years ago when she'd been promoted to captain and placed in command of the *Enterprise* on its maiden voyage. Since that time, its unwavering presence had been humble witness to the *Enterprise's* two-year shakedown cruise, and its four subsequent five-year missions. It had participated in countless debates, briefings, and meetings, and had traveled to every corner of the immense Federation and beyond. As a silent observer to Garrett and her senior staff, the desk had grown with them as they'd developed into the finely tuned unit – the family – that they'd become. Indeed, it too, in some ways, had become a part of the family. Embedded in the upper right-hand corner of the desk's polished surface, 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 CHEKOV ~ STARFLEET COMMAND*

As such, Rachel stared with disinterest at the pile of padds that lay scattered across that indomitable desktop. Several more were spilling out of a half-open drawer to her right and she just

couldn't bring herself to sort through it all. The endless commitment, the endless responsibility... the seemingly endless nights without sleep... sometimes it all just became too much. As it turned out, command was as much about paperwork as it was about leadership – something they failed to mention at the Academy. She let out a long sigh and blinked her tired eyes. Cascading before her was more detail on this *Ambassador*-class starship than anyone really cared, or even needed to know. The *Enterprise* was running at peak efficiency, as usual, thanks mostly to the dedication and hard work of her multicultural crew, and there wasn't much else for her to do except sit here and let the tide roll in and roll out as it may.

She picked up one of the devices and held it unfocused before her weary eyes. **SICKBAY REPORT** was emblazoned across the top of its small screen, and she now rolled those eyes. "Ensign Malfoya broke his wrist playing Parrises Squares... wonderful." Rachel shook her head. "Lt. Comstock spent two days in Sickbay with the Thelusian flu... ah, the burdens of command." She tossed the padd back into the pile and winced at the clattering sound it made. Everything, it seemed, was designed to give her a headache.

Restlessness? Perhaps. But it had been some weeks now since anything interesting had happened aboard this ship – the true reality of deep-space travel. Even at a thousand times the speed of light, the black and empty space between the stars was just that: black and empty. The entire crew was restless, and their habitually impatient captain – sequestered away in her Ready Room – even more so. By any means, she was not a person to just sit idly around, and it had taken many years of practice on her part to simply master the humble art of letting her crew do the work, without some erroneous need to hover over them. This, in fact, had proven to be the true burden of command – she must let the ship run itself, in spite of herself.

As bored as they all may be however, she expected that things were about to get far more interesting around here. Their latest orders – *to patrol the Klingon border relative to the Romulan Neutral Zone* – had brought forth a new set of challenges that was sure to test their resolve. They were nearing the end of a five-year mission that, in all honesty, had just about broken their collective determination altogether. It had taken them out to the farthest

reaches of the frontier and smashed them against the shore... and by extension it had also left them hopelessly out of touch with the ebb and flow of the greater Federation that they were now returning to. Five years is a long time for anyone to be away from home.

The sudden chirp of the door chime made her jump. *God, am I really that on edge?* she thought, then said aloud: "Yes, come in."

The Ready Room doors parted and her First Officer, Commander Stadi, and her Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Commander Skyl, both strode in, each clutching several more padds to add to her clattering cascade. Spencer made a quick glance at the chaos strewn across her desk, then deflected his gaze up into her almond eyes.

"We have the ship's readiness report you requested," he said casually, trying not to smirk at her obvious dismay. When she did not reciprocate with her own usual wry smile, he posed a simple question that had perhaps been too long coming. "Are you alright, Captain? You've seemed a little melancholy... even a little on edge the past few days."

"Oh, I'm just a little tired is all," she countered with a flippant flick of her wrist. But his telepathic prowess knew better than to accept such codswallop from his longtime friend and colleague. He glared at her and at last she gave in. In that brief 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 weary eyes. "I've grown very tired, Gentlemen," she said softly, "more tired than I ever remember."

She opened her eyes and leaned forward, making a haphazard gesture toward the scattered disarray of padds. "We've been so many places and done so many things, and God," she sighed, "this crew has been through *sooo* much together... but now I find myself feeling that maybe it's time 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." It was a difficult admission and she paused, looking up at the ceiling, thinking of their newest orders. It wasn't just her, for Cris'sake, they were *all* tired, and they *all* needed a break. For Starfleet to add three more months onto their tour and throw them headlong into a hotbed of political intrigue was not only irresponsible, it was almost perverse! This,

this was the true heart of the matter, and it made her angry. They had no right, or so it seemed.

Rachel stood abruptly and moved to the aft-facing viewport; her back now to her two oldest and most faithful comrades. The warp stars streaked away from her at a blinding speed and pulled her mind back, back, back into the past. She thought of those first new glory days aboard this brand-new *Enterprise*, so long, long, long ago now. She'd been so young, and oh my God, so naïve. She thought too of the 104, the *Resolve*, gone and all but forgotten in the vast stores of the Starfleet archives. Then she thought finally of Hal Kenzie... oh how she'd loved him, and oh how she'd hated him. It all seemed like a lifetime ago now, the memories often distant and faded, so abstract and disconnected, but sometimes the past sure can have a funny way of presenting itself. She had hardly thought of Hal Kenzie in nearly two decades, but the dreams nonetheless were as vivid and sharp as a tack and they haunted her not just in her sleep, but in her waking hours too.

Spencer and Skyl both moved silently up to stand by her side, and for a quiet moment, they each paused, each lost in their own thoughts, and each staring longingly out the window as those warp stars passed them by, seemingly just beyond their reach. The events of the Kenzie Rebellion and its subsequent 'purge' were still largely classified, but its effects had rippled down through the ages, even to this very day. The Federation borderlands were still, even after twenty-two years, a tinderbox just waiting to ignite. How could one little ship ever hope to stand in the face of all this? How could she ever ask her crew to take a stand yet again for what was right, when everything about it was so wrong? But fate was knocking, and an unseen force told Rachel she'd better take heed. Everything depended on it. Everything. It was a convergence of events that had at last culminated at this one true moment. She suddenly felt that this and this alone was now her one and only mission.

She must protect the peace, and she must do it now, lest all of time become unraveled. "Well gentlemen, it appears we have a decision to make," she mused. "Do we tuck tail between our legs, defy orders, and return to Betazed at last for a much-needed break... or do we move forward once again into the great unknown and try to sort this border mess out once and for all?" Secretly, she

prayed for a return to Betazed, though this went against her every instinct. The *Enterprise* went forward, always, and never back. She turned away from the viewport and looked Spencer square in the eyes.

"Your opinion, Commander?" She knew she could hold no secrets from her first officer on this all-too-important decision. She stared into those bottomless ebony eyes and found comfort in his gaze. In the face of all else, they were still together, and perhaps that was all that mattered. No doubt, the prospect of an extended shore leave back at Betazed held its own alluring charm for Stadi as well, but the *Enterprise* must go forward, never back. In the unwavering face of such resolve, no words were necessary.

"And you Skyl?" Rachel said with a smile.

"The hull may be dented, Captain, but the bones are good." Rachel and Spencer both raised an eyebrow at their Vulcan engineer, and then began to laugh. For an instant, they thought they saw a smirk curl his upper lip, but only for an instant. Together, the three of them turned and headed for the Bridge. As persistent as the past may be, the future can be dogged in its relentless pull forward. As time crashes against the shore, we have little choice but to be drawn to it, for to resist each our destiny is to resist the beating heart of life itself.

# *The End*