

STAR TREK:
YESTERDAY'S ENTERPRISE
The Ambassador



WCS MARSH

Star Trek

Yesterday's Enterprise

"The Ambassador"

W.C.S. MARSH

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

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Author's note:

Some historians, in the eons to come, may regard these events as the Great Federation Civil War. Just a few short days in the midst of the First Golden Age that tested the resolve of a peoples united to maintain the common ground of peace. It will be remembered perhaps as their greatest hour, and remains yet an epic tale that shall endure the ages...

FEDERATION CIVIL WAR - Battle of Ethos

STARFLEET COMMAND

USS Ambassador	Ambassador-class	NCC-10521
USS Enterprise	Ambassador-class	NCC-1701-C
USS Melbourne	Excelsior-class	NCC-62043
USS Kyushu	New Orleans-class	NCC-65491
USS Galaxy	New Orleans-class	NCC-63637
USS Gage	Apollo-class	NCC-11672
USS Hathaway	Constellation-class	NCC-2593
USS Queen Anne	Miranda-class	NCC-31161
USS Uluru	Miranda-class	NCC-1870
USS Starfleet One	Sydney-class	NSR-01
USS Cumberland	Oberth-class	NAR-603
USS Congress	Oberth-class	NAR-604
USS Dolphin	Oberth-class	NCC-3847

BETAZED DEFENSE FORCE

HRH Hestia	Janaran-class	BTZ-099
HRH Galatea	Janaran-class	BTZ-101
HRH Adamathea	Janaran-class	BTZ-102
HRH Callirhoea	Janaran-class	BTZ-103
HRH Cataria	Janaran-class	BTZ-104
HRH Eileithea	Janaran-class	BTZ-105

“It has been said: ‘time heals all wounds’ - I do not agree. The wounds remain. In time, the mind, protecting its sanity, covers them with scar tissue and the pain lessens. But it is never gone.”

Rose Kennedy

A PROLOGUE A

THE PLANET ETHOS IN THE ALPHA GEMINORUM SYSTEM SATURDAY, 13 MAY 2339

“My God, what have we done?” Captain Marshal Lord stood on the Bridge of his starship and stared with wild and disbelieving eyes at the events unfolding before him. His great vessel was plunging headlong now into an uncontrollable downward arc; the blue-green surface of the planet looming ever larger on the viewscreen as the ship slowly fell from its orbit. Even the once sturdy deck beneath his feet began to take on a noticeable shudder.

Steely eyes narrowing, the captain shouted into the comm system: “Engineering... Report!”

“All propulsion systems have gone offline, Sir. There’s a fault in the navigational subprocessors... I can’t seem to nail it down.”

“We need impulse drive **now**, Mister.” Beads of sweat began to form on the captain’s brow and upper lip, while the slight shudder of before was quickly becoming a significant shaking.

“Captain!” the young ensign at the helm called out, his fingertips pausing just above his console. “We’re entering the atmosphere now, Sir. I’m having trouble maintaining lateral control, we’re skipping like a stone...”

Captain Lord moved to the helm, placing his hand on the shoulder of the young ensign, peering for himself at the readouts. “We need more speed before we get dragged under,” he muttered. “Engineering! Dammit, what the hell is going on down there?” *“It’s no use, Sir,”* the chief engineer finally responded, his voice as near to panic as anyone on the Bridge had ever heard it. *“The navigational subprocessors have completely crashed... it would take hours to reboot the system and bring the engines back online.”* A sense of doom began to settle over the Bridge as the blackness of space was now completely replaced by the foreboding surface of the planet. Gravity finally won over on inertia and the great starship started a sudden and giddy descent into the thickening atmosphere. The shaking became nearly catastrophic as the ship picked up speed and began to resonate with an ear-splitting shriek and too, to reverberate with those deep metallic groans that seem to pierce through the chest with their own criminal intensity.

“Lieutenant Galloway,” the captain called out with a certain finality in his voice.

“Broadcast the following on all subspace channels... Mayday, mayday, mayday - this is the Federation Starship *Ambassador*, we are going down, I repeat, we are going down... Encode that with our coordinates and launch the ship’s buoy.”

“Aye, Sir!”

“Ensign Hendricks?” The deck pitched wildly and the captain fought to maintain his footing while his hand fell again on the shoulder of his helmsman.

“The secondary hull is acting like an anchor, Sir. I can’t hold her; we’re going to tumble!”

The captain knew it would be certain death for them all if the ship began to plunge head over heels through the dense atmosphere. It was time for some hard decisions. His Starfleet training had prepared him for this, but he found the actual act of it to be far more difficult than he had ever imagined it would be. The Starfleet tacticians called these ‘acceptable odds’ - but the word ‘acceptable’ hung in his throat now like a pill too tough to swallow.

He stumbled backwards as the Bridge lurched again. Steadying himself, Captain Lord called back to his Operations Manager. “Lieutenant Galloway, arm the explosive bolts. Prepare to jettison the secondary hull on my command.”

“But Sir, there are nearly three hundred peop...”

“DO IT **NOW**, LIEUTENANT!” The forcefulness in his voice startled even him. The deck jumped upward so violently this time that he was thrown into the air, landing flat on his back. He both felt and heard from below decks a deep rumble and knew that Galloway had followed his orders; orders that had consigned nearly three hundred people to their deaths. But the sacrifice of those three hundred might just save the six hundred more that still clung to life inside the saucer-shaped primary hull.

Things on the Bridge became suddenly still. “I am now able to maintain a glide trajectory, Captain.” Ensign Hendricks glanced over his shoulder at the still prone form of his fallen captain. Marshal Lord climbed slowly to his feet as an image of the secondary hull tumbled and broke apart on the viewscreen. The captain let out a long sigh and tugged his crumpled uniform back into place.

“Begin course management subroutines,” he said flatly. “We’re not through this yet. Ops, coordinate with the helm, start looking for a landing zone.” Atmospheric ionization flared off the forward shields as the saucer section sailed off towards the nearest continent, and indeed, towards a sudden impact with history.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PLANET BETAZED IN THE AL-BETAZ SYSTEM EARLIER THAT SAME DAY

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. Hundreds of tiny pinpricks of light swarmed around its dazzling form in a carefully choreographed little dance that was a black and white image of the true myriad of colourful starships it represented.

Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett sat in the chill air on a park bench far below the orbiting behemoth. Her own starship lay berthed inside its yawning interior preparing for a midday launch that was sure to be a show-stopping spectacular. *Ambassador*-class cruisers were the largest and most complex starships ever built by Starfleet Command. Her ship, the *Enterprise*, currently held the singular honor of being the Federation flagship, making this day's launch all the more exciting to the growing swarm of spectators.

Just as those that had come before them, Captain Garrett's crew had become as legendary as the ship itself. They each proudly carried on the mantle left them by Pike, Kirk, and Harriman; their own crew's adding to the mythic lore that surrounded past starships *Enterprise*. It was a tale of honor and of distinction that grew ever greater with each successive generation.

She hugged herself now against a damp, predawn breeze that drifted in over the land from nearby Lake Cataria. She could sense the thoughts of her First Officer long before she heard him approach. Commander Spencer Stadi was a native of this lush and beautiful world, and like his people, a full telepath. For nearly seventeen years they had lived and worked together as a unified team; and in all that time, she had picked up a trick or two in mental telepathy.

His mental and physical presence soothed her now as he came up and stood near to her, seated there as she was on her park bench. She was his *Imzadi* and he was hers. In the Betazoid mind, the term meant beloved, though it was never spoken of aloud, especially between a first officer and his captain. Their years of service together had created a mental bond that was greater than physical attraction and went beyond love. They

had been inexorably linked, but decades of Starfleet training had kept all things both formal and professional.

“First day jitters, Captain?” Stadi’s voice was soft, his manner only slightly stiffened by the crisp new dress uniform that made him look larger than life in the brightening twilight. She smirked inwardly at his comment; in truth, the *Enterprise* would today embark on its fourth five-year mission into deep space. She had been captain, he first officer, for nearly seventeen years, but launch day still filled her with anxiety.

“What word from above, Commander?” Garrett gestured to the shimmering Space Center hovering above them.

“Commander Batanides has informed me that we will launch on schedule. It always amazes me what can be accomplished in just a few short weeks.” His eyes too went skyward as the sun broke suddenly across the horizon. The brilliance of it all but extinguished the light from the station, leaving only a barely discernable prick in the fabric of the brightening sky.

“It certainly is no small task,” she mused, finishing perhaps his own thoughts, “loading enough fuel and supplies and hardware for five years in deep space. I often think of the early Earth explorers that had to cram enough food and water into their tiny capsules to keep them alive for a two-year mission to Mars... can you imagine?”

“Now we can cover that same distance in five minutes,” Stadi harrumphed. The Betazed sun was full up now, and the Galatea Space Center was lost for another day. Garrett stood, stretched, and pulled the bunches out of her own dress uniform. Her brown hair hung not quite to her shoulders, and her almond eyes briefly met Stadi’s own ebony eyes, devoid as they were of any colour. His black hair was only now in the sunshine showing a hint of grey at the temples.

“The jewel awaits us,” Stadi said with a smile, sweeping an arm forward to invite his captain down along the path. She smiled brightly, knowing full well that he had taken this description directly out of her own mind.

“Shame on you, Commander,” she rejoined. “In just a few short hours, you’re going to have to behave yourself again.” Turning a faint crimson, Stadi looked away, then smiled. “You know,” he said at length, “the Jewel is actually the Betazoid name for our sun.” Garrett stopped and gave him an incredulous look.

“It’s true,” he continued. “In the ancient language, *Al-Betaz* translates as ‘the Jewel’ and the planet Beta-zed, as it is known today, was known by the ancients as Be-tazed... or more simply, *Bejeweled*.”

“Come on Confucius,” Garrett said with a laugh, rolling her eyes and stepping forward again. “I’m going to be late for my meeting with

Commodore Hanson, and I'm kind of anxious to see where the fools are sending us this time."

~ ~ ~ ~

Seated in the command chair on the Bridge of the *Enterprise*, Commander Marta Batanides stared at the viewscreen with narrow eyes and a tightly pinched frown. She leaned forward slowly now, elbows on knees, chin resting on two tightly clenched fists. She shook her head finally, causing her long dark hair to ripple in great waves over her narrow shoulders. At length she spoke with disdain in her voice to the only other person on the Bridge, Lieutenant Richard M. Castillo.

"That was awful."

"That was the all-time number one classic film ever made." Sitting at the helm, Castillo swiveled in his chair now to face her. There was little to do onboard a starship that lay nestled inside the belly of a massive starbase, so the duo had spent the past two hours engaged in the lieutenant's favorite pastime: watching ancient Earth motion pictures. The black and white end credits continued to flicker and flash on the main viewscreen, but Marta had quickly silenced the closing musical score.

"That was truly awful," she muttered again.

"It was filmed in 1939, give it a break," Castillo countered, taking personal offense at her critical review.

"Were those supposed to be flying monkeys?" Marta sat back now and stared at him with wide blue eyes and a twisted smile.

"Whatever," Castillo shot back, swiveling to face the screen again. "Y'know, they're having a huge celebration at the Toronto Film Festival this fall to mark the movie's four hundredth anniversary..."

"Oh, I can't wait..."

"...I'm going to ask the Captain if she thinks we can divert there for the really big show."

"Oh, I'm sure..." their playful banter was halted suddenly by a series of warning tones coming from the Ops station. Castillo jumped to his feet as Marta studied the readouts on the command chair armrests.

"Looks like a perimeter alert," Marta called over her shoulder as Castillo bounded up the few steps to the aft-facing workstations at the rear of the Bridge. Standing over the Ops board now, he quickly keyed in several commands.

"It appears to be a runaway cargo container... about twenty metric tonnes."

"Tractor beam?"

“Too small, too close,” Castillo said conclusively. “Shall I raise shields?”

“Not unless you want to turn half the people on the station into fried eggs...”

“Oh yeah,” Castillo muttered.

“...Looks like a perfect opportunity for a drill,” Marta continued. “Sound Collision, Lieutenant.”

“Awe, are you kidding me,” he protested, even as his fingertips keyed in the proper sequences. Marta’s tactical training quickly took over as her tone and manner went immediately into full command mode.

“Seal off all bulkheads, place damage control teams on standby, safe all engine systems, and prepare to vent drive plasma.”

“Messin with the engines...” Castillo shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Skyl’s gonna be pissed.” Below decks, eight hundred and thirty-five people were caught completely off guard by the blaring alarms and the sudden orders coming down from the Bridge. Most of the junior crewmembers hadn’t even unpacked yet and a few of the fresh new faces were still searching for their quarters. The honeycombed interior of the ship became a virtual sea of chaos.

In Engineering, Lt. Commander Skyl raised a single upswept eyebrow. The Vulcan chief engineer was somewhat obsessive about his engines, and he especially did not like surprises. His emotions kept carefully in check by generations of learnt suppression, he touched his commbadge and spoke with just a bare hint of irritation.

“Commander Skyl to Bridge...”

“Batanides here...”

“With deference, Commander, I wish to confirm your orders to safe all engines and vent drive plasma.”

On the Bridge, Marta glared briefly over her shoulder at Castillo, who stared back at her with a devilish grin. Shaking her head, she turned back to the main viewscreen where the tiny cargo container drifted still ever closer.

“My apologies, Commander,” Marta finally responded. “Apparently Mr. Castillo neglected to inform you that this is only a drill. Please stand by.” Even as she said this, the cargo container bounced harmlessly off the thick hull plating with a dull thud, then spun aimlessly away on a new trajectory.

“All hands, stand down from Collision Stations,” Marta announced into the comm system. “Lieutenant, I want a **full** report on the crew’s readiness and response time.” His shoulders sagged and his head stilted with a frown. “Any damage?” she smirked back. “Y’know,” he commented,

collecting the data, “this is a very bad omen.” Marta scowled at him with a ‘what now’ sort of look on her face.

“It’s true,” he continued. “The *Titanic* too had a near miss in port on her own launch day.”

“Did you ever meet Admiral McCoy?” Marta interjected.

“Oh, you mean ole Doctor Bag-o-Bones?”

“He told me once to treat the *Enterprise* always like a lady, and she’ll always bring me home.”

“Well Marta the Martian, your little lady now has a nice dent in the fender, and...”

“And?”

“Awe,” he muttered, “and the bastards scratched the paint too.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Dr. Jura Po held the tiny knitter up to the twitching blue antenna of the very young looking Andorian Ensign Enyo. Caught completely unawares by the recent chaos, the fresh new academy graduate had been knocked down in the corridor by her more seasoned crewmates. Now, fighting back the tears of an awful first day, the poor girl sat in Sickbay and fidgeted nervously under the scrutiny of the Chief Medical Officer.

“Do sit still, Ensign.” Dr. Po was a native of the Tellarite medical supply depot on ‘audet IX. His pronounced, pig-like snout was just inches from her face, making the young ensign all the more nervous. The doctor exhaled a hot breath that made Enyo’s cooler-than-normal blue skin dimple in protest. The once-bleeding scratch finally mended, the doctor leaned back at last, giving Enyo back her personal space.

Behind her, the doors to Sickbay parted with a whoosh, and the ship’s resident counselor entered and quickly surveyed the expansive facility. Fortunately, Ensign Enyo was the only crewmember to be injured in that little stunt that had recently come down from the Bridge; but many a nerves were frayed already, and it was the counselor’s job to put everyone’s sanity back together.

“Ah, Onovan my good friend,” Po said with a boisterous guffaw. “Welcome back.

How did you find things on New France?”

“Not well I’m afraid,” the El-Aurian answered. “The local cuisine did not exactly agree with me.” Usually the counselor carried about him an almost strange and mysterious air of clairvoyance, but his apparent gastrointestinal distress made him appear queasy, even from a distance. Doctor Po let out a high-pitched squeal of laughter that made Ensign Enyo giggle.

“Have you had a chance to meet our young Miss Enyo here?” the doctor asked as

Onovan walked up to the biobed on which she was seated. “I am afraid she is having a very bad first day.”

“The pleasure is mine, Ensign,” Onovan nodded at her, holding his belly in discomfort. His skin was coal-black, and like the other members of his species, his face and head were completely absent of any form of body hair. Known as a race of listeners, their words were always carefully chosen, their sentences always carefully orchestrated.

“Do not fret young lady, you’re aboard the *Enterprise* and among friends... Now Doctor, please.” He looked plaintively at the Tellarite, who squealed again, crossed to a replicator terminal, and keyed in a few short commands. Within the small chamber in front of him, a swirling cloud of energy coalesced into a short, fat glass filled with some sort of thick pinkish fluid. The doctor plucked it up gingerly and proudly marched it over to Onovan and Enyo.

“Here, try this,” he snorted. “It’s an ancient Earth remedy, you’ll like it, trust me.” Ensign Enyo giggled again as she scrunched up her nose at the odor. Her twin antennae twitched wildly as Onovan eyed the concoction with trepidation, then bottomed the glass in one sullen gulp. Doctor Po squealed with laughter as Onovan shook involuntarily and nearly gagged. Enyo couldn’t help but giggle again as he placed a hand on her shoulder to steady himself.

“What is it?” Onovan coughed. *Fine time to ask*, she thought.

“It’s, um... it’s pink, that’s all I can tell you.” Onovan shuddered again as a shipwide comm call came in on the overhead speakers:

“This is the Captain... All decks, all stations: prepare for departure. All senior staff, report to the Bridge. Launch in T-minus thirty minutes, Garrett out.”

Feeling suddenly better, Onovan nodded his thanks to Doctor Po, then turned to the still smiling Ensign Enyo.

“Ensign,” he said casually, “since you are having **such** a bad first day, how would you like to join the good doctor and me on the Bridge for the ship’s launch?” The good doctor let out another great peal of laughter, followed by several short snorts that spread a broad smile across the young ensign’s blue face. She had always heard of this legendary ship and its crew, but she had never dreamed in a million years that she would become a part of it.

~ ~ ~ ~

Some minutes later, the trio emerged onto a Bridge alive and bustling with noise and activity. Ensign Enyo was at once overwhelmed by the sights and sounds that came flooding over her. The circular command center was much larger and more graceful than she had imagined. It was laid out on three levels, she and her companions standing now on the lowermost level near to the main viewscreen. To her astonishment, she was only a hands-breadth away from the ship's dedication plaque. She wanted to reach out and touch its polished surface, but didn't dare; instead mouthing the inscription with a certain reverence:

"...to boldly go where no one has gone before."

On the uppermost level, at the rear of the Bridge, a vast array of science stations, including Engineering and Operations Management, displayed every single detail about the great starship's current status. Commander Stadi stood there, talking casually with the ship's Vulcan chief engineer. Several other officers passed around them, checking systems and comparing notes, cross-referencing their data with hundreds more below decks. And then, there she was. Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett stood on the command level at the center of it all. She was talking now to her helmsman and tactical officer, seated at their own control stations just ahead of the command chair. Enyo gulped involuntarily. Captain Garrett was an icon, a legend who had commanded this ship for as long as the young ensign had been alive.

Enyo suddenly felt out of place here, like she did not belong somehow. Only now did she notice with an inward horror that everyone else was wearing their dress uniforms; everyone but her. Even Doctor Po and Counselor Onovan were so attired. She could not believe she hadn't noticed before! She tried to take a step back, but the lift doors had already closed. Her blue skin began to glow to near phosphorescence as the captain suddenly spoke.

"Gentleman," she said warmly, "welcome to the Bridge. Counselor, I see you've brought a guest," Garrett added with an all-too-knowing smile. Her only saving grace, Enyo was grateful to see that the commotion all over the rest of the Bridge seemed to continue unabated; everyone else was simply too busy to notice them.

"Captain Garrett," Onovan bowed slightly, "may I present Ensign Enyo, fresh out of Starfleet Academy."

"She's having a very bad first day," Doctor Po added with a squeal that now caught everyone's attention. Enyo's skin flashed again to near florescence. Captain Garrett offered her another warm smile, then stood up even straighter than before, became even larger than life.

“Ensign,” she said with sudden command in her voice. “We are presently short an Operations Manager, please assume control of that station.” Frozen with fear, Enyo could not move. She heard the captain mention Onovan’s name, and then felt herself being pulled along to the far side of the Bridge. Before she knew it, she found herself seated at Ops with Onovan’s comforting presence standing vigilantly by her side. He glanced down at her and winked.

“Any word yet on Cicely?” Lieutenant Castillo swiveled now in his chair and faced his captain. He was referring to yet another fresh young academy graduate who was initially supposed to be seated at Ops. A one-time stowaway, Cicely had been somewhat adopted by the senior staff and had eventually been groomed to the point of entering Starfleet Academy. Once there, the former Orion slave-girl had astonished everyone and graduated at nearly the top of her class.

“I am afraid,” Garrett announced, “that her transport has been delayed at Axanar. She will rendezvous with us at a later date... Now my friends,” she said louder, “the hour has come... Commander Stadi, make the ship ready!”

“With pleasure, Captain,” he snapped with a formal tone. “All decks, all stations, this is the ExO, give me a go / no go for launch.” He held up a padd, and in a stern voice, began to announce each individual department in turn. The effect sent chills down everyone’s spine:

“Science...”

“Go flight!”

“Environment...”

“Go flight!”

“Sickbay...”

“Go flight!”

“Operations...”

“Go flight!” (gulp!)

“Navigation...”

“Go flight!”

“Tactical...”

“Go flight!”

“Engineering...”

“All engines go, Sir!”

“Captain,” Stadi announced, “the ship has been made ready.”

“Well done, Commander,” Garrett acknowledged. “Ops, open a channel to Spaceflight Control.” With some quick help from Onovan, Ensign Enyo was able to key in the proper sequences.

“Channel open, Captain,” she squeaked, and Garrett smirked.

“Spaceflight Control, this is the *Enterprise*... awaiting final clearance for departure.” “*Starfleet Heavy 1701C, this is Spaceflight Control... you are hereby cleared for departure on heading zero-niner-zero at fifteen degrees positive azimuth. Be advised of heavy traffic in all space lanes.*” There was a loud, system-wide tone that sounded on all channels before the announcement continued. “*All traffic, all traffic, this is Spaceflight Control... Ambassador-class Heavy Cruiser departing on escape vector. All vessels are hereby ordered to give way. Repeat, all traffic, all...*”

The voice was silenced by Onovan with a single hand gesture from his captain. Garrett stood up straight and proud now and tugged her uniform into place. She could hardly suppress the smile that made her feel giddy all over. Formal launches were rare on missions that could last for years. She was at the height of her glory now, a starship captain with seemingly the entire universe at her fingertips.

“Mr. Castillo,” she announced, “let’s see what this *Ambassador*-class starship can do... Clear all moorings, aft thrusters at one-quarter, port and starboard at station-keeping. Take us out Lieutenant!”

Freed at last from her restraints, the great vessel began to move forward ever so slowly, but then gradually faster as it picked up momentum. But it would still take several long seconds for the massive starship to cross the absolutely cavernous hangar bay in which it was berthed. The Galatea Space Center 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 actuality 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 Hanson’s legendary flagship *Melbourne*, and the *Cumberland* and *Congress*, twin *Oberth*-class science vessels set to depart later that day on an unusual dual mission to the Murasaki Quasar. There was even a rare *Janaran*-class corsair carrier, one of only six left in the Betazed Defense Force.

Yet, the dozens did not compare to the hundreds more that swarmed the AI-Betaz System as the *Enterprise* at last emerged from the yawning space doors and out into free space. The staggering congestion was compounded even further by dozens of other small pleasure craft filled to capacity with space tourists; many having traveled light-years just to catch a bare glimpse of the near mythical Federation flagship on her launch day.

Like dolphins riding the bow wave of an ancient Earth steamship, these ships skittered ever here and abouts, while the *Enterprise* began her

graceful upward climb out of orbit. Out ahead of the massive starship, still more cleared a flight path far out into the outer solar system. Some took notice, some didn't, some were impressed, and indeed, some were not; but there was no denying the grandeur of it all, taken as a whole. This was the First Golden Age at its height, and seemingly, the entire rest of the galaxy was in envy of it.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PLANET EARTH IN THE TERRAN SYSTEM STARDATE 16363.57

President Kalomi Joran stood with his feet in the sand and watched as the orange globe known as Sol began its lonely afternoon descent towards the ocean. Waves crashed on the beach before him, just as they had done for centuries. The ice-cold water lapped bare inches from his toes, and they almost involuntarily curled up and dug into the sand, as if sensing the chillness. The President was a man prone to quiet contemplation which often helped to keep his political rivals off guard.

A native of lush and tropical Betazed, Joran still hadn't quite gotten used to the chill air that was Western Europe in springtime. Still, he loved to stand here at this beachhead and contemplate with a certain awe the great metal hulks that lay rusting and half submerged in the rolling waves just offshore. The humans called this place Normandy, and it had been the sight of the greatest invasion in the whole of the planet's long and bloody history. Nearly seven thousand vessels and twelve thousand aircraft supported a landing force of over one hundred and fifty-six thousand troops; hundreds of thousands more than that crossing this very same sand in the days and weeks that followed.

The President had to admit that he was certainly overwhelmed. Yet, he was all the more so overwhelmed by this lofty office that he had so tenuously attained. The United Federation of Planets in its Golden Age was comprised of nearly 150 major worlds, and thousands of minor ones. Billions upon billions of citizens swarmed across 8,000 light-years of free space and beyond. More than one hundred thousand starships explored never-before-seen regions of the galaxy and conducted trade on a staggering scale that was nearly beyond comprehension.

Yes indeed, Kalomi Joran had been overwhelmed, and had in truth found himself totally unprepared for the responsibilities of this office. But these few years had aged him greatly and made him all that more wiser. He woke up in the morning prepared now for a galaxy that awaited his every move. Many a past president, and even a few vice presidents, had crumpled in on themselves under the intense pressure and scrutiny, but Kalomi Joran in all his contemplation had at last found himself in this ocean that surrounded him. The telepathic regions of his brain sensed Ambassador Sarek's approach long before he heard him. Noted throughout

the Federation as touch-telepaths, Vulcans had learned a millennium ago to shield their thoughts from the probings of others, but they still couldn't mask their physical presence from an adept Betazoid with full telepathic abilities like Joran. The president did not even turn to acknowledge his friend and confidante, but merely spoke as if he had been there all along.

"Sarek my friend, kick off your shoes and relax with me in the sand."

The Vulcan's robes billowed out behind him in the ocean breeze. His sharp, upswept eyebrows and pointed ears were all the more pronounced in the orange glow of the slowly setting sun. At 174 years old, Sarek was at last beginning to show his age, but only in the sense of slightly greying hair and a few careworn lines in his furrowed brow and around his haunting olive-green eyes. A Federation ambassador for nearly the whole of his entire long life, Sarek had stood on this very beach with dozens of presidents past, since the very beginnings of the Federation.

"Join me in my musings," Joran continued. "I was just contemplating whether or not the Federation could repulse such an invasion force as this." The President swept his arm over the whole of an imagined Allied fleet of thousands. In truth, both men knew that in spite of a hundred thousand ships or more, Starfleet was still spread pretty thin where its defensive borders were concerned. In the Golden Age, exploration had slowly taken precedence over long-neglected adversaries.

"Let us hope, Mr. President, that we never have cause to find out." His emotions deeply suppressed by centuries of collected training, he still could not hide from Joran the bare hint of worry. For the first time, the president turned to face his longtime ally.

"Sarek, what troubles you? I did not hear a shuttle and surely you did not walk from Paris..."

"Indeed, Mr. President, I did not, for there was not time."

"Go on," Joran urged with growing trepidation. It had been a very long time since he had seen Sarek this unsettled.

"There has been an incident, Mr. President, at the planet Ethos in the Alpha Geminorum System."

"Refresh my memory, Ambassador... I'm afraid I am unfamiliar with this planet." "This does not surprise me, Sir. It is a pre-warp civilization, and indeed very few are familiar with it." There was a brief pause that Sarek had come to expect from this president and his musings. Finally he spoke, and looked back at the great orange globe known as Sol sinking ever closer to the sea.

"Am I to suppose that this 'incident' has now thrust this unfamiliar planet into the center of our universe for today?"

"And for many days to come, Mr. President."

"Well out with it then," Joran said with a weary sigh.

“The *Starship Ambassador*, whilst conducting covert scientific reconnaissance, has gone down on this planet...”

“Gone down?! My gods Sarek... as in *crashed*?”

“Yes, Sir, Mr. President.”

“And survivors?” Joran swayed uncertainly.

“Unknown at this time, Sir. The *Enterprise* has launched and they have been dispatched immediately to the scene.”

“Well, thank goodness for that at least.” The President brought a hand up to his chin in deep thought. Choosing a course of action now would be difficult and could have far reaching consequences well into the future. Being President of the Federation was akin to playing a game of chess with time and all of its possible outcomes. A pre-warp civilization with no knowledge of alien life had now suddenly on this day found itself at the center of a galactic empire. Would they cope, or would they self-destruct?

“We must take this carefully, one step at a time,” Joran at last said, his musings turning into decisive action. “Who else knows?”

“I have informed the Privy Council, of course.”

“And the Federation Council?”

“I thought it wise we travel to San Francisco and deliver the news in person.”

“Yes, of course” Joran stated flatly, thankful his good friend was here with him now. “We will have to inform the Vice President as well.”

“I already took the liberty of contacting Downing Street, Mr. President.”

“And?” (already knowing the answer)

“The Vice President’s office informed me that he is currently off world and quote:

‘cannot be reached’.”

“Damned fool,” Joran said hotly now. “Probably off on another bender somewhere...” Unlike President Kalomi Joran, Vice President Austin Kelley had not so easily adjusted to the unexpected and overwhelming pressures of his office. He was often ‘off world’ in one sense or another, and the press quite often found him at some of the more seedier outposts, like Farspace Starbase Earhart, where the Secret Service had more than once pulled him out through a back alley.

“...Well done, Ambassador, you have already gained a good head start on this. Perhaps we can yet save the day. Now, while I address the Council, you can find the Vice President.” The president gave Sarek a wide smile as he reached inside his coat and touched a commbadge.

“This is President Kalomi Joran to Spacedock Control.”

“*Spacedock Control, Mr. President, go ahead.*”

“Ambassador Sarek and I need immediate emergency transport to Council Chambers in San Francisco.”

Even as he finished his sentence, the two men began to dissolve, moving instantly from sunset to sunrise half a world away. Still yet in his bare feet, and being further briefed by his friend as he went, Kalomi Joran moved into the austere chambers of the Federation Council, to give perhaps the most important speech of his presidency.

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At the Manzar Colony, not far from Earth, but much nearer to Ethos, Vice President Austin Kelley slept heavily in a pitch-dark room devoid of any light. Some days earlier, he had snuck away from Earth; reluctantly in the company of one insistent aide. For the past thirty-six hours, the pitiful little man had tried to drown his worries in a sea of clubs and casinos, before finally collapsing here, in this place, at the back of his best friend’s restaurant.

Austin Kelley was an enigma. A relative unknown in the grand political circles of the Federation. Young and charismatic, his impassioned speeches and dark Greek physique had catapulted him unexpectedly into the vice presidency before any of the rest of the candidates knew what hit them. When fully decked out in his best white suit, it offered a stark contrast to his dark skin and long, shoulder-length black hair. He swept along with himself an aura and a passionate following that barred any seemed sense of reasoning. But charisma and impassioned speeches do little in the face of reality, and the reality of his life had become mired in the constant burdens of governance. The appearances, the meetings, the conferences, the never-ending parade of diplomats had practically beaten the life right out of Austin Kelley. He needed to unwind, and the Manzar Colony was just the place for that. Yet, as he slept, the vice president had no idea the importance that his current location was about to take on.

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High on a plateau in the Unduari Highlands, Leilani Algethi sat on a sun-scorched rock and stared up into a viridescent sky. It was not yet quite high-Ascension, but already the day was hot and humid. Despite the humidity, it rarely rained here at this elevation, except when the really big storms pushed through. Perhaps that was why Leilani liked this spot. A

difficult climb was rewarded by a 360° panoramic view, unhindered by the sparse vegetation and rock outcroppings of the lower terrains.

She looked out now over the Highlands with their contrast of beauty and hardship. Her sharp eyes could just barely catch a glimpse of the Boreal Sea shimmering in the broiling air. To her left, the silvery ribbon of the Sleep River was much more pronounced as it etched its way through the landscape. There was beauty here yes, but the hardship came when her people had been exiled to this place long before Leilani had even been born. The Second Continent was much less hospitable to life than was the lush and tropical First Continent.

Her parent's hatred for the Crown Empress would not even broach a discussion about traveling to the First Continent. Sure, Leilani had seen pictures of the Palladium in her textbooks, but to actually stand there in the capital streets and stare up at that magnificent structure sent chills through Leilani's imagination. But young minds don't always understand the political motivations of generations past. Whereas her parents and grandparents had rebelled against the young new Crown Empress, Leilani had never known a single day under her direct rule, and as such, had none of the misgivings of her ancestry. Somewhere behind her, far, far above her, Leilani heard a shrill whistle that she had never in her life heard before. Her braided hair swung wildly as her head spun round and jerked upward. There, at some distance, a white tear in the seamless fabric of the green-blue sky was growing ever longer, second by second. Leilani's fear grew with each passing moment as the tear approached and the shrill whistle grew into a dull roar. At the head of the tear, a billowing, flaming globe ripped the viridescent sky asunder.

Is this the chariot of the One True Goddess? Leilani's internal spirit trembled. The ancient Book of Darkness often spoke of a Chariot of Fire that would arrive from the Ascendants bearing a Goddess that would unite the people. But the Crown Empress had already made this claim; so, *what manner of Dark tidings could this be?* "But fear not, for when all hope seems lost, many angels shall descend from the heavens heralding the coming of the One True Goddess."

Leilani trembled again. Her parents often spoke of the Crown Empress as being a false prophet sent by the Darkness to conquer and subjugate. But this was not right, the ancient Book spoke of many angels, not just one. Even as she thought this, the flaming globe ballooned outwards with a sudden roar. Leilani slid backwards off her rock onto the ground. The billowing orb separated now into two, then three, and finally four great flaming projectiles with many, many more smaller ones trailing along behind.

Leilani's whole body shook as the foremost chariot sailed out ahead of the rest on a heading towards the First Continent. With a roar, this and the secondary chariot at last sailed far above and over her, but not before two ear-splitting cracks thumped her in the chest and shattered the air, sending the poor child crawling for a sparse thicket of underbrush. Yet, in spite of her terror, Leilani could not remove her eyes from the two remaining chariots which seemed to be heading straight for her.

She cupped her ears as the dual roar became a high-pitched double-shriek. With a chest-deep, earth-shattering thud, the first of the two projectiles struck the plateau a mere kilometer from her cowering form. She did not hear the second fall into the lower terrain as she was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of dust and debris and a rolling mound of earth from the first.

Leilani was thrown up into the air and catapulted several meters askance before making a hard landing deeper into the prickly underbrush. It was several moments before she tried to stand. Her ears and nose were bleeding. Her bare arms and legs bore the scratches of her flight, and a deep, bloody cut on her knee was oozing an amalgamation of stone and sand. As she hobbled clumsily out of the knee-high thicket, she gaped in wonder at the great metal monster before her.

Even from a kilometer's distance, she could still feel a great heat emanating from the towering behemoth. Its hulking, sizzling form was the largest thing she had ever seen, rising into the air at a height that rivaled some of the taller buildings in the capital city. More curious now than afraid, Leilani managed to pry her eyes away long enough to peer down off the plateau to where the final chariot had made its own similar impact. There, far in the distance, its own sizzling hulk stuck far above the surrounding vegetation and rock outcroppings, the top of the beast nearly even with the level of Leilani's plateau. Around it, several smoky brush fires crackled and popped in the heat of an already scorched day. Dazed and confused, Leilani turned back to her own chariot that lay there off in the distance. Too hot to approach though, she instead sat down on her upturned rock and began to try and cope with all that she had just seen.

~ ~ ~ ~

“Starship down, starship down! All hands to rescue and triage stations, this is not a drill!” That had been the call that resounded through the corridors of the *Enterprise* just moments before it went to Red Alert and jumped into high warp. However rare the call may be, it almost always meant catastrophe, all the more so where an *Ambassador*-class starship was concerned. Not since the very early days of space travel had vessels

actually been designed to take off and land on a planets surface; especially now in the modern age when ships took on ever larger and more unprecedented sizes. The perfection of the transporter had all but eliminated even the use of shuttles, saving precious time for a population always on the move.

So, yes, crashes were exceedingly rare, but nonetheless trained for. At this, their first call to duty, the crew of the *Enterprise* had moved to their rescue stations with remarkable ease and efficiency. Everyone, including the junior crewmembers, knew exactly what to do and where to do it. Starfleet training was an art perfected; traditions and knowledge passed down for generations, each learning from the ones before in a system that had worked from the very beginning.

Even the ship itself was a marvel of efficiency. At 526 meters long and 325 wide¹, the 39-storey high behemoth was now cruising across interstellar space at 1,024 times the speed of light. The monstrous seventeen-story warp core creating not only enough energy to keep the lights on, but also enough to feed the twin, power-hungry warp nacelles that now reached deep into subspace and pulled the massive vessel along at its current breakneck velocity.

In the Observation Lounge, just aft of the Main Bridge, the captain's senior staff sat in silence at the long, curved oak table and waited patiently for her arrival. From the captain's position at the head of the table, Commander Spencer Stadi was next seated immediately right, Lt. Commander Onovan across from him to the left. The petite chief of security, Commander Marta Batanides sat next; across from her, the 'Asian-looking' chief engineer, Lt. Commander Skyl. Reaching towards the far end of the table, the boyish looking blue-eyed helmsman Lt. Richard Castillo sat across from the Tellarite doctor Jura Po; his snout twitching in anticipation.

Besides the captain, the only other vacancy in the group was the Operations Manager, the aforementioned Orion girl, Ensign Cecily Garrett, still delayed at Axanar. Through the chain of command, these eight people directed over eight hundred more in a carefully choreographed dance that had made this *Enterprise* as legendary as all the ones that had come before it. But excellence in command leadership had to come from the top down, and it all had to begin with a legendary captain.

Captain Rachel C. Garrett strode into the room in earnest. Her senior staff all sat forward in anxious anticipation of the details, as much out of curiosity as of concern. They stared into a careworn face that had already seen a very long day; a day that had started before dawn on a park bench already light-years away. She paused just briefly behind her chair, her

¹ 1,726ft x 1,066ft

hands resting on its high back, her almond eyes gazing out the wide viewports to the rainbow-coloured streaks of warp stars racing wildly off into the infinite distance. She let out a long sigh, then sat, her back arched straight, her hands clasped tightly on the tabletop. She briefly surveyed each member of her senior staff before beginning slowly, her voice somewhat shaky at first.

“Our sister ship, the *Ambassador*, went down this morning on the planet Ethos in the Alpha Geminorum System. As more data comes in from the ship’s distress buoy, the situation becomes all that more complex, and perhaps all the more grim.” She paused now and typed in several commands on an embedded tabletop keypad. At the far end of the room, a wall monitor blinked to life and displayed the Alpha Geminorum System.

“The Ethosian people,” she continued, “are a semi-industrialized pre-warp civilization... which means we are now in a very dangerous forced-first contact scenario.” At this, the senior staff all began to murmur amongst themselves. Under ordinary circumstances, first contact would only be made with a pre-warp society *after* they had constructed their first faster-than-light spaceship and made their first warp-jump. Until that happened, the unhindered natural development of any planet within Federation space was guaranteed by the Prime Directive; also known as Starfleet’s ‘non-interference clause’.

Captain Garrett wrapped her knuckles on the table, then gestured to the wall monitor. “The situation gets worse,” she stressed. “Alpha Geminorum is a six-star system. The only planet, Ethos, is tidally locked within the center of gravity of the four primaries. This means that the people of this planet have *never known darkness*.” The senior staff all turned to her with mouths agape.

“*Never?*” Castillo blurted out with astonishment.

“Never,” Garrett reiterated. “For these people, their skies have always been filled with the dance of their four primary suns. They have never gazed longingly into a starry night, never seen a moonrise over the ocean, never wondered at the twinkling of a distant planet. Their thick green-blue atmosphere even blocks out the light from the twin red dwarfs that orbit the primaries. They have never dreamed of life elsewhere or indeed, of anything beyond their seemingly endless atmosphere. Until today, these people were alone in a world without a universe.”

“My gods,” Stadi whispered, slumping into his chair. “Their entire civilization is going to be thrown into chaos.”

“I can’t even imagine life on a world like that,” Marta added.

“A world like this,” Skyl interjected, always the analytical Vulcan. “The present tense must be used in this situation, Commander.”

Marta gave him a cross-looking frown as he turned to Garrett. “What do we know of the crash itself, Captain?”

“Well,” Garrett sighed, “data from the distress buoy is still slowly trickling in. No one yet is for certain why the ship even entered the system, and the cause of the crash itself remains remarkably vague... but the sequence of events following becomes quite clear.” A few short keystrokes changed the image of the star system to that of the planet itself. “Apparently upon entering the atmosphere,” she paused, thinking of Marshal Lord, “the Captain ordered the secondary hull to be jettisoned...” The faces of the senior staff all lit up with surprise as she continued.

“This allowed the primary hull to begin a stable glide trajectory.” They all nodded in understanding. “The secondary hull immediately tumbled and broke apart. The engine nacelles impacted on the smaller northern continent.” Two red dots began to blink on the wall monitor image of the planet. “The remaining bulk splashed down just offshore in roughly one hundred sixty meters of water.” Another red dot began to blink along the coastline.

“Adding perhaps insult to injury,” Garrett continued, “the primary hull glided directly into the planet’s capital city. There it impacted with several high-rise buildings before making ground-contact and slide-out in a large central park.”

“They couldn’t have picked a better place to land?” Castillo chided, piloting a starship being his own one true specialty.

“Given the circumstances,” Skyl intoned, “and judging by the topography of the planet, they were fortunate to make landfall at all.”

“Which brings us to our mission,” Garrett stated, stalling any further banter. “First and foremost, preliminary data is suggesting that there may be a fault or a design flaw in the navigational subprocessors...”

“A design flaw in an *Ambassador*-class starship?!” Castillo shot back with a look of disbelief painted on his boyish face.

“These are the most complex pieces of machinery ever built,” Stadi offered in response. “And the *Ambassador* was the pathfinder for this class.”

“Indeed, Commander,” Skyl added. “Although rare, design flaws remain always a possibility. I will begin full diagnostics on all navigational subsystems, Captain.”

“You’ll do more than that, Commander,” Garrett stated flatly. “You will turn this ship inside out. The last thing we need right now is to park the *Enterprise* alongside the

Ambassador. Check and double-check everything... do I make myself clear?”

“Most clear, Captain.” Skyl stared at her with a somewhat startled upswept eyebrow, but made no further comment.

“Upon arrival,” Garrett spoke louder now with full command presence in her voice, “Onovan and I will go to the capital city and attempt to sort this mess out with the government. Starfleet Command is making the assumption that any survivors are being cared for in local hospitals or possibly onboard. We are *not* to interfere until contact with the government has been established.”

“But...” Doctor Po began to protest, but he was quickly silenced by a single look from his captain.

“Commander Stadi,” she continued, “you, Commander Skyl, and Doctor Po will have the unenviable task of surveying the submerged secondary hull. Search for survivors, find out what went wrong, and stabilize the warp core and antimatter supply. A core breach would create a tsunami the likes of which this planet has never seen. We don’t need that either,” she added with an ever-so-slight smirk.

“Commander Batanides and Lieutenant Castillo, you will remain in orbit and coordinate rescue operations once they begin. The *Cumberland* and the *Congress* have launched early and will join us by day’s end as will the *Starship Kyushu*, already enroute. They will need a command presence and leadership and both of you will provide that... understood?” The two officers nodded solemnly in unison.

“Good,” Garrett said, standing up now. “All data from the *Ambassador* has now been made available. Review it, get to know the ship and its crew, get to know the planet, and above all, get to know its people. We are now their angels descending from the heavens, and they will need us.”

Captain Rachel Garrett had no idea the true portent of her words.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PALLADIUM IMPERIAL FORTRESS OF THE CROWN EMPRESS EPHEMERIS CITY, ETHOS

High up upon the stone battlements that were the North Tower, Ras Tau'aman stared out over the Inner and Outer Bays towards the distant sea. His mind was troubled, as it always was, by the constant burdens of his high office. As First Lord of the Ascendant, it was his job to see to every erratic whim of the very young and ageless Crown Empress. He had been at it for nearly seventy years.

In this part of the world, it was fast approaching late-Ascension. The viridescent sky always took on an eerie sheen during this time of the day and much of the populace slept as much out of fear as instinct. But in another hour or so it would soon be full-Opposition, and then the glory of the heavens would be reborn in the re-Ascension. Thus, the Ascendants, guardians of the people, continually watched over and illuminated their world below always and without end.

It was late, and Ras was forever tired. He could scarce remember how he had fallen into this position, only that he had been a young and eager state-guard at the glorious time when the Empress and her family had arrived from the Ascendants aboard their chariot of fire. And for seventy years he had faithfully served this Ascendant Goddess until his youth had long since evaporated and left him only the withered and wearied shell of a tired old man.

With a sigh, Ras took his weary mind and shuffled slowly over to the nearer side of the stone battlement. He looked now past the Eastern Tower and down over a sleeping city that cared little for his tiredness nor his troubles. Across the broad inner plaza to his right, he knew in his mind that the Crown Empress was at last asleep in the South Tower. This offered him but a brief respite to be alone with his troubled thoughts. He had long and almost painfully endeavoured to keep hidden his growing inner fear that the Crown Empress was indeed the false prophet that the ancient Book of Darkness had warned about. But even an instant's acknowledgement of such a blasphemous thought would most surely mean instant execution, so he pushed it away; pushed it yet deeper into his subconsciousness. Instead, he focused on the sleeping city below and at length resolved that he himself should try to get a few precious hours rest. Just as he was about to turn however, a glint in the northern sky unexpectedly caught his tired eyes.

Squinting, Ras tried to focus on the shimmering point of light that seemed to be fast approaching. He could hear it now and a quivering instinctual fear began growing within his belly. The point of light quickly resolved itself into a smoldering and steaming mass of immense proportions. The noise it issued became a shriek in his ears as it passed now into the airspace of the Outer Bay. With a roar, the monstrous saucer-shaped object almost instantly crossed the confines of the Inner Bay, turned, and headed straight for him. Its speed was terrific! Frozen with terror, Ras Tau'aman gripped with bloody fingertips the edges of the coarse stone battlements. This smoldering and belching metal monster was as tall as any building and as wide as any city block. With a blur that astonished him, the scorched beast roared past and slammed into the Eastern Tower with such horrific force that Ras involuntarily cowered and covered his ears.

Stumbling backwards now, he stared with mouth agape as the beast continued onwards unabated; his own tower trembling as what was left of the Eastern Tower thundered into the streets below. The sights and sounds were almost beyond comprehension and were yet to continue. With a precision that could only come from an expert swordsman, the monster next sheared the roof off of the Ministry of Aldermen and with a now dull and distant thud, completely leveled the Park Haven apartment complex. With a final almighty roar, the beast at long last hit the ground, and in the span of but a few short seconds, completely decimated what had once been the city's pride and joy, its central park. Ras could do nothing but stand in place and tremble. Below him, the city came to life with a shriek of terror and utter pandemonium. He could no longer hold back the tears of fear as a quote from the ancient Book of Darkness once again resurfaced within his mind:

"But fear not, for at that critical hour when all hope seems lost, many angels shall descend from the heavens heralding the coming of the One True Goddess, a savior."

~ ~ ~ ~

Rachel Garrett sat in her darkened oval ready room and stared with dismay at the clutter strewn across her desk. This small office gave her some privacy to tend to the true burdens of command, while still providing her with quick and easy access to the Bridge. Her first day back on the job had already left her behind on the seemingly endless parade of paperwork that was the mundane day to day reality of starship command.

The desk was an ancient wooden school-teachers desk, and it simply dominated the small room. It had been a congratulatory gift from her grandfather nearly twenty years ago when she had been promoted to captain and given command of the *Enterprise*. Since that time, it had

traveled with her to nearly every corner of the Federation, bore silent witness to every staff briefing, and remained a true testament to the heart and soul of generations of education and experience.

The *Enterprise* had dropped out of high warp only moments ago and was now beginning a high polar descent into the Alpha Geminorum System. Lt. Castillo had hoped that this trajectory would avoid most of the gravitational turbulence commonly associated with a six-star solar system, but the ride was still expected to be a bit bumpy. Already the ship shuddered slightly each time it crested over one massive gravitational wave and began plunging through the next.

Garrett considered this and so many other things as she sat and pondered the ill-timed fate of the downed *Ambassador*. Had some rogue gravity wave knocked the ship out of its orbit? Unlikely, she concluded. Why had they even been in orbit in the first place? Unknown. She knew that there had not been a systemwide technological failure aboard a starship in over fifty years either. But the evidence continued to mount that this was indeed exactly what had happened. Could the indomitable *Enterprise* suffer the same fate as her fallen sister? And if so, when? When would disaster strike?

At any moment. The captain shuddered involuntarily, then slowly rose and crossed over to the food replicator. Ordering a steaming cup of black coffee, she turned and took the few steps to stand in front of the full-length oval viewport that stared out into deep space. The hot coffee quickly steamed up the alumglass directly in front of her and made a blurry image of the star-studded blackness beyond. Somewhere out there a hundred thousand starships plied those dark waters: each with a careworn captain just like her, and each with a computer system similar to the *Enterprise's*.

A shudder this time shook the ship and roused the captain from her reverie. She was about to return to her desk, and indeed to her work, when a barely discernable glint caught her eye. At first, she thought it was beyond the alumglass, but as the glint spread outward in a starlike pattern, she quickly realized it was the alumglass itself. Her immediate reaction was more of fascination than worry as the starlike pattern grew ever larger and transformed itself into a sparkling spiderweb.

Reality can sometimes be fooled by the unreal and Garrett was for the moment caught up within the web of the unreal. But when reality strikes, a moment's hesitation can be fatal. Stunned, the captain took a single step backwards as the growth of the defect became audible and its size nearly doubled. Her first breathless instinct was to make a forlorn dash for the door.

And then reality struck. She knew she'd never make it before the glass caved outward and she was blown into deep space. Without a

moment's hesitation, she tapped the commbadge pinned to her chest and called for emergency beam-out. And even as her body dissolved into a shimmering column of energy, her minds-eye perceived the glass disintegrate and her coffee cup vanish into the endless vacuum of the star-studded abyss.

~ ~ ~ ~

"But what does it mean, Alderman?" In the small hardscrabble community of Ertai, the startled people all crammed around the central fount and begged their leader for answers. It was just past high-Ascension and they all had seen it; the flaming chariots that had rent open the heavens, had landed nearby and set the dense underbrush ablaze. The nearly encapsulated Alderman raised both his hands in a futile attempt to hold the nearly panicked crowd at bay. The crow's feet around his eyes became all the more pronounced in the harsh glare of midday. He quickly broke into a sweat as the twin Orbs of the Ascendants beat down on him and the great mass pressed yet closer. He began to gain a real fear for his life.

As the required representatives to the Empress, the Aldermen were not always popular, especially here in the high deserts of the Second Continent. These people had been exiled to this place for their dissention of the Crown and resented that they still had to answer to Its authority, even here. The harsh terrain made for a harsh and meager existence and left the people with little time but for survival.

"People, people, please!" the Alderman said in earnest. "I have not yet been in contact with the Ministry... people, please!" The crowd moved in one great undulating wave as they jockeyed to get yet closer. His voice was nearly lost in the clamor of a hundred more voices all fighting to be heard.

"Is she coming?" one man's voice echoed above the rest.

"Are the Angels now among us?" This time a woman's voice transcended the mob.

The crowd fell into a momentary hush.

"I'm sure there is a perfectly reasonable explan..." The mob again rose into an uproar. "People, please, I must try to contact the Ministry," he tried to shout above the din. With a silence that startled him, the crowd ceased and the great undulating wave stiffened into a single rigid mass of bodies all held in awe. The northern perimeter of the circle began to separate, then closed in again to encapsulate a much smaller circular void. This void began to move ever so slowly through the mob and towards its center, indeed towards the now dumbstruck Alderman. The strange void

came very near to him now and made him strangely feel even more uncomfortable than before.

At last, it opened and revealed to him a girl-child; twelve, perhaps thirteen, dirty and disheveled. At first glance, he paid her no mind. But then he noticed the encrusted blood on her face, the torn and tattered clothing, the bashed and battered knee. He began to take notice quite quickly of the haunted look in her eyes. He recoiled from those eyes with a certain fear. They had seen things, things he subconsciously was not yet ready to accept.

“My child, wha...”

“Silence old man.” The clarity and the pitch in her voice at once silenced him. The Alderman began to back off around the fount, yet still those haunted eyes followed him, disquieting his very soul.

“We take no more direction from the likes of you,” she growled in a tone seemingly only he could hear. Awestruck, the press of the crowd eased backward, but not before absorbing the Alderman, vanishing him from memory. The battered girl circled the fount and surveyed the tired and weary people. She climbed now up upon the stone edges of the shimmering pool of water.

“My people,” she cried, “I have seen the Angels, *AND I AM THEIR MESSENGER!*” The crowd fell backwards as one. “The Ascendants have spoken to me in a vision. *SHE IS*

COMING, and the time to be united is *now*; to go forth as one!”

Prostrate now, the mass of people all shuddered as one. Leilani Algethi looked out over their cowering forms, not to subjugate, but to incite. She crouched and dipped from the well and drank. She heard someone murmur the words fearful and almighty.

“Who is it that fears me?” she cried out, rising. “I am but the Messenger of the One True Goddess. Do not fear me,” she laughed, “rise up with me. Does not the ancient Book of Darkness speak of a false prophet sent by the darkness to conquer and subjugate?” “It is so written,” several voices echoed at once.

“Then join me,” she impassioned, “for I tell you now, the Empress Ethereal *is* that false prophet and we *shall* rise up against her!” Her vibrance was becoming infectious now as the great mass mulled over her words. For nearly three generations, the Ethosian people had been subjected to tighter and tighter restrictions as the fanatical power of the ageless Crown Empress had grown in tandem with her paranoia. Yet, her own narcissism had not prepared her for this, had not allowed her to see the rising of this wave.

“Yes, that’s it,” Leilani encouraged. “Rise up, rise up with me! Rise up with me and march to the Palladium... *for we shall go forth and conquer the darkness!*”

~ ~ ~ ~

The constant drip of water was more agonizing than ancient Chinese water torture. The occasional sparks that this produced was as equally unnerving. Every once in a great while a deep metallic groan would fill the air and pierce the body to its very soul. Even the air was growing cold and stale. The pressure was building nearly as fast as his anxiety. His eyes were jittery, rolling around like caged animals, and his hands were trembling. “They cut us loose,” he said yet again in disbelief. “I can’t believe the bastards just cut us loose.” In the submerged stardrive section of the *Ambassador*, Chief Engineer Ryan Mackenzie stared in disbelief at the intermittent readings that flashed on his computer monitor. Despite the chill damp air, he wiped a few beads of sweat off his brow with the back of his hand.

For his part, Ensign Andrew Dardanelle looked ominously at the barely idling warp core – currently the only thing that was keeping them alive – then just as ominously back to the chief engineer. At one-quarter Vulcan and three-quarters Terran, the sandy-haired young ensign usually possessed the good humor and personality of his human heritage and seamlessly combined it with the efficiency and the preciseness he had inherited from his Vulcan grandfather. But good humor was quickly giving way to concern as the chief -engineer became increasingly agitated and all-the-more-so unpredictable.

“Bastards,” Mackenzie hissed under his breath. His fingers fought nervously with the computer trying in vain to bypass each shorted circuit. Through sheer act of will alone, he and Dardanelle had somehow managed to keep the massive seventeen-story warp core afloat, so to speak, even as the shattered stardrive plunged into the sea and slowly settled to the bottom. For now, the massive power the core produced, even at idle, was just holding the crushing water at bay.

“Sir,” Dardanelle said calmly. “Forcefield 47G has collapsed. Everything aft of bulkhead 74 is flooding on Decks 37, 38, and 39.”

“How many people this time?”

“Indeterminate life readings, Sir. At least twenty.”

“Bastards,” Mackenzie hissed again. “Antimatter containment?”

“Still holding at fifty-five.”

“Dammit, Ensign!” Mackenzie shouted, flashing him a wild look. “I said reroute power from the secondary feeds on Deck 38!”

“As I stated before, **Sir**, salt water has destroyed all interlink controls between here and Deck 38.”

“Then find another way you sniveling little half-breed!”

Moving slowly away, Andy Dardanelle cast one final look towards his chief engineer. The man's trembling hands moved ever more erratically over the computer console. He wiped his glistening upper lip, then struck his damp dark hair backwards at a rakish angle.

Muttering yet again the familiar curse word, he shook his head as if shaking off insects. The pressure was building, and indeed, the constant drip of water was more agonizing than ancient Chinese water torture.

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Lieutenant Sam Galloway, Ops Manager of the *Starship Ambassador*, was holding on for dear life. Why Sam? His grandfather had always said that every good story needed a Sam in it. In truth, he had been named after Mark Twain, though not once in his life had he ever been called Mark. He was a Canadian, born and raised, and grew up in a little town in Alberta called Vulcan, strange as it seemed. All across the endless prairies he had never had much to do but watch the stars. On cold winter nights when it was 25 below zero and the air was crisp and clear, he would spend hours spying on the orbiting starships with his telescope. Hell, he probably even saw the *Ambassador* once or twice.

His first years as an ensign had actually been spent aboard the *Starship Fearless*. He still to this day held a certain amount of awed respect for the old *Excelsiors*. They were stout and sturdy little vessels, and he was not surprised as to why Starfleet had built so many of them. Yet, when a spot had opened up on the *Ambassador*, Sam had jumped at the chance to get a little deep space exploration under his belt. Actual outer space for him was as vast and unending as the Alberta prairies. It was the stars that mattered. He had never served on the Bridge before coming here, so imagine his surprise when he'd been assigned as Ops Manager. It had been the night shift at first, but still a rare honor to be sure.

That had been seven years ago. He was now a member of Captain Lord's senior staff and head of the entire Operations Department. Sam held a somewhat begrudging respect for his captain, but it did not extend much further than that. He often thought the man too haughty, too stiff and formal; and he could sure be a bear on a bad day. Though his team worked well together, Lord's senior staff had never really developed any genuine friendship or camaraderie for each other. Sam bore no ill will against any of them, especially now, but he had often wished for more. Right now, however, he was wishing he could say why they had even been in orbit of Ethos in the first place. He didn't think any of them really knew, they had been just sort of 'drawn' there.

The hardest thing Sam had ever had to do in his life was the moment he cut the stardrive loose in the atmosphere. He'd protested at first of course, on behalf of the over three hundred people down there, but in the end, he had been trained to take orders without much questioning. He thought he was going to be sick when he saw them tumble away and break apart on the viewscreen. Starfleet tacticians called these 'acceptable losses' – but when all was said and done, those bastards weren't the ones with their finger on that little red button. Some of those people had been his friends; he'd played cards with Andy just the other night. If he ever lived through the next few minutes, he wondered if he would ever be able to forgive himself for what he had just done.

Sam knew there was method to the madness in Starfleet's classic design strategy. "In the event of catastrophic vehicle failure, the saucer module has been designed to serve as a lifeboat, with atmospheric entry as a possible course of action." Sure, looks good on paper he thought, but he bet none of those brainy bastards over at the Design Bureau had ever dropped a brick in a bucket just to see how it would fly. They were falling like a rock, and all Sam's Ops panel showed was water, and miles of it. Yes, indeed he was holding on for dear life, and scared as hell too.

Sam had often considered that Hendricks kid to be good looking, but he'd never been entirely convinced that the kid could drive. His Ops panel showed the barest glint of land on the horizon, so he relayed this information to the helm. Their two stations were supposed to coordinate, but Sam never quite understood why he was here and Hendricks was way the hell over there. He'd read that the next generation starships were to have the helm and operations stations side by side, with tactical toward the rear, but he didn't quite see how that did him any good right now. His scans were now showing a pretty good-sized continent; all they had to do was make it there.

Hendricks banked suddenly, and quite hard to the left, a bit *too* hard for Sam's taste. He had to give the kid credit though for trying. They had no impulse and thus, could do nothing but try to steer through their breakneck descent with maneuvering thrusters only. He gave Captain Lord a small measure of credit too for not tossing the kid out of the seat and taking over for himself. He could be a miserable old cuss, but he was a good teacher, and Sam knew his captain had a hell of a lot more patience than he did. The Ops panel showed the landmass dead ahead now, and Sam breathed a small sigh of relief.

They had entered a large bowl-shaped harbor and for obvious reasons, Sam thought it was one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen. It was a picture-perfect postcard of Rio and he quickly decided that it wouldn't be a bad place to vacation if they could ever set this brick down.

But excitement soon began to turn to dismay when his scans next showed a sprawling city nestled in the mountains. It was a Catch-22, they had no safe place to land, but land they must. With barely inches to spare, they passed through a narrow strait and into an inner harbor. They could get a real sense of their speed now, and it was *terrific*.

A tall stone castle loomed suddenly into the foreground and Hendricks banked hard to miss it, but Sam could already see it was too late. Surprisingly, the sound of the impact was much worse than the impact itself as a million tons of stone block rained down on the unshielded metal hull from what was left of a magnificent tower. His ongoing scans showed a small central park ahead – it was either that or the side of a mountain – so Sam relayed his calculations to the helm and began to pray that the kid could actually land this thing. The whole Bridge shook violently as they bounded off the rooftop of one large building and headed straight for another.

He began to feel really bad for Hendricks now. They don't really teach you at the Academy how to drive a starship through the streets of downtown San Francisco. Sam figured it would be about like trying to drive a Sherman tank through his mom's flower garden. The kid was doing his best and he no doubt knew that there were people in those buildings, just as Sam knew there had been people in the jettisoned stardrive. He began to long now for those quiet days back on the Alberta prairies. Hendricks didn't deserve this, he didn't deserve this, hell, none of them deserved this; but they had all joined Starfleet knowing the risks, and violent death had always been a possibility.

After striking another building head-on, they had landed now, so to speak. Now all they had to do was stop. They had hit the ground so hard that the Bridge simply erupted into a scene of frightful destruction. Panels exploded and burst into flame, beams and shorted out wires fell from the ceiling, and everything shook so violently that Sam nearly lost consciousness. His teeth rattled and his head felt like it was ready to roll right off his shoulders. The sound was unbelievable. An aft science station burst into flame and sent Allison screaming to the deck. He wanted to run to her, but found himself frozen with fear instead. And then they simply *stopped*.

The last thing Sam saw before the lights went out was everyone flying through the air like ragdolls. Then everything went dark.

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In his small office in Main Engineering, Lieutenant Commander Skyl stared out through the alumglass at the pulsing warp core beyond. The once-steady deck beneath his feet shuddered only slightly as the *Enterprise*

plunged through yet another gravitational wave on its way to Ethos. The Vulcan rarely let his thoughts wander, but after checking and rechecking every computer system aboard ship, he was still no closer to finding any possible design flaw.

Designed and built with an almost personal exacting care, each *Ambassador*-class starship was launched with virtually no kinks (as the humans would call it) to work out. Still, the class prototype was the first, and as such, maybe something had been overlooked that did not necessarily affect the other ships of the line. This appeared to the Vulcan to be a perfectly logical conclusion to explain the negative results of his search.

The narrow eyes with their upswept eyebrows and his dark skin complimented well the red uniform jacket and black slacks that he wore. This uniform had been the standard since the legendary days of James T. Kirk and crew. Skyl always wore the jacket in the more formal style, with its triangular chest flap snapped tightly shut. Casting off long ago the wanton emotions of their ancestors, the Vulcans were analytical and precise to the utmost. All else would be illogical.

Sitting down now, something else he rarely did, the chief engineer began scanning through the thousands of computer subprocessors one last time. The navigational subprocessors checked out again, and again, and on this, his third attempt, yet again. As he moved onwards into the antimatter containment matrix, all too seemed to check out. On the verge of passing the system off as normal, a very slight variance, barely an anomaly, caught his sharp eyes.

Antimatter was the most volatile substance known in the universe. In the strange and mysterious world of atoms, antimatter particles were the exact opposite of their normal matter counterparts. Thus, if matter and antimatter particles should meet, they canceled each other out and gave forth an almost supernatural burst of energy. All faster-than-light starships fed precise amounts of antimatter through the lower half of their warp core and combined it with simple deuterium coming in from above. The intense energy this created was then channeled outwards to the warp nacelles.

And every person aboard ship knew intuitively that the key to the entire system was the safe containment of the antimatter supply within carefully controlled forcefields. None more so than the chief engineer, Lt. Commander Skyl. This was why the unexpected variance in the containment system gave him uncharacteristic cause for alarm. Standing abruptly, he spun and took two quick steps to stand before an adjacent wall monitor.

Inputting several different sequences of numbers, they all produced the same result. Another gravity wave made the deck shudder as Skyl

backed away from the monitor. He, for a moment, was caught up within the web of the unreal. Despite his perfectly logical disbelief, the *Enterprise* appeared to be just moments away from a warp core breach. Stunned, the Vulcan engineer knew that a moments hesitation would be fatal. And then reality struck.

“Lieutenant Commander Skyl, please report to the Captain’s ready room immediately.”

Staring out through the alumglass at the pulsing warp core, Skyl was startled out of his trance by the urgent comm call from the Bridge. The Vulcan rarely let his thoughts wander, but this time had somehow been different, almost unbidden; like they had in some way invaded his subconsciousness. Disoriented, he stared down at his computer readouts.

All systems normal.

“*Commander Skyl, respond please...*” Stadi’s voice held the barest hint of concern, even over the comm system. It was not at all in the Vulcan’s nature to delay in anything. “Acknowledged Commander,” he said at long last, and indeed, somewhat absently; yet he remained in Engineering for several more long moments staring at his readings.

Arriving in the ready room some time later, a now fully recovered and composed Commander Skyl approached his captain and her first officer. They were both standing in front of the rooms full-length oval viewport and studying with some intensity what appeared to be a spilled cup of black coffee. Raising a single upswept eyebrow, the Vulcan engineer paused and stood near to them for a moment quite unnoticed. A full telepath, it was not uncommon for Spencer Stadi and his captain to share the occasional quiet moment. “Ah, Commander,” Garrett said finally, “did you bring your trusty tricorder?” Always at the ready, the engineer pulled from his waist pocket the small handheld scanning device.

“Good,” she continued, “please scan the alumglass for me.”

Without comment and mindful of the cup and its dark stain, Skyl took several steps forward and opened the small device. With a flurry of beeps and flashing, multi-coloured lights, he studied the findings for a few brief seconds before making a report. “Aluminum-silicate composite structure stable... anti-radiation barrier intact... translucence conforming to norms... micrometeoroid damage within acceptable means.” Tracing the perimeter of the large oval with arm extended, he made one final comment.

“Support frame intact and stable. Is there something about the viewport that troubles you Captain?”

Garrett paused a moment and looked into Stadi’s dark ebony eyes. Staring back into her soft almond eyes, he made the next command.

“Skyl, please scan the liquid on the carpet.”

“Chemical analysis indicates replicated coffee, Commander, heavy sugar, no cream.” “Any unnatural or unusual trace elements?” Stadi queried further, never breaking eye contact with his captain. After a brief pause in which Skyl probed yet deeper, the Vulcan spoke conclusively.

“Other than normal trace contaminants found in the carpet, the molecular structure of the liquid is consistent with replicated black coffee as found here on the *Enterprise*.” Garrett and Stadi’s mental link continued for several more long moments. It would almost have been construed as an ‘awkward moment’ if the chief engineer had not indeed been Vulcan. As such, he merely waited patiently for this form of a ‘mind-meld’ to conclude. The Vulcan people were touch-telepaths, but the underlying process of linking two minds together as one was virtually the same.

“Thank you, Commander,” Stadi said at last, breaking the trance. Wearing, Garrett crossed over to her desk and sat down in silence. Stadi brought Skyl in closer, spoke to him in a hushed tone, almost a whisper.

“A short time ago, the Captain had a very real vision of the viewport cracking and blowing out into space... so real in fact that she called for an immediate emergency transport and had herself beamed to the Bridge.” With an upswept eyebrow, Skyl studied again the heavy glass, then turned and studied his captain.

“What troubles you Skyl?” Stadi said abruptly, his acute Betazoid telepathy picking up on very subtle clues hidden deep within the Vulcan’s carefully controlled mind.

“I too had a vision, Sir... just moments ago in Engineering.”

“A vision?” Captain Garrett suddenly perked up and came to attention. “What sort of vision?”

“While studying the computer subsystem diagnostics, I became momentarily convinced that a core breach was imminent. I very nearly ejected the warp core.” Stadi swayed and swung to face his long-time friend and captain. Even as Stadi wavered, Garrett became as steady and resolute as a rock.

“Gentlemen,” she said flatly, “we need to get to the bottom of this situation *now* before this ship is placed in real peril.”

“*Batanides to Garrett...*”

“Go ahead, Commander,” the captain responded, still glaring at Stadi and Skyl.

“We’ve entered orbit of Ethos, Captain, and our problems just got worse.”

CHAPTER FOUR

FEDERATION STARSHIP ENTERPRISE ON ORBIT ~ PLANET ETHOS IN THE ALPHA GEMINORUM SYSTEM

With her worries now multiplied two-fold, Captain Rachel Garrett stepped out onto her Bridge trailed by Commander's Stadi and Skyl. Concern for her own ship now weighed as heavily on her mind as her concern for the fallen *Ambassador*. But the *Enterprise* was sent to do a job, whatever the risk; for the risk of inaction would be incalculable to the population below. An entire planet, indeed, perhaps the sanity of an entire planet was at stake. Until this morning, these people had lived in a world without a universe.

"What do we have, Commander?" Garrett said as she approached her chief of security, Marta Batanides. Marta stood at the Auxiliary Control Pedestal at the front of the Bridge and stared with dismay at the readouts. She let out a deep sigh, then looked up to the main view screen and its large parabolic projection of the planet below. Just above the surface of Ethos, several large tropical storms bristled with lightning and made great white splotches in the blue-green atmosphere.

"Something we did not anticipate, Captain," she answered at last. "A superdense ionosphere and several other factors will make communication sketchy at best and will render our transporters totally useless."

"*Totally* useless?" Garrett responded with incredulous disbelief.

"Totally," Marta stated again. She looked briefly to Skyl to back up her findings. Moving around Garrett and Stadi, the chief engineer walked up to the ACP and tapped several commands into its smooth sleek surface. Raising a single upswept eyebrow, he too looked up at the parabolic projection of the planet.

"Most unusual," he confirmed, "but true, Captain. Continuous solar bombardment over the eons has served to create an unusually dense ionosphere. Sensors are also indicating an intense magnetic field. No doubt, these factors have made life on this planet possible, but will indeed make use of the transporters impossible."

"Well..." Garrett said at a loss.

"Looks like we'll have to do things the old-fashioned way," Lt. Castillo chirped up, seated at the helm behind them all. The group all turned to him

and smirked, with the exception of Skyl of course. The Vulcan engineer again stared at the readouts from the ACP, his brow deeply furrowed.

"I am also detecting trace levels of metaphasic radiation in the lower atmosphere, Captain. Most intriguing..."

"Could any of these factors have affected the *Ambassador* or its crew?" Garrett said forcefully, cutting off the Vulcan engineer before he could go off on another one of his infamous tangents.

"That would be most unlikely, Captain," he said conclusively. "Standard orbit places us well above the ionosphere and concurrently, safely within the confines of the planet's magnetic field."

Garrett looked up into Stadi's bottomless ebony eyes. They were no closer to an explanation; either for the loss of the *Ambassador* or for the captain's and Skyl's strange visions. They had no choice but to press onward with their planned rescue operations; rescue operations that would be confined now to the cumbersome use of shuttles and runabouts. Turning and striding up onto the command level, Garrett stood at the very heart of the Bridge.

"Commander Batanides, tractor the *Ambassador's* log buoy into a cargo bay for analysis. Ensign Enyo, data analysis on surface conditions, please."

Still settling into her first day on the job, yet not willing to let her captain down, the young Andorian had already prepared her report; with a pre-emptory nudge from the ever-present Onovan, of course. With her twin antennae twitching and her blue skin flushing to near phosphorescence, she took a deep breath in preparation for her big debut. In a clear sharp voice that surprised even her, she directed her findings towards the center of the Bridge.

"Analysis of the main continent indicates a *very* hot and humid tropical environment with lush vegetation. Smaller secondary continent reads as very hot and arid with sparse vegetation. Exceptionally warm oceans cover 80% of the planets surface and give rise to frequent tropical storms. Data analyses from the *Ambassador's* logs indicate that these can rise very quickly and without warning."

"Well done, Ensign," Garrett said with some measure of satisfaction. "Commander Batanides, final analysis of the *Ambassador.*" Seated now at her tactical station next to Castillo, Marta studied her readings one final time.

"Saucer section is heavily damaged but intact... reading multiple lifeforms both inside and out. Stardrive is submerged in approximately one hundred sixty meters of water... difficult to get a clear reading... indeterminate life signs, but I am reading pockets of air. Warp core and subsystems appear to be intact. Even if we could transport, our beams would not have penetrated that much water from orbit."

“Understood, Commander,” she acknowledged, then spoke much louder and in full command mode. “In light of our recent findings, we’re going to have to switch things up a bit... Counselor, you and I will take a runabout to the capital city and make first contact with the government. Commander Batanides, you will take a second runabout and hold station above the stardrive section. From that base of operations, Lieutenant Commander Skyl and

Doctor Po can begin their survey. With hope, we can begin rescue ops as soon as the

Kyushu arrives. Now snap to it, we have a lot of work to do.”

With a flurry of activity, junior officers began to take the places of their seniors. It was a carefully choreographed exchange that had been mastered over generations of Starfleet training. And indeed, for this seasoned crew that had worked for so long together, there were no first day jitters. Without incident the trio of Batanides, Skyl, and Onovan moved as one to the forward turbolift to make their pre-flight preparations in the Main Shuttlebay; calling over the commsystem for Dr. Po as they went.

With the commotion now subsided, Spencer Stadi moved in close to his captain, his voice at a whisper. “This is a dangerous situation, Captain, shouldn’t you stay aboard ship?”

“You’re more in tune with the crew, Commander, and more likely to sense any unusual behavior.” She knew full well that over half the people onboard her vessel were natives of the *Enterprise’s* home port of Betazed. Notoriously well suited to work together in large groups, this race of full-telepaths had an extraordinary sense of self-preservation that was above instinctual and bordered on a single-minded consciousness.

“Keep a sharp eye,” the captain added, “and have the intrepid Ensign Enyo look over the *Ambassador’s* log entries for any unusual behavior there. We need to consider the possibility that the ship was brought down by crew error alone.”

Stadi nodded solemnly, then began again, tone still hushed. “Then may I suggest,

Captain, that some member of security...”

Garrett raised a single hand to mollify him. “I appreciate your concern, Spencer, I really do. But I really feel that a small detail is warranted here. We need to make this situation look a lot less like the full-scale invasion that it actually is.” She said this last bit rather grimly knowing all too well that by days end four starships would be sending down dozens of shuttles to rescue the marooned and injured crew. An invasion it was, and all conducted in broad daylight.

Spencer Stadi stymied any further argument. When all was said and done, she was still his captain, and even despite years of friendship and

their close mental bond, the structure of command must be preserved. It was the bond that held them all together through thick and through thin, in good times and in bad. Without the structure of command, the crew would unravel at the first sign of trouble. Without foundation, a structure cannot stand, and must surely plunge downward into the abyss.

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At the Manzar Colony, Vice President Austin Kelley rose only once from a fitful sleep to urinate, then collapsed back into his disheveled bed. He had slept nearly twelve hours, and if left uninterrupted, was likely to go on for another three at least. He was not a bad man; he would not even be considered a drunk under ordinary circumstances. At times, he simply became overwhelmed with the burdens of his high office, however the burdens of this high office followed him even here.

“Mr. Vice President,” the girl said, shaking him gently. “Mr. Vice President, please, wake up Sir.” She was his aide-de-camp so to speak, and perhaps had the hardest job of anyone on his staff, for it was her that accompanied the vice president off world on his many excursions.

“Mr. Vice President, please wake up,” she said again, this time shaking him with a little more urgency.

“For God’s sake, Amy, what is it now?” the man mumbled from underneath his covers.

“The *Dolphin* is in orbit, Sir,” she said in her characteristic soft voice with its heavy British accent. “They’re awaiting our arrival.” With a sudden move that startled her, Austin Kelley swung his feet onto the floor and sat bolt upright in bed.

“What *are* you talking about?” he said with eyes closed, head tilted slightly to the right. His jet-black hair, usually long, sleek, and flowing, was matted and bunched in the oddest angles. His thick mustache and dark eyebrows were complimented by better than two days growth of bristling dark stubble. By all accounts, this man with the dark Greek physique, appeared at the moment to be little more than a great mass of dark hair from top to bottom.

“Honestly, Sir,” she scolded with sharp Cockney reproach. “There’s been an accident,

Sir. A starship has gone down, and the President has ordered us to the scene.”

“Don’t be daft woman,” he fired back, mocking her with her own accent. “Starship gone down? Down where, Australia? Starships don’t go down you silly girl.” His head lolled around slightly, eyes still closed, as if he threatened to fall back into bed.

“Mr. Vice President, please, this is serious, Sir.” He could hear the frustration mounting in her voice, almost to the breaking point of tears.

“You’re serious aren’t you?” he said flatly, eyes popping suddenly open. Like all politicians, he had that uncanny knack to know just when to flip on that politician switch.

Standing now, in the buff, he crossed to a nearby chair and grabbed his shorts.

Nonplussed by this common occurrence, Amy went on to account the events and the latest updates from Ethos. Absorbing every word like a true politician, Austin Kelley became again the Vice President of the United Federation of Planets.

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High above Betazed in the administrative offices of the Galatea Space Center, Lt. Ian Troi stared out his small window at the world below. It had been a long day at the office. As adjutant to Commodore J.P. Hanson, the lieutenant had helped oversee the launch of three major starships, two of which had been rushed into emergency service. All of this had been added onto his ordinary daily workload. And he loved every minute of it.

Like many of the human officers stationed here, Ian had also fallen in love with the lush and beautiful world below, calling it home inasmuch as he had once called Earth home. And like many of the human officers stationed here, he had also fallen in love with – and even gone so far as to marry – his Betazoid sweetheart. She would be waiting for him now, at their home on Lake El-nar, and he knew instinctively that her adept mind could sense him even here, in orbit high above.

A human and Betazoid mind seemed at most times to form an almost inexplicable bond, as if the two complimented each other down to the most basic levels. The human psi-factor was known to develop almost twofold or more as the process of falling in love took its natural course. Indeed, if he concentrated hard enough, Ian too could almost sense his *Imzadi’s* presence within his own mind. Beloved. It was a mental bond that was greater than physical attraction and went beyond love.

He could even sense his three-year-old daughter, Deanna, if only on a more fundamental level. Empathic rather than telepathic due to her mixed heritage, the darkhaired little girl with her bottomless ebony eyes was definitely her daddy’s little girl. The family was inseparable in all hours that he was not at work. As adjutant to the station’s commander, the young lieutenant had been given a rare dispensation to live on the surface rather than here on the station.

He had as much Lwaxana to thank for this as the commodore. She was an influential individual to say the least. As Daughter of the Fifth House, her rank and title were equal to that of ancient Earth nobility. Upon her father's death, she took her seat in the Betazoid House Consensus, whose power superseded even that of the Legislative Assembly. On ancient Earth, Ian Troi would be a prince. But on the Galatea Space Center, Lieutenant Ian Troi was content to be nothing more than adjutant to Commodore J.P. Hanson. And he loved every minute of it.

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At the president's office in Paris, on Earth, the large curvilinear room was always, it seemed, in some form of chaos or another; and always, it seemed, filled with people.

President Kalomi Joran sat at his desk and watched over it all with the glittering form of the Eiffel Tower rising to its magnificent heights out the broad windows behind him. Fast approaching midnight, this long day had been more chaotic than usual as the Privy Council awaited any news from Ethos.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please," he called out, rapping his knuckles on the desk for seemingly the hundredth time. "Can we stick to the matter at hand?"

"Uh, yes of course, Mr. President," his Councillor on Health replied, somewhat sheepishly.

"Thank you," Joran nodded. "Now what do we know of the outbreak of Phyrox plague on Cor Coroli Five?"

"Very little, Mr. President, but we believe it to be relatively contained at this time. The Vulcan starship *T'plana-Hath* will arrive there by tomorrow evening."

"And have all necessary security measures been taken, Mr. Haan?" The president directed his gaze towards his weaselly little Internal Security Advisor.

"Yes, Mr. President," the man answered, leaving you always with a greasy feeling every time he spoke. "Both the *T'plana-Hath* and Cor Coroli have been ordered to strict subspace radio silence."

"Very good," Joran nodded again. He resented having to place such restrictions on the planet, but the unusual nature of the plague demanded it. He next turned to his Councillor on State, a petit young woman from Klaestron, near to the hotly disputed Bajor Sector.

"Zarella, what's the latest on the damn Cardassians?" The president's homeworld of Betazed was not itself too far removed from this hotly contested region of space either. "High Councillors from both

Klaestron and Trill have made several overtures towards the Cardassian Central Command regarding the latest outbreaks of violence on Bajor, but to no avail, Mr. President. High Councillor Tigan of Trill is still calling for a moratorium on Prime

Directive restrictions and for direct Starfleet intervention.”

“My gods,” Joran said hotly. “Why can’t that man get it through his head?” The president then let out a deep sigh. “Inform the High Councillor that we will review the situation yet again.”

“Yes, of course, Mr. President.”

“Admiral Hawk?”

“As I’ve stated before, Mr. President, any strike force sent to liberate Bajor would sustain serious losses. The Cardassians are heavily entrenched, both in orbit, and on the planet’s surface. We’ve lost one starship today, are you prepared to lose five or six? And God knows how many more we would lose in a protracted engagement. The loss of life, both Bajoran and Federation, would be staggering, Mr. President.”

“Mr. President, I cannot believe we are still entertaining these notions of invasion... a moratorium on the Prime Directive is preposterous!” This from the greasy little Internal Security Advisor, Mr. Haan.

“Perhaps that is a discussion best served for another day, Mr. President.” Ambassador Sarek at long last broke his silence and rose from his customary chair in a darkened corner of the room. He was notorious for cutting off the irrational, illogical Mr. Haan; much to Haan’s equally notorious consternation.

“Why, you of all people *Sarek*...” Haan began to protest.

“The Ambassador is right,” Joran cut him off. “It’s late, and we all need some rest. Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen,... hopefully we’ll all know more by morning. Good evening.” The weaselly little Mr. Haan looked fairly ready to burst, but in the end, he acquiesced as his other colleagues slowly rose and filed out of the room. At long last alone again with his long-time friend and ally, Joran rose from his desk and moved to stand next to Sarek at the broad windows.

“You know my friend,” he said quietly, “I’m finding this office to be a bit stuffy.”

“As am I, Mr. President.” If Sarek had been human, he most surely would have smirked.

“Contact Starfleet Security. I think it’s high time we took a little trip, don’t you think?”

“Indeed, Mr. President, I believe it is past time.” President Kalomi Joran merely smirked on the Vulcan’s behalf.

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Still trembling, and now hopelessly winded, Ras Tau'aman had at last crossed the broad inner plaza and was now slowly making his way up the winding stone steps within the dark South Tower of the Palladium. In his seventy years of service to the Crown Empress, he had climbed these steps a hundred thousand times or better; yet this was the very first time he was not sure he'd make it. Badly shaken by the events he'd just witnessed just a short while ago, and filled with a deep inner fear of what it all might mean, Ras Tau'aman was wearied beyond all imagining.

With one final momentous shove, he was barely able to place himself upon the upper landing. That had been the easy part. Now he must enter the Empress's private apartments and recount to her his version of the momentous events, while simultaneously holding back its more ominous overtones. If this truly was a portent of the coming of the One True Goddess, then he sensed intuitively that this Crown Empress would not go without issue. His people were entering now into some very dark days.

Steadying himself against the damp stone wall, this First Lord of the Ascendant paused a moment to catch his breath. Slowly, and by effort gained from years of practice and experience, this tired old man settled his mind and cleared his thoughts of everything but the essential. He pushed again, and still yet deeper into his subconsciousness, any heretical thoughts that might arouse suspicion and indeed, endanger his life. Focused now, he entered her darkened chambers.

"What is it now, Ras?" she said in her clear, sharp voice before he had even shut the door. He could just see her milky silhouette through the thin muslin draperies that always kept her hidden from the entrance portico. Dropping with some effort to his knees, he then settled back onto his haunches. Taking a deep breath from the exertion, he at last spoke. "A projectile, Majesty," he said with extreme deference, "of unknown origin and design. The damage and loss of life is significant."

"Get up off your knees, you old fool," she said with reproach. "You are far too old to be groveling there like a peasant boy."

"Yes, Majesty," Ras conceded, struggling to force his weary bones up off the floor. He had barely regained his footing when she continued.

"All is as I have foreseen," she said with her usual casual aloofness. "They are unfortunate victims of a far-off and foreign land, nothing more. You will instruct My people to care for them as they would any other loyal subjects to My Crown. Attend to their injured and bring their representatives to me. That is all."

"Yes Majesty," he acknowledged, taking a deep bow and backing towards the door. "And Ras," she called after him, just as he was about to

pass into the relative safety of the antechamber. “Fear is an irrational result of weakness. I am the one and only True Goddess of Ethos.”

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He was awake now, though he had no idea how long he had actually been out. He was fairly sure he was alive because his head felt like one of those 2x4s that’s been driven into a tree by a tornado. The darkness was absolute and he couldn’t hear a thing, but he was relatively certain that most of his senses were still working, judging by the lingering stench in the air. It was kind of a mixture of melting plastic and burning hair. If he had to guess, he would have to say he was near the front of the Bridge by the captain’s ready room. His body felt like it had bounced off the wall first, so he took that as more evidence that he was indeed still alive; though the level of absolute dark was really beginning to bother him.

Dear God, I hope I’m not blind, Lt. Sam Galloway prayed silently. He figured the main computer had to be toast, but he was surprised that none of the backups had kicked in. Maybe they had and he just couldn’t see them, or maybe the batteries had already gone dead. He prayed again, this time for the latter. “Hello!” he called out, then twice more, but got no response. That meant *they* were either all dead, or that he had been left behind. Sam’s mind refused to believe that he could be the only one left alive, so this time he just assumed the latter. He knew there was a tool locker on the other side of the Bridge and decided it best to start there. Now all he had to do was *get* there.

Sam tried to get to his feet, but quickly laid back down in frustration. He swore that every bone in his body had to be broken, so he resolved to crawl there instead. It was probably more sensible anyway, he reasoned, rather than to stumble around in the dark and fall over God knows what. What was left of the *Ambassador’s* Bridge was sure to be a minefield of fallen hardware and razor-sharp bits of metal and plastic. It had not occurred to him what else might be lurking there in that awful darkness. Thus, dragging himself along slowly, the first body he came to was a complete shock and caused him to cry out in surprise. He had certainly never anticipated this.

It was definitely a female, he could tell that much, possibly Allison or Ensign Lidell,

he couldn’t be certain. He checked for a pulse, then cursed. Though not necessarily a family, they still had been close colleagues of his and he had hoped for better. Forced to move on, Sam crawled over the corpse and reached for the step up onto the command level. Sacred ground on Captain Lord’s starship. Still, Sam chose the high road figuring Lord and the others

were probably up front somewhere. The second body was no less a shock, but this time he did not cry out. It was a man, no pulse, and Sam thought it was probably the first officer, Lt. Commander Argaya.

The darkness by now was beginning to totally unnerve him. He had to draw on all of his Starfleet training and more so as not to freak out entirely. The thought of being blind made him queasy. The thought of being the only one left alive made him downright nauseous. He had to force himself again to move on, force himself to keep it together. Crawling over this second corpse, he felt his way to the next step. This one was down, and then only a few more feet and he could get light! The third body brought him to a near panic. He didn't even know who this one could be. Hell, he realized, he didn't even know how many people had been on the Bridge at the time of the crash.

Sam had to fight back the sobs that he knew were coming. He'd never wanted to be in a command position, never wanted to be in charge. He had been quite content below decks back on the *Fearless*. He cursed himself now for ever transferring to this house of horrors. He had never really been happy here. This ship had always felt cold to him, and he knew that that had come from the top down. He had very nearly transferred off once, but then Captain Lord had made him Chief of Operations. He remembered that fateful day now, when he'd gone against his instinct and accepted. Oh God, he wondered, where would he be today?

With as much care as he could manage, Sam rolled the corpse out of the way so he could get to the tool locker. It was down near the floor, so he sat up now and began to work on its cover with ever-increasing frustration. It appeared to be stuck, though he couldn't be sure in the darkness. The entire Bridge had no doubt been tweaked in the crash, but that still didn't mean he wasn't missing something as stupid as the catch. Finally, and with several bloody knuckles, the lid popped off with a flimsy metallic clink. Tossing this aside, Sam quickly began to rummage through the contents. A first aid kit, some epoxy bonding agent, a few other things he couldn't identify, and no light!

Frantic now, he rummaged through the materials again. Finding it this time, he cursed himself for being so daft. As battered and bloody as he was, he not surprisingly fumbled it at first and had to rummage around for several more endless seconds to find it again. And then the big moment came and he hesitated out of fear. Closing his eyes and whispering another silent prayer, he switched the light on. Opening his eyes slowly, Sam was much relieved to find that he was not indeed blind after all. With reluctance, he slowly shuffled around to look at the rest of the Bridge as if for the very first time. This time he could no longer fight back the sobs.

Captain Lord, Hendricks, and Davis had gone halfway through the main viewscreen. All Sam could see were their legs sticking out. Cruses was laying here next to him, and then there was Allison and Lidell, Argaya, and up on top, T'Pera. So, they had all been here, and now they were all dead. He began to hyperventilate. He needed to get out. He needed fresh air and proper light. Like a madman, Sam picked his way through the tool locker again. He was looking for that little gadget that was supposed to open up the doors. The computer had no doubt put the ship on Isolation Protocol, sealing off every section from the possibility of multiple hull breaches. Pointless now, but the ship would be locked up tighter than Fort Knox, nonetheless.

Struggling to remain conscious and fighting the urge to throw up, he crawled his way over to the turbolift doors. Attaching the gizmo the best way he knew how, he was finally able to force the stubborn doors apart. Sam cursed himself again for being so stupid. The turbolift was long since gone - it had likely fallen in the crash - not that it would have done him the least bit of good anyway with no power to operate it. Sam could see no point in climbing down into that deep dark hole with no hope of escape, so he rolled over instead and sighed. Still breathing heavily, the acrid stench of burning hair and melting plastics was beginning to make him dizzy and disoriented. "Dumbass," he said aloud, realizing at last his only way out was through the captain's ready room.

Armed with a light now, Sam climbed up the doorframe to his feet, then began picking his way back across the shattered Bridge. He tried not to look at their faces, though he sobbed again when he saw Allison's bright blue eyes staring up at him, her beautiful face blackened and burnt. In another place and time, perhaps even on a much warmer ship than this one, they probably could have made a pretty good go of it. Reaching the ready room door at last, it took Sam much longer to force this one open, but he refused to give up. There was no way he was going to climb down into that turboshaft. He imagined it would be about like descending through the seven circles of hell.

With a sudden whoosh, the doors parted and slammed open. Sam was struck

instantly by a beam of blinding sunlight. It felt so warm on his skin and for the first time in a long time he felt truly alive. Alive. With a start he realized he was now, by default, in command of the *Ambassador*. A sudden wave of duties and responsibilities washed over him, but he pushed these aside. First, he needed air. All of Captain Lord's prized possessions were in a pile now in the forward curve of the oval room and this left Sam a clear path to the glistening oval viewport. This would lead him outside, lead him to freedom.

It was a thin pain of glass as strong as steel, designed to be virtually indestructible. Freedom, it seems, never comes easy.

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At the helm of the *Allegheny*-class runabout *Genesee*, Rachel Garrett piloted the moderately sized craft with ease through the dense atmosphere of Ethos. Seated beside her, Counselor Onovan kept a close eye on the controls and monitored the skies ahead for any signs of tropical storm activity. They had made their entry high above the vast north polar ocean in hopes of masking their fiery descent from a no doubt already spooked population.

Anthropological reports from the *Ambassador* had listed these people as human-like in appearance, if only shorter in stature and more stout in build. They were passionate in belief, and had a deep-rooted religious view of the four suns that continuously illuminated their skies. Notoriously charitable and kind to the utmost, their only contradiction to these noble attributes was an almost inane deference to their ubiquitous and enigmatic Crown Empress; by all accounts, a living Goddess.

Banking now to the right and heading South, Garrett set course for what was now known as the First Continent and the capital city of Epheris. Sensor data from the *Enterprise* suggested that the *Ambassador's* crew was apparently being cared for by the local populace just as Starfleet had originally hoped. Now all that remained was this captain's unenviable task of establishing contact with this perhaps omnipresent Crown Empress and welcoming her and her people to the much larger universe that surrounded them.

Trailing some distance behind the *Genesee*, the runabout *Canisteo* was at the same time banking left and heading east towards the Second Continent and the submerged stardrive section of the *Starship Ambassador*. Aboard, Marta Batanides chuckled lightly as the Tellarite doctor Jura Po continued to ramble on incessantly to the perpetual disinterest of the Vulcan engineer, Skyl. She couldn't help but laugh at the thought of the two of them confined together for perhaps many hours beneath three-hundred-some-odd feet of water. Skyl had been aboard the *Enterprise* longer than even she, since the earliest days of Rachel Garrett's command when the now seasoned ship had been virtually new. Doctor Po on the other hand was a relative newcomer, taking over finally for the ancient and much wizened old Doc Colett; a heavy smoker with a gruff voice to match his gruff personality. For her part, Marta had transferred to the *Enterprise* ten years ago as a

fresh-faced young ensign from the Utopia Planitia Fleet Yards on Mars. She had previously never left the Terran System.

She and Richard Castillo had traveled to Betazed together aboard the battered old transport ship *Milan*. A fresh young ensign himself, Castillo had mysteriously been pulled out of Starfleet Academy a year early to join the *Enterprise* on its second five-year mission into deep space. Veterans now, neither one of them could ever imagine life anywhere else but aboard their legendary flagship. Confined once to one solar system, Marta now had thousands of light-years under her belt and had visited countless alien worlds.

Starfleet was freedom. It was the drive of a peoples united to seek out new life and new civilizations. To explore never before seen regions of space. To make first contact with worlds such as Ethos that was as exotic as any she had yet seen. With a smile of replete satisfaction, Marta Batanides laughed again as the Tellarite doctor Po made another verbal jab at this Vulcan friend and colleague and squealed with laughter himself. Ever stoic, Skyl merely looked on, he himself content with the world that was around him.

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Becoming increasingly concerned with the state of mind of his colleague, Ensign

Andy Dardanelle had now stationed himself at the far side of the table-like Master System Display. At the very center of Engineering and directly adjacent to the warp core, the display was painting a very real and a very grim picture of their situation. Nearly every computer readout was flashing red. Nearly every forcefield and nearly every bulkhead were stressed to the max.

With a pressure of over fourteen tons per square foot, the ocean above was squeezing the *Ambassador's* hull like a partially cracked egg. Meant for travel in the vacuum of space, the immense superstructure was designed to contain the relatively low outward pressure of air, not the intense inward pressure of millions of tons of water. With her skin too thin and her spine too weak, the *Ambassador* and her warp core were a ticking time bomb waiting to go off.

Towel at the ready, Andy Dardanelle wiped another puddle of water off the tabletop display console, and made a sideways glance towards Lieutenant Ryan Mackenzie. The chief engineer's hands were still trembling, his eyes still darting around like caged animals. His hair was standing practically on end now as he continued to swat at it like a man swatting at flies. Ensign Dardanelle was no doctor, but he was now

relatively certain that the man squirming beside him was suffering from nitrogen narcosis.

Not only squeezing the hull, the intense water pressure was also squeezing the air in around them, compressing the nitrogen and driving it ever deeper into their very cell structure. Of its many symptoms, nitrogen narcosis could produce madness to the most frightening degree. If they weren't killed by a warp core breach, or drowned in a sudden torrent of water, they would eventually and most certainly be poisoned to death by the very air they breathed.

"Dammit," Mackenzie hissed nervously. "If we could just get those people to move toward Engineering we could centralize our power here."

A sudden and chest-deep metallic groan right above their heads caused them both to cower involuntarily. Several gallons of water poured out from the ceiling all at once and they were both certain of their impending doom. But still, the forcefields held, the hull resisted. They regained their composure and began again their important work. At least a hundred other people were still alive, but they were hopelessly scattered amongst a dozen different pockets of air. Despite his growing madness, Ryan Mackenzie still clung to his compassion.

"Dammit," he hissed again, freshly soaked by the deluge.

"Sir, if I may suggest," Dardanelle offered cautiously. "Perhaps if we focus our concentration on one bubble at a time, we can use cascading forcefields to push each pocket of air towards Engineering."

"Yes, Ensign!" he shouted, startling the young man. "But we need more power from the warp core to do it!"

Both men now stared with foreboding at their massive metallic comrade. Once rhythmic and almost melodic, its labored pulse was now thready and disjointed. It too was slowly succumbing to the pressures bearing down on it. Like Atlas holding up the world, the warp core was straining under a weight it was not designed to bear, but must, lest it be crushed into oblivion. And like Atlas, it was condemned thus to do so for seemingly all the rest of eternity.

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"Junior Lieutenant Spencer Stadi, Ensign Zora McKnight, Ensign Excalibur Jones... please rise. You will now be read the findings of this Special Tribunal of the Advanced Starship Design Bureau as convened on Stardate 24032.02... after a thorough review of the facts in this case, this committee can find no evidence of willful negligence on the part of the accused, nor any attempt at subterfuge regarding the mysterious events which took place here two weeks prior.

“Though satisfied with these findings, this committee still holds grave concern as to what really took place on the night in question. Indeed... we may never know. As such, Lieutenant Stadi, Ensign’s McKnight and Jones, you are hereby absolved from any further action on this matter and thus granted permission to graduate with your class three days hence. This Tribunal stands adjourned.”

Spencer Stadi let out at last a deep sigh of relief. The past two weeks had seen a grueling parade of admirals and commodores all asking seemingly the same questions over and over again. He couldn’t wait to get out of this room; to take a breath of fresh air outdoors and be alone for awhile with his own thoughts. He turned and briefly shook hands with his two accomplices, then began scanning the crowd for a means of escape. “Commander Stadi,” someone called from behind him. “Commander Stadi, Sir, are you all right?”

Commander? The word at first made no sense to him. “Uh, yes, uh, what?” Stadi stumbled, then slowly came to awareness aboard the Bridge of the *Enterprise*; seated as he was in the captain’s chair.

“Do you have a report, Ensign Enyo?” he heard Castillo say from the helm just ahead of him. The lieutenant was now staring at him with a quizzical, if not puzzled look. “Uh, yes, Sir,” Enyo replied, stumbling now herself. “The *Starship Kyushu* has entered the system... they will be in orbit within the hour.”

“Thank you, Ensign,” Stadi himself acknowledged her, now fully aware of his surroundings. “And what of the *Cumberland* and the *Congress*?”

“They are still at warp, Sir, several hours out.”

“Yes, that’ll do, Ensign,” he replied rather curtly, focusing his gaze instead on Castillo and nodding. The lieutenant understood this hidden double command and swiveled back to attend his duties at the helm. Stadi then turned his head to look over his left shoulder at Enyo. “Please send my warmest regards to the captain of the *Kyushu* and inform him of our current status.”

Returning his dark eyes back to the almost hypnotic image of Ethos on the viewscreen, the commander couldn’t help but let his thoughts wander. His telepathic mind could easily sense with keen awareness all those souls that were busy at work immediately surrounding him. He could extend this outward to the crew of the very ship itself, enhanced all the more by their being largely from Betazed themselves. He could even sense on a much deeper level the great life force that was the massive population of the planet below.

All this, and yet, something more. Something deeper. Something almost sinister in nature, and he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around it.

Something was out there, and it was beginning to have an effect on them all. He became startlingly aware that he must let Castillo know what was going on. Someone other than he and he alone on the Bridge had to be let in on the secret that they were all in grave danger here. That the peril facing the *Enterprise* was as great or greater than that that had befallen the *Ambassador*. That the structure of command must be preserved, lest they should all plunge headlong into the abyss.

CHAPTER FIVE

EARTH SPACEDOCK IN THE TERRAN SYSTEM STARDATE 16364.6

Like two young boys playing hooky from school, President Kalomi Joran and Ambassador Sarek were now safely stowed away aboard *Starfleet One* and awaiting departure. One of the hidden beauties of transporter technology was that someone like the President of the United Federation of Planets could move from place to place almost instantly, sight unseen, and without any fanfare. While his Privy Council slept, this president had escaped. It was 2am.

“By gods,” Joran laughed again, “we really should do this more often Sarek! No press, no nagging councillors or snivelling aides, no yeoman’s or boatswains...”

“No more Mr. Haan,” Sarek concluded, completely deadpan, causing the president to throw his head back and laugh even harder.

“I’m tempted to fly this ship myself. Think we can get her out the doors, Sarek?”

“Perhaps, Mr. President, I should pilot the craft until we are safely in free space,” Sarek replied. “*And well clear of the doors,*” he added woefully.

Joran shook with laughter now, that is until a slightly dishevelled man with a stubbly chin and a half thrown on Starfleet jacket cleared his throat from the doorway. Faking a cough and clearing his throat, Joran cast Sarek a mischievous look and winked, then turned to the ship’s rather cross-looking captain. Clearly the man had most recently been shaken out of a dead sleep. “Ah, Captain,” Joran said with a broad grin, “Sarek and I have decided on a little weekend getaway. How hard would it be for us to,” he paused, “sneak away?”

“Everybody but us is asleep, Sir, it shouldn’t be that hard,” he answered with a roll of the eyes and a yawn.

“Greeeat,” Joran chuckled again. “Then by all means, let’s make ourselves scarce, shall we?”

“It will take some time to wake my senior officers, Mr. President,” he said somewhat flippantly.

“I am a qualified pilot, Sir,” Sarek said to the captain in all seriousness, “and I believe my accomplice here would make an adequate First Mate.”

Relaxed and as happy as he'd been in a very long time, President Kalomi Joran laughed all the way to the Bridge that night.

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With the warp core slowly gaining strength behind them, Ryan Mackenzie and Andy Dardanelle had now begun the arduous task of herding nearly one hundred people towards Engineering. With communication offline, they had no way of telling who was yet conscious, who was injured, and indeed, who may have already lost their minds to the intense pressure of their underwater prison. Cold, wet, and under pressure himself, Ryan Mackenzie was fighting a losing battle on several fronts.

"God Dammit, Ensign," he shouted at his colleague, "keep those God Damn flow regulators wide open or this thing's gonna stall." Andy merely raised a single eyebrow, much like his Vulcan grandfather would've done, and silenced another auto-shutdown alarm from the main computer. Most of the core sensors were already redlining and he knew they were just stalling the inevitable. With frustration bordering on hysteria, Mackenzie tore at his hair and pounded the computer console with his fists.

"Why aren't they moving?!" he hissed at the dozens of little red dots, each denoting a single person. He punched again the tabletop computer monitor. Again, he raked his hand through his tattered hair. With a dull rumble immediately followed by a blaring alarm, the two engineers watched as another bubble collapsed and several more red dots blinked out of existence forever. Andy Dardanelle was resigning himself now to what must surely come. "Did you hear that?" Mackenzie whispered as the alarm was silenced.

"Sir?"

"There," he whispered again, pointing at the ceiling, his eyes darting all about the open spaces of Engineering.

"I hear nothing out of the ordinary," Andy stated flatly, keeping his eyes fixed on the warp core subsystems. What was left of the ship continued to groan and shudder around them and the constant drip of water had indeed become almost ordinary.

"There it is again," he said, ducking his head and crouching slightly. "There's something out there, Ensign... in the water... and it's big... real big." Face fraught with fear, Mackenzie continued to stare at the ceiling as he slowly moved around to the end of the table-like control station. Crouching low, but never taking his eyes off this newly perceived, yet unseen, threat, he reached into a locker and pulled out a phaser.

"Sir!" Andy said with a sudden intake of air. He could already see that the weapon was set to its highest setting. With a deep rumble

somewhere above them, another bubble of air collapsed and consigned still yet more of those little red dots to a watery unmarked grave. Ryan Mackenzie waved the lethal phaser all around him, both frantically and erratically.

“There it is again,” he gasped, “and it’s trying to get in!”

As the warp core spiked, and another forcefield collapsed, to Andy Dardanelle it seemed that all hope had been lost.

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Hovering now in the airspace far above the submerged stardrive section of the *Ambassador*, the runabout *Canisteo* had made all the preparations and taken all the necessary precautions to beam two people through nearly three hundred feet of water. Lt. Commander Skyl, chief engineer of the *Starship Enterprise*, was still in a quandary over what to do with the *Ambassador’s* volatile antimatter supply. Ordinarily, the canisters containing this dangerous material would’ve been beamed into space from orbit, leaving the warp core inert.

But the planet’s dense atmosphere coupled with a nearly impenetrable barrier of water had made this option impossible. Their only other choice was to use the *Canisteo’s* limited transporters to beam the antimatter out in stages and detonate it in the atmosphere directly above. Risky to say the least, this would also take time, and sensor data was already showing that time was fast running out. Before all else however, the Flight Data Recorder must be retrieved. The fate’s of the *Enterprise* and her many sisters could very well hinge on this all-important device.

Materializing out of two columns of swirling energy, the forms of Lt. Commander Skyl and Doctor Jura Po all-too-soon found themselves plunged into a virtual sea of despair. Marta Batanides, at the controls aboard the *Canisteo*, had transported the duo deep within the partially flooded bowels of the *Ambassador’s* engineering computer core. At once dry and safe aboard the light and airy confines of the runabout, they were now knee deep in frigid water and immersed in total darkness.

Dr. Po let out an almost immediate squeal of sheer terror as the beam released him and the icy water soaked through his heavily-lined uniform. The stale air was cold and damp and had an almost tangible feel to it; its density being several times that of normal atmosphere. The darkness was as absolute and as oppressive as a tomb; only this was entombment beneath the palpable pressures of a million tons of water. From somewhere out there in the darkness, a deep groan passed through them and made them shiver. Time was indeed running out.

Skyl was the first to snap on the headlamp fitted snugly over his furrowed brow. It illuminated only a portion of the narrow, head-high side passage they were confined in. He turned slightly and the sharp beam struck at last the hundreds of viredescent memory crystals that were the heart of the massive computer core. Only partially recovered, Dr. Po quickly switched on his own light and too turned his head towards the crystals. The otherworldly glow this produced provided him with some small measure of comfort. "Commander Skyl to *Canisteo*..." the Vulcan said, touching his commbadge. His voice too seemed oppressed by the intense pressure bearing down on them from above.

After some delay, Marta at last answered, her voice broken up and crackly with static. "*I'm reading you Skyl,*" she said with some relief. "*What's your status?*"

"We are in the computer core, Commander. I will contact you when we have retrieved the Data Recorder... Skyl out." Precise and to the point, the Vulcan was not known for any unnecessary embellishments. Dr. Po on the other hand was quickly unraveling in the damp and cold oppression of their underwater tomb. His pig-like snout twitched involuntarily, and he shook from head to toe as much out of fear as of the chilling effect of the ever-rising icy waters.

"I need to get out, Skyl, I need to get out," he said with all the nervousness of a man trapped. The viredescent crystals and the silvery beads of water droplets were quickly losing their comfort value.

"I suggest, Doctor," Skyl responded levelly, "that you focus your attention on scanning for survivors."

"Uh, yes, of course," he replied, pulling a tricorder out of a pouch at his waist. He opened the device and began surveying even as another thunderous metallic groan passed through their chests. "I am detecting two individuals in Main Engineering," he said nervously, "and several more isolated pockets of air containing numerous indeterminate lifesigns."

"Thank you, Doctor," Skyl said calmly. "Now once we have retrieved the Flight Data Recorder, I suggest we make our way aft to the warp core. From there, we can climb down into Main Engineering. Is that acceptable, Doctor?"

"O-o-okay, Skyl... you lead the way." Wading now through near waist-deep icy water, the Tellarite doctor kept close behind the stoic Vulcan engineer. Somewhere above them, another forcefield collapsed, and the dark and silent sea rushed in yet deeper to claim still more of its unwilling victims.

High again in the North Tower of the Palladium, Ras Tau'aman was perhaps the first to notice the approach of the strange and silvery craft as it glided slowly over the waters of the Outer Bay. Nothing on their world was known to fly, save the birds and the fabled Messengers of the Ascendants. Every hospital and every gymnasium in Ephemeris City was filled to capacity with these strange victims of a 'far off and foreign land'. But were they really victims, or were they more simply angels in disguise, testing them?

"But fear not, for at that critical hour when all hope seems lost, many angels shall descend from the heavens heralding the coming of the One True Goddess, a Savior." The ancient Book of Darkness had been the center of their belief structure for generations. Why should he doubt its teachings now? He could see now that the Ascendants were indeed testing him. That his very faith in what he believed in was being questioned. And this silvery craft that approached would perhaps be the ultimate leap in that faith. There was something inside him that ignited; a fire that had been rekindled by hope. He knew now instinctively that the One True Goddess, their savior, had arrived and he started down now the long stone steps to greet her.

Aboard the runabout *Genesee*, Captain Rachel Garrett slowed the sleek and silvery craft to a virtual crawl as it passed over a broad outer bay and entered the confines of a much smaller inner bay. The scene reminded her of a long ago trip she had once taken to Rio de Janeiro back on Earth; only in place of the stone escarpments stood an imposing stone fortress with its three remaining high battlements. They could very quickly see the damage wrought upon the structure and upon the city itself by the crash of the *Ambassador*.

"Boy," Garrett said quietly, "if ever we could use a Romulan cloaking device, now would be the time." The whole of the city was sprawled out before them, and it seemed the entire population was watching. Indeed, it could be clearly seen that every broad avenue was choked with the congestion of a million or more people.

"Ever get that feeling that you're being watched, Captain?" Onovan said somewhat distantly, his comment falling perhaps on deaf ears.

"No point in beating around the bush," Garrett sighed. "I'm going to set us down in that broad plaza at the center of the stone fortress."

"The Palladium," Onovan instructed, "Imperial Palace of the Crown Empress."

"Also known as a Goddess, if I'm not mistaken... tell me, Counselor, what should I expect from these people?"

There was a long pause as Onovan mulled this over. As was customary for this three-hundred- and sixty-five-year-old El-Aurian, his words were always carefully chosen, his sentences always carefully orchestrated. The pink palm of his left hand gently stroked his coal-black chin.

“A godlike belief in any ruler often leads to fanatical behavior in the people they rule, Captain. Surveys have shown *these* people to be kind and generous to the utmost degree, but I suggest we tread very carefully when it comes to issues of their religion.”

“Have you ever read the *Dune* series by Frank Herbert?” Garrett asked as she banked the runabout over the remains of the eastern tower and began her final descent down into the enclosed central plaza.

“I’m not familiar with it, Captain,” Onovan replied, taking note of a lone individual apparently waiting therein for their arrival.

“Well,” Garrett explained, “Mr. Herbert made a very good point by stressing that when religion and politics ride in the same cart, the whirlwind follows.”

And with a thump, the runabout *Genesee* came to rest at the very heart of Ethos.

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Back on the *Enterprise*, the Bridge was dark as pitch and thick with smoke. What little light there was was flickering and erratic and came from a host of small fires that danced about from console to console. The occasional flash from an overloaded circuit was like lightning. In place of thunder, there was a continual hiss of venting gases and sizzling, shorted out electronics.

And then there was a chorus of coughing as everyone seemingly regained consciousness at once. Castillo heard someone call for emergency lights and at long last this dim illumination came online. Everything around him was a scene of frightful destruction. The Bridge was rocked again by another terrible jolt. More circuits exploded, more fires burned; the thick grey smoke became even heavier, making it harder and harder to breathe. The defensive energy shields surrounding the ship’s hull were now virtually nonexistent.

Yet, throughout all the chaos, the lieutenant began to notice something odd. All the smoke on the Bridge was drifting with ever-increasing speed towards the right front corner of the battered command center. Castillo’s eyes followed this grey river to the base of the forward bulkhead near the floor. There, his eyes could barely discern the outlines of a fissure that became slightly larger each time the Bridge was rocked by

another terrible jolt. From the very first days of space travel, this was every astronaut's greatest fear realized. The hull was cracked, their precious oxygen escaping outwards into the never-ending vacuum of deep space. Another sharp jolt shook the Bridge violently and the crack became wider. Castillo held his breath as the outrushing of gases now became audible above the surrounding din. Without hesitation, he jumped up and headed for a tool locker near the starboard turbolift doors. He quickly retrieved a canister of epoxy bonding agent and a plasma torch and set himself immediately to work.

The Bridge was rocked again, and for a brief instant, Richard Castillo had a dark vision of his own doom. If the hull blew outward now, there would be no hope for the young lieutenant, even if the rest of the crew was saved by an emergency forcefield. That is, of course, assuming that the Bridge didn't suffer a catastrophic failure altogether and sheer away from the splintering hull entirely.

"Mr. Castillo," he heard Commander Stadi call from somewhere behind him. *What could he possibly want at a time like this*, Castillo thought.

"Mr. Castillo," Stadi called again, this time a little more forcefully. "I sense that you're not quite with us, Lieutenant. Is everything all right?"

Startled back to reality, and still seated safely at the helm, it took Richard M. Castillo some moments to fully regain his bearings. Somewhat dazed, he swiveled quickly around in his chair and took a full survey of the Bridge. All was as it should be. No fires, no smoke, no sign of the dangerous hull breach. But it had all seemed so real! In fact, his vision had felt more like an eerie premonition of things yet to come. He shuddered involuntarily and stared into Stadi's bottomless ebony eyes.

Accepting this quiet invitation, Spencer Stadi's telepathic paracortex reached out and deep into the lieutenant's disconcerted mind. Saw there the scenes of frightful destruction, sensed the feelings of hopelessness and doom; and indeed, felt with keen awareness the almost paralyzing shock of total disorientation. Lt. Castillo in turn gained a sense of calm from this very personal act of sharing. It was rare for a human to achieve this level of understanding with anyone and was perhaps the reason why so many humans stationed on Betazed ultimately chose to marry their companions there.

His composure now regained, Castillo jumped up suddenly and passed around the helm console to stand beside the Auxiliary Control Pedestal at the very front of the Bridge. Rising from the command chair, Stadi, too, moved quickly forward and now stood with the lieutenant at the ACP. Sometimes a mental link so personal can create unusual ideas and they each now shared one. Glancing briefly over the displayed data and each inputting several independent commands, the same conclusions were

reached at the same time. Together, they looked up as the *Starship Kyushu* entered orbit on the main viewscreen. Far off on the horizon they could just barely discern two distant points of light that were the *Cumberland* and the *Congress*. These ships must work together now as a unified team for the sake of the entire population. The planet below was counting on them without even knowing it; for we are all often unaware of the heavenly host of angels that tirelessly look out for us from above.

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“Commander Skyl to *Canisteo*, come in please.” He paused as more static burst forth from his commbadge. “Commander Skyl to Commander Batanides, please respond.” Standing now in chest-deep icy water and holding the *Ambassador’s* Flight Data Recorder high over his head, the Vulcan engineer was as near to frustration as his carefully controlled mind would allow. There was another sharp creak from above and yet another thunderous groan from all around just before the floodgates opened and more water began pouring into their tiny alcove. Panicked and shivering, Dr. Jura Po let out another sharp squeal as the frigid water crept ever higher around his barrel chest.

“Doctor,” Skyl urged calmly, “perhaps you should try your communicator.” His headlamp flickered erratically over the doctor’s haggard features.

Dropping an uplifted arm only just enough to tap the device pinned to his chest - itself only just above the waterline - he spoke in a breathless half whisper. “D-D-D-Doctor P-Po to *Canisteo*... M-M-M-Marta, *please*, can you hear me?” he pleaded desperately. An unintelligible crackle of static filled the tiny alcove for mere seconds before being drowned out for good by the rising waters. Up to their necks now, and with their only lifeline now hopelessly severed, they had but few choices yet remaining to them.

“Doctor,” Skyl said plainly, “we must get to the next junction and climb to safety.” Without further invocation, and still holding the black box high over his head, the Vulcan began to push his way down the next narrow passageway. Behind him, the Tellarite doctor let out another squeal as his feet began to float ever so slightly off the deck. Pausing, Skyl was now faced with a choice. Save the technology that he had devoted his entire career to – or save a life. His choice, of course, was perfectly logical.

With a splash and a gurgle, he dropped the Flight Data Recorder into the icy water. “Doctor, take hold of my belt... good... now stay focused and alert. We *are* going to climb to safety.” Swimming now more than walking, the duo began their long perilous trek down this last narrow passageway and towards the ladder they knew to be at the other side. And

still they pushed onwards, even as their heads slipped beneath the surface and their flickering lamps flashed in the darkness one last time.

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In Main Engineering, Andy Dardanelle watched with dismay as two more little red dots flashed out of existence forever. These two had been close; almost too close really. There were very few left now. After an all-too-brief rally, the warp core's pulse was once again thready and weak. The power in its veins reaching out a little less far with each passing moment. Andy had, in the end, silenced all the alarms. What was left of the *Ambassador* was dying slowly one compartment at a time. But like a wizened old star in the heavens, a withering death would soon be replaced by a supernova.

When power levels in antimatter containment ultimately dropped below critical mass, ultimate annihilation would occur. The core would breach precisely according to the laws of Einstein's famous equation: $E=mc^2$. Tons of antimatter would instantly combine with many more tons of seawater. The resulting energy release would be equal to all this mass multiplied by the speed of light *squared*. An astronomical number to say the least and almost beyond comprehension.

In deep space, this titanic explosion would quickly dissipate in the cold and endless vacuum between the stars; but here, deep underwater, the resultant shockwave would quite literally rock the planet and send forth a tsunami of unprecedented size and magnitude. Every coastal region within reach would be wiped right off the face of the globe. The level of destruction would be staggering, the loss of life perhaps incalculable.

Andy Dardanelle shuddered at the thought but knew that he and Ryan Mackenzie would be vaporized in the first instants of the explosion long before any of this occurred. They too were matter and would only serve as fuel to the antimatter's fury. But in the meantime, this young Starfleet ensign was no quitter. He had not given up on those few littered dots that yet remained. His fingers still fought frantically with the computer to keep the warp core alive. His eyes still darted over the console like two caged animals.

And as Ryan Mackenzie still danced all around engineering waving the phaser above him, Andy Dardanelle was not even aware that his own hands had begun to tremble; that beads of sweat were now forming upon his own furrowed brow.

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All around her, circuits popped and sizzled. The lights and the computer displays all flickered seemingly in tune with the now near constant lightning. Each sharp crack of thunder sent a shiver down her spine. The rain came in sheets and slapped the glass with an intensity that defied belief. The wind was like some *thing* come alive and howled with a frenzy she had never before experienced. The tropical storm had come upon her so quickly that she had no chance of outrunning it.

“*Canisteo to Enterprise, do you read? Canisteo to Enterprise, please come in!*” Marta’s fingers raced frantically across the helm controls as she tried with all her might to keep the sleek craft in the air. All she got out of the comm system was still more static. Another bolt of lightning flashed so close this time that it seared her eyes. The snap of thunder deafened her and twanged the tiny runabout like a guitar string. A monumental downdraft struck with such force that the *Canisteo* pitched wildly and gave Marta a giddy nauseous feeling.

The computer issued two sharp tones. “*Warning, primary stabilizers offline... switching to secondary systems.*”

“Computer,” Marta called out. “Distance to nearest landform?” With an ear-splitting shriek, the ever-searching lightning at long last found its mark and arced wildly off the hull. Marta was tossed against the ceiling like a ragdoll as the *Canisteo* was thrown into a flat spin. The computer gurgled a few nondescript wordforms before falling silent for good.

With a dreadful thud, Marta hit the floor running.

Out of breath with head swirling, she forced her way back into her chair and tried for a system reboot. “Come on you bitch!” she cried as the computer screen flickered only once for an instant. “Come on,” she seethed again through clenched teeth. She had to fight the urge to throw up; fought even harder to stay conscious. Her heart thumped in her chest and felt as if it would burst. At the last possible moment, the computer screen flashed on, albeit briefly. Just long enough to halt the spin and slow her descent.

But it was too little too late. Like a high-dive gone wrong, the *Canisteo* did a bellyflop into the turbulent seas; hitting the surface with such force that the hull cracked like an egg. The shock of waist-deep seawater in the cabin brought Marta immediately back to her senses. She fought against this rising tide as the nose of the craft dove quickly underwater.

With time fast running out, she pushed with all her might towards the aft compartment. Pushed even harder as the sleek craft slipped quietly under the sea.

And as the storm raged on above, the *Canisteo* plunged headlong into the dark abyss below.

Determined that he was *not* going to climb down into that dark turboshaft to escape, Lieutenant Sam Galloway had used everything at his disposal to beat on the alumglass window of the captain's ready room, but to no avail. The indestructible pane still held fast. Outside it was sunny and bright with a light refreshing breeze. Inside, the acrid smoke had permeated in from the Bridge and now tinged the air with a murky grey sheen. Locked in Isolation Protocol with all systems offline, the atmosphere was growing staler by the minute and Sam felt as if he might suffocate. To make matters worse, the twin suns high overhead were beating down on the metal hull, and the Bridge was beginning to heat up like an oven. With tiny rivulets of sweat pouring down his forehead, Sam could think of only one other option, but it would require him to leave the relative comfort of the ready room and venture back into the shattered command center. The thought of returning to that morgue caused him to shiver, but he could think of no other way. He had no wish to die here, despite the horrific fate of the others. He knew it wouldn't be long before he lost consciousness, either from exhaustion, or by asphyxiation. The deed must be done if he ever hoped to escape, so onwards he marched towards the Bridge, gritting his teeth with resolve.

Reaching the doorway, Sam held his palm light up to have another look around. Standing as he was, partially blocking the incoming sunlight from the ready room window, his body cast an uneasy shadow into the smoky air of the expansive facility. Somehow though, it looked smaller than he'd remembered. He was overcome with a wave of profound sadness for their fallen angel. Funny, he thought, to have such nostalgia for this thing, this ship, that had once plied darker oceans and now lay beached and in pieces around him. Funny too, he thought, that he did not have more remorse for his fallen comrades. Slowly picking his way to the front of the Bridge, he came at last to the main viewscreen.

Sam assumed the legs sticking out on the right must be Hendricks. Poor kid. In the middle, probably Captain Lord. That meant Davis on the left, the *Ambassador's* former chief of security. Taking in a deep breath of acrid smoke, Sam wiped his brow on his sleeve, and then wrapped his arms around the corpse, just above the knees. With a momentous heave, he dragged the hapless victim out of the shattered screen and let his body flop unceremoniously to the floor. Retching at the smell of burnt flesh, Sam turned quickly away in hopes of fresher air, but it was no use. He coughed and almost barfed again before turning at last back to the grisly task.

Crouching down, Sam shone his light on his onetime colleague. His skull had been crushed, and what was left had been compressed down to the level of the shoulders. These too had been flattened by the impact making the man unrecognizable. Placing a hand over his mouth and nose,

Sam stifled another urge to wretch. Shining the light down now to the man's waist, he finally found what he was looking for. Tucked in his belt was a small thumb sized phaser; the chief of security was never known not to have one on him. Not wishing to prolong this any longer than he had to, Sam hastily plucked the device out of its little pocket.

He was about to stand when he noticed that a small silver medallion had also come out of the man's pocket. A good luck charm perhaps, or a gift from a lover. It was only now that Sam realized just how little he knew about any of these people. Even Allison; they had flirted on dozens of occasions, but he couldn't even say now what her favorite colour had been or what she liked to eat for breakfast. This filled him with sadness, and he let out a melancholy regretful sigh. With the utmost care, Sam tucked the small medallion back into the man's pocket and then said a short, silent prayer.

Rising slowly, and taking one last long look of goodbye around the murky Bridge, he passed slowly back into the bright sunshine of the ready room. Pausing at the door, this time he did not hesitate. Setting the device to maximum power, Sam aimed at the glass and fired. Resisting for a brief half-second, it ultimately vaporized on the subatomic level and took half the wall along with it. Sam was almost knocked down as the pressure equalized and fresh, cool, life-sustaining air rushed in, flushing out the smoke and the stench. He could do nothing but just stand there a few moments and take in gulp after gulp of pure clean air.

Wisely tucking the phaser into his own little pocket for future use, he gingerly began approaching the gaping hole in the wall. The effect had been a little more than he'd anticipated, but it'd gotten the job done, nonetheless. His mind still wasn't quite used to the idea that they were on the ground now. Spacewalking was one of his least favorite things; in fact he'd nearly failed the course at the Academy. As such, Sam approached the hole's perimeter with some small amount of trepidation, as unfounded as it was. He quickly realized he had never actually been *outside* of the *Ambassador*. At the edge now, he peered out into an absolutely perfect summer's day, knowing full well that this day would indeed never end. It was glorious.

The grey hull stretched out away from him for what seemed like forever. It was so bizarre to see the ship from this perspective, glinting in the sunshine. The sheer size of it absolutely astounded him. He had never really gained a sense for how big this vessel truly was from within its zigzagging honeycombed corridors. The fact that he was only now looking across half of its total diameter astounded him yet further. Taking his first tentative steps out of its protective shell, Sam tapped his toes on the hull plating as if testing a frozen Alberta pond for the thickness of its ice.

Relatively certain that this alien landscape would support his weight, he ventured out a few more wary steps.

There was an eerie stillness about him, almost as if all the sound had been somehow muffled. He could just barely see the treetops peaking up above the rim of the saucer some 163 meters² distant, with the cityscape far beyond that. Sam abruptly realized that any sound was quickly being swallowed up by the sheer size of the *Ambassador*. It was akin to the effects of a massive Roman amphitheatre, or standing on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Grand Canyon. Surveying this vast plain, Sam wasn't quite sure which direction to head first. For all intents and purposes, he was technically standing now on the roof of a fifteen-story building. This presented the rather daunting challenge of how to get down.

Sam at last concluded that he had to go aft. There was an airlock beside the Main Shuttlebay doors, and if he could gain entry there, he would then have access to the rest of the ship. If any of the crew were yet alive, they would instinctively gather there as well. Perhaps together they could blow the emergency hatches and begin a coordinated rescue effort using the shuttles and runabouts to ferry people to safety. He had his mission now and began to stride in earnest towards the rear of the ship. Thus, quite without realizing it, Lieutenant Sam Galloway had taken command of the *Starship Ambassador*. He did it for Allison, he did it for Hendricks, he did it because he was a Starfleet officer and that's what he had been trained to do.

~ ~ ~ ~

Slipping away, slipping away. Their beautiful world was slipping away and there was nothing they could do about it. The invasion force was greater than anything they could've ever imagined; greater than anything they could've ever mounted a defense against. They came by the hundreds, by the thousands, perhaps by the tens-of-thousands. An unstoppable swarm attracted by the distinctiveness of their world and its people. It was the end of their history, the end of their civilization.

"Counselor," Garrett called, "are you coming?" The El-Aurian was still seated in the copilot's seat; eyes vacant as if in a trance. Slipping away, slipping away. Onovan could do nothing but watch as another massive vessel entered orbit of his homeworld and began assisting the others in carving it up like a roast. It had been the hardest decision of his long, long life, just to turn and leave. To start running and to never look back. Would

they forgive him, would his *son* ever forgive him; could he ever forgive himself?

“Counselor,” Garrett said more firmly, “are you alright?” He shuddered once, then snapped back to reality. He had not relived that day, relived that memory, in many, many decades. It frightened him all over again and he drew in a sudden breath, startling his captain. She continued to eye him speculatively, remaining quiet, giving him a chance to recover and regain his composure. She knew all-too-well what a harrowing experience the strange visions could be.

“Yes, Captain,” he said quietly, “I am here...” He rose somewhat absentmindedly to stand bedside her at the exterior hatch. Still, she left the door closed and gave him a few more moments to recover. At long last, he fully regained his senses and turned to her with a sheepish grin of somewhat mild embarrassment.

“Care to talk about it?” Garrett offered softly.

“It was the Borg, Captain,” he said, turning away in shame.

“The who?”

“Another time perhaps,” he answered with a sudden smile and gestured towards the hatch. “Shall we?”

Outside, Ras Tau’aman carefully studied the sleek and silvery craft with its strange markings. He had watched it move around the North Tower with an eerie gracefulness before gliding in for a soft landing just several meters away. Its many windows were blacked out so that he could not see inside; he was resigned instead to stand patiently and wait. Seventy years of service to the Crown Empress had taught him patience many times over.

He thought that he should be nervous, perhaps even a little scared, but he was neither of these. Anxious yes, giddy even, with an anticipation that threatened to overwhelm his near infinite patience. But scared no. *‘Fear not o’ people’*, the ancient book read, *‘for many angels shall descend from the heavens heralding the coming of the One True Goddess’*. On the streets below, the angels were indeed testing them, testing their kindness and generosity, testing their compassion. And here, in the Palladium, Ras Tau’aman knew that he too was about to be tested.

With a sudden whoosh and a hum that startled him and caused him to jump back, the craft at last began to open. He still could not see inside and craned his neck to look over the lower half of the blossoming hatch. Ras had to force himself to relax now as the opening grew ever larger. Still, the contrast between light and dark kept all inside hidden from his view. With the dull clank of ground contact, it suddenly became eerily quiet. And then she stepped forth out of the darkness and into the light.

Overcome with sudden, unanticipated emotion, Ras threw himself to the ground; palms outstretched, forehead pressed to stone. "Ascendant!" he cried aloud, body shivering. He drew his hands in and cupped his face. *And then he wept.* For nearly seventy years he had devoted his life to serving a false prophet. Been the instrument of death to hundreds of dissidents. Exiled thousands more to the dry and forbidding lands of the Second Continent.

He wept now, as much out of penitence, as supplication. Had his entire life been a sham? All that time wasted on false beliefs; all those lonely sacrifices made in devotion to the wrong cause. He had betrayed himself and betrayed his people. How could he ever hope for forgiveness from the One True Goddess now standing before him? He was not worthy. How could he ever hope to forgive himself? He did not believe himself capable. The foundation of his entire life was crumbling away beneath him, and he knew not where to stand.

The hopelessness of it all caused him to wail: "Forgive me Ascendant, *for I have sinned!*"

"Uh, oh," Onovan merely said, standing a half-step behind his astonished captain.

CHAPTER SIX

SHORES OF LAKE EL-NAR THE PLANET BETAZED IN THE AL-BETAZ SYSTEM

It was quite a sight to wake up to every morning, he had to admit; his wife standing there in their small kitchen totally in the nude with naught on but an old apron like his grandmother used to wear. Nudity was quite a common occurrence here on Betazed, where a world of full telepaths really had nothing to hide. In the warm, lush environment, light and airy clothes were the norm on the outside, and very little else while on the inside. Ian Troi sometimes wondered if this could possibly be why so many humans *really* chose to make Betazed their home.

Yet, when it came time to dress up, these people really knew how to throw a party. None more so than his wife, Lwaxana Troi, Daughter of the Fifth House, Holder of the Sacred Chalice of Rixx, heir to the Holy Rings of Betazed. Official banquets were a sight unseen anywhere else within a hundred light-years of the Al-Betaz System. As a member of nobility, Lwaxana was known the world over for her absolutely flamboyant gowns that flowed from her long, graceful neck in great undulating waves. But even these did not compare to the enormous and fanciful wigs.

The tradition dated back to antiquity; so far back in fact that no one knew its origins. These magnificent woven masterpieces stood a half meter tall or better and came in any range of colour or style. But their real trademark, their true shining glory, if you will, was the gilded cage carefully interwoven into the center of this great mass of artificial hair. Within the cage, a colourful little bird twittered and fluttered all about and made a most unwholesome noise. The louder and the more active the bird, the greater the success of the wig.

Fortunately, Ian mused, these gaudy monstrosities were not an everyday occurrence. Lwaxana stood now at the small cook-stove and prepared his breakfast. Her hair was cropped short, she had not even put on her everyday wig yet, and Ian rather thought he preferred it that way. He was a quiet, unassuming man from an everyday background back on Earth. He enjoyed a traditional American breakfast, and in the evenings, was content to simply sit by the fire and enjoy his family.

He had even introduced Lwaxana to the Terran practice of the lazy Sunday picnic; one human tradition she had truly come to adore.

“Oh Ian,” she said with her sudden characteristic flamboyancy. “I thought we might take our picnic at Lake Cataria. Deanna does seem to love it there.” Ian Troi found that he did very little talking while at home. Lwaxana Troi was not known for letting a quiet moment slip quietly by. But deeper than that, as a full telepath, she quite often knew her husband’s thoughts before even he did. But it was not an unfriendly or hurtful relationship; it just simply was the way it was.

As if on cue, Deanna came charging into the room still wearing her long flowing nightgown. It billowed out behind her like a blizzard as she raced across the floor and leapt into her father’s arms. Sadly (Ian at times thought) her hair too was cropped short to allow for its own long curly wig. This was one tradition he could not win over, but still gained concessions elsewhere.

“Daddy, Daddy, will you *please* tell me more about the Ancient West? I want to hear *everything* about that bandit, Billy... Billy... Billy the Kid!” He couldn’t help but chuckle at her tiny voice as she stared up at him with those big bottomless ebony eyes. He still smiled as her head jerked suddenly around and she looked sullenly at her mother. He knew intuitively that she had no doubt been told to give it a rest. His psi-factor had developed to the point that he always knew intuitively what was being said, even if it was not always expressed in words.

A tiny chirp from his communicator was followed by a gruff voice from the outside world. “*Commodore Hanson to Lieutenant Troi...*”

“Troi here, Sir,” Ian replied, still smiling.

“*Looks like you better come in a little early, Son. Things on Ethos aren’t exactly going according to plan, and we better see if we can muster up a few more starships.*”

Lwaxana spun around with frying pan in hand and clucked her tongue. Ian merely smiled even wider.

“Understood, Sir. I’ll be there shortly,” he said. “Troi out.”

“Oh Ian!” Lwaxana cried with exasperation. Scooping Deanna up, he rose and moved to his wife, kissing her on the cheek.

“It’s all right, Love, give my eggs to Liilbet.”

“Yaaay! Make mine runny,” she giggled, scrunching up her nose.

“Ohhh,” Lwaxana laughed with a broad smile. “She definitely got that from you.”

Ian Troi chuckled again, loving every minute of it.

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It was late in the morning aboard *Starfleet One*, and Ambassador Sarek stood in quiet solemnity in the president’s darkened stateroom

watching as the silent warp stars glided wistfully by. Both he and the president had been up very late the night before. The duo had indeed piloted the *Sydney*-class transport out of Spacedock and set it on its course for Ethos before at long last retiring. The president's revelry had continued thereafter until nearly 4am, thus Sarek had not initially been surprised when his longtime friend had not joined him for their customary early breakfast.

But now he fully understood why. Kalomi Joran of Betazed, President of the United Federation of Planets for the past six years, was dead at the age of 47. Sarek let out a deep and uncharacteristic sigh. When his human wife Amanda had died, Sarek had found himself drifting in a most un-Vulcan-like way. Joran had recognized this in his old friend and helped to set his path to rights again as only a best friend could do. Sarek respected this man above perhaps all others.

And now his friend was dead. Sarek turned slowly and looked down at his comrade's waxen face. It still bore the glint of a smile from the night before. Whatever the cause, the president had obviously gone quite peacefully in his sleep. There was no sign of struggle, nor hint of misdeed. In the end, centuries of medical science still could not prevent the inevitable; nor should it really. Medical science could however explain the unexplainable.

And so Sarek waited.

The door chime came at last and Sarek bade the caller to enter. It was a human female, quite young to be sure, with a shapely figure and brown, shoulder-length hair that hung tremulously in her eyes. She seemed to be of a nervous nature and moved in a somewhat jerky motion that stood in sharp contrast to her latent beauty. When she spoke, her voice was quiet, almost what the humans would call 'meek'.

"You called for a doc... oh, Oh, OH!" she said with a sudden start.

"You are the ship's surgeon?" Sarek said calmly, plainly.

She paused, stalled for a moment by the archaic term, then continued nervously. "Uh, yes, uh, Sir. Doctor Ann Grey... is he, uh, is he dead?" She pointed with a somewhat shaky finger at the president's mortal remains.

Sarek merely nodded. "Will you please examine the body," he gestured, "for a preliminary cause of death?"

Still, she hesitated. Then, in her usual apparent fashion, moved without grace to the opposite side of the bed. Tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear, she pulled a tricorder out of a pouch at her waist and began finally to scan the president from head to toe. There was no grace even in this and Sarek marveled at how this timid young girl had ever made her way to be the chief medical officer aboard *Starfleet One*. She was less than forthcoming even with her prognosis.

“Cerebral embolism,” she blurted out finally, with little enough compassion even for the Vulcan’s taste. She seemed to almost congratulate herself on the diagnosis, almost as if it were exactly what she’d hope to find. Sarek eyed her speculatively for a moment with a single upswept eyebrow. It was rare for a Vulcan to host even the barest hint of an emotion, but the sudden death of his friend had, after all, unsettled him. He did not like this woman, he resolved. She gave him a most ‘uneasy’ sensation, and his sharp scrutiny seemed to make her all the more nervous.

“Thank you, Doctor,” he said at length. “Please remove the body to Sickbay and conduct a complete autopsy. I will be awaiting your *full* report,” he added sternly. Backing up slowly at first, and then turning awkwardly, Ann Grey passed out of the stateroom with as very little grace as she had entered.

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Under any other circumstance, it may have seemed comedic to see Ryan Mackenzie dance all around Engineering waving a phaser over his head. But to Andy Dardanelle, there was nothing funny in this at all. He still had enough sense to see that, without a doubt, the end was near. Lifesigns throughout the submerged stardrive were scarce. Most of the forcefields had collapsed. What air was left was becoming toxic. Antimatter containment was approaching critical; the warp core was ready to stall.

What scared Andy the most was the total and absolute darkness that was sure to come. To *wait* in total darkness to drown had to be far worse than drowning itself. To *wait* in total darkness for the core to breach would be torture unendurable. Every sound, every creak and groan of the ship, every single drop of water would leave you hanging that much closer to the noose. For an eternity you would just sit there, in that darkness, just waiting.

It was madness inescapable. How long can you hold *your* breath?

“There it is again!” Mackenzie said with a sudden start.

“It’s just the ship, Sir,” Andy droned on again, for what seemed like the hundredth time. Above them, another sharp crack heralded the coming of a deep groan that caused the very deck beneath their feet to shudder. The warp core faltered for an instant and the lights and computer displays flickered erratically. Still more water crept in and dripped into their tiny compartment. And tiny it did seem. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but the room did almost appear as if it had been squeezed into a smaller space.

“There it is again!” Mackenzie virtually screamed at a whisper. This time Andy too thought he heard something. Voices from above in the vicinity

of the warp core. He passed this off too as only his imagination. But Ryan Mackenzie's mind had long since gone wild with imagination. He crouched into a defensive position; phaser held at the ready. Another deep creak and groan filled the room and caused the lights to flicker. Again, they heard the spectral voices.

Cold, wet, and startled by a man with a phaser, Doctor Jura Po came around the corner and let out a long, high-pitched squeal of terror that sent shivers of fear right through to Andy Dardanelle's core. But before Andy even had a chance to blink, Ryan Mackenzie fired and vaporized this apparition right where it stood. The sudden silence was deafening. Ryan fired again through the gaseous cloud, but the Tellarite's companion, a Vulcan, somehow dodged this second blast. Now addled with fear himself, Ryan Mackenzie fired a third and final time; but the shot went wild...

Struck a mortal blow, the warp core thrashed against its moorings. Horrified, and half mad himself, Andy Dardanelle plucked a phaser from the tool locker and took his own aim. Like a fire-breathing, gas-belching dragon of ancient yore, the warp core continued to shudder and flail against its restraints. The computer consoles went dark and the lights began to fade. Andy's horror was replaced with a total terror of the coming darkness. Like a madman, Ryan Mackenzie turned on him with a howl of rage.

"Dammit Ensign!" And then he too dissolved into a swirling cloud of orange vapor.

But Andy had not fired; he was sure he had not fired!

"Drop your weapon, Ensign," came to him in a calm, but stern voice. A surge from the warp core pushed the lights beyond standard and it hurt his eyes for a second before the circuits exploded and all went dark. In the ethereal glow of the hissing warp core, he could just barely discern the bare silhouette of a man. Still, he held his phaser close to him in defense against the suffocating darkness. The ship around him let out a dreadful moan and the deck beneath his feet shuddered as forcefields began to collapse in sequence. Water began pouring down the core shaft in great torrents and still the calm voice came to him out of the darkness. It somehow appealed to his Vulcan quarter – and made him listen.

"Put down the phaser, Ensign."

"Yes, Sir," he said softly, dropping it with a clatter on the tabletop display.

Defenseless now against the darkness, he began to shiver uncontrollably. The waiting had begun. The shuddering warp core became but a dreamy pantomime of that fire-breathing dragon, as seen through the torrent of crashing water that cascaded down the seventeen-storey core shaft. Eventually it too went dark. Death comes to all things in the end. An

eternity passed as Andy stood there in that darkness waiting to drown. Waiting. Just waiting.

The sound of the intrushing water suddenly changed, and Andy backed himself into a corner as an icy wave washed over his ankles. He did not know what to do; he did not know which way to turn. The ship around him let out its last and final death wails. The water rose quickly, up to his knees now. The darkness was absolute. And then he felt it. A Vulcan presence very near to him, next to him, and it was a brief but welcome comfort. A relief almost.

“It’s all right, Ensign,” the voice said softly, calmly. “Meld with me, it will ease your discomfort.” He could feel the Vulcan’s fingertips on his face, felt his consciousness slipping away even as a new voice suddenly startled the darkness. They were up to their waists now in icy water.

“*Canaseraga to Away Team... Commander Skyl, this is Lieutenant Castillo, do you read?*”

“Skyl here, Lieutenant,” the calm voice replied. Andy could feel the warm breath upon his neck even as the fingertips fell away. He was up to his chest now in icy water and every moment became more surreal in nature than the last.

“*Do you need a lift?*” the voice from the outer world said.

“Immediate transport would be appreciated, Lieutenant.” Up to his neck now in frigid water, Andy Dardanelle had resigned himself to death; had come to accept his fate here in this cold, dark, watery grave. And even as his body dissolved into a swirling column of bright warm energy, a part of his mind stayed behind, buried there with all the others beneath a million tons of water.

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“Mr. President, Sir... Mr. President, please wake up.” The young woman shook the man, but still, he did not stir. “Mr. President,” she said again, and this time he let out a muffled groan. She knew of no one that slept as heavily as he did. There were times she thought him dead. On some occasions, this routine could go on for a good five minutes.

She shook him again. “Mr. President, please, it’s urgent, Sir.”

“With you my dear,” he mumbled at last, “it’s always urgent.”

“But Sir, *Starfleet One* is enroute to rendezvous with us at Ethos. Ambassador Sarek must swear you in, Sir.”

With a sudden move that startled her for what seemed like the hundredth time, Austin Kelley swung his feet out onto the floor and sat bolt upright on the edge of the bed. “For Christ’s sake, Amy, what *are* you on about now?” His eyes were closed, his head tilted to the right in its usual

way. He stood up now, stark naked as usual, and stretched, letting out a great yawn in the process. He next rubbed his nose, then smacked his lips as if he needed a brush. And a brush he did need. His long dark hair was its usual matted mess. His eyes still closed, he stumbled in the general direction of the bathroom.

Warp stars raced by his state room window quite unnoticed.

"The *Starship Uluru* is also enroute," she continued unfazed. "They are bringing the Privy Council," she said matter-of-factly. Austin Kelley mumbled something incoherent, then stopped dead in his tracks. Slowly he turned to face her, eyes now half open, pointer finger raised like this little light of mine. By now, Amy had retrieved his robe and took the invitation to slide the sleeve over his partially extended arm. As she tossed the robe over his opposite shoulder, the aforementioned finger made its reappearance through the cuff.

"What?"

"Honestly, Sir," she scolded sharply with her usual Cockney reproach. "President Joran is dead, Sir. As soon as Sarek arrives, you're to be sworn in, Sir."

"Stop with the 'Sirs' for Christ's sake Amy, what the *hell* are you talking about?"

"Oh honestly, you are a right mess," she clucked. "President Joran died last night in his sleep. Ambassador Sarek is to rendezvous with us at Ethos to swear you in as President. Congratulations, I suppose," she sighed.

President of the United Federation of Planets? He could not quite wrap his mind around it. He had only become vice president on a whim really. The dark-horse candidate; in it for the travel, the prestige... the women. But the real burdens of the office had quickly overwhelmed him. The appearances, the meetings, the conferences; the never-ending parade of diplomats. One hundred fifty major worlds, dozens of minor ones. Billions upon billions of people scattered across thousands of light-years.

He crashed into a chair and took on the shape of Atlas holding up the world. He needed to somehow center himself. He needed to somehow find himself. He was drowning in a murky sea and did not know which way was up. Austin Kelley the enigma. Austin Kelley the President. He had to admit it did have a nice ring to it. His mind began to clear. *President of the United Federation of Planets*. He liked that. It rather rolled off the tongue, he thought.

"Amy," he said with growing confidence, "will you marry me?"

"Not on your life, Mr. President," was the reply, and Austin Kelley laughed as the *Starship Dolphin* raced onwards towards his destiny.

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In orbit, high above Ethos, four Federation starships held position relative to each other in a diamond-slot formation. With the *Enterprise* at the vanguard, the *Kyushu* and the *Cumberland* and *Congress* now stood by the ready to implement Lt. Castillo and Commander Stadi's unusual, if not audacious, plan. In the center of the diamond, in the slot so to speak, a makeshift transmission dish had been deployed, and it now pointed downward and was aimed directly at the submerged stardrive of the *Ambassador*. On the Bridge of the *Enterprise*, the scene was a flurry of activity. Seated in the captain's chair, Commander Spencer Stadi directed a half-dozen junior officers.

Coordination was the key to the entire operation. One slight misstep could mean disaster for them all. With the senior staff all deployed, their juniors had been asked to fill positions not their own. And Spencer Stadi had full faith and confidence in every single one of them. "Commander," Ensign Enyo called from Ops. "I'm detecting a sudden surge in neutrinos from the *Ambassador's* warp core. It could indicate that a core breach is imminent."

"Damn," Stadi said to no one in particular, yet everyone was listening. "If we're going to do this, we have to do it now." He tapped a few buttons embedded in the armrest of his chair and opened a commlink.

"*Enterprise* to *Canaseraga*, what's your status?" he said quickly.

"*Mission complete, so to speak, Commander...*"

"Get well clear of the area, Lieutenant. We're about to implement the plan."

"Core breach in progress!" Enyo called out suddenly, startling everyone.

"Set computer interlink – begin auto sequence... All ships, stand by!"

Linked together through the transmission dish, the four starships all activated their transporters at once. Working together as a unified team, their combined power would just barely be enough to pierce through the dense ionosphere and snatch the *Ambassador's* warp core and antimatter supply off the ocean floor. Hopefully. The plan was then to reverse the beam and send the lot harmlessly out into outer space. It had seemed like a great idea at the time, but now, as the Bridge lights began to dim and circuits began to sizzle, they were all no longer so sure.

"Report, Ensign!" Stadi shouted above a rising din.

"Transport in progress," Enyo shouted back as her console popped and snapped. "But the interaction with seawater is destabilizing the beam... Oh my God," she cried suddenly, "everybody hold on!"

The first half of the plan had worked, at least. The warp core and antimatter had indeed been snatched off the ocean floor; but the destabilization had caused the rematerialization to occur right in the middle of the nest. With a white flash as bright as any star, the warp core, transmission dish, and all the antimatter flared outwards like a supernova. The primordial explosion sent out a shockwave at the speed of light, tossing the tiny little starships like teacups.

And as the ships spun away from each other, the population below had been saved without ever even knowing it.

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*Author's note: My original concept for this story was to have the *Ambassador's* warp core breach underwater and throw the planet out of its stable orbit, thus plunging the population into total darkness for the first time in their history. If the gentle reader is interested in further exploring the idea of this sort of cataclysmic event, the author humbly recommends the novel *Nightfall* by Isaac Asimov. -W.M.

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His boots clanking heavily on the metal hull plates, Sam Galloway had already made his way around the circular dome of the Bridge and was now heading dead aft. He found himself fascinated with the vast array of gadgets and gizmos that stuck up here and there along his trip. To his left, about knee-high, a massive sensor pallet simply bristled with dozens of different hardware components. Even as Ops manager, he couldn't imagine what half of them did, though he'd probably used most of them on a day-to-day basis. He was struck for the first time by the level of sophisticated engineering that it required to construct just one of these monstrous starships. It was humbling to think that the *Ambassador* was just one of many sisters.

Strolling along in the sunshine and enjoying the warm breeze, Sam very nearly fell over his next obstacle. His mind was still processing the fact that he was literally walking on the rooftop of the ship now. Before him was a very steep incline down to the top of the next deck. Peering over, he could see the great oblong windows of the crew rec lounge; and beyond that, the massive emergency escape hatches for the Main Shuttlebay. Scanning from right to left, he could clearly see that all the heavy hatch covers were still in place. Either there was no power, or no one had been left alive to

operate them. Despite the carnage on the Bridge, Sam's mind still refused to believe he could be the only one left. Sitting down now, with his feet hanging off the edge, Sam had made the perhaps fateful decision that it would be safer to slide down the alumglass rather than down the rough hull plating. What he had not anticipated, as he shoved himself off the edge, was the speed he would gain on this near frictionless surface. With arms flailing for control, Sam tried to dig his heels in, but it was no use. Quickly reaching the bottom of the glass, his feet found purchase at last, launching him headlong, stiff as a board, towards the deck. Sam saw stars as his body crumpled into a heap, then bounced and rolled along out of his control. Dazed, he laid there finally for several long moments staring up at the viredescent sky, cursing himself for his stupidity.

Sam thought his body had ached before! He seriously considered just lying there as he was and going to sleep. He figured someone would find him eventually. But the suns were hot, and with his injuries he knew he could quickly fall into a coma, or worse, so he forced himself to his feet. Gingerly, and nursing his wounds, Sam picked his way down a narrow path between two of the explosive hatch covers. He knew he was taking a hell of a risk here; if someone below jettisoned the covers now, he didn't dare think what would happen. He had to navigate this hazardous course for over fifty feet, and when he finally made it through, he breathed a heavy sigh of relief. He thought again of his friend Andy, and this caused him to pause.

The diligent little engineer's mate would've loved to explore this strange new territory. Sam felt so suddenly and hopelessly alone that he didn't think he could go on. Andy was gone now, as were so many others. The shock of the crash and the horrors of the Bridge were beginning to finally sink in. He began again to hyperventilate and fought back the sobs that were now knotted up tight in his throat. Holding his hand up to shield his eyes from the midday glare, he surveyed this great grey plain and saw no one. Tears started to stream down his cheeks as a near panic welled up from within. He couldn't possibly be the only one left! How could he be the only one left?!

Sprinting ahead now, Sam nearly fell off a virtual cliff. Screeching to a halt and swinging his arms back wildly, this drop looked to be about twice as far as his last tumble. He had finally reached the outer edge of the cavernous shuttlebay, and it was a long ways down. So, distraught, his eyes filled with tears, that he did not even notice them at first. People, hundreds of people, clustered in groups and milling around on the hull below him. He blinked his eyes and shook his head several times before he allowed himself to believe it. In all his life he had never seen such a welcome sight. In all his life, he had never felt such relief.

“Hello!” he whooped, but the sound was swallowed up by the canyon between them. “Hello!” he cried again, laughing and waving his arms like a madman. Still, they did not hear, but he did not let this discourage him now. He had been found, and that was all that mattered. They were a family again and Sam was filled once more with hope. Pacing back and forth, he began to look for a way down. The incline was as steep as before, but much, much farther. Directly below him, the space doors were still closed, but they were recessed, making this route impossible. To the right or the left were the only other options, other than go back, and he’d be damned if he would do that.

“Hello!” he cried again, this time with a little more desperation in his voice. He could not have come this far only to be denied by this ridiculous impasse. “Think, dammit,” Sam muttered to himself, breathing heavier with ever-increasing agitation. He briefly considered firing his borrowed phaser, but thought better of it when he envisioned the entire crowd below shooting back at him. “Dammit,” he muttered, there had to be a way! So frustrated was he that he began pacing again like a wild cat, taking in short, sharp, upsetting breaths. Determined that he would get down somehow, Sam finally ran to the far side of the hanger doors and actually sat down, with every intention of scrambling over the edge just as he had done before.

So absorbed was he in this reckless task, that he did not notice as the transporter beam snatched him away at the last possible second. Lieutenant Sam Galloway found himself immersed once more in total darkness and he screamed.

~ ~ ~ ~

Drifting, aimlessly drifting. The heat was staggering. The twin suns beat down from seemingly all angles at once. No breeze. In fact, hardly a single breath of air at all. She had stripped down to all but the bare essentials and used her clothing to create a tent of sorts to protect her from the midday glare, but it did little to assuage this form of oppressive heat and humidity. Lost, dehydrated, and in no hope of finding food or water, she had all but resigned herself to die out here a million miles from nowhere.

Drifting, aimlessly drifting. In the last moments before the *Canisteo* had plunged to its watery grave, Marta Batanides had grabbed the life raft from the aft compartment and blown the rear hatch. Carried upwards by a huge bubble of air, she had popped up onto the surface of a sea torn to shreds by the savage tropical storm. She was nearly drowned in the few short seconds that it took to inflate the raft. Marta had spent the next two harrowing hours tossed from swell to monumental swell, barely clinging to life.

And now she was drifting, aimlessly drifting. There had been no time to grab anything but the raft. Her communicator had been drenched through and through and was not working. It was the only piece of technology left to her, and it was useless. She did not even *like* the water. She dreamed fitfully now of her childhood days growing up at Sagan Station on Mars. There had been very little water there, just a few very small lakes contained under the biodomes.

She had not learned to swim, had not even seen the ocean, until her Academy days in San Francisco on Earth. And now, she was hopelessly adrift in one. A million miles of water and none to drink; and heat so oppressive that she wanted to crawl out of her skin. For a long while, Marta had become increasingly agitated that they did not come for her. Had the *Enterprise* too fallen out of orbit? And what of all those other starships that were supposed to show up? Just where in the hell were they?

Her anger had long since evaporated as she drifted aimlessly now in and out of consciousness. So deep was her delirium that she did not even notice the fleet that approached her. The sailing vessels were absolutely massive. Three of them, each the size of an early 20th Century ocean liner. Their magnificent and colourful sails ballooned outwards from an intricate webwork of rigging that pulled the ships along at a remarkable speed. The lead vessel did not even pause in its westward journey as it scooped Marta up, raft and all. So smooth was the transition that she did not even stir from her fitful slumber.

Leilani Algethi's army was on the move, let no one stand in its way.

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"Forgive me, Ascendant, for I have sinned," Ras Tau'aman wailed as Captain Rachel Garrett emerged from the runabout *Genesee* onto the stone plaza of the Palladium. Momentarily taken aback by this man lying prostrate before her, she stopped dead in her tracks, stunned and speechless. This was not quite the reception she had anticipated. She knew these people to be passionate in their beliefs. Knew that they practiced an understandable form of sun-worship. Knew even of their so-called Living Goddess. But she had never expected this.

"Uh, oh," Onovan said behind her, not helping.

"Counselor," Garrett whispered through tightly pinched lips, "I do believe we've missed something here."

"So it would appear, Captain," he replied, still not helping.

The man had called her 'Ascendant'. *What could it mean*, Rachel wondered, *ascended from what?* Her mind began quickly to turn this information over. Most religions on Earth had faded away over the past

three hundred years; but as a Starfleet captain trained in numerous First Contact scenarios, Rachel Garrett was well versed in the power of myth lore and superstitious beliefs. It did not take long for her puzzle solving abilities to correlate her present situation with the sun-god-like pharaohs of ancient Egypt.

“Uh oh,” she muttered to herself, then stormed forward and grabbed Ras Tau’aman by the arm. It took Garrett and Onovan both several long minutes to coax this aged and overcome old man to his feet, where he now stood, still sniveling into a white handkerchief. He was still trembling from head to toe, and still refused to look Garrett in the eye; or Onovan either for that matter. It was almost as if an entire lifetime of pent-up grief had poured out of this tired and sad little man in just those few short moments.

“There, there,” Garrett said, patting him on the back while at the same time giving Onovan a rather cross look. Onovan’s eyes went wide for an instant as he offered his captain a slight shrug. “Can you tell us your name?” she asked as the old man blew out his snuffles into the handkerchief.

“Ra, Ra, Ras Tau’aman,” he stuttered. “First Lord of the Ascendant.” He then let out a queer sort of laugh and drew in two short, tearful breaths. “At least what I thought was the Ascendant,” he murmured. “You must forgive me my transgressions, Majesty,” he said suddenly, twisting the handkerchief tightly around his withered old hands. “I did not know, I could not have known,” and again he wept.

There were several more long moments as Onovan and Garrett tried to calm the overwrought old man down. This was a dangerous situation, and both of the seasoned officers recognized it as such. There had been more than one instance in Starfleet’s long history where an overzealous captain or crewmember had used just this sort of fanatical religious belief to their own advantage. Most notably, Captain Ronald Tracey, who became embroiled in a bitter civil war on Omega IV; and most notoriously, Captain R.M. Merik, who was nominated as First Citizen of the primitive culture on planet 892-IV. Both were in gross violation of the Prime Directive, and both ultimately paid for it – Merik with his very life.

“We are visitors, nothing more,” Garrett said, trying to assuage his fears as much as her own.

“We are on a mission of mercy for our fallen comrades,” Onovan added with his usual soothing casual confidence. The slightest whisper of thunder and a rising sea breeze drew all their attentions to a steadily darkening northern sky. Several more sharp arcs of lightning traced their way through the multifaceted cloudbanks. The old man drew in another broken, tearful breath, then stood suddenly rigid and came to attention as a single resonating tone sounded across the stone plaza. His countenance

changed almost instantly and Ras Tau'aman became once again First Lord of the Ascendant.

"I must take you now to audience with the Crown Empress," and he turned without further ado. Garrett recognized the immediate fear in the man as they marched now in unison towards the South Tower. This was revealing in and of itself. Though his belief structure may have been altered, he still feared her, this Crown Empress, and that could mean only one thing. She was a despot, in all possibility, a tyrant. She did not command respect, only fear, even in this, her most loyal of subjects. Valuable information if one wished to gain the upper hand.

Fear begets fear, which meant that to rule with fear, the Crown Empress herself must be afraid of something. Something from her own past that haunted her. For Rachel Garrett, the variables had changed once again. Fear inevitably leads to desperation and the crew of the *Ambassador* scattered throughout the city streets below were now in far more danger than Starfleet could've ever imagined. If this Crown Empress should feel threatened in any way, the slaughter of the innocents would begin. The men and women of the *Ambassador* and anyone who helped them would be herded up like sheep.

Garrett shuddered involuntarily, catching a sidewise glance from Onovan. This once delicate mission of First Contact had now become as fragile and tenuous as that spiderweb of broken glass that had been the captain's earlier vision of doom. She fought now against her own rising tide of fear. She felt so suddenly alone that she hesitated, catching another bewildered glance from Onovan. The first few large drops of the storm splattered against the stones and a quick clap of thunder sent the trio ducking at last inside the base portico of the South Tower.

"Tell me, Sir," Garrett probed, "what has been the Crown Empress's response to the sudden arrival of our injured comrades?" This time Ras himself hesitated ever so slightly, then continued on unabated, taking the first of many spiral steps up into the heights of the tower.

"All is as the Crown Empress has foreseen," he intoned in an obviously well practiced litany. "The Imperial Ministers were instructed to attend to the injured and treat them as any other loyal subjects to the Crown."

"How very benevolent of Her Majesty," Onovan offered, surprisingly not falling in step with his captain's tack. This puzzled her.

"You will find the Empress to be most gracious in all things." Again with the practiced litany; again laced with the finest stitches of fear. If it had not been for her heightened psi-awareness, Garrett would've most certainly missed it, so subtle were its threads. Oh, how she wished for Spencer Stadi by her side. Every quarter-turn on the spiral, they passed a torrential downpour out a narrow slit in the thick stone battlement. Muffled thunder

sounded like a deep bass drum. The dampness in the tower chilled her. She spoke again, testing the old man, testing Onovan.

“M’Lord, has the Ascendant Goddess offered any explanation of our origin?” Her use of the reverent term for the Empress caused Ras to stumble on the next step. Catching himself mid-flight and recovering almost immediately, he continued onwards in his unvarying march up the tower. Those subtle threads of fear became minute rivulets above his furrowed brow. He seemed to swallow hard before answering her. He had not forgotten his near blasphemous display out in the courtyard any more than she had.

“Her Majesty has informed us that you are... you are visitors... from a far off and foreign land, nothing more.”

“Her Majesty is most wise,” Onovan nodded, this time receiving the bewildered sidewise glance back from his captain, yet seemingly taking no notice of it. He continued along in step behind the old man almost as if in a trance. Again, the captain felt so suddenly alone that she recoiled in fear and hesitated, falling behind a pace or two. Her heightened psi-awareness began to sense something more was at work here. Something just beyond her reach and out of her control. This captain was not used to not being in control. “But surely, Sir,” she pressed, “you can sense that we are something more?” Right or wrong, the captain had taken a gamble and played the religious card. This time Ras Tau’aman stopped, just short of the upper landing, and stared at a heavy wooden door, then down to his feet. His fear was nearly palpable and this at long last seemed to arouse some suspicion in Onovan. The counselor turned to his captain with a somewhat vacant stare, as if he had just now become aware of his surroundings.

Ras spoke finally in quiet reverent tones. “The Ancient Book of Darkness tells us of many wondrous things, Your Grace.” He at once climbed the final steps and stood resolute on the high landing. His mind was closed, his fear evaporated. The transition was as startling as it was sudden. But Garrett had gained the wedge she needed. She looked Onovan squarely in the eyes and could see that he was with her now. This Book of Darkness was the key to understanding these people and their ways and they must get a look at it.

Her own fear now set aside, Rachel Garrett charged up the few remaining steps to stand beside the heavy old door. But fear is just the beginning of loneliness and discontent, and Rachel Garrett was about to face loneliness on an entirely new level.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALLEGHENY-CLASS RUNABOUT CANASERAGA ORBITAL RESCUE OPS THE PLANET ETHOS

“*Canaseraga* to *Kyushu*... this is the runabout *Canaseraga* calling the *Starship Kyushu*, do you read? *Kyushu*, you have fires and violent decompressions all along your ventral flight pod... do you copy?”

“Report, Lieutenant.” Still dripping wet from his ordeal within the sunken bowels of the *Ambassador*’s stardrive section, Lt. Commander Skyl emerged from the runabout’s aft compartment and took a quick visual survey out the expansive forward viewports. Out, and down slightly to the left, the *Starship Kyushu* was heeled over at an odd angle and trailing a cloud of smoky debris. Still farther off in the distance, the *Enterprise* too was listing heavily and was standing pretty much on end, nose down toward the planet. Lt. Castillo shook his head with frustration as Skyl sat down beside him.

“It’s not good, Sir. All four ships have sustained pretty heavy damage and interference from the explosion has cut off all ship-to-ship communication.”

“Then we will supply aid where it appears most needed, Lieutenant,” Skyl replied levelly.

“How is our new passenger?” Castillo asked, referring to Ensign Andy Dardanelle, formerly of the *Starship Ambassador*, and now its only confirmed survivor.

“The Ensign was unsettled, but is now resting in the aft compartment. Given time, he will... recover.” That briefest of pauses did not escape Castillo’s attention. A minor pause such as that often spoke volumes where the Vulcan people were concerned.

“And Doctor Po?” he ventured quietly. Always stoic, the Vulcan paused again, this too speaking volumes about the horrors he had just witnessed deep beneath the dark seas of Ethos.

“Another unfortunate victim of this calamity,” Skyl said at length. Other than an official report, Castillo knew that this was all he was likely to glean from the engineer regarding the mystery of events that had transpired in just the past few hours.

“Any report on Commander Batanides?” Skyl now asked, betraying no discernible hint of concern, but conveying it nonetheless.

“Nothing,” Castillo said flatly. A sudden alarm from the comm monitor broke their trance and directed their attention to the newest and most immediate crisis.

“The *Cumberland* has activated their Ship In Distress beacon,” Castillo blurted out. “Their warp core has been destabilized and they’re losing orbit.”

“Set course for the *Cumberland*, Lieutenant,” Skyl ordered, and almost instantly, the agile craft spun around and leapt forward on its new heading. Castillo’s brow furrowed into a deep frown as the Vulcan engineer programmed several rather strange commands into the flight computer. “Take us within tractor range and prepare to activate the warp engines.” “The tractor beam, Sir?” Castillo said incredulously. “I don’t understand. There’s no way we can tow...”

“Time is of the essence, Lieutenant,” Skyl stated flatly. “We must give the *Cumberland’s* crew sufficient time to abandon ship... with the proper calculations, a low-level warp field should reduce the vessel’s mass just long enough for us to hold it in orbit until evacuation is complete.”

Experience. Castillo quickly recognized the wisdom in experience. The Vulcan engineer had been working with starships since before the lieutenant had even been born. While Castillo had been concerned with saving the ship, Skyl had quickly recognized through experience that the *Cumberland* was doomed, and that the people aboard her must now take priority. It was another important lesson learned as the *Canaseraga* raced onwards towards this planet’s next unfortunate victim.

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High again above Betazed, Lt. Ian Troi stared out the window of his small office at the blackness of space with its spackling of stars. Within the hour, the monstrous space station would rotate just enough for the lush tropical world below to once again fill his view. He had spent the past few hours pouring over fleet formation charts and pulling from them a small taskforce to send to Ethos. Reports from the planet had been sketchy at best and had now suddenly stopped altogether, with no apparent explanation. It had given them all an uneasy feeling; none more so than Commodore Hanson himself.

Five starships; one lost, four now missing, with thousands of lives as yet unaccounted for. The commodore had demanded answers, but Ian had none to give. And now the startling news from Earth of the sudden death of the president had sent shockwaves coursing through the AI Betaz System. Their favorite native son: and now the people were demanding answers. In the modern medical era, the sudden and mysterious death of

someone so young and so prominent naturally drew immense amounts of scrutiny.

Betazed was simmering and ready to boil.

Even with the advanced culture of the Federation, political intrigue was still an ever-present art of statecraft; and as a politician, Kalomi Joran had his own enemies, at home, abroad, and beyond. The Legislative Assembly was in turmoil, and the Great House Consensus had convened a special session. The Betazed Defense Force had been placed on alert for the flood of off world mourners that were sure to come; not to mention the endless parade of official representatives from the hundreds of aligned worlds that would soon begin arriving in droves.

All this and many times more had to come through the Galatea Space Center. All this and many times more had to pass over the desk of Lt. Ian Troi, adjutant to Commodore J.P. Hanson. Whether he knew it or not, the lieutenant was perhaps the most powerful individual in this tiny corner of the vast Federation. Granted broad discretionary powers by his position alone, Ian Troi could change the very course of history with a simple thumbprint. Four more starships had been sent to Ethos. Three others had been issued full-stops and been ordered to standby. Six Corsair Carriers had been mobilized in orbit of Betazed. The stage had been set, and a fragile peace was about to be tested.

It was just another day at the office, and Ian Troi loved every minute of it.

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“Coward. Like all *Starfleet* you talk and you talk, but you have no *guramba*.” The surly Nausicaan stood nearly a half-meter taller than her friend, who alone stood another head taller than herself. Still, this did not stop him from stepping up, toe to toe, with the beast.

“What did you say?” Johnny retorted with a dumb look painted on his boyish face. Marta braced herself now for the fight that was sure to follow. At least this time the odds were evenly matched; and hey, she thought, the bigger they are, the harder they fall... right? She stole a glance towards Cory, who was moving now into a defensive position opposite.

“I said, *you* are a coward.” The Nausicaan sniffed at the air and stared down at the young cadet with indifference.

“That’s what I thought you said,” Johnny replied matter-of-factly. He made one half-

turn to the left to look Marta briefly in the eye, then swung back around violently, throwing his full weight into the Nausicaan’s midsection. Marta didn’t even know what hit her next as the second Nausicaan threw

himself upon her from behind. Her Starfleet training automatically kicking in, she spun and sent the oversized beast sprawling backwards with her first blow.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that Johnny was still coming out on top and that Cory too was holding his own with the third. But her diminutive stature proved her only weakness as her opponent came at her now with a vengeance. She fought the valiant fight, but was ultimately left dazed when the hulking monster picked her up and tossed her against the wall like a ragdoll. She sat helpless in a corner as Johnny fought now against two of the animals. His own hands full, Cory could not hope to assist him either.

With a monumental groan, Johnny threw one of the beasts over his shoulder and planted him for good on the floor before him. But then, to Marta's horror, the second came up from behind with a long, serrated blade and plunged it through Johnny's back. She struggled to her feet but fell back again at sight of the knife's bloody tip protruding out of her best friend's chest. Fighting a dizzying nausea, Marta forced herself to stand once more.

Johnny stared down at the knife point, then let out a queer sort of giggle before collapsing to the floor in a heap of lifelessness. "No," she whispered, and began to struggle against whoever was now holding her back. She began to fight harder against this new, unseen foe, and again she said no, only this time with much more forcefulness. But all her strength had seemingly left her, and she fought now in vain. She gasped back a sob, and this time screamed the word, but to no avail.

She opened her eyes and awoke to the face of a young girl with a freckled nose and braided hair. The girl looked down on her with a soft, comforting smile. Marta ceased her struggle and the girl released her instantly. There was no malice in those young brown eyes, but there was an undeniable sense of purpose hidden within them. Marta shuddered at this purpose, but too became immediately enamored with it. Those eyes were a force of nature not to be reckoned with. A force that swept along anything in its path.

"Whooo, whooo, whaaa..." Marta mouthed the words, but they did not come.

"I am Leilani Algethi, Holy One, and I have begun the crusade in your almighty name."

~ ~ ~ ~

Black and acrid smoke filled her lungs and caused her to cough spasmodically; almost uncontrollably. Nothing but blackness surrounded her as she clung to the floor in a vain attempt to gain just a single breath of

fresh air. Disoriented and alone, she could just now begin to feel the first sensations of heat, could just barely discern the faint flickering orange glow of the fire as it drew closer, and ever closer. Though barely seeing it, the crackling popping noise that it made betrayed its presence to her, nonetheless. In mere moments, she knew it would be upon her; and she had no place to run, no place to hide. The heat was growing in great waves, enveloping her, causing her skin to tingle. Her soft little hands went involuntarily to her face in a protective gesture that did little to ward off the suffocating heat and smoke. She could see actual flames now and got that first sensation that she was beginning to burn. There was surprisingly very little panic or fear, more like an acceptance. Strange thoughts for such a young girl. But her mother had always called her special; destined in some way to do great things. This stirred up some feeling in her, and as she began to smell the pungent odor of her own flesh and hair beginning to sizzle, she called out suddenly into the flames with a new acceptance: an acceptance of life.

"Mommy, Mommy, I'm here Mommy... Help me please!" the child in her cried out.

"Ensign Enyo," she heard someone call back, a young man, not her mother. Enyo was her name yes, but the Ensign portion of it took several long moments to process. "Ensign Enyo, Ma'am... Commander Stadi is unconscious. Ma'am, what are your orders?" Again, the young man's voice. It was the voice of one of the junior crewmembers filling in on the Bridge with her. *Okay, she thought, I'm on the Bridge of the Enterprise.* Her consciousness rebooted itself and she opened her eyes to a command center filled with the grey tinge of smoke and the smell of shorted out circuits and burned-out processors.

This was not the fire of her childhood; indeed, there was no fire at all, thankfully.

"Orders? Huh, wha...?" she sputtered incredulously.

"We don't know what to do, Ma'am... Commander Stadi is unconscious and we don't know what to do... Can you help us?" The fear in the voice of the young crewman was evident. These boys surrounding her were not officers; had been trained to take orders, not give them. For most, this was their first tour of duty, their first experience in deep space. And now, with their ship broken and their Bridge a smoldering mess, they were looking to her for guidance. For anything.

At first, she did not know what to do. Still feeling disoriented, and now, all the more so alone, she had no place to run, no place to hide. Strangely though, as back then, there was very little panic or fear. She experienced a renewed sense of acceptance, stronger than previously noted in certain aspects. It was now tempered with age, and a certain

amount of wisdom; leavened with the growth that comes natural to life; seasoned with maturity and hardened in the end with the finest training that Starfleet had to offer.

She knew now what she had to do. With their ship broken and their Bridge a smoldering mess, she had to bring some order to the chaos. She had to focus these young crewmembers onto a clear path and steer them out of danger. Rising now out of the grey smoke, Ensign Enyo of the *Starship Enterprise* took those few steps necessary to place her on the command level. And with fingertips resting ever so lightly on the armrest of the command chair, she called out suddenly with a new acceptance, an acceptance of life... "Petty Officer Parker, please take Ops... Sound Collision. Seal off all bulkheads, place damage control teams on standby, safe all engine systems, and prepare to vent drive plasma!"

~ ~ ~

"*Warning: warp core thermal overload... warp core breach in one minute, thirty seconds.*" The computer's incessant tones and warnings did little to assuage the urgency of the situation as the runabout *Canaseraga* continued to hold its tenuous grip on the *Starship Cumberland*. All but a few of the *Cumberland's* lifeboats had launched to safety; but as the two craft descended deeper into the atmosphere, time was fast running out for those few that yet remained. The starship's warp core too had spiked, and it was forming up to be one spectacular explosion. Lt. Richard Castillo just hoped he wouldn't be there to witness it firsthand.

"Cutting it a little close, aren't we?" he quipped to his partner, Commander Skyl, seated to his right. Still dripping wet, Skyl worked frantically with the computer to eek out every last bit of energy from the overtaxed engines. His brow deeply furrowed in concentration; the Vulcan betrayed barely a trace of concern.

"Adjust pitch plus two degrees, yaw to port five degrees," he said almost too nonchalantly. A Vulcan's almost fatalistic approach to life was nearly as unnerving to Castillo as the precarious position they were now in.

The computer issued several more threatening tones before speaking aloud in that classical female accent: "*Warning: thermal curtain failure, structural integrity compromised, warp core breach in sixty seconds.*"

"Greeaat," Castillo muttered as he made several more adjustments to the attitude of

the tiny craft. The great hulk of the *Cumberland* edged a few more inches away from doom for his determined efforts. The runabout began to shudder considerably as gravity took ever-increasing notice of the massive

starship in tow. Atmospheric drag began to lash out now too, tearing at the *Canaseraga's* torso like a great bear tearing at the bark of a tree.

"Anything I can do to help?" Ensign Andy Dardanelle seemed to almost smile as he emerged from the runabout's aft compartment. Like Skyl, he too was dripping wet and he made quite a caricature with his hair pulled back at a rakish angle, and a somewhat boyish grin painted on his neo-Vulcan features.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire," Castillo smirked. "Rumor has it you're pretty good with warp cores."

"This is some rescue," Andy gibed, sitting down at the aft science console. "By the looks of it, this just isn't my day." The computer toned out again, vying to be heard.

"Warning: neutrino surge detected, Cumberland warp core approaching critical mass. Recommend removal to safe distance..."

Then two more urgent tones... *"Warning: thermal curtain failure, structural integrity compromised, warp core breach in thirty seconds."*

"The final lifeboat is away," Skyl announced matter-of-factly. "It's been an honor to have served with you, Lieutenant."

"Oh no you don't," Castillo scoffed. "There's another starship coming in!"

"It's the *Galaxy!*" Andy shouted with a loud whoop. Castillo too let out a shout and clapped Skyl on the shoulder. The Vulcan for his part merely let out a deep sigh; but the corners of his lips did curl upward ever so slightly with the barest hint of a smile.

"Galaxy to Enterprise runabout... Prepare for immediate emergency transport."

The trio barely had a chance to rise before the beam took them and snatched them all to safety. Lt. Richard Castillo didn't get to watch his spectacular explosion after all, standing secure as he was in the safe confines of the *Starship Galaxy's* main transporter room. And as the sleek and silvery lines of this great vessel glided silently into a higher orbit, the *Cumberland* and the brave little *Canaseraga* tumbled together as one into the thickening atmosphere before being consumed at last by an otherworldly fire.

~ ~ ~ ~

She opened her eyes and awoke to the face of a young girl with a freckled nose and braided hair. The girl looked down on her with a soft and comforting smile. There was no malice in those young brown eyes, but there was an undeniable sense of purpose hidden within them. Marta

shuddered at this purpose but too became immediately enamored with it. Those eyes were a force of nature not to be reckoned with. A force that swept along anything in its path.

“Whooo, whooo, whaaa...” Marta mouthed the words, but they did not come.

“I am Leilani Algethi, Holy One, and I have begun the crusade in your almighty name.”

Marta looked past her now into the blinding light of a viredescent sky. There before her, and for all to behold, the heavens above erupted into an otherworldly fire that framed Leilani’s soft features in a silvery silhouette that quickly expanded outwards to form a majestic halo. Stunned beyond all belief, Marta merely lay there with mouth agape, unable to move, unable to speak, unable to breathe. In the presence of such divine magnificence, her spirit and soul were at once transformed. And as Leilani rose with arms outstretched and face uplifted skyward, Marta wept.

She had never felt such perfect peace and contentedness. From the center of this otherworldly glow, a heavenly host of angels began to radiate outwards and downwards, their fiery tails trailing long white streamers that coursed through the air with the softness of baby’s-breath. Hovering above her now like a cherub, this aura that was Leilani Algethi let out a soft, queer sort of laugh that was half-disbelief. Like a feather on a midsummer’s breeze, she moved to place both hands on a high railing.

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Marta struggled to rise to her feet, helped in the end by some unseen force to her left and to her right. Standing now at the rail beside Leilani, Marta could see that she stood upon the deck of a massive vessel surrounded by a topaz sea. Magnificent sails ballooned outwards with the force of a warm tropical breeze. Their bright and varied vermilion colours striking a certain majestic harmony with the cobalt blues and emerald greens of a sky resplendent with an ocean of snow-white puffy clouds. It was a paradise, an instant’s image of heaven.

“Behold, my people,” Leilani shouted, startling Marta with the force behind the words. Arms outstretched now to the blossoming starburst in the heavens, the girl continued.

“What more proof do you need that our cause is just? Even now, the angels of heaven walk among us... Many more yet descend from the heavens heralding the coming of the One True Goddess. And we *shall* be united, and we *shall* enter a new age. Let us not falter in this, our *almighty task!*”

Looking down now to the deck below, Marta could see for the first time a throng of hundreds. And as a great supersonic wave of thunder shook the very ship beneath them, the multitude all fell to their knees before

her. She could do nothing but grip the rail. A storm was coming, and this storm was Leilani Algethi.

~ ~ ~ ~

“Nooooo!” Lt. Sam Galloway screamed, as if all the horrors of the Bridge had been revisited upon him. He found himself immersed once more in total darkness, or so it seemed, and his mind, body, and soul would not accept it. Just moments ago, he had been perfectly content sitting in the bright sunshine on the outer hull of the shattered *Ambassador*. Granted, he was about to throw himself off a virtual cliff, but life out there was far better than life here inside this infernal darkness. Could it be that he had only been dreaming? Had this been just another one of those bizarre hallucinations? Maybe they had not crashed at all, maybe he would wake up and this would all just be over.

“Sam?” a girl said in the dim light. “Oh my God, Sam, is that really you?” He knew that voice, though the name escaped him. As his eyes slowly adjusted, he could see that he was standing in a transport arch aboard a runabout. Out the cabin windows it was total darkness, but there was no sign of the stars.

“S-S-Sally?” Sam said at last, more as a question to himself than anything. She was a chirpish little girl, sort of like a little bird. Andy had set him up on a date with her last week, but Sam had never really found the time for a follow up. As he stepped out of the arch, she unexpectedly leapt into his arms.

“Oh, Sam,” she exclaimed, “we figured everyone on the Bridge was probably dead!”

“They *are* all dead, Sally,” he said softly, but his melancholy was soon lost in her excitement. “Where the hell are we?” he asked, peeling her off one side of him and stooping to peer out the darkened windows.

“We’re still in the shuttlebay,” she explained. “We’ve been using the runabout’s transporters to beam the critically injured to the ground. There’s no other safe way off the rim... it’s a loong ways down,” she giggled.

“Believe me, I know,” Sam mused; again, half to himself. He was startled by another shape in the dim light of the cabin. Someone was sitting at the starboard control station. “Who?” he whispered and gestured uncertainly.

“Oh, sorry,” Sally giggled again. “Lieutenant Commander Seth... as near as we can

tell so far, he’s the seniormost officer.”

“I hereby relinquish that command to you, Sir,” Seth said suddenly in the darkness. Sam knew him too; the Vulcan served down in the stellar

sciences lab. They had coordinated several surveys together, though Sam wasn't quite sure if they'd ever actually met.

"Oh, no, Sir," Sam said, somewhat flustered. "You outrank me. The honor, if you wanna call it that, should be yours."

"Captain, I must insist," Seth said calmly. "You are a Senior Bridge Officer. Do not presuppose that I have an ego to bruise, Sir."

"Very well then," Sam finally acquiesced. Sally at last released him, then clapped her hands and fluttered about the small cabin before ultimately lighting upon the seat at the aft science station. She was cute, Sam had to admit, but a little too flighty and off-the-wall for his taste. He wondered now if the set-up had been just another one of Andy's rare and uncharacteristic jokes. With a wave of sadness, he realized he would never likely know. Letting out a deep sigh, the Acting Captain knew now he had a job to do and had better get at it. He moved to the front of the cabin and sat down beside Seth at the portside control station.

"Okay," he breathed, "what do we have?"

"All main and secondary power systems are offline, Sir. Rescue efforts have been hampered exceedingly by both the darkness and by Isolation Protocol. Nevertheless, we have confirmed reports of over 450 survivors, with more expected to be found in due time. Critical injuries are surprisingly minimal... these have been transported to the ground for treatment in local hospitals."

Sam nodded his head and glanced over the casualty lists. He then looked over at the Vulcan science officer. "Transport in this environment is pretty risky, Commander. Why didn't you blow the exterior hatches and make better use of the shuttles and runabouts?" "With all due respect, Sir," Seth answered matter-of-factly, "we have no way of controlling where the hatch covers will land once jettisoned."

"Ah-ha, ya got a point there," Sam mused. He thought of his own perilous passage just a short time ago between those dangerous hatches, then he thought of the hundreds of people that were presently milling around out there on the hull. They would surely have been crushed to death by those very same hatch covers. Seth had just saved them all from Sam's own shortsightedness, and he cursed himself again for his stupidity. He had never striven to be in command, had never asked to be placed in a position of authority; yet here he was, Acting Captain. He certainly didn't deserve it, he certainly didn't want it, and was only just now beginning to realize just how inadequate he was to the task.

"Sam," Sally called, "er, I mean, *Captain*," she giggled. "Damage Control Teams have reached Deck Twelve, Sir, and... oh my God..." she paused, and this time the giggle was gone. Sam and Seth both swiveled to

face her and found her with one hand pressed to the comm device in her ear, and the other pressed to her mouth holding back tears.

“Sally,” Sam whispered, “my God, what is it?”

“They believe, Sir,” she paused again. “They believe, Sir, that Decks 13, 14, and 15 have been completely compressed by the impact... They cannot gain entry, and do not expect any survivors below that level.”

Sam’s heart sank. Though smaller in circumference than the other decks, they would have still contained some people. They may never know how many, and their remains would certainly never be identified. When they’d hit the ground sooo hard, Sam had never given any thought to these people. He realized while they were being crushed to oblivion, he was high up above in the relative safety of the Bridge clinging on for his own dear life and giving little thought to anyone else’s. Yes, he had never asked to be in command. He had never asked to be given all this weight and responsibility. Yet, duty and honor called for it now. Starfleet duty and Starfleet honor.

Bolstered up by a sudden newfound sense of security, he resolved that it was time for him to take command in every sense; both of his insecurities and his responsibilities. He would not do so lightly, but humbly and out of honor for those who had fallen here on this day. For Andy and for Allison, for that poor kid Hendricks, and even for Captain Lord.

These and all the others were the torch that would be carried from this day forward by one Captain Sam Halloway, commanding officer of the once and forever *Starship Ambassador*.

~ ~ ~ ~

The sleek and silvery craft was so new that it didn’t even have a name yet. More advanced than any shuttle, the designers and engineers that worked on her had given it a new title, a *runabout*. Fast, maneuverable, and fairly well armed for its size, this state-of-the-art little number had been drafted to revolutionize often cramped and monotonous shuttle-type travel. A specially developed ultra-compact warp core made it go faster and farther than anything seen before, and an expanded aft section made the ride all that more comfortable.

“Zora, begin warp core auto-start sequence.”

“I have a really bad feeling about this,” she replied. “If Commodore Hawk catches us down here...”

“It’s two o’clock in the fricken morning,” Ensign Excalibur Jones scoffed from behind the two pilots. He was strapped into a temporary jump seat attached to the rear wall of the cabin. Next to him, a partially finished science console displayed in startling detail just where exactly ‘down here’ was. Deep underground and far beneath the Moon’s Copernicus Shipyards,

this hangar had been designed for both secrecy, and to contain any possible 'miscalculations' that may occur throughout the design process. Extending upwards for nearly a half kilometer above them, a cylindrical shaft punched its way through solid bedrock to the surface.

"Door's still open, Zor," Lt. Spencer Stadi said with a smile. Seated to his right, she smirked back and pressed a single button on her console. With a short whoosh and a clunk, the exterior cabin door closed and locked.

Their ears popped as the cabin pressure ramped up from Lunar to Earth standard. With golden brown eyes glimmering at the heart of a soft, round Latino face, Zora McKnight gazed back into her boyfriend's round ebony eyes. "This was my idea, I guess," she said with a smoldering stare.

"Awwl-right, let's rock and roll," X said from the back seat, grinning from ear to ear. "I can't wait to see the looks on our parents faces when they get wind of this little caper at graduation!" His dimpled smile sat upon pudgy cheeks, and his huge blue eyes were framed behind old-style black glasses complete with their heavy lenses. Zora and Spencer both knew that if they hadn't strapped him into the jump seat, he would have been flitting all over the cabin in a sort of nervous, excited little dance.

"This little caper ain't going anywhere unless you've fooled the security network like you were supposed to," Zora scolded him.

"Warp core online, warp field *firming* up," Spencer said, casting Zora a withering glance to which she merely rolled her golden eyes. "Our parents," he chuckled, "I can't wait to see the look on Hawk's face tomorrow morning when he wakes up to find his baby's been stolen right out of the cradle while he slept."

The couple laughed while Excalibur continued to jiggle and shake within the confines of the jump seat. Senior pranks dated back to antiquity, but it got harder every year to top previous contestants. Last year, a group of five Academy graduates reversed the rotation of Earth's Spacedock. A harmless enough prank to be sure, if it hadn't been for a misaligned gyro that sent every single piece of furniture on the massive station skidding across the floor. Captain Kenicki of the *Starship Hathaway*, docked at the time, reportedly fell out of bed the sudden change in direction was so severe.

This prank too, was soon to go wrong. Several warning alarms shook them from their laughter.

"The warp core is destabilizing!" X shouted from the aft science console. Suddenly dead serious, his fat fingers were frantically punching buttons on the half-finished control surface.

"Come on X, that's not funny," Zora said crossly, but with a growing measure of scarcely concealed alarm.

"No, I'm dead serious, we've got a f---ing problem!"

“Shit,” Spencer exhaled with a growl. “There’s an imbalance in the intermix ratio.”

“What?!” Zora shuddered. “Those knuckle-draggers in the orange suits were supposed to fix that last week!”

“Oh, man,” X said with a whimper, “we gotta shut it down.”

“Dammit, injectors are locked in cycle.” Spencer turned now to Zora. Despite technically being her senior officer, he was still relying on his girlfriend for direction, at a loss for what to do next. He had been promoted to Junior Lieutenant on a whim really, for what had been a truly minor and unremarkable accomplishment. He often suspected, and too resented, that the early promotion had been based more on the fact that he was Betazoid royalty than on any actual achievement.

“My *mother is going to have a cow*,” Zora seethed. “We have to initiate Action Five and dump the core once we’re in orbit. Damn,” she whispered, biting her lower lip.

“But the whole f---ing solar system is going to see that!” X shouted with a whiney mixture of anger and fear.

“Too late for that,” Zora countered. “The Shipyard has gone on alert; we have to go now!” She turned at once to Spencer, who sat with finger poised above a flashing red button. “Do it,” she hissed.

“Initiating Action Five in five... four... three... two... one!”

With a sudden explosion of energy, the platform on which the runabout was sitting rocketed upwards at a phenomenal speed. Crushed into their seats with a force of nearly 8g’s, they all screamed involuntarily as they were squeezed to the point of near unconsciousness. With a loud metallic bang, the platform stopped abruptly at the top of the shaft, launching the runabout far out into the dark orbital abyss miles above the Lunar surface. Disorientated, and now weightless, the trio found themselves nearly helpless.

“*Warning:*” the rudimentary computer gurgled, “*warp core overload in ten seconds.*” “Computer,” Zora shouted, “eject the core! Authorization McKnight-beta-one-nine-zero!”

Several calm and quiet tones were followed by a loud thump and a final, violent shaking of the entire cabin. And then all was quiet once more, save for an ultra-bright flash of light somewhere in the distance far above. It was several long moments before any of them even dared to breathe. Even Excalibur Jones remained uncharacteristically silent. The runabout rotated just enough to bring the Lunar surface and the Copernicus Shipyards into view. No doubt, everyone was awake now. At long last, it was Junior Lieutenant Spencer Stadi that finally broke the silence.

“I will not lie,” he whispered quietly to Zora.

“Oh yes you will,” she whispered back, neither of them willing to look the other in the eye. “There’s a starship approaching,” she said with a quiet sigh. “They’re hailing us...”

“This is the Starship Galaxy calling the Starship Enterprise... do you read? Galaxy to Enterprise, please come in...”

Commander Spencer Stadi was only vaguely aware of the voice filtering in through the static. Still lying on his back on the Bridge of the *Enterprise*, eyes closed, he was also only vaguely aware that the blue Andorian girl, Ensign Enyo, knelt on the floor beside him, gently pressing his forehead with a damp towel. But the voice filtering in through the static did begin to capture his attention. That voice... Zora’s voice; lost for so many years. He struggled now to open his eyes, struggled between the realities of his past, his present, his future. Where did the Andorian girl go?

“This is Ensign Enyo in command of the *Enterprise*, do you read us? Our viewscreen is offline.” Her voice was timid, almost desperate.

“Ensign, I am Captain Zora McKnight of the Starship Galaxy. Where are your senior officers? Do you require assistance?”

“Zora?” Spencer Stadi wasn’t quite sure if he’d said that out loud or not, but he was standing now, just behind Enyo, and leaning quite uncertainly against the command chair.

“Spencer? Oh my God, is that really you?”

“Zora, my Darling, oh how I’ve missed you,” he almost whimpered, still not yet quite aware of his surroundings, still not yet quite ready to let go of the past.

“Commander Stadi, Sir!” Enyo announced, to the point of scolding, shocking him almost instantly back to this reality.

“Enyo, bless you child.” He looked briefly down at her blue cherub-like face, then back up to the speakers embedded in the Bridge’s dome. “Zora, sorry love, but things are a mess down here and I’ve got some work to do.”

“Understood,” Captain McKnight said somewhat curtly. *“Galaxy out.”*

“I feel like my whole body’s been squeezed in a vice,” he said to Enyo, who now had her arms wrapped around him and was slowly helping him ease into the command chair. “Congratulations, Ensign, you’ve just been promoted to First Officer. Status report?”

“Wouldn’t that be demoted, Sir,” she replied with a wry smile, “down from Acting-Captain?” He returned her smile warmly. What a remarkable transformation, he thought, from the timid young girl that had stood quivering next to Dr. Po less than twenty-four hours ago. She would go far, this one, he swiftly concluded as she moved with ease past the helm console to the Auxiliary Control Pedestal at the front of the Bridge. He

raised his eyebrows in surprise when she began to give him reports on Collision status.

“Wait,” Stadi interrupted, “you sounded Collision?”

“Uh, yes, Sir” she answered, her timid voice now returning. “I can cancel if you don’t...”

“That’s brilliant, Ensign,” he replied. “You brought order to the chaos. Gave every single person on this ship a job to do with the pronouncement of a single word. Brilliant!

Please... continue.”

Her blue skin flashing now to near fluorescence, it took her several long moments to continue. “As I was saying, Sir, we have been coming down off Collision in stages. Almost all departments are now reporting Normal status, but Engineering is still having trouble with the port-forward Reaction Control Thruster. That’s what’s causing us to list, with a negative pitch and a five-degree rotational yaw to starboard. Commander Skyl is now aboard the

Galaxy, Sir, I think this requires his expertise.”

“Huh?” Feeling mostly confused and totally out of his element, Commander Spencer

Stadi stared now at this young Ensign with mouth somewhat agape. “At your discretion, Ensign,” he finally replied. “You clearly have things under control, and I clearly need a debriefing. Before the explosion though, I asked you to do some research for me. What were your findings?”

“My apologies, Commander,” she answered demurely. “I haven’t had a chance to write a formal...”

He laughed at her now and raised both hands, palms outward in supplication. “It’s okay,” he chuckled, “just the basics.”

“Well,” she smiled nervously, “it’s as you feared, Sir. The crew of the *Ambassador*, including the captain, did report in their logs as to having strange visions. Some memory, some almost clairvoyant, many vivid and almost realistic. Like us, they began having these, shall we say, hallucinations when they arrived in orbit. I’ve yet to find any direct link to the crash, but conceivably, Sir, it would only take one person to bring down an entire starship.”

“Thank you, Ensign,” Stadi said, nodding, and releasing her to go back to her extraordinary work. His dark eyes focusing on seemingly nothing, the commander couldn’t help but let his thoughts wander once more. His telepathic mind could easily sense with keen awareness all those souls hard at work around him. He could sense the rest of the crew, working together, slowly beginning to mesh into a single cohesive unit. He could even sense on a much deeper level, Zora McKnight. He knew she was out

there now too, close by. She still loved him, and he supposed, he still loved her too.

But he could still sense that something more. Something deeper. Something almost sinister in nature, and he couldn't quite wrap his mind around this. Something was out there, and it was beginning to have an effect on them all, even Zora. Yes, he could sense this too. They were all in grave danger here. The peril facing the *Enterprise* now faced the *Galaxy* as well. Zora was in danger. He could not escape this. The stage had already been set for them. A fragile peace was about to be tested. And quite without knowing, they could all quite easily plunge headlong into the abyss.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SOUTH TOWER OF THE PALLADIUM PRIVATE APARTMENTS OF THE CROWN EMPRESS EPHEMERIS CITY, ETHOS

Despite the warm tropical environment, the dark South Tower was damp and cold. Outside, the fierce tropical storm still raged, pelting the stone battlement with wind-whipped sheets of water. Every so often, the slate floor beneath her feet would shudder slightly as another deep rumble of thunder exhausted itself from near, too far off in the distance. She stood now on the upper landing at the head of a spiral staircase that wound its way back down behind her: her only escape. Beside her, Onovan, her chief counsellor and confidant. Before her, Ras Tau'aman, First Lord of the Ascendant; and beyond him, beyond that heavy wooden door, *she* waited.

For Captain Rachel Garrett, it had been easy to push her fear aside; it was in her training, it was in every Starfleet officer's training when facing the unknown. But now, standing before that door, the fear surged forward again and struck her like a mallet. Again, she felt alone and longed to have Spencer Stadi by her side. His comforting presence within her mind, his ability to reason through the unreasonable. Unseemly perhaps for a captain and first officer to share such a close bond, but it had developed over the course of twenty years, quite without intention on the part of either.

But she was cut off from him now, both physically and mentally. She would have to face her fear alone. The captain's heightened psi-awareness continued to sense something more was at work here. Something deeper, something almost sinister in nature. The cool damp air caused her skin to dimple, caused the hairs on her neck to stand on end. She could sense an almost otherworldly force beyond her reach and out of her control. This captain was not used to not being in control.

She marveled at how this Ras Tau'aman, this First Lord of the Ascendant, had so effectively, and so completely, pushed his own fear aside. It was sort of fear of fear itself that drove him, she concluded. She could sense a certain fear in Onovan too, but it was a fear of a different sort. A haunting from his long and distant past. The Borg he had said in the runabout. Even the name carried ominous overtones. Almost like a whispering of things yet to come. An unstoppable force beyond all reckoning and all reasoning. She shuddered as Ras shoved the heavy door open with a metallic clank and a deep creak. Without delay, he marched forward, pulling Garrett and Onovan along in his wake. Beyond him, an

entrance portico to the chambers was surprisingly light and airy. Outside, the storm had stopped as suddenly as it had started. Great beams of sunlight now flooded the tower with light giving the room before her an almost mystical quality. It was almost as if everything were slightly blurred with an enchantment of the surreal. A single tear rolled slowly down the captain's cheek.

The Empress sat at a desk, her back to the door, her posture straight as an arrow. Her milky silhouette could just barely be seen through the thin muslin draperies that always kept her hidden from the entrance portico. This, and her massive white flowing gown only added to the near mystical quality of the chamber with its great vaulted ceiling and massive wooden beams. The room was absolutely filled with light; pouring in from a great domed skylight and from a bank of overlarge windows that almost entirely circumscribed the tower's bulbous pinnacle.

Dropping with some effort to his knees, Ras settled back on his haunches and drew in a deep breath. When he finally spoke, it was with a deep and solemn reverence.

"I have brought you the visitors, by your command, Your Majesty."

"You may proceed," she said quietly, her voice betraying the unmistakable timbre of youth. She did not stir from her writing.

He rose now, and in a loud clear voice, startled the silence. "M'Lord, M'Lady," he gestured and bowed, "I present to you Her Most Royal Majesty, the Ascendant Goddess Ethereal, Crown Empress and Sovereign of the Peoples of a United Ethos."

He remained bowed to them, and for their part, Garrett and Onovan bowed in unison to the seemingly disinterested Crown Empress. The captain thought it odd that they had not been introduced by name, as would be customary in most cultures, Terran or otherwise. The seemed disinterest of this, this child, perhaps served as its own explanation to the indifference. The indifference of a child merely represents a mind untroubled by the disjointed affairs of a world created by adults.

"Do not mistake disinterest for indifference, Captain," the Empress said suddenly. "I am not indifferent to the plight of my people, nor to the plight of your own. And *dare not* mistake me for a child, or face the consequences of my interest over my disinterest." The captain shuddered, shaken right to the core. Here, here was the unseen force she had sensed, even from orbit! But what sort of sinister being was she? Perhaps this mysterious

Book of Darkness could shed some...

"Ras," the Empress spoke. "Take the dark man below and show him that dark thing in which she seeks. The Captain shall remain with me."

“By Your Majesty’s command.” Ras bowed and backed towards the door, pulling Onovan along with him as if by some unseen force. Garrett was struck dumb with a palpable mixture of fear and awe. *No, please don’t leave me alone with her*, she wanted to shout; but the words, the very thoughts, would not come. A chill ran up her spine and terminated in her skull. She watched them both go, heard the massive door clank shut with a certain finality that pressed in on her like a vice.

“Now, now, my fair Captain,” Ethereal said reproachfully, “fear is just the beginning of loneliness and discontent.”

“H-h-h-how do you...”

“You forget that I am a Goddess as well as an Empress, Captain.” Such force and such power coming from the voice of a child was all-the-more-so unnerving as than if it had come down directly from heaven itself. Garrett struggled to get control of her senses. She was a Starfleet Captain, God Dammit. She had encountered hundreds of seemingly omnipotent beings in her travels. And the explanation for their powers had almost always proved to be the most simplest. Technological trickery, the oppression of the powerful over the meek, mental conditioning, the full gambit; she’d seen it all.

Pulling her uniform into place and snapping to attention, she spoke. “I am Captain Rachel Garrett of the *Star...*”

“...*ship Enterprise*. Oh, yes,” she laughed, “I know all there is to know about you, Captain. Your childhood in the forests of New York. Those awkward Academy days in San Francisco. Your first assignments in deep space. The fear...” she laughed again, her back still turned; and still she wrote.

“Deep space?” Garrett said somewhat incredulously. “The *Starship Enterprise*?” The clues were beginning to form in her head. This child, this being, whatever she was, must be from offworld.

“It surprises you that I should know what a starship is? You continue to ignore that I am an Ascendant Goddess, Captain. It’s all there in your little head. The Engineer without passion, afraid of his own technology. The Commander Royal who *lied* and will never be captain. The Lieutenant, trapped by the past and afraid of the future. The Counselor, who turned and ran while his society fell to ruin. The petite Martian, lone survivor, yet sanest of them all... And then there’s you, Captain. Bearer of dark secrets, afraid of the dark space between the stars, afraid in the end to be *alone*.” At last, she set down her quill and stopped writing.

“Who are you?” Garrett demanded. She strode forward and flung open the draperies, her rashness fueled by anger; her anger fueled by fear. She stopped up short as the Empress slowly rose and turned. She was indeed a child, perhaps twelve, no more. The magnificent white gown

surrounded her with an almost ethereal glow as the sunlight poured down over her. On her head, a wig, or perhaps even her own hair, was piled high; and intricately interwoven within it, a small silver birdcage served host to a tiny colourful bird.

But of all these things, the most astonishing were her eyes. Deep colourless eyes, irises black as pitch. Eyes such as these were only known to exist on one world, a world of telepaths.

Betazed.

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As Onovan and Ras stepped out into the sunlight, the heat and humidity were staggering. Unused to this type of environment, Onovan began to sweat almost immediately while Ras, for his part, seemed largely unaffected. The vast stone plaza stretched out before them and showed only the slightest remnants of the torrential downpour of just moments ago. The twin suns overhead had quickly baked away the water, and in so doing made the air oppressive, almost tangible.

Onovan raised a dark hand to shield his eyes from the glare. They walked now towards the leftmost tower; the one Ras had identified as the Western or Antiquity Tower. It housed many of Ethos's ancient treasures, including the sought after Book of Darkness. The North Tower, he explained, housed his personal apartments and private offices. He gestured then to the right and slightly behind them in the direction of the runabout. It was clear by the gaping hole in the stonework that the demolition done by the *Ambassador* had been most effective.

"All that remains of the Eastern, or Eternity Tower, is piled in the streets below," he said somewhat matter-of-factly.

"My word," Onovan whispered. "And casualties?"

"Fortunately," Ras sighed, "it was nearly full—Opposition and the Liaison Office was closed for the twilight. Not so lucky were the victims in the city below. The Ministry of Aldermen has been destroyed as well, and the resulting chaos has made a death count impossible."

"We *are* here to help, you understand... your Empress understands this, right?"

It was here that Ras Tau'aman paused. "But fear not," he said at last, softly, "for at that critical hour when all hope seems lost, many angels shall descend from the heavens heralding the coming of the One True Goddess, a savior."

Onovan merely stared at him, at a loss for words.

"Come," Ras said to him finally, gesturing. "I have much to show you."

Onovan moved forward slowly, and with some degree of trepidation, to follow this unusual man into the damp and cold darkness of the Antiquity Tower, keeper of many secrets.

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Nestled in the center of the capital city on Betazed, stood the two of the great edifices of democratic rule. Shaped like great grey mushrooms, not unlike the spacedock far overhead, each held a branch of the planetary government. One of the people... and one, of royalty. The Legislative Assembly was quick, it was modern, and it was relatively young in a society that dated back to antiquity. They had held on to their tenuous grasp of government for a mere seventy-three years. The Great House Consensus only barely tolerated this so-called 'mob rule' and still threatened occasionally to have it dissolved.

The Great House Consensus: representing the five royal families that ruled the five great continents of Betazed. Cataria, Galatea, Adamathea, Callirhoea, and this, their capital, Hestia. Their traditions had lasted since before the record of time. The gowns, the pageantry, and above all, the massive wigs with their noisy, rakish little birds. And that was just the women. The men wore ostentatious floor length robes; and their own hats, strapped under their chins, rivaled even the wigs in their pretentiousness.

But none of this was allowed in the great Consensus chamber. In fact, no clothing at all was allowed within the chamber. This tradition too dated back to antiquity. In a race of full telepaths, where very little could be hidden, the nudity embraced a cultural awareness that indeed, *nothing* could be hidden. It was in this chamber that Ambassador Sarek had arrived so many years ago, also in the nude, to convince these people to join the Federation. They were now one of its most powerful and influential members.

"President Joran is *DEAD*. We must demand answers, we must demand retribution!" This from Tillis Andros of the Third House of Adamathea. He spoke to a chamber filled to capacity with couriers, clerks, and other auspicious members of the royal families. The fact that he spoke aloud at all was also ancient tradition under the premise that no thought could gain substance without physical form. And true to the spoken word, the room fairly erupted into a chorus of magnificent noise.

"Order... Order!" Hester Ghazali of the First House shouted.

"What form of retribution would you have us undertake, Tillis? An invasion of Earth perhaps?" Luther Stadi said this with a light chuckle and a casual smile. Younger brother to Commander Spencer Stadi, he was

thought by many to be too young, too capricious. But Galatea was the largest and the richest continent, and when he spoke, people listened. Especially the young and capricious Legislative Assembly, which he often frequented like some sort of brothel.

“*Yensid yortlaw,*” Andros shouted across the vast chamber, shaking his fist. Luther chuckled again. He could always bring out the ancient Adamathean in his boisterous colleague.

“Gentlemen, please,” Ghazali said, exasperated.

“If I may?” Lwaxana Troi queried the chair. Her beauty and her exceptional telepathic prowess were renown all the world over, even here. When she spoke, *everyone* listened. Her marriage to a human had been nearly as scandalous as Spencer Stadi’s own defection to Starfleet Academy. But her skill at oratory and her unrivaled beauty had turned all to her favor; even the tempestuous Tillis Andros. Her unfettered forwardness was considered to be equally as legendary.

Her naked form was thin and supple. Her skin soft and tight. She faced the predominantly male group with ample but firm breasts, with no predilection whatsoever toward vanity. Her voice rang across the chamber as clear and as true as a church bell on a frosty winter morn. She no doubt held their attention.

“Now is not the time for brashness, nor for levity.” Her bottomless ebony eyes cast a withering stare in the direction of the two offending parties in question. “Our native son is dead; Starfleet has begun its investigation. We can take no action until a conclusion is thus reached. Our efforts would be better focused at home. My husband has mobilized our fleet. It is *we* that shall be invaded by a force of perhaps millions of off world mourners. We should focus our attention on *that*.

“There can be no peace on Betazed until *all* her children have come home.”

~ ~ ~ ~

“Okay son, let’s hear what we got so far.” Commodore J.P. Hanson had sort of a gruff sounding voice that likened him to anyone’s grandfather. His receding hairline was all the more pronounced by graying hair that was combed back tight against his scalp. Yet his

gruff image was softened by steady blue eyes and a warm smile. He was relaxed, but if pressed, could be fierce. In command of the massive Galatea Space Center at the very heart of the Tenth Fleet, his eventual promotion to admiral was almost a given.

"I currently have five starships in orbit of Ethos, sir, and a sixth - the *Queen Anne* - has just arrived." Lt. Troi fumbled through several padds, juggling through an entire week's worth of paperwork.

"Well, let's have it boy," Hanson clipped brusquely. He was tired. He did not sleep well anymore, and this business with Ethos had left him dyspeptic. He sat wanly slumped at his desk as Betazed slowly loomed into view out his window.

"Uh, yes, sorry sir," Ian half mumbled to himself. "Here it is. Both the *Dolphin* and the *Uluru* are enroute to rendezvous with *Starfleet One*..."

"Dammit man," Hanson sighed. "Has anybody out there been able to establish communication? I need to know what the hell's going on dammit."

Ian again shuffled through his armful of padds. Inwardly, it made him chuckle to keep the old man on the verge of frustration. He could just picture the commodore standing in the street in anyone's hometown shaking a cane at the passing traffic. Hanson slumped deeper into his chair and cradled his advancing forehead in his trembling left hand.

"The *Queen Anne* has not yet reported back, sir," Ian smiled. "What little communication we did have stopped abruptly several hours ago."

"Balls," said the commodore, "if I had two I'd be King. Tell the *Melbourne* to make ready for departure. We'll give the *Queen Anne* another hour, then we'll go find out for ourselves." Hanson merely huffed as his young adjutant drolly pulled the appropriate padd from his stack and immediately applied his thumbprint to the command.

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"Status report, Ensign..." Commander Spencer Stadi smiled inwardly as the young Andorian girl strolled casually now around the Bridge, taking in each station in turn. Out the main viewscreen he could see that all of the Starfleet vessels were in perfect formation now. All of the lifeboats from the *Cumberland* had been retrieved, and even the *Kyushu* had managed to get her fires out and assume a stable orbit alongside her comrades. Yet, he tried to mask his growing concern that they had not yet heard from Captain Garrett or Onovan on the ground. And indeed, there remained as yet no sign of Marta Batanides or her wayward runabout either.

"Right as rain, sir," Enyo called out with a smile. "All departments report Normal status, and," she held up her padd, "communications to the outside world are beginning to clear."

“Well done,” Stadi replied, shifting somewhat uncomfortably in the command chair. He still ached from the jarring impact of the explosion; but duty preceded even this.

“Commander,” a very young-looking petty officer called out from Ops. “Another starship has entered the system, sir, it’s the *Queen Anne*.”

“It’s starting to get a little crowded,” Stadi sang quietly, staring out the viewscreen as the ship just barely came into view.

“They are flashing an urgent message to all ships, sir.”

“Well then, by all means, let’s hear it.” Stadi felt almost giddy, his telepathic paracortex flooded with the thrill and the excitement of the youth that surrounded him. It was refreshing, and really, almost astonishing that these young students had been so well trained as to assume these all-too-important roles that were now their own. It filled him with pride to be a member of such a proud organization; all-the-more-so, an organization dedicated to peace and to exploration.

“Message reads: PRESIDENT KALOMI JORAN IS DEAD. MASSIVE FUNERAL PLANNED AT BETAZED. VICE PRESIDENT AUSTIN KELLEY TO BE SWORN IN AS PRESIDENT ABOARD

*STARFLEET ONE AT ETHOS. ALL SHIPS OF THE LINE ARE HEREBY ORDERED TO COME TO A FULL-STOP FOR ONE STANDARD HOUR BEGINNING AT TIME INDEX 1200 ON STARDATE 16365. SIGNED: FLEET ADMIRAL XAVIER HAWK - CHIEF OF STARFLEET COMMAND.*”

No one on the Bridge said a word for several long minutes. The silence - almost deafening. President Joran had been very popular throughout the Federation, especially among the younger generation. His policies had helped the Golden Age truly glitter. His style of dress had transformed the fashion industry on dozens of worlds. Families gathered, villages gathered, entire planets gathered to hear his speeches broadcast over subspace. When he spoke, people couldn’t help but listen; from small crowds to large stadiums, they listened. His easy style and warmth reinvigorated the presidency and brought Betazed to the forefront of art and culture.

Yes, they listened. They listened because he listened. And now that he had fallen silent, Spencer Stadi trembled. He remembered a quote his captain had once used; a science fiction author named Frank Herbert:

“Out of chaos comes civil war.”

~ ~ ~ ~

“Surprised to see me, Captain?” The Empress Ethereal stood before her now in full Betazoid regalia. The extravagant white flowing gown, awash with pure sunlight. The fanciful wig, piled high, replete with its intricately woven silver cage. The colourful little bird fluttering and chirping wildly now. And those eyes, those haunting dark eyes. Black and bottomless, with no sign nor hint of remorse, or of love, or of anything that was good and pure in the universe. Eyes that looked back at her with an age many times twelve. This was no child, despite her outward appearance.

“But how in the world,” Garrett stammered, stepping back towards the muslin draperies.

“An accident of nature, nothing more, I assure you,” Ethereal said flippantly, with a toss of her tiny, gloved hand.

“An accident of nature?!” the captain shot back incredulously. “But who are you, why are you here?”

“We all have our dark secrets to hide, Captain. Even you...” And then, quite without knowing, Rachel Garrett found herself transported into her own past. She was twelve again, on Earth, in the Letchworth State Park region of the great forests of New York.

She sat in her grandfather’s study now, behind his ancient wooden schoolteacher’s desk, surrounded by his many great antiques. Her feet dangled and she swung them in a nervous rhythm that kept time with the sharp tic of a golden pendulum. With the metallic sound of loose springs, the clock struck ten, startling her. She slowly counted out the digits, then the room became eerily silent once more. Out the window beside her it was pitch dark. Rain splattered against the darkened glass and made that unique plinking sound that only rain on glass makes.

Rachel stared at the rivulets that ran downward in long cold streaks. Impulsively, she jumped up and her fingertips began to trace each one’s course down the brittle pane. Her soft face fraught with fear, her brown shimmering eyes full of tears, she listened. If she strained, she could just barely hear the shouting, the calling of his name. Occasionally, she could catch a glimpse of a flashlight dancing wildly about in the naked trees.

An early thaw and heavy rains had pushed the icy river to its breaking point. Shattered bits of tree trunk and huge blocks of ice were now choking on the submerged arches of the ancient concrete bridge just upriver. Threatening to breach this barrier by midmorning tomorrow, the usually placid Genesee had not reached such a frenzied state in over three hundred years.

That’s why they had been warned to stay away.

Hearing clattering footsteps in the hall downstairs, Rachel quickly dried her eyes, then slid back into the tall chair behind the desk. Her grandfather’s beloved desk. Oh, how he loved to tell her stories of the

ancient days of steam trains, and buggies, and canals along the river. The days of 'savage' Indians paddling canoes downriver with their captive little 'white' children. He'd probably even told her a tale or two about the Great Flood of '72.

With dread, she heard a series of footsteps coming up the stairs, then down the hall. Despite the forewarning, she still jumped as her mother charged through the partially opened door. The poor woman was soaked from head to toe, and pale as a ghost. Her long dark hair was tangled, her face scratched from her flight through the underbrush. Her eyes stared at Rachel with a hollowness that bored into the girl's soul. This woman was staring death in the face, and it was not her own.

"Baby," she said, crossing the room. The word was a mixture of fear, pleading, and panic. She swiveled the chair, then crouched and folded her arms across her daughter's small lap.

"Did you and your brother go by the river today, Baby?" Rachel looked nervously away from those haunted eyes and into the warm face of her beloved grandfather as he slipped quietly into the room. He, too, was drenched from the frigid rain. His look, though reassuring, had that same hollowness, that same look of desperation.

"Rachel," her mother shook her. "Look at me, Baby. Did you and your brother go down by the river today?" This time with a little more urgency, tinged with anger.

"No, Mama, I swear," she said meekly.

"Are you sure? Baby, please..." Rachel watched as her mother began to come apart right before her eyes. Scared, she struggled to her feet, the chair rolling away behind her. "Please, Baby, please..." her mother pleaded and began to sob. Both frightened and overwhelmed by her terrible secret, Rachel twisted away from her mother and tried to make a run for her grandfather but tripped instead on an ancient flat-iron resting at her feet. "No, Mama!" she shouted as she fell headlong into the chair, cracking her nose against its wooden armrest.

Captain Rachel Garrett staggered backwards and away from the haunting stare of the Empress Ethereal. She cupped a hand to her nose, still feeling the haunting pain of her fall, and her palm came away with blood. Her mind let out a horrified scream, but her lungs did not respond. Without breath, without sound, she lurched back against the muslin draperies. Clinging to them as a child would cling to her mother's skirts, she fell, pulling the draperies down on top of her.

Fear is just the beginning of loneliness and discontent.

Onovan peered now over the Ancient Book of Darkness. Ras Tau'aman stood idly beside him and the Counselor was quickly becoming impressed by this First Lord of the Ascendant's seemed infinite patience. They were part way up in the Palladium's Western Tower, but unlike the Empress's graceful South Tower, this stone edifice had a host of rooms all connected by a disjointed set of boxy staircases. This room too was cold and damp. What little light there was was streaming in from outside through a series of narrow slits in the extraordinarily thick stone walls.

Onovan studied carefully the yellowed parchment beneath his coal-black nose. The book was indeed ancient, its calligraphy flowy and artistic, its script in a language foreign to him. He let out a long sigh.

"You say this is the proper passage?" He looked up now into Ras's patient face.

"Yes, M'Lord, of course."

"Can you translate it for me, please?" Onovan felt strangely embarrassed now.

"Translate, M'Lord?" His face bore a new look of childlike puzzlement.

"Yes, Ras, can you read it for me?" Onovan was carefully trying to mask his growing frustration.

"But M'Lord, you speak the ancient dialect better than most Easterners."

In his over 350 years of life, Onovan too had developed near infinite patience, but he kept it a closely guarded secret that he hated coming down amongst the primitives. This was an atypical trait for an El-Aurian, known across the galaxy as a race of listeners. Even his estranged wife Guinan loved to dally with the primitive cultures. Listen to their stories and their fables. Marvel at the unwavering similarities of their simplistic myth lore and superstitious beliefs, unwavering from world to shimmering world. Onovan found it tedious, and quite honestly, a bore.

"My speech," he explained patiently, "is a trick of this device." He gestured with a dark hand to the communicator pinned above his left breast. The stylized Starfleet arrowhead symbol was nearly as old as he was. "My language differs significantly from your own, Ras. Please, accept this on faith."

Ras merely looked at him for several long, interminable moments. The Ascendants *were* a truly spectacular race. He took this in faith. It was foolish, he supposed, given the powers of the Crown Empress, that a simple written wordform would be necessary amongst a host of heavenly angels; though he had seen the Crown Empress write for hours on end in her own strange and mysterious script. Another sign of the false prophet sent to

conquer and subjugate? These things puzzled him, and for the first time in his long life, Ras began to question his faith.

Slowly, carefully, he pulled an oculus out of his waist pocket and, with some degree of trepidation, bent over the ancient book with its dark secrets. In a reverent voice hummed like a litany, he read:

“Fear ye o’ people, fear ye the Age of Darkness.”

“For at the end of the Third Age, a chariot of flame  
Shall descend from the Orbs of Heaven bearing a Goddess  
That for a time shall unite her peoples. But beware O’ people, for  
she shall be a false prophet sent by Darkness to conquer and to subjugate.  
Yet fear not, for at that critical hour when all  
Hope seems lost, many angels shall descend from The Orbs  
heralding the coming of the One True Goddess, A Savior.  
And the peoples, united, shall enter a new age,  
And shall go forth and conquer the darkness and Make It Their  
Home.  
For there, in the darkness, they shall find the light.”

“Okay, Ras,” Onovan said as the old man backed away slowly. “Now I want you to treat me as you would a child.”

“A child, M’Lord?” he scoffed, a grin growing within the lines of his face.

“Yes, Ras,” he explained. “I am drowsy from a long slumber and weary from my journey.”

“Yes, M’Lord, of course.”

“These Orbs...” Onovan pointed to the ceiling and made several small circles in the air. Ras nodded once, twice, then a third time before catching the counselor’s drift. “Ah, the Orbs of Heaven, M’Lord? They are home to the Ascendants and other angels such as yourself, who guide us and continuously watch over us.”

“And do you have names for these, these Orbs?”

“No, M’Lord. They simply represent the four levels of Ascendance.”

“I see,” Onovan said quietly, stroking his chin. This was a typical reincarnation/ reemergence type religion with a strong belief in sun-based worship. All-the-moreso stronger here on Ethos where the suns never set. But this did not explain this almost Nostradamus type myth-lore of angels and Goddesses descending from heaven to defeat a so-called false prophet sent by darkness. These people knew nothing of darkness. Knew nothing of starry nights, or moonrises over the ocean, or wondered at the twinkling of a distant planet. So, where this notion of darkness?

“Ras, how long has the Ascendant Goddess been among you?”

“Nearly three generations, M’Lord.”

“And how old is this book, particularly this passage?”

“It has been with my people since before the whole of recorded history.”

“Hmmm,” Onovan muttered, still stumped. Nothing was adding up.

“M’Lord,” Ras huffed, clearly unsettled. “These questions, they are disturbing to me,

M’Lord. They make me question my faith.”

“Questioning faith is the first sign of growth, my friend,” Onovan assured him, smiling warmly. But his faith was what had sustained him the whole of his long life. Without faith, what would he be? For nearly seventy years he had devoted his life to serving the Crown Empress. Been the instrument of death to hundreds of dissidents. Exiled thousands more to the dry and forbidding lands of the Second Continent. Without faith, how could he justify such heinous acts? Without faith, how could he hope to have forgiveness from his own people? Without faith, what would he be? A monster? Faith is but the cornerstone, it was his belief that was now in question.

Onovan decided to disregard the book for now, and move instead along a different tack: “Ras,” he said carefully, “has the Crown Empress ever said *where* she came from?”

“When her family first arrived,” Ras answered faithfully, “her father said...”

“Wait,” Onovan said suddenly, “her family?”

“Yes, M’Lord, the Ascendant Goddess did not arrive alone...”

“Then where the hell are the others?” Onovan shot back surprised.

Ras Tau’aman let out a deep, bone-weary sigh. He was forever tired. His youth had long since evaporated and left behind only the withered shell of a worn-out old man. Faith, at times, can be a burden much too heavy to bear. The world cared little for his tiredness nor his troubles. A lifetime of service had left him little to show for it. He had no family, few friends. His possessions could be packed into a small knapsack. He could not even remember the last time he had left the safe confines of the Palladium.

“Come,” he said, quietly gesturing. “I still have much to show you.”

~ ~ ~ ~

“Commodore Hawk, may I speak with you, sir?” The man did not even bother to look up from his desk; in fact, barely feigned to make a response.

“The Royal Lieutenant Spencer Stadi,” he jabbed finally. “I was wondering if you’d have the balls to darken my door.” Spencer Stadi did not like this man, nor his brusque attitude. They had clashed nearly from the start. The Copernicus Shipyards were a commodore’s only club, and Spencer Stadi would never be a member; not that it really hurt his feelings any.

“I’d like to speak off the record, sir, if I may?” The commodore at last looked up at the tall and lanky cadet standing before him. The lieutenant looked wan and overtired. Two weeks of hearings had done that to him.

“Oh,” Hawk chuckled, “this oughta be good. I was wondering if I’d ever get any truth outta you and your little band of riffraff.”

“I’d like to speak on behalf of my colleagues, *sir*.” Stadi was becoming angry, beginning to regret even coming to see this, this jackass.

“Your little Mexican filly finally broke ya, huh?” Hawk sneered. “And that fat kid, what’s his name... Jones? Shouldn’t even be in a uniform.”

“Not my call, sir, may I speak?” Stadi muttered, gritting his teeth.

“Off the record? By all means, let’s have it.” The commodore pulled a fat cigar out of his desk drawer, lit it, and puffed a noxious cloud of grey smoke in Stadi’s direction. Nonplussed, Stadi remained at attention, eyes dead ahead. He next espoused a carefully rehearsed litany:

“The incident with the runabout was nothing more than a senior prank, sir, *not* a treasonable act as it has been *suggested*. I will accept full responsibility; my colleagues are not culpable.” By this time Hawk had risen and come around the end of his desk. He now circled Stadi, puffing smoke as he went.

“Off the record,” he said at last, stiling his head, “we both know your little spic girlfriend was behind the whole damn thing. But as senior officer, you’re right to take the blame. At least Starfleet taught you that much.” He then sat back on the edge of the desk.

He took two large puffs, then pointed at Stadi, two fingers clutching at the cigar.

“You little shithheads are going to be absolved tomorrow,” he said with a rising voice. “But mark my words, for as long as I live, **you will never** make captain. Ya got that? I don’t like your royal ass,” he sneered, “and I didn’t like your royal commission getting shoved down my throat...”

“Will that be all, sir?” Stadi clipped, seething now himself.

“Nearly,” Hawk said, standing. “One more thing,” he added snidely, “*off* the record...” - and then, in conduct quite unbecoming an officer, he socked Spencer Stadi square in the jaw.

On the Bridge of the *Enterprise*, Commander Spencer Stadi jumped to his feet and cupped his nose. Horrified, he came away with blood. An anguished cry from Rachel Garrett flooded his mind. She was struggling and fraught with fear. His telepathic paracortex threatened to overload and shut down, but he forced his awareness to push through it and reach out for her. She was on the verge of unconsciousness but trying to warn him. He could still sense that dark, unseen force at work.

And then, as if a veil had been lifted from his eyes, he saw her staring back at him. Ethereal. She was hiding something, something he needed to know. The eyes. Those haunting dark eyes. Black and bottomless, with no sign nor hint of remorse, or of love, or of anything that was good and pure in the universe. Eyes that looked back at him with an age many times twelve. Deep colourless eyes, irises black as pitch. Eyes he knew only to exist on one world, a world of telepaths. Betazed.

Stadi gasped and crashed back into the command chair as if punched in the chest. Hearing his vociferation, Enyo was immediately drawn to his attention. Seeing blood, she too gasped and started for him.

“Get a transporter lock on the Captain,” he barked, warding her away. “She’s in trouble, get her outta there now!” Bounding up to Ops in two leaps, a very frightened young ensign heralded back with her answer.

“It’s no use, Commander!”

“Then open a channel, gods dammit, I wanna talk to her!” He waited several long moments as Enyo called out desperately into the open commlink.

“Nothing, sir,” she ultimately concluded, tears flowing down her cheeks. Sensing her distress, Stadi finally climbed up out of the command chair and treaded lightly over to Ops. “It’s all right, Ensign,” he said softly, placing a soothing hand on her shoulder. “Try and contact Onovan for me please.” After several more long moments, the counselor’s voice finally crackled in over the comm system.

*“Onovan here, Enterprise, good to hear your voice.”*

“Counselor,” Stadi called out sternly, “I need to know the condition of the Captain.” There was a lag in the garbled communications before his voice finally crackled in again.

*“I am not currently with the Captain, sir. I am gathering data on the royal family.”* Stadi let out a deep sigh and tried to regain his composure and calm his overwrought mind. A yeoman handed him a fresh, damp cloth and he wiped the blood from his nose and hand.

“Your instructions, sir?” Onovan crackled in over the comm system.

“What data on the royal family, I need specifics.” Another frustrating lag in the downlink caused Enyo to shake her head in dismay. She tapped

several buttons to try and clear up the mess. At last, Onovan's voice filtered in again.

*"A family of four landed here some seventy years ago, Commander. They immediately set themselves up as Gods and took command of the government..."*

"Names, Counselor, I need names."

*"Stand by, sir..."*

"Gods Dammit," Stadi muttered, tousling his hair. This was shaping up to be bad; very, very bad. He feared what he already knew instinctively.

*"Eleusis and Electra, sir, with twin children, Ethereal and Ethaniel."*

Stadi felt sick to his stomach. His head swooned and the room began to spin.

"A last name, Counselor," he shouted over the static, "I need a last name." The last name would only confirm what he already knew in his heart. He dreaded the answer, yet was impatient for the reply.

*"Burke, sir. Eleusis and Electra Burke..."*

"Oh my God," Stadi whispered, staggering backwards. After seventy-three years in hiding, the renegade Sixth Royal House of Betazed had been found. The implications of this were staggering. This was pre-Federation. It dated back long before Spencer Stadi had even been born. Yet, as a Son of the Second House, he was bound by honor and sworn by law. Every member of that renegade family had to be hunted down and exterminated. Nothing could stand in the way of this...

Not even Starfleet.

## CHAPTER NINE

### HER MAJESTY'S ROYAL DREADNOUGHT *ELEGANCE* COMMANDEERED FLAGSHIP OF LEILANI ALGETHI EASTERN ECHINUS SEA, ETHOS

To Marta Batanides, this was heaven. She had never experienced anything like it. There were no oceans under the carefully controlled biodomes of Mars. Every breath she took growing up had been perfectly balanced and engineered. Every step she took had been through flawlessly manicured gardens, amongst shimmering pools and machine-powered little brooks that flowed softly down into little glens. Every single aspect of her environment had been maintained to perfection right down to the enhanced sunlight and the simulated breeze. It truly was perfect.

But this, this was paradise. A warm tropical breeze blew through her hair and puffed out the brilliantly coloured sails. The dual suns hung low in the west now and washed over her face, infusing her skin with a gentle warmth that she had never before experienced. The massive ship rolled placidly over a topaz sea, under a verdant sky, navigating it seemed through an ocean of snow-white puffy clouds. It was indeed a paradise, an instant's image of heaven. But all this beauty hid perhaps a darker purpose.

The *Elegance* was flanked by two other massive warships. They too ploughed through the waves with a certain sense of purpose, their wooden bows sending spray far up into the air around them. Ahead of them all, but not yet seen, lay the First Continent with its gleaming capital city on the bay. This was their target destination. Ephemeris City, girdled beneath the yoke of the Palladium, held under the enchantment of the Crown Empress, false prophet of Ethos. All this had just been explained to Marta, held at the rail and transfixed as she was, by Leilani Algethi.

"But I don't understand," Marta confessed, "I thought the Crown Empress was considered to be a goddess, sent to you from heaven?"

"Indeed, she was..." Lani answered in the cherub-like voice of a twelve-year-old, "...at first. Her family was heralded by many as the Ascendants that would unite our peoples for the once and for all."

"Wait," Marta broke in, "the Crown Empress had a family?"

"Of course, Holy One." Lani scrunched up her little freckled nose. "Forgive me, Holy One," she added, "but your questions are most unusual."

Marta paused, temporarily caught unawares by another reference to her divinity. Her Starfleet propriety was at odds now with her vanity. How easy it would be to set oneself up as supreme *dominar* of such a primitive

and superstitious culture. She could at last understand the appeal of omnipotence that had so ensnared those scattered few officers who had strayed down this path before her throughout Starfleet's long history. The temptation for absolute power was intoxicating. She decided no harm could be done in letting the charade continue for the present time.

"Lani," she chided, "do not question my motives."

"Holy One," Lani buried her face in her hands in supplication, "please forgive my transgression, I meant no disrespect."

"You may continue," Marta said flippantly, with a wave of her hand. The temptation for absolute power was indeed intoxicating.

"Upon arrival," Lani continued, "the Emperor Eleusis proclaimed a new world order, dedicated to peace and to unity. But then, over time, strange things began to happen and power slowly began to shift to his daughter, Ethereal."

"To shift... how?"

"I don't know, Holy One, I only quote from my history lessons."

"And what of the Imperial Family now?"

"All disappeared, Holy One. First her mother, then her father, and finally her twin brother Ethaniel. As they vanished, the power of the Crown Empress grew into madness."

"Then it is time for a reckoning," Marta said as if in a trance. She could picture herself now leading this army instead to unseat this tyrannical dictator. Surely the Prime Directive would allow for such measures if the cause was just. And what harm if she were to set herself up as ruler (only for a time of course) if but to set these people aright with her superior intellect. Yes, the appeal of omnipotence did indeed hold a certain fascination with her. These people needed her to guide them, to show them the true path to salvation. A sudden commotion on the deck below startled her from her trance. She saw a man in the crow's nest far overhead pointing ahead and shouting below. This alerted the assembled masses, and they all rushed forward now to gain a better view for themselves. Marta squinted into the glare of the westerly suns only to see on the horizon a dark shape looming into view. A tall man appeared suddenly beside Leilani and saluted. He was smartly dressed in a military-style uniform.

"What is it, Captain?" Lani said, standing on her tiptoes and squinting herself into the glare of the dual suns.

"Our sister ship, the *Emancipator*, M'Lady."

"I see the Empress has wasted no time," Lani said ruefully. "Have they signaled their intentions?"

"Yes, M'Lady," the captain answered dutifully. "They are ordering us to stand down and come alongside."

Leilani actually laughed outright, and then with boldness: "Tell them they may join our cause or be destroyed." This order so blatantly issued seemed strange coming from the mouth of a child. Yet, the captain saluted again before stepping aft. Lani studied Marta now for several long moments. Yes, she decided, coming upon this Angel adrift alone at sea truly would prove to be a Godsend. She would use this mysterious stranger to her own means quite effectively. Together they would represent an unstoppable force; and in the end, when Lani herself stood as Empress in the Palladium, only then would these so-called Ascendants be sent back once and for all from whence they came.

In the sea ahead of them, the great sailing vessel turned abruptly leftward and presented its entire starboard side to the *Elegance*.

"Therein lies our answer," Lani mused quietly to herself. Hearing her whisper this softly, Marta focused again on the great wooden warship. Its own vermilion sails were plainly visible now hanging from tall masts and wide yardarms. She could even start to see people scrambling about on its deck. They all seemed to be focused on a single task, though Marta certainly couldn't imagine what that might be.

And then a white puff of smoke belched forth amidships, followed closely by another. *What in the world*, Marta frowned. She was about to turn to Lani for guidance when a shrill whistle turned into a shriek as an apparent projectile sailed close by overhead.

"*Jesus Christ*, was that a cannonball?" Marta gasped as the second screeched by to her left. She spun just in time to see the first strike the water just aft, and very near to their escort. She spun back around to face Lani with a look of shock painted on her petite, sunburnt face. For her part, Lani merely stared placidly ahead. The captain came up smartly beside them again and stood at perfect attention.

"M'Lady, shall I begin evasives, and try to skirt round them to the South?"

"No," Lani said forcefully, startling Marta. "Run out the forward guns. Cut them in two."

"But M'Lady," the captain protested, "they are our kindred sailors..."

"No mercy, Captain," Lani growled, "they were given their choice and they have decided." The captain looked momentarily to Marta as if for some sort of guidance from above. But Marta had none to give. Shocked beyond belief by the cannonballs alone, she now stared at Lani with a certain amount of fear of what indeed this child might be capable of. A fear of the fanatical following that she held at her tiny fingertips. A fear of power untempered by wisdom and seemingly without bounds.

With four ear-splitting booms that shook the ship with their ferocity, the forward cannons all fired in rapid succession. Marta stood breathless

as the projectiles streaked westward and ultimately found their mark. The *Emancipator* splintered amidships and her masts fell. Her deck was a scene of pandemonium as fire quickly spread amongst her timbers.

“M’Lady?” The captain stood beside them again like a wounded soldier caught in a deluge.

“Hold your course, Captain,” was all Lani had to say to his unasked question. The *Elegance* plowed forward and fired again, adding fury to the flames. The masses on the deck below began to scramble aft, not sure of what was to come. Marta gripped the rail now with an intensity that hurt her fingers. The splintered hulk of the *Emancipator* loomed ever closer, but the *Elegance* did not waver. Marta could see clearly now the ship’s panicked crew as they began to scatter. Many jumped overboard, many simply stood fast; out of fear or resolve, one could never say. And then there was a breathless moment, when all seemed calm.

With a supernatural shriek of timber that chilled Marta to the bone, the *Elegance* rode hard up upon the haunches of the stricken warship. More deafening than this perhaps, was the shriek of humanity that welled up suddenly from within. The *Elegance* rose up sharply and threatened for a moment to founder herself, before settling at last with full force and trepidation upon the *Emancipator*, splitting her in two at the keel. Marta shook from head to toe as these two halves thundered by to the right and to the left. She forced herself now to scramble rearward, following the wreckage as it slid by. She was beyond words, she was beyond thought. She had never seen anything so horrific in all her life. In space, battles were very impersonal. You never had to see your adversary, never had to look him in the eye, never had to hear them scream as their ship splintered and disintegrated around them. In space, death came almost instantly. In space, you did not have to watch your adversary drown slowly as their ship slipped quietly beneath a frothy sea.

Marta stood for a long while and watched as a sliver of the third sun slowly pierced the eastern horizon. It was twilight now, full-*Opposition* was soon to come, and she longed to be among friends again, longed to be in space and away from this place.

~ ~ ~ ~

“Burke, sir. Eleusis and Electra Burke...” All Onovan could hear in the commlink was a great amount of static. Yet, he could’ve sworn that he heard Commander Stadi say ‘Oh my God’ amidst all the hiss and crackle. He waited several long seconds, staring upwards in the general direction of outer space. Tucked deep inside a stone staircase within the heart of the

Western Tower, he realized this was not indeed the best place for long-distance communication. He sighed and waited a few seconds more.

“Commander,” he said at last, “is there a problem?” Several more long moments of hiss and crackle.

“Counselor...” Another long pause. “*My God, Counselor, I need you to find out every detail you can about this royal family, no matter how insignificant... Do you understand?*”

“Yes, sir, of course,” Onovan replied, increasingly puzzled.

“*And Onovan,*” this time no pause, “*return to the Captain, she may be in grave danger.*”

“But, sir,” Onovan began to protest, but the commlink had already been severed from above. Frustrated, he sighed, then noticed at last Ras Tau’aman standing beside him. The poor old man was white as a ghost, trembling all over, and quite clearly frightened out of his wits. Onovan sighed again, his patience nearly exhausted already on this damnable planet and its primitive inhabitants. And he was especially tired of these cold, damp towers.

He tapped his left breast again, just below his communicator.

“Another trick of this device,” he explained, but Ras was unconvinced. Onovan merely turned and continued up the stone steps. “Try to keep up, Ras,” he scolded. “Now enough with the mysteries... What happened to the rest of this royal family?”

The poor old man was indeed scrambling to keep up, not in the technological sense, no, but physically as Onovan bounded up the stairs ahead of him. His poor old mind was reeling too. Again, not in the technological sense, but religiously. He had no basis for comparison for all these strange events he was witnessing. He had no spiritual advisor to turn to, no clergy to explain history to him as it was happening. And these Ascendants and their Angels, they did not behave as he had always imagined they would. They were flawed. They acted almost *normal*. They had the same pratfalls, the same emotional responses – anger, fear, frustration, impatience – and indeed, the same weaknesses. Where was their divinity?

Winded, Ras climbed at last onto the highest landing to join Onovan. The counselor stood there, with hands on hips, waiting. He was frustrated, he was worried now about the captain, and he was tired of waiting.

“Well?” he said simply.

“All disappeared, M’Lord,” Ras answered, breathing heavily. “First the mother, then the father; and as they vanished, the power of the Crown Empress slowly grew into madness.”

“And the twin brother?” Onovan asked with growing concern, and ever-increasing puzzlement.

“Through here, M’Lord,” Ras gestured. Together, they passed down a narrow passageway; cold, dark, and damp. Onovan was beginning to get a certain sense of dread as they waded deeper into the darkness. His heart rate rose in fear with each passing step. Despite the cold and the damp, his dark skin began to feel warm and clammy. *He did not like it here.* His senses were fighting him, telling him to get out, telling him he did not want to see what was coming. He placed a hand upon the stone wall, and it was slimy, cold, lifeless.

The passage opened into a small room. Four small slits let in the barest hint of sunlight. It took his eyes some moments to adjust. He began slowly to make out bars, a mattress, straw strewn across the floor within. And he could smell, smell the odor of excrement, of decay, of unwashed layers of dirt and grime. And he could see the child, crouched in a corner, head on his knees, thin and spindly arms hugging naked legs against the damp chill of the Tower. This, this was Ethaniel, Royal Prince of Ethos, victim of the wicked tyranny of a mad Crown Empress...

His sister.

~ ~ ~ ~

News that the Empress Ethereal was of the exiled Burke family spread like wildfire; the simple insinuation of it jumped through space like a telepathic tsunami. From Stadi’s mind it bled out like a disease, first downward to the mostly Betazoid crew of the *Enterprise*, then outwards to the other ships in the tiny fleet with their own Betazoid crewmembers. It jumped from telepathic mind to telepathic mind until finally gaining substance with words. These words became subspace messages that traveled now at warp speeds, from ship to ship, planet to planet.

On the planet Betazed, this telepathic tsunami washed over a populace of billions. It brought people to a standstill. It woke people from their sleep like a nightmare. Billions of minds called out for vengeance. Students stormed from university classrooms. Production stopped; farmers came in from their fields. History had not forgotten how the renegades had tried to seize power; tried to consolidate all power within one ruling house. History had not forgotten how the armies of Eileithia had swarmed outward, with weapons of the mind as well as of the body.

These had been a peaceful people. They had not known war for millennia. Eleusis Burke had been brandished a madman, the tyrannical dictator of a single continent that would not be content until he encompassed the whole world. But words did little to stop his armies. The other Great Houses could not come to Consensus. They began to fracture down carefully drawn lines of belief and morality. They began to turn

amongst themselves and create alliances according to ancient codes of loyalty. They became a House Divided and played right into the madman's hands.

But the people revolted. They created an Assembly and formed an army. Through carefully controlled mind-games they began to push back the hoards. With off world weapons of mass destruction, they laid waste to Eileithia. Leveled its cities, destroyed its orchards and decimated its population. And in the final hours of battle, Eleusis and Electra Burke fled with their children and left their people alone to suffer. In the final hours of battle, the ultimate weapon was unleashed, and the entire continent of Eileithia was sent crumbling to the bottom of the sea.

And then a peaceful people were left to cope with what they had done. The Five remaining Great Houses would take decades to regain their stature, to regain the trust of their people. The Legislative Assembly for a time became the dominate ruling body. Great strides were taken towards modernization. Strict policy was initiated to prevent such a calamity from ever happening again. A Constitution was formed that tested the resolve of a peoples united to maintain the common ground of peace. And then Sarek had arrived. It had been nearly sixty-six years since the Vulcan ambassador had beamed into the Great House Consensus. Since that time the United Federation of Planets had entered a Golden Age of peaceful exploration and prosperity unprecedented in the history of the galaxy. At the Antares Shipyards alone, four *Excelsior*-class starships a week were being launched. The workhorses of the fleet, these vessels were quickly creating a strong base for a rapidly expanding trading network. And one of the principal hubs of this trading network was the Galatea Space Center. Betazed in peace had become one of the most powerful and influential members of the vast Federation.

Powerful enough in fact, that their candidate had been elected president. Kalomi Joran had been immensely popular to young and old alike. His policies had made the Golden Age truly glitter. His style of dress had transformed the fashion industry on dozens of worlds. His speeches drew crowds of tens-of-thousands. When he spoke, people couldn't help but listen. His easy style and warmth had reinvigorated the presidency and brought Betazed to the forefront of art and culture.

His death had brought Betazed to the brink of chaos. The people were demanding answers. The Legislative Assembly was being pressed into action once more. The Great House Consensus threatened to fracture. A world of telepaths was crying out in anguish and demanding retribution against a force they could not fight... *death*. Cries of conspiracy rang out on all subspace channels. Accusations of a government cover-up became

a commonplace explanation for the unexplainable. An entire planet was fueled and ready to ignite.

And the spark just turned out to be the Empress Ethereal of Ethos. She was the catalyst in a reaction that had taken days to coalesce. Within an hour, the Legislative Assembly had a unanimous declaration of war. Debate in the Great House Consensus took slightly longer, but only slightly. And in the end, the battle-charge had been led not by Tillis Andros or Luther Stadi, but by Lwaxana Troi herself. The call went out and the people answered.

Six Corsair Carriers, fully manned and fully armed, bound by honor and sworn by law, leapt out of orbit on course for Ethos. Every member of that renegade family had to be hunted down and exterminated. Nothing could stand in the way of this, not even Starfleet, not even Peace.

~ ~ ~ ~

On the Bridge of the *Enterprise*, Spencer Stadi was slowly beginning to sense the power of the force that he had just unintentionally unleashed upon the galaxy. It welled up from below decks as a unified cry for vengeance. It swarmed throughout the tiny fleet like a host of angry bees. Yet, those surrounding him on the Bridge, the non-telepaths, had no idea that the tsunami was upon them. This swarm was in the form of thought only. It was like a brain cancer that came slowly and without warning. He staggered back from Ops as that control station issued several sharp tones.

“Commander,” Enyo said frowning, “we are receiving a message from the *Queen Anne*, sir... a personal message from the captain to you, sir.”

“Let’s hear it,” Stadi almost whispered, holding his stomach. He backed up finally against the upper-level railing and stopped there.

“Message reads: WE STAND BY TO ASSIST. SIGNED: CAPTAIN ALDON RETNAX.” Enyo swiveled in her chair to face Stadi. “I don’t understand, sir. What does that mean?” Her twin blue antennae twitched nervously at his increasingly strange behavior.

“It means that Captain Retnax is also from Betazed,” he answered woefully.

“Sir?” But Enyo did not get her answer.

Everyone’s attention was drawn immediately to the front of the Bridge where a somewhat boisterous group was now emerging from the turbolift. Lt. Richard Castillo led the charge, followed closely by Ensign Andy Dardanelle, Lt. Commander Skyl, and one young and rather coy acting Academy graduate. Her green skin flashing in sharp contrast to her

red uniform, she peered tentatively out into the expansive command center. Ensign Cicely Garrett, the former Orion stowaway, had come home at last.

There were several long moments of commotion as reunions and introductions were made. Even Spencer Stadi forgot his troubles for a time and milled around with the group at the front of the Bridge. But pressing matters were at hand, especially in a telepathic mind, and *Commander* Stadi was quick to restore order.

"Mr. Castillo," he said at last, "please take the helm. Ensign Dardanelle, do you have any experience at Tactical?" Stadi smiled.

"Uh, yes, sir," Andy replied, somewhat startled. "Well, some, sir," he finally admitted, "I sat in on several night shifts aboard the *Ambassador*."

"Fair enough," Stadi acknowledged, "please take a seat next to Mr. Castillo." He could sense the two had already become fast friends. "Skyl," he turned now to the Vulcan engineer and placed a hand on the man's shoulder. "I need you to work on the transporter problem. I have a feeling we're going to need those before this is all over," he added ruefully.

"Commander," the Vulcan frowned, "the likelihood of..."

"Try, Skyl, please..." Stadi beseeched him. Skyl merely raised an upturned eyebrow, then passed quietly to the rear of the Bridge and began working at an aft science station. Stadi smirked thoughtfully, then turned at long last to Cicely.

"Ensign Garrett," he said with command, "welcome aboard. I believe your expertise will be needed at Ops. Now snap to it!" The young girl forced back a grin and nodded solemnly instead. With the willowy grace of her species, she moved smoothly around in front of the viewscreen and then passed placidly up to Ops to relieve Ensign Enyo. Somewhat struck, but graceful in her own right, the young Andorian girl moved gravely to an aft science console and tried her darndest to hide her awkwardness and loss of self-worth. Stadi noted this, as he did all things, but completely failed to notice the turbolift open once more behind him.

"Captain on the Bridge!" Castillo announced suddenly, startling everyone, especially Stadi. He spun, only to come face to face with his own past; Captain Zora McKnight of the *Starship Galaxy*. Unexpectedly overwhelmed with emotion for his former long-lost love, he could not at first speak, only stood there dumbstruck. It blew his mind that she had come aboard without him sensing her presence whatsoever. It was clear that this business with the exiled Burke family had clouded his extrasensory perceptions. Would it also cloud his judgment?

"Captain's ready room, *now*, Commander," she barked, shocking him back to reality. She breezed past him and marched to the opposite side of the Bridge. Caught in her wake, and bound by duty, he had no choice but to follow. His mind clearing as he crossed the Bridge, he remembered

at last who he was and the responsibilities that fell upon him. Pausing with Zora at the door, he looked now to the upper level and caught the rather downcast eyes of a blue-skinned young Andorian ensign.

“Acting First Officer Enyo,” he called out, “you have the Bridge!”

Standing now in the ready room, Zora spun in her tracks and glared at Stadi. “Spencer,” she said sharply, “what the hell is going on here? I have crewmembers having hallucinations, general unrest aboard ship, and now my Betazoid third officer is rambling some nonsense about vengeance against tyranny.”

Unable to answer, he just stared into her face for several long moments. Her soft brown skin and golden-brown eyes were just how he remembered them. Her auburn hair hung down in long curly rivulets, stopping just below the shoulder. Her Latino features appealed to him now, just as they had back then. Oh, how he had loved her; and oh, how badly it had hurt when they split. Hurt, even to this day. He had never forgiven Commodore Hawk for the brutality of this. To never be captain was one thing, to be denied one’s soulmate, quite another.

“Well, Commander?” Zora demanded. He stepped forward, and she stepped back against the ancient wooden desk. He pressed his soul against hers and gathered her up in his arms. They were both lost for an instant, locked in each other’s stare. And then he kissed her, a long deep passionate kiss that felt as new as one’s own first kiss. It enveloped them both and lifted them out of the room. They spun now as one like a feather in the wind, aimless and free. All worries behind them, they remained thus for several long moments before reality at last separated them.

“Things here are unraveling very quickly, Zora,” he finally whispered.

“What things? Spencer, you’re scaring me...”

“There are forces at work here beyond our control.” He gripped her by the upper

arms now. “Zora, you must protect yourself from within.”

“What?” she said incredulously.

“Do you remember the mental tricks I taught you?” She shrugged, he continued. “You must try to keep her out of your mind, Zora, you must *try*, do you hear me?” Zora shook herself loose and pushed him away.

“Who?” she demanded with growing anger.

“The Empress Ethereal,” he growled. “She is coming for us, *and we are coming for her...*”

~ ~ ~ ~

Drifting, aimlessly drifting. In the last moments before her shuttle had exploded, Lieutenant Rachel Garrett had donned a pressure suit and blown the rear hatch. Expelled outwards by a huge gust of air, she spun quickly now in a tight and uncontrolled head to toe rotation. She very nearly lost consciousness in the first few short moments that it took her to activate the airflow inside the suit; dizzy and disoriented as she was by the rapidly swirling stars. She had spent the next two harrowing hours with her eyes mostly closed, fighting off space sickness and barely clinging to life.

And now she was drifting, aimlessly drifting, light-years from anything or anyone. She had had no time to send out a distress call and the suits comm relay was much too weak to reach anywhere beyond a few hundred kilometers. So, she drifted, all alone, in the darkest depths of deep space. She drifted, aimlessly drifted. Scared, oh yes, scared now beyond all imagining as her oxygen grew thin and she began to anticipate death out here in the dark space between the stars. Alone. Her body resigned for all eternity to just drift out here, lost forever.

The lieutenant 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 her air grew thin, her memories turned darker; more sinister. She opened her eyes and tried to focus not on the spinning stars, but on the dark space between. Caught in a trance, a near delirium, her mind continued to flash back to that day. She fought against it at first but slowly began to look on it as a sort of reckoning. It was so long ago, and she was so cold.

An early thaw and heavy rains had pushed the icy river to its breaking point. Scattered bits of tree trunk and huge blocks of ice were now choking on the submerged arches of the ancient concrete bridge just upriver. Threatening to breach this barrier by midmorning tomorrow, the usually placid Genesee had not reached such a frenzied state in over three hundred years.

That's why they had been told to stay away.

She pushed her way through the dense underbrush, taking care not to catch her yarn mittens on the sticks and briars. She could already hear, almost feel, the roar of the river not too far ahead. The trees and limbs were black against a white overcast sky. The air was damp and chilly and what little snow was left was slushy and splashed aside as each boot fell in step with the last. The roar of the river, the fact that they were doing something wrong, was as exhilarating to her as the deep breaths of early springtime air.

"Rachel," her brother whined, some distance behind her. "I'm scared, let's go back."

"Don't be such a baby," she called back over her shoulder. It seemed to her he was always whining about something. Suddenly, and quite abruptly, she stumbled forth out of the underbrush and onto the bank of the river. She had never seen anything like it. About three hundred feet wide here, the brown and muddy water rounded a great bend in front of her, and at such a terrific speed that the far side loomed at least twenty feet over her head. At once terrifying and hypnotizing, she stood there breathless, almond eyes transfixed.

"Rachel," her brother whined again, spilling at last out of the underbrush and falling at her feet. Propelled forward by this small rocket launch of energy, his rain-soaked knit hat flew off his head and tumbled over the bank onto a narrow shelf of ice.

"Dummy," Rachel half chuckled.

"Awww," the boy whimpered, looking up at his sister with wilted hazel eyes.

"Well, go get it, stupid," she demanded as he climbed hesitantly to his feet. The hat lay several feet out, and down about a three-foot muddy embankment. He eyed both warily, then looked again to his big sister.

"Well, go on, chicken, or Ma's gonna kill ya," she urged again. With a sigh much greater than his years, he reluctantly fell to his knees, then to his belly, and swung his legs over. They dangled there on the precipice for several long seconds before he finally let go. Standing firmly now on the sheet of ice, he took two steps out and confidently plucked up his hat. Grinning from ear to ear, he turned and held it up for all the world to see, and then he was gone.

Rachel remembered now how she had laughed at first. He just dropped and vanished.

But he never came back up.

She cried now as she had done that night back in her grandfather's study. Her mother had scared her with an intensity of emotion that she had never before experienced. In fear, she had lied.

And that lie had haunted her her entire life thereafter. A life of so much potential, sucked beneath the ice. Rolled and tumbled until all that potential was gone. His body resigned for all eternity to just tumble on, lost forever, never found. Drifting, aimlessly drifting. The river began to roar in Rachel's ears once more. She began to gasp for air, as much out of panic as suffocation. Her own air was gone, and just like her brother, she would die now, alone and in the dark. Letting go, like he must have done, she inhaled one last time.

And then the *Starship Hathaway* beamed her aboard. She awoke slowly, on the floor, wrapped in the muslin draperies that had adorned the

entryway of the Empress Ethereal's private apartments. She drew a hand up slowly to her head, gripping in vain at the piercing pain. She forced herself to sit up. Her vision blurred, her nose still bleeding, she fought even to remain conscious. Indeed, she fought to even remember who she was. Her vision clearing, she struggled to her feet and glared now into the face of a child.

She remembered now. She was Captain Rachel Garrett of the *Starship Enterprise*, and she had had quite enough of this crap.

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"Lwaxana, what the hell is going on?" He stared at her image on his wall mounted comm panel. It wavered slightly from the effects of high-warp distortion.

"Oh, Ian," she laughed in her usual way. "*You do tend to get yourself all worked up, dear...*"

"Lwaxana," he scolded, "this is serious, Starfleet has gone on alert."

"Now darling, you have nothing to worry about," she tossed up a flippanant hand. "*We'll have this whole mess cleared up by dinnertime.*"

"Nothing to worry about?!" Ian shot back incredulously. "You are on board a warship, Lwaxana," he stressed firmly, not himself amused, "and are at the vanguard of a very powerful fleet," he added, case in point.

"Now, Ian," Lwaxana said a little more sternly now, "*I told you, this is a matter of Betazoid internal security. Starfleet need not get involved.*"

"Lwaxana," Ian pleaded, but knew it would be of no use. Once his wife had her mind set on something, there was no stopping her... not even the threat of Starfleet. He let out a deep sigh. When Hanson had heard that the six Corsair Carriers had left orbit, he fairly boiled over. Ian had only just placated the commodore long enough for him to make this quick comm call. He had hoped that in some way he could reason with her, get her to turn that fleet around before things got out of control. But sometimes there could be no reasoning with Lwaxana Troi of the Fifth House.

"Where is Deanna?" he finally said sullenly.

"*She is with Darcinda at her apartment in Letaria.*" Lwaxana's face dropped, she couldn't look her husband in the eyes for a moment.

"Well, thank God for that at least," Ian said with some reproach. He then softened. "Be careful, *Imzadi*, I love you."

"Oh, Ian," she laughed, again with her usual casualness. "*I'll be home for dinner.*" She smiled briefly, then her image vanished.

Ian looked languidly at the blank screen for several long moments. He knew in his heart that Starfleet would have to act. Planetary defense forces were for planetary defense only. What few that were still left in

service were usually outdated holdovers from pre-Federation days. Nearly all planets now depended solely on Starfleet for their primary protection. And Starfleet, charged with keeping the peace, would not stand idly by while some rogue planet took matters into its own hands; Betazed or otherwise. Yes, Starfleet would have to act.

Ian sighed again, worried for Lwaxana, as Commodore Hanson charged into the lieutenant's small office. His plump round face was flushed, and his carefully pasted hair had sprung up in several different locations. The old man looked positively frazzled. His rotund chest threatened to bust through his uniform with every labored breath. His puffy eyes bore the signs of long, slumberless nights, and the carefully drawn lines in his face were the proof of worry. Pausing now, albeit briefly, he ran a fleshy hand over his advancing scalp and pasted the errant strands of hair back into place.

"Dammit boy," he admonished, "the *Melbourne's* gonna leave without us." His gruff voice always made Ian think of his grandfather. "Any luck at your end?"

"Afraid not, sir. She seems *pretty* determined," he whistled and rolled his eyes.

"Oh well, can't be helped," Hanson muttered. "Nothin we can do from here, Son.

The *Melbourne's* fast, but they've got a head start. Let's go."

With that, Commodore J.P. Hanson charged from the small office, and Lt. Ian Troi had no choice but to follow. The mission to hunt down his renegade wife had begun.

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"Snap out of it, Commander, that's an order!" Zora McKnight pushed Spencer Stadi fully away from her now and tugged her crumpled uniform jacket back into place. Shocked back to reality, the commander snapped to attention. "Yes, Captain," he said dutifully, backing away from her somewhat embarrassed. Zora rolled her head and stretched out her neck. She still leaned on the edge of Captain Garrett's heavy wooden schoolteacher's desk.

"Good," she said levelly. "Now tell me in plain English what the hell is going on here... Who is this Empress Ethereal?" Stadi had wandered away from her and stood now at the replicator, hand held high on the wall, staring blankly at the soft lights of its interface panel. It was several long moments before he spoke, and only then after drawing in a deep breath.

"She is the daughter," he uttered finally, "of one of Betazed's most hated war criminals. He escaped with his family some seventy-five years

ago and was never heard from again.” He looked at her now. “Zora, I am sworn by honor and required by law to hunt this child down, as well as any remaining members of her family.”

“But Spencer,” Zora shook her head, “this can’t be her. That was 75 years ago, she would have to be an old woman by now...”

“It *is* her,” he shot back angrily. “I *felt* it, I don’t know how, Zora, but it is *her*. We detected some anomalies in the atmosphere... meta... meta...” he tapped his thumbs and forefingers together wildly. “Skyl called it metaphasic radiation,” he snapped his fingers, and pointed at her. “It must have somehow stunted her growth and trapped her inside that body...”

“But what of the rest of her family?” Zora countered, not sure whether or not to indulge him, not even sure if she even believed him.

“I don’t know,” he clipped. “She is evil, Zora, I felt *that* too.” It was quiet again for several more of those long moments. Spencer resumed his transient stare at the soft lights of the replicator panel. Zora leaned with arms crossed now, and stared blankly ahead. She hated to pull rank, especially here, aboard the *Enterprise*, but the entire situation was growing more unstable with every passing moment. She knew he would never forgive her for it, but Starfleet training had to supersede personal emotion in all things; even love, even vengeance.

“You’re way too close to this, Commander,” she said at last, rather coolly. She stood up and crossed to be near him. He did not look at her. “I am taking command of the Fleet,” she announced softly. “The *Enterprise* will fall back until I get this mess sorted out... or until Captain Garrett returns.” She pinched at his elbow, trying to get him to stir from his reverie, but he would have none of it. Resigned at last to be his superior officer and not his former love, Zora became again captain of the *Starship Galaxy*.

“Come with me,” she said sharply. Turning, she marched with full command presence toward the door, and towards the Bridge. She could sense him reluctantly acquiesce and start to follow her. Still, he remained silent and she decided not to press it. No, he would not ever forgive her for this, but it must be done. She thought back to those final two weeks at the Copernicus Shipyards. Oh, how they had fought, and oh how ruthless Commodore Xavier Hawk had been to them, especially to Spencer. This was that day all over again, Zora realized, but this time it was her that would be ruthless.

“Attention,” she called out, striding forth onto the Bridge. “As per Article 619 of the Starfleet Code, I am hereby taking command of the Fleet. The *Enterprise* will fall back to position Bravo and await further instructions... Do I make myself clear?” A muffled and disjointed murmur of ‘Yes, Ma’am’ circulated throughout the Bridge as everyone stared back at her with stunned looks of bewilderment. She soon realized however that

they were not staring at her, the outsider, but instead to their own comrade, their own outcast commander, Spencer Stadi.

But crew morale aboard this ship was not her concern; and so, without any fanfare or further ado, she crossed the Bridge, boarded the turbolift, and was gone.

“What the hell?” Lt. Richard Castillo was as usual the first to break the silence, but Spencer Stadi was quick to raise a hand to mollify him. Crossing slowly and stepping up onto the command level, he plopped heavily into the captain’s chair.

“Commander,” Enyo said rather boldly, “as acting First Officer...”

“Not now, Ensign,” he clipped harshly. He was not in the mood to indulge an ego trip from a girl just barely out of the Academy. Perhaps in the end Commodore, now *Admiral* Hawk, had been right all those years ago. Perhaps it was true – he was not cut out for command. He questioned now if he should even be a Commander. Spencer Stadi had now reached a low point in his career. He began to realize how heavily he depended on Rachel Garrett for support. It had slowly become an unhealthy, codependent relationship for them both. She needed him as much as he needed her! *Gods, what a pathetic mess*, he thought.

“Captain McKnight’s shuttle has cleared our airspace, Commander,” Cicely called out from Ops.

“Mr. Castillo, take us out of orbit,” he responded absently.

“And the *Starship Uluru* has entered the system, sir,” Cicely added. “They have the President’s Privy Council aboard and are waiting just beyond the gravitational distortions for the Vice President and Sarek.”

“Very good,” he absently replied again. For nearly twenty years he had served aboard this ship as Captain Garrett’s first officer. He had been a young man then and had passed to late middle-age almost without knowing. He had passed his prime. Most officers his age, like Zora, had their own commands by now. Even Excalibur Jones was the captain of a little skiff out on the Tzenkethi Border. He had stalled in his career, gone nowhere in almost twenty years. And in the end, what would he have to show for it? A life of good deeds?

“If I may, sir,” Enyo said softly, slipping in beside him. “We can still do *some* good here, sir. Commander Skyl and I have nearly worked out the transporter problem. We can pull the Captain out... we can begin the evacuation without the use of shuttles.” Her growing excitement was almost contagious.

This young woman truly looked up to him, Stadi suddenly realized. He could sense this clearly now. What he did as first officer aboard this ship, this *Enterprise*, was forming the next legendary generation of officers. He

was making a difference here after all. This crew worked as a unified team (indeed, were the best in the Fleet) only because he and Captain Garrett worked as a unified team. And in her absence, he finally concluded, this team needed him now more than ever.

“Excellent work, Ensign,” he said suddenly, sitting up. She merely grinned from ear to ear, all worry now washed completely away just like that.

“Commander,” Cicely again called from Ops. “I have an incoming subspace call from Commodore Hanson, sir.” She swiveled to face him with a puzzled look painted on her green-skinned face. “He’s enroute, sir, aboard the *Melbourne*.”

Puzzled himself, Stadi rose to his feet and stared at the main viewscreen. “On screen, Ensign,” he called out. Hanson’s round puffy face immediately appeared before him, blown up to immense proportions by the parabolic, three-dimensional display. The Commodore looked like he had had several bad days in a row.

“Commodore Hanson,” Stadi said warmly. “I did not expect to see you again so soo...”

“*Your Captain is not aboard, Commander?*” Hanson cut right to the chase. He clearly had a lot on his mind.

“Why no, sir,” Stadi responded, frowning. “She is still on the surface of Ethos. We have temporarily lost communi...”

“*Now listen carefully, Commander,*” Hanson glowered. “*Some hours ago, the Betazed Defense Force left orbit enroute for your position. We are doing our best to catch up with them, but they will arrive before us.*”

“But I don’t understand, sir,” Stadi said, beginning to feel sick to his stomach again. Instinctively though, he did understand.

“*They are apparently on some misguided quest for vengeance,*” Hanson explained with a marked amount of irritation mixed with disgust. “*I have dispatched the Starships Hathaway and Gage to intercept them, but they may be too late.*”

“Intercept them, sir?” Stadi shot back, stunned. “Surely you do not intend an armed conflict...” he almost warned, forgetting his position now.

“*Commander, by noontime today, that heavily armed fleet will converge with your own heavily armed fleet at Ethos. I do not intend anything, Mister, I **anticipate** an armed conflict.*” The Commodore stared at him angrily now. “*You are authorized to use whatever force you deem necessary, Commander. They must not be allowed to land troops on that planet... Do you understand me?*”

“Yes, sir,” Stadi gulped.

“*Hanson out...*” and his image was gone. Torn by both his loyalties to home and by his obligations to Starfleet, Spencer Stadi plopped back into the command chair stunned. He had sworn an oath to Starfleet’s ideals and

followed them closely almost his entire adult life; yet, he was still a Son of the Second House of Betazed. Royal obligations were sometimes more of a burden than a blessing. There was clearly only one choice. Lieutenant Richard Castillo was again the first to break the silence. He swiveled now to face Stadi.

“So, what do we do now, sir?”

“We follow orders, Lieutenant,” he said flatly, “and fall back to position Bravo.” A cop out? Perhaps. But Zora had been right, he was way too close to this. Article 619 clearly stated that if the commander of a mission was emotionally compromised by said mission, he should relinquish command. Her decision had been wise, but Stadi now hoped she knew what she was getting into. The bold young captain of the *Starship Galaxy* was sitting on top of a powder keg, and all it needed was a spark.

“Cicely,” he called out. “Forward Commodore Hanson’s instructions to Captain McKnight. The fate of the Fleet now lies solely in her hands.”

The stage had been set.

A fragile peace was about to be tested.

And it would be remembered perhaps as their greatest hour.

## CHAPTER TEN

### FEDERATION CIVIL WAR THE BATTLE OF ETHOS 12 NOON ~ STARDATE 16365

All across the vast Federation, nearly eight thousand lightyears of star-studded space, a host of over one hundred thousand starships came to rest to pay homage to fallen president Kalomi Joran. Not since the death of Captain James T. Kirk had there been this level of mourning. Memorial services and candlelight vigils were being held on dozens of aligned, and indeed, even on a few unaligned worlds that the former president had touched in some way throughout his long career. But nowhere was the grief more keenly felt than on the president's own homeworld of Betazed. Massive planet-wide tributes were being planned out that would ultimately culminate in a state funeral of unprecedented scale.

The outpouring of grief was almost inexplicable, almost as if it was feeding in on itself like a black hole; only this black hole threatened to consume the fabric of the whole of the Federation. The anguish of a telepathic race of billions was bleeding outwards like a dangerous contagion. The ancients had called this a telepathic tsunami, but the ancients could not have foreseen the dangers of their race being spread across half the galaxy. More threatening perhaps was the fact that this anguish was slowly being supplanted by a growing anger over his mysterious death, compounded a hundredfold by the meddling of the Empress Ethereal of Ethos.

She infected their minds like a black plague, playing on their worst fears and darkest memories. No one within the Alpha Geminorum System was safe from her marauding mind. On the surface, a vast population lived in fear of her madness. In orbit, her madness brought out the most sinister side of captains and ensigns alike. Her madness created a madness that fed in on itself in its own right, creating a black hole within a black hole. Yet this black hole could not be avoided with ships or technology or antigrav fields, for this was a black hole of the mind. And it would and could only be fought from within.

We will never know perhaps who fired the first shot on that fateful day. In the end, the *Starship Gage* with its Betazoid captain ultimately joined the Defense Force in its invasion of Ethos, as did the *Queen Anne*. With the arrival of the *Hathaway*, that only left four loyal starships under the command of Captain Zora McKnight when the battle began. She was outgunned two to one. Eventually the *Uluru*, the *Dolphin*, and the

*Melbourne* would join the fight on her behalf, but not before heavy damage had been done by all. The odds were now eight to seven, with the *Enterprise* as the wildcard waiting on the wings. The battle for peace was only just beginning.

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High up in the Western Antiquity Tower, Lt. Commander Onovan stood in horrified disbelief. He had just come down a dark and damp passageway and now stood in a small room with only the barest hint of light. It had taken his eyes some moments to adjust, and then he slowly began to make out bars, a mattress, and straw strewn across the floor.

Amidst the smell of excrement and unwashed decay, he could now see the child too. Ethaniel, Royal Prince of Ethos sat crouched in a dark corner, head on his knees, thin and spindly arms hugging naked legs against the damp chill of the Tower.

"Oh my God," Onovan exhaled, stifling the urge to gag. "Ras, is that..." he could not finish.

"Ethaniel, M'Lord, twin brother to the Empress Ethereal," Ras Tau'aman replied sullenly. This First Lord of the Ascendant had seen many horrors in his near lifelong tenure, but this one left him the most ashamed.

"How long," Onovan stumbled, "how long has he been here? ...oh my God," he whispered again, putting the back of his hand up under his nose.

"For over fifty years, M'Lord."

"Fif... fifty **years**?!" Onovan nearly shouted, mostly in disbelief. Unlike most species, El-Aurians lived for centuries. Onovan himself was nearly three hundred and sixty-five years old, but still, fifty years was a very long time, even to him. Fifty years inside this cold, damp cell, all alone in the dark. This time Onovan did gag. Turning his head against the stone wall, he threw up, then coughed and spit.

"M'Lord?" Ras said with some alarm. Ascendants indeed, where was their divinity?

Again his mind reeled with the questions of faith and belief.

"Open it," Onovan commanded, turning back to the steel cage.

"M'Lord?" Ras said again, this time somewhat startled.

"*I said open it, gods dammit!*"

"But M'Lord," Ras protested, "to do so would be treason... it is punishable by *death*, M'Lord," he added in a hushed, reverent tone.

In an almost unheard of fit of rage, Onovan began to seethe. His race was renowned for their ability to maintain an even keel, to remain calm and collected in almost any situation. But not this time. Furious beyond all

imagining, and not even sure why, Onovan pulled out the small thumb-sized phaser he kept concealed under his belt. *"I said open it!"* he demanded. But Ras did not know what the device was. Confused more than threatened, he merely stood there with a blank look until, in disgust, Onovan finally fired.

Before them both, the steel bars vaporized to create a hole just large enough for a man to pass through. Startled as much as astonished by this near blinding pyrotechnic display, Ras stumbled backwards. If it had not been for the stone wall behind him, he most surely would have fallen over. Instead, he plastered himself there against it and began to shake uncontrollably in abject terror. Ignoring him, Onovan passed through the still sizzling hole and then crouched so very carefully on the fetid floor beside the child. Cautiously, he checked for signs of life.

The boy was alive, but was obviously in some sort of catatonic state. "Ras," Onovan said calmly now, "you say this 'child' has been here for fifty years?" He looked away briefly to study the old man carefully.

"Ye-ye-yes, M'Lord," Ras managed to utter, still wide-eyed with fear and near collapse.

"And this child has not aged in all that time?" Onovan continued sceptically.

"No, M'Lord," he whispered, scowling now ever so slightly.

"I wonder why?" Onovan mused, more to himself than anything as he looked back to the frail little body next to him.

"Why, M'Lord," Ras said matter-of-factly, "the Ascendants are ageless." Again, the old man was questioning everything he had ever known, even as he said this. Logically, the statement made no sense. The Empress's parents had been adults. Indeed, Onovan and the strange captain too were adults. Yet these two children had remained so throughout his entire long life. Why did they not age? And if the Ascendants did not age, then how had the parents of these children become adults? It was the chicken and the egg paradox. In the past, he had always relied on his faith, but now Ras was losing faith. He felt betrayed now, lied to, and ashamed.

He watched as Onovan gently touched that miraculous gold device pinned above his left breast. "Commander Onovan calling the *Genesee*," he said, apparently to no one, confusing Ras yet again. But then, to Ras's continuing astonishment, the device issued several musical chirps in response.

"Computer," he said now, "can you maintain a transporter lock on my position?" And then again, the device spoke, only this time not in a man's voice, but with a that of a female, soft and as sure as a melody, though he did not quite understand her words. *"Limited transporter lock acquired... Moderate risk to lifeforms due to high ionic interference."*

“Understood,” Onovan said into the device. “Computer...” he hesitated, then quickly: “Transport three to the aft compartment... Authorization: Onovan-Charlie-Victor-November-six-five.”

More words that Ras did not understand, but still the device responded with several more musical chirps.

And then something magical happened that Ras would never forget for as long as he lived. The entire room around him began to dissolve in swirling white energy. The stone walls, what was left of the steel bars, the mattress, the floor, Onovan and the boy, even the very darkness itself. All of this was replaced with a pure white light that enveloped him and made his skin tingle all over. It was glorious, it was miraculous, it was heaven – and he never wanted to leave it.

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Captain Rachel Garrett of the *Starship Enterprise* had had quite enough of this crap. She struggled now to remain standing as she wiped the blood from her nose onto the sleeve of her uniform jacket. With icy eyes, she stared across the room into the face of an empty child, the Empress Ethereal of Ethos. Subjected to intense memory flashbacks, the captain’s head now pounded with a splitting headache and it took her several long moments to regain her composure. She longed desperately to have Spencer Stadi by her side, and she only now began to realize just how heavily she depended on him for support. She began to wonder too now if he needed her just as much as she truly needed him. Her head slowly clearing, Captain Garrett was just starting to get a glimpse of the foe she was up against. This child infected people’s minds like a black plague, playing on their worst fears and darkest memories. She wondered if anyone was safe from her marauding mind. The strange visions that had occurred aboard the *Enterprise* had begun almost as soon as they had dropped out of warp. The force behind such a telepathic mind to reach that far out into space was staggering. It caused Garrett to shudder involuntarily at the thought of such power wielded by the mind of a child.

This was madness because she was madness embodied, and it began to raise some serious questions. When do the thoughts of a sweet and innocent child turn suddenly to evil? What are the transformational causes that brings a young mind from the path of peace to that of a tyrannical dictator? What causes a person, a child, to lose control of his or her own senses and descend into madness? In the end, are we all really that far from the brink? The captain’s mind began to reel at the implications of this. She shuddered again as the defensive walls within her own mind began to go up, blocking out (she hoped) the madness that was Ethereal.

“My, my, Captain,” Ethereal almost giggled, “you have a most extraordinarily developed psi-region for a person of your inferior species.”

“Stay out of my mind you little bitch,” Garrett shot back bitterly.

“Come now, Captain,” the child laughed. “That sort of language is conduct quite unbecoming an officer of your station... Ut,” she chirped, raising a gloved index finger. “Your First Officer, my kindred, Spencer Stadi, he taught you well I must admit. I’m not quite sure what your next move will be,” she mused. “How refreshing after all these years to...” But she did not have a chance to finish as, quite *without* thinking, Rachel Garrett charged forward and slapped the girl hard across the face. Astonished, and completely unaccustomed to this sort of physicality, the Empress Ethereal stumbled backwards and fell at last into a plush divan. The captain was much pleased to see tears begin to well up in the child’s eyes. Inside its gilded cage, woven within the wig, the colourful little bird fluttered about wildly as if it too had been stunned by the captain’s brazen act.

“Now that’s more like it,” Garrett said firmly. “Now who are you, how the hell did you get here?” Ethereal looked up at her defiantly for several long moments, then apparently decided to indulge her.

“I was born,” she said with some petulance, “long before my homeworld ever joined your precious Federation. I am the purest form of Betazed – (taking on airs now) – I am the perfection that was... the perfection before all your off world contaminations.”

“But that’s impossible,” Garrett countered, “you’re lying.” She continued to take on the tack of a mother scolding her child; and so far, it was working. “Betazed joined the Federation over sixty years ago,” she added quickly.

“There’s something about this gods damn planet,” Ethereal stated bitterly, with just the tinges of a deep and profound sadness. “My father did this to me,” she spat out angrily,

“and I have been trapped in this body as a child ever since.”

“All of us at one point or another have wished we could be a child again,” Garrett mused, half to herself, not really thinking of the effect such a statement might have on the Crown Empress. But she was quick to find out.

“A child again, Captain,” Ethereal seethed, climbing to her feet. “A child again?! I have been a *child* for over 75 years. Can you even imagine what that has been like? You would be a child again, but would you be a child forever? Would *you* wish to spend eternity trapped inside this body with the knowledge of a lifetime stored inside your mind? All the hopes, the dreams, all the carnal desires of an adult entangled within the emotions of a child, and encased within this prepubescent shell. You wonder what would bring about madness? *You have your answer.*” This last she stated

flatly, almost as if it should be common knowledge. She stood and glared at the captain with all the hatred and anger of seven decades of pent-up rage.

There was a long period of silence here that seemed to linger on interminably. Admittedly, Captain Garrett didn't quite know what to say. Ethereal had been a child longer than Garrett had been alive. And she had apparently spent all those decades here, high up in this tower, for one long never-ending day, holding on to the illusion that she was some sort of goddess to these people. It was all she had in the end. But being a god elevated oneself far above mere mortals, much like being captain elevated oneself above one's crew. It created walls and barriers that perpetually sectionalized your world until, one day, you realized you were all alone. You had become an object of the state rather than a person of feeling. A curiosity perhaps, but little more. And as the world aged around you, you became more and more alone.

Loneliness begets fear, fear begets anger and still more loneliness. It was a paradox of emotion that fed in on itself like a black hole. Perhaps the devil isn't *out there*, perhaps he's right here inside all of us; we are all victims of our own demons, and sometimes it seems there can be hidden consequences to our actions. The threads of our lives all lead us to where we are today. For Captain Garrett, the drowning of her brother, her near death experience in deep space, had shaped the course of her life in ways she was not even aware of. All these things and so much more made up a person. But the Empress Ethereal had been stalled, she had been caught up in a web of her own unconscious design, and she was only just beginning to realize it.

The captain pitied her, as much as feared her for what she had become. Ethereal's own narcissism had consumed her from within like a black hole feeding in on itself...

"Pity?!" Ethereal shot out. "I don't need your pity, for it is you that are all alone, *Captain*. Your family died with your brother under the ice; you sacrificed everyone else for your career. Now you too will die alone and in the dark, just as he did. No one is coming for you this time, Captain. Your fleet in orbit is blowing itself to bits as we speak. Your dark-skinned comrade is aboard your runabout, and he too shall soon abandon you. Yes, it is you that are all alone, Captain, and fear is just the beginning of loneliness and discontent."

~ ~ ~ ~

Five light-minutes out from the planet Ethos, the *Starship Enterprise* held station at position Bravo. Ordinarily from this vantage point, they would see everything that happened back in orbit five long harrowing minutes *after* it had happened. But this little trick of light was undone in the modern age by the use of subspace communications, and the crew of the *Enterprise* saw as well as heard the terrible events unfold before them instead in real-time. They saw the Betazoid Defense Force of six enter orbit with the *Starship Gage* as an unlikely escort. They heard Captain Zora McKnight's protestations and orders to reverse their course and leave the system. They both saw and heard the disastrous results.

Indeed, unravel may have been a better word than unfold. No one will ever know perhaps who fired that fateful first shot. Much like Fort Sumter at the start of the ancient American Civil War, perhaps in the end, no one was to blame. Regardless of motive or cause, within minutes, the airspace above Ethos had erupted into a swarm of angry hornets. The first few tense moments were a cat-and-mouse game of whirling starships all doing sharp pirouettes around each other. What had once been clearly defined battlelines quickly dissolved into a chaotic sea of metal monsters all going for each other's throats. And when someone fired that first shot, well, all hell broke loose.

"Commander, are you seeing this?" Lt. Castillo wondered aloud, not daring to take his eyes off the screen. His vision had been so many times clouded by illusion the past few hours that he dared not believe what he was seeing now. Standing in stunned disbelief behind him, Commander Spencer Stadi could not even speak, he merely nodded in response. The entire Bridge was held in a subdued hush as everyone watched the first orange bursts of phaser fire leap from ship to tiny ship. Equally unprepared were they for the hurtling red globes of photon torpedoes that next lit up the fleet like flashbulbs in a darkened stadium.

"Commander Stadi, sir," Cicely called out from Ops, "the Corsair Carriers are launching gunships!" Still, no one spoke. What they were witnessing was unprecedented, unheard of in the long history of the Federation; indeed, for many decades even *before* the Federation. Civil War? Even the very thought of it had not crossed anyone's mind in generations. Its usage had been left to ancient textbooks of times long since gone. Yet now, here it was before them. Swarming like gnats amongst the larger host, the gunships began to fire their own little bolts of energy at Zora McKnight's loyal little band of starships. This time Andy Dardanelle spoke, his quarter-Vulcan composure keeping him focused just enough to report. "Commander, the *Starship Galaxy* is taking on heavy combatant fire, sir... Reporting casualties and heavy damage." He paused now, focusing. "They are sending a high-priority distress call to Commodore

Hanson requesting immediate support.” There was a particularly bright flash of light on the viewscreen, and then Andy made one final report.

“All communications with the *Galaxy* have now been lost, sir. They have activated their Ship in Distress beacon.”

“Commander,” Castillo blurted out, “we can’t just sit here, we have to do something for God’s sake!”

*But do what?* Stadi thought. Over half the crew of this ship and he himself were from Betazed. So, should he join their cause in defense of Betazoid honor and justice? With the power of the *Enterprise*, the Federation fleet could be subdued in a matter of minutes. Or do they make the charge instead in defense of Starfleet and decimate his own people, being brandished a traitor and exiled, if not hunted down, forever? It was a perfect paradox with Zora in the middle. *Zora*. Oh, how he had loved her; oh, how he loved her still. Zora was in danger; they were all in grave danger here. He could not escape this.

There was a madness at work here, he realized, and that madness was the Empress

Ethereal. She infected people’s minds like a black plague. No one in the Alpha Geminorum System was safe from her marauding mind. It was she that was the enemy, not the Federation fleet, not the Betazed Defense Force, but her. Her madness created a madness that fed in on itself like a black hole. Yet this madness could not be stopped with ships or weapons, for this was a madness of the mind. And it would have to be fought from within. And now Spencer Stadi had his course of action... Neutrality.

“Mr. Castillo,” he said with growing resolve, “set course for the battle coordinates. Take us to a defensive position relative to the *Galaxy*...”

“Aye, sir.”

“Ensign Dardanelle, you are *not* to fire under any circumstances. Do I make myself clear?” Stadi glowered.

“Yes, sir, perfectly.”

“Commander,” Castillo interjected, swiveling away from the helm. “It’ll take us twenty minutes to get there at full impulse... If I may, sir?”

Stadi merely nodded. Whether it was his telepathic mind that understood, or simply years of service together, the cryptic message was received and the order thus given. “Cicely,” Stadi continued, “patch me through to the rest of the crew... It’s time to implement Plan B,” he mused.

Somewhat mystified, Ensign Dardanelle now leaned in close next to Castillo. His face held a look of mild bewilderment, tempered as it was by his one-quarter Vulcan heritage. Upon spying his colleagues oddly complex calculations however, his features quickly transformed themselves into an untempered frown.

“What are you doing,” he whispered. “You can’t do a warp jump within a star system...”

Richard Castillo merely smiled. “You’re on the *Enterprise* now kid,” he said. “You better get used to the unexpected.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Marta Batanides had not seen anything quite so serenely beautiful in all her life. She had never been to Rio de Janeiro back on Earth, but she figured a picture could be painted of it here, and no one would know the difference. The *Elegance* was now closing in on Ephemeris City, Capital of Ethos, and Marta could do nothing but stand and marvel at it. A yawning outer bay narrowed at one end to permit passage into a smaller, circular inner harbor. The entrance to this harbor was flanked on either side by two sugarloaf mountains, and these in turn were capped with massive twin stone statues that stood with arms outstretched to the heavens.

Vast white beaches circled both these bays and the water shimmered and twinkled against the backdrop of forested mountains and sheer rock cliffs. Then, as the great ship drew closer, she saw it. The Palladium, home of the Crown Empress and seat of power over millions. This magnificent stone castle was about two hundred feet up a vertical rock face, and from its carefully fitted stone battlements rose three majestic towers. Yet, even from here, Marta could see a fourth was conspicuously missing. As their vantage point continued to change, she could slowly begin to see the remains of the lost tower piled high in the city streets below.

Ever so slowly, the *Elegance* began to fall back, and the two flanking escort ships began to take up the vanguard. Filling with a growing sense of trepidation, Marta turned now to Leilani. The girl’s cherub-like face and freckled nose belied the power beneath. She was a force *not* to be reckoned with, as Marta had so recently witnessed. But should such power really be in the hands of a child? This entire world was ruled by a child, and now a child was leading the revolution. There was a certain amount of poetic justice to it, Marta supposed. She just hoped the cause was just.

“Are you sure this is such a good idea?” Marta asked the girl now. “A revolution can often have unforeseen consequences, even many years into the future.” Long past full Opposition, the re-Ascension of the second two suns was fast approaching midday. She stood against the rail in the soft breeze and soaked up the intense solar rays. “Yes, but if a revolution should end years of tyranny, is it not justified?” Lani countered. “My people were exiled to the Second Continent for no other reason then for protestations of the Empress’s fanatical rule.”

“You continue to miss my point,” Marta interjected, as if in an Academy lecture hall. “Will what comes after be worse long before it becomes better? Sometimes the things lost, the intangible things, cannot be replaced, and the void can...”

“Enough!” Lani shouted at last, silencing her. The threads of their conversations had revolved around this subject for hours and Lani was tired of it. She knew not of half the things this mysterious visitor was espousing ad nauseam. Ascendant or not, this woman was attempting to interfere in Lani’s holy destiny. A destiny that had been engrained into her psyche since early childhood; ever since The Voice had entered her mind and told her it was she that must lead this revolution. And as The Voice had been telling her for months and months, the day was coming, and indeed it had; and soon enough, Lani would free her people from these, these sky demons.

Added again by the force behind the words, Marta remained silent. She was exasperated more than anything by the stubbornness of this willful child. Like it or not though, Leilani Algethi was a loaded weapon, and the revolution was at hand. The two lead ships were now well across the outer harbor with the *Elegance* a short pace behind. Marta watched in dismay as they opened their gunports and ran out long sleek cannons. Still moving at a pretty good clip, the escorts quickly passed through the narrow strait and into the inner harbor where they next turned opposite each other in an ever widening ‘V’ formation.

With an earth-shattering roar, their combined cannons all cut loose at once. The inner harbor simply reverberated with it and became instantly shrouded in a cloud of white smoke. More disjointed now, the random cacophony of cannon fire continued on unabated and this fogbank of smoke continued to thicken; all according to Lani’s master plan. As the *Elegance* began to pass through the narrow strait, Marta could just glimpse the cannonballs sailing above this ever-growing cloud. Some simply made great parabolic arcs and splashed into the sea, some merely smacked against the sheer rock face with a loud whump, then fell as flattened pancakes downward.

A scattered few however hit their mark and began to take large chips and chunks out of the mortared stone battlements of the Palladium. The inner harbor echoed with the deafening roar of cannon blasts and the din of shattering, falling rock. But the smoke was the key. Plowing forward unmolested, the *Elegance* plunged headlong into this murky white abyss. Marta’s nostrils began to burn with the acrid smell of sulfur. She could see nothing ahead and became fearful. She could not even see the bow of the ship, yet she could sense that their speed remained unchecked.

She began to hear a strange sort of noise that sounded like Romulan disruptor fire but quickly passed this off as only her imagination. Still, she

heard it again and then began to hear the distant splintering of wood, the screaming shouts of men. The cannon fire slackened and Marta heard still more of these mysterious energy blasts. Only then did she realize that their escorts had been a diversion. It explained suddenly why the ships had seemed so scarcely manned. Those brave souls were the sacrifice for Leilani's military force that was now arming itself on the deck below her. The sheer cunning of this maneuver caused Marta to shudder. It was ruthless, yet brilliant.

With a frightening suddenness, the *Elegance* emerged from the smokescreen into broad daylight. Marta felt instantly exposed, like standing naked in front of a crowd. She craned her neck upwards and almost fell over. The Palladium loomed above her now like a monster over a child's bed. A few cannonballs continued to peck at its mottled surface, but these had nearly ceased. Several bolts of green energy unexpectedly belched forth from its sides with that familiar sound of disruptor fire and Marta understood now that it must be off world technology; probably taken from the royal family's starship after they'd arrived here. The sacrificed crews aboard those wooden frigates had stood no chance against this. Marta wondered if Lani understood the meaning of this. If that impish child could even feel what she was feeling right now. Several more bolts of energy silenced the cannons once and for all and Marta's attention was next drawn dead ahead. The wooden docks of the harbor's quay were fast approaching and still their speed continued unabated. Marta impulsively gripped the rail and began to get a sick feeling within her stomach. She had not forgotten how the *Elegance* had cut the *Emancipator* in two. With sheer speed. It was pure physics of force multiplied by mechanics.

Marta crouched now and braced herself against the rail. Their speed seemed even more terrific as the docks loomed even closer. And then there was a breathless moment when all seemed calm.

With a supernatural shriek of timber that chilled Marta to the bone, the *Elegance* crashed into the docks. The great ship seemed to shudder now just as she did. The tall masts with their heavy sails all leaned forward and threatened to snap like matchsticks.

She was thrown ahead with such unanticipated force that she nearly flipped over the rail. The mighty warship shook and let out one final terrifying roar before launching itself backwards slightly and finally coming to rest. More deafening perhaps than all this though, was the shriek of humanity that welled up suddenly from within. It was not a shriek of agony however, but an almighty war cry.

Leilani Algethi's army was on the move, let no one stand in its way.

~ ~ ~

Ras Tau'aman did not want it to end. The white light that now enveloped him made his skin tingle all over. It was glorious, it was miraculous, it was heaven, and he never wanted to leave it. But it did end; slowly at first, and then more rapidly. Onovan and the boy began to take shape first. They were still seated on the floor in front of him. Yet, as things quickly solidified around him, Ras started to notice his surroundings had somehow changed. He first noticed that the bars were gone altogether, the mattress too, but more than just these simple things, the environment had changed as well. It was no longer cold, damp, and dark.

The swirling energy left him at last, left him hollow, left him longing for its return. Ras inhaled a sudden sharp breath. He inexplicably found himself in entirely new and unfamiliar surroundings. Onovan and the boy were seated now on a soft carpeted floor. The small room was plush and comfortable, the air at perfect temperature and humidity. Over there, a small table and two bench seats; fixed to the wall there, a rack of cots stacked one above the other. And out the sweeping tinted windows, the central plaza of the Palladium.

There could be no mistake, though his mind would not accept it. He had traversed this plaza thousands upon thousands of times. He knew the shape of every piece of slate, every chink in the mortar, and he was looking at it now. What he knew to be impossible was staring him right in the face. He crouched tentatively, almost fearfully, to get a better vantage point out the window. Sure enough, he could see there the base of the Western Antiquity Tower. His own tower, the North, stood in silence to his right. He began to tremble, to quiver from deep inside. He must be aboard the Ascendant's bizarre flying machine. But *how*?!

Feeling suddenly weak in the knees, Ras settled his withered frame into a couch beneath the windows along one side. Unable to catch his breath, he feared his heart might stop; or leap clear out of his chest entirely. He pulled his trusty handkerchief out of his breast pocket and covered his face with it, wiping the sweat from his brow. This truly was miraculous, but he was not so sure anymore about the glorious part. Pulling the handkerchief away, he steadied - or at least attempted to steady - his gaze upon Onovan and the boy. Onovan was now stroking the child's hair. He placed a dark hand beneath the boy's chin and forced him to look up, eye to eye.

"I need to get you back to the *Enterprise*," Onovan mused, mostly to himself. "We'll get you cleaned up and have the doctor take a look at you." Onovan was about to stand when he stopped abruptly and squinted, staring even deeper into the child's eyes. "Why yes, yes," he said suddenly, "I can

hear you perfectly... Your name is Ethaniel, right?" The boy's colourless ebony eyes narrowed and he nodded almost imperceptibly. Ras frowned, confused by this bizarre interchange. He then thought of the Crown Empress and her own freakish ability to read minds. He began to tremble anew, fearful of the powerful forces that surrounded him. He listened with uncertain attention as Onovan spoke again.

"She is coming," he asked, "who is coming?"

*Leilani Algethi and her army, I have sent for her at last.*

"But I don't understand," Onovan said aloud. "What army?"

*My revolution. She was the first of her people receptive to my needs. For over sixty years I have waited in the darkness for her arrival.*

"Revolution? I still don't understand." Onovan shook his head in frustration. Ras continued to tremble nearby. Though he could not hear the boy's silent thoughts, he had heard the words 'army' and 'revolution'. Could it be true? After all these years, could Ras ever hope it to be true?

*For years I have trained her mind, Ethaniel continued. She needed to be more ruthless, more cunning even than my sister... My sister...*

He paused now leaving Onovan transfixed. The boy's eyes held a certain amount of melancholy for memories of better days decades and decades past. Days long before this wretched planet had robbed him of his life. Memories of happier days, innocent days, back on Betazed. Peaceful days long before war had forced them from their home. Onovan could gather only a vague sensation of the child's thoughts, but there was an undeniable feeling of loss. Yet, there was love there too, a feeling of longing for a lost sister. Ethaniel held no hatred for her, in spite of his imprisonment. Ethereal had become who she was only because of this wretched planet, only because of their parents. He did not regret plotting *their* deaths any more than he regretted plotting *hers* now. It would be his final gift to her.

"Please," Onovan pleaded, "I need to know what you have done."

*I had the seed of my revolution, all I needed was the catalyst. I reached out into deep space and lured your Ambassador here. A prize I knew my sister could not resist... all those fresh new minds to toy with.* He chuckled now; a low, quiet, sinister sort of chuckle, and Onovan stood up slowly and backed away. This caused Ras to start. He had not heard what was said, but instinctively knew that this child was as evil as his twin sister; if not indeed all the more so. He had after all, been imprisoned for parricide. Ras began to feel sick deep within, as did Onovan, though each for totally different reasons.

Ethaniel chuckled again, then said aloud in the high tones of a child: "And now my revolution has come at last."

Off somewhere in the distance, Onovan and Ras could hear a deep rumble that sounded like far-off thunder. Both jumping to their feet, they

moved in unison to the aft windows and stared out at the sky. But it was as they had feared, the horizon was clear, by all accounts, a beautiful day. The deep rumbling continued, and then they thought they saw some stone chips fly upwards from the distant wall surrounding the plaza. *Surely not*, he thought, but then, quite to Onovan's astonishment, a great hole was blasted out of the

stone wall and a smoldering steel cannonball came bounding across the plaza straight for them.

Stunned, he couldn't think, he couldn't speak. The cannonball bounced and took one more great leap... "Computer," Onovan shouted, "shield's up!" ...but it was too late. The solid steel ball struck the runabout hard, denting in the hull right at Onovan's kneecaps. He breathed a deep sigh of relief: the glass had not broken, it had not come through.

"Computer," he called again, "status of hull integrity?"

The computer chirped several times, then responded. "*Moderate damage to aft-port quarter... Hull integrity intact.*" Ras stood up straight and stared around the little room, trying to find the source of that mysterious female voice. For his part, Onovan too stood up, but he stared directly at Ethaniel. The deep dull roar of cannon fire continued and the ground beneath the runabout began to shake from multiple impacts. The cannons had found their elevation. *Go now while we still can*, Ethaniel bored into Onovan's soul. *The Borg are coming, Father. We must flee to safety...*

"Computer... set autopilot coordinates to rendezvous with the *Enterprise*; best possible speed... Authorization Onovan-Charlie-Victor-November-six-five." And with no thought for his captain, or for Ras, or for the Prime Directive, Lt. Commander Onovan launched the *Genesee* towards outer space and to safety.

~ ~ ~ ~

When Rachel Garrett first heard the deep rumblings of cannon fire, she too looked out the near panoramic windows for thunderclouds. The Empress Ethereal still stood breathless before her, her energy apparently spent for the moment by her latest tirade. The captain began to wonder if what the girl said was true. Would Onovan leave her? The idea that the Fleet was 'blowing itself to bits' was preposterous. What could a handful of Federation starships possibly find to fight over? She actually smiled when she realized that Ethereal was playing with her mind again. That's all this child did, manipulate and toy with people's minds; and why? Because she was *bored*.

Still the deep rumblings persisted, and then the floor beneath her feet began to shudder almost imperceptibly. Curious, Garrett moved out of the entrance portico for the first time and navigated around the furniture to stand by the north windows of the tower. She now realized what a dizzying height they were above the plaza, many times that from the city streets far, far below. The view was stunning, magnificent in its beauty. Yet, something was amiss. In the Inner Harbor, a vast cloud of white smoke turned out to be the source of the distant thunder. *What in the world*, Garrett thought to herself. She was quick to note the runabout was still right where she'd left it.

"An insignificant child," Ethereal unexpectedly answered her, "has sent a mere two ships against my vast defenses." The Crown Empress giggled now, it was a silly little self-satisfied sort of laugh.

"Two ships, Your Majesty?" Garrett mused. "You must be mistaken, for I see three..." "Impossible," Ethereal huffed, still, she moved now herself, rather quickly, around the scattered furniture of her apartment. She arrived at the window just in time to see Leilani Algethi's flagship emerge from the protective smokescreen nearly on top of the docks. Garrett tried not to giggle herself now, for it was obvious the Crown Empress had somehow been duped and was quite shaken by the sudden appearance of this phantom vessel. She was about to make her own snide comment when the first stone chips began to fly up from the plaza wall. To her astonishment, a hole suddenly opened up within this stone edifice and a smoldering cannonball came bounding across the vast plaza.

The captain cringed and involuntarily cowered as this heavy projectile slammed into the runabout hard. She inhaled a sharp breath and brought a hand up to cover her open mouth. Ethereal let out a childish little teehee, much to the captain's chagrin. What Garrett saw next, however, shocked her most of all. Almost as if Ethereal had somehow predicted the future, the *Genesee* lifted gently up off the flagstones, banked ever so gracefully to the left, then shot off like a bullet on an obvious orbital trajectory. The captain's countenance slumped. Onovan had left her after all. He was the only other one here that had the access codes to the computer.

"You see, Captain, you are all alone." Ethereal looked up at her with a self-serving glare that made Garrett want to slap her again. But she had lost her edge now, she realized. The mother/daughter routine would no longer work, she would have to try something new. She remembered her first priority now: rescue the crew of the *Ambassador*.

She had no more time, no more patience, for the mind-games of a restless child. "Oh look," Garrett said with a perfunctory smile, "it seems your mysterious ghost ship is about to make landfall..."

“Rrraaahh!!” Ethereal fairly seethed. “Impetuous child. I don’t know how she slipped in, but now she will feel my full wrath.” The *Elegance* had by now slammed into the docks and they could already see swarms of soldiers storming out from its bowels and pouring into the streets, setting up an immediate defense perimeter. What Garrett did not know, but Ethereal did, was that the disruptor-type weapons had been fitted to defend the outer harbor only, *not* the docks. This rebel child was cunning to be sure. And then Captain Rachel Garrett of the *Enterprise* did what she did best. The unexpected.

“Well, Your Majesty,” she sighed, “I can see that you have important government business to attend to... I will just excuse myself and try to make contact with Captain Lord of the *Ambassador*.” In a flurry of snow-white gowns and one chattering little bird, Ethereal forced her way across the apartment towards her desk. Taking this opportunity to make her escape, the captain too wound her way around furniture, she in the direction of the entrance portico. At her desk now, Ethereal pushed down a button on what appeared to be an ancient intercom device, in use long before wireless communicators.

“Ras, Ras,” she shouted, “report to my apartments at once!” She paused, but only briefly. “Ras, dammit, answer me... Do you hear me?” she now raged. Rachel Garrett had the feeling that Ethereal was only just beginning to suspect what she herself had already surmised. The Crown Empress had been duped again. Ras Tau’aman was no doubt aboard the runabout with Onovan and halfway to orbit by now; though the captain could not imagine why. Yet, she knew Onovan well enough to know that the El-Aurian would not have left her without a perfectly good reason. Garrett smirked as Ethereal called after her. “Captain please, please don’t leave me,” she pleaded. “Captain, *please*. I’m all alone here, Captain, please... don’t leave me, I have no one else... I’m scared.”

~ ~ ~ ~

The *Enterprise* dropped out of its warp jump right on the very fringes of the battle coordinates. Whistling quietly, Lt. Richard Castillo had scared even himself a wee bit with that little madcap maneuver. Another half-second at warp and they would have slammed into the *Kyushu* at billions of kilometers per hour; another full-second and they would have vaporized on the planet’s surface. Still, they were safe, and they now plied these hazardous waters enroute to the besieged *Starship Galaxy*. The battle raged around them, but still they did not fire. For the moment, they were not fired upon. Still the wildcard, the combatants waited uncertainly to see

what the *Enterprise's* first move would be. "Ensign Dardanelle," Commander Stadi spoke plainly, "any communication yet from the *Galaxy*?"

"No sir," the young man answered. "They are still under heavy assault and showing significant damage."

"Mr. Castillo, close to within five hundred meters." Stadi looked up to the comm sensors in the ceiling. "Engineering," he called out, "prepare to extend shields." There was a momentary lull in the fighting as the *Enterprise* muscled her way through the crowd. But it could not hope to last.

"Commander," Cicely called from Ops. "Three more starships are coming in..." She swiveled to face the viewscreen as the unmistakable graceful lines of the *Melbourne* came into view. Commodore Hanson had arrived at last, with the *Dolphin* and the *Uluru* in close formation. There were several tense seconds as everyone on the Bridge waited to see how this new variable would play out; what Hanson's reaction would be. To Stadi's great dismay, the commodore's flagship came in weapons hot. The three ships plowed into the fleet all guns a'blazin, stirring up the swarm like a rock through a hornet's nest.

"Right," Stadi said with resolve. "Mr. Castillo?"

"Coming into position now, sir."

"Engineering?"

"*I am extending shields, Commander,*" Skyl's voice filtered in. "*However, sir, I do not recommend this perilous course of action...*"

"Understood," Stadi clipped. For right or for wrong, he knew they had to do this much for Zora. She did not deserve this fate; her crew did not deserve to be pounded to bits by their own fleet. Hell, none of them deserved this and it had to be stopped. This enemy attacked from within and it had to be fought from within. The Empress Ethereal preyed on their deepest and darkest fears. No one in the Alpha Geminorum System was safe from her marauding mind. She had infected them all like a black plague, and now he would fight back. Stadi was about to order Plan B when the unexpected happened. Three photon torpedoes belched forth from the *Enterprise* and struck the *Starship Congress* square on. Overwhelmed by this superior firepower, the small ship heeled over and slammed into the *Eileithia* at horrific speed. These two ships spun away from each other, idle now, dead in space. The *Enterprise* had chosen, and the ragtag Federation fleet was not amused.

"Dammit, Ensign!" Stadi barked at Dardanelle. "I told you **NOT** to fire..."

"It wasn't me, sir, I swear," Andy protested wildly, "the order came from Weapons Control, below decks!"

"Shit, shit, shit," Stadi fumed. "Cicely, as discretely as you can, send a *human* security team to Weapons Control. Dardanelle, lock out the

control stations in that section... All commands come from the Bridge,” he scowled. Skyl would be quick to warn him that this procedure was not recommended either. If the Bridge should be destroyed, or everyone killed, the *Enterprise* would be left completely defenseless. It was a risk Commander Spencer Stadi was willing to take though, to maintain the common ground of peace. But peace it seemed was not yet quite at hand.

Taking advantage of another brief lull in the fighting, the loyal Federation Fleet all regrouped under the new leadership of Commodore J.P. Hanson and began an organized assault on the Defense Force vessels and their non-loyal Starfleet allies. Unfortunately, thanks to those three wayward torpedoes, the *Enterprise* had only just recently been reclassified as an enemy combatant to peace. The *Melbourne* now held Betazoid Commander Spencer Stadi as its primary target, aid and comfort to the *Galaxy* notwithstanding. The sudden strike caught everyone on the Bridge by surprise.

The sound of the assault was unbelievable and reverberated in everyone’s skull like a kettle drum. First came the draining energy beams of phaser fire, then several crippling blows from a host of photon torpedoes. The entire ship rocked and shuddered like an old oxcart on a cobblestone road. Circuits popped and hissed, a thin veil of grey smoke polluted the air. The sizzling of overloading electronics carried an eerie similarity to the sound of burning flesh. It made everyone’s skin crawl, even as they held onto anything they could to keep from falling to the floor. It was a truly frightening introduction to reality for unseasoned officers like Enyo and Cicely.

“*Engineering to Bridge,*” Skyl’s voice crackled in through a momentary lull. Stadi knew it could not be good news, the Vulcan engineer rarely called the Bridge with any good news.

“Bridge here, go ahead.” Stadi had planted himself firmly in the command chair and now maintained a white-knuckle grip on its armrests. Several more torpedoes shook the Bridge violently.

“*Sir, respectfully, we cannot maintain shields as they are currently deployed...*” Skyl’s voice was briefly cut off by a sickening screech. “*Shields failing, Commander,*” the Vulcan relayed with as much alarm as his heritage would allow.

“Dammit,” Stadi muttered.

“Sir,” Cicely cried out now. “Security is reporting a firefight outside Weapons Control...” He turned to face the girl, who was clutching her own station with fearful trepidity. Another phaser blast drained the shields to near zero.

“Still no communication with the *Galaxy*?”

“Negative, sir,” Cicely quavered. “Their energy readings are off the chart, sir. There’s something very serious going on down there.” Even as she said this, four more torpedoes were hurtled towards them, a gift from the *Starship Hathaway*. The first instantly collapsed the *Enterprise’s* shields. The second struck the hull just above the saucer’s outer rim. The third and fourth found their target and slammed into the *Galaxy* amidships. The *Enterprise* was rocked with such terrific force that nearly everyone was thrown from their chair. An aft science station exploded, sending Ensign Enyo sprawling backwards and over the upper-level rail. She landed unconscious next to Commander Stadi. Quickly checking her pulse, he climbed to his feet along with most everyone else. The Bridge was filled with smoke, and a cacophony of alarms blared in the relative silence. The attack was over for the moment, just time enough perhaps for them to lick their wounds. “Commander,” Cicely began uncertainly, but then with steadily increasing alarm. “Hull breach on Deck Five, sir, and,” she paused, “and I’m detecting an unusual neutrino surge coming from the *Galaxy*...”

“Oh my God,” Stadi sputtered. “Mr. Castillo...”

“On it, sir!”

“Cicely, can you, can we... can we get a transporter lock on anyone... on anybody?” Stadi was near panic now.

“There’s no time, sir! Core breach in progress!”

Spencer Stadi’s telepathic paracortex reached out to her now, to Zora. He could just barely sense her on the fringes of his reality. She was so close. Oh, how he had loved her, oh how he loved her still. He began to breathe short, rapid, tearful breaths. His mind continued to grasp for hers, but only in vain. He thought he caught one tiny, fleeting glimpse into her soul, an instant’s image of heaven, before she was vaporized in the time that it takes for a heart to beat once. This hit him like a bullet to the brain. He staggered backwards and fell into the command chair. Zora was gone, and as the shockwave enveloped the *Enterprise*, enveloped him, he realized fear was just the beginning of loneliness and discontent.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### FEDERATION STARSHIP DOLPHIN HOLDING STATION ONE LIGHT-HOUR FROM ETHOS ONE-HALF HOUR BEFORE THE BATTLE

“Well, how do I look?” Vice President Austin Kelley stood before a full-length mirror and stared into the dull-grey eyes of his personal secretary reflected next to him. He was dressed in his best white suit, and it contrasted sharply with his dark Greek physique. His jet-black hair had been carefully combed for a change, and it hung down to his shoulders in long flowing sleek waves. He held his head tilted slightly to the right in its usual way and fidgeted with his black tie for the tenth time. He had to admit even to himself that he looked good, when he put a little effort into it.

“Well?” he said again, smiling. Amy had been very quiet for most of their journey from the Manzar Colony, and this bothered him.

“It’ll do, sir,” she responded absently in her heavy Cockney accent.

“It’ll do?” he huffed, then turned to face her and gripped her by the upper arms. “All right, out with it... Speak your mind, you know how much I depend on your council.” From her diminutive height, Amy was forced to look up now into his sharp olive eyes.

“It’s just,” she began.

“Yeasss...” he prodded.

“It’s just, well, sir,” Amy stammered, “are you sure you’re ready for this? The responsibilities, I mean.” Austin Kelley had only become vice president on a whim really. The dark horse candidate; in it for the travel, the prestige... the women. But the real burdens of office had quickly overwhelmed him. The appearances, the meetings, the conferences; the never-ending parade of diplomats. One hundred fifty major worlds, dozens of minor ones. Billions upon billions of people scattered across thousands of light-years. All this and so much more now rested on his shoulders, and Amy knew the man well enough to wonder if he was truly up to the task of President.

“With your help, my dear, anything is possible.” He smiled down at her and squeezed lightly as an added measure of reassurance.

“Sir, this is serious,” she scolded, somewhat mournfully. “Before you take that oath, you need to be ready. The whole of the Federation is counting on you, sir. President Joran’s death is having a profound effect on the fabric of our society and I’m not sure you understand that sir.” He

released her now, and she looked away with shame. Amy knew it was not her place to talk to him such, but though not necessarily friends, their relationship had developed its own unique form of closeness. They had spent many long, lonely hours together on starships sailing to the farthest corners of the vast Federation. It was a lonely life for them both.

Austin Kelley crossed his stateroom and stopped at the viewport to stare solemnly out at the stars. He often wondered how he had fallen into these roles of leadership his entire life. He had certainly never asked to be in charge of anything, but people trusted him and he quite often found himself thrust into positions of power before he really knew what he was getting himself into. From local government, to state government, then finally to planetary government, he had never expected to be anything more than an ordinary citizen. He had certainly never expected to go any higher than Earth's representative to the High Council; now he was expected to be their president.

"Amy," he said quietly, "I do need your help. I need you to keep me grounded, to remind me who I am and just how important I am expected to be."

"I'm not sure I can, sir," she languished, "but I'll try." She walked up next to him now and in a rare show of tenderness, put her arm around his waist, he returning the favor. "I know you'll do more than that," he teased. "Y'know, I wasn't kidding when I asked you to marry me."

She laughed.

"I'm serious," he continued. "That's the type of support I need, the thing that's been missing in my life."

"You're missing a lot more than that," Amy giggled, her heavy British accent putting a strong emphasis on her words.

"*Bridge to Vice President Kelley...*" The comm call caused the two to separate suddenly, as if caught in the act.

"Yes, Captain, go ahead," Kelley answered with a smile.

"*Sir, Starfleet One has informed us that Ambassador Sarek and the Privy Council are prepared for your arrival.*"

"Very good, Captain, we will transport shortly... Kelley out." He looked to Amy who stood sheepishly now several feet away. "You will stand by my side?" he asked her with a pleadingly boyish look.

"Yes, sir, Mr. President... always."

"Then let us go meet our destiny together," he said, taking her by the hand and marching out of the stateroom, whispering the presidential oath as he went.

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Dressed in his finest robes, Ambassador Sarek stood in his stateroom aboard *Starfleet One* and stared out the window at the nearby *Starship Dolphin*. Austin Kelley was aboard that ship. The vice president was one of the most curiously flawed individuals the Vulcan had ever met. In many ways, Austin Kelley reminded Sarek of Spock's most peculiar companion, Dr. Leonard H. McCoy; only Kelley had not the fortunate temperance of Starfleet training. This made the vice president a human in its most purified form. As Ambassador to Earth, Sarek had spent his entire life studying this species and their complexities, yet their erratic, emotional behavior still continued to confound him at times.

Accepting that history must take its course, Sarek rarely speculated about future events that were outside the definable. Austin Kelley though was an *indefinable* variable and Sarek could not help but wonder how this bizarre man's presidency would play out; especially falling in the footsteps of such an auspicious man as Kalomi Joran. Joran's presidency was the culmination of the Golden Age, with a vision and a style that perfectly matched this glorious era of reason and sensibility. Kelley on the other hand seemed to lack any sense or reason. He was an enigma; the humans would call him a 'wild card'. Whatever one chose to call it, Sarek mused, the next few months would prove to be most fascinating.

The door chime came at last, and he bade the caller to enter. It was the human female, quite young to be sure, with a shapely figure and shoulder-length brown hair that hung tremulously in her eyes. She seemed to be of a nervous nature and moved in a somewhat jerky motion that stood in sharp contrast to her latent beauty. Sarek eyed her speculatively for a moment with a single upswept eyebrow. It was rare for the Vulcan to host even the barest hint of an emotion, but the sudden death of his friend had after all unsettled him. He had already resolved that he did not like this woman. She gave him a most 'uneasy' sensation. His sharp scrutiny curiously seemed to make her all that more nervous.

"You, uh, you asked to see me, Ambassador?" Her voice was quiet, almost what the humans would call 'meek'.

"Doctor Ann Grey, if I am not mistaken," he said sternly, and she nodded. "Doctor, you have been less than forthcoming with the results of your autopsy. I require them now." "Oh, oh, I am, I'm really sorry, sir," Ann said nervously, tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear. "I, uh, I just figured with the upcoming, ummm, inauguration (she snapped her fingers) that it could wait, sir." Perhaps he had been mistaken, perhaps Austin Kelley was not indeed one of the most curiously flawed individuals he had ever met. A keen observer of humanity, Sarek found this quivering young girl to be most fascinating. She was hiding something, a dark secret that extended far beyond this tiny starship.

*“Bridge to Ambassador Sarek...”*

“This is Sarek.”

*“The Vice President and his personal secretary are ready to beam aboard, sir.”* Sarek’s eyes narrowed as he bored deeper into Ann Grey’s soul. He could see her physically cower away from him as his scrutiny deepened.

“You may proceed with transport, Captain,” he said finally. “Please conduct the Vice

President and Miss Tyler to the president’s office. I shall endeavor to join them there... Sarek out.” He marched suddenly towards the door, startling Ann Grey and causing her to jump. “You will walk with me, Doctor,” he ordered, passing her close by. Hesitantly, she turned, then had to jog to catch up to the ambassador’s billowing dark robes.

“Doctor,” he said when she’d finally caught up, “your report, please.”

“B-b-but, sir,” she stammered breathlessly, “I-I-I don’t have it *with* me, sir.”

“Then you shall convey your findings to me verbally, Doctor.” He was intentionally taking long strides, forcing her to keep up, and using his authority to intimidate her. Sarek had learned much from these humans.

“Wh-what, *now*, sir?” Ann sputtered as they rounded a corner. She fought feverishly to keep her hair from her eyes.

“Now, Doctor. Time is of the essence,” he forewarned, “I have much that requires my attention.”

“Wa-wa-well,” she began, “the autopsy confirmed my, my initial findings, sir. The President died from a cerebral embolism.” By now she was hopelessly out of breath and was convinced that they had taken several wrong turns. *Were they lost?*

“You do not sound certain, Doctor,” Sarek prodded. “What were the modal causes?”

Did the President’s previous physical tests show any signs of increased circulatory pressure to the arterial walls? Did the President’s familial records indicate any genetic anomalies that may have accounted for his acute condition? Did the President’s toxicology results suggest any nefarious causes for his premature demise?” They rounded another corner. Ann Grey said nothing. Sarek stopped.

“I suggest, Doctor,” Sarek scolded, “that you reconduct your autopsy with increased scrutiny. We are dealing with the mysterious death of the President of the United Federation of Planets. The eyes of the galaxy are upon us, *Doctor*. You are dismissed.” Flustered beyond words, Ann Grey turned and fled. Sarek’s discerning gaze followed her until she rounded a far-off corner. Yes, indeed he did not like that woman. The uneasy sensation he got from her vexed him. He would have to meditate on this.

Breathing a heavy sigh, he turned and rounded the final corner to the president's office.

When he entered, Austin Kelley, Amy Tyler, and the entire Privy Council had already gathered and were chit-chatting quietly amongst themselves awaiting the ambassador's arrival. The large room at the bow of the ship was fairly filled to capacity with these dignitaries, select Starfleet officers and members of the crew, plus a vast host of reporters that would catalog this event with a scrutiny all their own. Kalomi Joran had hated this trailing mob of gossip artists and spin doctors. A 'swarm of locusts' or more simply 'vultures' had invariably been the president's exact words. Sarek sighed again at thought of his lost friend as the room fell into a dead silence.

"Mr. Vice President, it is agreeable to see you again."

"Likewise, Mr. Ambassador," Austin Kelley said cordially. Sarek immediately noticed a change in this man and his eyes were instinctively drawn to the unsung personal secretary, Amy Tyler. She was perhaps the only level-headed influence in the vice president's life.

There was a new possibility that the transition of government would not be as challenging as he'd envisioned.

"Miss Tyler," Sarek nodded, and she returned the favor, perhaps in some way understanding his hidden thoughts regarding her importance.

"Let us begin," Sarek announced solemnly. "Mr. Haan, the Constitution please." The short and weaselly little Internal Security Advisor forced his way out of the pressing crowd and presented Sarek with an ancient, rolled up piece of parchment. The time was twelve-noon exactly.

Extending the parchment towards Austin Kelley, Sarek raised his right hand and waited. Hesitantly at first, the vice president stepped forward at last with Amy Tyler faithfully by his side. He gently grasped the other end of the roll, raising his own trembling right hand. Deliberately, and with a clear voice that filled the room, Sarek began:

"I do solemnly swear...

"I do solemnly swear...

that I accept and shall faithfully execute... that I accept and shall faithfully execute... the office of the President of the United Federation of Planets... the office of the President of the United Federation of Planets... and will to the best of my abilities... and will to the best of my abilities...

preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of this united Federation... preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of this united Federation... with every fiber of my being."

with every fiber of my being."

As Sarek released the Constitution and all of its inherent powers into the hands of President Austin Kelley, they had no way of knowing that a civil war now raged beneath them that would truly inaugurate this new president and would continue to test the resolve of a peoples united to maintain the common ground of peace.

~ ~ ~ ~

By some sheer act of genius, Lt. Commander Skyl had somehow managed to get the *Enterprise's* shields back up mere moments before the *Galaxy* exploded beneath them. Nevertheless, they had still been nearly on top of the stricken vessel and the Vulcan engineer's control stations were now showing multiple shield impacts and one massive electromagnetic pulse. Skyl stood in his small office like the Rock of Gibraltar as the energy wave swept through Engineering and tripped every single relay as it passed. For a moment, everything went dark and silent, but only for a moment. In a rebound effect that was inversely proportional to the force of the explosion, the *Enterprise* tumbled away like a rock off a cliff.

Crewmembers screamed around him as the deck shook in the darkness. His heightened Vulcan senses tuned to the maximum, Skyl listened intently for the telltale signs of a hull breach, but fortunately none came. The chief engineer had a momentary, fleeting fear that his ship might actually break in half as the bulkheads and cross-frames shrieked around him. He had a brief sensation of vertigo as the gravitational fields wavered and the great vessel began to spin uncontrollably. At long last, the emergency lighting flickered on, and Skyl could at least make a visual survey of his surroundings.

Most of the other crewmembers were either lying on the floor, or on their knees clutching to whatever they could find. The warp core had stalled and was uncharacteristically dark and forbidding. He ran his fingers over the darkened control boards and got nothing. He knew the humans at this point would likely cross their fingers and hold their breath, but the unsuperstitious Vulcan was content to simply wait patiently for what he knew would come. With a beep, his console flashed to life and began to display the reboot progress of the main computers. Slowly, one by one, Skyl watched systems come back online, crosschecking each other as they went. The technology had been proven time and again for generations, and it worked.

As expected with an EM pulse of this size, both internal and external communications and sensors were still offline, but he was reassured to see that the engines had automatically started to dump their excess heat and energy. Skyl could just imagine what the *Enterprise* must look like from the

outside, swirling in a cloud of venting gasses like the mythological sand-dragon of ancient Vulcan yore. Federation starships were remarkably resilient and could fairly well take care of themselves, but they still needed that biological touch to keep them alive. It was a symbiotic relationship between man and machine that required all the parts to make a whole. As such, Skyl had to first pull his team back together before he could begin the unenviable task of putting his ship back together; and he wasted no time in doing it.

Zora was gone – and as the shockwave enveloped him, enveloped the *Enterprise*,

Spencer Stadi realized that fear was just the beginning of loneliness and discontent. The EM pulse knocked out all the lights, and for a breathless moment, an eerie stillness settled over the Bridge; but it could not last. The shock wave struck next and threw everyone out of their chairs, tossing them around the command center like ping-pong balls in the dark. The dead hulk of the *Enterprise* let out such a horrific shriek that everyone screamed, expecting a hull breach to take them at any second. The gravitational fields wavered, only adding to the chaos within this unnatural nightmare. Spencer Stadi was afraid; not only for himself, but for his valiant crew. And then all was quiet in the dark.

At long last, the emergency lighting flickered on, and Stadi could at least make a visual survey of his surroundings. He found himself first, laying on the floor next to Enyo. The young Andorian girl was still unconscious but moaning softly. Lt. Castillo and Ensign Andy Dardanelle had landed side by side, behind the ACP at the front of the Bridge. They had apparently knocked heads as they both now rubbed gingerly at mirror-image goose eggs on their respective foreheads. Rising to his knees, he could see Cicely climbing slowly to her feet on the upper level, as were two other junior crewmembers. They were all still here, they had survived.

Slowly, one by one, consoles and control panels beeped and began their reboot process. Stadi knew their first order of business would have to be to find out just where in the hell they were. The longer they flew blind, the more the danger of colliding with another starship. Forcing himself to his feet, he thought better of it, and plopped unceremoniously into the command chair. Castillo and Dardanelle did the same just ahead of him, and finally, Cicely too, back at Ops. Glancing down at Enyo with sad concern, the commander touched the comm button on his armrest to call for help... but got nothing. With a sigh, he ran a hand through his hair – she would have to wait.

“Mr. Castillo?” he said glumly, clearing a frog out of his throat.

“Uh, yes, sir,” the lieutenant answered, still rubbing furtively at the bump on his head. “It looks like Commander Skyl has already begun to stabilize our rotation and orbital path. No ships reported in our immediate airspace, though it looks like we must’ve cleared the *Melbourne* by just inches, sir.”

“Mr. Dardanelle, are you alright?” The young ensign was at present waving a hand in front of his eyes, apparently checking his vision.

“Uh, yes, Commander... Sorry,” Andy said sheepishly, his one-quarter Vulcan side embarrassed by his three-quarter human side, which was often a strange sort of twist for his psyche to handle.

The commander could sense this and allowed himself a thin smile. “Status of the Fleet, Ensign?” Stadi asked now. His telepathic soundings could also tell that Dardanelle and Castillo had already become fast friends, and that they were now both fighting back the urge to laugh at each other for their mutual bump on the head.

“The battle appears to be over for the moment, sir. All ships are holding station and nursing their wounds.” Indeed, the destruction of the *Galaxy* had been a sobering wakeup call for all. Ethos had now claimed three starships and Spencer Stadi couldn’t help but wonder how many more would fall into her snare. And by her, he did not mean the planet. The Empress Ethereal was behind this, and somehow, she must be stopped. He would do this for Zora if nothing else.

The overhead comms crackled suddenly and let in a familiar, albeit staticky voice.

*“Lieutenant Commander Skyl to Bridge...”*

“Skyl, good to hear your voice,” Stadi replied, then looked down again at the labored breathing of Ensign Enyo.

*“Likewise, Commander. Internal communications have been restored, however...”*

“Stand by please,” Stadi cut in, then touched a button on his armrest. “Emergency Medical Team to the Bridge,” he announced. He had to admit he had been quite taken by this brave young girl at his feet, though the chain of command (and age) would never allow it to go any farther than that. He still wanted to see her cared for, and somehow this now took precedence above all else; perhaps as it should.

“Skyl,” he continued, “what about external communications? Can we contact the *Melbourne*?”

*“Negative, Commander,”* the Vulcan crackled in. *“Electromagnetic interference would prevent that.”*

“Understood,” Stadi sighed.

*"I should also report, sir, that the warp core is in auto-shutdown. It will take approximately one hour to reinitialize the injectors, Commander, before we can attempt a restart."*

"Skyl," Stadi forewarned, "we may not have an hour... get it started, whatever it takes."

*"I shall endeavor to do so, sir... Skyl out."* Straight and to the point, Stadi envisioned that the Vulcan was already fast at work. He was much relieved to see the turbolift doors open now, and a medical team pour out onto the Bridge. Three of them went immediately to Enyo, a fourth to Castillo and Dardanelle, and the commander waved off a fifth, directing him instead to upper level to check out the others. With a beep from the ACP, the main viewscreen rebooted at last and they could finally see out into space. "Ensign Dardanelle, what is our shield status?" Stadi narrowed his eyes at the small fleet of starships and nearly two dozen light gunships that just waited out there now for someone to make the first move.

"Well," Andy said, studying his readouts. "The ventral shields took the brunt of the explosion, sir... they are," he sighed, "sporadic at twenty percent, sir. Dorsal at seventy percent and climbing."

"Not good, Ensign," Stadi conceded. "Coordinate with Engineering... we're in the middle of a tinderbox here and all we need is a spark."

"Yes, sir," Andy said, somewhat absently, then: "Sir, I am picking up a small craft coming up from the surface... It appears to be a runabout... Ident Code indicates the USS *Genesee*." He swiveled to face Stadi with a slightly puzzled look on his face.

"Thank the gods," Stadi whispered. "It must be the captain at last. Cicely, can you hail them?"

"Negative, sir, still too much interference."

"Damn..." he muttered as he watched the four med-techs carry Enyo off the Bridge.

"Commander," she continued, "I'm not picking up any human life signs."

Stadi turned now to face her, slowly rising to his feet. He was beginning to get again that very bad feeling right down to the core of his soul. He began to sense once more that otherworldly force, almost sinister in nature. But this time it was slightly different. Something more, something deeper. They were all in grave danger here, even more so than before.

"Who *are* you picking up?" he said slowly, with ever-increasing dread.

"An El-Aurian, an Ethosian male, and what appears to be a child, sir, a Betazoid child... I don't understand..."

"Oh my God," Castillo sputtered from the helm.

"Mr. Castillo, lay in an intercept course *now*."

“Already on it, sir...”

“Stadi to Engineering... we need warp drive, Skyl, we really *really* need warp drive...”

“*Commander, as I stated...*”

“I mean *now* Mister!” Stadi shouted into the comm, just as the Bridge was rocked by a fresh wave of photon torpedoes.

~ ~ ~ ~

Without regard for his captain, or for Ras Tau’aman, or for the Prime Directive, Lt.

Commander Onovan had launched the runabout *Genesee* towards outer space and to safety. Yet, in his mind’s eye, he felt perfectly justified. To him, he was fleeing to safety, fleeing his homeworld to save his son, fleeing the Borg. In reality however, he had just abducted Ethaniel, Prince of Ethos, twin brother of the Crown Empress; not to mention Ras Tau’aman, the Empress’s own First Lord of the Ascendant. By all accounts, these were court-marshal offenses, but he nevertheless felt justified. Out of control of his own senses, the El-Aurian was under the complete control of a twelve-year-old Betazoid child.

As the runabout lifted off, Ras stumbled to the rear of the cabin and plastered his face to the alumglass. Nothing on Ethos was known to fly, save for the birds. He was wrought with an overwhelming sense of vertigo as the craft spun suddenly, then shot off, nose towards the heavens. Yet, there was no sense of motion whatsoever, which only added to Ras’s dizzying loss of equilibrium. Like a child marveling over his first-ever view of aerial photographs of his home, the old man stood transfixed as the Palladium receded into the distance below him. The Inner Harbor was obscured in smoke, and he could see now the two dreadnoughts firing their cannons. He could see the Palladium’s defensive weapons firing back. But he could hear nothing.

It was only now that Ras Tau’aman got that first sensation that he had passed on into that next realm. He thought it funny that he had not immediately recognized his moment of passing. His heart must have failed after all, up there in the cold damp of the Western Antiquity Tower. That strange tingling and bizarre heavenly light must have been the crossing and now this Ascendant was taking his soul home, taking him to be with his family again in the Orbs. Pulling out his handkerchief once more, he wiped the tears from his eyes. He had been so tired, so old and worn out. What a blessed relief it would be to be welcomed at last into heaven. He would be at peace at long last, with no more care for mortal affairs of state.

“Ras,” Onovan called out, trying to gain the old man’s attention. They were at a terrific height now, passing above the clouds and high over the ocean. The whole of the First Continent was passing away into memory. The beauty and the glory of it filled him with perfect peace and contentedness.

“Ras,” Onovan called again, this time reaching him in his trance. The old man turned and saw that Onovan and the boy now stood before the narrow passageway that led to the front of this heavenly chariot. So, they would be his guide.

“Come with me, Ras, to the cockpit. Everything is going to be all right,” Onovan said in a calm soothing voice, totally misinterpreting the old man’s tears. The First Lord of the Ascendant took one last fleeting look out the window to the world below, towards his old life, then let it all go with a heavy sigh. Turning now, he shuffled across the soft carpeted floor to follow Onovan and Ethaniel through the passageway. It was narrow and dimly lit, but not cold and dank like the passageway to the Crown Prince’s former cell. They emerged into the ‘cock-pit’ almost at once, a much smaller room and as equally dimly lit. There were three seats here, almost as if the chariot had been personally designed for its divine purpose. Each seat was surrounded by multifaceted banks of blinking colourful lights. “Ras,” Onovan gestured, “take a seat here, beside me, at my right hand.” Onovan sat down at the forward seat to the left and Ethaniel moved in close behind him, directing his moves almost like a puppeteer. Ras hesitated uncertainly. He did not trust that child, even after all those decades of imprisonment. And Ras could not quite grasp what role the Crown Prince played in his own very personal ascendance. To serve as guide? Unlikely. To speak on his behalf? Perhaps. Warily, but with ever increasing resignation, he moved to the front of the craft and sat.

Out the sweeping forward windows there was naught but the everlasting blue-green of the never-ending sky. They were far, far above even the clouds now and Ras knew instinctively that they would soon arrive at the Orbs of the Ascendants. They could not be far, because to him they had never seemed very far; both to look at, or by their outward warmth and radiance. He was beginning to make out two dull red dots though that he had never seen before and couldn’t quite comprehend. They looked like the eyes of the albino pantha beast that grew wild on the Second Continent. Could this be the Abode of the False Prophets? What Ras could have never known was that these were the distant red dwarf companions to the four primaries.

Ras continued to marvel at these crimson devils for several more long seconds, and then it happened. The wispy green-blue atmosphere gave way suddenly to the infinite blackness of deep space, star-studded in

all its splendor. Ras's mouth fell open and his throat went dry. Ethosians rarely knew complete darkness; they shied away from the deep caves and their homes were always permeated by some diffuse sunlight, even at full Opposition. A deep-rooted instinctual fear of the unknown is core to any being of any species. Ras Tau'aman's transcendence had now become a living nightmare. Those dull-red eyes continued to stare at him in the dark, calling for him, beckoning him to atone for his myriad of sins. His years of service to the Crown Empress had led him to this, and he wept. He wept, and then he prayed, and then the craft banked abruptly to the left and those haunting dull-red orbs disappeared from his view and were replaced by two of the much closer primaries. Still, he wept. This time however, he wept for the forgiveness so readily given. His mother had told him long, long ago that with penitence all sins in the end could be forgiven, and for the first time in his life Ras believed her.

"What in the hell?" Onovan said suddenly, startling Ras back to reality. The dark man was staring intently at the blinking colourful lights. He then looked up and squinted out into that unending darkness. Always curious, Ras too leaned forward to peer out. Off in the distance, he could see a myriad of closer little white points all swirling around each other like a school of pinwheel fish. Still brighter flashes permeated the swarm in a random pattern like nothing he had seen. At a loss, Ras had no memory of any such bizarre phenomenon ever appearing in the ancient texts. In fact, his knowledge of ancient belief had ended when the atmosphere had ended. With the exception of the distant Orbs, none of this bore any seemed sense of reality.

"It appears my sister has been busy," Ethaniel chuckled in the high-toned cherub giggle of a child.

"Your sister is responsible for all of this?" Onovan said stupefied, with a broad sweep of his arm.

"She does tend to overdo," the child clucked.

"Then you must have her put a stop to it at once!" Onovan demanded.

The child laughed. "Whatever would I want to do that for? Then surely she would know of my escape." He pointed now to a glowing glimmer of light. Look there," he said, "your commander, my kindred, is coming for us now. Your starship shall prove most adequate to the task of serving as command post to my Empire."

"Wait, wha, but wha..." Onovan stuttered.

*Now Father, Ethaniel manipulated, the Fleet shall continue to engage the Borg until we can mount an appropriate defense.*

"Yes, my Son," Onovan merely replied.

Quietly observing this with a growing sense of dread, Ras Tau'aman was slowly beginning to suspect that not all was as it seemed here. With decades of careful practice in dealing with the Crown Empress, Ras was still controlling his own thoughts to the extent that he still remained largely ignored by this imp of a child. He knew full-well what the Crown Prince was capable of and just what it had taken to imprison him that half-century ago. The boy was a danger to every living conscious being around him and after nearly seventy-five years, Ras had had quite enough of it. Whether this was the true path to Ascendance or not, whether he was dead, alive, or caught forever in some sort of netherworld, Ras knew that it was time for him to act.

With a sudden move that startled him with the agility of seemed youth, he was on his feet and throwing the wisp of a child against the bulkhead before Onovan could even react. With a dull thud, the boy hit the floor unconscious, even as Ras fell back into his chair, winded and faint. The path to Ascendance never comes easy, and never without true provocation.

Far, far below them, and high up in the South Tower of the Palladium, the Ascendant Goddess Ethereal, Crown Empress of the peoples of Ethos, felt the steel spike of her brother's consciousness falter slightly deep within her paracortex. In the barest half-second that it took for him to lose consciousness, she felt his lifeforce shift quite suddenly from the Western Antiquity Tower where it should be, to the runabout far, far overhead. Ras, Ras Tau'aman was with him too, both abducted to space by that dark, dark man. A lifetime of pent-up rage welled up within her mind, and she thrust this outwards now towards an unsuspecting fleet.

In Main Engineering, Lt. Commander Skyl was about to protest again Commander

Stadi's foolhardy orders that they must have warp drive immediately. But his protests were soon silenced by the familiar thuds of photon torpedoes impacting on the weakened shields. Again, standing like the Rock of Gibraltar, Skyl braced himself as the ship shook around him. The darkened warp core thrashed against its moorings almost taunting him with its unfamiliar idleness. Monitoring the Bridge comm relays, he could hear Ensign Dardanelle report the grim statistics of their shield status. He could see this information displayed on his own screens, and even the Vulcan had to admit that their situation looked dire.

*"Engineering... Report!"* Stadi shouted at him.

“We shall attempt a cold restart of the warp reactor, Commander,” Skyl said rather matter-of-factly. It must have been a little too matter-of-factly for the commander, Skyl quickly deduced.

“*Just flip the damn switch, Skyl!*” Stadi shouted over the thunderous noise. “Lieutenant Stroud, please assist me,” Skyl said calmly as the ship was struck again, this time by a fresh phaser blast. The lieutenant fought his way across Engineering to join Skyl in his small office adjacent to the warp core. The two now stood side by side before a large schematic of the seventeen-storey colossus.

“Lieutenant, please monitor interstitial pressure within the Dilithium Crystal Chamber. I will begin by injecting antimatter at fifteen parts-per-million. Alert me when core pressure reaches sixteen thousand kilopascals.”

“But, sir,” Stroud began to protest, “we risk a flameout at that pressure... it’s not enough to contain the reaction!” Even as he said this, four more torpedoes struck the *Enterprise*, the fourth blasting its way completely through the shields and striking the hull just several decks above them. The sound alone hit Engineering like a freight train. Circuits popped and entire workstations exploded. With a single hand, Skyl held Stroud fast to his position; and while techs screamed and the facility began to fill with acrid smoke, the chief engineer said only one thing...

“Injecting reactants now, Lieutenant.”

On the Bridge, that last torpedo hit sent everyone crashing to the floor again. Lying on his back as he was, Commander Spencer Stadi could sense the rage welling up within him, could sense it in the minds of the crew, could sense it in the minds of the Fleet. It threatened to overwhelm him with its intensity, threatened to cause him to order the crew to do very bad things. He knew instinctively that they must not return fire, that they must remain neutral. Yet the rage within him wanted to bring all the *Enterprise’s* formidable weapons to bear on this impudent little fleet. He wanted to strike out, to lash out against anyone and anything around him.

With the destruction of the *Starship Galaxy* as a sobering wakeup call, the battle would have most certainly petered out if it had not been for the sudden arrival of the runabout *Genesee*. Now, with so much rage flying about from mind to primal mind, the Battle of Ethos had degenerated into an all-out free-for-all. Drowning in a sea of confusion, anger, and distrust, everyone was now firing on everyone else without any prior cause or provocation. So brutal was this insidious mind-game that the *Starship Queen Anne* had taken it upon herself to simply hold station, and began to pluck off the two-seat light gunships one at a time, almost for sport. As the level of damage increased, time was running out for them all.

“Commander,” Cicely cried out from Ops, “Security reports that the firefight outside Weapons Control is escalating, sir. They report that they are being outflanked now by a second force of apparently all Betazoid crewmembers.”

Both within and without, this civil war was rapidly spiraling out of anyone’s control. Both within and without, Commander Spencer Stadi was struggling to maintain control of his own senses. Forcing himself to stand, he grabbed Richard Castillo’s left arm with both hands and jerked the lieutenant off the deck, then tossed him unceremoniously back into the chair behind the helm. His telepathic paracortex could sense Castillo’s own rage begin to build now at being manhandled such. Calm, Stadi forced his mind to calm and projected this outwards now as best he could towards Castillo’s own mind. Sensing this on perhaps a subconscious level, the lieutenant did indeed begin to calm himself, and the duo began at last to reinforce this in each other.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Stadi merely said softly, the words having evident compound meaning. “Distance to *Genesee* please.”

“Closing to within 100 kilometers, sir.”

“Cicely, are you able to get a lock on them yet?”

“Barely, sir, EM interference is still high.”

“Ensign Dardanelle?”

“For the moment, sir, the rest of the fleet is leaving us alone...”

“But that’ll change soon enough,” Stadi warned, “as soon as they realize we have one of the royal twins.”

“Commander,” Cicely called out from Ops, “I am picking up a transmission from the Captain’s communicator.” She swiveled now to face him with a certain amount of fear growing on her green-skinned features. “It’s being broadcast in the clear, sir.”

“Shit!” Stadi blurted out, still fighting the rage within as the message began repeating itself on all subspace channels. It came to them in the cherub tones of a girlchild, no more than twelve.

*“Starship Enterprise, you will return my brother to me or your Captain will most surely die at my own hands.”*

“Commander,” Dardanelle cried out, “reading multiple sensor scans from the Fleet... they’re on to us, sir!”

“Receiving multiple hails, sir,” Cicely added. “Most are demanding that we turn the child over to them at once.”

“We don’t even have the little bastard yet,” Castillo shot out, on the verge again of losing his temper once and for all.

“Okay everybody,” Stadi admonished, “let’s see if we can hold it together just a few more minutes... Cicely, forego the transporters and order

the *Genesee* to make a combat landing... Mr. Castillo, bring our ass-end too and open the aft hanger bay..."

"We'll have to lower shields," Castillo clucked as an ominous forewarning. "Ensign Dardanelle, now may be the time to put up a fight," Stadi replied, perhaps equally as ominous. "Load all forward torpedo tubes."

As the *Enterprise* spun around, they could all see the ramshackle fleet approach on the main viewscreen. Fortunately, most of the fighting had subsided at the moment to just a few random potshots here and amongst their scattered ranks. Unfortunately, though, these scattered ranks were quickly forming up into a single, battle-hardened regiment, with their sights all trained now on a single target – the Federation Starship *Enterprise*. Commander Stadi forced his mind again to calm itself. He could sense that the rage of the diabolical Crown Empress had somewhat slackened, and thus had begun to slowly loosen its grip on those around him. Perhaps now was the time for Plan B; if he could hold his crew together long enough.

"Bridge to Engineering..." Stadi called out gingerly, sitting down somewhat tentatively on the edge of the command chair.

"Commander Skyl here, sir."

"Skyl," Stadi pleaded, "please tell me you have the warp core back online."

*"Commander, attempting a cold restart of the warp reactor is tenuous and dangerous work requiring..."*

"Skyl..."

"Yes, Commander?"

"I am *not* amused."

*"Yes, sir, another time perhaps... Warp reactor operating at peak efficiency. All power available at your discretion, sir."*

"Thank you," Stadi groaned, covering his face with an open hand and sliding back fully into the command chair. Fine time for the Vulcan engineer to develop a sense of humor he thought quietly to himself.

"*Genesee* will dock in ten seconds, sir," Cicely announced plainly.

"Fleet will enter combat range in fifteen seconds, sir," Dardanelle added woefully.

"I'm lowering the shields," Castillo shook his head.

"Cicely," Stadi whispered breathlessly, "initiate Plan B now."

"All decks, all stations," she began to announce, "initiate Plan B... repeat: all decks, all stations, initiate Plan B now."

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. For a moment, all of the rage was replaced by an almost euphoric feeling of wellbeing. For the moment, every single Betazoid mind on the ship acted as one, even those caught up in the firefight at Weapons Control. For a moment, they each concentrated all of this telepathic energy onto one single individual; the one

person responsible for it all, the Ascendant Goddess Ethereal, Crown Empress of the peoples of the planet Ethos. Almost like a drug, Stadi could feel the euphoria wash away all his pain, all his anger, all his distrust. For a moment, all of the rage was replaced by a feeling of perfect peace and contentedness. For a moment, Ethereal felt this too, and ever so slightly, loosened her grip, but only for a moment.

“*Genesee* is aboard, sir!” Cicely shouted with glee.

“Mr. Castillo,” Stadi said with renewed resolve, eyeing the fleet as it hesitated uncertainly on the fringes of combat range, “is your course laid in and set?”

“Yes, sir, it is” he acknowledged, “but you know this is gonna suck right?”

“Can’t be helped, Lieutenant... *Do it*,” Stadi ordered, and the *Enterprise* plunged headlong into the abyss once more, and perhaps for the final time.

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“What do you mean you don’t know what’s going on, Admiral?” Vice President Austin Kelley had only been President for less than an hour when news of the horrific battle began to filter in from the orbit of Ethos. His large office aboard *Starfleet One* had immediately been cleared of all but the Privy Council. Anxiously awaiting details, the assembled group all stared now with drilling eyes trained on Fleet Admiral Xavier Hawk. Beads of angry sweat forming across his brow, Hawk had never been one for the hotseat. He was a man used to being in charge, being in command, and certainly *not* used to being lectured to by a man like Austin Kelley. This usurper to the throne was weak, he was soft, and Admiral Hawk did not like his tone.

“As I stated, *Mr. President*, there appears to be a great deal of interference in orbit...

Communications are random and intermittent at best.”

“Well surely, *sir*,” Austin Kelley countered, “you must have had some communication with Commodore Hanson as he breezed past us at full impulse, sweeping up two more heavily armed starships as he went.” The president glared at him now becoming increasingly irritated with the man’s cavalier attitude. They were talking about civil war here for pity’s sake, not just some skirmish along the Cardassian border.

“I gave the Commodore full discretion to tend to the situation as he saw fit, *sir*.” Admiral Hawk was fairly bristling at the mane now. He would be damned if he’d let this fop of a man dictate *Starfleet* policy to him. Presidents came and went, good ones *and* bad ones, but the Admiralty endured.

“Well, it certainly would be helpful for the Commander in Chief to know just what that situation is, would it not, Admiral?” The rest of the Privy Council remained uncharacteristically silent as this interchange went on. They all knew Admiral Hawk well enough to know that this had become a battle of wills. Even the weaselly little Internal Security Advisor, Mr. Haan, sat quietly by, though he was more amused than anything. He didn’t like Austin Kelley either and he expected this man’s presidency to be as short as the upcoming election.

“Sarek,” Austin Kelley finally resigned, dropping both his hands on the desktop with a frustrated thud. Sarek briefly closed his eyes, and inwardly, the Vulcan sighed. Admiral Hawk had won this round; he feared that Austin Kelley had already lost the battle.

Sweeping forward gracefully in his long dark robes, Sarek moved to the end of the desk to place himself, at least partially, in the line of fire.

“Fleet Admiral Hawk,” he began calmly, “for the benefit of us all, perhaps a brief tactical overview would be in order so that we may better advise the President.” For several breathless seconds, no one moved. Hawk still stood at the head of the President’s desk and stared down at Austin Kelley like a headmaster to a contemptuous student. Steely eyes narrowing one last time, he finally backed away. Indeed, Hawk barely had any respect for Sarek either. Brought up old-school, he had been taught to view the Vulcan’s as nothing more than the silent puppet masters behind Earth’s glory. What little respect he did have for Sarek came only in regard to the ambassador’s advanced age.

“It was discovered by the *Enterprise* this morning,” he began, (taking on airs and *not* looking at the president) “that the Crown Empress of this planet is the member of some former renegade house of Betazed. Upon learning of this, the Betazed Defense Force immediately left Betazed, and in direct violation of the Prime Directive, began an offensive move on this planet. I instructed Commodore Hanson to enforce the strictures of the Prime Directive by whatever means necessary. End of story,” he said curtly, whirling to face the president once more.

“Since when did these ‘means’ come to imply firing on our own citizens, Admiral?”

This came surprisingly from Zarella, the Councillor on State from Klaestron. Her face bore a look of angry shock, and it was clear that she too was demanding answers now from the Admiral, without all the doubletalk.

“Amy,” Austin Kelley whispered quietly over his left shoulder, “get me everything you can find on Betazed prehistory... Mr. Haan,” he called out, cutting off the heated exchange that was about to take place.

“Uh, yes, Mr. President,” Haan answered somewhat distractedly.

“Eyes front buddy,” Kelley demanded, snapping his fingers. “I want a complete breakdown of Prime Directive precedents pertaining to member worlds since the days of Captain Kirk... Fleet Admiral Hawk, you will find out *exactly* what is going on down there, and I mean exactly, Mister. We will reconvene here in one-half hour.” *Perhaps*, Sarek considered, *this president shall serve after all.*

Hawk very nearly began to protest, but was silenced instead by the blaring sound of an alarm klaxon and the simultaneous flashing of numerous red lights encircling the ceiling of the room. The comm system came suddenly online, startling them all.

*“Red Alert, all hands to Battle Stations, this is not a drill.”*

“Admiral Hawk to Bridge,” he said irritably, “what the hell is going on?”

*“Ship approaching at high warp, sir. They are refusing to squawk ident.”*

“Approaching from where?” he said now incredulously.

*“From **within** the system, Admiral,”* the man replied with obvious disbelief. He then paused momentarily before practically shouting: *“It’s the Enterprise, sir!”* Instinctively, everyone in the presidential office jumped to their feet and moved to the forward viewports. Austin Kelley arrived just in time to see a white flash of light blur into a long streak of motion that solidified suddenly into the massive glistening hulk of the legendary flagship. Yet the great leviathan did not stop as expected, but instead heeled over abruptly, nose downwards, delivered a glancing blow to *Starfleet One*, then pinwheeled away in a cloud of smoky debris. The *Enterprise* was dead in space, and for the assembled guests, the Battle of Ethos had been brought now dangerously close to home.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### SHATTERED HULK OF THE AMBASSADOR ROYAL ASCENDANCY PARK EPHEMERIS CITY, ETHOS

Still inside the dark and cavernous main shuttlebay of the *Ambassador*, Acting-Captain Sam Galloway and his comrades had worked tirelessly for nearly two hours hooking up a hodgepodge mixture of fiber optic cables and plasma conduits to the runabouts power systems. After a sudden cloudburst from a freak tropical storm had drenched everybody standing outside on the outer hull, the fierce twin suns were now baking them in intense heat and humidity. They desperately needed the shade and shelter that only the shuttlebay could provide, but they first needed to get it open to let in some light and fresh air. All things considered, the final casualty counts had been relatively light; with the exception of course of those killed in the stardrive's fiery plunge to the sea. Of the 540 people in the primary hull, an amazing 473 had survived.

"Okay, Sally, try it again," Sam called out. She sat inside the runabout monitoring the power feeds while he and Lt. Commander Seth remained outside toying with the cables trying to get their plan to work. A spray of sparks caused them both to jump back in alarm. The massive hanger was hot and stuffy with only the small airlock open to provide some air.

"Nothing," Sally shouted from within, as if they didn't already know.

"Dammit," Sam muttered. He had taken on the mantle of acting-captain somewhat reluctantly at first, but after two hours in the heat and stale air he had fallen into the role with a casual confidence that even he hadn't noticed. Bourne in the wake of disaster, this had become more of a team effort than a definitive chain of command anyway.

"Well, what'd'ya think now?" he asked his Vulcan counterpart.

"Perhaps if we place the secondary bypass lead into port L19, we will achieve the desired result, sir."

"At this point Seth, I'm open to anything," Sam said, wiping his brow on his already dampened sleeve. Together, they both crouched down next to an open computer panel in the wall of the shuttlebay and began sorting through the myriad of tiny wires. Neither one of them were engineers and it had taken them over an hour to make all of the initial connections before they could even try it in the first place.

“Well?” Sally said with a giggle, sticking her head out of the runabout’s narrow door. Sam had grown to really like her over the past couple hours; she had seemed much too flighty for his taste at first, but now her vivaciousness had become somewhat infectious and intoxicating. Perhaps it was the heat. As Seth switched the wire in question, Sam looked at her with a boyish smile.

“We’re gonna try it again,” he answered her, “but this time try reversing the polarity on L19... I’ve got a hunch.” He winked at her.

“Your previous hunch tripped all the relays, sir,” Seth said completely deadpan, as any Vulcan would, causing Sally to giggle in her chirpish bird-like way.

“Yeah,” Sam jabbed back, “and your last hunch gave us both a pretty good shock as I recall... Sally, try it again, and this time we’re going to stand back,” he smirked.

“A wise precaution, sir,” Seth nodded solemnly, giving Sally something new to giggle about. Her head disappeared inside the runabout and there were several breathless seconds as they waited to see just which pyrotechnic display would be the result of their latest effort.

At first, nothing happened, and then they both jumped again as the gigantic space doors let out a sudden sharp shriek behind them. With a deep metallic groan that caused the deck to rumble beneath their feet, the titanium monsters at last began to move. Parting in the middle like an iron curtain, the doors separated with a sudden blinding beam of light that penetrated deep into the heart of the cavernous hanger bay. With a whoosh, the air pressure equalized and a cool summer’s breeze flooded in, flushing out the stale, stagnant hot air with one fell swoop. Sally at once came skipping out of the runabout, then continued to dance around the deck, clapping her hands silently as the yawning hole grew ever larger with every passing moment.

After what seemed like many long minutes, the great beasts finally disappeared into their respective alcoves and locked into place with a solid metallic ka-chunk. And then all was silent once more until the crowd outside erupted into cheers. It was a small victory in an otherwise dismal chain of unlikely events. With a broad grin, Sam slapped Seth on the shoulder just as Sally came up and gave both men a diminutive bear hug, each in turn, before dancing away again in the cool fresh air. Outside, the sounds of laughter and good cheer drew closer as the survivors slowly began to move as one into the shady coolness of a ship that they had all fought so hard to get out of just a few short hours ago. Yet, it was still their home, and it offered them some protection from the elements, nonetheless.

“I have a half a mind,” Sam said at length, “to fly out and have a look around. Perhaps find out what’s taking Starfleet so long,” he mused.

“That would be unwise, Captain,” Seth countered. “To prevent further cultural contamination, we should remain as we are. Starfleet will no doubt come for us in due time, sir,” the Vulcan added reassuringly.

“Perhaps,” Sam merely said, then called for Sally, who came skipping quickly over. “Contact our base camp on the ground,” he ordered. “Tell them that I am now restricting the transporters to emergency use only. We’ll use the shuttles to move people from here on out, it’ll be a lot safer.”

“Yes, sir,” she nodded with a sharp salute, then ducked back inside the runabout to make the call.

“Seth,” Sam said next, “we’ll leave the *Tioga* wired up to the doors for now, let’s go get the *Ischua* warmed up. I have a strange feeling we’re going to need it.” Even as he said this, a deep and strange rumbling could be heard echoing outside and somewhere far off in the distance. To their modern ears, it was indiscernible from the sound of thunder. They could not have known that it was indeed the cannon fire of Leilani Algethi’s invading army. They could never have known that this army was coming now for them, let no man stand in its way.

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In the trail of Leilani Algethi, Commander Marta Batanides had just stepped off the *Elegance* onto the shattered city docks when she saw the runabout *Genesee* bank away from the Palladium, then blast off towards orbit. For a brief second, she jumped and waved her arms, but as the craft sped away, she realized how ridiculous and futile this was. As far as her shipmates were concerned, she had gone down at sea many hundreds of kilometers from this place. By this point, they were probably not even looking for her anymore, especially not here, practically right under their noses and caught up in the middle of a revolution. It was an insane and improbable set of circumstances that Marta herself could scarcely believe. She shuddered at the thought of being stranded all alone on this planet, with these backwards people, for perhaps all the rest of her life.

The sight of the *Genesee* however had given her a subtle hint as to a possible course of action. If she could somehow separate herself from Lani’s revolutionary army, she could perhaps make her way towards the center of the city and to the downed *Ambassador*. Their scans from orbit had shown definite survivors and given the conditions, Marta knew there was no way Starfleet could have mounted an effective rescue effort in such a short amount of time. Indeed, it was likely that Starfleet’s presence would remain here for months, dismantling the *Ambassador* piece by piece and airlifting it to orbit, not to mention the much harder task of acclimating these

primitive people to the wider universe surrounding them. These thoughts gave Marta a small glimmer of hope, albeit tempered slightly by the realization that the *Enterprise* may be long gone before she could ever make her way to safety. She could not ever imagine her life on any other ship, with any other crew; though with her age and experience she could probably have a command of her own by now. *No*, she thought, *I'm happy where I am*, and she knew that she may have to fight one way or another to stay there. She stared ahead at the back of the child that was leading this army. She was such an enigma. Lani's long braids bounced from left to right as they all marched off the quay and across a cobblestone street lined with shops.

This place could be a tourist paradise, Marta thought, the obvious problems notwithstanding. It reminded her of a trip she had taken once with Castillo to ancient Savannah back on Earth. The twin suns were beating down on her, making it as hot as a southern summer, just as it had been back then. She imagined it was probably like this all day, every day, and quickly concluded she did not like it here any more than there. Growing up under the carefully controlled biodomes of Mars, she didn't think she could ever grow accustomed to this level of heat and humidity. She thought again of Castillo, and realized she missed him already. That summer in Savannah was the closest they had ever come to romance, but it just wasn't meant to be. Best friends instead, she hoped she would see him again.

Leaving the riverfront behind, Marta and Lani moved quickly up one of the main streets towards the Palladium. The army had fanned out ahead of them now and had encountered virtually no resistance. Sensing perhaps the trouble that was brewing, or maybe not wishing to interfere with the child's holy crusade, most of the city's populace had either gone inside, or cleared a path for the invading army to pass. Known notoriously to be peaceful and sedate, Lani had not been surprised by the reaction of these city folk of the First Continent. She knew deep down inside that these people too believed Ethereal to be the False Prophet, but they had simply been too weak to rise up against her.

It would take a hardscrabble girl like her, raised in the scrublands of the Second Continent and bearer of The Voice, to defeat the likes of this sinister and unholy beast. Lani knew that virtually no resistance on the streets was a gift from the Ascendants that would not last. At the palace gates, and up the long winding road to the Palladium, that's where Ethereal would unleash her unholy scourge upon them. She knew that most if not all of her men would be slaughtered there, but only one needed to get through. Her. Once inside, she would get her chance at an unlikely ally, Ras Tau'aman, First Lord of the Ascendant; her grandfather. This entire

operation hinged on his cooperation, and The Voice assured her that it would be so.

The child stopped so suddenly that Marta nearly ran into her. Passing around to stand in front, Marta looked Lani square in the eyes. She appeared to be in some sort of trance. Her lips were mouthing some sort of words Marta could not quite make out, perhaps in an ancient tongue? Her cherub-like face and freckled nose looked so innocent, so peaceful, yet there was a forcefulness of purpose there too that scared Marta with its intensity. And it was not necessarily apparent on the outside either, it was more of an aura that surrounded the girl's soul and projected outwards like the tendrils of some insidious vine.

With a start, the girl breathed in suddenly causing Marta to jump back. Eyeing her speculatively for a moment, Lani at last spoke in a low, succinct tone that chilled the Starfleet commander right down to the core of her very own soul.

"I have heard The Voice, Holy One," she said gravely, "and you too shall heed the call of my crusade."

"Uh, duh, wha?" Marta sputtered, stepping back several more steps in fear.

"Captain!" Lani shouted past her. The leader of her personal advance guard stopped abruptly, then turned back on their position double-time. He arrived just in time to receive new instructions from his unlikely commander.

"Captain," Lani said quickly, "reorganize the advance guard. We will take her at once (pointing at Marta) to the Royal Ascendancy Park. The rest of our forces shall carry on as planned... storming the Palace gates and creating the necessary diversion."

"By your command, M'Lady," the captain saluted, then charged off on his revised mission.

"Come," Lani ordered, marching away herself. "We shall make excellent use of your metal flying machines."

Speechless and unable to resist, Marta Batanides trailed along behind her as helpless as a feather caught on a midsummer's breeze.

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"Captain, please don't leave me," the Empress Ethereal pleaded, "I have no one else, I'm scared." Turning, Rachel Garrett could see that the child really was scared, but of what exactly? Scared of being alone, scared of losing control of her empire, or just plain scared of losing her head? Garrett was tired of the mind-games, she was tired of the doubletalk, she

was especially tired of a twelve-year-old girl running the show, no matter how old her mental age may be.

“What is it you want, Your Highness?” the captain said irritably.

“I want you to stay with me,” the girl said sheepishly.

“Oh, poppycock,” Garrett scoffed, her anger increasing. “What is your real agenda here, because we both know you have one.”

Affronted, the Crown Empress swirled away from her, upsetting the little bird in its gilded silver cage. There had been some truth in her statement though, she truly did want the captain to stay here with her. To provide her with guidance and with support, to comfort her on those melancholy days that never, ever ended on this infernal damn planet. She was a girl caught on the cusp of pubescence. Her mind swirled with so many unanswered questions. Even with the accumulated wisdom of eighty-five years of life, there was still so much she did not understand. So many things she had never had the chance to discuss with her own mother before Ethaniel had so ruthlessly strangled her in her sleep. The mysteries of love, and of sex, what it was to be a parent and to love unconditionally, no matter the evils your children have committed; mind-games played between them that had plunged an entire race into civil war, evils that still haunt to this day.

Most of all, she sought forgiveness, an atonement for all her sins. “I want you to love me, Captain,” Ethereal said suddenly, startling the captain with its frankness, and indeed its utter preposterousness.

“I am not your mother, nor am I your confessor,” Garrett said flatly, her own heightened psi-awareness subconsciously picking up on the threads of Ethereal’s thoughts. The Crown Empress could sense the reinforced defiance within the captain’s mind, her love for ship and crew, her suppressed love for Spencer Stadi in particular. Angrily, her telepathic mind lashed out now to the *Enterprise*. In orbit, the great ship was just moving to intercept the runabout, and she called out silently to the weaker minds in the fleet not to let that happen. It was spiteful, it was cold and callous, it was exactly what was expected of her; she was what her brother had made her. Turning back to face Garrett, Ethereal took on the countenance again of the high-riding bitch that she had become so notorious for. “In truth, Captain,” she said, “I need your protection from my brother.”

“From whom?” Garrett sneered with speculative disbelief.

“My brother, he is coming for me. He’s mad Captain, and I made him that way... save me,” she half giggled. For Rachel Garrett, this was perhaps the last straw.

“I don’t have time for this,” she muttered, raking an index finger across the dried blood beneath her nose. “Destroy my mind if you feel you must, but I have a starship to rescue.”

“What,” Ethereal said coyly, “you don’t believe me? He is imprisoned as we speak in the Western Tower, you can even ask your dark-skinned comrade... oh wait,” she laughed, “I forgot, he has abandoned you here and fled to orbit.” The captain turned to leave. “Just where do you think you’ll go?” the Empress taunted her. “There is no escape for you, Captain... you are my prisoner.” Ethereal plopped into a divan, stuck her nose up in the air, and looked away.

Garret paused at the heavy chamber door. Something the Empress said had struck a chord with her. Why *had* Onovan abandoned her? Ras Tau’aman had taken the counselor to see that mysterious Book of Darkness. Perhaps if Onovan had discovered instead the dark secret of an imprisoned brother, he had acted impulsively to get the child to safety. Again, the captain’s heightened psi-awareness came into play. She could sense that the Crown Empress was hiding something from her. There was something about this invasion in the streets below that was an important piece of the puzzle. *Think Dammit!* She was careful to use Stadi’s mind-tricks to block her thoughts as best as possible. *Ah-Hah!* The mysterious brother was behind all this, and that was the wedge she needed!

“Oh, Your Majesty,” Garrett called out seductively, turning back. “I will admit I am somewhat curious about this invading force... you called their leader an insignificant child?” “You see,” Ethereal said, still not looking at her, “I need your protection. My brother has used his extraordinary telepathic prowess to groom this child to be elusive to my perceptions...”

“Or perhaps,” Garrett countered, driving in the wedge, “this child and her invasion are only a figment of your imagination... a ruse perhaps to distract you while he made his escape?”

Turning as white as a sheet, the Empress Ethereal jumped suddenly to her feet and charged across the room to stand again at the sweeping windows. Garrett smirked openly as the child stared downwards, scanning the city streets below to confirm the invasion was in fact truth. There indeed was the sailing vessel wedged into the docks, there indeed was the tiny specks of the tiny army. Swirling to face the captain, Ethereal’s face was now beet red with anger.

“You lie!” she growled threateningly.

“Do I?” Garrett said with mock surprise. “Pray tell, just where exactly did you say your brother was? Cause I’m just not sensing him,” she clucked, shaking her head. She could see the concentration in Ethereal’s face as the Crown Empress began reaching out, her mind’s-eye trying to see through Ethaniel’s smoky haze.

She could still clearly sense her brother confined within the walls of the Western Antiquity Tower, as he had been for decades. *Or could she?* Peeling back the layers of consciousness as one would peel away the

layers of an onion, she came face to face at last with Ras Tau'aman. It was at this moment, aboard the runabout *Genesee*, that her First Lord of the Ascendant was being overcome by an overwhelming need to act for his own salvation. With a sudden startling move, he was on his feet and tossing the Crown Prince against the bulkhead before Onovan could even react.

Far, far below them, and high up in the South Tower of the Palladium, the Ascendant Goddess Ethereal, Crown Empress of the peoples of Ethos, felt the steel spike of her brother's consciousness falter slightly deep within her paracortex. In the barest half-second that it took for him to lose consciousness, she felt his lifeforce shift quite suddenly from the Western Antiquity Tower where it should be, to the runabout far, far overhead. Ras, Ras Tau'aman was with him too; both abducted to space by that dark, dark man. A lifetime of rage welled up within her, and she thrust this outwards now towards an unsuspecting fleet, and indeed, towards Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett.

With the roar of a lioness the likes of which only a twelve-year-old child can duplicate,

Ethereal swirled in her gowns and charged at the captain. With arms outstretched, she jumped up, on, and over a divan, slamming into Garrett in mid-flight. They both hit the ground hard, with Ethereal's hands tightly grasping the woman's throat. Unprepared for such malicious violence, and cracking her head quite hard on the floor besides, the captain was in no position to mount a defense, even from a child. Tightening her grip with her left hand, Ethereal tapped the captain's commbadge, then resumed her desperate act of strangulation. Beginning to see stars, and losing now her own grip on reality, Captain Rachel Garrett heard one final ultimatum from the Crown Empress.

"Starship Enterprise, you will return my brother to me or your Captain will most surely die at my own hands."

~ ~ ~ ~

For Lieutenant Ian Troi, his life as adjutant to Commodore J.P. Hanson had turned into a living hell. The battle had raged on for almost an hour, far longer than even Hanson had anticipated, and the damages and casualties were mounting minute by bloody minute. Somewhere out there, on one of those renegade Betazoid cruisers, his wife Lwaxana Troi was at the vanguard of this revolt and thus their primary target. At first, it seemed like such a simple task for the *Melbourne* to swoop in and take her captive and clear this whole damn mess up. But then things had gotten strangely complicated, the battlelines had become blurred, the objective no longer clear.

The destruction of the *Starship Galaxy* had been a sobering wakeup call to a ramshackle fleet on the verge of destroying itself. The explosion had sent the *Enterprise* hurtling towards them; and if it had not been for some quick thinking by the ensign behind the wheel, the collision would've most certainly destroyed these two ships as well. Ian thought Hanson would have a heart attack as the great flagship tumbled by them with just inches to spare. It caused them all to give pause; not only those aboard the *Melbourne*, but all the others out there as well. Ian had taken this brief lull in the fighting to scan the sensor readouts. All six of the Betazed Corsair Carriers were mostly intact, but he had no clue if his darling wife, his *Imzadi*, were alive or dead.

It was at this point that Commodore Hanson had desperately tried to establish communications with the Betazoid flagship. This had all gone so horribly wrong and it had to be stopped. And then the *Enterprise* had sprung up suddenly from the dead and made that startling move towards the planet. The *Starship Gage* had fired on them, and then the *Kyushu* on the *Gage*, and then the *Callirhoea* on the *Kyushu*, and the battle was begun anew. But it quickly degenerated into a free-for-all now and no one really knew why. It was almost as if some dark and sinister force was at work here. They were all filled with so much rage; even the usual calm and gentle countenance of Ian Troi was overflowing with it. Fighting began to break out on the Bridge between the officers too, as well as below decks amongst the crew. The rage and violence threatened to overwhelm them all, to consume them from the inside out. The chain of command was breaking down, the shields were weakening, the ship was starting to come apart, both inside and out. And then that message had shattered the void.

*"Starship Enterprise, you will return my brother to me or your Captain will most surely die at my own hands."*

All attention was suddenly centered on a small runabout coming up from the surface. Scans showed a child aboard, a Betazoid child, and the fleet's collective objective was somehow changed once again. Absolutely no thought was given to the plight of Captain Rachel Garrett, slowly being strangled to death by the Empress Ethereal. There was no plan for her rescue, no attempt at negotiation, no concern whatsoever for her safety. There was just a single, deep-seeded desire by all to gain possession of that child. Hails were sent out by all combatants ordering the release of the boy to them, and each and every one of them were bearing down now on the *Enterprise* to ensure his extradition. But then something new happened.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. For a moment, all of the rage was replaced by an almost euphoric feeling of wellbeing. Spencer Stadi's Plan B. Almost like a drug, Ian could feel the euphoria wash away all his pain, all his worry, all his anger and distrust. For a moment, all of the

rage in those around him was replaced by a feeling of perfect peace and contentedness. The near constant bickering amongst the officers stopped, the random potshots within the ragtag fleet all but ceased. It was a rare moment of peace in a sea of total chaos; a sea they were still drowning in, but for the moment, did not know it. It was a rare moment of peace that could not hope to last as they entered weapons range of an *Enterprise* bristling and ready to fight.

Ian held his breath as they all waited on the fringes for the Federation flagship to make its charge. But then the *Enterprise* did what they should have expected it to do, but didn't... the totally *unexpected*. With a sudden flash of light, the remarkable starship leapt into warp right before their very eyes and was gone. It was brave, it was risky, it was totally insane and would probably get them all killed, but Ian nonetheless had to admire them for their tenacity. It was brilliant and the effect on the fleet was akin to deflating all the balloons at a birthday party. The shattered starships all began to drift away from each other to tend their injured and lick their wounds. The evil spell had been somehow broken and all that remained now was to put the pieces back together again.

"My God, what have we done?" Commodore J.P. Hanson slumped into his command chair as all the colour began to slowly drain from his face.

"I can track the *Enterprise* if you like, sir," the *Melbourne's* tactical officer said eagerly, still caught up in the lingering thrill of the battle.

"May the Saints preserve them," Hanson said in nearly forgotten Irish brogue, crossing himself, then kissing his thumb and forefinger. He had not forgotten the dozens of gravitational wavefronts they'd crossed just getting into this system. The *Enterprise* would be hitting them now practically all at once, and at billions of kilometers per hour. It would be about like riding a bicycle into a brick wall at a hundred miles an hour. *My God*, Hanson thought, *have we really driven them to this?*

"Commodore," Ian said quietly, moving in close to Hanson's side. "My wife, sir, if I may?" He gestured towards the main viewscreen as the old man looked up at him with hollow, sunken eyes. At first the commodore did not understand and only stared at him blankly. But the worry evident in the young adjutant's usually gentle eyes quickly clued the old man in.

"I'll do ya one better, Son," Hanson said gruffly, "I'll contact her myself. What was the name of that ship?"

"The *Cataria*, sir," Ian replied with growing hope mixed with dread.

"Ensign Abrams," the old man called out to Ops, "get me the *Cataria*, Priority One... You take it from here, Son," Hanson said gently, then let his balding scalp drop into the palm of his trembling left hand. Slowly, and with ever-increasing trepidation, Ian moved to the center of the Bridge, just

several steps ahead of Hanson and the command chair. And there he waited for what seemed like an eternity for the connection to be made. At first, the viewscreen only crackled and buzzed. Frustrated, Ian began to pace. He wished now he had requested to use the commodore's ready room to make this perhaps fateful call. Oh gods, what if she were dead? The panic threatened to overwhelm him as his wife's image wavered before him at last.

"Oh, Ian, my darling, is that you?" Lwaxana squinted and weaved her head from left to right. Apparently, the image was no better at her end.

"Yes, love," Ian half laughed, half cried, "it's me. Are you hurt, do you need anything?"

"Ohhh!" Lwaxana exclaimed with her characteristic flamboyancy. "*My head is simply splitting with a headache. All I need right now is a nice long bath.*" Ian couldn't help but laugh; his wife was indeed okay.

"Mrs. Troi," Hanson said suddenly, startling Ian. "We'd like to negotiate a truce, perhaps issue a cessation of hostilities until we can sort this damn mess out."

"Yes, yes, yes," Lwaxana reiterated, a bit flippantly. She pinched her temples between the fingers of her left hand, then waved the pain away. "*But first we need to get out of this system before my head simply explodes.*"

"How about *Starfleet One*, neutral territory?" Hanson suggested gruffly. "Our scans suggest that's where the *Enterprise* was heading... if she ever made it," he muttered under his breath.

"Fine, fine, fine," Lwaxana sputtered impatiently. "*But I've been informed that this crate isn't going anywhere...*"

"Shuttle over," Hanson replied with a half-attempted smile, "you can bunk with my first mate."

"Ohhhh!" she grinned for the first time, and Ian merely smiled back.

Love once found should never be lost, and peace once gained should never be surrendered.

~ ~ ~ ~

Perhaps the only thing that saved Captain Rachel Garrett from a death by strangulation, was an unexpected feeling of wellbeing, almost a euphoria, which flooded down suddenly from orbit. A special gift from Spencer Stadi and her crew? She could not know, but for a moment, time seemed to stand still, and she was able to take in a breath. For a moment, all of Ethereal's rage was replaced by a feeling of perfect peace and contentedness. It was like a drug, and even the captain could feel the euphoria wash away all her pain, all her anger, all her fears and phantom

memories. It was a rare moment of peace in a sea of total chaos; a sea that they were all threatened to drown in. For a moment, Ethereal loosened her grip, but only for a moment.

But it was the moment that Rachel Garrett needed. It was the moment that Spencer Stadi and the *Enterprise* needed. It was the moment that the orbiting fleet needed – to survive; and quite without knowing any of this, Rachel Garrett seized on that moment. Forcing her head clear of the stars, the Starfleet captain brought up her left knee and rolled over on top of the Empress Ethereal. Grabbing the child by the base of the monstrous wig, she slammed the girl's head once, twice, three times, against the cold stone floor. The colourful little bird fluttered and squawked wildly as the Crown Empress's eyes rolled back into her head and into unconsciousness. Weak, dizzy, and just plain exhausted, the captain herself rolled back over onto the floor and too slipped into unconsciousness.

It was an odd sort of feeling as their dreams and memories merged. They were once again a child, running and playing in the vineyards and orchards of Eileitheia back on Betazed. Ethaniel was with them too, and it was a glorious and sunny day. The uttaberry bushes were in bloom and the air was filled with their soft sweet fragrance. The sky was an electric blue and filled with great white puffy clouds that passed them by far overhead. They had sat down by the creek that day for hours and watched as the rippling water washed all the world away. "What shapes do you see?" she had whispered, her voice as soft as the breeze through the shimmering trees, and they had laughed and laughed with all the innocence of their young age.

And that was how it had started, happy and innocent. When do the thoughts of a sweet and innocent child turn suddenly to evil? What are the transformational causes that brings a young mind from the path of peace to that of a person out of control of her own senses? Was it madness, was it genetics – perhaps a deep-seeded spark of mischief implanted at birth – or was it simply boredom? It was the classic question of nurture versus nature, and yes, it had begun innocently enough within her own mind. For it was on this day that the manipulations had begun. The small little mind-games between brother and sister testing the wisdom and will of their parents. It was a test of strength, it was a test of resolve, and it was all done on a deeply subconscious telepathic level.

It had started simply and innocently enough, each pushing the envelope just that little bit more just to see who could get away with what. But as the game grew, the stakes grew higher and innocence was somehow lost. Compassion was lost. It became competitive, it became vindictive, and it quickly degenerated into simmering levels of anger mixed with jealousy. A battle for attention, a battle for praise and recognition. The royal

twins began to think not as brother and sister, but as rivals. Their telepathic power struggle began to spread outwards like a plague, and inwards like a cancer. It became a recursive memory loop within their minds that began to feed in on itself like a black hole within a black hole. It was a madness that began to embody their very souls.

It slowly grew and propagated into a telepathic tsunami that eventually washed over a populace of billions. They had been a peaceful people. They had not known war for a

millennia. Eleusis Burke had been brandished a madman, the tyrannical dictator of a continent that would not be content until he encompassed the world. But words did little to stop his armies. The other Great Houses could not come to consensus. They began to fracture down carefully drawn lines of belief and morality. They began to turn amongst themselves and create alliances according to ancient codes of loyalty. They became a House Divided and played right into the hands of madness.

But the common people revolted. They created an Assembly and formed an army. Through carefully controlled mind-games of their own they began to push back the hordes, with off world weapons of mass destruction they laid waste to Eileithea, leveled its cities, burned its orchards, and decimated its population. And in the final hours of battle, Ethereal and Ethaniel Burke forced their parents to flee, and left their people alone to suffer for sins not of their own doing. In the final hours of battle, the ultimate weapon was unleashed, and the entire continent of Eileithea was sent crumbling into the sea. And then a peaceful people were left to cope with all that they had done, were left to cope with the consequences of madness not necessarily their own.

Yet, for the royal twins, the madness would not be left behind. It would follow them all those many, many light-years to Ethos. It could not be ignored; its malignancy could not be treated. The wound continued to fester inside as Eleusis Burke set himself up as God and Emperor to a primitive and backwards people. But he and Electra remained nothing more than puppets, pawns in a dangerous mind-war that had now turned in on itself with a vengeance. It became a battle for love, and ultimately, for supremacy. It was fueled by resentment and jealousy, it was sibling rivalry gone horribly wrong, and now it was compounded by a newer more sinister threat.

The metaphasic radiation in the lower atmosphere had somehow halted the aging process. The twins were now locked at age twelve on the very cusp of pubescence and mental enlightenment. They became lost and disillusioned; they became bored as this never-ending day stretched on into years. They began to grow angry, resentful, they began to struggle with issues of identity, especially in a telepathic mind. They had lost who they

were and began to drown in a sea of cross-gender ambiguity. Right on the verge of sexual prepubescence, fleeting incestual undercurrents began to tear at them in their dreams. The never-ending days of Ethos became a never-ending nightmare of sheer and utter terror. Ethaniel, always the weaker more submissive one, was the first to crack. In a classic Oedipus reaction, he struck out at his mother first, strangling her in her sleep. Then, in fear of recrimination from a seemed overbearing father, he sealed that man's fate as well. Luring the Emperor out onto the central stone plaza of the Palladium, Ethaniel stabbed his father to death in a rage the likes of which even Ethereal had never seen. It had taken four grown men to subdue the boy and drag him kicking and screaming and thrashing to the very heights of the Western Antiquity Tower. They each had spent the next fifty years locked away, each in their respective towers, each a prisoner of the other.

Until, that is, on that fateful day in May, by the sheerest of chances, the Federation Starship *Ambassador* entered into the very fringes of Ethaniel's consciousness. It was a prize he knew his sister could not resist; all those fresh new minds to play with. And Ethereal had fallen perfectly into his snare. What are the transformational causes that bring a young mind from the path of peace, to that of a tyrannical dictator out of control of his own senses? When do the thoughts of a sweet and innocent child turn suddenly to evil? Was it madness, was it simply a deep-seeded spark of mischief implanted at birth? One need only ask the Crown Empress Ethereal of Ethos, and she would tell you.

~ ~ ~ ~

The deep rumbling had ceased, but now a huge white cloud of smoke was billowing up over the treetops and the city buildings to the north. Acting-Captain Sam Galloway did not know what was going on, but he knew he did not like it. The whole thing gave him an uneasy feeling. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the sound seemed familiar to him. He knew he'd heard it before, perhaps in an ancient Earth motion picture? He and Commander Seth picked their way deeper into the cavernous shuttlebay now as the crew slowly filtered in and made strange silhouettes against the backdrop of the yawning space doors. The place was a frightful mess. Littered with debris and even a few wrecked shuttles, the shuttlebay was certainly not as Captain Lord would've left it.

Ever cheerful Sally came skipping up behind them and fell into step, humming quietly to herself. Sam couldn't help but smirk. She had been like this for their date just one short week ago, and it had been an initial turnoff then, but he found it now to be somewhat endearing. One week that

seemed like more than a lifetime ago. He thought again of Andy Dardanelle and let out a long melancholy sigh. The young ensign had had a somewhat unusual sense of humor, Sam remembered. Andy had said it was his one-quarter Vulcan side fighting to be heard. That had never seemed to make much sense to Sam, but they had become fast friends anyway. Sally was perhaps his final jest and Sam laughed, causing Seth to cast him a rather speculative sideways glance.

“Did you contact the ground team?” Sam asked her, still grinning.

“Oh yes,” she replied matter-of-factly, and he waited.

“Aaand?” he said at last, laughing again.

“Oh,” she giggled. “They’re fine. Still waiting for an update from the team at the hospital, but at last report everybody was out of surgery.” She completed this statement by blowing a large pink bubble and letting it pop, though Sam could not imagine where in the world she had found a piece of gum.

“Where’d you get that missy?” he asked her playfully.

“She replicated it,” Seth muttered, as close to irritation as any Vulcan was likely to get.

“You should try a piece,” Sally giggled, casting Seth a withering stare and jabbing him in the ribs.

“On the runabout?” Sam asked now dubiously, taking note of the duo’s unusual interchange.

“That would seem logical, Captain,” the Vulcan replied as they stepped up to the present runabout, *Ischua*.

“You should try a piece,” Sam goaded him further and began typing his access code into the keypad to open the hatch.

“I have, sir,” Seth replied nonchalantly.

“And?”

“He swallowed it,” Sally giggled. “Seems our little green friend here can’t roll his tongue.”

“Hey,” Sam shrugged, “you can’t fight genetics.”

“Indeed, sir,” Seth muttered, and the hatch opened with a hiss.

“Sally, you take Ops... get communications up. Seth, you and I will get the warp core online and see if this baby’s still flight worthy.” As stated before, Lt. Sam Galloway fell into the role of acting-captain with a casual confidence that even he hadn’t noticed. Despite the destruction surrounding them, things had gone remarkably well and relatively smoothly since the crash. It was a true testament to Starfleet training that even in the wake of disaster, everyone was still prepared to know just where to be and just what to do. The chain of command had been preserved, even despite losing nearly half their ranks to catastrophe. It was peaceful cooperation between all sexes, races, and species that made Starfleet, indeed, made

the whole of the Federation so successful. This was teamwork on an unprecedented scale, built on the backs of legends from Kirk to Zefram Cochrane and all the way back to Churchill and Roosevelt. The very beginnings of cooperation can sometimes be lost to antiquity.

Together, Sam's team entered the darkened runabout and took their seats at their respective stations. Within moments they soon had the craft powered up, filling the cabin with the soft glow of colourful blinking lights and multiple display graphics. Heavier and a bit sturdier, the *Ambassador's* three runabouts had fared slightly better in the crash than the lighter shuttles that now lay strewn across the deck. As an Ops manager, Sam couldn't help but wonder at the logistics of cleaning this entire mess up. And not just the shuttlebay, oh no, but the entire shattered hulk of the *Ambassador*. It would all have to be cut up into sections and airlifted back into space. These were a primitive, pre-industrial people with the far-distant future plopped down suddenly in their laps. If left unanswered, this unintended exposure could be far more catastrophic than the crash itself.

"Warp core online and at idle, sir," Seth said suddenly, startling Sam from his silent reverie.

"Communications online, Captain," Sally added, blowing a great bubble and letting it pop.

"Very nice," Sam smiled. "Diagnostics show all systems go, now all we need is somewhere *to* go."

"In the coming weeks, sir," Seth said pointedly, "you will no doubt have ample opportunity as the salvage operation begins."

Sam whistled. "How many trips do you suppose it'll take?" he murmured speculatively.

"Approximately..."

"Um," Sally cut him off with a giggle. The Vulcan cast her a withering stare as Sam broke into a broad grin.

"Your report, Ensign?"

"Our base camp on the ground is reporting some sort of skirmish in the city streets," she said with a frown, pressing the earpiece tighter into her ear. "They say it's getting closer and are requesting that we send some sort of backup."

"Acknowledge that and tell them to stand by," Sam ordered, then brought his left hand up to his chin. Noticing for the first time a crop of day-old stubble, he made a perhaps fateful decision that he knew Lt. Commander Seth was not going to like.

We rarely see those moments in life that may change the course of our destinies forever. Those thousands of little intersections, the major crossroads; we each come to them each and every day of our lives, and they each lead us all in the end to the same destination. Our fate. For a

brief fleeting moment, Lt. Sam Galloway was once again that sixteen-year-old teenage boy standing out on the freezing Alberta prairie spying on the orbiting starships with his telescope. He could remember now the exact date he had decided to join Starfleet: October 26, 2322. The newest and most elegant *Starship Enterprise* had just been launched at Betazed and was inspiring a new generation, himself included, to seek out a new life of exploration that was no longer bound to just one planet. And thus, the threads of our lives lead us each to where we are today.

“Sally,” Sam said, giving pause. “Inform the ground team that we will be coming down with a runabout to monitor the situation... Lieutenant Commander Seth, you will remain here. Take what security forces we have left and set up a precautionary defense perimeter at the hangar doors.”

“Captain,” Seth protested, as expected, “I realize that these are extraordinary circumstances, but Starfleet regulations clearly discourage a commanding officer from knowingly entering a hazardous situation...”

“Seth,” Sam interrupted, somewhat plaintively, “take a look around. The past twenty-four hours have been a hazardous situation. You’re the best man for the job, and we all know it. I’m not cut out for command; it’s just not in my nature to boss people around. It was fun while it lasted, but as Captain, I’m promoting you to Captain. Congratulations.”

“I don’t think you can do that,” Sally chirped up from behind them.

“Shut it,” Sam quipped with a smirk, and she let out one of her signature giggles. “Very well, sir,” Seth acquiesced, “I accept your promotion and hereby take command of the *Ambassador*.”

“Gee,” Sam chided, “don’t you at least wanna think about it?”

“I assure you, *Lieutenant*, sufficient thought *has* been given to the matter.”

“I’m not quite sure how to take that,” Sam scowled, and Sally giggled some more.

“Live long and prosper...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah... peace and long life, now get out.” The two at last stood and shook hands. Wiping away tears, Sally jumped up and grabbed the Vulcan tight around the waist just as he was about to exit the runabout.

“I’m going to miss you, sir,” she sniffled. Completely flummoxed, Seth could do naught but stand with arms uplifted and let nature take its course.

“Oh, for the love of Peter,” Sam scolded at last, “unhand him silly girl.” She backed away finally and giggled, biting at her thumbnail. She blew another large bubble as the *Ambassador’s* newest captain stepped out into the hangar bay, turned, then raised his right hand in the traditional Vulcan salute.

“Oh, brother, you two are something else,” Sam muttered, pressing a button and closing the hatch once and for all. “Now sit up here next to me, spacecase,” he added, rolling his eyes.

“Oooooo goody,” she clapped, then fluttered about the small cabin two or three times before settling down at last to sit at his right hand. And with the softness of a feather, the runabout *Ischua* lifted off the deck and brought them one step closer to their destinies.

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Like a feather caught in the wind, Commander Marta Batanides trailed along in the wake of Leilani Algethi. With the advance guard taking point, they had slowly picked their way through the city streets towards the Royal Ascendancy Park. The bulk of Lani’s forces had already begun their assault on the palace gates far behind them, yet the fierce firefight could still be heard even from this distance. Lani had already explained to Marta that beyond the gates was a long winding road up the side of the mountain to the palace itself. As *Enterprise* chief of security, Marta was quick to point out the grim odds of such an assault succeeding. Lani had remained strangely silent.

So huge was the shattered hulk of the *Ambassador* that it had gone quite unnoticed by the group, sticking up as it was above the treetops of the park. It was almost as if the brain refused to recognize an object that was almost beyond comprehension; much like an ant would cast off a sudden human presence across its own path by simply ignoring it. Yet ignorance must give way to enlightenment when confronted at long last with evidence that can no longer be ignored. Stopping suddenly, and some even swinging their arms wildly as if confronted by a sheer cliff, the small band of rebels all fell into an awed silence when they reached the edge of the mammoth devastation zone caused by the slide-out of the massive

Federation starship. Pushing their way up from the rear, Lani and Marta each gave pause as well.

To their right and to their left, for seemingly as far as the eye could see, everything – every tree, every stone path and fishpond, every blade of grass – had been scoured and pulverized out of existence. All that remained was the soft brown soil that lie beneath. Not a bird could be heard, nor any sounds from the surrounding city. It was almost as if this vast wasteland swallowed everything and anything up like a black hole, including the very air, leaving them all breathless. It was only now, confronted with such stark emptiness, that the towering hulk of the *Ambassador* could be noticed just off at an inestimable and hazy distance.

Even with its lower three decks compressed, the size of the thing left everyone stunned, including even Marta. Its height was still over twelve stories, though by perspective it seemed like much more. The width, three hundred and twenty-five meters<sup>3</sup>, could not all be taken in at a single glance; one instead had to scan from side to side, taking in multiple blinking snapshots for the mind to try and sort out later. Tenuously grasped as a whole, the great behemoth was larger than anything on Ethos, including the Palladium itself perched far above it. For Marta, who had served aboard an *Ambassador*-class starship for most of her Starfleet career, it was a startling and stunning introduction to the true grandeur and magnificence that was her *Enterprise* in orbit high overhead.

For Leilani Algethi on the other hand, it was an open invitation for action. They had arrived just in time to see the runabout *Ischua* bank gracefully off the edge and make a soft landing next to a small and insignificant ground team. What further divination did she need that her cause was just? A storm was coming, and this storm was Leilani Algethi, let no one stand in her way.

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<sup>3</sup> 1,066ft

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### ABOARD STARFLEET ONE NEUTRAL SPACE ONE LIGHT-HOUR FROM ETHOS

For the assembled guests, the Battle of Ethos had been brought now dangerously close to home. The *Enterprise* was dead in space, but fortunately for *Starfleet One*, her shields had absorbed most of the jarring impact. Still, President Austin Kelley and the rest of his Privy Council had found themselves at once in a heap on the floor, and for a few moments at least, immersed in total darkness. For several long seconds, no one moved, no one breathed. After seeing the massive glistening hulk of the legendary Federation flagship bearing down on them, they were all content now to simply lay there for a time and count their blessings.

Fleet Admiral Xavier Hawk was the first to stir, and everyone could see from his countenance that he was not a happy sailor. The weaselly little National Security Advisor, Mr. Haan, jumped to his feet next, leaving everyone left on the floor with a slightly greasy feeling upon his parting. Almost at once, all that remained forced themselves to their feet and began to shakily brush themselves off. No one spoke, no one made eye contact, no one dared to break the silence, surprisingly not even Xavier Hawk. But that was soon to change.

With the familiar whine of a transporter beam, a column of energy began to solidify in the center of the president's executive office. Still, no one spoke, the shock of the collision still fresh as it was in everyone's mind. Indeed, they were all uncertain just how to react to this newest infringement into their personal space. People just did not beam into the center of the president's executive office, especially unannounced. It simply was not done. Yet, instinctively, they had all come to expect the unexpected from the *Enterprise*, even now as Commander Spencer Stadi stood before them in a tattered and scorched uniform, wispy smoke curling off his haggard shoulders.

"YOU!" Admiral Hawk screeched, scaring the wits out of everyone, save Sarek. "YOU, YOU, YOU, SONUVABITCH!" he sputtered.

"Admiral!" Austin Kelley bellowed out, causing everyone to take a step back including Sarek. "You *will* be still, sir!"

Sarek could now see that he had grossly underestimated this man. An enigma indeed! The Vulcan allowed himself a brief moment of surprise. These humans so rarely surprised him anymore. It was a curious emotion,

surprise. Equally surprising perhaps was Spencer Stadi's scorched and tattered look, but none of this was near as surprising as Hawk's reaction to the man. A past history perhaps? Most curious indeed.

"I am Austin Kelley," the president said more calmly now, stepping forward and cutting off the incensed Admiral. "And you are?"

"Commander Spencer Stadi, sir, First Officer of the *Enterprise*." He tried to stand up more squarely, but still winced at some unseen pain, whether it was mental or physical, as yet undetermined.

"Well, Commander, you've certainly got our attention," the President said with a slight smirk. "Now do you require some medical attention?"

"No time, sir!" Stadi said rather abruptly, still wincing, causing Austin Kelley to raise both hands in supplication. "With all due respect, Mr. President," Stadi said a little more quietly, "events in orbit have spiraled out of control, people are dying, she has control of our minds for God's sake!" The commander tussled his hair and turned away from the president, clearly frustrated. At a loss, Austin Kelley turned to Sarek, who surprisingly, also seemed to be at a loss.

"Pull yourself together, Commander!" Admiral Hawk seethed, with obvious disgust for

the man chiseled across his stony features. "I have right mind to have you..."

"Admiral, please," Zarella admonished. The Councillor on State rarely had any patience for Admiral Hawk's little tirades, perhaps none more so than right now. "Commander... Stadi was it... perhaps it would be best if we were to begin at the beginning?"

Stadi puffed out his lips and offered a queer sort of laugh as Austin Kelley rounded his desk and took a rather hesitant seat behind it. His ever-faithful aide Amy slipped in quietly by his side and the rest of the Privy Council all settled into their own respective comfort zones. Still seething however, Admiral Hawk continued to pace in the background like some wild hyena searching for that perfect moment to strike.

"All we know to date, Commander," the president stated cautiously, "is that the Crown Empress of this planet is of some former renegade house of Betazed, and is apparently the target of some sort of blood feud?" *Blood feud*. Spencer Stadi had not before considered this distinction, but the president was right; this was indeed a blood feud, only on a planetary scale. Nothing in Earth's history could compare. Not even their great World Wars had honed the goal of global conflict down to the extermination of a single family. Spencer Stadi sighed. It was preposterous he knew, but deep down in his very soul he also knew that every member of the Burke family had to die.

“Eleusis and Electra Burke were ordinary citizens,” he began quietly, “until their twins were born...”

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It was an odd sort of feeling as their dreams and memories merged. They were once again children, running and playing on a wet and slushy March day. An early thaw and heavy rains had pushed the icy river to its breaking point. Scattered bits of tree trunk and huge blocks of ice were now choking on the submerged arches of the ancient concrete bridge just upriver. Threatening to breach this barrier by midmorning tomorrow, the usually placid Genesee had not reached such a frenzied state in over three hundred years.

That’s why they had been told to stay away.

She pushed her way through the dense underbrush, taking care not to catch her yarn mittens on the sticks and briars. She could already hear, almost feel, the roar of the river not too far off in the distance. The trees and limbs were black and bottomless against a white sky. The air was damp and chilled her to the bone. What little snow was left splashed aside as each little black boot fell in step with the last. The roar of the river, the fact that they were doing something wrong, each pushing the envelope just a little bit more, was as exhilarating as the chill spring air.

“Rachel,” her sister whined, some distance behind her. “I’m scared, let’s go back.”

“Oh Ethereal, don’t be a baby,” she called back over her shoulder. It seemed like she was always whining about something. Suddenly, and quite abruptly, Rachel stumbled forth out of the underbrush and onto the bank of the river. She had never seen anything like it. About three hundred feet wide here, the brown and muddy water rounded a great bend in front of her, and at such a terrific speed that the far side loomed at least twenty feet over her head.

At once terrifying and hypnotizing, she stood there breathless, almond eyes transfixed. “Rachel,” her sister whined again, spilling at last out of the underbrush and falling at her feet. Propelled forward by this small rocket launch of energy, Ethereal’s rain-soaked knit hat flew off her head and tumbled over the bank onto a narrow shelf of ice.

“Dummy,” Rachel half chuckled.

“Awww,” her sister whimpered, looking up at Rachel with all too knowing eyes, haunting dark eyes, eyes with no hint of anything that was good or pure in the universe. “Well, go get it, stupid,” Rachel demanded

with sudden anger, giving the girl a small shove towards the ledge with her foot. “Well, go on, chicken,” she shouted again, giving the girl another quick kick.

Without hint of fear or hesitation, Ethereal jumped up suddenly and leapt forth from the ledge, landing squarely on the narrow shelf of ice. With more surprise than any real concern, Rachel prodded the girl further. Undaunted, Ethereal took two more steps out and confidently plucked up her hat. Grinning from ear to ear, she turned and held it up for Rachel to see. And then she laughed at her.

Rachel remembered now how she had just stood there and laughed at her. A dark and sinister sort of laugh, devoid of any joy. And those eyes, haunting dark eyes, black and bottomless with no sign of remorse or of love or of anything that was good or pure in the universe. Eyes with an age many times twelve. But that laugh, evil and sardonic, that laugh that would not stop. It was almost taunting her with its vitriolic tangibility.

“Stop laughing at me!” Rachel screamed. In angry desperation to make that insidious laughter stop, she leapt forward off the bank and plowed headlong into Ethereal with arms outstretched. With a terrifying crack, the ice splintered beneath them, and they were both plunged into the icy river. Alone now and in the dark, Rachel rolled and tumbled in those frigid depths until all the life had been sucked right out of her. She began to gasp for air, as much out of panic and fear as suffocation. Once, in fear, she had lied; and now in fear she lay on a cold stone floor. Letting go like he must have done; she inhaled one last time.

And then she awoke with a start to see the Empress Ethereal standing over her. And in the cherub-like tones of a little girl, the Empress laughed at her.

~ ~ ~ ~

For Ras Tau’aman, First Lord of the Ascendant, his entire world, his enduring faith, indeed everything he had ever believed, had been turned completely upside down. Whether he was dead or alive, or caught up in some sort of netherworld, Ras Tau’aman’s ascendance had become a living nightmare. The real and the unreal, the fringes of his own reality, had now become blurred in this newest vision of hell. He had awoken just moments ago on the floor of this bizarre flying machine under a hail of hot sparks and immersed in near total frightening darkness. His head felt like someone had driven a steel spike into his brain.

One of the last things Ras could remember were the words ‘combat landing’ coming in from an otherworldly voice and materializing out of thin

air. What happened next had left him breathless. This bizarre flying machine had made a sudden breakneck dive into the yawning mouth of a monstrous metallic beast that defied all wonder. The descent had left him queasy and reminded him of that ancient children's fable of the sea beast and the fisherman. At once terrifying and exhilarating, the landing at not been quite so glamorous. Their speed must've been terrific as they slammed into the belly of the beast *hard* and bounced askew into an apparent safety net.

Fortunately for Ras Tau'aman, he had already been knocked unconscious by the time the *Enterprise* had made its horrific warp jump, and then slammed sidelong into *Starfleet One*.

The hail of sparks smelt acrid as the weary old man slowly pushed himself off the floor. He could see now that it was not completely dark, that the smoky air held an eerie, almost tangible glow. With a certain sense of panic, he could also see that the boy, the Crown Prince Ethaniel, was nowhere to be seen. This somehow filled him with a sickening sense of dread as he looked down now at the unconscious form of that dark, dark man that had brought him here to this wayward place. Where was their divinity indeed? He once again found himself to be disappointed. Unfulfilled. Unimpressed. He found *them* to be lacking and this in turn left him hollow inside.

Over his right shoulder he could see that the hatch to this craft was open and he quickly surmised that that was where the boy had gone. The child was loose. After over fifty years of imprisonment, the child was loose! Ras heaved a heavy sigh, then himself gingerly inched his way towards the opening. At once hours and a lifetime ago, he had watched the Ascendant and the dark man emerge from this very same hatch and onto the hard stone plaza of the Palladium. What manner of events had transpired since then? If asked, this First Lord of the Ascendant would hardly have described them as divine. The real and the unreal had now become blurred on the fringes of his own reality.

As Ras emerged from the hatch, his senses were again assailed by incomprehensible surroundings. His ears were filled with a cacophony of shouting voices. The very air smelt burnt, and he scrunched up his nose and coughed. All around him people scurried about putting out fires and clearing away debris. One group seemed intent on reordering a stack of fallen containers, one man in particular shouting orders to the rest. It was chaos, but he was quick to note that it seemed like well-ordered chaos. Behind him, the damaged flying machine belched forth a cloud of steam, then continued to hiss like a thing come alive. It gave him an uneasy feeling, so he moved farther away from it.

Looking up and scanning from left to right, Ras could see that he was standing at the heart of a massive cavern. He had ventured into a cave once as a teenage boy until even the very fringes of light had left him. There, in that all-consuming darkness, he had found the light, the core of his very soul, his very own enlightenment. It had been all at once terrifying and exhilarating and for the first time he had felt truly alive. Ras cast his gaze downwards now. It had been many, many decades since that experience and now for the first time he realized just how truly empty and hollow and alone he felt inside; how dead he felt, indeed had felt, for many long years now.

At a loss, Ras shuffled off in no particular direction, passing it seemed quite unnoticed by all the commotion that encompassed him; almost invisible – a ghost perhaps? This weary old man was not so humble as not to be reminded of a colony of ants. Some faiths believed in the reincarnate nature of Ascendance. An interesting but unlikely thought, he quickly concluded. He was forced to stand aside as a team of four ran by him with a stretcher. Within moments, they were pulling the dark man out of the wounded silvery craft. Very efficient in their task, they were running off now in the direction of a distant tunnel. Still at a loss, Ras decided to follow and shuffled off slowly in that new direction. Without the guidance of the dark man, Ras was lost here in this strange new world; not that the dark man had proved to be much of a guide anyway. He continued to wonder at the divinity of these people with all their weaknesses and apparent flaws. What was the meaning of faith when everything you had ever believed in had been called into question? Faith had been the cornerstone of Ras's entire long life. Even in the face of doubt about the Crown Empress, he had held on to the faith that in the end, all things would unfold as they should. He truly wondered about that now, yet he had no spiritual advisor in which to turn, no clergy to explain things to him as they were happening.

Quite unexpectedly, the Royal Twins had created an all-new Ethosian. A self-aware Ethosian, and Leilani Algethi and Ras Tau'aman were but the first to come of a new generation that would begin to break the bonds of superstitious belief and organized religion. It was an inevitable and dangerous consequence of a primitive culture being thrust suddenly into the far-distant future. To begin to question: *who am I, why do I exist, what is my purpose here?* But an unfortunate side-effect of this questioning of belief, was a devastating loss of Faith. This was the problem that would plague the Federation now for many years to come as it tried to acclimate these people into a new and unknown future. And as his head swirled with this slow new awakening, Ras Tau'aman began to wonder too just what sort of mischief that dangerous evil twin was getting himself into. These strange new people that swirled around him in the smoky air seemed ill-equipped to

deal with this child and his menace. Ascendants or not, he concluded that they would need his help, *his* guidance, and this in itself stirred up bizarre new feelings inside him. He began to feel alive again with this strange new purpose. Perhaps he *was* being tested after all. Would he live up to the challenge? Bolstered by this new self-confidence, by this new self-awareness, Ras charged forward down the tunnel of white light before him, towards a world of all-new enlightenment.

Ras's instinct correct, Ethaniel, Crown Prince of Ethos, was indeed getting himself into mischief. Making his own way forward, this dangerous little child would soon arrive at the Bridge. Taking command of this massive starship would be easy, and then he had every intention of returning to Ethos to exact his revenge... on his sister.

~ ~ ~ ~

Nearby, aboard *Starfleet One*, Commander Spencer Stadi had just given his dissertation on Betazed prehistory to the president and his privy council. How the Burke Family had risen to tyrannical power over much of the planet; how the resultant war had reduced a peaceful people to despicable violence; and how the ultimate weapon had been used to reduce an entire continent and its people to a pile of rubble beneath the sea. Yet this war had not been fought with machines alone, but also with minds, minds trained to destroy other minds with violent thought. They had been called the Old Guard, and many of them had been driven insane by the horrific acts they had committed in the name of peace. The Old Guard was gone now, all passed away into history; but as it turned out, the threat to peace still remained.

"But I don't understand, Commander," Zarella spoke first, "surely there must have been twins born before on Betazed. What of them?"

"Indeed, there were, Madam Councillor," Stadi said, growing more ashamed, "but in ancient times, those few that survived gestation were quite often smothered at birth. They were considered an... abomination."

"What do you mean, 'survived gestation?'" the weaselly little Mr. Haan sneered, a look of obvious disgust distorting his already distorted features.

"Even a Betazoid fetus has some latent telepathic abilities, sir. As twins develop in the womb, deep down in their subconscious minds they already begin to vie for supremacy. It's nurture versus nature," Stadi explained, "they can sense mother's love, but they do not yet have the faculty to share it. Quite often such pregnancies abort themselves."

“Freakish,” Xavier Hawk muttered. Feigning disinterest, he turned to face the viewports and stared out at the stars.

Stadi’s ebony eyes drilled into the man’s back like laser beams, the death of his longtime love, Zora McKnight, still fresh in his mind. Hawk’s ruthlessness all those years ago had driven a wedge between the two young lovers that had never been resolved. And now she was gone, his beloved Zora was gone. Stadi closed his eyes and turned away from the man. So much potential wasted, not only in lost love, but also in lost career opportunities. Hawk had held true to his word, Commander Spencer Stadi would never be Captain. This made him think of Rachel Garrett.

“So why were these twins allowed to survive?” Haan sneered with even greater disgust. Some members of the group looked at him with shock, but most still remained focused on the commander, awaiting his response.

“In our modern era,” Stadi began hesitantly, “surviving twins are carefully screened.” He let out a sigh, trying to formulate his scattered thoughts in an understandable way. “In normal childhood development...” he began again, “...telepathic ability is virtually nonexistent until puberty, and then it matures very quickly. In some rare instances however, child prodigies are born with their telepathic abilities ‘switched on’ so to speak.”

“And this is what twins would normally be scanned for,” Austin Kelley nodded with understanding.

“Yes, exactly, Mr. President,” Stadi said, focusing now on his Commander-in-Chief. “You see, these child prodigies are hit all at once with the thoughts and feelings of all those that surround them. All the passions and fears – anger, happiness, and disgust – they are literally smothered in it from birth.”

“My God,” Zarella breathed, “it’d be like listening to an orchestra warm up for hours on end...”

“Yes, Ma’am, for days upon years in fact. And this overwhelming noise eventually drives all but the very strongest into madness.”

“Is this your assessment of our current situation, Commander?” Sarek queried from his inconspicuous corner off behind the President’s desk.

“No one can know for certain, Ambassador,” Stadi admitted. “The Burke children were born more than eighty years ago. As cruel as it sounds, twins are normally separated at birth and taken to opposite sides of the planet... sometimes even off world. Why the Burke children were never separated and screened has never been fully explained, but there is little doubt that they were born prodigies.”

“And thus mad,” Sarek mused.

"If not back then, then surely now, sir. Seventy years alone here, on this primitive planet, trapped in children's bodies... I cannot imagine..." Stadi trailed off.

"Sounds like a load of metaphysical bullshit to me," Admiral Hawk expunged from his vantage point by the tall, graceful windows. He stared at Stadi now with menacing eyes and crossed arms.

"Oh, is it, sir?" Stadi glared back, jaw muscles clenching. "The ancient texts also talk of a telepathic tsunami. Well, you saw it here today, sir, just a few short hours ago," he jeered. "The barest mention of these twins spread like wildfire and brought this entire Federation to the brink of civil war..."

"Not on my watch you sonuvabitch!" Hawk bellowed.

"Gentlemen, please!" Austin Kelley sat forward now, nearly on his feet, fearing this may actually come to blows.

For his part, Ambassador Sarek quietly marveled at the interchange. *Definitely a past history*, he mused, *I shall have to investigate this further.*

"Why don't you tell them, Admiral?" Stadi provoked. "You forget that I am a full telepath and..."

"Be still, Commander," President Kelley admonished him, with just the right amount of command presence in his voice to catch the seasoned officer's attention. Sarek was becoming increasingly encouraged by this new president's sudden growth. These humans so rarely surprised him anymore, it was oddly refreshing.

"Tell us about what, Admiral?" Austin Kelley insisted now. All eyes in the room were now trained on Xavier Hawk. But the man would not budge. Austin Kelley sighed.

"Commander?" he queried in frustration.

"Two more starships have been destroyed above Ethos, sir." Nearly everyone in the room gasped. Perhaps ashamed, Hawk looked plaintively back out his window, Sarek quietly down at the floor. He closed his eyes in carefully concealed trepidation. All the others remained transfixed on Stadi as he continued.

"The battle raged on for nearly two hours," he paused now, taking a breath. "There is much damage and many casualties. She's in our f---ing minds, sir! There are no 'sides' anymore... the *Enterprise* only just barely escaped destruction herself." Stadi tussled his hair and looked now almost like a madman on the brink. He sensed the word *cowards* come forth from Admiral Hawk's mind and he very nearly lunged after the man. No one in the room spoke as Stadi forced himself to relax again.

"So, how do we combat this menace, Commander?" Austin Kelley finally said at length, clearly out of his element.

"I don't know, sir," Stadi answered truthfully, puffing out a long weary sigh. Back during the War, the Old Guard was sent in to deal with such crises. But they were all dead now, nothing more than a shameful memory in a carefully obscured history. Perhaps the boy? There had not been enough time to evaluate this potential before Stadi had found himself standing here. He really began to wonder now how Onovan had not only found the child in his care, but had also managed to smuggle him off world. Yes, Stadi mulled, *perhaps the boy is the key to defeating this wicked girl-child*. They would have to call the *Enterprise* and check on his condition, and then perhaps interview him...

"*Bridge to Admiral Hawk...*" The sudden comm call startled everyone from their silent reverie.

"Hawk here, go ahead," the admiral called out.

"*The Enterprise is underway, sir... They are heading back towards the planet.*"

"God Dammit," Hawk fumed, "lay in a pursuit course at once!"

For the second time today everyone in the president's office jumped to their feet and moved towards the forward viewports. Austin Kelley arrived just in time to see the massive glistening hulk of the legendary flagship flash by the windows, then recede into the darkness like so many of the distant stars.

"You're with me, Commander," the admiral barked as he breezed by Stadi. "Let's get to the Bridge." Trained to follow orders, Spencer Stadi did not so much as flinch as he fell into step behind his senior officer. Within moments, they had passed out of the president's office and into the corridor; and it was only here that Admiral Hawk spun, grabbed Spencer Stadi by the uniform jacket, and threw him up against the bulkhead.

"Now you listen to me you Royal little sonuvabitch," he seethed. "I don't know what your game is here, but when I get this mess sorted out, I'm gonna bring Betazed to its knees, and put an end to *you* once and for all."

*Most intriguing indeed*, Sarek reflected from his vantage point just down the corridor. The Vulcan allowed himself a brief moment of surprise. These humans so rarely surprised him anymore. It was oddly refreshing.

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By a most extraordinary and unlikely set of circumstances, Lt. Richard M. Castillo now found himself in command of the *Enterprise*. By an even more extraordinary and unlikely string of events, Ensign Andy Dardanelle now found himself as his First Officer. Just a few short hours ago, the sandy-haired young man had thought himself doomed in the

submerged bowels of the sunken *Ambassador*. Strange and unlikely events indeed! Repairs and damage control were proceeding slowly in the time since Commander Stadi's departure. Ordinarily, Andy would've been the one doing this work, and he was now finding it a difficult transition to be content instead to simply direct these operations from the Bridge.

He never asked to be boss; command had never really been his forte.

For his part, Richard Castillo was carefully trying to hide the fact that he was feeling slightly overwhelmed himself with his newfound duties. To be sure, he had sat several night watches in the past just to get the feel of it, but that had been in the farthest reaches of deep space far from anywhere. This, this was something totally different. Virtually in a state of war, the *Enterprise* was a smoldering mess, practically dead in space, and it was now Castillo's job to see it put back together. They were relatively safe for the moment, drifting as they were near to *Starfleet One*, but their desperate warp flight had come on the heels of already significant damage. Commander Skyl had just reported that the warp core could take hours if not days to repair. Life support was at minimum, and their shield strength was intermittent at best.

Such was the state of affairs when Ethaniel, Crown Prince of Ethos, had emerged from the turbolift onto a smoky, dimly-lit Bridge. At first, no one even took notice of the insignificant child, as adults so often do. But it was only a matter of moments before he had taken *control* of them. A scruffy, dirty little kid dressed in rags can play on the heartstrings of even the most hardened adults. These, these Starfleet officers with their high morals and superior sensibilities, they had not stood a chance; especially against the telepathic prowess that this boy possessed. It had been a simple matter for him to manipulate their minds to his own twisted whims. Repair efforts were doubled, and before anyone knew what was going on, the *Enterprise* was underway once more.

And as the *Starship Melbourne* loomed ever closer now on their viewscreen, the boy issued just one simple command: "Target their Bridge..."

In sharp contrast to the large, rather bulky form of the *Enterprise*, the *Excelsior*-class starship *Melbourne* bore the long, sleek, and graceful lines of a beautiful lady. Long considered Starfleet's finest achievement of form over function, the original *Starship Excelsior* had at first been regarded as a technological blunder. With a failed engine system that took years to rework, the entire development project was nearly abandoned. Yet, cooler heads prevailed, and this streamlined shape had now become Starfleet's reigning standard. At the massive Antares Shipyard, a hundred of these

sturdy, dependable vessels were turned out each year, creating a strong foundation for the Federation's glistening Golden Age.

In his expansive quarters on Deck Two, just forward of the Main Bridge, Commodore J.P. Hanson was just now serving tea to his two weary guests. Lwaxana Troi still pressed at her temples occasionally, though the splitting headache was slowly beginning to subside the farther they got from Ethos. She wore her everyday wig here and was dressed uncharacteristically drab in a grey Defense Force issued jumpsuit. Her husband Ian sat near to her side and listened intently to his wife's careful account of Betazed prehistory. All of the obscure events were news even to him, and he could not help but be reminded of the old human proverb about 'skeletons in the closet'. Feeling evermore dyspeptic as the story went on, the commodore slid back into his chair and turned his nose up at his tea.

"So, Madam," he finally asked, "how do we combat this unseen threat?"

"Oh," Lwaxana waved her hands, "back during the War the Old Guard would've been sent in to combat such a crisis... but sadly, they're all gone now..."

"The Old Guard?" Ian asked, fascinated that he had spent so many years immersed in this alien culture, married to a native, yet in the end knowing so little about them. He sighed. His daughter was part of this alien culture too and he felt suddenly like an outsider.

Sensing these thoughts, his wife gazed into his eyes with comfort and understanding. "The Old Guard," she began reluctantly, "were carefully trained soldiers with minds conditioned to destroy other minds. It was a shameful and despicable necessity," she sighed, "for our kind of war... a telepathic war."

"My God," Hanson sighed; but it was not a sigh of shame or of condemnation, but of a shared feeling of sadness and loss. This weary old soldier too had seen his own fair share of the horrors of conflict and war.

"Many of the poor old fools were driven into madness," Lwaxana concluded. "Ugh!" she exclaimed suddenly, jumping up. "Such dreadful, melancholy thoughts!" Ian had grown accustomed to such flamboyant theatrical acts from his wife, but Commodore J.P. Hanson was startled nearly into heart failure. All but spilling his now tepid and untouched tea, he too jumped to his feet wondering where the fire was. Ian fought back the devilish laugh that threatened to escape him now at the expense of the old man's displeasure. It amused him in some sick sort of way to keep this gruff old veteran on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Lwaxana scolded him with her bottomless ebony eyes even as she too broke into a carefully concealed, but devious smile.

*“Bridge to Commodore Hanson...”*

“Hanson here,” he called out with a clear amount of unconcealed exasperation. Ian chuckled openly now as Lwaxana simply beamed.

*“The Enterprise is on approach, sir. They are not responding to hails.”* Ian was standing now too, and together the trio all looked out the expansive forward viewports towards the oncoming flagship.

“What the hell,” Ian spoke first, “those look like torp...” but the young adjutant would not get a chance to finish his sentence as the two orange globes hurtled past the windows and slammed headlong into the Bridge – a mere one deck above them.

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Like a feather caught in the wind, Marta Batanides had arrived alongside Leilani Algethi just in time to see the runabout *Ischua* bank gracefully off the edge of the shattered *Ambassador* and take a soft landing next to a small and insignificant ground team. Despite the signs of welcome friends and familiar surroundings, Marta began to get a sickening feeling inside as the sinister designs of this impish child became now readily apparent. Marta thought of protesting, but then thought better of it. She could sense that Lani was growing increasingly impatient with her, her status as Holy One slowly losing credence. This child, Leilani Algethi, was changing right before Marta’s eyes. She was growing up – and quickly losing her dependence on mysticism and superstitious belief.

Off to their left, the northern sky was blackening and forked with lightning. A storm was coming and this storm would soon serve Leilani Algethi well. Her braids swinging wildly, she turned her freckled nose to her guard captain and whispered several commands. Almost as one, the small armed force backed up into the cover of the remaining trees and then began to pick their way closer to the downed *Ambassador*. Some time ago, The Voice had come to Lani and informed her that plans had changed. Her grandfather, Ras Tau’aman, had been taken to his Ascendance. She was saddened that she would not get to know this man after all, could not count on his strength and guidance to get her through the next couple days. It was now solely up to her to have the strength to get to the Crown Empress alone; to unseat this tyrannical monster from her unsteady throne.

With the softness of a feather, Lt. Sam Galloway guided the runabout *Ischua* in for a landing near to the tiny ground team. Ever cheerful Sally sat by his side humming quietly to herself and Sam quickly concluded that there was comfort in the sound. In the northern sky, they could both see a black storm approaching and were grateful now that they and the

ground team would have the protection of the runabout for when it arrived. Sam was somewhat relieved to have relinquished his duties as acting-captain, yet he felt strangely melancholy as well. It had been a long road from the Alberta prairies of his youth, and he had actually enjoyed his few minutes of fame at the top. He quickly dismissed a miniscule grain of regret, grateful instead to have turned the reigns over to Lt. Commander Seth.

"Seth is hailing us already," Sally giggled, snapping another large bubble of her gum. "I think he misses us," she laughed. Sam just shook his head and smirked. The girl certainly was infectious. He was fairly certain though that the Vulcan did not 'miss' anyone. "This is the *Ischua*, go ahead, *Captain*," he called out, putting careful emphasis on the word *captain* for Sally's own amusement.

"*Lieutenant*," came Seth's carefully stilted reply, causing Sally to shake with silent laughter as the Vulcan continued. "*Now that the air has been refreshed within the shuttlebay, I have decided to retract the space doors to protect the crew from the oncoming storm... any objections?*" Sam's eyebrows popped up in surprise. It was rare for any Vulcan, especially a Vulcan in command, to ask for anyone's advice. Sally giggled some more as Sam studied his computer screens.

"Uh, yeah, Seth," he answered casually, "that seems like a sensible precaution. Sensor readings are showing that that baby is packing quite a punch. I'm going to move the ground team and their equipment inside as well."

"*Understood, Lieutenant*," Seth said a little more formally now. "*Maintain contact every half-hour as agreed... Ambassador out.*"

"Aye, sir," Sam chuckled into the empty commlink.

"He definitely misses us," Sally squeaked. Sam merely shook his head again as he keyed in several commands to open the outer hatch. With a puff and a hiss, the doors separated and slowly yawned open like the jaws of a cat. Bright sunlight poured in and filled the cabin with a soft, warm breeze. Yet the breeze held within it a hint of the coming storm; primitive instincts picking up on the subtle changes in air pressure, the charged ions, the almost subliminal smells. They demanded a certain, yet undefined urgency, and Sam jumped to his feet. Gesturing, he bade Sally to go first, and with her flitting, birdlike grace, she complied. What they stumbled into upon departure stopped them cold in their tracks. "You two are the pilots of this craft?" A child, with braided hair and a freckled nose, held them both transfixed with the business end of a short sword. Quickly surveying the scene, Sam could see that the rest of the small ground team was being held similarly at bay by an only slightly larger assault force.

"Answer me," Lani insisted again, shoving the point ever-so-slightly closer to Sam's chest.

“Ye-yes,” Sam croaked, stunned beyond words, throat suddenly dry. The assault force he could understand, but this child? A wind-whipped cloud of dust brought them a deep rumble of thunder. Beside him, Sally trembled, white as a ghost, all of the infectious giggle drained right out of her.

“Captain,” the child called out with a startling clarity. “You, me, and the Holy One shall board the craft with these two as our guides.”

“Wait, wait, wait just a minute,” Sam sputtered.

“Do as she says, Lieutenant,” some woman at the back of the group suddenly ordered. His eyes scanned again, only to focus finally on a petite, sunburnt woman dressed in the remains of a Starfleet uniform. He did not recognize her, she was not from the *Ambassador*. Too confused now for words, Sam merely let out an exasperated ‘uhh’ and stood with mouth agape.

“Just do as she says, trust me,” the woman reiterated, stepping forward. “I am

Commander Marta Batanides of the *Enterprise*. You will not be harmed; you have my word.” Another sharp crack of thunder was heralded by another wind-whipped cloud of dust blowing across the scoured remains of the park. A storm was coming and Sam trembled now in awe of it.

“Quickly now,” the child ordered as the first huge drops splashed in the dust around them, “time grows short in all things. Captain, order the rest of our force to fall back and join in the assault on the Palace.”

“Ensign Rogers,” Sam called out now, the protective instincts of his Starfleet training overriding all other fears. “Have Commander Seth beam your group and all your equipment back inside. A storm is coming...”

He hoped the child would not see the double meaning in this one simple order. Sure, it was foremost for their safety; but nearly as importantly, they would hopefully be able to convey to the acting-captain just what exactly had transpired down here. Assurances or not, Sam was still uncertain as the true intentions of this Commander Batanides. Had she been somehow coerced or manipulated by these bizarre marauders? He suspected he would soon find out as the small group slowly boarded the runabout. Fortunately, or so it seemed, the girl had not protested his coded order.

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For a brief and uncertain moment, Commodore J.P. Hanson stared up through the smoky air at the stars. He was on his back; this he knew for certain. All the rest of it was the uncertain part. All around him he could hear circuits pop and sizzle, could hear the agonized shriek and groan of

metal fighting against metal. He could sense the air getting thinner, like on a mountaintop, and this gave him the lightheaded sensation of floating ever nearer to those twinkling stars. A shudder shook the deck beneath him and roused him back into this reality. He was aboard the *Melbourne* and had just witnessed two photon torpedoes sail by the windows and slam into the Bridge just one mere deck above him. He was lucky to be alive.

Another shudder shook the deck; another metal shriek filled his ears. The commodore was about to try and get up when barely discernable glint caught his eye. At first, he thought it was beyond the alumglass, but as the glint spread outward in a starlike pattern, he quickly realized it was the alumglass itself. His immediate reaction was more of fascination than of alarm as the starlike pattern grew ever larger, and transformed itself into a sparkling spiderweb. Reality can sometimes be fooled by the unreal and Hanson was for a moment caught up within the web of the unreal. So transfixed was he that he did not immediately notice his adjutant, Ian Troi, crouched over him, desperately trying to get him to his feet.

*“Engineering to Commodore Hanson,”* someone said, somewhere far off in the distance. *“Showing massive structural damage in your area, sir. Prepare for immediate emergency transport...”*

And then reality struck. And even as his body dissolved into a shimmering cloud of energy, the commodore saw the glass, indeed the entire wall, disintegrate before him, and cave outwards into the star-studded and endless vacuum of deep space.

Moments later, Commodore J.P. Hanson was on his feet and furious. “Well, let’s have it son,” he bellowed to the frazzled chief engineer.

“The Bridge and most of Deck Two are gone, sir,” the young man said, his pallor slowly going from the white of shock, to the shaded green of realization.

“Poor bastards,” Hanson now muttered. He turned briefly to Ian and Lwaxana Troi with a pained look on his worn-out features. The couple stared back at him, at a loss for words, still in shock themselves; gripping each other against the lingering fear of such near death and thinking only of Deanna.

“Lay in a pursuit course,” Hanson ordered. “We’re putting a stop to this bullshit right now, one way or another.”

“Sir, this ship is *not* going anywhere,” the chief engineer countered blatantly, clearly annoyed with the order. Ian Troi watched his commodore turn a sudden shade of red and he quickly put a hand on the old man’s shoulder to mollify him.

“Explain, Lieutenant,” Troi said quietly to the engineer, soothing the situation only slightly.

“We were just hit unshielded, sir, by *two* torpedoes,” the man answered matter-of-factly, almost too matter-of-factly. “The computer is *Fubar*, along with most of the other crap around here.” Something popped and sizzled behind them, adding emphasis to his words. “I don’t even know why we’re still alive,” he shrugged, apprehensively eying the shorted-out piece of equipment.

“*Starfleet One calling the Starship Melbourne... do you require assistance?*” The unexpected comm call deflated Hanson almost immediately. He now offered the chief engineer a bizarre sort of smile and patted the man squarely on the back. “Well best of luck son,” he said with a toothy grin, “‘cause the three of us are abandoning ship.”

Ian and Lwaxana Troi could do naught but hide their devilish smiles.

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“Why are you doing this to me?” Captain Rachel Garrett pleaded, and the little girl giggled some more. The captain brought a hand up, only to wipe away fresh blood dripping from her nose. She struggled now to sit up as the Empress Ethereal slowly backed away, still giggling. The captain felt more alone now than she had ever felt in her life. She could no longer sense Spencer Stadi’s distant but delicate touch within her. Had they left orbit? Was the *Enterprise* destroyed? She was afraid too, afraid that she would not now get out of this alive; or worse, that she would in the end come out of this insane. Those had not been her memories. They had been corrupted, pillaged, almost defiled, by the wicked mind of that child.

The Empress continued to giggle as she began to dance around the room, twirling and bouncing to some unheard and ancient melody. Her great white dress ballooned outwards with each sharp pirouette, while the little bird in its silver cage fluttered about wildly in tune with the dance.

*She’s mad!* Garrett thought now. Her conscious mind had only considered it before, but now her subconscious mind was screaming the truth. *My God, she truly is mad!* The captain’s mind raced. She could not help but think of the mass murderers that, when asked, could not explain their actions. They just did what their demons told them to do. No conscious thought, no conscience for the result, just primal and unexplained rage.

Loneliness begets anxiety, anxiety begets fear, fear begets anger, and anger begets still more loneliness. It was a paradox of emotion that was limitless in its resources. The real and the unreal became blurred. Paranoia besets upon the fringes of one’s own reality. But whose reality? For the telepathic mind, for a child prodigy like Ethereal of Ethos, reality was

anyone she chose it to be and more. Even altered memories could become the plaything of such telepathic prowess. And this fear spread like a plague all across the populace, just as it had done back on Betazed all those years ago. When do the thoughts of a sweet and innocent child turn suddenly to evil? What are the transformational causes that bring a young mind from the path of peace to that of a madman out of control of his own senses? One need only ask Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett of the *Starship Enterprise* and she would tell you.

The captain struggled to her feet, in fear now more than ever before. How could one hope to confront, ever hope to fight, such a demon? This child was capable of anything. Fortunately, her resources were somewhat limited here on this primitive planet. Such a mind in control of a starship could lay waste to all manner of things... the captain suddenly became sick, almost nauseated. Onovan had taken this mysterious twin brother into orbit. The Empress had said the Federation fleet was blowing itself to bits high overhead! Garrett had no way of knowing how long she had been unconscious. *Oh, dear God, let it not be so*, she prayed even as the heightened psi-region of her brain reached out again for Spencer Stadi. Nothing! Just the interminable silence of her own thoughts. Her mind had not felt so alone, so *empty* in almost twenty years.

Still the child giggled and danced. "Ethereal," Garrett called out cautiously. "Tell me more about this invading force." *Perhaps keep her distracted?*

"Ah, yes," she laughed. "My Palace Guard has them pinned down in the access roadway. A bold, but foolish plan," she giggled. "I assure you, Captain, we are quite safe here."

"What of the child though, Ethereal," the captain coaxed, "the child sent by your brother to lead this invasion?"

"Oh, Captain," Ethereal suddenly stopped. "Now there's the rub! Oh, ho ho ho, my brother, he is cunning to be sure. He chose well, Captain, for I cannot sense her."

"And this does not alarm you?!" she chided.

"Ha!" the girl exclaimed. "It's all part of the final hand, Captain... the Telepathic Endgame. Two twins, pitted one against the other, their thoughts linked together almost since conception. Do you not see the beauty in this, Captain?"

"The beauty, Your Highness?"

"Oh, Captain!" Ethereal scolded. "It's the perfect irony. You forget that I can see into his mind as clearly as he can see into mine." She laughed now. "Can you not see the beauty in that? It's difficult to devise strategy when your own thoughts betray you to the enemy at every turn!"

“But he’s your brother,” Garrett whispered, her thoughts returning now to that icy river of her youth. The sadness and the loss, the destruction of a family that simply could not cope with the torrent of emotions.

“*He killed our parents!*” the girl shouted, startling the captain. “And he is most surely coming now for me,” she concluded flatly, defiantly. “What else do you think would sustain him for fifty years in that cold, dark tower?” At a loss, Garrett moved over to the north side of the tower and stared out at a rapidly darkening sky. The black clouds were forked with unheard lightning. She could see wind-whipped dust blowing across the plaza as the first few errant drops splattered against the glass. For her part, the Empress crossed over to the southern windows, gazed out at the city, the forested mountains beyond. “A lot has changed in seventy years, Your Highness,” Garrett mused, breaking a long stretch of silence. “You and your brother could be taken off world and separated, perhaps treated... Away from this planet you would age normally, you could live out the rest of your days in peace, away from his thoughts.”

“Peace, Captain?” The girl let out a dark laugh. “What do you know of peace? You are all alone too. Elevated far above your crew, perched on a gilded throne, hardened and indifferent to the love that surrounds you. Afraid of that dark space between the stars, afraid to let go, afraid to let down those inner walls built up since childhood. You stand idly by and let *life* happen all around you, all the time telling yourself that your sacrifice is all for the greater good. Your hard callous shell has at last driven out all feeling; you are empty inside. You stand beside yourself even now, and watch your body go through the motions, clinging to anything you can to maintain your sanity. Pity me, Captain? Oh no, for it is I that pity you.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” Garrett pleaded, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“To prepare you,” Ethereal almost whispered. “Your crew will need your love, not just your guidance in the few short years to come, Captain. Your own endgame is at hand... It is being written even now, by dark and unseen forces hidden deep within your own Fleet. Subtle events are already in motion that will change the course of history for the next generation... and will presently lead you to your own final hand.”

“Wh-wh-what?” the captain sputtered, wiping away tears, her fingers raking across the dried blood on her cheeks. She was facing the Crown Empress now, had even taken a few steps towards her.

“How clearly the telepathic mind sees,” Ethereal replied distantly. “How beautifully all our lives interact and interchange in such curious and unseemly ways. And indeed, how the threads of our lives lead us each to where we are today.”

Garrett was becoming increasingly alarmed now by the child's somber tone, her quiet musings. They seemed a dangerous portent of things to come. Very bad things. The captain moved closer, ever so slowly closer, ever more fearful of the madness that danced around the room. Above her, the rain began to splash against the great glass dome. But the Empress still stared out the windows, towards the city, towards the distant park where the *Ambassador* lay. Ethaniel had brought that ship into orbit; a prize he knew his sister could not resist... all those fresh new minds to play with. *Damn him!* It had been a clever distraction to hide his true intentions. To hide Leilani Algethi from her.

"Separate us, Captain?" Ethereal said suddenly. "Oh, no," she added angrily. "We are a matched set. What my brother does not understand is that he is far too weak to live without my strength. Separate one, and the other dies..." she trailed off at last.

"Well surely, Your Highness," the captain began, only to be cut off by the unexpected.

"Do you remember the name of your first boyfriend, Rachel?" The use of her first name, the sudden invasion of her memory, it startled her. She remembered now, Seth Wallace, her first kiss... a memory long since forgotten. "It really is beautiful how our lives interact and interchange in such curious and unseemly ways."

"Empress, I, I, I don't..."

"By some bizarre twist of fate," she explained, "Seth also happens to be the name of the highest-ranking officer left alive aboard your precious *Ambassador*. He is a Vulcan... curious creatures the Vulcans, they suppress such a deep instinctual fire inside... It's a true wonder that it doesn't overwhelm them."

"I do not understand," Garrett sputtered, fear gripping her even harder than before. She could feel her chest tightening, her heightened psi-awareness fighting against a growing burning sensation deep inside.

"Tell me, Captain, have you ever heard the Requiem of Vulcan's Forge? It was written by this Commander Seth. They really are such a passionate people." And the Empress began to recite with the cherub-like tones of a child:

*Across the plain to Vulcan's Forge  
Like the blood of Vulcan kin  
The fires, the fires of Vulcan burn.*

*Deep in the lava chasms flow  
There drift the darkened souls of love  
There to sing their lonely lament.*

*High on the peaks of Vulcan's Forge  
Hear the wailing of Vulcan sin  
While quiet the fires of Vulcans burn.*

"Tragic really," Ethereal clucked. "You know, that poor young man's parents were both killed in a horrible fire?" And again, the Empress began to recite, even as Captain Garrett moved up beside her at last to stare with her out the rain-smearred glass. Her heightened psi-awareness fought ever harder against that growing burning sensation, but this deep instinctual fire could not be stopped.

*Across the plain to Vulcan's Forge  
Like the blood of Vulcan kin  
The fires, the fires of Vulcan burn.*

*Deep in the lava chasms flow  
There drift the darkened souls of love  
There to sing their lonely lament.*

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Hear the wailing of Vulcan sin  
While quiet the fires of Vulcans burn.*

In the *Ambassador's* main shuttlebay, Acting-Captain Seth had just beamed the last of the crew back inside to the seemed safety of the shattered hulk. Even the injured had been brought back from the hospitals to ward off the possibility of any further abductions by this bizarre new marauding army led by a freckle-nosed child. The crew all talked cheerily, despite their losses, for they all knew that Starfleet would soon be on its way. Outside the closed doors, the storm now raged with an intensity all its own.

Standing near to the runabout *Tioga*, Commander Seth seemed indifferent to the crew's camaraderie, as most Vulcan's would; but in truth, he was troubled. His mind continued to drift now to thoughts of his parents. It was not common for a Vulcan to reminisce thus, to dwell on the dark thoughts of the past. He had written a requiem once, shortly after their untimely deaths, and this dirge played now over and over in the dark back fringes of his mind.

*Across the plain to Vulcan's Forge  
Like the blood of Vulcan kin*

*The fires, the fires of Vulcan burn.*

*Deep in the lava chasms flow  
There drift the darkened souls of love  
There to sing their lonely lament.*

*High on the peaks of Vulcan's Forge  
Hear the wailing of Vulcan sin  
While quiet the fires of Vulcans burn.*

Caught up now, as if in a trance, the Vulcan turned and slowly entered the runabout. The *Tioga* was still wired up to the *Ambassador's* mainframe and from inside, he would have access to everything. For a moment, Seth was caught up within the web of the unreal. The fringes of his own reality had been replaced somehow by the fringes of a new one, and he knew now just what he had to do. Sitting down at the aft control console, he quickly keyed in several commands, then entered his access codes. He was convinced he was doing the right thing... and then reality struck and the spell was broken. Slowly, he looked down at his work.

The five-second countdown had already begun. Strategically placed charges of antimatter set throughout the ship would all detonate at once. The autodestruct sequence had been designed to prevent the ship from falling into enemy hands; and now, anything of tactical value would be destroyed, leaving naught but a smoldering spaceframe. Within moments, the shuttlebay, and everything in it, would reach many thousands of degrees. All things therein would be incinerated, cleansed, reborn, each in their new form. High on the peaks of Vulcan's Forge, hear the wailing, the wailing of Vulcan sin, while quiet the fires of Vulcans burn. And as the clock reached zero, Lieutenant Commander Seth, acting-captain of the once and forever *Starship Ambassador*, could not help but wonder if anyone would write his requiem.

High in the South Tower of the Palladium, Captain Rachel Garrett wailed. Out through the rain-smearred glass, far across the city, in the distant park where the *Ambassador* lay, she could see the great glistening hulk begin to glow with an otherworldly fire. For a brief instant it shown with the white-hot intensity of a star, before slowly fading into various colours of orange and yellow. Mushrooming upwards into a rain soaked sky, a great black cloud of smoke blotted out the mountains beyond. The fury of the antimatter now spent, all that remained burned with an intensity all its own. Rachel Garrett placed her hands and forehead against the ice-cold glass and wept.

“Why,” she whispered, great tears streaming down her cheeks. But she did not expect an answer, did not necessarily want one. She could not help but think of the mass murderers that, when asked, could not explain their actions. They just did what their demons told them to do. No conscious thought, no conscience for the result, just primal and unexplained rage; and now the captain’s own mind burned with its madness.

## ~ CHAPTER FOURTEEN A

### BIOBED TWO ENTERPRISE MAIN SICKBAY PORTSIDE ~ DECK EIGHT

The heat was growing in great waves, enveloping her, causing her skin to tingle. Her soft little hands went involuntarily to her face in a protective gesture that did little to ward off the suffocating heat and smoke. She could see actual flames now and got that first sensation that she was beginning to burn. There was surprisingly very little panic or fear, more like an acceptance. Strange thoughts for such a young girl. But her mother had always called her special; destined in some way to do great things. This stirred up some feeling in her, and as she began to smell the pungent odor of her own flesh and hair beginning to sizzle, she called out suddenly with a new acceptance: an acceptance of life.

“Mommy, Mommy, I’m here Mommy... Help me!” the child in her cried out.

“Ensign Enyo,” she heard someone call back, a young man, not her mother. Enyo was her name yes, but the Ensign portion of it took several long moments to process. “Ensign Enyo,” again the young man’s voice, “wake up love, it’s Doctor Blaine, you’re in Sickbay yeah.” Still her mind struggled through the smoky haze. *The Enterprise Sickbay?* So, this had not been the fire of her youth. Disoriented, the young woman slowly opened her eyes to stare into the face of the scruffy-haired young doctor from Perth.

“Wh-wh-what?” she said with a tentative grasp on reality.

“You’re in Sickbay, love,” he answered. “You took quite a nasty bump on the head, but you’re gonna be fine yeah.” His thick Australian accent caused her twin antennae to twist in his direction. With a sudden move that startled him, she sat up and swung her feet off onto the floor.

“Doctor, I have to get to Engineering!” Her blue skin flashing to near florescence, her antennae began to twitch wildly now as she breezed past him towards the door.

“Uh, Ensign,” Blaine called out, “I don’t think you’re going anywhere love, doctor’s orders.” He could barely contain his smile as the young girl skidded to a stop and turned on him.

“Doctor, please, this is very impor...” Enyo stopped up short as the doctor grinned wildly at her and pointed downwards, his face turning a slight shade of crimson. Puzzled, she looked down, only to see knees and toes

peering back up at her from beneath her hospital gown. She craned her neck around slowly and caught a bare glimpse of blue butt cheeks, and understood now that perhaps a brief delay could do no real harm.

Some minutes later, and dressed in a crisp new uniform, Ensign Enyo picked her way towards Engineering. She could hardly believe that only yesterday these corridors had been glistening and clean, almost as if the *Enterprise* had been brand new. Now, the air held a smoky tinge, half the lighting didn't work, and the floor was a minefield of debris and open tool chests. All around her, like busy little bees, the crew worked feverously in the murky heat to put their glorious lady back together. Her first real deep space assignment, the young ensign wasn't sure just how bad the veterans would consider it, but the damage seemed pretty severe to her.

Boarding a turbolift and calling for Deck Twenty-Eight, she felt the car begin to move. She would be descending down into the very bowels of the ship, deep into the secondary hull as it was called. The ensign could remember now that during the battle, this section had taken the brunt of the assault. She began to wonder just how she would find things in these lower decks. New to the ship, she suddenly realized she would be leaving the primary hull for the first time. *Some tour*, she thought as the speeding car came to a soft, but abrupt halt. *I can't be there already?!* she mused, even as the doors opened to reveal a large '28' painted on the wall across from her. The speed of her descent amazed her.

Enyo found these corridors to be much different, much more utilitarian. They were squarish, framed in with unadorned girders and titanium crossbeams. It all appeared to her to be much more durable, and indeed it was, for there was very little apparent damage down here. The air did still carry that smoky tinge, but most of the industrial grade lighting was still lit, albeit harsh to the eyes, and this gave the impression of a white, sterile environment. Making her way aft, the ensign did pass several teams working on this or that or the other. Despite the *apparent* lack of damage, her discerning eye could still begin to see the telltale signs that there was indeed quite a lot of damage. Foremost in this was the darkened warp core that now jumped out at her like some great thing in the night. She stood now in awe of it. Even stalled, the great seventeen-story monstrosity was magnificent and defied the senses. Enyo knew little of engineering, but could still sense the power of the thing by just looking at it.

"Can I help you, Ensign?" The Vulcan chief engineer looked out at her from his small office, startling her from her trance, reminding her suddenly why she'd come.

"Oh, Skyl... errrr," she sputtered, embarrassed. "I mean, *Commander*... I believe I've solved the transporter problem!" Her

excitement was infectious, and even Skyl raised an upswept eyebrow at her. He beckoned her into his office, and she fairly skipped towards him.

"It is agreeable to see you so well recovered, Ensign," he said flatly as she came skidding to a halt next to him.

"It's not the ionization, sir, it's the metaphasic radiation!" Enyo blurted out.

"Indeed," Skyl intoned, studying her blue features for several short seconds. *Curious young creature*, he thought. "I admit that I am intrigued by your hypothesis, Ensign. Please continue... as succinctly as possible," he warned.

"Uh yes, sir," she gulped. "If I'm not mistaken, sir, metaphasic radiation is a subspace phenomenon. Punching through the ionization is easy, but what we're basically trying to do is beam through a warp field as well, and that's where our problem is."

"Fascinating," Skyl whispered, his keen intellect picking up instantly on her train of thought. His mind moving almost into a trance, he ignored the girl for several long moments.

Disheartened by his silence, the girl looked down at the floor. "Sir?" she queried at length, believing that she had somehow erred.

"You are brilliant, Ensign," Skyl mused. A compliment from a Vulcan was rare enough; beaming praise was simply unheard of. "You will assist me, Ensign. I believe the solution lies in adjusting our warp field to the correct millicochrane frequency. First however, we must get the warp core back online."

"Indeed," Enyo giggled now, until a clanking sound from somewhere out in Engineering caught their sudden attention. Something had fallen. Curious, they both moved out and near to the slumbering warp core. Slowly looking up, they could see him now, the old man; and wondered at his presence there.

Ras Tau'aman had made his way to Engineering, and little did they know, he was there to help them.

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Dr. Ann Grey paced her quarters aboard *Starfleet One* even more so than usual that afternoon. The silence was only occasionally broken by quiet murmuring as she tried to reason through the jumbled thoughts that always raced through her jumbled mind. She often shook her head in frustration, only to tuck unruly strands of her brown hair back behind her ears, and chew some more at her fingernails. Ann once again read over the latest message her father had sent her from her homeworld on Dulisian

IV. Her lips moved as she studied each paragraph; carefully examined every word. Sir Brandon Grey had taught all his children, oft times harshly, to be strict and accurate in everything they did. He had drilled into their minds time and again that careful and well-defined strategy was the only way in which the Revival could ever hope to succeed.

Despite the chaotic storms that raged across her mind, the timid young doctor was well known for her compassion. Her service record was exemplary and some of her 'medical miracles' were already becoming legendary. By all accounts, Ann Grey was a model Starfleet officer. Yet, at the moment, she had the appearance of a caged animal as her eyes darted around the room and she continually fussed with her hair. The message had left her more unsettled than usual. She was torn between her loyalties to Starfleet, to the Federation; and to her family and her homeworld. Dulisian IV was on what had once been the hotly disputed border with the Klingon Empire. The Khitomer Peace Accords had stabilized the region for almost forty years now, but the underlying tensions could perhaps never be erased after the nearly one hundred and fifty years of hostility that had come before it.

Thus, she paced, and she muttered. The demands that family loyalty placed upon her nearly overwhelmed her fragile mind at times. To Grey and his sons, family was everything and Ann and her mother had oft times been caught in the extremes. Ann wondered now if history would ever look kindly at some of the awful things she had done in the name of family, in the name of the Revival. Would she be painted some day as the hero or the villain? In the face of evil, was there good, or just more evil fighting the greater evil under the label of justice? If only the world knew what it was like inside a mind such as hers, perhaps they would understand. The chaotic storms that raged across her consciousness. But *understand*? She knew no one could ever understand. No one could know what it was like. Her mind never stopped... it was always locked in a constant battle for control. Voices, so many voices, screaming at her from the past. Her own conscience fighting her, old songs, unbidden memories... conflicting emotions torn by conflicting loyalties. The present, all the possible futures... it was all a constant whirlwind racing through her mind, and *I CAN'T MAKE IT STOP!*

Ann smacked the palm of her left hand repeatedly on her forehead and screamed. It was only then that she heard the door chime to her quarters ring a second time.

"C-c-come in," she trembled nervously. She feared it may be Ambassador Sarek.

Would she be strong enough?

The doors parted to reveal Fleet Admiral Xavier Hawk. He took one step inside, and the doors closed behind him.

“Oh, Zave,” Ann practically whimpered, running and jumping into his arms. The Admiral hid a tight smile - seducing this vulnerable child had almost been too easy; bending her to his whims, almost disgustingly simple. He continued to marvel at the almost sadistic machinations of her father, Sir Brandon Grey. The man was ruthless, and Hawk admired the old fool for that much at least. Ann backed away from him slowly, tears welling in her bright blue eyes.

“Ss-Ss-Sarek is really pressuring me about the President’s autopsy,” she murmured, almost in fear of being heard.

“Ann,” Hawk soothed, his voice like a slippery eel, “don’t worry about Sarek. Your autopsy is without question. The Board of Examiners have looked it over and found nothing of issue in your findings. That crotchety old Vulcan is just doing what all Vulcans do best – fishing.”

“B-b-but,” she stammered.

“Shhhh,” he soothed, placing an index finger over her lips. “I have a new assignment for you, a long-term one, and it’s an integral part of the plan.”

“Oh-oh-okay,” she muttered with all the intensity of a beaten dog. Her whole life it seemed had been ‘integral to the plan’ – it had never once been about what *she* wanted.

She began to dread now what was coming. ‘Long-term’ would mean another move, a new crippling environment to adjust to and try to cope with. No friends, just the day-to-day monotony of life in the service.

“I’ve just learned from our resident Royal asshole that the *Enterprise’s* Chief Medical Officer was killed down on Ethos.” Hawk said this with almost a hint of joy in his voice, almost like he could not believe this latest good fortune. “I am reassigning you to the *Enterprise* as soon as this mess is cleared up... This is the break we’ve been waiting for, Ann, this is important.”

She turned away from him now. It was all so ‘important’ and she began to wonder why. What did it matter to her? It mattered to *them*, that’s what was so ‘important’. *Time to start a new life*, she sighed inwardly. She felt like an empty shell, like all the life had been drained right out of her. She didn’t care much about anything anymore. One day just sort of blurred into the next in a never-ending parade of heartache and disappointment. The *Enterprise* was to begin its next five-year tour of duty in deep space far out on the very fringes of the frontier. A knot began to form in her throat at the thought of the isolation, so far from home, so far from everything, trapped in the artificial environment of one tiny little starship for years on end. Quite unexpectedly, a wry new smile began to creep across her pursed lips.

"I understand," Ann Grey said quietly to herself. Xavier Hawk did not quite catch the strange timbre in the girl's meek little voice. He merely took it as the quiet acquiescence that he had come to expect from this timid little creature. He thought no more of it as he forced her towards the bedroom, there to take from her what he had really come here for.

And as the Admiral grunted and sweated on top of her, Ann Grey's face held a strange new sort of smile. Five years in deep space, isolated, so far from home, so far from everything. *Time to start a new life*, she mused.

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The boy sat in the command chair of the mighty flagship and swung his feet as any good child would do. Still dressed in his rags, face and hands smudged with dirt, he nibbled gleefully on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a Terran specialty, and an offering from the human, Richard Castillo. For all intents and purposes, all the minds on the Bridge took their orders from him now, Ethaniel, Crown Prince of Ethos, who had only just recently usurped his role as Captain of the *Enterprise*. He knew too that (with some careful guidance) all those below decks would loyally tow the line from above through the faithfully regimented command structure of this most remarkable vessel. The order to fire on the *Melbourne* had been met with virtually no resistance. It was frightening really to see just how quickly his sister had reduced these peaceful people to such despicable violence.

The insidious nature of it filled him with an instant, indescribable joy when he had first regained consciousness aboard the crashed runabout. So many fresh new minds! And oh, to find so many of them from his homeland of Betazed. It had been so long since he had felt the familiar touch and warm embrace of his own kind! His psyche fairly teemed with it, left him feeling giddy; indeed, almost overwhelming him at first. The Ethosians were a simplistic race, primitive in thought and interaction. Oh sure, they had been fun to play with at first, to manipulate, but soon boredom had set in and Ethaniel and Ethereal had been finally left to themselves once more. The *Ambassador* had been his gift to her – but this *Enterprise!* – this had become his ultimate reward after so many decades of ultimate patience. The sweet song of a kindred harmony resounded throughout his paracortex even now. It infected his very soul like a sweet narcotic.

To understand a thing is not to be manipulated by it. To understand the Crown Prince, one must go back to his very conception. The fact that most Betazoid twins self abort is no accident of fate, it is the cry of nature

against abomination. Even a Betazoid fetus has some latent telepathic abilities, none more so than twins. Deep down in their subconscious their personalities are already asserting themselves, struggling for identity and individuality, vying for supremacy. They can sense mother's love, but they do not yet have the faculty to share it. Indeed, they can even sense the emotions of all those that surround them; all the fears, the anxiety, the love, the hate, the malice - and the jealousy. For Ethaniel, his sister's jealousy had beat him into submission long before he'd even been born.

To manipulate a thing, one must first have perfect understanding of it. Where his sister excelled in extreme self-centeredness, Ethaniel excelled in perfect understanding. From birth onwards he had become a keen observer of the erratic whims of all those hundreds of minds surrounding him. During the War, as his sister honed her skills at ruthlessness, Ethaniel had been the true genius behind their machinations, carefully controlling the whims of countless thousands. With an almost unnatural clairvoyance, he had absorbed the over eight hundred personalities aboard this ship in just the bare moments before the runabout had crashed into its hanger bay. He knew instinctively how they would react to his arrival here. Had easily manipulated Castillo and Stadi into performing that harrowing warp jump to safety - to *his* safety.

And as the *Melbourne* had approached, he had absorbed all of their minds as well, reduced their thoughts to a set of statistical probabilities, knew with that same unnatural clairvoyance that with the right amount of pressure, the ship's chief engineer would not pursue them, would defy the orders of even a commodore to declare his ship dead in space. Some distance behind them now, Ethaniel could also sense *Starfleet One* in its entirety. So many more minds to absorb and to calculate. The uncertain president, his gilded crown set so precariously upon his head. The fleet admiral, whose self-assuredness in his own indefinable cause would soon be his ultimate undoing. The doctor, the wicked timid doctor, whose shattered mind may indeed be the only hope for a true and lasting peace. The Trois, so much in love, yet so sad; and Commander Stadi, so lost now without ship or captain. So many minds!

Right here in front of him, on the very Bridge of the *Enterprise*, sat perhaps the truest irony of fate. Andy Dardanelle, soon to be the sole survivor of the late great *Starship Ambassador*, and indeed, the one person solely responsible for the great vessel's fall from orbit. The young engineer assigned exclusively to the care and maintenance of the navigational subprocessors. So easily understood, so easily manipulated. It had been simple enough to convince this little half-breed to introduce an irreparable fault into the ship's flight computers. Perhaps simpler even for the Crown Prince to convince his sister that it had all been merely part of her own artful

and malicious design. So easily understood, so easily manipulated. Pull on a thread and watch the lives unravel. Through all of his telepathic probings over the past eighty years, Ethaniel had become acutely aware of the fickle finger of fate; how the threads of hundreds and thousands of lives all interacted to bring each and every one of us to our own individual and very personal destinies. How an unlikely boy from the far-flung, far-off prairies of Alberta would very soon now set a chain of events in motion that would change the course of history on a planet that was so many, many light-years removed from his own home. The threads, the never-ending threads... Ethaniel saw this and so much more in the thousands of minds that surrounded him. So many minds!

Madness? When do the thoughts of a sweet and innocent child turn suddenly to evil? What are the transformational causes that brings a child from the path of peace to that of a person out of control of his or her own senses? Perhaps the more important question to be asked is: when does a child become responsible for his or her own actions. Subject to the erratic and irrational whims of his own twin sister, Ethaniel was forced into a world entirely of her making. Or was he? To manipulate a thing, one must have perfect understanding of that thing, and Ethaniel certainly understood his own sister. Or did he? This was not the famous twin paradox of Einstein's Relativity. This indeed was far more insidious. This was a telepathic paradox that reached far beyond all seemed sense of reality. The chicken or the egg? Just who had created whom?

When does a child become responsible for his or her own actions? The 'child' sitting now in the command chair of the *Enterprise*, swinging his feet and nibbling on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, had been born on Betazed eighty-five years ago. By the age of twelve he had beguiled his entire homeworld into civil war. Or had it been her? It was nurture versus nature. History would always ask the question: just how much culpability did the parents have in their children's horrific acts. Who created whom? Just what were the motives behind Eleusis and Electra Burke's sudden rise to tyrannical power? Had they been merely pawns? Or had they simply acted on their own true desires? Why hadn't their children been screened and separated at birth? What were the true driving forces, who indeed was in control? Were the Burke's already under their children's hypnotic spell even then? Had they quarreled right from wrong throughout the pregnancy, paralyzing their children with a crippling fear of separation almost from the moment of conception?

Madness? *Define madness*, the Crown Prince harrumphed as the ragtag and tattered fleet began to resolve itself on the forward viewscreen. Ten starships, six corsair carriers; thousands of minds and he read them all, controlled them all. All that is except for one – his sister. When can anyone

take consequence for their own actions under the grip of such madness? Perhaps no one, not even he.

~ ~ ~ ~

In an anteroom just off the main office, President Austin Kelley stood and trembled.

His first few harrowing hours in this auspicious office had already seen the unprecedented. He couldn't help but muse that the legends about the *Enterprise* were true – where the flagship went, adventure followed. It was exhilarating and terrifying all at the same time. Civil War! Reports were coming in of protests and even some violence on at least five other worlds. Betazed itself was a powder keg waiting to go off. All of her spaceports had been closed and all space traffic in the region had been ordered to a standstill. Quite frankly, Starfleet had been caught with its pants down. Starships were out of position, it was taking hours to muster the necessary peacekeeping troops, and subspace communication channels had become jammed. Society across an entire sector was breaking down. Thus, the new president trembled. In but the first few hours his sudden responsibilities had all but overwhelmed him. Many a past president had crumpled in on themselves under the intense pressure and scrutiny. The United Federation of Planets in its Golden Age was composed of nearly one hundred and fifty major worlds and hundreds of minor ones. Billions upon billions of citizens swarmed across eight thousand light-years of free space and beyond. More than a hundred-thousand starships explored never-before-seen regions of the galaxy and conducted trade on a staggering scale that was nearly beyond comprehension. Civil War! Yes indeed, Austin Kelley was overwhelmed. He had been totally unprepared for the responsibilities of this office, and he realized that now with a sickening sinking feeling that delved into his very soul.

So consumed was he that he did not hear his faithful aide come into the room and creep up silently beside him. Amy Tyler had seen this man at his worst, seen him fight his demons the only ways he knew how – in drinks and debauchery at seedy outposts all across the Federation. She had been with him through the thick and the thin, the high points and the low points. He was an enigma yes, but also very human. The dark-horse candidate that had shocked many with his election to vice president and subsequent rise to power. But Amy was one of the few people that had ever seen Austin Kelley the person. Though not necessarily friends, their relationship had developed its own unique form of closeness. They had spent many long, lonely hours together on starships traveling to the farthest corners of the vast Federation. It had been a lonely life for them both.

She smiled now; just a few short hours ago he had asked her to marry him. “Hey,” she whispered, “how ya doing?”

“Oh, you know,” he said, somewhat startled. “Soldiering on,” he then replied, doing his best to mirror her East London accent and clenching his fist in the finest British tradition.

“Bullocks,” she shot back almost immediately, and Austin Kelley sighed.

“Admiral Hawk,” he began slowly, “will no doubt have to be replaced... a task I am not looking forward to.”

“He won’t go without a fight,” she replied levelly, “but you’ll have Sarek’s support, and Councillor Zarella’s... and mine of course,” she added as an afterthought. She placed a tiny hand in the small of his back and he in turn swung a great arm over her head, then dropped it gently across her shoulders.

“And what to do about Mr. Haan?” The president sighed again. Former president Kalomi Joran’s Privy Council had been an eclectic mix of strange individuals that many a political analyst had tried to make sense of. Perhaps it was something within the man’s telepathic mind that had pieced them all together and made it work. But for the very human Austin Kelley, all of these disparate personalities had begun to clash. Civil War! The sudden and unexpected transition of power had not been a smooth one.

“I find myself wondering what he would do,” Austin Kelley muttered, before releasing Amy and turning to peer out a small round porthole.

“With respect, Mr. President,” Amy countered, “you’ll have to find your own way now. Wallowing in your usual self-pity and playing victim to your supposed misfortunes will not solve the crisis at hand.”

“Well, well, well,” he said turning, her face slowly flushing to crimson. “Speak your mind, please do,” he laughed now, raising his eyebrows at her. “I have a right mind to promote you to National Security Advisor.”

“Oh, no, sir!” Amy shot out, causing him to laugh again.

“Relax,” he smiled, “you are far too valuable as my own personal aide... and my friend.” She smiled herself now, face still red, and looked away demurely.

“*Bridge to President Kelley...*”

“Go ahead,” Austin Kelley chuckled some more.

“*Commodore Hanson and Lwaxana Troi of Betazed have beamed aboard, sir. They are requesting to see you at once.*”

“Then by all means, have them conducted to the Executive Office at once.” He eyed Amy squarely now with some new measure of resolve. Perhaps together they would get through this after all.

Trained to follow orders, Spencer Stadi did not so much as flinch as he fell in step behind his admiral. Within moments, they had passed out of the president's office and into the corridor; and it was only here that Admiral Hawk spun, grabbed Spencer Stadi by the uniform jacket, and threw him up against the bulkhead.

"Now you listen to me you Royal little sonuvabitch," he seethed, "I don't know what your game is here, but when I get this mess sorted out, I'm gonna bring Betazed to its knees, and bring an end to *you* once and for all." Releasing him at last, Hawk stormed off, leaving Spencer Stadi to try and make sense of his scorched and tattered uniform. *Most intriguing indeed*, Ambassador Sarek reflected from his vantage point just down the corridor. The Vulcan allowed himself a brief moment of surprise. These humans so rarely surprised him anymore that it was oddly refreshing. Only moments earlier in the executive office, he had marveled at the unusual interchange taking place between these two highly seasoned Starfleet officers; clearly now the result of some unknown past history.

And he marveled still while Spencer Stadi, as scorched and as tattered as his uniform, hesitated momentarily there in the corridor, plainly at a loss as to how to proceed. Unsure whether to carry on to the Bridge, or to just simply skulk off somewhere else, the commander tried to brush himself off, but all was in vain for the smudges went too deep. A tarnished past can haunt like the requiem of a dream of wistful and solitary memories. Spencer Stadi truly was at a loss. He felt empty and alone here among these strangers and aboard this tiny stuffy little ship. In less than twenty-four hours he had lost his captain, his *Imzadi* and friend; and he had lost Zora, the one and only true love of his life. His ship and his crew were now plunging headlong into the abyss without him, and he felt helpless about it, abandoned, lost in this sea of loneliness and discontent. Adrift. And now, standing as he was all tattered and scorched, he had at last lost his dignity. The admiral had finally taken this from him too, and so much more. The commander could sense that some very dark and sinister forces were at play here that went far beyond these renegade twins. Something else was in motion that threatened to undermine the whole of the Federation and everything that it stood for.

So absorbed was he that he did not sense Sarek's approach. "Walk with me, Commander," the Vulcan said, pausing only briefly. Trained to follow orders, Stadi could sense that this had not been a request and fell quickly into step beside the wizened old ambassador.

"The situation is tenuous at best," Sarek mused. Stadi did not need his telepathic reasoning to infer the multiple meanings contained within that one simple sentence. This somehow comforted him.

"Indeed, Ambassador," he merely replied. They turned a corner and headed down another long corridor.

"Calm your mind, Commander, focus your thoughts," Sarek intoned, almost as an adept monk would to his junior acolyte. Stadi immediately felt himself relax, felt his thoughts begin to reorganize themselves. He decided to let this meditative process flow over him and through him. Vulcans were ordinarily touch-telepaths, yet in the presence of a full Betazoid mind such as Stadi's, the process of thought-sharing could almost take on a symbiosis of sorts, a convergence of form not unlike two soldiers falling into step beside one another.

"Structure. Logic. Function. Control," Sarek recited. "A structure cannot stand without a foundation. Logic is the foundation of function. Function is the essence of control. I am in control. I am in control."

"I am in control," Stadi repeated to himself. They rounded another corner, this time locked into step with each other.

"All problems have a solution, Commander."

"These twins sow the seeds of self-doubt in the most insidious way, Ambassador... through our memories."

"Yet they are not invulnerable," Sarek countered.

"But how, sir?" Stadi argued. "How does one confront such a menace that consumes from within?"

"By facing it, Commander," Sarek said abruptly, and Stadi reflected on this. Had he run when his captain, and indeed his fleet, needed him most? The decision had seemed right at the time, but now he felt his mind filling again with the seeds of self-doubt.

"There are too many minds at play here, sir," he pointed out at last.

"Yet only two minds of concern, Commander."

"Yes sir, of course," Stadi argued again, "neutralize the twins and you neutralize the threat. But how, sir? People are dying, we cannot just simply wait for them to fall asleep." "Indeed," Sarek acknowledged. "But what of your assets, Commander? You already have one of the children in custody, do you not?"

"With all due respect, Ambassador," Stadi stopped walking now, frustrated. "I do not think you fully grasp this situation. That child is now in command of one very heavily armed starship. His sister has turned an entire fleet of once loyal starships against themselves. Together as one they have bred misery and discontent everywhere they have ever gone." He paused now as the ambassador eyed him speculatively. They had reached an intersection in the corridor and Stadi mused at the irony of this.

To go left or to go right? But there was always that often forgotten third option, they could go back. This roused a curious sensation in the commander as if he were on the verge of some great discovery, a solution to their dilemma perhaps. Yet, like a word lost on the tip of the tongue, it would not come. The frustration of it was almost debilitating.

"There are always more options than those that seem most obvious, Commander," Sarek reflected, as if picking up somehow on Stadi's subconscious thoughts. "These children have been unwanted from birth. Part of society yet separate from it; together in thought, yet separate in body. A feeling of aloneness, of being separate, breeds anxiety in all sentient creatures, Commander, large or small, old or young. One can have intelligence with knowledge, but there can be no wisdom without understanding. You must learn to understand these children for who they are, not for what they have done. Only then can you face them and the challenge they represent."

Stadi stood speechless for many long moments. Anxiety was the root cause of all disquietude within the mind. And it led to fear; and fear was just the beginning of loneliness and discontent. These children lived - thrived - off the anxiety of others. Yet this anxiety was just an extension of their own. It was a paradox of emotion, a vicious circle wherein A led to B and B led back to A again. By feeding off the negative emotions of others, they were only gaining a false high at best; their own loneliness and discontent assuaged for a time by the suffering of others. But only for a time. All this suffering did little to assuage the underlying truth that lay behind all the suffering, the anxiety of being alone. It was only now that Spencer Stadi began to get a real feeling for what these royal twins truly represented. They are but an extension of ourselves.

"I pity them," Stadi said now with new understanding.

"Pity them perhaps, Commander," the old Vulcan countered, "or perhaps you should give them your love."

~ ~ ~ ~

"B-b-b-blue," Ras Tau'aman stuttered. He stood now uncertainly before the Andorian Ensign Enyo and eyed her twitching dual antennae with a dubious curiosity. Diminutive in stature, the blue-skinned young girl still stood nearly a head taller than the aged old man.

Beside her, with his upswept eyebrows and pointed ears, Skyl towered like the Rock of Gibraltar above them both yet stood silent within the infinite patience of his Vulcan heritage. He had let the young ensign do all the talking throughout the nearly five minutes that it had taken to coax the old man down off his perch in the upper level of the expansive engine

room. His utterance of the word *blue* was as yet the only thing they had managed to get him to say.

“B-b-b-blue,” he stuttered again. A little over twenty-four hours ago, this First Lord of the Ascendant had grown up within a world without a universe. In the perpetual daylight of

Ethos, no time had ever been spent pondering the unseen stars, or speculating about life

‘elsewhere’. Even the enigmatic Burke couple had looked pretty much like every other Ethosian; though slightly taller and possessing those haunting black colourless eyes. The prospect of alien life was as new to Ras as had been everything else he’d seen in the past day; and he still had no explanation whatsoever for any of it! Faith and divinity had been thrown right out the window. Even wonder had somehow taken second stage now to his latest beholderance. Nothing in the sacred texts had ever said anything of blue girls or tall men with pointed ears!

“My name is Enyo. Now please, sir, what is yours?”

“R-R-R-Ras if you please, Miss.”

“Good Ras, and did you come aboard with Onovan?”

“Uh, yes Miss, the dark man,” Ras mumbled, feeling suddenly faint. The dark man had been an oddity in itself, but this girl was *Blue!* And the antennae! They seemed to watch him with their own twitching intensity, an intensity nearly as unnerving as the stare of the tall quiet man with the pointed ears. He swayed uncertainly, causing Enyo to move quickly to his side. Wrapping an arm around him, she guided him into Skyl’s small office at Skyl’s own silent behest. There she seated the old man in a tall swivel chair facing the darkened warp core. Expending no further time on this matter, the chief engineer returned immediately to his duties.

“Ensign,” Skyl ordered, “I shall resume my endeavors to bring the warp core back online. Glean what information you can from our guest, specifically the whereabouts and safety of our Captain.”

“Yes, S...”

“Nooooo,” Ras said suddenly, cutting the girl off. “You must protect yourselves from the Crown Prince! He is here and you are all in danger!”

“Wh-wh-what?” Enyo sputtered.

“Ethaniel,” Ras continued in earnest, “brother to the Empress Ethereal. With the aid of the dark man, he has escaped from the Tower and is among you now! He must be stopped!” The old man’s impassioned pleas had by this time caught the attention again of Skyl. The Vulcan faced him now with the intensity of a headmaster to an unruly student. Only just recently the Bridge had fired two photon torpedoes at an ‘unspecified target’. As if in a trance and so consumed by his work on the warp core, the chief engineer had not so much as questioned this somewhat unusual order...

until now. Indeed, he was even on the verge of being startled by the fact that the *Enterprise* was on an unexplained return course to Ethos *without* Commander Stadi; and he had not so much as given this a passing thought either! His once highly controlled Vulcan mind now swooned with a swarm of confounding thoughts and disturbing possibilities.

“Please clarify,” he ordered, but the old man was winded and trembled now at the sudden new scrutiny these alien creatures were placing him under.

He was tired, oh so tired – he had been bone-weary tired long before this terrifying ordeal had even begun. *It should not be like this*, he lamented. Ascendance was supposed to be a blessed experience, filled with perfect peace and contentedness. He should not feel tired and confused, terrified and alone. The thought of eternity spent in this purgatory made him physically ill. He was thirsty, had not eaten, had not slept in untold hours. He had a fast-fleeting thought of his granddaughter, Leilani Algethi, his own flesh and blood that he had never – would never see. A lifetime of regret flooded over him. He had banished his own family to the harsh Second Continent under the guise that it was ‘for their own safety’. He felt sick and ashamed of himself now for such despicableness.

“Here,” the blue girl said, startling him. She held out a crystal-clear glass of cold sparkling water, and at first Ras hesitated, fearing some kind of trick from these otherworldly specters of the afterlife. Still, she proffered it to him again and he at last, albeit reluctantly, took it from her. At first smelling it and sensing nothing untoward, Ras finally took a cool refreshing gulp of the tasteless liquid. He could feel the ice-cold sphere of creation course its way downwards and deep inside him before being absorbed by the very depths of his eternal soul. Closing his eyes and drawing in a long, fantastic breath, the old man felt instantly reinvigorated. Perhaps this was heaven after all.

“Now, please, sir,” Skyl insisted, “we must know of this child.” Ras opened his eyes and stared into the soft warm face of the blue-skinned girl. She was actually quite beautiful. With another couple of gulps of the cool refreshing liquid, Ras began to recite for them the ordeals of the past few harrowing hours. He told of the dark man and the captain’s arrival. (Minus of course his first embarrassing scene on the plaza.) He told of their audience with the Crown Empress, how she had instructed him to take the dark man to the Western Antiquity Tower. The Book of Darkness and the discovery of the Crown Prince; the phantasmagorical set of events that had transpired after his discovery. And finally, here, in the belly of the beast after being swallowed whole by this massive metallic monster. Now as before, he issued his stern warning with true and undeniable passion. “You

must protect yourselves from the Crown Prince! He is here and you are all in danger!"

"It's all right, Ras," Enyo soothed. "Relax now, you're safe here with us. Just give us a few moments now to think," she nodded, and he nodded back, clutching his empty glass like it was an old memory. Enyo and Skyl both turned now to face the still darkened warp core and confer.

"What do we do, sir," Enyo almost whispered, "this child is an adept telepath... he can probably sense us even now." She peered out the reinforced alumglass and into the expansive facility beyond; up, up, up, the darkened core shaft she peered almost as if in search of a sinister spirit or shade.

"Remain calm, Ensign," Skyl intoned. "Do not draw attention to your thoughts. There are over eight hundred people aboard this vessel, over half of them from Betazed. Logic suggests that the child cannot sense us each as individuals without specific cause."

"O-o-okay, Skyl," she whispered, then bit her lower lip. "I mean, *sir*," she quivered, then squeaked a sorry.

In a rare gesture, the Vulcan clasped his hand in hers. "Ensign, repeat after me... Structure. Logic. Function. Control. I am in control."

"I am in control," Enyo repeated quietly. She felt her mind instantly calm itself, then remembered that Vulcans were touch-telepaths. *What a clever little trick*, she thought as he released her. She suddenly did not feel so scared and alone.

"An enemy combatant has taken control of this vessel," Skyl stated flatly. "It is our duty as Starfleet officers to retake command." He touched several buttons on the control stations in front of him, then studied the readouts. "As expected, all command functions have been locked out from the Bridge."

"What does that mean?" the inexperienced young officer asked honestly.

"It means, Ensign, that we can only retake command from *on* the Bridge."

The girl's shoulders slumped immediately. "Oh no, Commander, but how? We just can't stroll onto the Bridge and take command, sir..."

"That is precisely what you will do, Ensign," he said, cutting her off.

"What? Me?!" she said incredulously. But Skyl was already turning to face Ras again. He eyed the old man with a single raised eyebrow and a speculative look. "You know this child well?" he queried. Ras sat up suddenly, somewhat startled, as he had been nearly half-asleep. He stared now into that alien face. They used such bizarre words! Yet somehow Ras knew instinctively what was being asked of him.

"I have known the boy and his sister for over three generations," the First Lord of the Ascendant answered wearily. The initial effects of the water now spent, he could feel the burdens of his life returning to him with alarming haste.

"Will you assist us in subduing him, sir?" Skyl pressed. Ras could sense from the alien's bizarre emotionless tone that it was more than just a request. Purgatory or not, his work here was not yet done. The Ascendants were indeed testing him on this day. The alien creatures needed his help; there was no denying it. They had no idea what they were up against. Tired as he was, he knew what his choice must be. After a lifetime of so much wrong, perhaps this was his one last chance at Redemption. Perhaps here before him lay the true path to Ascendance.

He nodded to Skyl solemnly.

"Very good," the Vulcan acknowledged. "Now Ensign," he said turning, "you will meld with me to protect your mind, then we shall proceed as follows..."

By some small twist of fate, Acting First Officer Enyo of Andoria would soon be in command of the *Enterprise* once more.

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*Madness.* Sitting in the command chair on the Bridge of the great flagship, the Crown Prince Ethaniel continued to swing his feet with glee. *Define madness,* he harrumphed as the ragtag and tattered fleet began to resolve itself on the forward viewscreen. Ten starships, six corsair carriers; thousands of minds and **she** controlled them all. This fleet was all that stood between the *Enterprise* and Ethos, between Ethaniel and his sister Ethereal. He was coming for her, and she knew it; and she would stop at nothing to stop him. Those sixteen ships would soon bear down on this single vessel with full force and blistering depredation; with full intent to kill. But he would quickly turn them against themselves again; it was a simple matter to excite their worst fears and anxieties. The fleet would destroy itself, and the *Enterprise* would fly straight through the middle and on to Ethos; and on to her.

Ethaniel had the true advantage here and he knew it. He was assaulting his sister now on three different fronts. His ground forces were keeping the palace guard busy at the gates, he himself was in command of the *Enterprise* with all its formidable weaponry and technology, and Leilani Algethi was on the move as well with all of her powers of persuasion coming fully to bear. All this while his sister remained locked in her own ivory tower; oh, such delicious irony! He clucked his tongue and grinned now at the

nearly forgotten bonus... the helpless human captain, Rachel Garrett. She was keeping his sister's addled mind distracted in such a delicious way that even he had not before anticipated its success. It was a perfect *coup-de-grâce* and he congratulated himself now for its perfect execution. After a half-century of near infinite patience his time had finally come. His sister's tyrannical rule would be at an end and he at last would be truly free.

Freedom. The right of every sentient being in the universe to have the power to choose their own destinies, or so the humans believed; and now they had infected half the galaxy with their bizarre notions. When his sister had at last been deposed, Ethaniel would return to Betazed and consolidate his power there. He would be its ruler as he had always been meant to be. That was *his* destiny. This human vagary called democracy was an abomination. He was Ethaniel, Son of the Sixth House, Holder of the Sacred Orb of Sanctity, Heir to the Revered Rod of Betazed. Royalty by divine right alone. This abhorrence known as the Legislative Assembly would be dealt with in all due time as well. Soon he would take up his rightful place as Emperor of Betazed, *not* of this backwards and primitive world that his parents had brought him to out of fear and cowardice. Yes, very soon there would be a settling of accounts. Very soon these foreign invaders would be brought to their knees and Betazed would be expunged and returned to its purest form. Only then would all the Great Houses bow to him, he who was their liberator, he who was their Savior. Only then. But first it must be she.

"Enemy fleet approaching, Your Highness," Castillo called out from the helm.

"They as yet have not raised shields, sir," Dardanelle said somewhat quizzically. "In fact, I am detecting no active weapons systems on any vessel. They appear to be engaged in intrafleet search and rescue operations."

This unexpected act of humanitarian aid caused both the officers to give pause. Their minds both faltered in a hazy dream of momentary uncertainty. These vessels were allies, not enemies, or so it should seem. None of this was making any sense to them now, it was as if their minds were on the verge of knowing something they shouldn't, almost like two teenage boys on the verge of pubescence.

"Stay focused, Gentlemen," Ethaniel soothed and manipulated, the adult words sounding so strange and hypnotic coming from the mouth and in the soprano-like tones of a child. "Let's wake them up, shall we?"

Without so much as a spoken order beyond that, Ensign Andy Dardanelle targeted the nearest vessel and fired.

Two shimmering orange globes belched forth from amidships and hurtled through the darkness. Within seconds, they plowed into the

unshielded bow of the Corsair Carrier *Cataria*, former flagship of Lwaxana Troi. For an instant, the ship shuddered as if throwing off a chill, then erupted from fore to aft in a concussive series of ever-widening concentric explosions. With one last momentous surge from its warp core, the ship flashed outwards into an orb of splintering, burning pieces. Even as this horror unfolded, two more shimmering torpedoes sailed unmolested towards the lumbering fleet. This time Ethaniel had chosen to target the *Queen Anne* with its Betazoid captain. The svelte little ship made a harrowing attempt at evasive maneuvers, but not before having its starboard warp nacelle completely sheared off and disintegrated in the blast.

Like a rock through a hornet's nest, the fleet came alive with the intensity of a two-year-old's temper tantrum. Once again, the airspace above Ethos erupted into chaos, and the battle was begun anew. Under the grip of such madness, can anyone take consequence for their own actions?

Perhaps not without help.

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On the Bridge of *Starfleet One*, Fleet Admiral Xavier Hawk stood beside the ship's captain and watched the first moments of the beginning skirmish. His steely eyes narrowed as the *Cataria* erupted into a ball of debris and the *Queen Anne* pinwheeled away like some misaligned Fourth of July firecracker. At first, the remaining ships seemed to hesitate in uncertainty, but then all hell broke loose; and this time there seemed to be no rhyme nor reason to the chaos. The *Enterprise* had clearly fired the first shot, yet the great flagship remained largely ignored on the fringes of the engagement. The battle was not being fought strictly down the line this time either – Starfleet versus Betazed – but rather more of a free-for-all, sucker-punch, back-alley brawl. Hawk didn't like it; it was far too messy for his taste. His upper lip curled in disgust.

"Captain," he said, "reverse course and take us to a safe distance away from the battle coordinates."

"Belay that order," President Austin Kelley called out from the rear of the Bridge as his considerable entourage continued to file out of the turbolift behind him. With him was Amy, of course, and Sarek, but also Commodore J.P. Hanson, Ian and Lwaxana Troi, and lingering in the background with uncertainty, the scorched and tattered frame of one Commander Spencer Stadi. Truthfully, the commander had been somewhat taken aback by the president's bold, sudden, and unexpected stance against the admiral.

"I beg your pardon?" the admiral now seethed, spinning on his heels to see just who had so brazenly countermanded his orders. The ship's

captain cowered and took several steps away. *Starfleet One* was little more than a luxury liner, and her captain was not accustomed to such internal strife.

“You *are* Admiral of the Fleet, are you not, sir?” Austin Kelley seethed himself. “Will you just stand idly by while your fleet continues to blow itself to bits?” Admiral Hawk actually took a few steps back as his commander-in-chief drew nearer, and ever more omnipresent.

The president continued forward like some new and unstoppable force. “Captain,” he commanded, “take us to the heart of the battle... Full steam ahead, or whatever it is you people say.” At the front of the Bridge now, he turned to face the rest of the stunned officers and assembled guests. “First,” he said loudly and clearly, “we need to get those people to stop shooting at each other. Second, we need to get those starships out of orbit and away from this planet. And third, we need to regain control of the *Enterprise* and subdue those children... if anyone’s got any great ideas, now’s the time.”

*Perhaps this President shall serve after all*, Sarek mused quietly to himself.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### ALLEGHENY-CLASS RUNABOUT ISCHUA COMMANDEERED ASSAULT CRAFT OF LEILANI ALGETHI EPHEMERIS CITY, ETHOS

Like a feather caught in a turbulent storm, the runabout *Ischua* banked hard to the left on a heading towards the Palladium; only this storm was a revolution. Buffeted by heavy winds and pelted by huge drops, the runabout was already beginning to handle like a brick in a bucket. It was taking nearly all of Lt. Sam Galloway's concentration just to maintain attitude control of the bulky craft. Beside him, Sally remained uncharacteristically quiet and trembled in that bird-like sort of way that was commensurate with her nature. She sat with arms crossed, an unwitting show of defiance perhaps towards their situation, and indeed towards their captors. Sam could scarcely believe the sequence of events, the threads of his life that had brought him to this moment. From his boyhood days on the Alberta prairies to here, at the heart of a revolution on Ethos, it had certainly been the 'road less traveled' and more.

For Commander Marta Batanides, this was shaping up instead to be a nightmare scene revisited. It had not been so long ago that her own runabout, the *Canisteo*, had been caught in just such a storm and been ultimately plunged to the bottom of the sea. The rain began to come in sheets now and Marta wondered what the odds were that she'd find herself back here again, twice in virtually the same day. In truth, she actually feared what her chances of survival were for this second go round as the runabout shook beneath her feet. What a marvelous set of circumstances had brought her to this place over the past twenty-four hours! Her day had started on the Bridge of the *Enterprise*, safely berthed at Galatea, watching an ancient Earth motion picture. Marta couldn't even remember the name of it now, just that it was 2-D and partially filmed in archaic black and white. Her thoughts turned finally to Castillo with a certain amount of mournful longing to be home again and amongst friends.

Leilani Algethi stood on a different plane entirely. Stoic and proud, she held fast behind the three Starfleet officers with sword still drawn. Her mission was different than theirs, and she knew that they would never understand. She had perhaps come the farthest on this day. From a freckle-nosed child on a plateau to the leader of a revolution. The Voice had guided her here just as it was guiding her now. For her people, and in the memory of her grandfather, the Crown Empress must fall, and Lani must

be the instrument of her demise. The bizarre flying machine lurched suddenly to the right and Lani moved with it, flowed with it, as if she were standing back on the wooden deck of the *Elegance*. She had been born for this, she knew this instinctively as The Voice had told her this was so. The path had been a chosen one, chosen for her.

We rarely see those moments in life that may change the course of our destinies forever. Those thousands of little intersections, the major crossroads; we each come to them each and every day of our lives, and they each lead us all in the end to the same destination. Our fate. For a brief fleeting moment, Lt. Sam Galloway was once again that sixteen-year-old teenage boy standing out in the freezing Alberta prairie spying on the orbiting starships with his telescope. For a brief fleeting moment, Commander Marta Batanides was home again aboard the *Enterprise* and amongst friends, amongst family. And for that brief fleeting moment, Leilani Algethi was just where she knew she should be, fulfilling her destiny and preparing to sacrifice all for the freedom of her people. Yes, we rarely see those moments in life that may change the course of our destinies forever. The runabout

*Ischua* was coming to a crossroad, and somehow, in some way, the passengers could each get a sense of it.

Through the buffeting storm, the runabout climbed ever higher till it hovered now high above the towers and the vast stone plaza of the Palladium. There below them the battle raged. There below them the rain-soaked plaza ran red with blood. There below them, the way was blocked. It was time to improvise.

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So far things weren't quite going according to plan. Through the smoke and blaring alarms Ensign Enyo and Ras Tau'aman tried to pick their way towards the Bridge. It seems that Ethaniel, Crown Prince of Ethos, did not quite have the control over the situation that he thought he had as another phaser blast shook the ship beneath their feet. Enyo herself had come a long way in the last day. From that timid little creature that had been knocked down in these very same corridors during a simple drill, to *de facto* acting first officer, this had been no small feat for an ensign fresh out of the Academy. With a determination all her own, she pushed her way forward through a swarm of debris and repair techs. Her meld with Commander Skyl had left her mind clear and focused. To her right, a control panel snapped and showered her with sparks, and still she pressed on. Instinctively, she knew this feeling of clarity would not last as the effects of

the meld slowly faded, but this did not deter her from her most important task: to take back command of the *Enterprise*.

As if caught in the wake of some great force, Ras Tau'aman struggled to keep up with this strange blue girl. The old man's senses were on overload again and this time they threatened to overwhelm him. The great metal beast shrieked around him as some new unseen force struck out at it, and Ras shuddered. Hot sparks rained down his neck and acrid smoke burned his nostrils. He had no basis for comparison for all these strange events he was witnessing. He had no spiritual advisor, no clergy to explain history as it was happening. Around him these supposed Ascendants seemed more and more like ordinary people at every given turn. They had the same pratfalls, the same emotional responses, and indeed the same weaknesses as one fell bleeding now at his feet. He paused for an instant to stare down into this man's dark eyes, so much like the boy's. He saw there the pain, the fear, the desperation. He was fairly certain now that he had passed into some sort of netherworld of sin and condemnation, full of demons and fallen angels. Yet this still did not explain the presence of the Boy! Ras knew instinctively that the child must be stopped, no matter what the cost, whether it be his eternal soul or something more; so, he forced his weary bones to push onwards in pursuit of that strange blue girl.

In Engineering, if Lt. Commander Skyl had been human, he most surely would have been muttering an entire string of curse words by now. His every effort to restore the warp core was being infernally hampered by each new phaser and torpedo blast. Nearly all of his attention was being focused instead on the sheer act of damage control, most notably the weakening shields, rather than what mattered most: his transport equations had nearly been solved when this newest battle began, but they would be useless without an active warp field! Out of the corner of his eye, the Vulcan engineer monitored the progress of the intrepid Ensign Enyo as she picked her way through the smoke-filled and damaged corridors. Her way, too had been hampered by the battle it seemed; yet the girl was making remarkable progress nonetheless. Beside Skyl, Lt. Stroud muttered several curse words under his breath and the Vulcan's focus was drawn once again back to damage control. *You must hurry Ensign*, he almost prayed as the ships overwrought shields absorbed yet another hard hit, and the dark and listless warp core slumbered on in all its complacency.

The *Enterprise* had nearly pushed her way through the dense phalanx of starships on her course to Ethos when *Starfleet One* entered the fray behind her. The tiny little ship was certainly outmatched and outgunned amongst the ragtag combatant fleet, but she did however carry one very powerful weapon: her *Name*. From the fringes surrounding this one little

ship, a momentary sense of calm began to spread outwards from it like a ripple across a mill pond. Slowly, one by one, the ships began to cease fire as the omnipresent force of Starfleet's number one ship drew ever nearer to the heart of the conflict. Without ever saying a word, without ever firing a shot, President Austin Kelley had brought peace at last by nothing more than an act of sheer audacity. One by one the commanders all began to give pause, one by one they began to stop and take a look around them... and indeed, take an even harder look at what they had done.

But Ethaniel, Crown Prince of Ethos would have none of it. He was on his feet now in the center of a smoldering Bridge. His dear, dear sister had done everything in her power to prevent the *Enterprise* from regaining orbit. At first bearing the upper hand, Ethaniel had not been prepared for the intensity of her subsequent assault. He had at first held the fleet in the palm of his hand as the great flagship arrowed through its heart at piercing velocity. But the Empress Ethereal would have none of it. She fought back with the ferocity of a lioness. It was everything Ethaniel could do now just to maintain his control over the *Enterprise*. He could feel the upper hand of control slowly slipping through his fingers, could feel her animosity towards him clutching at his throat. The child felt now as if he were suffocating, as if the noose were tightening, and he could not breathe here in this cloud of swirling smoke.

Yet defying all odds, *Starfleet One* had muscled its way in and loosened Ethereal's grip ever so slightly. Ethaniel could sense *her* losing control now and he took this moment of weakness to pounce. The *Enterprise* was free at last, clear of the fleet, but the great ship still must be protected from the mysterious machinations of this upstart new president. With the expert brushstrokes of a fine artist, the Crown Prince directed the tattered assortment of bruised starships towards their newest objective – put an end to *Starfleet One*.

So absorbed was he with this delicate balance of power, that Ethaniel failed to take notice of the far, far greater menace that was growing ever nearer to him with every passing moment. Ensign Enyo of Andoria and Ras Tau'aman, First Lord of the Ascendant, had at last found a functioning turbolift and were now enroute to the Bridge. So absorbed was Ethereal within this deadly powerplay, that she too had failed to take notice of her own growing menace that was growing ever so nearer out there in the storm. We rarely see those moments in life that may change the course of our destinies forever.

Both Enyo and Algethi were on the move, let no one stand in their way.

~ ~ ~ ~

Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett sat with back against the cold stone walls of the South Tower and wept quietly. Above her, the torrential rain splashed in heavy sheets against the great glass dome, there to run down over the surrounding windows in great undulating waves. A sharp crack of thunder ran down her spine before lumbering off into the distance like some frightened beast in the dark. The captain felt more alone now than she had ever felt in her life. So lost, so forgotten. Yet above all, she feared the coming madness. Her conscious thoughts had split between the real and the unreal. In the rift that remained there was naught but loneliness and despair. She at first had feared death here at the hands of this insane child, but now somewhere down there deep in that pit where her soul had once been, she began secretly now to long for it. After all her years of such strength and confidence, after all her years in the service of Starfleet, she had been beaten in the end by the maniacal whims of a child.

“Oh, come now, Captain,” Ethereal giggled. “Must you be so maudlin?”

For the first time now, Rachel peered up into those dark empty eyes. Ethereal had been curiously preoccupied for quite some time up until this moment. This caused Rachel to give pause. Something was happening far beyond the confines of this cold stone tower. On the brink of madness, at the gates of exhaustion, her heightened psi-region could still sense this in the Crown Empress. It was almost a sensation of foreboding of very dark things to come. An ending perhaps.

“Something on your mind, Your Highness?” Rachel managed to croak out of a dry throat. This put Ethereal on edge, and the fear became palpable.

“Merely a trifle,” the girl attempted a giggle.

“Oh, I think not,” Rachel countered. “I think that you can sense it too, an ending perhaps. After all, nothing can last forever.” It is a curious sort of thing when someone has been beaten down completely. They cease to care. Nothing at all seems to take on any importance anymore. It is an empty feeling perhaps, but quite unexpectedly it can provide a newfound sense of strength and clarity as well. With all fear of death removed, Rachel Garrett was slowly beginning to realize that all her other fears had evaporated with it. The Empress could do her no more harm. Rachel had been beaten yes, but this had brought on a sort of rebirth too. Things were going to get better. Each new ending brings a new beginning.

“That’s where you are wrong, Captain. I have been ruler here for three generations, and my reign shall continue on until long after your pitiful life has come to its end.”

“Oh, haha,” Rachel laughed. “Perhaps. But my life is naught so pitiful as yours I should think. You are delusional, Your Highness, and you’ve become complacent in your old age. You’ve let things slip, and I think you are only just now beginning to realize it.”

“You will be **silent**,” Ethereal the child screeched. “I am the supreme authority here!”

“You have grossly underestimated Starfleet, Your Highness. You have underestimated the Federation it upholds. And you have sadly misjudged the strength and the vitality of the new Betazed that has sprung up in the ashes of your tyranny...”

“Be **Quiet!**” Ethereal screamed.

“You’re just a pitiful frightened child,” Rachel jeered.

“Nooooo,” the girl seethed through clenched teeth. She clutched the base of the monstrous wig and clamped her eyes shut. For Rachel Garrett, the room began to spin. Drifting, aimlessly drifting within the darkness of her mind, within the infinite darkness of deep space. In the last moments before her shuttle had exploded, Lieutenant Rachel Garrett had donned a pressure suit and blown the rear hatch. Expelled outwards by a huge gust of air, she spun quickly now in an uncontrolled head to toe rotation. The rapidly swirling stars left her dizzy and disoriented, light-years from anything or anyone, all alone in the darkest depths of her memories. Scared, oh yes, scared now beyond all imagining as her oxygen grew thin and she began to anticipate death here in the dark space between the stars. Alone.

Yet fear is just an illusion, an invention of the mind to combat the hazy specter of the unknown. Rachel Garrett was not alone. Her family had become Starfleet, her ship, her crew. She longed now more than ever to be home again and amongst friends. She began to get a sense now not of the rage that Ethereal felt, but of the jealousy. This child wanted to be loved as much as she herself, the captain, was loved. The child’s envy became nearly as palpable as her fear. Weary, and perhaps indifferent, Rachel began to care less about the nausea and the swirling stars of her memory. They became an abstraction. She began to think less and less about Ethereal and Ethos and more and more about the *Enterprise* and Earth. They were the real in this web of the unreal. It was time to go home. And like that one lucky fly in a hundred, Rachel’s mind was lifted suddenly from the spell.

Frustrated, Ethereal plopped into one of the plush divans.

Still seated on the floor with her back to the stone cold wall, it was Rachel’s turn to giggle. “It seems we’ve reached an impasse, Your

Highness,” she said with a sardonic half smile. Still the Empress pouted. Rachel could begin to sense the weariness – not just for all the concentration of today, but for all the never-ending days that had come before it. Ethereal was losing her grip. Rachel had found perhaps this child’s one single weakness: exhaustion. Even an Empress must eventually give way to sleep, as must a captain. Quite without knowledge or intention, Rachel’s mind had raised up its own defensive walls by simply saying: *I’ve had enough!* And the Empress Ethereal no longer had the strength to continue her assault. An impasse indeed.

“So, what shall we do now?” Rachel said, slowly sliding up the wall to her feet. “Sleep this off and go at it again tomorrow? How long shall we continue this, Your Highness, for all eternity? I have no doubt ceased to age as well since my arrival here. So, when is enough, enough? Answer me now you upstart little brat!” A particularly strong gust of wind caused the tower to tremble at the captain’s feet. A sharp crack of thunder agitated the rain soaked glass, rattling it within its frame.

“I thought we were friends,” Ethereal began to cry softly.

“Pish posh,” Rachel scoffed. “You’ve never had a friend in your life... you don’t even know what the meaning of the word is.”

“Shut up!” the child shouted, slapping her slippered feet against the floor.

“Enough,” Rachel said pointedly. “This ends here and now, Your Highness.”

“Now who’s being upstart?” Ethereal sneered.

“Your reign here is over,” Captain Rachel Garrett said finally, decisively, conclusively; and with that, the Empress Ethereal’s world came crashing down around her once and for all.

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“I’m reading two lifesigns... a Betazoid child, and a human female.”

“Wh-wh-what does that mean?” Leilani Algethi asked querulously.

“How should I know?” Sally shot back defiantly. Beside her, Sam Galloway still worked feverously at the controls of the tiny runabout, anxiously fighting every erratic whim of the raging storm. They were hovering now far above the great stone battlements of the Palladium. The heavy rains swirled around them like some thing come alive. At random intervals, a great flash of light would shake the runabout with thunder. Marta Batanides was scared, for she knew all too well the consequences.

“A human?” Marta said with sudden interest, ignoring for a moment the storm that was raging around her. Sally uncrossed her arms and leaned

forward again with seemed disinterest. Her delicate fingers touched two buttons.

“Commbadge ID trace reads as Captain Rachel Garrett.”

“What the hell?”

“Wait, what does it mean,” Lani asked impatiently, “a beta-beta-betawhatsit?”

“Take us directly over the South Tower, Lieutenant,” Marta commanded, and she felt the craft lurch suddenly to the left. “Gently,” she muttered under her breath.

Sam could do naught but comply as the fierce wind took them there almost as if ordered to do so. He made one fitful glance at Sally and his soul filled with a moment’s melancholy. Last week on their date he had been disinterested, perhaps even a little cold and aloof. Now, her safety and protection was all he could think about. The transformation amazed even him. He would stop at nothing now to save her from this madness. Struck by a downdraft, the runabout descended abruptly, and precariously close to the tower.

“Transporters?” Marta asked, knowing full well the unlikelihood.

“In this lightning?!” Sam scoffed. “Yeah! If you want this ship to go up like a roman candle.”

Lani jabbed her sword towards Marta. “Tell me what all this means,” the young girl insisted with a fierce impatience that bordered on paranoia.

“Your Empress and my Captain are in that tower!”

Lani took naught but a second to process this. Determined, and guided by The Voice, this hard-scrabble girl made a choice. The Crown Empress must fall. Her reign of tyranny here was at an end.

“Open the hatch,” she said suddenly, decisively, conclusively.

“What?” Marta herself scoffed now.

“Open the hatch, position us over the dome.”

“You can’t be...” but she could not finish her sentence as Lani shoved the tip of her sword into Sally’s shoulder.

“Open the hatch!” she screamed as Sally screamed. Marta made for a defensive move but was held up short by the guard-captain’s own sword held fast at her throat. Sam too began to make a move, but a sudden lurch from the runabout brought his attention immediately back to the helm.

“Open the hatch,” Marta muttered. Whimpering, her right hand covered with blood from clutching the wound, Sally leaned forward and keyed in several commands. “Go ahead and jump you little bitch,” she sneered as the hatch popped open with a sudden roar. As the doors yawned wider, the cabin became filled with the very substance of the storm. Wind-driven rain spritzed them all with a pulverized mist. Lightning flashed and the tiny craft simply shook with it. The sound, the sound was

unbelievable, fearful, a thing not to be reckoned with. With eyes wide, Marta looked out into the heart of the monster. It almost shimmered, its pattern directionless. It was alluring, intoxicating and intimidating all at the same time. It filled one with awe at the beauty and the power of raw and absolute nature. It was a frenzy of forces beyond the control of technology. This was the real that surrounded the web of the unreal.

“Captain,” Lani commanded. Immediately, the loyal soldier forced his way to the open hatch and jumped. Marta gasped and charged for the door. She and Lani both arrived just in time to see the man strike the dome. The glass cracked - but it did not break. Marta watched in horror as the noble veteran began to scramble for purchase. But the wet glass was frictionless, would provide him with no aide and comfort on this day. He fell to his belly, but to no avail. Sliding and clutching with fingers that would not penetrate the slick surface, he at last rolled off the edge and disappeared into the storm.

Stunned beyond all imagining, Marta did not feel Lani’s small little hand slip into her own - time for her had stopped. She was caught for a moment within the web of the unreal. She felt herself moving forward, felt the child by her side. Together now they were falling, falling as one, falling into the storm.

In that instant, her thoughts turned again to Richard Castillo. Her day had started on the Bridge of the *Enterprise*, safely docked at Galatea, watching an ancient Earth motion picture. The tune of it now began to drift through her mind. It was a languid and wistful ballad, filled with melancholy and hope all at the same time.

*Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, there’s a land that I heard of once in a lullaby. Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue, and the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.*

Melancholy and hope - together now as one, they were falling into the storm.

With absolute and unadulterated amazement, Sam glanced over his right shoulder just in time to see all of his passengers disappear out the yawning hatch. It was just him and Sally now. The chirpish, bird-like young girl showed no emotion as she reached forward and keyed in several commands to close the hatch. Her uniform was soaked with blood at the shoulder and her crimson-stained fingers continued to clutch absently at the wound. They were alone at last, free of the tyranny and oppression of that bizarre child. He must look to Sally’s safety now; no other thing mattered to him. She was important, that they were together was important. *Fly, little bluebird fly*, he thought. The ever-searching lightning glanced decisively off the hull, and the cabin went dark. For a moment, Sam was once again that

teenage boy all alone on the prairie, staring up into the darkness at the stars. It had been a good life, he decided. No time for regrets.

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It was sheer pandemonium on the crowded Bridge of Starfleet's number one ship. Circuits popped and sizzled and the air was filled with a smoky haze. The captain and crew of this glorified luxury liner were little accustomed to such chaos, and it was beginning to show on all their faces. *Starfleet One* was at the dead center of the battle coordinates now and taking one hell of a beating. At the mercy of the whims of an irrational child, the tiny little vessel stood little chance against an entire fleet of battle-hardened starships. Time was running out; not just for the presidential cruiser, oh no, but for them all as shields all around weakened and the damages escalated. The *Enterprise* by now had cleared the fray and Ethaniel, Crown Prince of Ethos, was hopelessly far beyond the reach of those that had intended to stop him.

"Return fire!" Admiral Xavier Hawk bellowed. The frightened crew all jumped as another phaser blast tore at the defensive shields.

"You will **NOT** fire, Captain," President Austin Kelley commanded. "We are trying to stop this battle, *Admiral*, **not** escalate it!"

"You stupid sonuvabitch!" the admiral raged. A photon blast rocked the ship so precariously that everyone standing had to dance to starboard for several skittering steps to maintain their footing. At the rear of the small command facility, Ian Troi held his wife in a comforting, protective gesture that would do little to save them if the shields collapsed. Ian had spent most of his career in administration, so the specter of combat was an all-new experience him and one he could've lived without. Beside them, Commodore J.P. Hanson, a battle-hardened old veteran, dutifully bit his tongue as his two supreme commanders battled it out between themselves. A civilian commander in charge of the armed forces was all part of the time-proven system of checks and balances, but it did not come without its own inherent set of problems, especially in a time of war. Peace in command of conflict, held in balance by the scales of justice.

"Admiral, sir, you are relieved," the president said with such forcefulness that everyone on the Bridge came to attention. "Commodore Hanson," he ordered, "please assume command of the Fleet." All the color immediately drained out of the face of Xavier Hawk, and he backed up a step, wilted. For a breathless moment, no one moved, no one blinked; even the raging battle seemed to give an instant's pause. The scale of justice was teetering now on the razor-sharp edges of the next few seconds. Hovering in the dark recesses at the rear of the Bridge, Commander

Spencer Stadi smiled. This was justice for Zora. At long last there would be a reckoning, a settling of accounts for a racially motivated man that was out of step with his society. Spencer Stadi knew that his own personal career would never advance, but that did not matter now that Xavier Hawk had been deposed. The commander could return in peace now to his ship, his crew, his family; but most importantly, to his captain, his friend, his *Imzadi*, Rachel Garrett.

President Austin Kelley held fast, his faithful aide Amy Tyler standing stoically by his side. In the smoky air, watching over them all, Ambassador Sarek duly took note of every nuance of the moment, every tiny detail, for later recording in his journals. History can be broad and sweeping, or it can be narrow and confined, and contained within the time span of but a few short heartbeats. We rarely see those moments in our life that may change the course of our destinies forever. Xavier Hawk had failed to see his as he backed off and away from his president and slowly disappeared into the pages of history.

“Right,” Commodore Hanson said as he moved to the center of the Bridge. “Mrs.

Troi, contact the Betazoid fleet, order them to stand down at once by authority of the Great House Consensus... Lieutenant Troi, contact the Federation fleet and order *them* to stand down by supreme command of the President...”

“Dammit,” the old man muttered now to himself, “we need to draw their attention away from those damnable children, we need to break the spell somehow...”

“Captain,” President Austin Kelley chirped up suddenly. “Set the ship’s autodestruct sequence.”

“Wh-wh-what?!” the captain sputtered.

“Do it,” Hanson ordered with a wink and a nod to his commander in chief. “And make sure the whole damn fleet knows about it too!”

“Let’s just hope it gets their attention before we’re all blown to bits,” Austin Kelley added woefully as the countdown to their absolution began.

Keen observer to all things human, Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan began to wonder now at his own destiny. His fate was in their hands now, as was the fate of all those around him. He allowed himself another brief moment of surprise; these humans so rarely surprised him anymore.

~ ~ ~ ~

*Someday I'll wish upon a star and wake up where the clouds are far behind me...*

Like the whispered melody of a dream, the wistful and languid ballad drifted through Richard Castillo's memory like sanguine promise of better days to come... *Where troubles melt like lemon drops, way above the chimney tops, that's where you'll find me...* For the first time since the disappearance of her runabout, the lieutenant thought of Marta Batanides... *Somewhere over the rainbow, bluebirds fly...* She was gone now, claimed like so many others by this wretched damn planet... *If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow, why then oh why can't I?* He had not really let this register, had not let it sink in until just now as the *Enterprise* settled once more into orbit above Ethos.

They had spent an extended shore leave together once in Savannah, back on Earth. It had been hot, he remembered, and he had teased her about her comfortable and privileged life growing up under the biodomes of Mars. That summer was the closest they had ever come to romance, but it just wasn't meant to be. They had become best friends instead, and he had often tortured her with his penchant for ancient Earth motion pictures. *The Wizard of Oz* was his favorite, and he had been holding it in silent reserve until just the right moment. He could not believe now that that had been just twenty-four short hours ago. He could not believe now that she was gone. He missed her already and he knew deep down inside that the full gravity of this had not even really hit him yet. A sudden knot began to form in his throat. *So much for the perfect moment*, he thought bitterly. We so rarely see those moments that change the course of our lives forever, and we so rarely give pause to those moments in life that matter most.

Ethaniel, Crown Prince of Ethos, did not realize it yet, but he was losing his grip. His control over many hundreds of minds was slowly taking its toll. One cannot mess with free will for very long and get away with it. Exhaustion was setting in, and one by one the crew were slowly breaking free from the spell. Ethaniel's thoughts quickly darted from person to person, trying to reinforce his supremacy. He continued to monitor the movements of the fleet, the whims of that erratic new president, and the increasingly frantic behavior of his sister. Leilani Algethi was on the move too, though she seemed to have taken on a life all her own. Her mission objectives were no longer clear to him. And that music! That song that would not stop! He could not even pinpoint its source with any great certainty. It seemed to be flooding his mind all at once from multiple and disjointed points of view... *and the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true...*

Drifting, aimlessly drifting. One can almost sense the moment when one becomes the last of his kind. To be the sole survivor, to be the so-called 'lucky one'. Ensign Andy Dardanelle's mind was drifting; his memories

seemed to be flooding his consciousness like a gentle rain. He was thinking now of his friend Sam, how he had laughed inwardly as his flustered friend had quickly recounted the events of his blind date with Sally; a blind date Andy himself had set up. That had only been last week, but now it seemed like it had been part of another life, in another time entirely. His life aboard the *Ambassador* seemed like a distant and all-but-forgotten dream now. That part of himself that he had left behind in the submerged stardrive began calling to him; the echoes of over eight-hundred voices that begged not to be forgotten. These are the things and more that cry out in the night, these are the things and more that drown hope in the seas of despair. *Fly little bluebird fly*, he thought. No one even noticed at first as the turbolift doors opened and a blue but insignificant young ensign strolled out onto the Bridge. She took several steps in and stopped, standing at attention. "Science Officer Enyo reporting for duty, sir!" she said pointedly, and the boy nodded absently. He took no further notice of her as she made her way towards the science stations at the rear of the Bridge. The lingering effects of her mind-meld with Commander Skyl kept her thoughts relaxed and focused. The next few moments would be crucial, yet the young lady betrayed no hint of nervousness or anxiety. True to her Starfleet training, she would let patience prevail over emotion and let history unfold as it should. No one even noticed at first that the turbolift doors had not closed. Quietly, and without fanfare, Ras Tau'aman, First Lord of the Ascendant, shuffled out onto the Bridge and wearily approached the child. He was forever tired. For over seventy years he had faithfully served these Ascendants, until his youth had long since evaporated, and he had been left with nothing but the withered and weary shell of a tired old man. At the sacrifice of his own family, he had stood guard over this troubled child for fifty of those years. Perhaps with some amount of pity, or more likely compassion, Ras himself had spent many long hours at the top of that tower just keeping that lonely boy company. His personality was not like that of his twin sister. He was much more fragile, so much more delicate, even despite his heinous crimes. To live under the shadow of a much more dominate sibling was painful and debilitating.

Ras could never know however that, in all his insidiousness, Ethaniel had used the old man's mind as the bridge to gain control of the granddaughter. Leilani Algethi had been the masterstroke in the Crown Prince's plan, with this pitiful old man as merely cover, just another tool of statecraft.

"Your Highness," Ras said softly. The old man did not nod, he did not bow, he did not attempt to fall to his knees. The events of the past twenty-four hours had changed him. Quite unexpectedly, the Royal Twins had created an all-new Ethosian. A self-aware Ethosian, and Leilani Algethi

and Ras Tau'aman were but the first to come of a new generation that would begin to break the bonds of superstitious belief and organized religion.

"You look tired old man," Ethaniel sneered. Strange angry words from a child, but the child had not so soon forgotten Ras's sudden attack in the runabout.

"You must stop this, Your Highness."

"You don't give the orders here," Ethaniel scoffed. "Tactical, load torpedo bays, target the Palladium." With one shot, the Crown Prince was fully prepared to erase seventy years of bitter and angry memories.

"All those years by your side, My Prince," Ras said mournfully, "I had been so proud of your progress... now you disappoint me. You must stop this; you must stop yourself." The Crown Prince actually faltered at this. It was at this moment that Ensign Enyo keyed in several commands at her science station and released the Bridge lockouts. Commander Skyl in Engineering was now effectively in control of the *Enterprise*. Further using the distraction to her advantage, Enyo next started to move round to portside, and behind the little prince.

"How dare you!" Ethaniel sputtered.

"Your sister can no longer harm you, you're free."

"Free?!" the child shouted. "I can never be free as long as she is alive! You know that as well as I do, Ras. She has poisoned my soul for long enough!"

"Let these people help you," the tired old man pleaded. "Stop bewitching them to do your evil bidding!"

"Nooooo!" Ethaniel screamed, launching himself off the command level and into the old man's arms. Ras nearly fell backwards with the impact, but he held the child fast... just long enough for Enyo to come up from behind and inject him with a hypospray. The little crown prince began to struggle at first, but as the sedative started to take effect, the poor boy began to sob. He clung to Ras now like the scart little thing that he was. All the grief and anguish of a lifetime poured out of him now in great unstoppable waves and Ras squeezed him tightly with all the love he could give. And then Ras himself began to weep as the child slipped slowly into unconsciousness and went limp in his arms.

"Ensign Enyo to Commander Skyl... the Bridge is secure, sir," she announced stoically. "I have retaken command of the *Enterprise*."

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"Fear ye o' people, fear ye the Age of Darkness."

“For at the end of the Third Age, a chariot of flame  
Shall descend from the Orbs of Heaven bearing a Goddess  
That for a time shall unite her peoples. But beware O’ people, for  
she shall be a false prophet sent by Darkness to conquer and to subjugate.  
Yet fear not, for at that critical hour when all  
Hope seems lost, many angels shall descend from The Orbs  
heralding the coming of the One True Goddess, A Savior.  
And the peoples, united, shall enter a new age,  
And shall go forth and conquer the darkness and Make It Their  
Home.  
For there, in the darkness, they shall find the light.”

“Your reign here is over,” Captain Rachel Garrett said finally, decisively, conclusively; and arguably perhaps, in direct violation of the Prime Directive. And with that, the Empress Ethereal was instantly back on her feet.

“Nooooo!” the girl screeched, and same as before, launched herself up and over the back of the divan; but this time Captain Garrett was ready for her. In a standard defensive move, she caught the child mid-flight, twisted slightly, and threw her up against the expansive windows. The glass cracked – but it did not break. With a muffled grunt, the girl fell into a heap on the cold stone floor. The great white billowing dress lay all around her like piles of new-fallen snow. Seconds passed, and then, with a moan, she pushed her head and upper body slowly upwards. The monstrous wig hung at a precarious angle now, and the little girl struggled against its weight. She shook her dazed head once, twice, three times before the great mass of hair finally detached. She could do nothing but just stare at it for many long moments with the most melancholy look any child’s face could ever possibly bear.

And the lightning flashed and the thunder rolled and the tower trembled.

Wind-whipped sheets of rain tossed themselves against the glass and the great dome cracked, but it did not break. The tiny little bluebird fluttered wildly inside the wig and the Crown Empress slapped at it. Almost as if directed by some divine power, the silvery cage popped open suddenly and the hapless little creature flitted out. With ultimate sadness, the child watched it go, her upturned face streaked with tears. Up, up, up it went towards the apex of the dome. *Fly little bluebird fly*, she thought. Up, up, up it went, only to be swallowed by the storm. And that storm was Leilani Algethi.

With a roar, the glass caved inwards and the plush royal apartment was at once awash with the deluge. Instinctively, Captain Garrett raised her arm to shield her face from the blast. With an ear-splitting shriek, lightning arced wildly over the tower and glanced off something metallic high up in the sky. The captain just barely caught the outlines of a runabout before it tumbled away into the wind and the rain. The Empress Ethereal was on her feet now, her close-cropped natural hair as soaked as the rest of her body. The storm was like some thing come alive, a force not to be reckoned with. It almost shimmered, its pattern directionless. It was alluring, it was intoxicating and intimidating all at the same time. They had become part of it, even as they stood in awe of it. This was the real caught up within the web of the unreal.

Leilani Algethi was on her feet too, and she startled them both with her presence there. She had appeared out of the windswept mist like some spirit or shade and now stared at the Crown Empress like some fallen angel sent to do the work of the devil. Sword drawn, she called out into the storm.

“Empress Ethereal, I have come to relieve you of your crown, if not your head.”

The force and the power behind those words caused Rachel Garrett to tremble. The pitch and the clarity of The Voice demanded immediate and unwavering attention. *Was this whole damned planet ruled by children?* The freckle-nosed girl raised her sword straight up to the heavens and the storm slackened. Lightning split the sky, and yet the clouds still thinned. She tilted her braided head upwards and opened her mouth to catch the last drops of falling rain. With a stark suddenness, great beams of sunlight broke through the howling veil and began to flood the tower with a steamy warmth. Captain Garrett could not help but be enraptured by the near mystical nature of the child. The real storm it seemed had only just arrived.

“Captain,” Ethereal pleaded, “you must protect me.” For the first time in the past twenty-four hours, the Captain’s heightened psi-awareness detected real and genuine fear from the little princess. The girl began to slide backwards ever so slightly to be nearer the adult presence. This was certainly a curious new sensation for the captain, having so long endured so much torture at the erratic whims of this mischievous little imp. “She is not alone,” Ethereal whispered tremulously.

Rising slowly to her feet to stand behind Leilani Algethi, Commander Marta Batanides palmed her rain-soaked hair behind her ears. Sunburnt and dazed, she peered up through the broken dome at the now blazing sunlight. She had been falling, falling through the storm with the whispered melodies of Munchkins and wizards racing through her mind.

Together, they had fallen as one, and she could still feel the child by her side. Leilani Algethi was a force of nature not to be reckoned with. A

force that swept along anything in its path. In the presence of such divine magnificence, Marta's soul and spirit could not help but be transformed. She had never felt such perfect peace and contentedness. It was almost as if the storm had washed everything away. The fall had been exhilarating, thrilling, terrifying, and if left her feeling giddy, awakened. All of her senses came alive like never before and she knew she would never be the same.

Lani lowered her sword and advanced a step. "You will submit yourself, Your Highness." The clarity and the pitch in her voice demanded attention.

The Empress Ethereal cowered further and whimpered. The fear in the child was palpable and undeniable, and Rachel Garrett began now to feel for her. "I-I-I cannot sense her," Ethereal whispered. "H-h-how can that be?!" She backed up at last into the captain. Her soft little hands grappled blindly behind her until they at last found the captain's waist. Slowly, and without taking her eyes off Lani, the scared little princess moved behind the protective custody of her adopted mother-figure. The fear was real, or else Rachel Garrett would have never stood for such behavior from this devilish little fiend. The next few moments would be crucial. How would this freckle-nosed little crusader react? And what of the apparently awestruck Marta Batanides – where did the loyalties of this once faithful commander now lie? With Starfleet, or with this near-mystical revolutionary?

"I think you should do as she says, Captain," Marta announced plainly.

"And what Commander? Let children slaughter children? I don't think so," Garrett said forcefully.

"But the Prime Directive..."

"Don't quote the Prime Directive to me... command is as much about instinct as training..."

"Enough," Lani demanded. She had grown tired of these mysterious visitors and their bizarre words. Ascendants or not, they would no longer interfere in her most holy destiny. A destiny that had been engrained into her psyche since very early childhood; ever since The Voice had entered her mind and told her that it was she that must lead this revolution. The time for action was now, and she would at last fulfill her destiny and free her people from the tyranny of these sky-demons. Charging forward, Lani brought her sword up and thrust it just under the chin of the unsuspecting Starfleet captain. It hung there in sharp defiance, its razor-sharp point just dimpling the skin. Something had stayed Lani's hand though. The power of myth-lore and superstition can cause a moments hesitation in even the most determined soldier.

"Step aside," she ordered, and the Empress Ethereal clung tighter to the captain's waist and began to whimper with terror.

“I will not,” Garrett replied defiantly. “You’ve won; there’s no need for this to go any further.” With the slightest twist of the wrist, the point of the sword pierced the captain’s skin. A tiny rivulet of blood began to slide down the silvery blade. Lani traced its course with fascinated eyes, then stared up at the captain. Rachel Garrett stared down into those young brown eyes and saw an undeniable sense of purpose within them. She trembled at this purpose, but too became slightly enamored with it. Those eyes were a force of nature not to be reckoned with. A force that swept along anything in its path. The captain realized now that there may be no stopping her. The fear of the whimpering little princess behind her became tangible, and it became suddenly her own.

Garrett glanced briefly up at Marta, but the former chief of security had changed somehow – she had lost her edge. This planet had changed her as it had changed them all. Awestruck, Marta could not move, she could not gain a sense of reality. Reality can sometimes be fooled by the unreal, and she was for the moment caught up within the web of the unreal. But when reality strikes, a moments hesitation can be fatal. At the captain’s glance, Marta came suddenly to attention, but it was too late. They had all reached an impasse now, and for a moment, no one moved. Yet the captain knew instinctively that this moment could not last. The storm had arrived, and that storm was Leilani Algethi. And the child had no choice but to act.

With the slightest twist of the wrist, the river of blood ran deeper.

The bizarre and unnatural tingling of the transporter beam caused Lani to give the slightest pause. Her body separated from her soul, and she was at once a shimmering column of energy. She had awoken that morning in a world without a universe. And now she would go forth and conquer the darkness, and her peoples united would enter a new age, and make it their home.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### STARFLEET ONE HIGH ORBIT ~ PLANET ETHOS IN THE ALPHA GEMINORUM SYSTEM

“I am told that your first name is unpronounceable,” the president mused and the young girl grinned. “Therefore, Ensign Enyo of Andoria, it gives me great pleasure to present to you the Christopher Pike Medal of Valor, may you wear it well.” He himself smiled broadly now as the small reception area erupted into applause and the young ensign’s blue skin flashed to near phosphorescence. With the greatest of care, he pinned the small purple medal to her chest, then took a few steps back out of the limelight. Her twin antennae twitching wildly, Enyo admired it for but a moment, then turned to face the crowd. They were mostly strangers, but a rather auspicious bunch, nonetheless. The entire privy council had gathered, as well as a few other diplomats and high-end Starfleet officers.

Commander Spencer Stadi was the first to come forward. “Congratulations, Ensign,” he smiled warmly, shaking her hand, “from one First Officer to another.” He then winked. He was dressed in crisp new dress uniform, but his face still bore a weary and haggard look.

Zora McKnight was not yet far from his mind it seemed.

“Most commendable indeed, Ensign,” Commander Skyl said next. A very discernible ear would’ve had to strain to catch a glint of pride in those words, yet the pride was there nonetheless. The Vulcan engineer nodded only slightly before moving off to the side to exchange a greeting with Ambassador Sarek. This left the timid young girl face to face now with none other than Commodore J.P. Hanson.

“Capital work, Ensign,” the old man said gruffly, shaking her hand. “We could sure use some of that take charge attitude back at Galatea.”

Enyo stood speechless and cast a nervous and uncertain glance toward Stadi. Her quivering antennae wilted ever so slightly. “The young Ensign thanks you, Commodore,” Stadi said with a smile, “but her expertise are still much needed aboard the *Enterprise*.” Enyo breathed a sigh of relief and her skin flashed blue once again.

“Telepaths,” Hanson muttered to himself, shaking his head, then skulked off to mingle with the rest of the crowd. Enyo and Stadi both chuckled now for the first time in what seemed like days.

Quite unnoticed in the back corner of the room, President Austin Kelley and Amy Tyler looked on over the crowd in quiet contemplation. They

had both come a long way from the Manzar Colony. One can never really know what one is capable of until one is pressed fully with an unimaginable crisis. This fop of a man with his dark Greek physique had won the vice presidency on as much popularity it seemed as anything else. No one ever expected that his true mettle would ever actually be put to the test, and no one surely ever thought that it would be the stark reality of civil war that would define his unexpected presidency. His part was but a small role in the sheer greatness of it all, but it is the small moments such as these that can define a man's integrity. His successes or failures from this point forward would become the purview of history, but the true definition of his character had been written today.

"You know," the president mused, "I've been thinking seriously lately of getting married... what do you think about Councillor Zarella of Klaestron?" He cast Amy the most devious look imaginable.

"Oh, ho!" Amy laughed. "You are incorrigible, sir," she said in her heavy London accent, and he chuckled along with her.

"So that's a no," he said finally. "I'm afraid I just don't know of anyone else," he concluded with a dramatic sigh, casting her another devious smile.

"I must admit to a small measure of envy for them," Amy said dreamily.

"All those other girls meant nothing to me, I swear," Austin Kelley countered quickly with a sheepish grin.

"Ugh, no, sir, (casting him a withering stare) the crew of the *Enterprise* I mean..."

"Oh?"

"They are heading back out into deep space again on another adventure. It's so exciting," she added wistfully.

"I'm offering you an adventure of a different kind," he murmured in all seriousness, and almost without notice. Yet, she did notice, and for perhaps the first time she stopped and took a true and honest look into his soft olive eyes, saw there the earnestness, and indeed perhaps some of the loneliness. They had spent many long, lonely hours together on starships traveling to the farthest corners of the vast Federation. It had been a lonely life for them both. But she wasn't sure if this was the answer, especially now. The burdens of the presidency would be crushing, and this enigmatic and complicated man would need her support. Perhaps then it was the answer after all, perhaps they would both need that kind of support...

"Perhaps," she said softly, still looking deep into those mesmerizing olive eyes. "Perhaps," he answered back, not so sure now himself. He brought an arm up and draped it over her shoulders. Whatever else history should prove, they would at least be together, and be friends.

Nearby, J.P. Hanson had at last fallen into the company of the Trois. The old man was looking even more dyspeptic than usual, much to the amusement of his adjutant, Ian

Troi.

“The fools have seen fit to promote me,” Hanson said gravely.

“Admiral, sir!” Ian announced with a sharp salute.

“Shush boy!” Hanson barked. “You want the whole bloody crowd to know?!” His ashen face looked wearily around the room for prying eyes and ears.

“Does that mean you’ll be leaving us, sir?” Lwaxana asked with an uncharacteristic hint of mournfulness in her flamboyant voice.

“Telepaths,” Hanson muttered to himself again, and the Trois both grinned. “Damn fool of a man wanted to make me Admiral of the Fleet! Of all the hair-brained ideas...”

“And did you accept, sir?” Ian asked with a quick wink to his wife.

“Don’t be daft, Son,” the old man said gruffly. “I couldn’t pull you away from your lovely wife and home, now could I?” And Lwaxana Troi let out one of her characteristic laughs that did indeed draw the attention of the crowd.

“A wise choice, sir, on both accounts,” Ian said with a grin. His thoughts then shifted unexpectedly to his daughter Deanna. It had been just a little over twenty-four hours since their interrupted breakfast back on Betazed, yet it seemed like weeks gone by now. He unconsciously hooked an arm around his wife as their thoughts both merged for a rare moment. Perhaps picking up on this telepathic link himself in some strange way, Hanson was quick to speak.

“Don’t you worry, Son, we’ll have you both home in time for breakfast. Have you contacted the *Melbourne*?”

“Uh, yes sir,” Ian stammered. “The Chief Engineer says we’re good to go. They should be in orbit any time now,” he finished quickly.

“Son,” Hanson shook his head, “we need to work on those follow-up skills of yours.” He then winked at the two Trois with a genuine affection.

“Yes, Admiral,” Ian grinned, clutching his wife a bit tighter. Thus, the trio would return to Betazed together... and the planet would sorely need their leadership in the days to come.

For Ambassador Sarek, it had been a day full of surprises. He had been told that former Fleet Admiral Xavier Hawk had already filed a formal protest against his dismissal with the Federation High Council. But the Ambassador also knew through his inside diplomatic channels that the High Council would soon be launching a full inquiry of their own into the events leading up to the Battle of Ethos. Admiral Hawk would be facing some very

hard questions in the weeks to come. The scales of justice rarely remained out of balance for very long. As lead prosecutor, Sarek would no doubt be seeing many more surprises before the business of this affair was concluded. He could sense that some very dark and sinister force was at work here that went way beyond these twins. Things were in motion that threatened to undermine the whole of the Federation and everything that it stood for. The death of President Kalomi Joran was just the beginning.

"Ambassador Sarek, sir," Spencer Stadi called after him as the aged Vulcan slipped quietly out into the corridor. Sarek paused, he liked this commander. As before, the two men fell into step with each other, then continued on for some moments in silence. "I just wanted to thank you, sir," Stadi said at last, "for giving me a fresh perspective on the current situation."

"Sometimes perspective can only be gained by taking a step back, Commander."

Stadi paused a moment to reflect on this as they rounded a corner in unison and continued down the next corridor. "Indeed, sir," he nodded. "And the first true act of learning, is learning to listen... we are all victims of our own demons."

Sarek himself paused now to reflect. This indeed had been a day full of surprises. This commander had learned much on this day and Sarek could sense this with his latent telepathic abilities. One can have intelligence with knowledge, but there can be no wisdom without understanding. Stadi had gained a new understanding today, not only of himself, but of all those around him as well, including those meddlesome twins. The road to wisdom is never an easy one, and the demons inside can indeed never quite be satisfied. Sarek found this thought to be mildly disquieting. Even the carefully controlled Vulcan mind can become victim to the darkness that lurks beneath. *While quiet the fires of Vulcans burn.*

These twins had brought out the worst in all of them.

"Have the negotiations been concluded, Commander?"

"Provisions have been made for the safety and wellbeing of both the Royal Twins... vengeance is no longer an option..." Stadi trailed off. The entire experience had been draining to mind, body, and spirit. It had taken some convincing, but Stadi had ultimately used Sarek's own words to finally convince the Consensus. They would all have to learn to understand these children for who they were, not for what they had done.

"Will you return with us to Betazed, Commander?"

"No, sir... my place is aboard the *Enterprise*," and he thought of Rachel Garrett; his captain, his friend, his *Imzadi*.

"Betazed has lost much credence as a result of these events," Sarek mused. "There are hard days ahead and the Consensus could sorely use your wisdom and guidance in the time that is to come. There is a deeper

darkness at work here Commander that we are not yet seeing,” he warned. “The Federation faces great peril from within.”

“I sense it too, sir...” By some strange irony they had arrived again at that very same intersection in the corridor. To go left, or to go right? Yet there were always more options than those that may seem most obvious. Stadi chose to go forward. “My place is aboard the *Enterprise*,” he said softly to himself; and with the knowledge of wisdom, Sarek understood.

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In a small observation lounge high above Ethos, Ras Tau’aman and Leilani Algeithi stood aboard the *Enterprise* and stared down at their world below. Grandfather and granddaughter reunited at last. The greenish-blue hues of the planet with its wispy white clouds stood in sharp contrast to the star-speckled blackness beyond it. The shimmering orbs of the four suns glistened far off to the left and to the right and bathed the gleaming world in warmth and light: this too in sharp contrast to the all-consuming darkness and cold of deep space. The breathtaking beauty of it all would leave anyone without words, no less so than this old man and the girl. Just a few short hours ago, there had only been Ethos, there had only been four points of light.

“I am told there are many such worlds,” Ras said quietly, almost reverently, “with many such peoples not too different from us.”

“It’s so small,” Lani whispered, hardly listening. It was a humbling experience to see one’s home planet from orbit for the first time. To see that thin and wispy veil of an atmosphere clinging so tenuously to a tiny globe against all that empty blackness. Lani and her people had never gazed longingly into a starry night, never seen a moonrise over the ocean, never wondered at the twinkling of a distant planet. They had certainly never dreamed of life elsewhere or indeed of anything at all beyond their seemingly endless atmosphere. Her lifelong mission to end the reign of the wicked Crown Empress seemed unimportant now, insignificant against the larger whole that shimmered in the darkness below them. Lani felt suddenly lost and all alone. Her life had lost all meaning in the face of such immensity.

“The Ascendants have recognized you as legal ruler of Ethos... will you accept their proposal?” The question seemed strange for the elder to be asking the young girl. Her eyes remained transfixed on the viredescent globe.

“Ascendants... where is their divinity, Grandfather?” Ras found himself unable to answer her. These Ascendants and their angels did not behave as he had always imagined they would. They were flawed. They acted almost *normal*. They had the same pratfalls, the same emotional

responses – anger, fear, frustration, impatience – indeed, the same weaknesses. Where indeed was their divinity? He himself had been disappointed, unfulfilled, unimpressed. He had found *them* to be lacking. But in his short time here aboard this *Enterprise*, he had also gained a sense of the greater good. These people possessed a certain enlightenment, an undeniable drive to do better, to be better. The events of the past twenty-four hours had been orchestrated by forces beyond their control, yet they had prevailed.

“We must have faith in things greater than ourselves, my child. Faith that things will unfold as they should, and that the greater good will ultimately prevail.”

“And the peoples united shall enter a New Age,” Lani recited, “and shall go forth and conquer the darkness and make it their home. For there in the darkness, they shall find the light’ ...Our people shall need much guidance in the time that is to come, Grandfather. These Ascendants say they will not abandon us... do you trust them?” For the first time the child looked away from the planet and up into her grandfather’s tired eyes. “I have seen much in this great metallic beast my child. The blue girl and her pointy eared companion showed me great comfort and subdued the Crown Prince without violence or malice... they seem to be just and honest people. I trust them as far as faith will allow,” he conceded at last.

“Then it appears that we all must go on faith,” Lani sighed, and returned her gaze back to the planet below. “Will it be enough?”

“Faith is as great as you make it child.”

“Then I have little choice but then to accept their proposal.”

“I am told that the Ascendants are using powerful medicines to keep the Royal Twins asleep... that their bizarre powers can somehow be mollified.”

“I care little for the Royal Twins,” Lani said, and Ras sighed. A lifetime of fidelity was hard to let go of. “The welfare and security of our people must take priority!” Ras was somewhat startled by the young girl’s presence of mind, the force and the clarity behind her words. He could not help but be enraptured by the near mythical nature of his granddaughter. She was a force *not* to be reckoned with... the peoples of Ethos would be in good hands, and for long after he was gone. This filled him with a certain peace and contentedness that he had not expected and suddenly he did not feel so tired.

“I thought I had died and gone to my Ascendance,” he blurted out suddenly. He had not expected or intended for his granddaughter to become his confessor. But the young girl held within her a certain divinity that was all her own. The Royal Twins had quite unexpectedly created a new breed of Ethosian, a self-aware Ethosian, and Ras Tau’aman and

Leilani Algethi were but the first to come of a new generation that would begin to break the bonds of superstitious belief. They would no longer be afraid of the dark.

“Ascendance is a concept that will have to be redefined, Grandfather,” Lani answered him with resolve. “Perhaps heaven isn’t up here, perhaps it’s down there in our hearts.”

And for the first time, the tired old man wrapped his arm around his granddaughter and was filled at last with peace.

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“They found the runabout, both occupants were dead,” Onovan said softly, and Andy Dardanelle sighed. He stared out the viewport into the star-studded night. To be the sole survivor, to be the so-called ‘lucky one’. He thought of Sam and Sally being together in the end and this gave him a queer sort of smile. His life aboard the *Ambassador* seemed like a distant and all-but-forgotten dream now. The part of himself that he had left behind in the submerged stardrive was still calling to him, but ever more softly with each passing moment. Perhaps it was his one-quarter Vulcan heritage, perhaps it was shock; he hoped that it was not indifference. Yet his life here aboard the *Enterprise* had taken precedence somehow. He already felt at home here, more at home than he had ever felt anywhere else. This left him feeling guilty.

Many a nerve had been frayed on this day, and as ship’s counsellor, it would be Onovan’s job to put everyone’s sanity back together again. The Battle of Ethos had affected all aboard in some adverse way or another, including the counsellor, and this left him feeling somewhat overwhelmed. The El-Aurian people were well known for being a race of listeners, but over eight hundred crewmembers would need his help and guidance in the days and weeks to come. Mental abuse can sometimes create far deeper scars than physical abuse. Stoic and proud, Captain Rachel Garrett would require his greatest attention, but time too must be made for Ensign Andy Dardanelle. To be the sole survivor, to be the ‘lucky one’. In all of history there had never been anything quite so uniquely debilitating as this. Guilt can quite often consume the soul and leave the body to wither on its own.

“I’ve never talked to a counsellor before,” Andy admitted. “What I say to you will be held in the strictest confidence, yes?”

“I am bound by the rules of doctor-patient, yes,” Onovan answered. There was a long pause as the young ensign obviously mulled over something very important. He at last spoke in a hushed and somber tone.

"I am solely responsible for the crash of the *Ambassador*..." he trailed off.

"These feelings of guilt are completely normal, Ensign. In the next few..."

"No, sir, you do not understand... I created the fault in the navigational subprocessors that led to the crash. I knew that system inside and out... I don't know what came over me!" The young man was obviously frustrated beyond imagining and it was clear that he had been secretly trying to fight this demon on his own. For several long moments though, Onovan stood speechless. Confessions of this sort always put him in an awkward position. Yet he knew enough to take all things with a grain of salt, especially under the bizarre circumstances of Ethos. Even Onovan had found himself doing things he had not thought himself capable of.

"I believe we shall forgo the court-marshal this time, Ensign," Onovan said in all seriousness. There was no attempt at humor in this, merely a profound understanding and Andy found himself strangely comforted by that.

"Part Vulcan or not," Onovan added, "this will stay with you a very long time, Ensign. You are not responsible for the deaths of all those people, do you understand me?"

"I imagine all you counselors say that," Andy said with a smile.

"Perhaps," Onovan conceded, "but not all counselors would tell you that you will however be billed for one very expensive starship," and he too offered a smile; and there was a certain amount of comfort in this as well.

"Will I be allowed to remain here? Aboard the *Enterprise* I mean."

"The *Enterprise* takes care of her own, Ensign. Always remember that."

"I'm not quite sure I detect an answer in that, sir," Andy countered, and Onovan could sense a certain amount of fear coming from the young man. The *Enterprise* had become this sole-survivor's last lifeline. Not only had they rescued him from a certain death beneath the sea, but they had provided him with a profound sense of security as well in the face of such unimaginable destruction. The level of complexity within this boy's mind fascinated Onovan. A Vulcan/human hybrid was always intriguing to say the least, nonetheless so with Andy Dardanelle. He would enjoy getting to know this young man.

"Your place here is secure, Ensign," Onovan answered at last.

"Well, I packed light anyway..." Andy attempted a smile, but his lower lip curled instead, and for the first time a great tear rolled down his cheek. Only time and patience can cure a wound despite all the wonders of modern medical technology. With the deepest compassion, Onovan placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. His entire demeanor was a

soothing presence to almost anyone. The El-Aurian's age and wisdom far surpassed even the oldest of Vulcans. His experiences spanned centuries, yet he exuded this with humbleness, not arrogance. It surrounded him like an aura and the simple presence of it made Andy feel suddenly more at peace.

"We will get through this together, Ensign," and Andy wiped away his tears and smiled.

"The *Enterprise* takes care of her own, eh?"

"Always..." Onovan said, shaking him gently with his large hand. The two of them smiled warmly and stared back out into the star-speckled night. We are all victims of our own demons, yet how we choose to face them is perhaps the true measure of our character. Andy Dardanelle's demons would never be completely gone, but he was already well on his way to facing them.

~ ~ ~ ~

"I thought I had lost you," Richard Castillo said softly. It was an honest but somewhat dangerous confession to make to his longtime friend, Marta Batanides. They had made an attempt at romance once all those years ago back in Savannah, but had been resigned instead to simply be great friends. Yet the harrowing events of the past twenty-four hours had opened up some very old and long forgotten feelings in him. Love can never quite fade away, it just gets covered over sometimes by those other things. Life gets so easily lost in the day to day, the week to week, and it becomes far too easy to lose sight of what is really important. Love and friendship, kindness and compassion, and above all perhaps, understanding. His emotions so strong, it somewhat bothered him now that Marta seemed so distant, so far removed from reality. He would need to be very understanding in the days and weeks to come.

"I thought I was lost," Marta replied at last, and somewhat absently. Those many hours adrift at sea after the crash of the runabout had left her feeling abandoned, disheartened, lost and all alone. And then Leilani Algethi had entered her life and changed everything. Marta felt like she was on the outside looking in now, like her perspective had somehow changed. She had spent the last twenty-four hours questioning her life and everything it stood for. Her career in Starfleet, her oath to uphold the Prime Directive. (How could anyone just sit idly by and let such *evil* rule a planet?) Lani had showed her a new way; to take a stand for what was right, *not* for what the law said should be right. That child had been a force of nature not to be reckoned with and in the presence of such divine magnificence, Marta's soul

and spirit had been transformed. For the time being it seemed, she would remain caught up within the web of the unreal.

"You've changed," Castillo observed. His quarters were startlingly quiet; the meal he had prepared for her remained largely untouched. Marta let out one of those deep, soul-searching sighs.

"You know what it's like when you suddenly see the world through somebody else's eyes? Everything you ever thought you knew gets changed somehow."

"Yeah..."

"That little girl," Marta continued, "she changed me. She possessed such strength and ambition, such confidence and clarity of vision... we make a difference here, sure enough, but we can do so much better."

"Sounds like you're suffering from a little bit of hero worship," Castillo laughed, but Marta remained stoic. This time he let out a sigh. He had never seen her so subdued, so absent from the here and now. This worried him. He had always admired this steely little chief of security for her own strength and courage, but the petite woman that sat before him now had lost her edge. It would be a long road back for her; yet he knew he would be there at her side with all the faith and understanding that she deserved.

"Our society has grown short on heroes these days," she said despairingly, "so yes, perhaps I am."

"I used to think so too," Castillo acknowledged, "but then one day I realized that *We* are the heroes. This is just everyday life for us... we wake up, we do our job, we have supper, and the next morning we do it all over again.

"But y'know," he stressed, "somewhere out there, let's say on the prairies of Alberta or Saskatchewan or something, there's a little boy looking up at us through his telescope with wonder in his eyes and hope in his heart. He's looking up at us and he's thinking: someday I want to explore the stars, I want to see what's out there. And I'll bet back in his room he's got a little model of the *Enterprise*, and he's got all our names memorized and what our positions are, and he sits down every night till after midnight writing stories of our adventures and all our travels. To him, we are the true heroes. To him, we are the ones making a difference."

"Saskatchewan, eh?" And Marta for the first time smiled.

"Laugh it up," he jabbed, then smiled sheepishly. "I call that my *Enterprise* moment."

"I'll bet you even had a model of the *Enterprise*, didn't ya?" Marta teased.

"And I'll bet you did too!" And Marta laughed openly now, before looking away with cheeks turning slightly crimson. "You did!" he laughed, "and all the little action figures?!"

“Stop,” she giggled and pinched her lips in that way he always loved.

“Heroes come in all shapes and sizes and can pop into our lives when we least...”

“Teach me, oh master,” she giggled some more.

“Don’t underestimate your own importance in this world, Marta Batanides,” he scolded, and she stopped up short.

He had at last struck a nerve with her and brought her back to reality. They weren’t making a difference; they *were* the difference. Starfleet was important, the Federation was important. All those thousands of starships spreading peace throughout the galaxy were not just some random objects in the dark. They each contained good and honest people all doing their part for the greater whole. The Prime Directive may not always be the best solution, but it was the right solution. It brought order to the chaos and kept Starfleet grounded in reality. It becomes too easy sometimes to get caught up within the web of the unreal, and Marta was realizing this now. She admired Lani for her strength and her tenacity, but this was not Marta’s fight. Her home was here, aboard the *Enterprise*, where she was making a difference. Where they all were making a difference.

~ ~ ~ ~

Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett sat in her darkened oval ready room and stared with disinterest at the clutter strewn across her desk. Before her lay the true burdens of command; a dozen or so pads representing the seemingly endless parade of paperwork that was the mundane, day to day reality of starship command. The events of Ethos had already left her hopelessly behind, but they had also left her drained and withered like a desert flower. This had just been Day One of a five-year mission and she was already tired beyond all imagining. She began to wonder now if she would be able to cope with it all. Their mission orders would take them far out on the frontier and push the boundaries of unexplored space like never before. *So tired!* The Empress Ethereal had quite simply taken every last ounce of strength out of her. Day One! How could she cope indeed, for these scars ran deep.

The child had warned her of dark days ahead, and this vexed the captain now as she sat alone in the silence. *Dark and unseen forces hidden deep within your fleet*, Ethereal had said. *Your own endgame is at hand*. If this were true, then the Battle of Ethos and the death of President Kalomi Joran had just been the beginning. A prelude to something far more sinister in kind. But what could be more sinister than near civil war?

Garrett had often feared that the Federation had grown soft in its Golden Age. Starfleet had grown far too complacent with the Romulans,

invested far too much faith in the Klingons, and let the Cardassians take Bajor without even a fight. Their borders were weak, their fleet was spread too thin, and their infrastructure was outdated. Garrett knew that eventually something would have to give. Yet she wondered: had this just been another clever game? Had the Empress planted these seeds merely to cultivate her own sick and twisted pleasures? How much stock could she, or should she, really place in the predictions of that maniacal child?

"Probably far more than I want to," the captain said aloud with a fearful melancholy.

Her door chime rang and she sighed. The burdens of command were always near at hand. "Come in," she called out, and the doors parted to reveal her chief engineer and her first officer. Skyl entered first, padd almost always in hand, followed by a rather weary looking Spencer Stadi. The events of Ethos had clearly taken their toll on him as well. Her heightened psi-awareness could sense a deep pain hidden inside his weary countenance.

He had suffered much, and these scars too ran deep.

"Captain," Skyl intoned, "have you had a chance to review my damage assessment?" The captain wanted to roll her eyes but didn't. Instead, she leaned forward and shuffled through the padds on her desk. The small plastic computers all clattered against each other and threatened to give her a headache. She found it at last and collapsed back into her chair.

"It appears we have a decision to make, Gentlemen," she mused. "Do we tuck tail between our legs and return to Betazed for an extensive overhaul... or do we continue on with our mission and make the necessary repairs as we go?" Secretly, she prayed for a return to Betazed, though this went against her every instinct. The *Enterprise* went forward, never back.

"Extensive repairs are already underway, Captain," Skyl reported. "Areas of greatest concern however include the warp core and the starboard nacelle. Both took heavy damage."

"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. 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. "I believe, Captain," he smiled softly, "with a brief layover at Starbase 105, we can obtain the necessary components to repair the warp core, and also take that time to realign the starboard nacelle."

"Commander?" Garrett said, eyeing her chief engineer.

“Agreed,” Skyl answered at last, albeit somewhat dubiously. It did not take a telepath to tell that, much like his two colleagues, the Vulcan was also hoping for a return to Betazed. His desire however was from a purely technological standpoint. The *Enterprise* had taken a pretty sound beating. Her scars too ran deep. But she would go forward, nonetheless. It had been decided.

“By your leave, Captain?” Skyl queried. “I have much that requires my attention...” “Dismissed, Commander,” she said quietly. She watched the man turn and leave, and only after the doors had closed tightly shut behind him did she speak again.

“I have something to show you that may somewhat ease your despair,” she said softly.

“Oh?” Stadi’s curiosity has certainly been piqued. His telepathic paracortex could sense the ‘off-limits’ part of her consciousness and this intrigued him. Indeed, he had taught her most of these mental tricks to combat a crew of mostly telepaths, but she had become remarkably good at blocking out even him when she wanted to. His captain leaned forward and rifled through the stack of padds once more, making him wait. He sensed that this was more for dramatic effect than anything, and he smirked. She found the right one at last and offered it to him.

“This has been classified Top Secret,” Garrett said, “but Admiral Hanson gave me special permission to show it to you.”

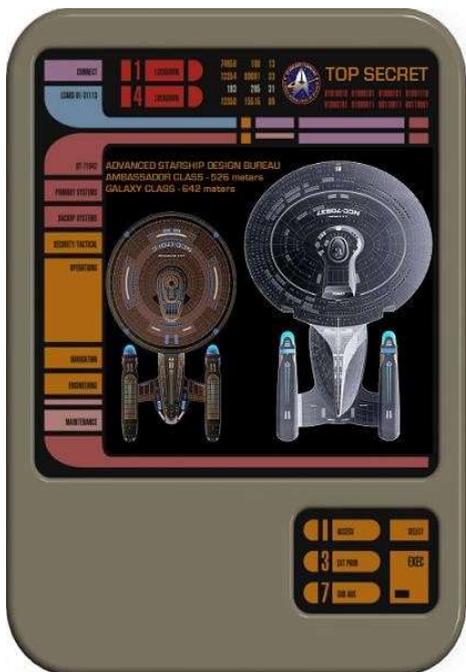
Stadi clutched the padd and whistled. “Are they really going to build this thing?”

“They’re going to build six!” Garrett half laughed. “They are calling it the ‘Next Generation starship’ - a new breed of superexplorer.”

Commander Stadi whistled again. “But why show me?” he asked.

“In honor of the sacrifice of Captain Zora McKnight and her crew to the cause of peace, they have decided to christen this new angel as a *Galaxy*-class starship.”

Stadi stood speechless and stared at the image again, noticing for the first time the tiny print...



There were several long moments of silence as the captain allowed her first officer to absorb this. He had only ever spoken openly of Zora once or twice, but it had been enough. Moreso now than ever before Rachel Garrett's heightened psi-region could sense intense pain and regret coming from the man. And love, so much love. He had loved Zora McKnight more than he had ever loved anyone else. The humans would call the pairing *soulmates* and the mysterious events surrounding their early career had cost him this; and so much more. Despite discrete and repeated inquiries to Starfleet Command, Captain Garrett had never had the singular honor of offering her first officer a command of his own.

Whatever had happened all those years back had tarnished his career forever. Commander Spencer Stadi would never be Captain. Not that she wanted to lose him to be sure, but he had never been given his chance to shine in the limelight. This dismayed her.

The door chime rang again and she sighed. The burdens of command were always near at hand. "Come in," the captain called out wearily.

The doors almost hesitated as if the unseen guest was reluctant to enter. And indeed, she was. They parted at last to reveal the frazzled nerves and the uncertain countenance of one Doctor Ann Grey. The opening doors seemed to startle the young woman and she jumped back a step, then nervously tucked a wild strand of hair behind her ear before peering sheepishly into the darkened ready room.

"Ex-excuse me, Captain," she stuttered. "Doc-Doc-Doctor Ann Grey reporting for duty." Commander Spencer Stadi gave his captain a somewhat inquisitive look.

"Yes, Doctor," Garrett said curiously, "please, do come in." Ann took a single frightful step across the threshold, then jumped again as the doors slid shut behind her. The captain gestured to a chair, but the timid young woman seemed reluctant to venture any closer to the large antique desk. The captain began to sense an unusual panic in this strange little creature, and she cast her first officer a fleeting glance. Ann Grey's sharp blue eyes stole a glance at Stadi as well, and Garrett sensed the girl's panic deepen ever so slightly. This caused the captain to smirk, strangely enough.

Stadi had told her once that the Betazoid people had been afraid of humans at first. They feared the intensity of thought and emotion that regularly poured out of the human psyche. It was just such an intensity that the captain was sensing now. In fact, it almost bordered on dangerous. But that was ridiculous, Garrett knew. The timid young doctor's credentials spoke well of her compassion, her service record was exemplary, and some of her 'medical miracles' were already becoming legendary. By all accounts,

Ann Grey was a model Starfleet officer. Still, at the moment, she had the appearance of a caged animal.

“Doctor, please,” Garrett smiled warmly, “we don’t bite.”

“Uh, y-y-yes, Ma’am,” she replied meekly and took several small steps closer.

“I must say, I was quite surprised to receive your request for transfer from *Starfleet One*. That is quite an auspicious posting.”

“Y-y-yes, Ma’am. But not much for ad-ad-adventure,” she stumbled, then regretted giving such an obvious stock answer to such a seasoned starship commander.

“It’s always adventure with the young ones, Captain,” Stadi chuckled in an attempt to put the young woman at ease, but she cringed instead at his perceived scrutiny. “We are about to embark on a five-year journey into deep space, Doctor,” Garrett remarked. “There’s no turning back. Are you sure you’re up to it?”

“Oh, yes, Ma’am,” Ann Grey said suddenly, and the captain and Stadi were somewhat taken aback. Adventure was not what this girl sought, it was escape that she craved. Not necessarily a healthy way to start a deep space mission, but then, we are all victims of our own demons. The doctor seemed ready – maybe not necessarily for the right reasons, but she was ready.

“Very well, Doctor,” the captain said at last. “Your request for transfer is accepted. Welcome aboard the *Enterprise*.” She rose to her feet and offered the young woman a hand. Ann Grey seemed at first to be at a loss, but then breezed forward suddenly to grasp the captain’s hand. The gesture was as meek and uncertain as the doctor’s own personality and it left Garrett with that hollow feeling, that gut instinct that she had just made some sort of terrible mistake. The Empress Ethereal’s words came back to her now in force. *Dark and unseen forces are hidden deep within your own fleet. Your own endgame is at hand.*

There were indeed dark days to come. The captain shuddered as Ann Grey turned and fled from the room without so much as another word to her captain, or to Commander Spencer Stadi. The entire exchange had been bizarre, and this vexed Rachel Garrett as much as anything else on this day.

As Stadi watched the doctor go, the word *dangerous* flashed suddenly through his consciousness. He could sense a dark spot, a stain on Ann Grey’s mind. Every human mind held such a dark spot, but Ann’s had been unusually large it seemed. It was the one thing about humans 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 dark 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 inner self?

“There may be no simple reason why,” Garrett said plaintively, startling him from his reverie. It took him several brief seconds to realize that his captain had been referring to Ann Grey’s bizarre personality, not in fact to his very own personal thought processes. Still, he continually marveled at his captain’s remarkable psi-awareness. Perhaps in some subconscious way she had picked up on the threads of his internal monologue and quite unconsciously commented on it. Or perhaps there was more going on inside her head than he was aware of. She often amazed him with her keen insight and sharp observational skills. *I’ve created a monster*, he smirked inwardly to himself. His telepathic paracortex reached outward now and found it at last, the captain’s own dark spot. It had shrunk considerably over the years, almost disappeared in fact, but it was there, nonetheless. We are all victims of our own demons.

As he turned quietly to leave, he paused briefly to say only this: “What was his name, Captain?”

“Whose?” she said, sitting back down in her chair.

“Your brother’s, what was his name?”

“Y’know, sometimes I almost forget...” she paused and bit her lower lip. “I can’t remember,” she admitted at last and sighed.

We are all victims of our own demons, and sometimes it seems, there can be hidden consequences to our actions.

## ⚡ EPILOGUE ⚡

### FEDERATION STARSHIP MELBOURNE ENROUTE TO BETAZED ~ WARP SIX STEADY STARDATE 16366.78

I am returning now to the world of my birth; my so-called reign of terror at its end. How could I have known when I brought that meddlesome little vessel down from its orbit that it would lead ultimately to my own downfall? The seeds of revolution are sown by the mistakes of those that rule. My father knew not how to rule, and the seeds of his mistakes led to my own revolution of sorts.

For nearly seventy years I reigned supreme as the childlike goddess of a superstitious and backwards people. My outward appearance belied the ageless wisdom that lurked beneath. My power was secured therein. Superstition can create a pliable yet dangerous state of mind in persons of such limited imagination. No different for an entire race devoid of any common knowledge, or so at least as we would perceive it.

I held at my disposal an entire world of small minds to do my bidding as I saw fit. My title was a combination of tradition and superstition, and my people feared me as they should. My only weakness was my twin brother, Ethaniel. We are many light-hours from Ethos now, yet I can still feel the steel spike of his presence in my mind – a ghost image perhaps, like an amputee would still feel the images of a lost limb? Perhaps this will fade more with time than it will with distance.

When do the thoughts of a sweet and innocent child turn suddenly to evil? What are the transformational causes that brings such a young mind from the path of peace to that of a tyrannical dictator? We are all victims of our own demons. To be unwanted from birth. To be feared for what you could be and not for what you are. One can have intelligence with knowledge, but there can be no wisdom without understanding. Fear is just the beginning of loneliness and discontent. When do the thoughts of a sweet and innocent child turn suddenly to evil? Why don't you tell me?

I am going to miss that captain. Her mind was such a complex and wonderful place. She challenged me. Oh, how beautifully all our lives interact and interchange in such curious and unseemly ways. What perfect irony that her brother's name should be Ethan. And indeed, how ironic that the threads of our lives should lead us each in the end to that same place – our destiny. We are all victims of our own demons are we not? Do you not see the beauty in this?

To manipulate a thing, one must have a perfect understanding of that thing. I understood that captain perhaps better than she understood herself, or else I would not be here. Rachel Garrett must always take the high ground. It is in her very nature to do so. To do anything otherwise would be a complete betrayal of character. One could argue that this was in her Starfleet training, but I beg to differ. That drive comes from within, and it makes her the person she is. She is the true force not to be reckoned with.

So, where was my fatal flaw? I grew weak, I grew tired, I grew bored. While my brother hardened within his shell, I grew soft as one never-ending day blended with another. I underestimated his level of patience. For fifty years he waited. For fifty years I grew ever more listless and lonely. And still he waited. The *Ambassador* was the prize he knew I could not resist, yet this Leilani Algethi was his true *coup de grâce*. He too held at his disposal an entire world of small minds to do his bidding. Yet it took just one.

I have been told that I will age normally now, free from the temporal bonds of Ethos. What is normal? I am eighty-five years old and have merely traded one prison for another. What sort of normal life could I ever hope to live with the knowledge of a lifetime stored within my mind? The cure may be worse than the disease. The pills are starting to take their effect now and I am already beginning to feel sleepy. Eighty-five years is long enough for anyone, even a child. There can be no peace on Betazed until all her children have come home. Regrets? Only that I shall die alone here, and so far away from the comforting touch of my brother.

My so-called reign of terror is at its end... at last.

~ ~ ~ ~

High up upon the stone battlements of the Palladium, the Empress Leilani Algethi and her royal consort, the Crown Prince Ethaniel, watched as the work progressed. Stone by stone, the Eastern Eternity Tower was slowly beginning to take shape. The South Tower was being fitted with a new glass dome as well, and the furnishings altered to better befit the lifestyle Lani was accustomed to. High up on the North Tower, the two watched as the graceful 'Starfleet' craft slowly lifted away what was left of that great metallic beast in the park. Soon all things would be right again on Ethos. Very soon.

In the austere apartments below them, Ras Tau'aman slept peacefully for perhaps the first time in over seventy long years. It had been largely him that had brokered this settlement with the Ascendants and Lani

had reluctantly agreed. It was deemed by these beings of the darkness that the people would need this weakling boy to accept the transition of power after so long a rule of tyranny under the Empress Ethereal. Lani had been assured that the boy had been treated, that he would age normally now, just as she would. His mind too had been supposedly altered somehow. He would no longer share the freakish hold over the populace that his sister had so long enjoyed.

Yes, soon all things would be right again on Ethos. Lani had already met with the

Ministry of Aldermen. Clemency had been granted to all the exiles so far away on the Second Continent. But many had chosen to stay, much to Lani's surprise. Perhaps it was a reluctance that things would not indeed change. Perhaps it had merely become their home. Lani had a wistful and fleeting memory of her favorite rock high up on her plateau. It had been a simpler life then, a life she would no doubt long to return to in the times to come, though she certainly did not realize that now. The true burdens of command had not yet reached her high tower.

She thought now of that infinite blackness that lay just beyond the thin veil of what the Ascendants had called an 'atmosphere'. Her grandfather had told her that there were many such worlds as this, with many such people. She chose now to accept those million points of light each as a new level of Ascendance. The ancient texts spoke of a new age, where her people would go forth and conquer the darkness and make it their home; for there, in that darkness, they would find the light. Lani would thus make her Million Points of Ascendance the cornerstone of her new religion; and she would teach her people not to live in fear of that inner self, but instead to embrace it. True enlightenment was within their grasp at last. The people would believe in her now, not in this weakling boy beside her. She sneered at him in disgust, but he did not notice.

Ethaniel was thinking instead of his sister. He could still feel her presence in his mind. A ghost image perhaps? He would at last live a life out from under her thumb. He would at last sit as ruler here. And he would be patient, patient and ever watchful. That perfect moment would again present itself one day and he would be waiting. Someday he too would return to Betazed, would exact vengeance on his sister, would take up his proper place as ruler of his homeworld. Some day. Fifty years of imprisonment within the Western Antiquity Tower had taught him a level of patience that went far beyond these simplistic people. There can be no peace on Betazed until all her children have come home. Until that perfect moment arrived, he would bide his time, and wait.

He had groomed this girl-child beside him almost since birth to do his biddings. And now he would mate with her. The foolish Starfleet doctors

had played right into his hands. By releasing him from the temporal bonds of this planet, he would grow now into the strength and virility of manhood. Yes, this Leilani Algethi would serve him well. She would bear him many children, and together they would create an all new Ethosian. And he and his children would train this backwards and superstitious people how to be an army. And he would be waiting; and when that perfect moment arrived, he would return to Betazed in force. This time there would be no stopping him. This time he would have an army of his own design. This time *all* of Betazed would fall before him...

And he was falling.

Lani sneered again in disgust. Shoving him off the edge of the tower had been far too easy; she had hoped at least for some sort of struggle, but the weakling boy's bony frame had offered virtually no resistance. She watched now as he twisted frantically in the empty air trying to find purchase in his descent. But this time there would be no stopping him. She almost imagined that she could see into his black and empty eyes. There was fear there after all, just as there had been fear in the empty black eyes of his evil twin sister. *Fly little bluebird fly*, she mused. Lani's freckled face broke into a satisfied smile as his body at last slammed into the stone plaza far below. It was only now that The Voice entered into her thoughts for perhaps the final time. *Why, my child, why?*

"We shall have no more foreign rulers here," she answered.

And at long last all things were right again on Ethos.

*The End.*

## Biographical Notes:

The fates of most of the crew of the *Enterprise-C* are established in the legendary Star Trek: The Next Generation (TNG) episode “Yesterday’s Enterprise” and my novelization thereof. Only Captain Garrett and Lt. Castillo are established and seen on screen. All other characters are the work of my imagination, with exception to the following...

*Jean-Luc Picard* appears only briefly in Marta’s flashback fight scene with the three ‘surly’ Nausicaans. This scene was alluded to in the TNG episode “Samaritan Snare”, and finally established in the episode “Tapestry” in which Picard’s heart is pierced by the serrated blade, resulting in his near death and requiring the implantation of an artificial heart.

*Marta Batanides* and *Cortin Zweller* are only ever seen in the TNG episode “Tapestry” as academy graduates. Their storylines beyond that are purely speculative on my part.

*Admiral J.P. Hanson* would die some 28yrs later at the Battle of Wolf 359 leading a fleet of 40 starships against the Borg invasion. He features extensively in the TNG episode “Best of Both Worlds” – Not yet encountered, the Borg are only hinted at in this story.

*Lieutenant Ian Troi*, wife of Lwaxana, father of Deanna. His sudden death is established to have happened four years later, but never explained. Deanna would later serve as

Counselor to Captain Picard aboard the *Enterprise-D* throughout the 2360s and 70s.

*Lwaxana Troi* appears in many episodes of TNG and DS9. Her much more erratic and eccentric personality on screen could be a result of the shock of losing first her daughter, Kestra, and then her husband at such young ages. (*Kestra Troi* is not mentioned in this story to remain consistent with the events of the episode “Dark Page”). Actress *Majel Barrett-Roddenberry* would also provide the voice of the computer for over 40yrs.

*Ambassador Sarek* is perhaps one of Star Trek’s most beloved characters. He made several appearances in TNG and would die at the age of 202 in the episode “Unification.”

*A small fleet?* I did not wish to undermine the devastating effect the Battle of Wolf 359 would have on Federation culture less than 30yrs later. Starfleet's first encounter with the Borg would claim 39 starships and more than 11,000 lives in a matter of minutes; including Hanson and the *Melbourne*. It marked perhaps the end of the Golden Age...