

STAR TREK

YESTERDAY'S ENTERPRISE



PARABOLA

WCS MARSH

Star Trek

Yesterday's Enterprise

“PARABOLA”

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Third and final novel based upon the legendary Star Trek: The Next Generation episode.

Star Trek: Yesterday's Enterprise – Parabola

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[NASA remasters Voyager I's famous 'Pale Blue Dot' image - CNET](#)

Quote by Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994)

Quote by Roosevelt, E. (1960). You learn by living: Eleven keys for a more fulfilling life. Westminster John Knox Press.

Based on Star Trek, created by Gene Roddenberry and characters created by Diane Carey.

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Pale Blue Dot¹

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

Pale Blue Dot is a photograph taken of the planet Earth on February 14, 1990 by the Voyager 1 space probe from a distance of about 3.7 billion miles (40.5 AU), as part of the *Family Portrait* series.

In the picture, Earth's apparent size is less than one pixel; the planet appears as a tiny dot against the vastness of space, among bands of sunlight scattered by the camera's optics. Voyager 1, which had

¹ [Pale Blue Dot - Wikipedia](#)

completed its primary mission and was leaving the Solar System, was commanded by NASA to turn its camera around and take one last snapshot of Earth across the great expanse of space, at the request of astronomer and author Carl Sagan. Of this photograph, Sagan said:

“From this distant vantage point, the Earth might not seem of any particular interest. But for us, it's different. Consider again that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every ‘superstar,’ every ‘supreme leader,’ every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam...”²

“Courage is more exhilarating than fear; and in the long run, it is easier. We do not need to become heroes overnight - just one step at a time, meeting each new thing as it comes.”

Eleanor Roosevelt³

T-minus 690...

² Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994)

³ Roosevelt, E. (1960). *You learn by living: Eleven keys for a more fulfilling life*. Westminster John Knox Press.

For countless millennia, the black body spun on its course, unhindered by the vacuum of deep space. Its origins had long since been lost to the histories of the worlds it had so peacefully passed on its long and lonely journey. On Earth, hundreds of lightyears away, glaciers had grown and receded, and man had burst forth from the savannahs of Africa. Pyramids charted his course to the aqueducts of Rome, then onwards to the palaces of London, and finally to the great white city of Washington where the journey to the moon had begun. From Kennedy, the white ships burst forth into the heavens, chasing the dreams of man. From Montana the dreams of man would take him to the stars. And from Betazed, the dreams of a human captain would put her starship on a collision course with the destiny of a far distant world hundreds of light years from home.

“There can be no mistake, Nomen Prime.” The Master of Internal Security, a slippery little man, stared at his Commander-In-Chief with a half self-absorbed, half shocked little smirk painted on his baby-soft features. “Top scientists from around the world have analyzed the data and have all reached the same conclusion.”

Primari Qoarta Zenthi reached for a bowl of salted minnows on his desk, then thought better of it as the information slowly settled in. Tall and lanky in stature and not overly handsome, he was an atypical candidate for the lofty position he so tenuously occupied. Elected with less than a majority vote, his tenure here was expected to be short. His lips were dry, his yellow face turning a blotchy white.

“Wh-what are our options?” The primari directed an almost pleading look to the chief administrator of the SENSES Division.

“Unfortunately, Nomen Prime,” the man said quietly, “we do not have a magnificent Videoplay solution for this crisis. There are no secret spacecraft, no super lasers... and no amount of nukes will ever divert a body of this size.”

The primari swallowed hard in a dry throat. With dizzying uncertainty, his large dark eyes drifted imploringly over to his long-time friend, Conflict Marshal Rarna Alcormi. Usually stone-faced, the marshal’s oval eyes bore a distant look, one of uncertainty and even

fear. He looked back at his primary and friend with naught but a sigh and a slight shrug of his narrow shoulders.

“How... hho,” clearing his throat, “how long, Tarma?”

“It barely missed us on the last pass.”

“How *long* Tarma?” The slippery little man shifted uneasily under the scrutinizing glare of his peers.

“By all estimates, Nomen Prime, the black body will strike us on its next orbit... roughly 690 days.”

“My God, and there’s nothing...”

“No, Sir. The object is the size of a small planet. Directoria will quite literally be vaporized by the impact.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Sitting at her desk in the pristine workspaces of the SENSES Division Laboratories, Dr. Moira Ananti stared at her calculations yet again with stunned disbelief. Her shoulder length forefins were pinned back with colorful barrettes, but still threatened to fling forward at any moment. Her thin dark lips curled around a pink stylus, while delicate webbed fingers twirled it aimlessly. So engrossed, she did not even hear her long-time friend and mentor enter the room.

“You really should get some sleep,” the old man said quietly so as not to startle her.

“Maxta, there really can be no mistake. The calculations are perfect.” She still did not look up, did not see the soft oval eyes that held so much love for someone nearly forty years his junior. He held up his *quhwah* mug in mock salute.

“To Dr. Moira Ananti, winner of the Zenthi Prize.”

“Oh, please.” She at last looked up at him with her characteristic dimpled smile. “If anyone deserves the Zenthi Prize, it certainly would be you, Sir.” She gazed into his grey and aging features as a daughter would look upon her father.

“I am just a foolish old man,” he retorted with multiple meaning and a boyish grin that belied his years. He offered her the mug in his other hand, and they clinked them together with the mutual admiration of colleagues. She took a cautious sip, then sighed.

"The calculations were easy, proving them will be hard. How long before we can start testing?"

"Sleep first, my dear," he smiled, then frowned at her suddenly distracted gaze. He followed her eyes to a Videoplay screen in the lounge across the hall. On it, a blotchy looking Primari Qoarta Zenthi was about to speak, but he too seemed distracted. Moira and Maxta stepped quickly across the hall and arrived just in time to hear the most startling news of their lifetimes.

"People of the planet Directoria, I come before you tonight not as the Primari of the United Front, but instead as a kindred soul in the affairs of our small little world. It pains me to inform you that a team of international scientists has determined that a planetoid of destructive size will strike this world in less than two year's time. There is no escape."

The tall lanky man paused, nearly losing his composure. He withdrew a handkerchief from his breast pocket, then touched it softly to his upper lip. His slender webbed hands were trembling as he continued.

"I call on all the peoples of this world to remain calm and to live out the remainder of our days together in peace. Nothing can be gained by aggression with your neighbors. Embrace your fellow kindred and show the true compassion of brotherhood in this, our darkest hour. May the Guardia of the Secondlife have mercy on our souls."

The two scientists stared agape as the screen turned to snow before them. Moira swayed slightly and fell into her mentor's arms. A long silence passed between them as they stood there within the sterile walls and supposed safety of their enclosure. At long last, Maxta offered a wry, but broken comment.

"I guess the testing will have to wait." With a sudden surge, Moira pushed away from him.

"Yes! That's it," she shouted. "It's our only hope!"

"Wait, what... what? Moira, calm down!"

"No Max, listen, we can use the graviton beam to divert, um..."

um,” she smacked her webbed fingers, “to deflect the planetoid away from Directoria. It may be our only chance!”

The old man stroked his sagging neck, then shrugged with resignation. *What the heck*, he thought, *it's certainly worth a shot.*

T-minus 16...

Hundreds of light years from home.

There was perhaps nothing more exhilarating to a starship captain than this... and perhaps nothing more dangerous. At this distance, even subspace communications took weeks. Help was years away, even at high warp. They were alone out here, on the very fringes of the frontier, with nothing but their own ingenuity to keep them alive. For nearly two centuries Starfleet had been pushing the boundaries of exploration, ever deeper into the dark fringes of the galaxy. And everywhere they went, life abounded; some of it hostile, most of it peaceful. Each new passing world brought new vitality to the ever-changing United Federation of Planets, whose Golden Age now spanned nearly 8,000 light-years of free space. Far from home, one little ship in particular was pushing those boundaries just a little bit farther than most.

Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett sat behind her massive wooden schoolteacher's desk and studied with earnest her ship's readiness report. It was late in the evening on a fairly routine day, so she had retired to her darkened ready room to try and catch up on the mundane realities of starship command. Cascading before her was a stack of padds that contained more detail on this *Ambassador*-class starship than anyone really cared, or even needed to know. The USS *Enterprise* was running at peak efficiency, as usual, thanks mostly to the dedication and hard work of her multicultural crew. They had just reached the great arc of their five-year journey of exploration into deep space, and would soon start their long, lonely descent back into the heart of the Federation. They were going home... but in this case, going home still meant two and a half more years and untold dozens of more star systems to chart.

The captain rarely thought of the Empress Ethereal anymore. Time can heal all wounds; yet the scars still remain. What her conscious mind had so easily set aside, her subconscious mind still held in hidden reserve. The nightmares were infrequent now, and her discussions with the ship's counselor had become fewer and farther

between. Yet the scars still remain. She had not entirely forgotten the dire warnings that imp of a princess had offered up like some wanton mystical prophesy; but so far from home and the internal affairs of the Federation, they had somehow taken backstage now to the mundane realities of starship command. Contrary to popular literature, deep space exploration was far from exhilarating. Days – sometimes weeks – were spent at warp cataloguing little more than space dust and stray hydrogen. The true thrill was the interactions of a crew bottled up for years inside a tiny tin bubble of air.

Rachel Garrett had always remained above all this, an enigma to both crew and senior staff alike. The events of Ethos had, however, softened this stance to some degree by allowing her to see the love and devotion that lie beneath the stiffly regimented Starfleet command structure. Ethereal had at least taught her this much. She interacted with the crew more, spent less time here alone in her small office – participated in the life that surrounded her; and in so doing, she had strengthened the bonds of friendship that had perhaps eluded her throughout much of her earlier career. She did not feel quite so alone. As reward, she enjoyed an almost unprecedented loyalty that rivaled even the heady days of Captain James T. Kirk. Whether she knew it or not, Garrett's crew would follow her to the very edge of hell... or so it would seem.

Even so, as the captain grew older, she had begun to fight an almost chronic tiredness. Very little aboard this ship happened without her direct knowledge and/or approval. This was the structure of command that held them all so tightly together. The Battle of Ethos had quickly proven what would happen if the strength of leadership broke down, especially out here so far from home. These constant burdens, these almost constant responsibilities, wore at her day after day, week after week, pounding at her physical and mental form like great waves crashing against a rocky shore. All things must eventually wear down with time, even a legendary Starfleet captain. She drew great strength of course from her first officer, her friend, her *Imzadi*, Spencer Stadi, but in the end, the responsibility for the continued health and safety of eight hundred and thirty-nine other people was still hers and hers alone. She had been at it for nearly twenty years now.

Yet, despite the long hard lonely days at the top, Captain Garrett had recently started to feel a newfound sort of giddiness. Perhaps it was the upcoming crescendo of their great parabolic arc into the unknown, perhaps it was her growing bond with the crew, perhaps it had been the mixed emotions of her 50th birthday celebration. Perhaps it was all these things, and maybe even a little bit more. She could not quite place her finger on it, but Rachel Garrett felt more alive now than she'd felt in years. The *Enterprise* had made peaceful first contact with fifteen new species on this trip. Her ship and crew were operating at their best. By all accounts, this five-year mission was shaping up to be the crowning glory of her twenty-year-long command. *Life can be pretty good sometimes*, she thought, leaning back and throwing her arms up over her head in a fantastic full-body stretch.

The captain let out a peaceful sigh, then stood and crossed the room to her personal replicator terminal. *Okay infernal damn machine, dazzle me yet again...* "Computer, one bowl of vanilla ice cream." The replicator offered nothing but the usual string of negative sounding chirps and tones that the captain had come to expect from this troubling machine.

"Eye cream is not a programmed nutritional supplement, please try again," the computer responded levelly.

"Ugh, vanilla eyeecream," Garrett attempted to annunciate, only to be confronted with still more negative sounding tones.

"I scream is not a recognized command. Please restate your selection, input the proper chemical formula, or submit a sample for chemical analysis."

"Dammit, if I had a sample, I wouldn't be needing any from you now, would I?"

"Command not recognized."

"Ohhhh, you *make* me wanna scream!" Garrett seethed, shaking her head in frustration. The novelty of having her very own personal replicator had quickly worn off in the months that had followed its installation. A relatively new technology, the system clearly had a few kinks that still needed ironing out. Mercifully, the sound of her door chime drowned out the din of confused tones that

now plagued the terminal's internal software.

"Come in," Garrett called. The computer suddenly chirped positive, and within the open chamber a swirling cloud of energy quickly coalesced into a small bowl of jiggling orange goo, replete with olive green bits.

"What the hell is that?" she exclaimed in surprise.

The computer chirped. *"Wanice cream is an Andorian delicacy derived from the mammary glands of..."*

"Stop!" Garrett cried out. At the door to her ready room, Cicely came to an abrupt halt and stood at attention, eyes front, like a cadet on review.

"Dammit, not you Ensign," the Captain sighed. With the utmost care, she gingerly plucked the bowl of goo out of the replicator terminal and gave it a cautious sniff.

"If you're busy, Cap..."

"My God!" Garrett cried out, startling the young woman and freezing her in her tracks yet again. "What the hell is this stuff?!"

"Ma'am?" Cicely queried softly, raising her dark eyebrows.

"Oh, never mind," Garrett said absently, placing the jiggling mass back in the slot and wiping her hand on her uniform jacket, upper lip curled in disgust. She scrunched up her nose and wiped her hand again before at last turning to her Chief of Operations. The green-skinned Orion girl was clearly at a loss and eyed her captain with uncertain speculation as Garrett sniffed her fingers, shuddered, and again wiped her hand at her waist. She finally made her way back towards her desk, but not before casting a withering stare and muttering something indistinct towards the replicator panel.

"Yes, Ensign, what do you have?" Garrett said with a devilish sigh as she settled back into her chair. Cicely had almost forgotten the small padd she held at her side. Her brown eyes went wide for a confused moment before she finally came too and her long, twig-like fingers presented their evidence.

"Ma'am, do you remember that rogue planetoid we passed a couple days ago?" She offered Garrett the padd, which the captain leaned forward and deftly plucked from the ensign's slender fingers.

"The fast moving one?" Garrett asked as confirmation.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Cicely replied.

“Other than it’s unusual speed, it was fairly unremarkable, as I recall,” the captain commented, glancing first into the young girl’s expectant eyes, then down at the padd.

“Well, I’ve analyzed its trajectory, Ma’am, and found something quite startling.” Garrett’s eyes went wide as she scanned the data. She blinked and looked up into Cicely’s soft green features.

“And your certain of these calculations?” she said astonished, knowing full-well the answer, but at a total loss for what else to say.

“Yes, Captain, without a doubt.”

“How long before impact?”

“Just a little under sixteen hours, Ma’am...”

~ ~ ~ ~

In a darkened state room, Spencer Stadi stood in naught but his shorts and stared out a viewport into the black darkness of outer space. Sometimes he saw the stars, sometimes he saw only the space in between, depending on his mood. The mental probings of the Empress Ethereal had left their far-reaching mark on him as well. Xavier Hawk had long ago guaranteed that Stadi would never advance beyond Commander, never be anything more than just a first officer; and this played over and over in his mind. Though his loyalty to Rachel Garrett was almost without bounds, sometimes the truths of his life left him staring at the infinite blackness of space with a melancholy all its own. He had been in Starfleet nearly thirty years now, first officer of this ship for nearly twenty of those. He knew nothing else, and often wondered if a career in stagnation was truly a career at all. The humans might call this a mid-life crisis, but that still didn’t make this right. Behind him the girl stirred.

He saw damn few options. He could certainly transfer to a different ship, or even to a starbase, but he knew happiness was not to be found there. He may only be first officer, but he was first officer of the *Enterprise*; a posting that many younger officers would climb over his cold, dead body for. Under ordinary circumstances, first officer of this ship was an invitation to command virtually any other ship in the

Fleet. The *Enterprise* was often a make it or break it steppingstone to much greater things, but for Spencer Stadi it had become a dead end of sorts; though he knew he hardly had room for complaint – and was often ashamed of these dark thoughts. As Son of the Second House, Holder of the Sacred Stone of Destiny, Heir to the Divine Swords of Betazed, he could certainly take up his place in the great House Consensus. But life had become complicated.

After the Battle of Ethos, Lwaxana Troi had practically begged him to come home, begged him to help her piece back together their shattered world. He had often thought of early retirement since then, thought of a posh life in civilian government as opposed to this sometimes-austere military routine; bottled up for years inside this tiny tin bubble of air. But life had become so complicated. Rachel Garrett had become his *Imzadi*, his beloved, a Betazoid term of endearment that went beyond physical love. Their minds had become inexorably linked by years of close telepathic contact. Any decision he made would profoundly affect her, and she had certainly never made any indication of retirement. It was often joked that Rachel Garrett was likely to remain in command of this starship until the very walls of time collapsed, and likely she would. Sometimes Spencer Stadi felt stuck, and this in turn made him feel even more guilty, especially now.

Behind him the girl stirred again, then suddenly threw her arms up over her head in a fantastic full-body stretch. She peered up at him now with a soft smile that made his mood quickly melt away. Stadi at last turned away from the darkened viewport and his own dark thoughts and sat down on the edge of the bed. With the back of his index finger, he slowly traced the soft contours of her jawline down her neck, between her breasts, and finally down to her navel where he placed an open hand on her belly. Her blue skin dimpled in protest, but the smile remained. Life had become so complicated.

“That was wonderful,” Enyo said softly, still smiling.

“Did you have a nice nap?” Stadi playfully replied.

The girl yawned. “How long was I out?” she giggled, her own blue little hand now running through the coarse dark but graying hair on his chest.

“Only about twenty minutes or so,” he said quietly, brushing

away the last of his brooding thoughts. He stood up and crossed over to the replicator and ordered a dish of *uttaberries* while Enyo sat up and covered herself with a plush comforter. Delivering his sweet Betazoid treat, he sat back down on the edge of the bed. The berries were only a shade darker than her skin, and this made him smile as she placed the first few in her mouth and nibbled away at them like a child with a newfound prize. He sighed. Their secret hideaway was a seldom-used guest quarters on the portside of Deck Three. Very few crewmembers ventured into these VIP sections of the ship, especially at night, so the room had proven to be a good escape. Stadi had used his pull as first officer to clandestinely secure them, and the guilty thoughts now returned.

“You seem quiet,” Enyo remarked, her twin antennae turning inquisitively towards him. Stadi stared into her gentle eyes, took note of her cherub-like features. She was twenty years his junior, and this made him feel young and old at the same time. Their burgeoning love affair over the past two years had made him feel so alive again, but had also filled him with such remorse. He was her commanding officer, to say nothing of the age difference and the myriad other problems associated with their little dalliance. On a ship full of telepaths, constant vigilance was beginning to wear on them both. Their relationship could go nowhere beyond this room.

“It’s nothing,” he commented, placing the back of his fingers on her baby-soft cheek. Flashbacks of his beloved Zora still flooded his consciousness at times. Her dark skin and golden eyes. The way she smelled. The sound of her thoughts in his mind. They had been so much in love once, and this filled him now with such sadness. Life is full of so many profound choices that we all give so little thought to at the time, yet they still affect us for many years to come. Zora was gone though, another victim of the tragedies of Ethos. So much lost potential in the wake of such disaster. Looking now into Enyo’s soft sweet eyes, Stadi saw such hope, such childish optimism. He admired her for this above all else. They were both startled by a sudden comm call from the Bridge.

“This is the Captain, all senior officers will report to the Observation Lounge immediately... Garrett out.”

The unexpected presence of Rachel Garrett seemingly in the room with them caused them both to flush, breaking the almost mystical trance. Stadi jumped up and began putting on his trousers.

“Duty calls,” he said absently, trying to mask his embarrassment as he hurriedly zipped his pants and struggled with his standard grey undershirt.

“Duty calls,” Enyo mirrored quietly, feeling somewhat ashamed herself.

“Stay as long as you like,” Stadi said with an understanding smile as he bent over to kiss her. Their eyes locked for a sad moment before he was off, grabbing his uniform jacket as he went. With a tear of uncertainty mixed with love, she watched him go.

~ ~ ~ ~

There was perhaps no stranger pairing than that of Doctor Ann Grey and Commander Marta Batanides. Against all odds, the two had become fast friends in the time since Ann’s transfer to the *Enterprise*. The timid young doctor’s awkward and often nervous behavior stood in sharp contrast to the strong and confident nature of the ship’s petite security chief. Yet the disparities in their personalities seemed to strengthen their friendship somehow rather than diminish it. With Marta, Ann felt more poised, more self-assured, while Marta in turn felt more feminine and graceful in the presence of Ann’s unassuming beauty and latent sensuality. What one lacked, the other reinforced. They had taken to spending most evenings together now, either alone, or in the company of Castillo and Andy Dardanelle. It was an interesting combination of souls.

The camaraderie between Richard Castillo and his faithful sidekick was fundamentally more understandable. The two were pals in every sense of the word. They had hit it off almost instantly back at Ethos, and their friendship had only strengthened since then. Somewhat mischievous at times, the two cohorts rarely missed an opportunity to get into trouble, much to Commander Stadi’s unfettered consternation. But on a far more basic level, the two perhaps identified with each another. They were both orphans of sorts. Castillo had spent

his formative years bounced from grandparent to grandparent, his widowed mother unable to cope with his impulsive rebellious streak. Andy in turn had been the sole survivor of the downed *Ambassador*, the so-called lucky one. In addition to Stadi, they had both proven to be an ongoing thorn in the side of the well-intentioned ship's counselor, Onovan, as well.

These were just but a few more examples of how life aboard a starship brought people together in such curious and unseemly ways. There was nothing quite like it in the history of mankind. Even the crews of battleships or submarines did not develop quite such a similar level of interaction. The people aboard this ship were completely and entirely separated from the rest of their kindred. They were truly alone out here, light years and calendar years away from any familiar faces or friendly allies. This created a dependence on one another that was unprecedented in the history of mass travel. A simple message from home took weeks to materialize; even the ancient royal mail steamers delivered their precious cargo faster. The distances involved in deep space exploration were beyond the comprehension of the ordinary mind, so the ordinary mind coped by relying on the only familiar thing left available to it. The comfort and company of friends.

With a grunt, Marta smacked the paddleball with all her might. Slamming against the outer wall of the gym, it shot backwards far beyond the reach of Ann Grey.

"That's game," Marta laughed as Ann stood up, hands on hips, breathing heavily.

"You suck," Ann retorted, her lips cracking into a playful smile.

"Shut up, that's the first time I've beat you in weeks!"

"Only cause you've let me win," Ann chuckled.

"So, pick something else to play then loser," Marta harrumphed, causing Ann to giggle further. Her long brown hair hung in her eyes as it always did, only this time it was matted and stringy with sweat. For her part, Marta looked barely disheveled as they passed through an arched alcove and into the locker room, towels thrown over their shoulders. Not sensing anything even slightly amiss, they both dropped their short skirts to the ground and unzipped their

frilled tops. They had no more dropped these to the floor when the lights suddenly dimmed and provocative form of sleazy bar music began flooding the room. Overhead, a small silver ball spun slowly, and bathed their white undergarments and slim bodies in a colorful photoelectric display.

“Ugh,” Marta exhaled, dropping her head back on her shoulders. In a near panic, Ann quickly attempted to cover herself with her towel. Marta merely placed her hands on her slender hips.

“You two little assholes are gonna spend the night in the Brig, I swear,” Marta called out, shaking her head and trying not to smile. With that, the music suddenly changed to a more male-oriented number and Castillo and Andy slowly appeared from around a set of lockers. Glistening wet and dressed in tight-fitting red swim trunks, the duo danced with feline grace up to the ladies with hands clasped behind their respective heads. Marta threw her head back and laughed outright now, then slapped both her hands on Castillo’s chest as he came much too near. Mortified beyond words, Ann could do naught but cower behind her towel and try to conceal her awkward glances.

“Where did you get that?” Marta said, casting a smoldering stare up at the sparkling silver ball.

“Say what?!” Castillo feigned above the din of the music’s growing crescendo. Behind him, Andy’s neo-Vulcan features stood out even more than usual with the sheepish grin that now flashed across his boyish face. He was but a string-bean next to the taller and more filled out form of Richard M. Castillo, but still the perfect model of Starfleet health and fitness, nonetheless. He stole a quick look at Ann’s half-concealed shapeliness, then himself glanced coyly away.

“You’re a jackass,” Marta giggled as Castillo brought up a small padd and quickly silenced the music at its peak. “And now the lights,” she instructed with a scolding stare.

“Awe, you’re no fun,” Castillo said teasing, returning the lighting to normal.

“Good Lord, when do you find time to do this stuff?”

“Just before our swim,” Castillo laughed. “The timing had to be perfect.”

“Sometimes I swear you must have this locker room under

twenty-four-hour surveillance,” Marta clucked. Behind her, Ann looked warily up at the ceiling and began surveying its hidden nooks and crannies for tiny cameras and any other nefarious devices that may be concealed there. Andy had to suppress a laugh as he continued to marvel at her nervous reactions to this entire little escapade. At one-quarter Vulcan, nervousness was not generally in his nature, and it fascinated him in Ann. As per usual, neither of them made any comment, nor eye contact, leaving instead all the playful banter to the two more seasoned veterans.

“What’ya gonna be for Hallowe’en tomorrow?” Castillo gibed, eyeing Marta’s soft and slender body, then giving her an all-too-knowing smile.

“Um, how about Chief of Security of a starship?” she shot back.

“Boooring,” he sang to her now, casting a look over his shoulder and rolling his eyes at Andy. Again, the younger officer glanced at Ann, then looked sheepishly back to the floor.

“You two are planning something, I can tell,” Marta remarked like a scolding mother. She stole a quick look at Andy and smiled inwardly at his awkwardness. He had been eyeing up Ann more and more of late, but Marta knew of the timid young doctor’s burgeoning love interest in Skyl, strange as it may seem. Her heart sang a silent lament for love unrequited.

“Nah...” Castillo smirked, throwing another mischievous stare in Andy’s direction.

“Commander Stadi is going to have both your butts in a sling, I swear,” she now warned. At the mention of the commander’s name, Castillo suddenly became quiet and moved in just a little bit closer.

“So have you heard the latest?” he whispered conspiratorially.

“Do you think the Captain suspects anything yet?” Marta blurted out, blue eyes going wide with electricity. Andy and Ann both made nervous eye contact for the first time, albeit briefly, thus completing the circle of complicity.

“You’re third in command; I think you should tell her!”

“Not on your half-naked life!” Marta retorted, looking suddenly fearful.

“This is the Captain, all senior officers will report to the Observation Lounge immediately... Garrett out.”

The four companions nearly jumped out of their skins at this and had to resist their initial reaction to duck and cover. Then all four laughed now, but in its undertones was carried a mutual amount of guilty uncertainty. Within the confined, close-knit community of a deep-space starship, rumors were perhaps more dangerous than truth itself. Feeling suddenly exposed, the men quickly withdrew to their own private alcove to dress themselves in unspeculative silence.

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By default perhaps, more than by actual preferred companionship, Lieutenant Commander Onovan sat with Lieutenant Commander Skyl on the upper level of the hanging-gardens-like Starboard Café. Both officers picked absently at their meals as they stared into respective padds and reviewed their day’s work. Below them, the off-duty dayshift laughed and chatted in the relaxed comfort of the ship’s massive, three-tiered dining lounge, their muffled din barely a distraction at this height. As an unwritten rule, the third tier was often reserved mostly for senior officers and other members of the ship’s elite Bridge staff. However, only Onovan and Skyl were present.

The chief engineer, a full-blooded Vulcan, studied in earnest the various reports from his subordinates. The *Enterprise* was running at peak efficiency, as usual, and sometimes it was difficult to keep everyone busy. These daily readiness reports were more of a preemptive endeavor to plan for the next day’s work, rather than an actual gauge of the ship’s preparation for action. It had been nearly two weeks since their last port of call – a routine star mapping of an uninhabited system – and the crew was already beginning to show signs of restlessness. The ever-analytical, ever-watchful Skyl was quick to recognize these subtle changes in his junior crewmembers and had already planned a full day of unscheduled maintenance to keep idle hands busy. The Vulcan could no doubt expect some grumbling from below decks, but he had slowly become accustomed to this form of necessary stress relief. Onovan had taught him this much.

For his part, the ship's resident counselor was perusing through the crews third-quarter mental-health assessments. Interviewing eight hundred and thirty-nine individual crewmembers was no small task to be sure, especially when dealing with the more resistant cases like Rachel Garrett and Richard M. Castillo – and the ever-stoic Lt. Commander Skyl. This ship had the added benefit of being over half telepathic, which made the counselor's job just that much more interesting. But Starfleet had learned its lessons well when it came to the wellbeing of its deep space explorers, trapped as they were in such close quarters together, often for years at a time. As crew sizes had expanded and become ever more diverse, the need for a counselor had become all that more evident. And on a starship as extraordinary as the *Enterprise*, Lt. Commander Onovan had long ago proven to be the best man for the job.

Even at ninety-seve years old, Skyl could not compare to Onovan's three hundred and sixty-eight years of collected wisdom and patience. Known as a race of listeners, the El-Aurians had an almost strange and mysterious air of clairvoyance about them. When he spoke, the counselor's words were always carefully chosen, his sentences forever carefully orchestrated, putting most anyone instantly at ease. He spoke now to his dining companion, still yet to look up from his work.

"The crew is becoming restless," he remarked casually. "I'm seeing signs of increased anxiety, frayed nerves, and flares in temper." Onovan tapped several buttons on his padd. Boredom was quickly becoming his key assessment. Something interesting needed to happen, and soon. "I expect to hear at any moment that one of Mr. Castillo's practical jokes has finally landed someone in Sickbay."

"The Captain should not tolerate such behavior from a senior officer," Skyl intoned, he himself not looking up from his own padd.

"It's difficult to tell sometimes," Onovan mused, "who the true mastermind is in that little dynamic duo." He at last laid down his padd and began to absently stir around in his unfinished dinner. He thought now of Andy Dardanelle, the last living crewmember of the downed *Starship Ambassador*. To be the sole survivor, to be the so-called 'lucky one'. It had been hard for the young ensign at first to adjust to

the realities of being alive when so many of his former friends and colleagues were not. But the senior staff of the *Enterprise* had embraced him and made him one of their own. And the nurturing showed: within a year he had been promoted to lieutenant and made chief duty officer for his exceptional service.

His mischievous behavior on the other hand was a different story. The captain had granted an unusual amount of leniency in this regard, and this often left the counselor puzzled. The dynamic duo of Castillo and Dardanelle had become the ship's merry band of misfits, so to speak, and could seemingly do no wrong. *Within reason of course.*

"Skyl," Onovan queried. The engineer at length laid down his own padd and stared into the El-Aurian's coal-black features. The counselor continued: "You and I have served together on this ship far longer than anyone else... with the exception of Commander Stadi of course."

"Indeed."

"I have noticed a certain comparative change in this mission to that of our previous five-year missions into deep space."

"As have I, Counselor."

"Why do you think that is?" Onovan asked now, curious of a Vulcan's logical assessment to the subtle transformation taking place around them.

"If it is my counsel you seek, Counselor, I can offer only my own speculation."

"Yes, of course, Skyl," Onovan nodded with an amused smile.

"The events of Ethos," Skyl mused, "left a lasting mark on us all, as you well know. It has caused a fundamental shift in the way most of the crew relates to their past decisions. Regret has been brought to the forefront of most of their daily lives. This has in turn created an unusual shift in their behavioral patterns."

"And the Captain's perhaps more lackadaisical approach to command?"

"It is not my place..."

"Skyl, please," Onovan said somewhat testily. Skyl raised a single upswept eyebrow and paused for a moment. The two men had

been colleagues for a very long time, and the counselor obviously valued his opinion. They had indeed been here far longer than anyone else aboard, so perhaps who better then to evaluate the captain's own subtle psychological transformation?

"Very well then, Counselor," he said at last. "To use a human colloquialism, Rachel Garrett is *only human*. She above all others bore the brunt of the Empress Ethereal's telepathic intrusions. She above all others bears the most regret. As a result, she above all others requires the greatest emotional connection with those around her. It is... only human," Skyl concluded in an exceptionally rare show of emotion – compassion. The subtle changes were evident even here at this table among the two oldest and the wisest members of the *Enterprise's* diverse crew.

"And Commander Stadi?" Onovan said with a sudden devilish smirk.

"Counselor, I do not..." Skyl began to protest.

"Relax, Commander," Onovan chuckled openly now at his companion's obvious discomfort. Onovan's oath to doctor/patient confidentiality notwithstanding, neither one of these seasoned officers were predisposed to idle gossip or speculation. Yet the hushed undertones were there, nonetheless. Even they knew what was going on. The only great mystery that remained was how Rachel Garrett would react when rumor became truth.

"This is the Captain, all senior officers will report to the Observation Lounge immediately... Garrett out."

Onovan and Skyl both looked at each other with an understanding eye. They had indeed been here longer than all the others, and perhaps only they alone understood the true impact of what was sure to be coming.

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With a sort of nervous uncertainty, the senior staff all gathered in the Observation Lounge just rear of the Main Bridge. It was rare to be called to duty at such a late hour, and many were unsure what manner of dark tidings this night would bring. The crew was becoming

restless, bored. Nerves were shot, tempers were flaring, and anxiety was on the rise. Something interesting needed to happen, and soon. The six senior officers all fidgeted uneasily and cast wayward glances around the room at each of their colleagues. Few would look at Commander Spencer Stadi for any great length of time before glancing quickly away. For his part, Stadi's telepathic mind could not help but pick up on the veiled thoughts that swirled around him. The subtle hints, the sideways glances; he had finally pushed the envelope too far, and he feared now the consequences. *Could this be it?*

Rachel Garrett stood stoic, back to her officers, at one of the Observation Lounge's sweeping aft viewports. Unwitting accomplice to the scandal that was brewing, her thoughts were instead on the unfortunate world that lay just ahead, in the path now of certain destruction. She knew that in the long history of the universe, many civilizations had come and gone – as too would mankind someday – but rarely was it witnessed in an all-at-once fashion such as this. And rarely was it witnessed firsthand by a starship crew held helpless by the hands of fate. How would they cope? Archaeology often reveals for us the lives of long ago lost and nearly forgotten societies, but how would you react to the actual destruction of Pompeii as viewed from the safe vantage point of a nearby mountainside? How would you cope as tens of thousands of people died right before your eyes?

Rachel Garrett feared now more for her crew, as any good captain would, than she did for all the millions of condemned people on that woe begotten little world that lay ahead. The next few harrowing hours would be hard on them all, especially with so many telepaths on board. With a weary sigh, she turned at last to face expectant eyes. They were nervous, agitated, and her subconscious mind took note of this, even if her conscious mind did not.

"Ensign Garrett," she began slowly, quietly, "has uncovered evidence that the world we are about to visit will be destroyed in less than sixteen hours' time." She paused. "The rogue planetoid we passed several days ago is on a collision course, and there's no stopping it." The stillness of the room permeated the air like a graveyard as the captain quietly took her seat. Folding her hands, she said: "Cicely, further contextual data if you please..."

Cicely slowly lifted a padd up off the tabletop, then drew in a sharp breath. "The planet in question is Minshara class, though it may be closer to class O, as vast forested swamps cover most of its habitable surface. Population: approximately ten billion..."

The senior staff all sat back in their chairs in unison, visibly shaken by this unexpected revelation. It was a well-established fact that asteroid collisions had led to mass extinctions on many such worlds, but these sorts of cataclysmic events were usually referred to in the abstract context of 'millions of years ago'. Never had such an event occurred within the confines of 'written' history on any of the worlds of the Federation. It was shocking, and the chances of it happening were quite literally astronomical; the chances that the *Enterprise* would arrive just in time to bear witness, even more so. Still, the fullness of it had not yet truly settled in.

"If memory serves," Skyl intoned dryly, "the aforementioned rogue planetoid is of significant size, is it not?"

Captain Garrett now spoke: "We are not talking about a simple *Extinction Level Event* here, people. Both of these planetary bodies are going to be vaporized right before our eyes." The straightforward flatness of her words slapped the assembled officers to immediate attention. They all sat forward again, faces brimming with unanswered questions, questions aimed at their captain. "Cicely, continue please..." she said quietly. They all turned back to face the green-skinned Orion girl.

"For the past three hours I have been monitoring various transmissions from the planet." Cicely briefly consulted her padd. "Its name is Directoria Primari, though it is most often referred to as simply Directoria. It contains a post-industrial, pre-warp civilization at the height of the Information Age. Numerous satellites and space probes, vast computer and transportation systems, and of course, a plethora of weapons of mass destruction..."

"Wait," Marta interrupted, "did you say pre-warp?" She turned away from Cicely and looked levelly at her captain. Garrett merely nodded, confirming Marta's unspoken thoughts... *and fears*.

"So what?" Castillo chirped up now. "Are you saying we can't help these people?!"

“The Prime Directive does apply,” Stadi stated levelly.

“That’s crap,” Castillo countered with increasing agitation.

“Lieutenant,” his captain warned. Then flatly: “We cannot interfere.”

“But Captain, there must be something...”

“What do you propose, Lieutenant?” Skyl queried, always the logical Vulcan thorn in Castillo’s human rashness. Castillo’s blue eyes flashed an angry look at Skyl.

“I don’t know, blow the damn thing up or something... you’re the engineer!”

“Ca-Ca-Captain...” This surprisingly from the awkward and timid Ann Grey, who rarely spoke up at any staff meeting. She tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

“Yes, Doctor,” Garrett responded, casting a cool stare in Castillo’s direction.

“P-p-perhaps in this instance, s-s-some form of ah, um, evacuation could be attempted.” Garrett’s heart went out to the young doctor’s compassion. Her child-like naïveté was an endearing quality to be sure, but it often stood in the way of practicality.

“That would not seem plausible, Doctor,” Skyl quickly dismissed her, causing the young woman to cower behind a bizarre wall of growing feelings for the man.

“It would take dozens of starships months to evacuate ten billion people,” Onovan carefully explained, trying to assuage the timid creature, but only adding to her distress.

“B-b-b-but...” she attempted meekly, only to be swept aside by her more dominant colleagues.

“We *could* take aboard three or four thousand or so...” Castillo offered hopefully.

“But who decides?” Marta shot back. “Who’s going to pick who gets to live?”

“Enough,” Garrett spoke loudly, with full command presence in her voice. They all turned to her muted, and she softened her tone. “The Prime Directive expressly prohibits us from interfering in the natural course of events of these people. This is to protect us as much as it is to protect them.”

“But we’re *not* protecting them, are we, Captain?” Castillo still tried to argue.

“You’re on dangerous ground, Lieutenant,” Stadi scolded him.

“We are not gods, Mr. Castillo,” the Captain stated plainly.

“Yes, but we are a technologically advanced species with a powerful starship at our disposal,” he quickly countered. “If they don’t know we helped them, how have we really damaged them?” The testiness in his voice was evident, and it put everyone else on edge.

“We are forgetting,” Cicely said stoically, “that these people are also technologically advanced. They no doubt already know of their impending doom. My orbital analysis even suggests that this is the rogue planet’s second flyby. I would offer that we simply do not yet have enough information to come to any definitive conclusions.”

“A logical argument, Ensign,” Skyl stated, directing his gaze pointedly across the table at the now superheated Richard Castillo. Onovan couldn’t help but conceal a smile at the interchange. His recent conversation with Skyl in the Starboard Café still rang fresh in his mind. The counselor continued to maintain his own argument that Castillo could seemingly do no wrong, within reason of course; but that axiom was about to be tested.

“Why you pointy-eared Vulcan sonuvabitch...” the Lieutenant blurted out.

“Mr. Castillo!” Stadi shouted. “Consider yourself on report.”

“And who’s gonna fill out that report, Commander? Ensign Enyo?”

Marta’s mouth fell open as Spencer Stadi’s face turned a sudden bright shade of crimson. With those few simple angry words, he had been exposed, and he felt his whole world begin to tumble down around him. The senior staff all began to shift uneasily again in their seats, as darting eyes exchanged uncertain nervous glances. Each in turn stole a glance at the commander, before turning away in shame and perceived complicity. Castillo too turned red, but then slowly blanched as the import of his words gradually settled in around the tiny, cramped room. Marta brought a trembling hand up and placed cool fingers upon a sweating upper lip. Any attempt at concealment by anyone save Garrett was lost in that barest of instances. Stadi’s

telepathic mind swooned with the incoming flood of conspiratorial thoughts from his long-time colleagues. His friends. He, too, slowly blanched as Onovan let out a long deep melancholy sigh. His job in this was only just beginning.

“Mr. Castillo, you are dismissed,” Garrett stated curtly. “Report to the Bridge and set course for Directoria, full impulse.” She mistook the dead silence of the room as a simple matter of frayed nerves. Anxiety had been on the rise, her crew had been growing restless, occasional flares in temper were to be expected. But underlying this, there was that something more. Her heightened psi-awareness was just barely picking up on the threads of it now. Castillo’s words had been stilted somehow, almost in an accusatorial way. This caused her suddenly to give pause as the lieutenant rose in uncharacteristic silence and passed quickly out of the room. She looked at Stadi who merely looked down at the table. She glanced now at Onovan who offered her nothing more than a pressed smile and a barely perceptible nod. Taking in the table as a whole, the captain was filled with a sudden inexplicable feeling of anxiety.

“Right,” she whispered, her voice strangely hoarse. She cleared her throat. “Ensign Garrett is right, we need more information. Commander Skyl, work with the Ensign... pull up all our sensor data from a few days ago. Reanalyze the planetoid’s trajectory. Give me breakdowns on density, composite structure, gravitational waveform anomalies.”

“Does that mean we’re going to try to intercept it, Captain?” Marta asked plainly.

“We are...” Garrett paused now on the razor-sharp edge of Prime Directive law, and its interpretation. “We are exploring all potential avenues of discussion, Commander... please wake Mr. Dardanelle and call him to the Bridge. Put the ship on Yellow Alert.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Counselor, you and Doctor Grey will begin looking at the people of this planet. Their culture, their way of life, how they might... (another pause on that razor sharp edge) ...react to our presence here. We don’t have a lot of time,” the Captain reminded them.

“Aye, Captain,” Onovan acknowledged, smiling at the usually

quiet Ann Grey. She merely looked down at the table in her usual uncertain way.

“Commander Stadi,” Garrett continued, “wake Ensign Enyo. Have her look at their satellite network, detection grids, weapons capabilities... we don’t want any surprises here.” And then the captain saw it, that slightest trace of shame hidden deep within the commander’s dark ebony eyes. The words ‘wake Ensign Enyo’ had hit her first officer like an electric shock. The heightened psi-regions in her brain lit up with that same cruel electricity as it leapt out of his mind and into hers. The moment was fleeting, the feeling gone almost instantly, but the hollowness it left in its wake was but a small portent of what was sure to be coming now that rumor had become truth. Onovan let out another long melancholy sigh. It had always been his job to put the pieces back together again; only this time things may be broken far beyond his simple repairs. His heart went out to Garrett now, and to Stadi, and indeed to the rest of the senior staff. The next few weeks would be trying to say the least. They were far from home, and far from escape, and no one knew yet how this one was going to play out.

Ever in control, ever in command, Captain Rachel Garrett faltered only slightly before recovering herself and returning boldly back to the task at hand.

“Let’s be clear, people,” she said with increased resolve, “we are bound by the Prime Directive *not* to interfere here. We must resist any temptations to act impulsively, we must uphold our oaths to Starfleet Command, and we must have faith in the principles upon which the Federation was founded. These are the things that must guide us in the next few harrowing hours to come, for even the slightest misstep could lead us all to ruin.”

Commander Spencer Stadi stared out the viewport into the black darkness of outer space. Sometimes he saw the stars, sometimes he saw only the dark space between.

T-minus 14...

The black body rotated slowly beneath them.

The *Starship Enterprise* appeared to be placidly in orbit around the rogue planet now, but in reality, they were both careening towards Directoria at a little over fifty-eight million miles per hour; or one-third full impulse. In other words, barely taxing the engines of the mighty Federation flagship. After a two-hour chase, the crew had at last settled in to begin their all-important research. Even at this speed, they had not yet reached the equivalent orbit of Jupiter, and would not for several more hours to come. They still had time.

After that point, however, things would progress very quickly on many fronts. When dealing with the gravitational forces of large bodies, there was an eventual point of no return in all things. Past a certain point, very little could be done. Past a certain point, the rogue body would knock Directoria out of its orbit whether it struck it or not. Better to be vaporized instantly? Or better to be tossed out of the solar system altogether to die a slow and icy death in the cold dark of outer space? Or worse still, spiral slowly into the sun.

Whether the people of Directoria knew it or not, their planet had already been perturbed two years ago by the rogue body's first pass through their solar system. The effects of that initial encounter may not be known for generations, or it may rear its ugly head within the span of a current lifetime. A new ice age perhaps? Or perhaps the vast swamps and oceans would slowly boil away to create vast deserts in their stead. No one could know for certain as the calculations were immense and the variables complex. What was known for certain, however, was that the rogue's great parabolic arc had brought it in for another pass, and this time there may be no stopping it.

On the Bridge of her starship, seated at the center of it all, Captain Rachel Garrett sat with legs crossed and hands clasped placidly across her thigh. Patience was at the heart of any command, and perhaps the hardest thing for any commander to master. She must wait for her staff to do their jobs, and she must do it quietly. To have her fingers in every pot so to speak, to be meddlesome, would only

prove to be a distraction to her seasoned officers; and in many ways, diminish their greatness. All parts working together to become a whole; this was integral to the safety and wellbeing of them all, so very far from home. Counterintuitive to popular thought, a captain could only do so much. She must be patient.

Just ahead of her at the helm, Richard Castillo sat uncharacteristically quiet, the hairs on the back of his neck bristling with the empty feeling of embarrassment; as well as the polar opposite feeling of irritation. A defense mechanism perhaps for his own gaff in the observation lounge, but also a heartfelt concern for the billions of people about to be vaporized right before his eyes in less than fourteen hours' time. He felt sick and paralyzed all at once; and especially now, he felt excluded from the intense discussions taking place at the rear of the bridge. His dismissal from the captain's briefing had essentially cut him off from having any further input, and his brazen outburst at Commander Stadi had basically cut him off from the support of his peers. Sitting here alone now, with Garrett directly behind him, he could almost feel her omnipresence boring into his very soul.

The captain's heightened psi-region could sense his uneasiness, if only on a fundamental level, and she eyed him speculatively from time to time, even as she stared out the viewscreen at the black body falling slowly away beneath them. Her mind still teetered on that razor-sharp edge of Prime Directive law. To help these people was perhaps a mortal sin – and went against every grain of her Starfleet training. To not help them was perhaps a mortal sin of a different kind, churning within a sea of moral issues that crashed against a wailing wall of ancient religious beliefs and social codes. They were not gods... but Richard Castillo had been right about one thing: they were a technologically advanced species with a very powerful starship at their disposal. If the people of this planet didn't know the *Enterprise* had helped them, how had they really been harmed? It had been every starship captain's argument for the past two centuries, and it caused Garrett's face to break into a queer sort of smirk.

At the front corner of the Bridge, the turbolift doors parted with a quiet whoosh and Lt. Andy Dardanelle emerged with Ensign Enyo

close at hand. Briefed on the crisis, they carried themselves with the same somber reserve that held the rest of the senior staff in a sort of quiet reverence. They had not, however, been briefed on the heated interchange between Castillo and his esteemed colleagues. Andy stared with a speculative grin at Castillo, seated as he was all alone at the helm. Taking a glance at the crowded upper level, he quickly chose to take a seat at tactical, next to his pal, and away from all the commotion.

For her part, the cherub-faced, blue-skinned ensign surveyed the expansive command center with the same sort of awe that had overtaken her on that very first day back at the Galatea Space Center. She couldn't help it. To be aboard the *Enterprise* was one thing, to serve on its Bridge quite another. Though adjusted to this prestigious posting, she still felt the urge sometimes to be overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of it all. She stole a quick glance at the ship's dedication plaque, as she always did, then her sparkling eyes quickly surveyed the crowd and zeroed in on Commander Stadi. This she could not help either. With all the innocence of a girl her age, she smiled – and the Bridge hushed. It was just the barest hiccup, but the tension rose around her and her twin antennae quivered, though she did not know why. It was just a feeling, a charge of electricity in the air, and Captain Rachel Garrett felt it too.

The Captain watched as Andy slid in next to Castillo, and her mind was lost for a moment, sensing perhaps the sudden surge of emotion that arced out into the air from the mind of her first officer. Once again, the heightened psi-regions in her brain lit up with that same cruel criminal intensity, and as before, the moment was fleeting, the feeling gone almost instantly; but the hollowness it left in its wake caused the captain to stare at her helmsman with a newfound wonder. What exactly *had* he meant in that little outburst with Stadi? A sudden knot formed in her throat to match Castillo's own, and the hairs on the back of her neck now bristled with his.

"What's up, buddy?" Andy said quietly, settling in and smiling warmly at Castillo's very palpable discomfort.

"Shut up," Castillo whispered back harshly, not daring to move, barely willing to breathe.

“Jeesh, man, take it easy. What the hell’s gotten into you?”

“Mr. Castillo,” Garrett called out suddenly, “my Ready Room, five minutes.” He felt the captain breeze by so near to him that it felt like the angel of death had stolen his very soul. A barely audible groan escaped him, and he unintentionally pulled at his collar with two hooked forefingers.

“Wow, better you than me!” Andy breathed as the Captain disappeared into her small office.

“Seriously man, you need to shut up right now!” Castillo growled audibly.

“Gentlemen, is there a problem?” Nearest of the officers on the upper level, Marta Batanides leaned heavily against the rail and peered down at the two boys in question.

“No Ma’am,” Andy sang out blithely, then under his breath: “no problems here.”

Marta turned back to Commander Skyl and Cicely with a heavy heart. This awful day was only just the beginning of what was sure to be an awful month. All three were at the Ops station staring with dismay at the readouts from the rogue planetoid. Cicely’s initial calculations had been dead on, as expected, and there was no room for doubt now. The black body would strike Directoria nearly head on, and with terrific force. There was no exaggeration in the statement that both planets would be vaporized. In less than fourteen hours’ time, all that would remain of the two worlds would be a cloud of gas slowly spiraling into the sun.

Marta sighed. The tension level on the Bridge hung over them all as if that cloud of gas had already invaded their space. Richard Castillo had been her friend for a dozen years or more, and she knew now that he was in trouble. Forced by events completely out of his control, he had crossed that sacred line; and now the awkward position that his brashness had placed him in threatened to bring them all crashing to the ground. Yes, this awful day was only just the beginning; and maybe it was the beginning of a shake-down that was perhaps a long time coming. The Battle of Ethos had changed them all. It all at once had brought them closer together; but too – had torn them apart

from themselves – an internal rift on the fabric of the soul. A structure cannot stand without its foundation. Bound so seamlessly together on the outside, Garrett's crew was slowly crumbling from within.

"Skyl," Marta said plaintively, "setting the Prime Directive aside for a moment, any ideas on how maybe we could steer this thing?"

"An object tends to travel in a straight line, Commander... unless acted upon by another object." The Vulcan's sense of logic sometimes trapped him within a web of obviousness. Marta sometimes found this amusing, but not always.

"So, it would take significant mass," she said levelly, "to alter its trajectory."

"That is correct."

"And if we were able to magically blow it to bits?"

"The mass would still remain the same, Ma'am, and the destructive force would not be diminished."

Seated in front of them, Cicely spoke next. "What if he were able to lower the mass of the planetoid, and maybe push it?" She typed several commands into her console and was immediately discouraged by the results.

"You mean kind of like a warp field?" Marta said with interest even as Cicely's newest calculations popped up on the screen. Hope for her too quickly faded back to reality.

"As is evident, Ensign," Skyl spoke stoically, "the mass and speed of the object is far beyond the parameters of any reasonable sized warp field."

"Why the hell is this thing moving so fast anyway?" Marta pondered aloud, shaking her head and clasping her scrunched up chin with delicate fingers.

"There could be any number of reasons, Commander," Skyl replied, his logic also excluding the possibility of a rhetorical question. "The object could have been ejected by a supernova or pulled out of orbit by a black hole. Its speed is indeed remarkable however..."

"Wait just a minute," Marta said with just a hint of excitement. She pushed in close to Cicely and typed in a few calculations of her own. The green-skinned ensign's face lit up with realization as the

results slowly scrolled down the screen in front of them.

“Intriguing theory, Commander,” Skyl intoned with a single upswept eyebrow. Marta was quick to note his own carefully concealed enthusiasm. She knew the Vulcan all too well, and it always made her smile.

“An artificial black hole...” she said with a grin, and turned to face the black body on the viewscreen. *Let the Prime Directive be damned*, she thought. They might just be able to steer this thing after all.

At the opposite corner of the Bridge, Onovan and Ann Grey sat at their own science station and worked on the problem at hand with the same amount of diligence as their comrades. Commander Stadi stood adjacent to them, monitoring their progress, and adding input as needed. Though he too must allow the senior staff to do their jobs, he was not quite as constrained as his captain about offering suggestions and assisting in the investigation. Charged with looking at the people of Directoria, the good doctor and the counselor had found perhaps the obvious – a society in a state of complete and utter chaos. As should have been expected, there was nearly a total breakdown of controlled, civilized behavior. It had always amazed Stadi how a crisis could almost always turn a peaceful people into a lawless mob.

Case in point: his own world of Betazed at the discovery that the Royal Twins were still alive. One of the most influential planets of the Federation had erupted into madness – after seventy-three years of peace – over nothing more than the long-dead sins of a single family. Faced with the prospect of complete annihilation, and the death of billions, how could any civilized society hope to react? This was a case ripe for deep philosophical discussion. Stadi was certain that this mission would fill university lecture halls across the Federation for decades to come. But the task at hand was now, and it was theirs to cope with. Two and a half years from Federation space, the *Enterprise* was on her own.

“Well at least some shred of government seems to still exist,” Onovan said, disturbing Commander Stadi from his silent reverie.

“And perhaps it’s no surprise that the media network is still

operating at full tilt,” Ann Grey added with a touch of melancholy.

The timid young doctor rarely stammered in the presence of the El-Aurian counselor, whose gentle demeanor could put most anyone at ease. Onovan’s thoughts flashed briefly to his own homeworld, *Tor Umbria Omri Nexus El-Auria*. Invaded by the Borg almost a century ago, he couldn’t help but wonder how his own quiet and reserved people had reacted in the face of their own destruction. Had they peacefully resigned themselves to their awful fate, or had they spiraled downwards into that same deep dark well of madness that was now swallowing the people of Directoria? The people of this planet had a similar prehistory to many of the worlds of the Federation, including Earth, and in some ways even El-Auria; a prehistory filled with violence and self-destruction. But in time, these worlds had overcome their angry pasts to live together in peace. How would Earth react today to its own imminent destruction, after so many centuries of tranquility?

“Doctor, Counselor,” Stadi said quietly, “how do you think these people would react to our presence here?” As per their captain’s charge, the trio were meant to explore every avenue of discussion, even those that treaded on the sacred fabric of Prime Directive law.

“W-w-well, Sir,” Ann Grey suddenly stuttered, “if we t-t-truly are *not* going to help these people, then we c-c-certainly shouldn’t give them any, um, false hope by telling them we’re here.” Her voice was filled with angry frustration, and Stadi’s telepathic paracortex winced at the flood of emotion pouring out of the compassionate young woman.

“Counselor?” he queried in a low voice.

“Well, Sir,” Onovan said with a reflective sigh, “*some* of their broadcasts seem to suggest an active, imaginative power of invention that does appear to include *some* elements that might fall within the realm of science fiction. And with their technology, they have certainly made detailed observations of the heavens, and have perhaps come to *some* acceptance of the possibility of alien life...”

“But?”

“But I do have to agree with Ann, Commander. If we are not going to make any attempt to help them, why upset them further?”

"You have both evaded my question," Stadi rejoined with a thoughtful smile. "If we *were* to help them, how would they respond?" So engrained were the principles of the Prime Directive in every Starfleet officer, all three of them were having a hard time even allowing their minds to speculate.

"Anger," Ann Grey stated flatly, catching the counselor and the commander both by surprise.

"Explain," Stadi said, intrigued.

"Why haven't we come sooner? Why don't we stop this? If we can't stop this, why don't we at least take them all away to safety?" Her passion reflected perhaps the thoughts of many of the crew. *Why hadn't they come sooner?* Speculation like this was pointless of course, but it did touch on many aspects of fate and predestiny that had troubled people's minds since the very beginnings of philosophical thought. If the *Enterprise* had intercepted the rogue weeks ago, or even two years ago, perhaps they could have saved this planet long before the inhabitants had ever known they were in any danger. This was where the Prime Directive was meant to guide them; but at the same time, it was also where many of its tenets fell to pieces. The actions of today could affect the events of a future not yet known, or that may never be known. To turn left, or to turn right? It was here that the turbolift doors opened to reveal a very young and innocent looking blue-skinned ensign.

Spencer Stadi's heart jumped up into his throat. The telepathic regions of his brain immediately clamped shut, like the jaws of a steel trap closing tight around the legs of a fox, but it had not been soon enough. A momentary hush fell over the Bridge as their eyes met and he looked quickly away. He had been caught in the henhouse. The very air became charged with the deep undercurrents of conspiracy. His telepathic mind became wrought with anxiety... not only his own anxiety, but the anxiety of the colleagues surrounding him. His friends. They each in their own right had attempted to close their minds to what they were thinking, to what they felt. He looked up just in time to see Garrett twitch, to shift uneasily in the command chair. The commander felt like the naked schoolboy in everyone's worst nightmare. And staring at him from across the Bridge, the sweet and innocent Ensign

Enyo smiled with all the beauty of her youth.

"Mr. Castillo, my Ready Room, five minutes," he heard his captain state flatly. He watched her breeze by the lieutenant so closely that he too could feel her cold passing. A knot hung in the commander's throat that threatened to choke him. And before he knew it, Enyo was standing there next to him.

"Ensign," he croaked.

"Commander," she said warmly. The hearts of all the rest of the officers on the upper level went out to the young ensign now. The girl did not know, how could she know, of the conspiracy that now swirled around her?

"Is everything all right, Sir?" she said, her twin antennae wilting ever so slightly. Deep down inside the core of her being perhaps she knew that they had been exposed at last, but the realization of it had not yet clawed its way to the surface. The innocence of youth and beauty will cling to its naivety till the bitter end it seems, even long after it has been betrayed by the harsh realities of love.

"Uh, yes, Ensign," Stadi issued from a dry throat, "please take a seat at Science Station Two," he gestured with a long arm. She moved past him slowly and took a seat, glancing up over her shoulder into his deep dark ebony eyes.

"We need to talk," his lips moved, and she knew. Then aloud: "The captain would like you to look at the satellite network of the planet, their detection grids, their weapons capabilities. We need to know how long we can remain unnoticed here, and what kind of threat they may pose if we should become... detected." Again, that pause on the fringes of the Prime Directive. Quite involuntarily, he placed a hand on her shoulder and she nodded. Pinching softly, he turned away. *What an awful day,* he thought; that was sure to be only just the beginning of what was sure to be an awful month.

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Staring out the oval window of her darkened ready room, Rachel Garrett barely noticed the twinkling stars, only the blackness between. She was standing so close to the aluminoglass that she could

feel its coolness against her face. Millimeters separated her from absolute zero and negative pressure. Death. Where she stood was warmth and light and air. Life. This was home. Out there was nothingness, oblivion. The planet Directoria was also warmth and light and air; but in just a few short hours, it would be nothingness, its people consigned forever to oblivion. Her mind dwelled on the words of Carl Sagan, a twentieth century Earth scientist: "...everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you have ever heard of... every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."

Her mind also dwelled on the words of the Prime Directive. "Interference in the natural course of development of any world is expressly forbidden." Every Federation schoolchild had been taught this for almost two centuries. As a Starfleet cadet, she had sworn an oath to protect this principle, even at the risk of death, before she could even enter the Academy gates. This sacred testament was so engrained within the hearts and minds of every Federation citizen that it was rarely tested, rarely even called into question. Captain James T. Kirk was notorious for stretching it from time to time, but even he fell within the parameters of its underlying wisdom most of the time. Its goal was simple... to protect the people from their own passions. They were not gods. It was not theirs to decide who should live, who should rule, who should be worshipped... or who should die.

The captain held in her hand a padd containing a list of rare precedents in which the principle had been tested. By default, perhaps, many of these difficult decisions had been made by Starfleet captains much like herself – starship commanders confronted with an impossible truth, the Kobayashi Maru, the no-win scenario. That's why the test was administered at the Academy; for moments such as these, when there was no right answer. Captain Garrett felt the coolness of outer space on her skin and knew that she was facing this test again, here and now, and there were indeed no right answers.

Philosophically speaking of course, there were dozens of arguments to go either way. For instance, one need not mention the hundreds of civilizations that had perished since the dawn of time, long before the Federation and its vaunted principles had even come into

existence. Why was the status of warp capability the deciding factor in all things? If Earth was faced today with this very same crisis, hundreds of worlds would come to her aid. Thousands of starships would begin an immediate evacuation. But here and now, this one lonely little world all alone in the universe would get no help on this day. This was a natural development in their history, even if it would prove to be the end of their history. The Prime Directive was clear. The *Enterprise* could not interfere. But what if the people of Directoria never knew? Aye, young Horatio, now there's the rub.

Regardless of this argument, time was not on anyone's side. They were not gods. The black body could not just be wished away. Its mass and speed were beyond their poor power to add or detract. A collision was imminent. The door chime rang a second time.

"Come in!" Garrett called out, blinking and taking in a sharp breath. She turned just in time to see a somewhat gaunt-looking Richard Castillo enter her small office. "Take a seat, Lieutenant," she gestured with the padd. She noticed his hesitation. On this ship, the flagship, there was rare cause for disciplinary action. These were the best of the best. But it was slowly becoming clear to the captain that she had perhaps become a little too lax with things since the events of Ethos. She wondered inwardly at this as Castillo slid uneasily into his chair.

She took the few steps necessary to stand behind her massive wooden school-teacher's desk. She deliberately set the padd down amongst a heap of others. The sharp clack it made shattered the silence; put punctuation to her thoughts. Twin hands steeped on the polished surface, she paused, not really knowing where to begin.

"I have been lenient," she said at last, "with you and Mr. Dardanelle." She sat down, her sharp gaze into his eyes never faltering. "I felt after the events of Ethos that I needed to loosen the reins a little to allow this... family... to adjust to a new reality. We were changed, all of us, and now we are here."

Castillo swallowed hard in a dry throat. "Yes, Ma'am," he said in a quiet voice.

"Yes, Ma'am?" she countered with raised eyebrows. Then softly: "I value your input Mr. Castillo. You are an important member

of my senior staff. I cannot run this ship without the help and guidance of my officers.” She leaned forward now. “But I will *not* tolerate disrespect on any level. Do I make myself clear?” she said in earnest.

“Yes, Captain,” Castillo whispered, looking down at the floor.

“I’m sorry, Lieutenant, I didn’t hear you...”

“Yes, Ma’am!” he said louder, clearing his throat and quickly looking up into her cool brown eyes. She eyed him speculatively. There was fear there, in those bright blue eyes, but this fear went far beyond this simple dressing down. The heightened psi-regions of her brain lit up with the same sharp electrical impulses of before. It gave her a hollow knot in her throat, just as before, and it was her turn to swallow.

“My thoughts of late have been preoccupied with the ‘no-win scenario’,” she offered cautiously.

“Captain?”

“The Kobayashi Maru, Lieutenant.”

“Ah, yes Ma’am.”

“Speak your mind, Mr. Castillo,” the Captain said plainly. “This may be your only chance at vindication.” In the vernacular of a younger generation, the young man was acting very *weird*, and this was slowly putting Garrett on edge; his bizarre behavior making her feel increasingly uneasy.

“I do believe in the importance of the Prime Directive, Captain,” he said at last, “but sometimes it’s all just bullshit.”

She laughed. “Go on...”

“If we can stop this thing from happening without them knowing, I just don’t see how we’ve hurt them?” he concluded passionately.

“And when everything they know about physics and gravitation is suddenly called into question because this rogue makes a sudden and dramatic turn away from them, what then, Lieutenant?”

“I don’t know, make it appear as if some other astronomical body had affected it.”

“Easy enough,” Garrett countered, “if we had encountered it weeks or months ago. But we are talking now about mere hours, Mr. Castillo. We cannot just hide our actions here behind smoke and

mirrors.”

“Well, we sure as hell could try...”

“Careful now...” she warned, wagging a finger.

“If we try and fail, Captain, at least we tried,” he said, his tone a little softer. “But if we do nothing, can we ever hope to live with ourselves after?” The young man leaned forward now, stared into Garrett’s soft almond eyes. “At least let us try, Ma’am, please,” he beseeched her, “and in the unlikely event that we do succeed, well... we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, I guess,” he shrugged and sat back.

There was a good long period of silence between them. He was still right. If they could help these people and concurrently avoid detection, had they really done any harm? The chances of success were miniscule at best anyway, so perhaps he was right there as well... could they ever hope to live with themselves if they had not tried? And if they tried and failed, point one would be moot anyway. The *Enterprise* could fly right over their capital city at full impulse, and it still wouldn’t matter. Their destruction would be imminent.

“Thank you, Mr. Castillo, you’ve given me a lot to think about,” his captain concluded.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he said satisfied, and slowly rose to leave. But his mind betrayed him in this last instant. Garrett’s psi-awareness sensed his *relief*, not his satisfaction. And this relief had nothing whatsoever to do with their conversation.

“Just a moment, Lieutenant,” Garrett said, her mind still trying to wrap itself around her gut’s instinct. Something was rotten in the state of Denmark, and it had no bearing at all on their present situation. “Your comment to Commander Stadi, something about Ensign Enyo... what was that about?”

Richard Castillo’s heart sank and it dragged his body down with it. He wilted like the leaves of an unwatered plant, and his skin blanched to a similar color, even as his upper lip began to sweat in the perceived heat of the room. He faltered in his response, and it was as if he had written it in chalk on the board for all to see. He looked down at the polished surface of the schoolteacher’s desk and winced.

“Lieutenant?”

“It was nothing, Ma’am,” he stammered. “Just a disagreement Commander Stadi and I had last week about filling out reports.” He gestured halfheartedly to the stack of padds covering her expansive desktop. “You know how it is with reports,” he half smirked. He had never lied to her before.

“Remember what I said about *respect*, Lieutenant,” she warned, staring up at him with a menacing glare. She eyed him for a half-second further. “You are dismissed,” she said at last, releasing him from the trap. *He’s never lied to me before*, Garrett thought, as he turned and fled. The young lieutenant was fighting his own no-win scenario, and she could sense it sharply. *Nothing indeed*. This centered around Enyo somehow, she quickly concluded, though she couldn’t imagine why. Yet imagine as she would, nothing she could ever dream would come close to the truth that was about to break all around her.

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Some moments later, Rachel Garrett emerged onto a Bridge filled with expectations. Would they help, or would they turn away? Would she expose Commander Stadi’s licentious love affair here and now, or was she still oblivious to its sinister machinations? Instead, the captain surveyed the expansive command center with a certain amount of pride. Cicely, Marta, and Commander Skyl chatted at Ops; Doctor Grey and Onovan worked diligently at science station one; and squeezed in tightly together at science station two, Stadi and Enyo. After so many years in space together, they were a team – a family – and it showed in their interactions with each other. Only Castillo and Lt. Dardanelle sat in silence, seated together at the front of the Bridge, and uncharacteristically stoic. She took note of this, and her gaze fell involuntarily back to the intrepid Ensign Enyo.

“Ensign Enyo,” she called out, “front and center please.” The captain felt that charge of electricity again, and it gave her pause. Blinking, she crossed over to the Auxiliary Control Pedestal just ahead of the helm and awaited the young woman’s arrival there.

“Yes, Captain?” the girl said, walking up confidently with her usual warm smile. Her twin antennae quavered only slightly, another

one of those subtle betrayals that only the subconscious mind can see. Stadi stood at the upper-level rail and looked down at them both, his face pale. He turned back to the science station just as the captain glanced his way. She blinked again.

“Ensign,” Garrett said quietly, “I believe Commander Stadi asked you to look at the satellite networks and detection grids of this planet?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Enyo answered. Her slender blue fingers with their white nails tapped at the ACP, and on the main viewscreen, an image of a beautiful blue-green world replaced that of the dark and forbidding rogue planetoid. Surrounding Directoria, a swarm of pixilated red dots represented the thousands of bits of metal put into orbit by its inhabitants.

“Wow,” Garrett whistled, “I saw a picture of Earth once that looked like that, long before massive efforts were made to clear up the skies.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Enyo acknowledged. “Much of it is space junk, Captain, mixed in with dozens of communication and military satellites. There are a few space telescopes of varying design as well, and a small space station... there...” she pointed.

“So, what kind of detection capabilities are we looking at here?”

“Are you asking me if they can see us, Captain?” Garrett nodded, and the ensign continued: “Like many planets at this stage of development, most of their attention is focused inward, Ma’am. The orbiting telescopes, including their land-based counterparts, are limited in their outward view to very unrefined, sub-luminal observations. Even if they focused right on us, Captain, all they would see is the fuzzy dot of the Rogue. We wouldn’t even be a pixel on their screen.”

“And these military satellites,” Garrett waved a finger at the screen, “could they detect our warp signature, or any of our other EM emissions?”

“No, Ma’am, we are simply too small and too far away... plus most of our emissions are at subspace frequencies far below what most cultures would ever even think to look for.”

“How close could we get?” The captain pinched her lower lip, deep in speculation, treading further on the sacred fringes of Prime Directive law.

“As close as one AU, Ma’am, perhaps closer, if we took precautions...”

“I think that would be close enough, Ensign.” Garrett smiled. By now their conversation had drawn the attention of the rest of the Bridge staff, who all stood now and waited in rapt anticipation for a free moment to speak, a free moment to put forward their own opinions, to offer their own conclusions.

“Captain?” Richard Castillo said at last with that same pleading look as before.

“We will try, Lieutenant,” Garrett at long last conceded.

“And if we succeed, Captain,” Skyl queried from the upper level, and the one most likely in the group to object to this new, perhaps dangerous, course of action.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, Commander,” the Captain offered, with a wry smile directed at Castillo.

“Captain?” the Vulcan persisted.

“Skyl,” Marta half scolded, “the chances of success are slim at best. We will cover our tracks somehow.”

Skyl opened his mouth to argue further, but he was cut short by the unlikeliest of the group, Doctor Ann Grey.

“E-e-even if we do s-s-succeed, Captain,” the timid young doctor said unevenly, “are we not then ob-obligated to aid in relief? Th-their society is in chaos. M-m-millions will starve...”

“That’s where we draw the line, people,” Garrett announced in a clear, succinct voice. “Succeed, or not, the inhabitants of this planet must *never* know of our existence, do I make myself clear? That is the price we pay for helping. We’re in and we’re out, and we leave them behind to deal with reconstruction in their own way. This is where the strictures of the Prime Directive shall be satisfied, and hopefully, where we will find some measure of peace.”

The captain looked around the Bridge at her officers, and they all slowly nodded in agreement. Even Skyl, perhaps could not argue with her logic, so he too finally acquiesced. For an unemotional

people, Vulcans could still at times be remarkably compassionate, and this was reflected in the many wise decisions they made.

“Right,” Garrett said conclusively, “now we need a plan.”

“If I may, Captain,” Marta said, stepping at last off the upper level and moving forward to join Garrett at the Auxiliary Control Pedestal. Enyo moved quietly away, her role on the stage thus completed. She made her way, perhaps fatefully, back to Stadi on the upper level. But so ensconced as they were in their new mission, no one at present feigned to notice the electric reunion of the two star-crossed lovers.

“I have been working,” Marta began, “with Skyl and Cicely on a possible course of action.” Her own fingers tapped now on the ACP interface, changing the image on the viewscreen back to that of the Rogue, only farther back, with an image of the *Enterprise* superimposed next to it. “I believe we can turn this thing,” Marta added as she continued to type. “Perhaps even make it disappear.” In the distance, a swirling distortion appeared, and the Rogue slowly began drifting towards it.

“An artificial black hole?” Garrett whispered, captivated.

“Not exactly, Captain,” Marta explained. “A spatial interphase.”

“A what?” Castillo quipped; his face contorted into puzzled scrutiny.

“An interdimensional rift, Lieutenant,” Skyl enlightened him, leaving the lieutenant only slightly less puzzled. On the viewscreen, the Rogue continued to drift towards the distortion.

“I-I-I don’t understand,” Ann admitted, even as the Rogue suddenly vanished into the mist.

“It’s not really a black hole,” Marta said louder, turning to address the crowd. “It’s more like a fracture in the void between two parallel universes. On Stardate 5693.2, the *Starship Defiant* became trapped in such rift near Tholian space.”

“And it very nearly swallowed the original *Enterprise* as well, as I recall,” Garrett mused. “Are we sure we can control such a thing?”

“It would require precise mapping of the boundaries of the phenomenon, Captain,” Skyl interposed, “perhaps by a runabout, or a

network of probes... but collapsing it would prove simple enough with a high energy burst from our main deflector.”

“Preferably without us inside,” Castillo jibed from the helm.

For the first time, Commander Stadi stepped forward and spoke: “But opening an interphasic rift of this kind would take teracochranes of energy...”

“A tricobalt device?” Onovan suggested.

“None aboard,” Marta shook her head. “It would take a full-power inverse warp field channeled through our main deflector to...”

“Wheeeeew,” Castillo whistled, “when we blow ourselves to smithereens, will we at least get to take the Rogue with us?”

“That much power is possible,” Cicely spoke up now, defending the plan.

“Yeah, but it’s gonna get pretty hot in here,” Castillo jabbed back, “like Kentucky fried chicken hot.”

“Commander?” Garrett said to Skyl, side-eying her helmsman with no small measure of irritation.

“The warp core is capable of the necessary energy requirements, Captain, but the main deflector will require extensive modifications. However... colorful puns notwithstanding... the Lieutenant is correct. Inverse warp fields do generate an intense amount of heat.”

“All right” The Captain paused, mulling over the facts, the pros and cons – the safety factor – as any good captain would. “Let’s get started,” she said at last with renewed authority. “Cicely and Enyo, work with Commander Batanides on the interphasic calculations. We don’t need to go overboard here... do only what is necessary to turn the Rogue safely away. Swallowing it up will only make it harder for us to cover our tracks. Remember,” she warned, “this must look like a natural phenomenon.” Marta nodded and moved back towards Ops.

“Commander Skyl,” Garrett continued, “get to work on that main deflector. I do agree with Mr. Castillo that we need not blow ourselves to smithereens,” she added wryly.

“Understood, Captain,” the Vulcan acknowledged and made his own way towards the turbolift.

“Commander, Counselor,” she called to the far side of the

Bridge, “your job as always is departmental coordination... plus decide how best we should monitor the spatial distortions. I don’t care to go looking for the long-lost *Defiant* today, as I’m sure, neither are you,” she smiled drolly, leveling her gaze forward again. Lowering her voice to a near whisper, Garrett next addressed her helmsman and his faithful sidekick.

“You two smartasses are going to work on our little heat problem, understood?” She glared at them like a fifth-grade schoolteacher, causing Andy to noticeably squirm. She couldn’t help but offer her usual wry smile, even as Andy cleared his throat to speak.

“Excuse me, Captain,” he said hesitantly, “but with all our attention focused on the Rogue in general, and on the people of Directoria, I’ve noticed something interesting that I believe we’ve overlooked...”

“Yes, Lieutenant, go on...”

“My scans of the surface of the Rogue are showing signs of an ancient civilization...” Garrett’s eyes went wide as she twirled to face the viewscreen. “...and Captain,” Andy continued, “I’m also picking up an energy reading.” She whirled back to face the young man with genuine astonishment painted all over her face.

“Well done, Lieutenant,” she stated, “now on your feet! Show me what you got.” Andy gulped as he rose from Tactical, then stepped down into that immense gulf to stand at the ACP with his captain. In all his time aboard the *Enterprise*, he had been content to simply be a minor player along the sidelines. It was a rare and new experience to stand here now and present his own findings. He fumbled at first with the controls of the ACP, but presently the image on the viewscreen magnified and zeroed in on his target.

“There,” he pointed. “Clear signs of an ancient city.” He zoomed in further and the screen resolution automatically adjusted to highlight a maze of city streets and a tumble of stone buildings and Coliseum-like structures. All were the same gray color as the surrounding landscape; no doubt the result of many millennia in deep space, and the accumulation of many inches of interstellar space dust. By now the rest of the Bridge staff had redrawn their attention forward.

“Captain?” Marta queried.

“You have sharp eyes, Mr. Dardanelle,” the captain praised. “Well done indeed,” she whispered, fascinated. So enthralled was she that she almost forgot the energy reading.

“And here...” Andy said, manipulating the display further. A small blip began to flash on the image, near to the remains of one of the larger buildings, and text began to scroll down the screen next to it, listing frequencies and amplitude, periods and durations.

“Oh my God,” Garrett whispered. The Bridge was in absolute silence at this point as they all marveled at the chances of such an occurrence. “Can you make out what it is?” Garrett asked at long last, breaking the trance.

“No, Ma’am, not from here,” Andy replied. She allowed herself another brief moment to marvel at the implications of this finding, then turned slowly to her first officer.

“Whatdya think, Commander,” she called up to Stadi, “should we risk it?” The commander looked down at her from the upper level and nodded solemnly.

“Yes, Captain,” he said presently, “I believe it’s worth taking a look.”

“Then by all means,” she said cheerily, then returned her eyes to the viewscreen and marveled some more. “And take the young Lieutenant here with you too,” the captain added finally, patting Andy on the shoulders. She turned back for Stadi’s acknowledgement, and that’s when the poor captain saw it at last. It was so subtle in its implications that she would never have noticed on any other given day... in fact, she had not noticed for all these many, many months... until now.

Ensign Enyo’s hand passed over the commander’s own and paused there, just long enough to be noticed. In just a moment more, Stadi’s arm came up and he placed that very same hand upon her shoulder, and squeezed just that half-second longer than was ordinary. Rachel Garrett’s mind burst forth all at once into a thunderstorm of electrical activity. The most innocent of gestures became the hailstones of a growing tornado that now engulfed her psyche and twisted her emotions into a maelstrom of knots. Her enhanced psi-region lashed out at him and he was exposed. Standing naked before her, Spencer

Stadi's inner walls of control collapsed against the onslaught. The entire ship shuddered, from top to bottom, and the mostly telepathic crew all knew that it had come at last. The awful day was finally here.

## *T-minus 13...*

The unmistakable skin color of a girl.

Her webbed feet crunched in the gravel as she cautiously approached the startled young man seated under a blanket before her. Her slick, soft-green skin glistened in the last shades of the settling twilight, the wetness of it fighting against the cool night air; her arms and legs dimpled and trembling. The boy's upturned face had instantly morphed from yellow to full-on orange, and in response, the girl flushed from her soft shade of lime to just a hint of indigo. She was tall and slender, with long graceful arms that seemed to flow about her sides as if she still swam in the swamps below. The white one-piece suit she wore hung tight to her skin, its floral design hugging her narrow form almost like skin itself. As with the rest of her chameleon-like species, males and females looked much the same body-wise, but there was no denying the elegance of her almost hypnotic feminine allure.

Allexna stared up at her like a boy transfixed. To be here all alone had been his final wish, in these perhaps his final hours, and thus he had not envisioned things to unfold in any other way. To be disturbed here at this remote place was surprise enough; that it be a girl left him stunned and speechless. The last of the twilight left them alone in the dark, the twinkling starlight outlining her thin and supple form against the horizon. She paused just meters from him now, and neither spoke, one perhaps just as curiously intrigued as the other. All through his adolescence, Allex had been pretty much a loner. With but a handful of close male friends, the companionship of females was something almost foreign to him. A few acquaintances sure, in a few of his various classes, but not ever any one girl close. Blinded by a crippling shyness, with just a dash of naïveté, he had not ever seen things in any other way.

The gravel crunched uneasily beneath her shifting feet. She spoke at last, unable to bear the drowning silence any longer.

"Well at least you planned ahead," she giggled nervously,

referring of course to his blanket and cushion.

“Huh?” Alex managed to utter, still stupefied speechless, his shyness – as always – getting the best of him. A bare breath of night wind sighed across his exposed cheeks, yet still he did not notice the wetness of her skin, only its softness. Its indigo shade caressed into a deeper purple and he felt the heat rise up under the blanket.

“A blanket, silly,” she said with a smile, “I forgot to bring a blanket.”

“oh... Oh... OH,” Alex stammered with sudden realization. He jumped up suddenly and startled her, then balled up the soft fabric and half-tossed, half-handed it to her. “Here,” he offered flatly, then meekly: “Sorry.” He looked down demurely and kicked at the gravel with webbed toes. The girl willingly wrapped up in the plush covering and let its remainder fall to her feet.

“Thanks,” she said, snuggling in and shaking off the last of the night’s cold.

“Sure,” Alex half-smiled. “I think I know you,” he frowned suddenly.

“Amira,” she answered him. “We had chemistry together last year. And a few other classes,” she added, “before...” and then her soft voice trailed off, as was customary in these dark uncertain times. It was the voice Alexna remembered, not so much the girl. So much was carried within a voice, he realized, and oft times it was just as much a cause of attraction as any of the other more subtle signs that made you like someone. He recalled her fully now. She had sat one row ahead of him, and one row to the right. Beauty was popularity, and she was indeed popular. Blocked by the tight social structures of youth, and his own unspeakable panic, he could do naught but admire her graceful features from a safe and walled off distance.

“Ah, I remember,” he simply said. His own skin prickled up now against the cold. He had remembered the blanket naturally, but not any other clothing other than his skin-tight shorts. The waters of Directoria were always pleasantly warm, day and night, and he had not thought of any other garments until he had stepped forth onto the island. He tried to cover up his own discomfort now even as the girl pulled the blanket’s edges in even closer around her.

"I'm not sure what brought me here," she huffed, surveying the blackened landscape.

"Where are your friends?" Alex blurted out, stopping just short of the sneer that had almost involuntarily escaped him. She was popular, he was not. It was a conflict of interest that he was sure the upper crust would never truly understand.

"Who knows?" Amira replied absently, not noticing his icy stare in the dark. "We used to come hang out here... y'know, to do things," she giggled, "without our parents knowing." In the past few minutes, Alex's skin had slowly returned to its more normal shade of lemon-yellow, but now it flashed back to an agitated orange, almost to red. It galled him in every way imaginable that his boyhood hideaway had been used by *her* kind for their parties and their raves. This was his starbase, this was his foreign outpost, this was where he and his friends had come to live out all those fanciful dreams of youth that are so soon crushed by the stark realities of pubescence. The archeologist in him wanted to push her into a nearby ditch. It hadn't occurred to him that his friends had slowly become her friends, as hormones had slowly drowned out the callings of childhood adventure.

"I just wanted to come to a familiar place, I guess," she spoke in his silence. "I wanted to be alone..." – trailing off again; that almost chronic habit people had developed in the past year. It was easier than stating the obvious. It was easier than admitting the truth.

Something about her wanting to be alone suddenly pulled at Alex's heartstrings, and he softened his stance ever so slightly. He had not expected that. Why would one of the most popular girls in school want to be alone? There was something about that he just did not, just could not, understand. Amira had always been surrounded by people in the hall. Boys flocked to her like she was a magnet, and they iron-minded fools. The other girls flitted around her like flies on half-rotten fruit. Admittedly, he had caught himself more than once, lost in a trance, staring at her in class; but to fall before her gushing emotion and false platitudes was one thing he just didn't get. Perhaps there was a certain humility to loneliness that allowed him to see the truer side of this girl, but that was as far as it went. He knew, as he had always known, that she wouldn't have given him the time of day.

“What about your family?” he said, kinder than before, with cautious intrigue.

“Oh, my dad left a long time ago,” she muttered, “actually, even before this...” her words got lost again on that long, lonely trail of denial. “My mom disappeared a couple days ago,” she shrugged, “and I don’t really care to be honest. What about yours?” she added, perhaps to hide the pain that was really there.

“My mom’s gone,” Alex found himself answering before he knew it. “My dad’s at home passed out on the kitchen floor.” The matter-of-factness of these statements by mere teens would’ve shocked most people only two years ago, but by now they were just the mildest of answers that any child on Directoria could give these days. ‘I was raped by a roving gang’ and ‘I was beaten over a loaf of bread’ were statements that fortunately these two adolescents had the luck of not bearing.

By now it was so dark that both appeared to be little more than a black splotch to the other. Alex was virtually frozen in the cool night air, and thanks in part to the darkness, he no longer made any attempt to conceal it. He shivered lightly and he thought briefly of slithering back down to the warmth of the swamp to gain some small measure of comfort there. But he knew that to get out and be wet now would be even worse, so he resigned himself to just stand here and be cold instead, as any gentleman would. He still didn’t quite know how to take the girl. She wanted to be alone, and so did he; but somehow now that didn’t quite seem right. His hormones suddenly surged to life within him, and he wanted to be near to her. Not only for the warmth of the blanket, but to feel her own soft skin against his own. He knew Amira would never go for it, however, mostly because his mind simply could not accept the fact that such a thing was possible.

By default, he looked up at the constellations and fixed his eyes on the spot. “The black body will appear there,” he pointed, though she could not really see him. Her head jerked skyward anyway, and then she noticed his quavering voice, could sense the shivering in his halted breaths.

“Oh, my goodness!” she exclaimed. “You must be freezing! Here...” In the darkness, she offered him one small corner of the

blanket. But still Alex hesitated. The moment took on an almost surreal feel as his mind rolled over what was happening to him. In less than thirteen hours' time his planet would be destroyed, but all he could think about was the girl.

"No, it's fine," he said chivalrously, a gentleman to the last.

"Don't be dumb," Amira scolded. She took a step closer and pulled the huge blanket over his neck and hooked her hand briefly over his far shoulder. In that instant the blanket felt a whole lot smaller as Alex's left hand came up quickly and snatched it from her. She quickly withdrew her own hand and wrapped it back around herself. Despite the meager warmth it now offered, Alex felt suddenly hot.

"Now, where again?" she spoke, and Alex could sense her own awkwardness in those few simple words.

"There," he pointed, this time leaning in close, quite closer than he intended. He felt the warmth of her face against his. He became keenly aware of her naked right arm against his own naked left. It gave him an electric tingling feeling that radiated outwards from the point of contact and filled the rest of his body with a deep instinctual longing to feel more. He couldn't believe that this was happening to him. She was one of the most popular girls in school. This shouldn't be happening to him! He couldn't help but think that this was just some kind of trick. A cruel joke, and any minute the jocks and the jerks would jump up over the edge of the bank and laugh at him. He would be humiliated this one last time as Amira shoved him instead into that yonder ditch. Muscles tense, he waited for it, mostly because his mind simply could not accept that this was real. Instead, she leaned in closer.

"Where? I can't see it," she giggled.

"Well, you can't see it yet," he laughed – for perhaps the first time in weeks, if not months. The Rogue was nearly the size of Directoria itself. The impact would vaporize both planets on impact. They both were staring death in the face, and yet they laughed.

"Why did you want to be alone?" he asked her speculatively.

"I'm not so sure," she answered him plainly, "but now something about that just doesn't seem right."

And together they looked back up into the heavens.

~ ~ ~ ~

Doctor Moira Ananti stood uneasily in a cramped control center of her own design. The tiny room had been haphazardly, and somewhat hastily, chiseled out of semi-solid bedrock adjacent to the powerful, point source generator. This was not the pristine workspaces of the SENSES Division Laboratories to be sure. Moira had grown accustomed to wires hanging from the ceiling, to the poor lighting, to the dinginess of the place so far underground. What she could not get used to was the dust. The dust was everywhere, even smudged on her face. It filtered down from the ceiling each time a new girder was added to the gigantic dish that lay nestled in the massive impact crater not too far above their heads. The Conflict Force Industrial Corps had assured her time and again that the structure was sound. But the three-inch-wide crack that snaked diagonally across the ceiling had never left her fully confident. It was also the source of most of the dust.

She ate dust, she wore dust, sometimes she even thought she dreamt dust. Why half the computers still worked was beyond her. These themselves were a hodgepodge network of disparate brands from all over the globe. They had been hotwired together in ways that would've left most computer programmers in the fetal position under their desks. The only tests they had run had been simulations, and Moira knew by the Guardias that this whole thing could blow up in her face in a most fantastic way. It was just hours now, and the great dish still was not finished, the nuclear reactor at its core had been in the redline all day, and the power-hungry point source generator was refusing to wake up. She couldn't remember the last time she had slept, and the only thing she had had to eat today was dust; boy what she wouldn't do right now for a swim in some nice subtropical swamp!

"The last rotolifter has left the airbase," Jondra announced matter-of-factly. Moira's faithful assistant seemed to live on dust. "It'll be here within the hour." The girl chewed wildly on her *qantergum*, unfazed it seemed, by anything. Moira could not have done this without her. The girl's almost indefatigable optimism was really what had held this team together at the cost of so much else. Most of them on this project were single; and if they had not been single when this

all began, they certainly were now. Only a handful remained, especially in the CFIC, where so many of the desertions had left this entire venture dangerously close to failure. The ten people in this small dugout were all that remained of the original SENSES team of hundreds. There was a cancerous malignancy that had slowly consumed all hope in the past six hundred days, and many had found that the only cure was to flee.

“I swear to the Guardias I’m gonna go out there and kick that thing,” Moira muttered, staring at her computer monitor in disgust. More dust settled down from the crack in the ceiling and Moira tried not to think of the millions of tons of steel that had been placed over their heads since the Conflict Corps had deemed this room ‘safe’.

“Well, if the radiation didn’t kill ya, the asteroid surely will,” Jondra giggled. Moira couldn’t figure out how the girl had remained so optimistic. Even despite the many meters of bedrock that separated them from the generator, the radiation levels in this room were still uncomfortably high. When the beam was finally activated, no one was sure that they wouldn’t be vaporized on the spot. All things being equal, if the audacious plan should indeed work, their lives had already been cut uncomfortably short by the effects of long-term exposure. More dust settled and Moira sneezed for the millionth time. Perhaps a dose of optimism was exactly what she needed right about now.

“Doctor,” a young and very yellow looking tech called from the front of the room.

“Yes, Thana,” Moira said with a sigh. The young man was still so annoyingly eager to please. For him this was still a great adventure, with the promise of a hero’s welcome when it was all said and done. Perhaps it was just she that was the only non-optimistic one in the bunch. How had that happened?

“There’s a telcom for you, Ma’am.”

“Vacilli again?” she retorted with half-irritation, half-amusement. Jondra giggled again behind her. The Master of Internal Security had been a pain in their collective asses since before day one. The general consensus in the room was that the slippery little man needed a healthy dose of radiation all to himself.

“Um, actually, Ma’am, it’s your, um...” Thana swallowed,

“husband.” There was just the smallest bit of jealousy in the young man’s voice, but she did not detect it. This young man, like so many others, was enamored with her. He had stayed – and risked deadly radiation exposure – all for her... but she did not see it. Love doth but a fool make.

“Oh,” she merely said, looking up for the first time. Her skin suddenly morphed a shade darker, catching her and her colleagues equally by surprise. Moira hadn’t heard from her husband in weeks. It was as uncomfortable a situation as any other relationship had become on Directoria. People had slowly abandoned monogamy for all manner of hedonistic and sadistic pleasures, especially now, so close to the end. Moira and her husband were a rare case however, they had split simply because of her work. There had been no place for a domestic life when so much hinged on her success. That had been her justification from the very beginning. She was saving them, her family, at the expense of her family itself. Until this moment, she had not let regret creep into her heart. Had not let it sink in.

“Did you hear the primari’s speech today?!” her husband said excitedly before she could even get herself in the door.

“Yes, of course,” she smiled, smacking his lips with hers. Three small children came screaming from the other room and fell into a pile at their mother’s feet. She could do nothing but laugh as they all squealed with delight at her arrival. How could anyone not be overjoyed by a greeting like that?

“How was work?” the man said, grabbing her bag from her and tossing it on a nearby stand. Moira reached down and snatched up the littlest one of the bunch and held her up over her head. The child screamed with delight as the other two playfully wrestled at her feet.

“Interesting,” she answered vaguely, dropping the child to her waist. “What’s for dinner?” Slowly she waded through the maelstrom and made her way towards the kitchen. In a rare switch from the norm, her husband had gradually become the domestic partner as Moira’s career at the SENSES Division had slowly taken off. In fact, their middle child had been named Maxta in honor of everything the old man had done to help jumpstart her career. “Max and I have been

working on something new,” she said cautiously, stepping at last into the kitchen, the children fanning out in her wake. She dropped the youngest to the floor and picked up the lid of a steaming pot.

“Boiled barrow root and mugda meat stew,” he explained as his wife’s face twisted at the strange odor.

“I guess you’ve been working on something new too,” she goaded him with a sleek smile. Some of his culinary delights were not necessarily the best the Videoplay cooking shows had to offer. A crash from the corner signaled the collapse of an immense tower the children had been building from most of the kitchen pots and pans. Peals of screaming laughter drowned out all other thought for a moment before they began to build again. Moira had had to learn the hard way to let her husband’s parenting techniques run their own unique course. Her salary was double anything he could make, so she had learned to back off. There had been sacrifices and compromises on both sides.

“So, whatdya think about this big space rock, eh?” her husband said cheerily. In this modern age of media sensationalism, the true hard facts of the black body would not really sink in for a few more weeks yet. It was just a novelty at this point, and many suspected a government conspiracy, or the types of overreaction that were typical of the weather reports these days. Climate change had become the new hot topic in the past couple years, and this supposed new threat from outer space was simply the latest target of explanation for a world gone crazy. Tomorrow, the news would shift back to the more interesting sexual exploits of the Princess Hedra. But Moira knew better. She and Max had spent the entire day in the lab analyzing the government’s data; and indeed, speculating over her plan.

“This is for real,” she blurted out suddenly, far more seriously than she had intended. Her quick change in demeanor left her husband momentarily stunned.

“What? ...Moira, you can’t...” but instantly he knew. Her face said it all; to say nothing of the fact that she was a world-renowned scientist. Another crash signaled another fatal collapse and its resulting tidal wave of laughter. “Hey!” he shouted. “Go in the other room and play now!” he added in a raised voice, startling the children into silence. With a clattering of pans, they all fled from the scene, the

littlest one just barely keeping up with her older brother and sister. Moira heard their beautiful laughter begin anew as they escaped into the den and to safety. She smiled in spite of herself.

“Moira,” her husband said again.

“This is for real,” she said flatly.

“But...” and his words trailed off. “But this can’t be the end...”

“Max and I have been working on a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Yes, a plan. A rotolifter is taking us to the Capital the day after tomorrow. We have a meeting with the primari.”

“What the font are you talking about?” he said angrily now. He was not even sure where the anger was coming from truthfully, but deep down perhaps it was just a dim realization of the coming truth. His mind retaliated with the only thing it had available to it... real life. “We have that big dance recital the day after tomorrow, *remember*? It *was*, after all, your idea to get her into dance...”

“Let’s not fight,” Moira said testily.

“Guardias, you drive me nuts,” he shot back. He snatched the lid off the pot and burnt himself. “Font!” he shouted as the cover flew out of his hands and clattered noisily on the stovetop. Slowly, the laughter in the den died down into silence.

Sadly, that night had become just the beginning of the end. Eventually all the laughter had gone, leaving only hollowness in its wake. Regret had now crept into Moira’s consciousness for the very first time. It had been so easy at first to justify her lengthening absences as a necessary evil. Perhaps she had been simply running away from the pain? To separate herself by necessity had proven easier perhaps, than it would have been to lose them all at once, while her heart was still full of so much love. It shocked her now that she had not even thought of them in weeks. How had she let this happen? In these final hours, when this damnable machine would not fire, what would she have left to cling to? The computer monitor before her still showed no signs of life, only radiation. Deadly radiation. She understood now why it was she in the group, and only she, that had lost all optimism.

“Moira?” Her husband’s voice was soft and cool.

“Oh, my love,” she sighed under a wave of exhaustion and grief.

“Don’t cry, the children are here.” It was a half-warning, half-bolstering response to the sudden anguish that flooded over her voice. “Hi Mommy!” she heard them cry in the background. They were so much older now! Two years, where had it gone?

“Oh, my precious babies,” she called out into the receiver. “Mommy’s here!” She heard them laughing. “I’ll be home tomorrow, I promise,” she half shouted, but it was likely they did not hear her over the faulty connection, over the clamor of life. She heard the noisy clatter of pots and pans and another wave of laughter as a crash filled her eyes with tears.

“Thank you,” she said softly to her husband. “For everything.” In the end, it was he that had held it all together against the growing darkness. In the end, it was he that had saved their family from the hopeless reality that was their crumbling world. In the end, when he could have just as easily excluded her from their lives, he had kept her presence warm and alive even long after she had withdrawn herself to this deep dark dusty hole under the ground. It reinvigorated her in a way she could not have anticipated. She would save them now, by Guardias, even if she did have to go out there and kick that damn thing. The line went dead, and she stood up, and she focused all her energy through solid bedrock into the very heart of the machine.

On her monitor, the generator sprang to life.

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Detector Fraca Novachi was a man obsessed. The pattern of these serial murders seemed to be just beyond his reach. Yet, there was a pattern, he could sense it; he could *feel* it with everything within himself that it meant to be a detector. He was so close to it now that he could almost taste it. That perhaps was what bothered him the most. Something about the pattern felt so familiar to him, like it had been staring him right in the face the whole time, but he just could not see it. The portly man had abandoned his desk some time ago, and now

stood in front of a large peg board. On it he had pinned the faces of all the victims. Over the past hour he had rearranged those faces in a myriad of different ways – by age, by sex, by possible background, and now finally, by location found. This is where the pattern seemed most natural, and where the feeling of it felt the strongest.

Novachi stared at the clock and sighed. T-13hrs. Less than thirteen hours till the end of everything. He really needed a hobby, he thought morbidly. Out the high windows to his right, the night was black as pitch. By some sheer act of will, the city had managed to keep most of the electrics on, or he would've surely been working by candlelight by now. This made him smirk... yes, he would've been working by candlelight... and this caused him to give pause. In that brief half-second he actually considered just throwing his arms up and walking out the door. But then he wondered, where would he go? Sit at home and fall asleep in his chair? What were the chances that his favorite pub would be open on this, the last night of all nights. He felt a small twitch in his loins and realized he couldn't remember the last time he had been in the company of a woman. He wondered if even they had given up their trade on this night. Where did the ladies of the night go to be at home?

By some irony, this made him think of his long-time friend and mentor, Subguardia Al'Embri. *"Come to confession, my son,"* the man had said. *"Don't let your soul make its crossing burdened with sins from the Firstlife... Don't wait until it's too late."* On the board in front of him, the faces stared back with placid disinterest. The portly man took a step back and tried to stretch; but ultimately gave up when it proved too hard to raise his arms much higher than eye level. *Guardias I'm fat,* he thought, as the buttons on his shirt threatened to burst. His mind wandering, he thought now of that age-old advice that had been passed down for generations: *Sometimes you just need to take a step back and look at the bigger picture.* It hit him like a ton of bricks. Taking two steps back, Novachi took the entire board in as a whole. Loosely arranged by discovery, the faces all fell now into a distinct pattern.

Novachi nearly fell over himself rounding the doorway into the chief's office. The room was in a state of complete disarray, much like

every other room in the precinct. The chief had just gotten up one day and left... and never returned. Slowly the others had followed suit, as the weeks went on, until only Fraca Novachi remained. The detector strode boldly up to the chief's desk, and began pawing through it like a man possessed. His webbed hands shoved things aside like frustrated shovels, but to no avail. Next, he turned and began knocking things off the top of cabinets, a nearby table, even the bookshelf. Nothing. He spun around the room in angry frustration. T-12:15hrs!

"What the font," he muttered under his breath. "You're telling me the Chief Detector doesn't have a fontan map?" *Of course, neither do I*, he shrugged. And then there, over his right shoulder, larger than life, it stared at him from across the room. A huge, framed map of the original city layout from over two hundred years ago. The Palace of the Primari lay at its center, with the rest of the city falling away from it like the spokes of a giant wheel. There had naturally been many changes in two hundred years, but the city itself still looked largely the same when taken as a whole.

"Good enough," he said loudly. Moving swiftly, and with little hesitation, he took his fat elbow and broke the glass on a priceless historical document. Webbed fingers closing in like a vice, Novachi grabbed the map by its center and tore it free from its weather-beaten and dusty frame. Out of breath now from his exertions, the detector spun back through the doorway and began to quickly detach the photographs from the peg board, clutching the parched map under his sweaty left arm. He carefully stacked the victims in order, their faces so engrained in his memory now that he barely even took note of their sad countenances anymore. Next, he pinned the overlarge map to the board, unceremoniously folding its edges over the backside to account for the excess. Lastly, and systematically, he began to pin the faces to the city's grid. *Still not good enough!* he thought.

The man circled around himself and made a charge at his desk like a mugdabeast turned loose for the very first time. Webbed hands again pawing, he muttered incoherently at the massive mess, swearing audibly as more and more files tumbled off the edges in great suicidal waves. At last, he found a permanent stylus and left the collapsing mess to its own devices. Turning back to the map, he began to draw

great red circles on the ancient paper, near to each photograph; pinning more on as he went. Plotting some of the locations of the deceased took frustratingly longer than others, owing to the modern changes in the city's original layout. On any other given day, Novachi may have been interested by this. Two hundred years of progress had wiped out many old neighborhoods as the span and reach of government had increased. It was the inevitable result of a powerful nation.

At last, he had plotted all of the thirteen victims against the ancient grid. Taking a step back, he took a cold, hard look at the red circles. He had seen this pattern before, but his tired mind simply could not quite grasp the fullness of it yet. Frustrated, he padded slowly back to his desk. The catastrophe of collapse had somewhat subsided by now, and he began searching for his quhwah mug under the resultant rubble of files and tumbled sticky notes. Finding it at last, he stared into its empty bottom with dismay. The chipped and tattered mug was always more often empty than full. *Perhaps in the Secondlife*, he thought, *the quhwah will always be hot and overflowing*. Novachi habitually looked at the clock. Nearly T-12hrs now and he seriously thought of his friend. *Confession*. Over the decades, religion had slowly taken back stage to career, but perhaps tonight he would go to confession after all; if for no other reason than to drink himself silly with the Subguardia.

Wearily, the detector crossed over to the refreshment counter and poured from his earlier pot. Ice cold of course. He usually liked it fresh, but tonight he did the unthinkable.

Popping open the door of the irradiator, he dropped his mug heavily on the glass tray (sloshing a little overboard naturally) then slammed the door back shut. Typing in **3:00** minutes, he stood idly by, his mind lost in a weary trance, waiting for the infernal machine to do its angry magic. Reheated quhwah was like warm mugda shit, but he didn't care at this point. With a sigh, he stared down through the little window and watched his mug go round and round. He had seen the pattern before, but his tired mind simply could not quite grasp the fullness of it. It was something quite common... something from nature perhaps? Round and round his quhwah went, until at last it hit him.

He did not even notice the wretched machine beep as he raced anxiously back to the peg board. Picking up his stylus, he began slowly to connect the dots. The first victim had been found far out by the city's edge; near to the church in fact, where Novachi had grown up. Subguardia Al-Embri had even been the one to call this first case in. Round and round the red stylus went, making an ever-tightening circle that slowly zeroed in on the last victim. When it had stopped, the detector stepped back and admired the pattern. It did, in fact, run through every aspect of nature, from seashells, to flowers, to the great branching out of trees. The Golden Ratio – an ever-widening spiral – only this time instead, it had slowly spiraled inward. There was a certain beauty to it, he had to admit. But why? Letting his eyes follow the spiral inward one last time, he paused on the last victim, then let his imagination do the rest. With the stylus, he continued the pattern inward with a blood-red dotted line to a final, single point...

The Palace of the Primari.

~ ~ ~ ~

How do you express the hopelessness of a man helpless to protect his people? He felt perhaps what everyone else felt on this night. Absolute and unadulterated ***Fear***. It was a natural thing to await death throughout the course of a normal lifetime, to wonder at it, to question at its arrival and what it meant. But this was a different thing altogether... death would come at exactly T minus Zero hours. There was no escape, no Stay of Execution at the eleventh hour, no real hope for a reprieve. Every single person on the planet could look at this countdown and know with an inescapable truth that their end would come at the precise moment when that countdown reached Zero. It had been a novelty at first for the retail outlets to market these clocks, to reverse the calendar and the passage of time, to poke fun at something that seemed so distant and so far away almost two full years ago; but now the time had come, and the novelty of it was gone.

Primari Qoarta Zenthi stared up at the wall and watched his own red digits make their death march towards zero. T-12:35:08... 07... 06... 05... and on and on it went, no matter how hard he wished for it

to stop. Helpless he felt indeed; for himself, his family, and for all the billions of people he had been elected to protect. The primari began to wonder now how history would remember him; if future generations would look back on the way he handled this crisis favorably, or unfavorably... and then the thought struck him so suddenly that he almost laughed. There would be no historians after this night, there would be no future generations. This in itself became a sobering thought. What meaning does a person's life have if the history of it is forgotten, or especially in this case, simply erased? What meaning did their entire culture have now that it was at its end? Had there been any purpose at all in all the anguish and the suffering that was the record of their kind?

The subguardia down here in the Firstlife would say that we would all gain purpose and meaning in the Secondlife, that all things would at last be made clear to us in new and beautiful ways of understanding. Zenthi wondered now just how in the hell would the Guardias of the Secondlife explain this calamity? He felt that there were many beautiful and meaningful things down here in the Firstlife worth holding on to: art, culture, theatre, dance... his children. And sure, there was perhaps an equal number of evil things: war, greed, sexual depravity... hatred. But did it warrant their summary execution? Was it fair that the Guardias should be made able to pronounce judgment on this entire planet without so much as an argument or a rebuttal from its people? The idea of law and justice, in its varying forms, was an almost universal concept in every corner of the world. Where was the justice here?

Frustrated, Zenthi swiveled in his chair, away from the clock, and towards the windows black with night. The Palace was largely empty now, and this left him feeling perhaps more helpless than anything else. What was a primari without his staff? Just an ordinary man. He wanted an update on Doctor Ananti's frivolous plan, but he doubted he could get one. The primari had had such hope for her success at first, but as the reports kept coming in of delay after delay, and of the deplorable lack of testing, he had slowly lost confidence that the generator would ever be ready in time; much less even work. *He must try to shake himself free from such morbid thoughts!* He

wished with all his heart that his friend Alcormi could be here with him now. They could have a drink, talk about old times, perhaps play a game of ramjet. But the conflict marshal was at home, with his family, as he should be. More seconds ticked away, and Zenthi could see their reverse reflection now in the dark glass. There truly was no escape.

A soft knock came at the door, and a slippery little man stuck his head into the Official Office. “Nomen Prime?”

“Yes, Tarma, what is it?” Zenthi responded with some irritation, not even bothering to swivel to face the man. The primari’s heart softened slightly though; the fact that his Master of Internal Security was still here meant that he too had nowhere else to go.

“There’s a telcom for you, Sir...”

“Doctor Ananti?” he said, with a small betrayal of hope, swiveling at last.

“No, Sir, someone else,” Vacilli replied, somewhat mysteriously, and closed the door.

“What the font?” Zenthi muttered, shaking his head at the blank door. He grasped the edges of the massive wooden desk and pulled himself closer to it, then grabbed the oblong transceiver from its cradle and pressed it firmly to the side of his head. It felt cold, yet somehow comforting, perhaps because it had finally given him something to do. “This is the Primari,” he said gruffly.

At first, the line was just a hiss of crackly static. Telecommunications had gotten steadily worse over the past few months as the nation’s infrastructure slowly collapsed under the pressing lack of something as simple as routine maintenance. Zenthi strained to hear anything in the storm of white noise. He was just about to hang up when he thought he heard his name.

“Yes, this is Zenthi...” he said much louder this time.

“Qoarta?” The use of his forename startled him. He strained to hear more amidst the infuriating noise. There was something about the voice... so much was carried within the sound of a voice.

“Zoella?” he said astonished. “Zo... Zo... Zoella,” he tried to wedge in between the crackles, “is that... is that... is that really you?” His wife and children had been presumed dead days ago. Trapped in

the City of Quid when the fire had started, they'd had no hope of escape, especially after the garment district started burning.

"Oh, Qoar--, I never ----eved I would --- through!" the woman cried, the fear in her voice evident, even despite the faulty connection.

"It's okay love, wh-wh-where are you? Are Xanda and Arnedra okay?"

"Oh, ---rta, I can hardly ---- you! Xanda h-- b--n amaz---. You ----- be -- proud! He g-t us -- safety, but now --- flames are ---ting closer... oh, Qoarta, I'm -- scared... we have nowh--- else to -- now. Oh Guar---s, --- fire is get---- so clos- now, Qoar..."

The angry blizzard of white snow finally swallowed her voice completely, and it left Zenthi gasping for it like he would gasp for air at the bottom of a lake. "Zoella?" he called hoarsely into the transceiver. "Zoella?!" he cried louder now. "Zoella!?" he screamed, but it was no use, she was gone, the line went dead in his hands. "NO!" he cried at the deafening silence. The primari wanted to call for help now, to alert somebody in this vast empty palace to his distress. He wanted to send the entire Conflict Force to the City of Quid and have them extinguish the flames at once, to have them airlift his family to safety, to have them bring his children directly here to him so that he could hold them in his arms.

"NO!" he screamed again, slamming the transceiver repeatedly against its cradle. His graying skin had morphed itself into deep and splotchy red now, and thick dark veins began to bulge out of his neck. He threw himself into a standing position and upset his chair, then swiped the entire telcom assembly off his desk and onto the floor.

"Mark my words," he seethed, "when I get to the Secondlife I will make the Guardias pay for this," he hissed, turning away from his desk and staring out into the blackness beyond his windows. A quiet knock came at his chamber door, and Zenthi shouted: "Not now, Tarma!"

"I am not Vacilli, Nomen Prime," Subguardia Al'Embri said softly from somewhere behind him.

"I have no time today for the witless prattle of holy men, Father," Zenthi replied angrily, still facing the glass.

"Then perhaps make time for an old friend," Al'Embri

answered him evenly. The primari softened his stance slightly and turned to face the ridiculous man in his flowing pink robes. He would hardly call him friend, but perhaps kindred; even the United Churches of the Firstlife had lost many of its subguardia to the intoxicating lure of desertion over the past year. It seemed, when faced with an inevitable death, a life of indecency and debauchery was preferential to a life of cold subservience. There was no denying the underlying core of basic Directorian nature. When faced with a calamitous crisis, people always reverted back to their base nature, the pious and impious alike. This caused Zenthi to break into a queer sort of smile as he eyed the fop of a man before him. His skin slowly cooled from a softer red, to a slight shade of orange.

The subguardia's billowing pink robes flowed about the man like a flourish of overstuffed curtains, and stood in sharp contrast to his own solid-gray features. The robes were tied about the waist with a coarse brown rope to symbolize a life of supposed impoverishment, yet the effect of it was somehow lost in the puffed-out sleeves and heavily ruffled chest fabric of the garment. Al'Embri himself had a smug look on his face, a look that Zenthi, privately, could not stand. All the subguardia seemed to possess it, almost as if they thought they were somehow better than everyone else around them simply because they were in some way 'closer' to the Guardias of the Secondlife... but numerous scandals throughout the ages had proven that these so-called holy men were just men after all, and that the concept of a pious life was just a sham that had been expounded throughout the ages by a self-serving Church.

"What can I do for you, Father?" Zenthi said with his best political smile, his face slowly returning to its splotchy shade of middle-aged yellow. He bent over slightly to right his chair, and was quick to note that Al'Embri made no effort to retrieve the telcom assembly for him. That would be beneath a subguardia, Zenthi quickly concluded, *but not beneath a primari apparently*, he thought wryly. Letting the transceiver just lie there, Zenthi seated himself, not offering his hand in greeting to the expectant church leader.

"You seem to be having a crisis of faith, my son," Al'Embri answered the primari coolly, not himself bothering to sit. Throughout

his campaign, and his subsequent years in office, Zenthi had made it clear that Church policy would play a much smaller role in his progressive administration. These changes reflected a growing trend in today's society of a younger generation infected with wicked impiety and a lack of subservience. The United Churches of the Firstlife had not taken kindly to this challenge to their divine authority.

"Just a disease of the soul, Father," Zenthi said with a naked grin, perhaps picking up on the theme of Al'Embri's darkest thoughts.

"It is not too late to save us from the wrathful judgment of the Guardias, Nomen Prime," Al'Embri retorted, almost angrily. "You must simply repent, my son, and bring the radical fringes of this government back into the pink folds of the United Churches."

"And then what, Subguardia? Will you just whisk this black body away?"

"Do not be facetious, child," he scolded the primari. "The Guardias will work through Doctor Ananti to avert this crisis... *but only if you will relent on this wicked blasphemy!*" the man now seethed through clenched teeth. Zenthi had to admire the man for his passion, if nothing else. There had been many, many arguments much like this in the past four years.

"You forget, Father," the primari goaded him, "I have a planetwide arsenal of nukes to throw at this threat *if* she does *not* succeed." Zenthi's skin was beginning to morph back into a shade of orange now. At this very moment his wife and children were being burned alive in the Quid Firestorm, and the primari had little use for the nonsensical scoldings of a backwards old cleric. What justice was there in the Guardias destroying a man's entire family, for simply standing behind his principles? Where was their justification in destroying an entire world simply because its flock had begun to stray? No sir! Zenthi would have none of it on this day. He would not fall victim to the preachings of this raving lunatic.

"Your weapons mean nothing to the Higher Power, child. Do you not see this? They are simply an extension of your repressed anger towards the Guardias..."

"I am not a child, you ridiculous old fool!" Zenthi shouted at him, rising to his feet, his face flaring at last to a purplish shade of

blood-blood-red. What Al'Embri did next, however, somewhat startled the now furious primari. The subguardia simply took a seat. Leveling his gaze on the stunned infidel, he spoke now in a soft, almost menacing voice.

“Tell me, Nomen Prime, are you familiar with the concept of the Golden Ratio?”

## *T-minus 12...*

There was nothing perhaps, more vulnerable than an Away Team.

Very few living things could survive in the cold hard emptiness of deep space, unwarmed by any sun. As such, there was nothing more hazardous to space travelers than a vacuum... the very medium in which they traveled. The survival of an Away Team in a vacuum was measured in mere hours; the survival of a man without a suit: seconds. Though it may have been a Class M world at one time, whatever atmosphere the Rogue may have once possessed had been stripped away eons ago by whatever calamitous event had thrown it out into deep space in the first place. Its ruins existed in a near vacuum now, protected for all eternity against corrosion and erosion and all the other forces of nature that would normally erase a culture from the pages of history. Though the ancient city had easily withstood the testament of time throughout all the millennia that had brought it to Directoria, its hardened environment was hostile now to humanoid life.

Due to the nature of this environment, it had taken longer than usual for the *Enterprise's* Away Team to prepare for their journey down to the long-forgotten metropolis. Shield generators had been beamed down first to set up a perimeter forcefield around the mysterious energy source. Next came the atmospheric processors that would create and maintain a safe oxygen/nitrogen bubble within this forcefield. And then finally, came the spacesuits. Their size and bulkiness had been greatly reduced in the generations since mankind's first voyages to the Moon, but the time required to put them on and to do the necessary safety checks had not been short-changed in any way. This was a person's only lifeline – only means of survival – in the cold, hard confines of outer space. A man in a suit could last hours; whereas a man in a compromised suit had only minutes.

The *Starship Enterprise* was too, in a sense, a massive spacesuit for all the travelers that lived within her. Just as a person could last only hours inside the protective environment of a spacesuit, the people of the *Enterprise* could last only hours within the confines

of a compromised starship. This thought had been foremost on the minds of every space traveler since Yuri Gagarin; though perhaps the thought could easily be forgotten in this era of massive *Ambassador*-class explorers that had become little worlds all their own. The level of comfort aboard these vessels was superseded only by the enormous spacedocks that now orbited most of the worlds of the Federation. But the *Enterprise* was one step ahead of even these... she was a little world in motion. Her mighty engines could propel her residents into the farthest reaches of the galaxy, to places once reserved only for their dreams.

Marta Batanides smacked the palm of her heavy glove against the helmet of Doctor Ann Grey. The gesture was just as much traditional perhaps, as it was to check the seal that held in the tiny bubble of life-sustaining air. The good doctor had been an unwilling accomplice in this little adventure, and it showed all across the pale features of her glass-distorted face. Advanced spacewalking had been a required course at the Academy, though Ann Grey had never fully understood just what it did have to do with the art of medicine. Her life in space had been contained within the larger artificial environments, the comfortable ones, and her mind now tried to focus on not having to go pee. During the long dark winters of her childhood on Dulisian IV, she had been scolded many times over for having to go only *after* her mother had completed the arduous task of getting her snowsuit on.

She attempted a smile as her own gloved hand involuntarily came up and tried to swipe at a strand of dark hair that had fallen down over her brow. Marta grinned at her, then turned and next smacked the helmet of Andy Dardanelle. As the senior-most officer on this away mission, the safety of the team was all hers to bear. There were five of them in all, and they stood now in the transporter room conducting this final ritual before Marta would allow them to depart. Suited-up missions were rare, but trained for, nonetheless. A spacesuit could be that deciding factor between life or death, and putting them on had to be done both efficiently and properly. Andy had been grinning from ear to ear even before this rather abrupt pressure check had set him teetering under the unaccustomed weight of the top-heavy suit. Marta

reached up and affectionately steadied him before moving on to the next member of the group.

By far the oldest person on the ship, Onovan had perhaps the least amount of experience wearing a spacesuit. He simply did not care for it, and his service record over the decades reflected this. Upon discovery, Captain Rachel Garrett had seen to it that the good counselor had gone on every suited-up away mission since. Much to the El-Aurian's chagrin, the commander of this particular vessel felt that her officers should be pushed just outside their comfort zone every once in a while. It built character she insisted, despite her own counselor's argument that, in over three hundred years, he had developed quite enough character, thank you very much. His coal-dark face practically disappeared within the helmet as Marta gave it a good thud with the palm of her hand. Uncharacteristically annoyed for his calm demeanor, the kindhearted old man wanted to give the petite young girl a solid smack back, but didn't, resigning himself instead simply to be cross.

Lastly, Marta turned to the petite Ensign Enyo and offered her a soft smile. The ensign's twin antennae had wilted within the tight confines of the helmet and now faced Marta like a second pair of eyes. Subconsciously perhaps, or perhaps consciously, the commander had asked the young ensign to come along on this trip to get her away from the storm that was now brewing up on the Bridge. Over the past hour, a crestfallen Richard Castillo had continued to simmer at the helm, while an exposed Spencer Stadi had made every attempt to avoid eye contact with anyone – while at the same time unconsciously making eye contact with everyone. The situation was becoming more and more uncomfortable with every passing minute as Captain Garrett's imagination had slowly gone wild with the implications of her discovery. The degree of tension had become measurably palpable.

Her heart going out to the girl, Marta smacked Enyo's helmet just a touch gentler than she had done the others, then took a step back to eye the group as a whole. Reaching up to her own helmet with her right hand, Marta flipped a tiny toggle switch.

"Comm check," she said, her voice echoing within its artificial bubble, her breath showing up faintly on the glass. The other four

officers each reached up and flipped on their own comm switches.

“Check,” Andy’s voice came to her first, the word filled with enthusiasm and teetering with excitement. It seemed strange to hear the young man’s even tone directly within her ear, rather than coming from the silently moving lips only a few short feet away.

“Check,” Enyo said next, the softness of her own voice coming through as if carried on new fallen snow. Equally as excited, the young girl was as ever, eager to prove.

“Check,” Onovan acknowledged at last, his voice gruff and laced with annoyance.

—and finally, meekly, almost as if forgotten: *-Check-* filtered through from the pale and soft features of Dr. Ann Grey.

Ann attempted again to swipe away at that errant strand of hair that had fallen across her brow, only to come away frustrated and wishing already that she were home. She, especially, didn’t like being forced outside her comfort zone, and it was one aspect of serving aboard this ship that she had not been prepared for. The rapid advancements in her career had been quite out of her hands really, and Ann had oft times felt quite disregarded within the grand schemes and clandestine machinations of Admiral Hawk; and indeed her own father. When she had first come aboard the *Enterprise*, the timid young doctor had at first seen it as just another move, just another new and crippling environment to adjust to and try to cope with. Yet, instead of the simple day to day monotony of life in the service, she had built an unexpected life here far, far away from the Federation and the men who sought to control her. As it turned out, getting pushed outside the limits once in a while had changed her life in ways she had not even realized yet.

With a rustle of hair amplified by its containment, Marta nodded, and the four before her turned and, one by one, stepped up onto the transporter pad. Slowly, methodically, she followed them, her own petite frame unaccustomed as well to the top-heavy weight of the suit. Her breath sounded funny cooped up within the glass, her eyesight dizzied by its reflective curvature. It was unnerving to have the peripheral vision so cutoff by the sides of the helmet, and she wondered now at the team-horses she had seen in Castillo’s ancient

films and how they must've felt about blinders. She could hear the rhythmic breathing of the others, and this too was unnerving, almost too personal an act to have broadcast directly into one's own ear. She thought now of this ship full of telepaths... how could they stand to constantly have the very thoughts of others invading their every privacy?

The exercise in diligence it must've taken for Commander Stadi to keep his little liaison a secret had to have been extraordinary, and Marta was almost impressed now as Onovan coughed lightly in her ear. Very few secrets could be kept for very long aboard a deep-space starship... especially a ship half filled with telepaths. For the second-in-command of this particular ship to carry on a love affair for months – if not years – with a much younger ensign was indeed pretty remarkable, Marta was forced to conclude. Still, impressed was not really the word she felt appropriate to the situation. Love in the lower decks was a fairly common occurrence throughout a crew's long sojourn into outer space, but love for the senior staff was almost a foreign word. The officers in charge carried with them a vast responsibility for the safety of those that served under them. This safety could be compromised with just the barest hesitation if emotional attachment clashed with orders.

Standing on the pad now, Marta turned to face the transporter chief and raised her left hand this time to activate another switch. "Batánides to Bridge," she said clearly into the helmet.

*"Garrett here, Commander, go ahead..."*

*"We are ready to transport down, Captain."*

*"Acknowledged, safe journeys..."* a pause, *"...and remember, Marta... time is short."* The Captain's use of her given name caused Marta to give pause. She really did not need reminding that the planetoid to which they were transporting would likely be destroyed in just twelve hours' time. But a recognition of the grim reality of it did sink in just that little bit more. Aboard the *Enterprise*, they were safe. On the rogue, their lifespan would immediately be reduced to mere hours. It was a sobering thought as she reached up and gave the signal to transport. And as the room before her began to dissolve into a swirl of tingly energy, she could not help but think of Commander

Stadi.

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“Acknowledged,” Captain Garrett said into the comm, “safe journeys...” She gave pause and stared out the viewscreen at the black and ominous world that rotated slowly beneath them. “...and remember, Marta,” she added at last, “time is short.” Though unintended, the overtones in her voice were as ominous perhaps as her Away Team’s destination. The captain was seated in the command chair and as usual, could do nothing but wait patiently as her crew did with diligence what they had been trained to do. Over her left shoulder, Cicely and Commander Stadi worked steadily on the complex equations that were necessary to open an interphasic rift. She knew that below decks, Skyl and his engineering teams were working with equal resolve to modify the main deflector to open such a rift. And at the ACP in front of her, Lt. Richard Castillo was running through various scenarios to use to bleed off the excess heat that an inverse warp field would produce.

Yet, despite all that was going on, Garrett could not help but stew about what her eyes had witnessed just a short while ago. All the pieces had fallen fully into place now, and all that remained was to find out just how far it had gone. Though she trusted her First Officer’s judgment in all things, the captain could not help but fear the worst. The Battle of Ethos had left them all vulnerable to internal forces not necessarily within their control. Stadi had lost someone very dear to him at Ethos, and his mind had been subjected to an onslaught of emotions that rivaled even that of her own. The commander had rarely spoken of Zora McKnight in their almost twenty years of service together, but the captain knew just enough. That the young and gentle Ensign Enyo should come in to fill this void was perfectly logical she supposed, but that did not make it hurt any less. At this moment, Rachel Garrett felt betrayed in ways that she could not have ever before imagined; and she was not even sure why. She just knew it hurt.

Standing next to Cicely, Spencer Stadi keenly felt every thought and emotion that now raced through his captain’s mind. She

was his *Imzadi*, his beloved, a Betazoid term that went beyond all physical forms of love and attraction. He had hurt her, he knew, and quite without intention of course; but he also knew that this day had been a long time coming on many fronts. Their minds had become inexorably linked, their souls virtually one. Whether it had been Enyo, or someone else, the results would've been the same. And it was not as if he had actively pursued the young ensign anyway. The relationship had developed in the many empty months that had come after Ethos; and like many such affairs, it had sort of just 'happened'. They had both obviously needed something to fill that gap that the Empress Ethereal had left within their shattered minds. It was something that Rachel Garrett could not have provided for him.

There was a certain comfort in their togetherness that had been lacking in his life for a long, long time. A closeness of mind, body, and spirit... molded within the softness of skin touching skin. The undeniable importance of Touch. His unexpected reunion with Zora – and her subsequent death – had reawakened these feelings within him in unexpected ways. He had not felt such closeness in years; had not ever let it creep into his broken heart until now. So perhaps Stadi couldn't help but let his mind wander, especially now that Enyo had been placed in a potentially dangerous situation. This was the haunting truth behind why relationships amongst the senior staff were so strongly discouraged. He was distracted, his mind focused on her, instead of the task at hand. Just a few short hours ago they had made love, and it had been as beautiful and as wonderful as all the times that had come before it.

In his mind's eye he slowly retraced the soft contours of her jaw line down her neck, between her breasts, and finally down to her navel, where his memory placed an open hand upon her soft belly. Her blue skin dimpled in protest, and he smiled. Her own little blue hand came up and ran through the coarse dark hair on his chest, causing him to shiver. Life had become so complicated. In the command chair, Rachel Garrett shivered, and Spencer Stadi was drawn back to the present, feeling at once embarrassed and ashamed. The moment was now, and his telepathic paracortex could sense it even before she could. After so many months of hiding, it was finally time to come out

into the open and face the consequences of his irresponsible, perhaps selfish, actions.

“Commander Stadi, will you please join me in my Ready Room,” he heard her say, never once turning to face him as she breezed away to privacy.

“Yes, Captain,” he said softly, doubting she could hear. His eyes fell down over the cascade of levels to Castillo, standing as he was at the ACP. The lieutenant’s blue eyes stared back at him now filled with sadness and melancholy. Stadi’s telepathic mind picked up Castillo’s unspoken apology just as if it had been spoken aloud. He nodded at him, instinctively knowing that the lieutenant understood from the simple gesture everything was going to be alright between them. The Bridge was quiet, and Stadi sighed. It was time.

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Although she had grown up on Mars, Marta Batanides was well versed on what Greek and Roman architecture looked like. The similarities to what she was now seeing were almost as profound as the differences. The grey city stretched out before her like a life-sized model of ancient Rome, or even Athens. At the base of a steep stone staircase, a wide empty avenue fled away from her into the dark and indiscernible distance. Behind her, a massive stone building with great triangular columns stood as the central spoke of a fan of smaller edifices that tumbled out of view to her left and to her right. Looking down, Marta could see that she was standing in at least a foot of grey powdery dust; no doubt the accumulations of many millennia traveling throughout the dark and starless cosmos of deep space. Tilting her spacesuit precariously backwards, and craning her neck skyward, the black sky was awash with unfiltered starlight. Even the Directorian sun was just a pinprick of light at this distance.

Twisting around from side to side in an awkward sort of dance, Marta at last was able to locate the *Enterprise*. She pointed upwards for the others without saying anything, and they all took a moment to reflect on the significance of it. That was home. “A mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam,” as Carl Sagan would have put it. Even

without the distortive effects of an atmosphere, the quintet could just barely make out the graceful lines of the mighty starship. From here it looked little more than the rest of the myriads of stars that filled the silent sky. Fearing to break this silence somehow, Marta merely turned and began trudging slowly through the powder towards the main entrance to the building. Growing up under the carefully controlled biodomes of Mars, the petite security chief had had little experience wading her way through light fluffy snow, but the effect was about the same.

She only spoke after she crossed the threshold and entered the cavernous chamber within. It had not seemed appropriate to do so before then, and even now she kept her voice at a soft whisper. The dust in here was sparse and grated under her boots now more like sand than snow.

“Andy, where’re we lookin at buddy?” she said softly, reaching up and turning on the bright headlights embedded within her helmet.

Dardanelle pulled a tricorder out of his hip pocket and began to scan the structure in a grand sweeping motion, taking in the entire building as a whole. Though he saw the lights of the device flashing, it was strange to not hear the familiar high-pitched whine of the machine working in the deafening silence. It was a pretty stark reminder that, just beyond the thin membrane of his spacesuit, was negative pressure and absolute death. Reaching up and switching on his own headlamp, Andy pointed to the left. The others all switched on their lights now and the great room suddenly arched upward into an incredible dome. Though dingy after all their centuries in open space, the colorful frescoes that adorned it still caught everyone’s breath. Andy was grateful that his helmet was automatically recording everything they saw, because he felt that he could lay on his back and study that ceiling for hours. But they did not have hours. It would have to wait.

“To the left, Commander,” Andy whispered, realizing that Marta could not have ever seen his silent gesture through the confines of her own suit. “It’s a small antechamber just off this chamber. Our equipment is there next to the energy source.”

“Are you still picking up the signal?” Enyo said with a dewy

softness.

“Yep, loud and clear.”

“Let’s go,” Marta said now, the command coming through in almost a normal voice, yet still feeling like it had been swallowed up by the silence of the enormous dome. She began moving forward, having only a peripheral sense that the others of her team were following. Quickly reaching the leftward wall, she came up upon a fairly normal sized door. She hesitated only briefly before giving it a good solid shove. It swung open more easily than expected and she nearly stumbled forward under the weight of the suit.

“Careful!” Ann cried out with concern as Onovan reached forward just in time to help steady her.

“Creepy,” Marta giggled. “I wonder if it squeaked,” she added, the darkness and the silence not unlike that of a haunted house. Though the others obviously could not see her grin, she thought immediately of Richard Castillo and realized that they were now in the early morning hours of Hallowe’en. She began to wonder what he and Andy had planned to dress up as after all, and it saddened her to know that the somber events of the day would not likely allow her to find out. While she mused over this, and perhaps guided by chivalry as opposed to rank, Onovan passed by her suddenly and entered the antechamber first, taking a quick visual scan of the room.

“Clear,” his gruff voice announced, causing her to laugh out loud now.

“Who’d ya think was going to be here, Counselor?” she giggled in his ear. The rest of the Away Team all laughed at this, and finally even Onovan was forced to chuckle a little. They had each just about filed into the room by now when in fact someone did appear before them, scaring the ever-loving shit out of them all.

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The Bridge felt strangely quiet now that Captain Garrett and Spencer Stadi had withdrawn in silence to her ready room. Granted it was late at night, but it was still unusual that only two officers should be left in the spacious command center to oversee the operations of an

entire starship. This was, however, an unusual night, and Richard Castillo was grateful for the peace and seclusion. Due to the extraordinary events that were about to take place over the next few harrowing hours, the ordinary night staff had been informed to standby at the auxiliary control center below decks. This left Castillo all alone with Cicely, and he could think of no other person right now that he would rather be with. Over the past two and a half years since the young Orion ensign had come aboard, Castillo had become somewhat of a surrogate brother for the orphan child. He had even taken to calling her Sis.

He moved now from the ACP to stand just below her at Ops. Slowly, he turned and sat down on the steps near her chair and let out a heavy sigh.

"Yeasss," she said with her usual playful grin. Her curly brown hair and sharp brown eyes stood in sharp contrast to her dark green skin – all of this almost clashing perhaps with her bright red uniform. Her long twig-like fingers continued to work in silence on the complex equations that would hopefully open an interphasic rift. This girl was a contradiction in almost every sense of the word. As a former slave-girl, Cicely had been trained in the sexual techniques of a thousand worlds and could show Castillo pleasures he couldn't even imagine. Yet to him, she was as virtuous as a baby sister. The thought of ever taking advantage of her made him cringe. By extension, it did not take complex calculations for Castillo to note that Ensign Enyo was virtually the same age as her... and Commander Stadi... much, much older than even he.

"You and Enyo are the same age, right?" he said as an opener.

"Within a year or two, yes," Cicely mused, frowning at her display screen.

"So, what's your take on their *alleged* relationship?" The lieutenant was careful not to commit himself to anything.

"Stranger things have happened," Cicely replied, still somewhat distracted by her equations. Castillo sighed again and placed his chin in his upturned palm, elbow against knee. He waited there in silence for a time in hopes that she might offer more.

"Are you asking me if I approve?" she finally said at length,

pausing at last in her work and looking down at his arched back and hunched up shoulders.

“I don’t know,” he said flatly and paused. “I guess I’m just asking you what you think. You’re her age and he’s obviously way older than I am...” Castillo sat up and rotated on his buttocks to face her, looking up into her eyes with a surprising amount of innocence painted across his face.

“He is a handsome man,” Cicely goaded him with a devilish grin, and he groaned and turned away from her, chin back in palm. “You’re jealous!” she teased now, clucking her tongue and shaking her head.

“I am not,” he shot back, turning with a defensive look. “I’m not interested in her in the slightest,” he frowned now, crunching up his eyebrows.

“That’s not what I meant,” she countered. “You’re jealous because he’s a much older man who has scored a very attractive and much younger woman. He’s like every human males’ greatest hero right now.”

“Ugh! What-ever,” – facing away once more.

“The history of couples on your world is flush with vast age differences, yet your entire society still seems shocked at every new occurrence... they fell in love,” Cicely shrugged, “who can deny that?” Her voice held within it undeniable compassion. “Whether it is right and proper aboard a starship is another matter, and I think we both know the answer to that.”

“Whatdya think Captain Garrett will do?” he asked honestly, compassion this time garnered for her. He stared out the viewscreen at the stars, his arms now crossed on his knees.

“She’s hurt,” Cicely said in a brief moment of frankness. “She will make him end it, of course, and life aboard this starship will go on... in its changed form... just as it always has.”

“This has been one f’ed up tour,” Castillo lamented, with equal frankness.

“And it’s not over yet,” Cicely clucked.

She could never know of the awful portent of her words.

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The hologram spoke to them across the millennial silence of the vacuum. But his voice was mute of course, even as his image wavered and flickered in the dust of ancient circuitry and half obscured projectors. Ann Grey had nearly fallen over backwards, if it hadn't been for the enfolding arms of Andy Dardanelle. Ensign Enyo as well, except she had crashed abruptly into the wall and now stood against it encapsulated in shock. Marta's heart pounded in her throat, and even Onovan had ceased to breathe. After a five second hush, the breath of five suddenly pulsed through the transceivers and receivers of their helmets and filled the air within them with a disjointed cacophony of nervous panting.

"Wow," Marta at last exclaimed, "that's one way to raise the dead."

"It must've been activated by us entering the room," Andy offered nervously.

"Very astute, Lieutenant," Onovan grumbled, not amused by either of them, nor by this greenish apparition that continued to flicker and waver before them. For the moment, its lips had stopped moving as it stared down at the five astronauts from a pedestal that was not quite waist high, and also made of stone. Somewhat looming, the hologram was humanoid in form, obviously made to look like its creators, and was dressed in a multilayered suit of formal-style clothing. Its arms were crossed at the waist, one hand gripping the wrist of the other. Yet, despite the appearance of solidity, the emerald-green projection was still largely transparent, its very form just a clever trick of shading.

"Wh-wh-what do you s-s-suppose it wants?" Ann Grey whispered, apparently afraid it would somehow hear her through the forgotten vacuum that separated them.

"Your recipe for chicken soup, Doctor," Onovan grumbled some more. He had an itch, and he was now sweating uncomfortably inside his suit. *Damn the Captain*, he thought, wishing for a glass of water. The overlarge but gentle eyes of the hologram stared at them

and blinked, while narrow lips curled up in a polite smile. He appeared to be the epitome of patience as he just stood there in the airless void and waited. Suddenly, the room was filled with light, startling them all again, before Enyo was able to squeak finally from somewhere behind them.

“Sorry,” she said meekly, “found the light switch.” If it weren’t for the heavy suit, she would’ve most surely shrugged. Onovan turned fully around now and gave her a wary eye through the distorted lens of his helmet. The girl shrank ever so slightly under his penetrating stare and ran her index finger along a ledge, picking up dust.

“Right,” Marta announced, spying their heavy equipment over in the opposite corner, “Andy, get that field generator online. Enyo, you can start the atmospheric scrubber when that’s done.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Ann, here, take this,” Marta snatched a small probe out of a pocket on the arm of her suit and offered it to the good doctor. “It’s a sonic probe,” Marta explained, “use it to see if you can clear some of the dust off those projectors... be careful,” she warned. “Maybe it’ll clean up the image. Onovan, why don’t you survey the rest of the room and make sure there aren’t any more surprises... I’ll look for a computer interface.”

Ann gently took the probe out of Marta’s hand, then cautiously approached the looming projection. The image looked down at her with naught but kindness, yet it still creeped her out beyond all imagining. To her it was alive, and looked as if it could leap down off the pedestal at any moment and scoop her up, perhaps hold her hostage against the others. But it was he who was held hostage, she had to keep reminding herself, as she began chasing the dust off the first of many multifaceted projectors encircling the rim of the dais. The doctor tried to stay focused on her work, rather than focusing on the sensation that those overlarge eyes were watching her every move. Though still flickering and wavering, his image became more and more sharp as she progressed around the base, not once looking up. Any lingering imperfections were the obvious result of decrepit circuitry.

After a few moments of this, Ann felt a tingling sensation creep through her suit which startled her all anew. She looked up just in time

to see the forcefield establish itself just across the doorway to the rotunda beyond. The harmless blue Cherenkov Radiation, it generated sparkled like snow on an ancient old television screen.

“Field established,” Andy announced.

“Starting atmospheric scrubber,” Enyo followed up, bending over her own machine and pressing several buttons.

“Well done,” Marta acknowledged. “Onovan, I’m not finding a computer interface, or any other signs of technology besides the hologram... how ‘bout you?”

“Nothing on this side either, Commander,” Onovan responded from the other side of the room. “It’s obvious the thing talks, perhaps the interaction is voice-only, like a docent of sorts?”

“Seems strange though,” Marta mused, “there’s usually *some* sort of interface. Maybe on a lower level, or in another chamber somewhere...”

“Atmospheric pressure at 547 millibars, Ma’am,” Enyo reported, “halfway there.”

“...I guess we’ll know in a moment,” Marta reasoned. “How ya coming, Ann?”

“All finished,” the doctor responded in her usual quiet tones. “It appears as if the r-r-rest of the, um, distortions are caused by in-internal errors.”

“Understandable,” she nodded, flipping a switch on her helmet. “Batanides to *Enterprise*...”

“*Castillo here, Marta, go ahead...*”

“We’ve identified the energy source... it’s an interactive hologram of some kind. We’ll know more shortly.”

“*Keep us posted,*” Castillo acknowledged. The fact that Richard Castillo was now in command of the mighty flagship could only mean one thing: Garrett was confronting Stadi at last. It was almost a relief, Marta thought; but at the same time, things would now get very difficult aboard that ship for perhaps many months to come. This had already been a difficult tour as it was. With the crew only just barely healing from the hurts of Ethos, the timing for this dramatic tragedy could not have been worse.

“Atmospheric pressure at one hundred percent,” Enyo

announced, interrupting Marta's thoughts.

"Confirm forcefield integrity," she cautioned. Andy bent down and checked his own machine, then drew out his tricorder and scanned the room. Even the slightest misstep in the forcefield could be catastrophic for them all, and they all knew it with the keenest sense.

"Confirmed," the young man said at last.

"Good, I'll go first..." Marta replied with just the barest hint of reluctance. The safety of the Away Team was however still hers to bear. Slowly, she reached up and gripped both sides of her helmet. Giving it a slight twist to the left, the seal cracked, and her ears popped against the unequal pressure. Even more slowly now, she lifted this all-important lifeline up over the top of her head, then tucked it under her left arm for safe keeping. Taking in a deep breath, the air was pure and fresh and brand new, with just a touch of ozone from the quietly thrumming forcefield.

"All clear," she proclaimed to the others, "but keep your helmets close," she warned. As the rest of her team slowly removed their helmets, Marta moved over to stand directly in front of the hologram. Tilting her head back, she now spoke to it in a clear succinct voice.

"I am Commander Marta Batanides of the Federation starship *Enterprise*."

"Eom se Leubh, hu maeg wom baef ne-troppus," the flickering image responded in a deep soothing voice filled to the brim with a calm and collected politeness.

"Any thoughts, Counselor?" Marta said with frustration as he came up next to her.

"Likely the language is too old or obsolete for our universal translators," Onovan offered, tilting his head slightly and eying the greenish apparition. He was grateful to finally have that blessed helmet off so he could at least turn his head and breathe some normal air.

Marta nodded. "Andy, use your tricorder to tie-in to the *Enterprise* mainframe. The database is much larger. Hopefully it can pluck something out of history to help us here." The young lieutenant next came up to her and flipped open his tricorder, keying in several commands, he nodded at Marta, prompting her to try again.

“I am Marta Batanides, can you speak for me again please?” Onovan smiled at her reciprocal politeness. Hot, sweaty, and uncomfortable, he probably would not have been so nice. The El-Aurian had always admired humans for their almost never-ending cheerfulness.

“*Eom se Leubh, hu maeg wom baef ne-troppus,*” the hologram said again, its tones and words precisely equal to before.

“Dammit,” Marta muttered.

“Give it a sec,” Andy scolded her with a smile. “There...” he paused, “one more time if you please, M’lady.” Marta sighed at the cheeky boy, then gazed up at the hologram one last time.

“I am Commander Marta Batanides of the Federation starship *Enterprise*, can you understand me?”

“*I am the Library, how may we be of assistance?*”

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Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett sat in her darkened 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 padds representing the seemingly endless parade of paperwork that was the mundane, day-to-day reality of starship command. The events of Ethos had left her hopelessly behind and unable to ever catch up; but they had also left her drained and withered like a desert flower. Her ship was only two and a half years into a five-year mission and she was already hopelessly tired beyond all imagining. She began to wonder now if she would even be able to cope with the final leg of their journey. *So tired!* The Empress Ethereal had quite simply sucked every last ounce of strength right out of her and that had only been Day One! How could she cope indeed, for these scars ran too deep. And now there was Spencer Stadi.

The child had warned her of dark days ahead, and this vexed the captain now afresh and anew as she sat all alone in the silence. *Your crew will need your love, not just your guidance in the few short years to come,* Ethereal had told her. *Your own endgame is at hand.* Well, she had certainly given them her love, Garrett concluded – and

well more than enough leniency, as it was quickly becoming apparent. Yet, she wondered, had those words of warning 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? It was entirely possible that their subconscious minds had merely been playing out a dark and twisted plot of the Empress's own design ever since. Deep down however, Garrett had known all along that eventually something would have to give – though she could not ever have expected this.

She was hurt. This fact surprised even her. Jealous? The notion of it caused her sensibilities to recoil at the thought, just as the sensation would for anyone else. We all want to believe we are above such petty feelings. That to be passed over for another is inconsequential to our emotional wellbeing. But it does hurt. The captain harrumphed at herself now. The commander and her were not a couple; and not likely ever would be. They were colleagues – friends even – but the idea of romance was not part of the equation. Above all else, she was his commanding officer. Still, they had lived together in close telepathic contact for twenty years now. They breakfasted together often, spent innumerable hours working together, and even spent much of their off-duty time together. To say that they were a team was an apt description... but there was still that something more. She was his *Imzadi* - the Betazoid term for beloved – and he was hers.

The door to her Ready Room chimed, and the captain let out a long and heavy sigh. She wondered at her selfishness now. This confrontation could certainly wait until tomorrow, or even the next day. The events that were about to transpire in this solar system over the next twelve hours should be the focus of her entire attention; not half... not one quarter, as they were now. Her mind was telling her to get her shit together; but her heart was telling her to slap the commander in the face.

“Come in,” she said at last. With a quiet whoosh, the doors parted and Spencer Stadi peered in. He looked small in the doorway, but as he approached her desk, the tall man seemed even taller, his stern frame looming even larger as she shrunk ever farther into her

chair. Her mind flashed back to that night in her grandfather's study when her mother had come unglued right before her very eyes. Both frightened and overwhelmed by her terrible secret, she had lied that night; just as Spencer Stadi had lied to her over these past many months with his own terrible secret. Her stance softened ever so slightly, yet she still could not look him in the eyes.

"Captain," was all the man could manage to muster.

"H-h-how..." she stammered, clearing her throat. "How long?"

"Over a year now." He didn't dare say *two*.

"And how far?" Embarrassed, she still could not look at him – felt increasingly ill.

"Too far," he replied, empty ebony eyes looking down at the floor in shame. There was no point, nothing to be gained, by hiding anything further from her. Rachel Garrett closed her own eyes now as truth became reality. The sensation of collapse began in her throat and carried down into her chest. It was an emptiness, a hollowness, that drained itself out way down deep within her soul – then slowly climbed back up to become a knot that threatened to choke her. She felt suddenly nauseous, and this nausea began to twist itself into even more knots, these knots slowly working themselves into hailstones – these hailstones becoming the focal point of a growing tornado that quickly wound her emotions into a maelstrom of uncontrollable rage.

*"WHAT THE F--K WERE YOU THINKING?!"* her mind screamed at him suddenly as she jumped to her feet with clenched fists, frightening herself as much as him. Fierce almond eyes drilled into his very core, and he could not answer. It had been a very, very long time since the good captain had lost her temper. She felt ashamed, she felt betrayed; but more than that, she felt stupid that she had allowed herself to be so deceived, to be made such a fool before her subordinate officers. Ever since the Empress Ethereal had shattered her mind, the captain had made every attempt to get closer to her crew, to connect with them on a much more fundamental and familiar way. To make them a family, her family, in a sad attempt to fight the growing tide of loneliness and depression that had threatened to overwhelm her in the wake of her experiences. Yet here, right under her very nose, she had been betrayed by the one individual that was

nearest and dearest of them all. The one she trusted most. She suddenly felt more alone now than she had ever felt before.

“Oh, Spencer,” she sighed, closing her eyes and collapsing back into her chair. There was no point in telling him what she was feeling. His telepathic paracortex felt all these things perhaps before she did; and all her anguish she knew was compounded tenfold within his own mind by whatever naked thoughts he was feeling. Forever linked to his, her heightened psi-region was now flooding her ganglia with a weight of emotion she did not feel she had the strength to bear. *So tired!* Ethereal had sucked every last ounce of strength right out of her. *The scars ran too deep!* And now here was Spencer Stadi. She fought the pain, but the pain encapsulated her. We all want to believe we are above such petty feelings. But it hurts.

“Why?” she pleaded with him, on the point of tears, feeling her heart break.

“The pain was not yours alone,” he stated flatly, “mine was just as much to bear.” He had not said this with any hint of selfishness, but slapped her instead with her own self-centeredness. Flashbacks of his beloved Zora flooded his consciousness even now. Her dark skin and golden eyes. The way she smelled. The sound of her thoughts in his mind. They had been so much in love once, and this filled him now with such sadness. Life is full of so many profound choices that we all give so little thought to at the time, yet they still affect us for so many years to come. Zora was gone though, another victim of the tragedies of Ethos. So much lost potential in the wake of such disaster. Remembering now Enyo’s soft sweet eyes, Stadi saw such hope, such childish optimism. He admired her for this above all else. No, the pain was not hers alone.

“No,” Garrett conceded. *I suppose not.*

“I, too, was broken, Captain... my mind was just as shattered as yours.”

“Yes.” *Leave me now, I wish to be alone.*

He stood there a moment longer and looked down on her with loving eyes, but she would not face him. The scars ran too deep. In every human mind there was a dark spot that seemed to govern their entire existence. They seemed to live out their entire lives in fear of it.

Even now, his telepathic mind was unable to penetrate this dark spot within his own captain, and he had always wondered why. There were so many things about humans that made him wonder why. Why did it 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*, he concluded. The complexities of our lives from the day we are born create the whys. The whys are who we are. They are the definition of our very existence.

And sometimes it's better to never ask why.

## *T-minus 11...*

For nearly an hour they had argued.

Frustrated and tired, Primari Qoarta Zenthi stared across his desk at his tormentor and simply wanted to strangle him. For nearly an hour, Subguardia Al'Embri had tortured the weary primari with the age-old, and perhaps unsolvable issue, of the separation of church and state. For over a thousand years, the United Churches of the Firstlife had been the driving force behind nearly every national government that had graced the face of the planet Directoria. For centuries, the will of the subguardia had often superseded even the will of elected leaders and their administrations. They alone had dictated policy for the greater good, for the betterment of the people; but unfortunately, their policies had often fallen quite short of this, and instead, had served only the betterment of the Church. It was only within the past two hundred years or so that a brand-new nation had at last challenged these ancient notions.

The United Front was conceived in the wake of a great religious clash, and had been founded on the principle of personal liberty, and a freedom from church domination. Yet, even this foundling government had fought a nearly losing, decades-long battle against Church supremacy. It had indeed taken nearly two hundred years for the political climate to finally be right to elect Zenthi's progressive, forward-thinking administration; and Al'Embri had since taken it upon himself as his own personal calling to unseat these infidels from power. The Guardias of the Secondlife demanded it from him. There could be no other way. Whereas Zenthi represented the future of thought, Al'Embri represented the cold hard stranglehold of irrational superstition. The arrival of the rogue planetoid in their system had been a godsend in Al'Embri's mind, and had signified a call for action of holy proportions.

In the long run of truth, however, time and religion had perhaps played only a marginal role in Zenthi's election. Technology it seemed had played the larger role, and was now governing the world's population with far more reaching scope than any church doctrine had

ever hoped to. Information sharing was changing the way the world looked at itself faster than the United Churches could adjust. Their dusty old principles simply no longer applied to the modern world, and a people always on the move had moved on to newer and better things. This was the drive of progress that the United Front had wrought upon the world. It was a social upheaval that was shaking society right down to its very core; and was unquestionably trampling over many in the process. Social change rarely comes without cost, and the policies of the Zenthi administration had caused as much evil as it had good. And then, The Rogue had arrived.

“I simply cannot understand why you still fail to see the divine intervention of the Guardias in this calamity,” Al’Embri continued to plead with the primari. “They are *testing* us, my son, surely you can understand *that!*”

“Are they, Father,” Zenthi retorted, “or are they simply testing you?” Over the past half-hour, as his patience had waned, Zenthi had started to mess with the old man merely for his own cynical amusement.

“My faith is tested daily,” the subguardia shot back angrily, “as a measure of my devotion. Have you truly forgotten all of your childhood lessons?”

Zenthi merely grinned as he rose and finally retrieved the telcom assembly off the floor next to his desk. Amused with himself, he had strangely found that his malignant hope was slowly returning in regards to Dr. Ananti’s audacious plan. The primari hoped now that she *would* succeed, if for no other reason than to prove the impossible Al’Embri wrong. Setting the unit down on the desk, he carefully placed the transceiver back into its cradle and rearranged its assortment of wires. He wondered how many calls he had missed, then smiled at himself. Probably none.

“Tell me, Father... what if my administration does not change its policies and Doctor Ananti does indeed still succeed? What then? Will you then reverse your own beliefs?” It was a game of logic, and Zenthi had always felt that he had the upper hand. Still, Al’Embri looked at him aghast as the primari sat back down.

“Will you really bet the future of your people on such

blasphemy?” the man almost whispered. He could not believe what he was now hearing – had thought that the primari would have a resurgence of faith in these final hours, would eventually recant and fall back into the folds of the Church and bring the government back in line with him.

“What if I said yes? What would you do then?” Zenthi challenged him. Al’Embri merely fumed, knowing now that there could be only one course of action. The Guardias were indeed testing him!

“You say that this is a test, Father,” Zenthi continued, “what if I say that it is not? What if it is simply a natural phenomenon that we are using our own technology and ingenuity to combat?”

“Pride in your technology will gain you nothing but Nolife, my poor misguided child.”

“As I’ve said before, I am no child.”

“You will not change the blasphemous policies of this administration?”

“No, sir, I will not.”

“Then you most surely shall be punished...” Al’Embri almost threatened. And almost as if on cue, the telcom rang and Zenthi eyed it speculatively. His heart leapt into his throat that it could be Zoella, that they had somehow survived the firestorm of Quid, but in his heart he knew better. He had already been punished, as far as he was concerned, and looked now on Al’Embri’s words as nothing more than empty threats from a meaningless empty man. If these were supposed to be lessons on faith, Zenthi quickly concluded, then the Guardias had done nothing but further harden his resolve against any and all manner of holy mysticism. Noooo, this government would not budge. They would stay the course.

“This is Zenthi,” he said, pressing the transceiver against the side of his head. “Yes Vacilli, of course, patch her through.” He looked up from his desktop into the cold hardened eyes of Al’Embri and gave the old man a smug look, knowing that this phone call would do naught but strengthen his stance.

“Yes, Doctor Ananti, I have been anxious to hear from you...” Zenthi spoke, his eyes squinting and his face contorting against the

crackling static in the line. As he listened, Subguardia Al'Embri watched the primari's features slowly sink from that ridge of hope, back down into the well of despair that had so earlier consumed him. Al'Embri knew within his heart that the Guardias had just spoken. Let thy will be done! The clock on the wall read T-11:23:58... the Golden Ratio... and Al'Embri smiled. The Guardias had indeed just spoken. *So be it*, he thought, *let this self-important man play a game of chance with the souls of his people*. The failure of Dr. Ananti's maleficent device would do nothing but reinforce his position. Only then perhaps would this threat become real to the heretic Zenthi. Only then could the salvation of the world rise from the ashes of the Nolife.

"Yes, Doctor, I understand," Zenthi said, interrupting the subguardia's silent musings. "There is still time, remain calm and focused." The Primari let out a heavy sigh and leaned forward, slowly sliding the transceiver back into its cradle. After a promising start, the generator had failed. Though her team was optimistic, Zenthi could tell in the young woman's voice that the same cancerous malignancy had all but consumed her hope as well. Zenthi leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He knew that the fop of a priest was staring at him, preparing to gloat, and the primari wished he would just go away. *I wish to be alone!* Behind his eyelids he could see the Quid Firestorm racing through the garment district. Within his mind's eye he watched as first Zoella, and then Xanda and Arnedra, burst into flames right before him and disintegrated into ash. He could almost feel the heat.

"I judge," Al'Embri spoke now, "that things are not going well out on the Nogolon Plateau?"

Zenthi sat forward with a start, the image of the conflagration still so vivid in his mind. His skin immediately morphed from its splotchy yellow, to the orange of angry frustration. Frustration at his own helplessness, frustration that the generator would likely fail after all, frustration that this priest still continued to harangue him. Frustration that his wife and children were now dead. As if he didn't have enough on his mind! – and still, the old man persisted.

"You soon will see the true meaning of my words," Al'Embri pressed him further. He knew without doubt the man would soon break. And if he did not... well, there was remedy for that as well. The

Guardias would be his guiding light in this darkest hour. Of that he also had no doubt. He had devoted his entire life to their service, and surely, they would not forsake him now.

Quarta Zenthi spoke not a word, just leaned further forward and pressed a button on the telcom assembly. “Vacilli, it is time,” he said, never taking his angry gaze off that of the subguardia. In but a few moments, the slippery little Master of Internal Security slithered quietly through the door and into the Official Office. He did naught but sneer at the subguardia, then focused his attention fully on his primari.

“At your service, Nomen Prime,” Vacilli declared. “Will thee... *priest*... be joining us?” he added with a quick, sidelong glance.

“Noooo,” Zenthi answered gruffly, “this government does not kowtow to the whims of the Church.” He rose slowly, still not taking his angry gaze off the cold hard eyes of the old man. Al’Embri stared back at the primari with equal vexation, his mind hardening with resolve for what he knew must now be done.

“If you please, Nomen Prime,” Vacilli gestured, “launch control has been set up in the Conflict Room... it is wise that you familiarize yourself with the...”

But those were the last words Vacilli would ever speak. With surprising swiftness, the old man was up on his chair and launching himself against the insignificant little man. All that Zenthi could see was a sudden flurry of pink robes enveloping his Master of Internal Security, then reducing his slight form to nothing more than a thin pink layer upon the floor. A sharp movement – and a tiny snap – were the only indication that the pink mass contained anything even remotely resembling a living being. Zenthi’s throat went dry and a sudden knot threatened to choke him as he stood there in horror. His mind could not quite grasp what had just happened here. *Did I just see what I think I saw?!* After a moment more, the pink mass slowly coalesced itself back into the form of the aged old subguardia. As Al’Embri rose, Zenthi could see that Vacilli now lay dead at his feet, his head cocked at a most unnatural angle. The primari’s skin morphed now from yellow to gray, and finally to a most unnatural shade of white. His lungs emptied themselves of air as he fell back into his chair.

“May the Guardias of the Secondlife enfold you into their pink robes, my son,” Al’Embri whispered, staring down at the corpse and making the circular sign of faith. Zenthi only half-heard the ancient blessing as he pulled at his shirt collar, struggling to breathe. Faith and practicality were at a crossroads now. A sign from the Guardias, or the work of a madman? The Golden Ratio had spiraled inward and made its point; yet its message had been strangely left open to interpretation. Be that as it may, Zenthi wished the Rogue would strike them all now, right now, and end forever the sickness of a mad, mad world.

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Detector Fraca Novachi had gone from a man obsessed, to a man possessed now as he raced down the city streets in his triwheel. Though he knew that the Primari of the United Front was likely to be the next target, instinct had told him to go instead to where it had all begun. The United Churches Tabernacle was on the very outskirts of the city, and quite a long drive from the precinct; but Novachi knew that his long-time friend Al’Embri was personal chaplain to the primari, and thus his key to the Official Office. Logic told him that it would do well to have the subguardia with him anyway when it finally came time to confront this mass murderer, as it was likely a man deranged. Attempting a quick glance at his watch, the detector was forced instead to dodge a body in the road. Alive or dead, he did not know, but it brought his mind back to the victims. He had to keep telling himself now that they were no longer important, that it was the Primari who was the real target.

Sometime in the last hour it had rained, and the streets were black and wet. Droplets of water hung from everything and sparkled in the dim light from what few streetlights were still working. Novachi stole a quick glance out his side window and tried to make out anything in the dark sky. It amused him to think that here, on this final night, the skies were so clouded over that the population would never see what hit them. It would just be *Over* in the blink of an eye. The disheveled man was well past middle-aged, so with no family, or any other concern really, he had given little thought to their impending

doom and what it would feel like. The Rogue was reportedly moving at such speed that it would not even be a visible disk until the last minute or so. But here, at the capital, with the skies all clouded over, would they even feel it? Would they even sense those final crushing moments?

At the next intersection, the control light signaled stop, but Novachi merely glanced to his right and left and ran it. The streets were largely deserted, except for the occasional trash can; or for the usual transients that had ignored the government enforced curfew. Some of them were rebellious teens, but most were street orphans abandoned by their parents; or simply the insane whose minds had cracked long ago under the crushing weight of reality. In the wickedness that had enveloped the city, these poor souls had often become the very targets of the aforementioned rebellious teens, only adding insult to injury to a world gone crazy. Many of the houses and apartment buildings that he passed now were dark, and he knew that to approach the door of one of these residences would almost certainly mean death. Towards the end, even the uniformed detectors were no longer safe.

As Novachi drove onwards into the night, he began again to review the cases stored so carefully within his mind. The Golden Spiral... now that had been a clever trick... but he still could not make forefins or webbings out of the mutilations. *Hearts and brains removed, with a reproduction medal of the Zenthi Prize on pink ribbon around the neck.* What could there be any possible meaning in that?! The Zenthi Prize obviously had some symbolism related to the primari as the final target, but nothing in the detector's life experiences would ever pair the two dissected organs together. The pattern now solved, *meaning* had suddenly become the driving force behind his obsession. He still wondered how he had become so passionate? Nothing had stirred his imagination like this in decades. It was almost sick! And he began to wonder now if he was any better than the actual perpetrator.

Coming to a screeching halt, he quickly began to realize he was lost. Not necessarily a good thing considering the state of affairs on this, the last night of all nights. The neighborhood he was now in was darker, trashier, and though his training had reinforced within him the

important need to avoid stereotyping, his many years on the beat had taught him otherwise. The potential danger here was real, no matter what the detector force psychologists tried to tell you. *Font!* Novachi thought, trying to get his bearings. It had begun to rain again too, and his wipers now squeaked as he stared up at the street signs and ran the names through his cluttered brain. Though laid out like a giant wheel, the capital city was an infuriating web of squares and circles, all broken up from the original plan by a complex overlay of modern office buildings and industrial sites. Entire neighborhoods had been cut off and left to rot as dead ends, all in the name of progress.

He glanced at his watch just as he heard a loud thump on his back fender. T-minus 11:23hrs. He heard the thump again, followed by laughter. *Font, I don't have time for this!* Straight ahead was a dead end, and in his rearview mirror, a gang of teenaged kids. Reaching over his fat belly, he pulled his plaque out of his inside pocket and held it up to the side window just as the lead instigator came up and tapped the glass with a heavy club. The young street urchin merely laughed at him, then reached into his own pocket and pulled out an identical plaque. Whether real, or fake, Novachi could not tell, but he pitied the poor fool that had once owned it. The detector's throat went dry as the gang all laughed now, while the ringleader continued to tap on the brittle glass. Against his better judgment, Novachi opened his window a few inches. The air was cool and damp.

"No time for fun," he said with a forced smile, his hidden right hand settling on his sidearm in the console. For once he was grateful for such a heavy gut.

"We got us a fat one here!" the boy said with a sinister grin.

"Toma likes the fat ones!" someone from behind the car called out. "...sick bastard," he added, followed by a lot more laughter. *So, this is it*, Novachi thought. *Raped and killed by a bunch of snot-nosed kids on my last night on the job... go figure. Shoulda gone home and fallen asleep on the couch!*

"This is a nice triwheel," the ringleader said, still tapping the glass.

"Sell it to ya," Novachi said, trying to be funny, just as the back glass blew out. Acting on pure instinct, the detector swung his sidearm

around his fat belly and shot the kid square between the eyes. With tires screeching on wet pavement, he was pulling away before the lad's body had even begun to crumple. "No time for fun," he muttered as he reached the dead-end and jerked the wheel hard to the left. Tipping up on two wheels, the triwheel came dangerously close to toppling over, before righting itself with a hard thump. Novachi was on the gas before the second bounce, and gunned it straight for the gang. His victim's body had barely hit the pavement before his elbow broke out the side window and he began firing into the remaining group of delinquents. Two fell and the rest scattered. With a final sickening lurch, the triwheel bounded over the three bodies and he was free.

"Font," he said under his breath, on the verge of throwing up. His arm still hung out in the icy air, and he realized he was shaking all over. "Not exactly standard procedure for threat mitigation... Guardias!" In all his years as a detector, Novachi had only ever used lethal force one other time. It was back when he had been young and brash and full of bravado... and also didn't know any better. The face of that particular victim had haunted him for years after that – had almost caused him to change careers in fact. But here, now, in this car, he could not even tell you what that last poor kid looked like. *Just another faceless, nameless street-orphan that had been gunned down in the street.* An orphan himself, whose parents had been similarly gunned down in the street, Novachi wanted to stop and barf out the window, but didn't dare. He drove on instead, shaking in the wet cold.

It was some moments before he realized that the streets had become familiar to him again. A right turn here, and a left just up ahead. *Yes!* Almost there. He realized he was still shaking, and without thought, tried to put up the broken window. It bothered him beyond all imagining what he had just done. No attempt to reason with them, no attempt to resolve the situation in any other way – nope, just *pop!* right between the eyes. It was just a dumb kid... he could've just sped away! The Rogue had made monsters of them all, including him. *Snap out of it!* Novachi scolded himself, knowing full well that the situation could've unfolded in many worse ways. *Stay focused.* But his heart was a mess, and this shocked him now almost as much as anything else. His brain had been working overtime, and he was more tired than

he realized. He must find the courage to see this through.

With a lurch, the triwheel bounded the curb and came to a stop at the steps of the United Churches Tabernacle. With some effort, Novachi forced himself out the door of the cramped vehicle, his gut barely sliding past the steering wheel. He reloaded, then tucked his sidearm into his coat pocket, knowing full well he was no safer here than anywhere else in the city. He glanced up at the imposing stone edifice, black and ominous in the wet darkness, then turned back towards the city. The tabernacle was up on a slight rise, and gave a fairly good view of its surroundings, especially from the top of the long flight of steps. With cheap, worn-out loafers scuffing on the coarse stonework, the detector began his long slow ascent, thinking all the way. The Golden Ratio had been the map, while the Zenthi Prize indicated the target; but what of the mutilated organs?! It was as vexing as these damnable steps!

Breathing heavily on wobbly knees, the portly man finally launched himself onto the wide portico. It was eerily quiet, and he did not like it. It spoke volumes about the nature of the Directorian soul that the tabernacle was empty on this night. Novachi had heard that in some cities the subguardia had even been attacked. The people felt betrayed, abandoned, lost and unloved, by the very beings they had spent their entire lives worshipping. Despite being raised in the orphanage here, the detector could relate. He had felt much the same way after his parents had been gunned down by thugs right before his very eyes. With utmost caution, he pushed open the heavy wooden doors to the sanctuary and peered in. Darkness. Taking a few steps into the massive internal space, the door closed behind him with a loud thud, leaving him in absolute darkness. There was no one here!

“Hullo, Father!” he called out, shattering the silence. His voice echoed throughout the immense chamber and made him feel small. It was a suffocating blackness that made him feel clammy and uncomfortable. He thought to call again, but thought better of it. There was nothing for him here, it was time to go. This was a curious feeling, he had to admit. He’d felt much the same way the last time he had left these austere surroundings. *There was nothing for him here.* That had been nearly forty years ago, he mused. Though forever grateful to

Al'Embri for practically raising him as a son, Novachi had never felt the connection with the Church that the subguardia had hoped out of him. The detector had simply left and never looked back.

Stepping back out into the dim light of the portico, Novachi surveyed the vast city. Many quarters were dark, as the electrics had gone out long ago and there was simply no one left to fix them. Novachi could not imagine the terror of living in those burned-out sectors. Towards the end, as supplies had dwindled, even candles had become scarce. He couldn't help but think now that The Rogue's impact would almost be a blessing by this point. The people of this planet had suffered so over the past year that they may not ever heal from this, even if Dr. Ananti did miraculously succeed. Such hopelessness.

Far off towards the city center, Novachi could see the Palace of the Primari rising up out of the cold dreary mist. Its lights were still blazing like a beacon of course. It was still such a long, long way though, and Novachi thought briefly of just giving up. What did it matter? Let the Primari be damned. The image of the bullet striking that boy between the eyes struck him now, and he collapsed against a pillar in melancholy. Tilting his head against it, his face brushed up against something soft. He forced himself back upright and stared at it. It was a pink swag that wound its way round and round the pillar, far, far up into the darkness. *Reproduction medal of the Zenthi Prize on pink ribbon around the neck.*

"Oh, my Guardias," Novachi whispered, looking back down over the city towards the Palace. Though it did not make the least bit of sense to him, his heart was telling him that this somehow was the answer to the whole fontan thing. *Sweet Guardias.* As fast as his chubby legs could carry him, the detector began his long descent back down the stairs, his overburdened brain suddenly seeing things under a whole new light.

~ ~ ~ ~

"Yes, Doctor, I understand. There is still time, remain calm and focused," Primari Qoarta Zenthi said to her over the crackling hiss of

the telcom. After a promising start, the generator had failed. And now, in this deep dark dusty hole under the ground, Dr. Moira Ananti marveled as her dream fell to pieces right before her very eyes within the deep bowl that had once been Deep Space Crater. At the heart of the Nogolon Plateau, one of the few dry places in the heavily forested marshlands of Directoria, the hopes and dreams of an entire world were withering on the vine and she felt just as helpless as everyone else. *Remain calm?! What the font*, Moira thought to herself as she hung up the transceiver.

“Well, what did he say?” Jondra prompted her, snapping her qantergum as wildly as ever.

“He told me to remain calm,” Moira half smirked, even as she threatened the bash in the brains of the computer monitor sitting directly in front of her. “What the Guardias is wrong with this fontan thing?!” she half screamed, pounding her fists against the table. But her theatrics did nothing but stir up a cloud of dust, causing her to sneeze. “Ugh!” she vociferated after the fit was concluded and the dust had resettled itself.

“Perhaps if we cross leads L19 with B47,” Thana said suddenly, jumping up from his own desk and pawing through a mass of wires in the back of an adjacent server.

“I’m, uh, not so sure that’s a good idea,” another faithful assistant said just as a hailstorm of sparks filled the small chamber and plunged them all into darkness.

“Greaaaat,” Moira quickly concluded. “Put em back ya big dope.” Somewhere in the darkness Jondra let out one of her characteristic giggles. Always the optimistic one.

“Anyone got a softlight?” Thana said as the lights automatically snapped back on. At least the Conflict Force Engineers had installed self-resetting breakers... it had saved their butts more than once from a number of embarrassing short outs. Yet, despite the harshness of the dusty overhead lights, the server still remained dark.

“Thana, I swear to the Guardias...”

“Hold on now Doctor,” he cut her off, pressing several buttons and bringing the machine back to life. On Moira’s own screen however, the point source generator was still dead as a doornail. The

power was there! The nuclear reactor was still in the redline, and the deadly radiation still permeated the air, *so why isn't this fontan thing working?!*

"The problem has to be with the generator itself," Zillia said, throwing her hands up in the air for what seemed like the two millionth time. This had been her argument for nearly every single problem they had encountered right from the very start, and Moira was at last slowly beginning to believe her. But the generator had been assembled with exacting care and had been checked and rechecked dozens of times by dozens of people before finally being sealed behind layers of radiation barriers and blast doors. Even if the team did wish to check it out *again*, it would take them hours just to get to it.

"Noooo," Moira said aloud, almost to herself. "It was working... there has to be something else we're missing." For about the two millionth time, she wished that Maxta was here to help them. Where the point-source theory had been Moira's, the design of the generator itself had been Max's. Staring at the screen, her mind wandered, just as it always did when confronted with a problem, and she began to wonder what he would do.

Day T-683 had been swelteringly hot on the plateau when Maxta and Moira had finally arrived at the center of the immense crater. Despite the crisis that now confronted their planet, it had still taken a considerable amount of wrangling for them to even get permission from the Heritage Service to drive their triwheel down here. People did love their paperwork, even if the request came directly from the *primari*; but the added bother had saved the two scientists nearly a day's hike in the blistering sun. As they stepped out of the vehicle, it did not take them long to be grateful for the air-conditioned comfort the ride had afforded them. The crater felt like an airless void on an otherwise lush and verdant world. Whether or not the environment had been affected by the Rogue's first pass through the system nearly two years ago was still a hotly contested issue; but then, people also loved to find excuses to go on abusing their planet.

Just by chance, Deep Space Crater had proven to be one of the few natural structures on Directoria that was large enough to support

the immense dish that Maxta was proposing. Estimates for the cost and logistics of building anything artificial that was even remotely this big were beyond even the combined resources of a united world. And everyone knew that as the time to impact drew nearer, any concept of a united world would quickly evaporate. It was also purely by chance that the United Front had been put directly in the line of fire so to speak, and many had felt that this had been the deciding factor on whether or not the plan could ever hope to succeed in the first place. By its very nature, the United Front had been at the leading edge of technological and industrial growth for the past hundred years. It seemed only fitting perhaps that they should be at the vanguard for this project.

Though the crater was not perfectly in line with the incoming rogue, Maxta felt confident that the point source generator could be steered just enough to make it effective.

“There,” he said, pointing. “The aperture of the generator will be precisely there, with the control center deep underground somewhere over there,” he waved in a northerly direction. “And climbing away from us and up the walls of the crater, the dish will take shape from here.”

“Guardias,” Moira whispered. She had always read about Deep Space Crater of course but had never had the chance to visit it until now. And now, standing in its very heart, she was overwhelmed by its immensity... and indeed, by the immensity of the project they were now proposing to undertake. Without a proper frame of reference, it was difficult for Moira to wrap her mind around the size of the thing, but the hollowness she felt – and the complete absence of sound – convinced her immediately that it would be no simple task to achieve. Behind her, Max began to chuckle in the airless heat.

“Impressive, isn’t it,” he commented, taking in a sharp breath.

“I had no idea,” Moira quickly conceded. “And to think that all this was caused by a mere pebble by astronomical standards is almost shocking.” She waved a tiny arm over the whole of the curved rim that lay far off on the horizon. A rock the size of a sixteen-story building had struck here many thousands of years ago... but the Rogue, now the Rogue was much, much bigger. Moira could almost feel its

crushing weight already.

“Here,” Max prompted, “I bought you a present.” Moira’s face broke into a broad grin as the old man proffered her a wide-brimmed straw hat he had retrieved from the rear bin of the triwheel. It precisely matched the one he was now wearing and her heart was touched. A father figure to her, she could never know the love the old man felt for her, and his aged heart felt weak as she accepted it with fluttering eyes. The heat was staggering.

“You alright?” Moira asked. “You better get some water. I’m gonna go look around at our new digs,” she added with a sweet smile. All Max could do was nod as the beautiful young girl moved slowly away. Her slick green skin practically shimmered in the bright midday sun, and Max’s overtaxed heart sang a silent lament for love unrequited. He had sacrificed so much in his life for the advancement of his career; and standing here now, his only regret was a lifetime of sacrificed of love. The girl kicked in the gravel on the spot that the generator would be and Max could picture it all in his mind. His heart, however, knew that he would not be here to see it. With a quiet sigh, and a whisper of love, he collapsed.

A tear slowly traced its course down over the high green cheekbone of Moira’s still baby soft features. By the time she had noticed him lying there in the gravel, it had already been too late. A hundred selims from nowhere, she had ultimately been forced to leave his heavy body just lying there in the hot sun as she fled from the scene for help. It had been one of the hardest things she had ever done. The rescue personnel would not even let her see his bloated form all those many hours later, and in many ways, she was grateful for it. Staring again through the solid bedrock and past the generator, she knew that his tomb, and his spirit, were not too far beyond.

“I’ll be damned by the Guardias,” Moira whispered under her breath.

“Come again?” Jondra giggled, snapping her qantergum.

“Zillia,” she called out, “you’re a gem.”

“Huh?” the young girl said in response.

“The problem *is* with the generator... Thana, bring up the

alignment procedure,” Moira ordered with growing excitement. Though the crater was not perfectly in line with the incoming rogue, Maxta had felt confident that the point source generator could be steered just enough to make it effective. “Ugh, it’s so simple!”

“Got it!” Thana announced, his voice too filling with excitement. The brilliant young man was already picking up on Moira’s train of thought.

“What the font is going on?” Zillia issued with some irritation; her ever-present pessimism often serving as the polar opposite to Jondra’s own eternal optimism.

“Oh, my Guardias,” Jondra suddenly announced, staring at Moira’s screen. “How the heck did we miss that?!”

“Seriously guys, come on...” Zillia whined.

“We never gave the fontan thing a target!” Moira explained, shaking her head at their combined stupidity. “When it came online the last time, it had momentarily focused on the space station, just by chance... now it’s just searching again. So stupid...”

“Inputting the coordinates of the Rogue,” Thana proclaimed, his webbed fingers clacking heavily on a large keyboard. Somewhere deep in the bedrock they all heard a deep thrum and felt a slight rumble. The massive generator was turning. After a few breathless moments, Moira’s screen at last came to life.

“Yes!” she screamed, followed by cheers from the others.

“Shall I call the Primari?” Jondra said excitedly.

“Font the Primari,” Moira exclaimed, causing the girl to giggle. “Let’s just fire the damn thing and get this over with!”

It was now only the *Enterprise* that stood between her and success.

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More than a hundred selims distant, on a much smaller plateau, two young teenagers sat together on a cushion and stared up at the stars. The warmth of a single blanket enveloped them both and afforded a skin-on-skin contact that they both thrived on. Just a few short hours ago, the boy had perhaps been the loneliest creature on the

planet. In contrast, the girl had been immensely popular, with friends and admirers that swirled around her like minnows in a stream... yet she too was lonely, and had in these final hours made her way here. Popularity does not necessarily promulgate happiness. Her home life, like that of his, had become unspeakable, so they had both fled. Chance alone had led them each to this place, and they now felt comfort in it. Comfort in its quiet safety, and comfort in their togetherness. They were companion now to their own belonging.

The girl, Amira, had requested a fire, but Allexna had carefully explained to her his desire to witness the brilliance of the oncoming rogue in its fullness... and too, to watch as its course suddenly steered clear of the planet at the hand of the magnificent Dr. Ananti. Instead of a fire, the two had simply snuggled in that much closer, and had ultimately been better for it. Allexna's initial trepidation had slowly given way to an unexpected level of comfort that he could not have ever imagined in his life. For her part, Amira had been surprised at the closeness she suddenly felt. It was a closeness that she had never experienced with any of her past boyfriends, or even with any of her so-called best girlfriends. On any other given day, in any other given year, the twos' paths would not have ever crossed. Yet here they were, against all odds, and they were both finding a love that they never knew existed.

"I guess I could've at least brought a softlight," he smirked.

"Or at the very least, a snack," she giggled in response.

"I could go down to the water and catch us some minnows... if I had a net," he laughed.

"Ugh! Raw?! And alive?"

"Oh, my Guardias, you're one of those people?" he harrumphed with a smile she could not see in the darkness, yet still sensed.

"I'll take mine salted and dried, thank you very much!"

"Order up... Ding!" Allex teased her, and she leaned in closer giggling. His skin absorbed her warmth like it was the hottest new drug. There was a certain comfort in their togetherness that had been lacking in his life for a long, long time. A closeness of mind, body, and spirit... molded within the softness of skin touching skin. The

undeniable importance of Touch. He had never felt such closeness; had not ever let it creep into his broken heart until now. He wished this night would never end, but knew – one way or another – that it must. Whether it was the coming dawn, or the destruction of all things, love was fleeting, and life in the end would get in the way. This he knew intuitively.

A moment of silence passed between them in which they both stared back up at the stars. At first, he did not see it, but as he stared at the carefully memorized spot, a faint glimmer finally caught his eye. It had arrived at last. It was barely a shimmer, and blinked in and out of existence often in the distortive effects of the atmosphere; but it was finally there nonetheless, after all these many months of waiting. And Alex suddenly wished it gone. What a painful irony love is. A sudden surge of fatalism clutched at his throat and threatened to strangle him. *What if Dr. Ananti did not succeed?!* The thought had never occurred to him before and he felt suddenly afraid. It is a natural thing to await death throughout the course of a normal lifetime, to wonder at it, to question at its arrival and what it meant. But this was a different thing altogether... death would come at exactly T minus Zero hours, and Alex was staring at it now right in the face. The time had come at last and the novelty of it was gone. He involuntarily separated himself from Amira.

“What is it?” she whispered, sensing him tense, feeling the sudden gap between them.

“It’s here.”

“What’s here?” she said with a half-hearted giggle, following his gaze upwards. To her, the blanket of stars was just a sea of pinpointed light. Her untrained eyes recognized no constellations, could not tell that any one point was out of place or missing. She could not see what he saw... that now there was an addition; so insignificant as not to even be noticed on its first time through so many, many months ago. And for many hours to come, that’s all it would remain: an insignificant point of light. And then all at once, quite suddenly and quite terrifyingly, the black body would begin to simply *loom*. It would quickly start to blot out the stars until, in the final seconds, it would fill almost the whole of the entire night sky. He could feel its crushing

weight already and wanted to run and hide. What the font was he doing here?! This was perhaps the worst place he could be.

And the girl leaned in closer. “Hey,” she whispered, “what is it?”

“There,” he pointed, breathless, feeling again her warmth against his skin.

“I don’t see it,” she answered, craning her neck, her cheek now touching his. Suddenly, and without thinking, he turned as she turned and he kissed her. His first... and by far – her most passionate. All the world’s troubles melted away in that instant as their spirits coalesced, and for a moment, Alex forgot all about their impending doom.

“Well,” Amira giggled when the little deed was done, “I certainly never expected that when I came up here tonight.” Her tingling skin flushed to indigo to match his own.

“I’m sorry,” he said meekly, turning away from her – his shade changing now to red.

“It was nice.” The flat statement made Alex feel suddenly warm all over. There was a long period of silence between them that was not necessarily awkward, it just seemed right. They both stared up again at the stars; though Alex carefully avoided the ‘spot’, and instead scanned the heavens much like he had always done since childhood. Love is such a painful irony indeed. His first kiss... and with the most popular girl in school too no less! Truthfully, his mind had been so focused on the beautiful and intelligent Dr. Ananti that he had not considered much else in the past year. With the schools all closed due to lack of staffing, that one aspect of his limited social interaction had quickly dried up, leaving him home alone with his books and documentaries. Where his peers had taken this unexpected break to ramp up their delinquency, Alex had instead become a homebody, losing even what few friends he did have. Never breaking out of his shell, he had instead collapsed within.

His body tensed as his eyes again focused on that single point of light.

“What are you so scared of?” Amira whispered in the darkness. But Alex didn’t want to frighten her with what he knew was coming. So innocuous at first, the final few moments of the Rogue’s arrival

would be catatonically terrifying to mind, body, and soul. And it would arrive here first. *By the Guardias*, he suddenly prayed, *Doctor Ananti must succeed!*

“Do you see that group of stars?” he prevaricated.

“Where?”

“This group over here,” he gestured, “that looks like a horizontal zigzag...”

She leaned in closer again, tilting her head. “Oh, yeah... okay...”

“Well, that is the constellation of Jetteila Al’Emori, also known as ‘The Star-Crossed Lover.’”

“Oooo, tell me more,” Amira giggled, snuggling in closer to his chest now, rather than adjacent to him as before. Still plagued by a lack of self-confidence though, Alex could not yet bring himself to wrap his arm around her soft shoulder; placed his webbed palm instead, face down, on the cushion behind her.

“According to legend, Subguardia Jetteila Al’Emori threw himself from a high waterfall after he was forbidden by the Church to marry the woman he loved. Recognizing his sacrifice for love, the Guardias captured the moment in time and placed it in the heavens...”

“Awe...”

“The splattering of stars in the constellation represent the time-frozen droplets of water... and the horizontal zigzag is Al’Emori as he leaps, lost forever in the moment.”

“That’s so sad,” Amira said in a soft and gentle voice. “And they were never allowed to be together in the Secondlife?”

“Suicide is a sin,” Alex explained, “so rather than punish him, the Guardias simply froze him in time.” Amira clucked her tongue while Alex continued: “His nameless lover is over there,” he pointed, “running after him. She too was frozen in the moment... destined forever to chase after him, rather than be punished for her primal lust.”

“Wow,” she giggled lightly, “but I meant: what are you so scared of with girls?” With a grin, she snuggled in just that little bit closer. This simple act of true affection brought the walls tumbling down within him at last, shattering the shell once and for all.

“That was my first kiss,” he blurted out unexpectedly. He felt

his skin flash instantly in the darkness from yellow to bright red. The warmth of embarrassment overheated the space within the blanket and he felt suddenly clammy in the cool night air.

“Really?” she merely said; softly, and with no hint of maliciousness or judgment, as he would have normally expected. Another long period of silence passed between them that was this time slightly more awkward, but not as uncomfortable as one might think. It was more a moment’s hesitation than anything else as a lifetime of inhibitions slowly dissolved themselves within Alex’s once angry and bitter subconsciousness. This moment had been such a long time coming. He looked once more up at that single point of light, the one that should not be there, and his heart sang a silent lament for all the time lost. So many chances not taken. So much love gone astray to the fears and the anxieties of youth.

With utmost care – and with a gentleness Amira had never before experienced – Alex rolled her over on the cushion and began to kiss her softly, letting all the rest of the world and its troubles just melt away.

## *T-minus 10...*

An unusual air of silence permeated the Bridge that night.

The expansive command center still remained largely vacant with the night shift stationed below decks and most of the senior staff on the away mission. Commander Stadi had resumed his work with Cicely finalizing the calculations for the interspatial rift, while Castillo still stood at the ACP solving the impending heat problem that the inverse warp field would generate. The only person with nothing to do was Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett, who sat now in her command chair and stewed in a pool of her own anxiety. The tension was high and it permeated the air like the stench of rotting flesh. The captain even scrunched up her nose and upper lip at the seemed perception of it. She knew her focus should be one hundred percent on the crisis at hand, but her heart instead left her distracted – angry – irritated and annoyed. She just wanted to go to her quarters and curl up in a ball.

Far away in Engineering, Lt. Commander Skyl and his teams were working at a feverish pace to modify the main deflector dish. Vulcan stoicism could sometimes be a hard driving force, but the crewmembers under his command could always be counted on to rally to the cause. Modifications that should have taken hours had taken barely one, and now all that remained were the myriads of safety checks that gave Starfleet ships an unparalleled record in reliability. A human engineer may have skipped a few of these steps, but Skyl could always be counted on for his diligence and attention to detail. Nevertheless, safety checks that should have taken an hour, had been completed in minutes, and the great starship was nearly ready to fire. Cramped and dirty in a tiny Jeffries Tube, the chief engineer made one final check, then tapped the communicator pinned to his left breast.

“Skyl to Bridge...”

*“This is the Bridge, go ahead Commander...”* Captain Garrett’s voice rang through the cramped access tunnel like the slamming of a heavy door inside a cathedral. Still, the Vulcan was not that out of touch with human emotion not to detect the hidden undertones of hurt in his captain’s voice. In a rare act of compassion,

his stoic heart went out to her.

“Modifications to the main deflector are complete, Captain,” he intoned. “Has Lieutenant Castillo come up with a proposal to bleed off the excess heat?”

On the Bridge, Garrett nodded to Castillo who spoke now into the open comm channel. “Yes, Commander, I have... but you’re not going to like it...”

*“I rarely like any of your propositions, Lieutenant, but please proceed.”* For the first time in hours Captain Garrett actually smirked as Castillo scowled at the hidden voice.

“If we lower all shields and run the heat dissipation units at full capacity, it’ll still get pretty hot in here, but I think the heat will be tolerable.” The Lieutenant actually cowered as if about to be struck. A brief moment of silence permeated the air that left Castillo peeking out of his eyelids for a safe haven.

*“Captain, the proposal is sound, albeit risky,” Skyl said at last. “All necessary precautions should be taken against radiation exposure, and we should expect some hull damage from scorching. Buckling may also be a concern.”*

“I believe it may be worth the risk, Commander,” Garrett answered. “Do what you can to shore up the structural integrity field, and we’ll take care of the rest from here... Garrett out.” The captain stood up and nodded to her helmsman, whose look of surprise would’ve made a good Christmas card. Turning, and still not making eye contact with Commander Stadi, the captain instead spoke directly to Cicely.

“Are your calculations complete, Ensign?” The green-skinned young lady made one final glance at her computer monitor, then smiled at her captain.

“Yes, Ma’am, all calculations checked and rechecked. May I suggest that Mr. Castillo take the runabout out at this time so we may begin the preliminary coordination and mapping procedures?”

“By all means,” Garrett proclaimed, throwing an open hand in Castillo’s direction. Stadi could sense just the barest hint of angry disinterest in her voice, in her thought patterns; which were completely

shut off from him now by the way. The cold silence within his mind was almost deafening, but it was the disinterest that troubled him more. Now was not the time for the ship's captain to be indifferent.

"We should also take the shields offline at this time," Cicely added, "so as to allow the heat dissipaters time to cool off and recycle." She could sense the tension building again and tried to keep her voice as cheerful as possible. At the front corner of the Bridge, Castillo was already making his hasty exit into the turbolift, leaving Cicely all alone within the eye of the storm.

"Make it so," Garrett responded, not even really listening to the young ensign. She sat back down in her command chair and paused there just a moment on that razor sharp edge of Prime Directive law. She was really pushing the envelope this time, and wasn't even sure she cared. Some distance behind her, Spencer Stadi merely sighed.

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Even farther away, and far beneath the Nogolon Plateau, Doctor Moira Ananti and her team stood poised to unleash an unprecedented beam of energy into the cosmos. The point source generator was aligned and operational, and the nuclear reactor at its heart was on the verge of a meltdown. The time was now, and there was no turning back. Months of planning, months of international cooperation... billions upon billions of cogents spent in materials and labor. But the cost factor for Moira went far beyond this. She had sacrificed everything for this project, given up everything – including her family – to save everything she loved and held most dear. She had refused to entertain the notion of failure, even in these, their final hours. And now the moment had come at last. A deep thrum began to fill the cavern as a cloud of dust permeated the air and encapsulated them in a dim haze.

All across Directoria however, many were beginning to wonder if any of it was even worth saving. In a time when Primari Qoarta Zenthi had called for peace and brotherhood, chaos and mayhem had ensued instead. Untold thousands had been murdered as the fight for scarcer and scarcer commodities escalated into madness.

It had taken mere months for the global society to fall into this state of near collapse, and many scholars now speculated that it would take a generation to rebuild even the most basic tenets of civilization. The City of Quid was burning uncontrollably. In Nosa Plana, the Royal Citadel had been stormed by an angry mob, the aged Empress thrown naked from the battlements. And on the other side of the world, the Western Front had long ago initiated a harsh regime of martial law, and was even now fighting an intense and bloody civil war. As dawn broke tomorrow, what then?

“Targeting parameters set,” Thana announced, coughing in the dust. Moira sneezed her acknowledgement as even more dust filtered in through the three-inch crack in the ceiling. Radiation counters, at least those that still worked, showed emissions to be off the scale. When dawn broke tomorrow, their lives would be short ones to be sure. Moira allowed her thoughts to drift only briefly to her children. In her mind’s eye, she could still see them there, playing, as a mountain of pots and pans crashed down all around them. She realized now for the first time that even if this worked, she would not likely survive long enough to ever see them again. The thrum was becoming painful.

“Target lock confirmed,” Jondra stated flatly, all joviality at last drained from her voice. She, too, had realized finally that this was a one-way trip. She plucked her last gritty piece of qantergum from her mouth and stuck it on her console next to a hundred other balled-up pieces. Once pink, the small mound had taken on the same dingy brown color of everything else in the suffocating chamber.

“Point source generator at 110%, and climbing,” Zillia warned, “showing a coolant leak in the reactor core.” She gave Moira almost a pleading look. There would be no second chances. The deep thrum threatened to shatter their skulls. *Make it stop!* Zillia silently prayed to the Guardias as circuits popped and sizzled inside her console. The dust was everywhere. Her head collapsed into her hands.

With a practiced deliberateness straight from the movies, Moira removed the firing key from around her neck and very carefully placed it into the appropriate slot. Trembling, her webbed fingers hesitated there just a moment longer.

“Generator at 119%... Doctor pleeease...” Zillia choked, even as Moira turned the firing key. What happened next could not be described in any Videoplay flicker. The thrum became a piercing screech. The rock cavern simply shook like a rocket had been launched from somewhere inside it. Wild arcs of electricity jumped from console to console and ball lightning danced crazily in the air. The dust blotted out all light, made the room dark and frightful. They could not breathe, they could not scream, they could not even move in the terror of it all. The heavy graviton beam leapt forth into outer space and collapsed an entire column of atmosphere into a single string of plasma. The resulting cacophony of thunder shattered windows a hundred selims distant. Delving deep into subspace, the beam shot out across the abyss at warp speeds, reaching its target in mere seconds.

Aboard the *Starship Enterprise*, nothing at all seemed amiss. Lt. Commander Skyl worked now in Engineering with his usual level of efficiency. He was performing final checks on the warp core, and on the engine nacelles themselves, in preparation to create the inverse warp field. The main deflector had been tested as well, with appropriate adjustments made to the linkages to counter any energy rebound that may occur during the upcoming operation. It all sounded much like a surgical procedure; and within the realm of Starfleet training, perhaps it was indeed just that. Precision was an art perfected in this modern age of *Ambassador*-class explorers. Anti-radiation pills had been administered to the crew, and the outlying regions of the ship had been evacuated simply as a precaution. It was all fairly routine to a crew honed to perfection by those in command of them.

But perfection had shown its flaws in the past few hours. Tiny cracks had begun to show within the command structure of the mighty flagship. Things were not always as they seemed on the surface, and imperfection can sometimes be only a hand's breadth away. Locked out of his *Imzadi's* mind, Spencer Stadi stood on a Bridge filled with silence and melancholy, lost in a sea of thoughts all his own. In their nearly twenty years of service together, the commander could count on one hand the number of times his captain had completely closed her mind to him. To say she was hurt was an understatement. To say

she was jealous was imprecise. It was more of a betrayal, and now Spencer Stadi had a lot of ground to make up. His relationship with Enyo must end of course, but even these thoughts brought their own level of defiance. Why must love be so summarily dismissed?

“The *Genesee* is stationed at one thousand kilometers distance, Captain,” Cicely announced to the mostly empty Bridge. Stadi felt that more officers should be called up to fill in several key positions, but his telepathic paracortex knew better than to suggest it. The Away Team would be back soon enough. “Mister Castillo has confirmed his uplink with the *Enterprise* computer, and he has already begun a preliminary map of the subspace boundaries.”

There was a longer than usual moment of silence before Rachel Garrett finally snapped to. “Thank you, Ensign,” she at last acknowledged. Stadi watched his captain slowly shake her head, the simple motion slowly increasing as she apparently shook herself free from a daze. She at long last stood and faced her first officer, and he could at once feel her countenance soften ever so slightly. That first step had been hers to take, and hers alone; yet despite the softening, he could still sense her defiance at having to take any step at all. It was a long road ahead to be sure.

“Shield generators are completely offline, and heat dissipation units are nearly cycled through. As soon as the Away Team returns, we should be ready,” Cicely stated lastly, finishing her report; though she doubted neither one of her senior-most officers had heard. The hairs on the back of her neck bristled in the uncomfortable air. A warning tone sounded from the vacant tactical station at the front of the Bridge, and it instantly broke the trance.

“What the hell is that?!” Garrett half shouted as she whirled around to face the empty station. Automatically tying in, the Ops station also sprang to life and began its own frantic beeping as well.

“Reading a massive incoming energy wave from the planet,” Stadi reported, quickly scanning the mounting data stream.

“From the Rogue?!” Garrett frowned, staring at the dead planet through the viewer.

“No, Ma’am, from Directoria itself... impact in ten seconds!”

“A weapon?” she said incredulously, eyes narrowing.

“No, Captain, it appears to be a deflection beam of some sort directed at the Rogue!”

“Oh my God.” The captain practically dove for the helm, but it was too late. The mighty vessel was struck amidships by a graviton beam of immense proportions. With all shield generators offline, the tiny tin bubble of air was kicked half into subspace like a tin can getting kicked halfway across the street. The ship groaned as she sank. Inter-dimensional pressure on the hull began to mount exponentially as the *Enterprise* slowly slipped beneath the surface of normal space and into nothingness. Hull plating began to crumple under the strain, and the once-steady ship now shook from bow to stern.

“My gods,” Stadi shouted above a rising din, “we’re getting pulled into an interphasic rift!” Stations exploded, wild arcs of electricity jumped from console to console, and ball lightning danced crazily in the air. They had mere moments left before they disappeared into oblivion forever. And then a familiar sound began to fill the air, the main deflector dish was firing!

“Bless you Skyl!” Stadi shouted, even as Garrett realized just what they had done. They all climbed to their feet in a momentary hush. The ship had reentered normal space, but the damage had been done... on many fronts.

What happened next could not be described in any Videoplay flicker. The thrum became a piercing screech. The rock cavern simply shook like a rocket had been launched from somewhere inside it. Wild arcs of electricity jumped from console to console and ball lightning danced crazily in the air. They could not breathe, they could not scream, they could not even move in the terror of it all. The heavy graviton beam leapt forth into outer space and collapsed an entire column of atmosphere into a single string of plasma. Delving deep into subspace, the beam shot out across the abyss at warp speeds, reaching its target in mere seconds.....*then rebounded off an unknown object and raced back to Directoria in the mere blink of an eye.*

“Thana, what the font is going on?!” Doctor Moira Ananti shouted above the rising din. They all cowered near the floor, clutching the edges of their desks for support.

“I don’t fontan know!” he shouted back. With a puff of air from pierced lips, the young engineer blew a layer of dust off his computer monitor and tried to make forefins or webbings out of what he was reading. “It appears the beam has rebounded off some kind of metallic object in orbit around the rogue!” It was the last thing the young man would ever say. There was no time for speculation, no time to wonder why. The rebounded energy quite simply overloaded every single piece of technology that lay nestled within the bowl that was Deep Space Crater. The point source generator evaporated, the nuclear reactor fused into solid bedrock and became a single molten mass, and the dish itself collapsed in on itself with a roar that could be heard for selims. The hopes and dreams of an entire world lay buried now in a tomb of metal and stone.

Garrett knew that a moments’ hush could not last. Circuits popped and sizzled. Tiny fires burned. The lights began to dim, and there was that tell-tale sign that dozens of systems were simultaneously going offline. The downward whine of death.

“Report, Commander,” The Captain said solemnly as her ship began to die. She could sense it, she could feel it, she could see it as the helm and tactical consoles went black. The ACP soon followed, and then finally, the viewscreen.

“Main power has failed, and the main computer has crashed,” Stadi said glumly. “All backup systems are going offline. We have a cascade failure in all life support subsystems... grav generators are spinning down. Internal and external communications are non-operative. All subspace fields have degraded to null status. Expected loss of antimatter containment in forty-seven minutes.” The commander slowly stood upright and turned to face his captain. Seated beneath him, Cicely sat in stunned silence as her Ops screen went suddenly black, startling her. Main lighting was the last to go and was replaced finally by the dim red glow of battery backup.

Captain Garrett placed her hands on her hips and looked down at the floor. They were hundreds of light years from home. There was perhaps nothing more exhilarating to a starship captain than this... and perhaps nothing more dangerous. At this distance, even subspace

communications took weeks. Help was years away, even at high warp. They were alone out here, on the very fringes of the frontier, with nothing but their own ingenuity to keep them alive. What now?

“Abandon ship, Commander,” she said flatly. He did not protest. Shocked, Cicely brought long slender fingers up to her lips and fought back tears. “Contact Mister Castillo from your lifeboat,” Garrett continued. “Instruct him to look for another habitable world within this system for the crew to find safe haven until...” she breathed, “...till help arrives.”

She turned to face the darkened viewscreen. “Don’t forget about the Away Team,” she added, almost as an afterthought. “They won’t want to be there when... wh-wh-when the Rogue strikes Directoria.” Her eyelids fluttered. *I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.* Ten billion people... if the *Enterprise* had not interfered, the poor bastards might have stood a chance! Her eyes dropped to the floor in shame. *We are not gods.*

“Captain?” Stadi said softly. Her mind still closed off from his, he could not believe she’d be foolish enough to go down with the ship.

She merely turned, and said with feigned optimism: “I will make my way to Engineering... perhaps Skyl and I can do something...” Her voice trailed off, and Stadi knew it was time for him to go.

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*“I am the Library, how may we be of assistance?”*

The overlarge but gentle eyes of the hologram stared at them and blinked, while narrow lips curled up in a polite smile. He appeared to be the epitome of patience as he just stood there and waited. The away team was somewhat stunned for a moment as this greenish apparition continued to flicker and waver before them. Somewhat looming, the hologram was humanoid in form, obviously made to look like its creators, and was dressed in a multilayered suit of formal-style clothing. Its arms were crossed at the waist, one hand gripping the wrist of the other. Yet, despite the appearance of solidity, the emerald-

green projection was still largely transparent, its very form just a clever trick of shading.

"I, uh, I am Commander Marta Batanides of the Federation starship *Enterprise*."

"*So you have said,*" it responded in a deep soothing voice filled to the brim with a calm and collected politeness. "*How may we be of assistance?*"

"Well, uh, let's start with: Who are you?" Marta stared up at the image with a reciprocal smile, her space helmet still tucked safely under her left arm. The others slowly gathered around her, fascinated.

"*I am the Library. How may we be of assistance?*"

"Typical logic loop inherent to primitive interactive software," Andy offered. Not necessarily self-aware, the machine was trapped within a web of its own programming. He moved in closer, jostling Marta slightly with his own helmet. "What is your make and model number?" he said as Marta gave him a slightly annoyed look.

"*I am Library Computer System Class 92, serial number seven-four-seven dash eight. Would you like to play a game with us?*"

"Very informative, Lieutenant," Onovan grumbled from somewhere behind him. The counselor raised his voice and spoke more clearly now. "Computer, what planet is this?" The hologram's image was immediately replaced by a swirling cloud of energy that soon coalesced into miniature 3-D solar system. On the lower left side, one planet in particular blinked three times, then expanded to consume the entire dais. Deep and soothing, the hologram's voice filled the room once more.

"*This is the planet Kurl Minor. First Colony of the Kurlan Hegira.*" The image of the planet shrank back down to reveal again the miniature solar system.

"Never heard of it," Andy chirped, grinning up at the hologram as it slowly rematerialized.

"I have," Enyo offered from the rear of the group. She and Ann Grey had remained largely silent since this greenish apparition had first made its initial appearance; Ann more out of fear, Enyo under the perception that she was just a lowly ensign. Andy, Marta, and Onovan all turned to her now and her twin antennae wilted ever so slightly.

“My dad’s an archeologist... well amateur archeologist,” she giggled nervously. “The Kurlan System is a long way outside of Federation space, but anyone in the field has heard of it.” She attempted to shrug in her heavy spacesuit, but merely grinned instead.

“And?” Onovan said testily after a long moment of silence. He was still hot and cramped inside his suit, and it was beginning to get heavy on his shoulders... not to mention that damnable itch.

“Well,” the girl began uncertainly, “as I remember it, the Kurlan civilization died out several thousand years ago. The colonies of the Hegira are all that remain... Lauren III for example,” she said matter-of-factly. “Kurl Prime and Kurl Minor disappeared ages ago... like literally, disappeared... and the great mystery has always been, what happened to them... especially since the central star in the system still remains perfectly intact.”

“Interesting,” Marta murmured.

“W-w-well, wh-wh-why don’t we just, well, ask it?” Ann Grey blurted out suddenly.

“Oh, my dad would just kill for this information!” Enyo snickered with a devilish grin.

“We are here to learn,” Marta mused, turning. The group all faced the hologram once more. The overlarge but gentle eyes of the image still stared at them placidly and blinked, while narrow lips curled up in that same polite smile. Once again the epitome of patience, he just stood there and waited. “Library,” Marta asked, “what happened to this planet?”

*“I do not have that information... would you like us to show you a trick?”*

“Well so much for that,” Marta sighed, “it obviously cannot sense anything outside this room.” Used to dealing with the much more adaptive and interactive computers of the *Enterprise*, the group was failing to pick up on the finer nuances of this particular hologram.

“Logic loop again,” Andy proclaimed, quickly dismissing what they were more and more quickly missing.

“Library, where are all the people?” Ann Grey called out with her usual level of compassion and medical straightforwardness. Surprisingly, she did not stutter, though her forehead was crunched up

in a growing frown of uncertain awareness.

*"They left us here alone."* The cold raw statement of it sent shivers up everyone's spine. The overlarge but gentle eyes of the hologram still stared at them placidly and blinked, and narrow lips were still curled up in that same polite smile, but there was a new sudden depth to this character that they all began to keenly feel. *"Would you like us to tell you a story?"*

"Us?" Marta said nervously, more to her colleagues than to the hologram itself.

"The Kurlans believed," Enyo began to explain, "that each individual is a community of individuals..."

*"...that inside each of us are many voices, each with its own desires, its own style, its own view of the world..."*

"Or maybe the thing is just whacked," Andy countered with a boyish grin.

"The program has been running for millennia," Onovan added, though just a little bit more wary than his younger and more impulsive comrade.

"So has it simply been programmed with the basic philosophy of its culture, or has it indeed gone insane?" Marta asked her colleagues. But none of them were programming experts, and Ensign Enyo was the closest thing they had to an archeologist; intelligent she was, but hardly a scholar on ancient extinct cultures.

"Regardless," the young girl stated, "it still would be nice to satisfy one of the greatest archeological questions of our age... for my dad's sake of course," she added sheepishly. "Can we maybe access the archives directly?"

"There were no computer interfaces," Marta reminded them, "and we don't have time to survey the rest of the structure." So enraptured were they with the hologram, the group had almost completely forgotten that the solid ground on which they were standing could potentially be reduced to a cloud of vapor in just under ten hours' time. Yet, like any good explorer, Marta was not willing to give up quite that easy. "Andy, can you access the database *through* the hologram somehow... perhaps an interactive subroutine within the *Enterprise* mainframe?"

"Don't make the ship crazy, Lieutenant," Onovan warned, with just a hint of uncharacteristic humor in his otherwise agitated voice. Andy grinned and flipped open his tricorder. But his grin quickly faded as the device offered him several negative sounding tones.

"That's odd," he said, "I've lost my uplink with the ship's computer."

*"Your ship went silent some time ago,"* the hologram offered, giving them all an instant case of the heebie-jeebies.

"Wait," Marta said, raising a single gloved finger, "you've been communicating with our ship?!" She continued to point as if the *Enterprise* were in the room right above her.

*"An uplink was created with your language database to better facilitate our communication."*

"Don't let a simple machine distract you with its nonsense, Commander," Onovan warned her. *"We* created the uplink through the tricorder, remember."

"Logic loop," Andy chided her with his usual smartass grin.

"Oh, yes, of course," Marta conceded at last. "But this thing is starting to freak me out." Annoyed, she reached up and flipped the communication switch embedded in the collar of her spacesuit. "Batanides to *Enterprise*..." A long pause.

Silence.

*"Your ship went silent some time ago,"* the hologram reminded her. *"Would you like to play a game with us?"*

"Shut up," Marta growled. "Batanides to *Enterprise*... *Enterprise*, do you read me?" Nothing. Not missing a beat, the Chief of Security was quick to act. In the back of her mind, she was already beginning to wonder if the whacked-out hologram itself was somehow behind the communications blackout, but there was more than one way to skin a cat. She directed her gaze towards the smartass boy with the sheepish grin. "Andy, suit up and go make a visual survey of the ship. Perhaps you can establish contact from outside the structure."

Picking up on the subtleties in her voice and demeanor, the young lieutenant quickly gleaned from Marta her growing lack of trust in their most gracious host, the hologram. Though doubtful, Andy supposed it was possible that the disturbed program might've

somehow hacked their system. It had after all been running a very long time, and all things in nature will adapt and learn over the ages. He merely nodded to his commanding officer, then slowly donned his helmet. Giving it a sharp twist, he heard the good solid click of a hard seal. Marta suddenly filled his field of vision, and this time used both gloved hands to grasp his helmet and shake it, perhaps only slightly more aggressively than was necessary. With a smile, she gave it a final smack and sent him on his way. It was strangely quiet in there, all by himself this time, and he found the sound of his own breathing to be just a hair bit unnerving.

Andy turned back only once at the forcefield to face his comrades one final time. By now, Ensign Enyo was at the field generator ready to modify its harmonics in order for him to pass. They all held tightly onto their own respective helmets, just in case, as she bent down silently to make the necessary adjustments. With a cheeky wave, Andy at last turned and forced his way through the tingly energy barrier. It took considerably more effort than he had anticipated to push through it – and he very nearly foundered on the other side – but recovered quickly and trudged out of the alcove and back into the massive rotunda. Looking up, the young man allowed himself a few brief moments to admire once more the majestic frescoes that adorned the gigantic dome. He wished he could just stretch out on his back and stare at them for hours; but hours he did not have.

Air was precious, and time was short – and in just a few more hours, this magnificent structure that had stood the test of time for millennia, would be pulverized to dust. This filled him with a certain amount of melancholy as he reflexively looked down at the pressure gauge on his wrist. *No time to dawdle*, he thought, as much as he might like to. His heavy boots crunching silently on the sandy grit that covered the marble floors, Andy at last stepped outside into a surprisingly increased amount of daylight. The Rogue had moved that much closer to the sun by now that the gray landscape had started to take on a hue only slightly less than that of a full moon. He could spend days here, exploring these ruins, he decided, and quickly made the decision that he would explore further the legends of this Kurlan Civilization. Perhaps convince Enyo to begin an extended study with

him.

It somewhat humbled him to think that he had actually stood on one of their homeworlds; a simple thing he was sure so many other generations of archeologists had only dreamt of. Perhaps with Enyo's help, he could convince the captain to delay their departure for a week or two and do a really extensive survey... once the ship had steered the planet clear of danger of course. Even a whacked-out hologram could provide a wealth of information on a culture so long extinct, he concluded. Smiling to himself, he looked up to the heavens. The ship was there, but it looked different somehow. Its angle was all wrong, and it was as gray as the surrounding landscape. *It looks dead*, he thought, flipping open his tricorder. No energy readings of any kind... he should've picked up *something*, even from this distance. He looked up again and felt suddenly very, very alone, with only the sound of his own breathing for company.

Behind him, in the airless void, the doors to the rotunda slammed shut and locked with a silence that naturally aroused no suspicion. Reflexively, Andy looked at the pressure gauge on his wrist. Air was precious and time was short, and he really hated being alone.

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His indigo skin glistening in the cool night air, Allexna laid on his back and stared up into the heavens at a shower of sparkling stars. Curled up next to him, wrapped in a blanket and leaning on his chest, the girl snuggled in just that much closer against the chill. He knew that he too should be cold, but instead, Allex relished the coolness as it slowly wicked away the glorious heat of lovemaking. All through his adolescence, Allex had pretty much been a loner. With but a handful of close male friends, the companionship of females was something almost foreign to him. A few acquaintances here and there to be sure, but not ever any one girl close. Blinded by a crippling shyness, with just a dash of naivety, he had not ever seen things in any other way. What had happened here tonight challenged everything he thought he knew about life. Things like this just did not happen to guys like him!

He had always felt like he was on the outside looking in; like he had been excluded somehow from the secrets of interaction that made sociability look so easy to everyone else. He often felt that it wasn't fair that he should be singled out from amongst his peers to be that odd man out, the last one picked, the one so often overlooked. Yet here he was now, snuggling in the cool night air with a girl – the most popular girl – staring up at a nighttime sky that seemed to blaze now with a newness that he had never before seen. Even the twinkling new star that was the incoming Rogue pierced the fabric of the cosmos with a brilliance that electrified his senses. It filled him with the thrill of the chase and sent his heart racing. In less than ten hours' time his planet would be destroyed, yet all he could think about was the girl. It was exhilarating!

Just a short time ago, this boy had perhaps been the loneliest creature on the planet; while in contrast, the girl, Amira, had been immensely popular, with friends and admirers that swirled around her like minnows in a stream... yet strangely, she too had been alone. Popularity does not necessarily promulgate happiness. There was a certain comfort in their togetherness that had been lacking in his life for a long, long time. A closeness of mind, body, and spirit... molded within the softness of skin touching skin. The undeniable importance of Touch. His glistening indigo and yellow skin absorbed her warmth like it was the hottest new drug. He had never felt such closeness; had not ever let it creep into his broken heart until now. He wished this night would never end, but knew – one way or another – that it must. Whether it was the coming dawn, or the destruction of all things, love was fleeting, and life, in the end, would get in the way. This he knew intuitively.

"You don't seem very scared anymore," the girl giggled, pulling the blanket up around her head. "Aren't you cold?!"

"Nah, I'm fine," Alex said softly. The electric stars began to flutter in the soft warm breeze that slowly began to rise up from the swamps below them. His left arm around her, Alex squeezed her lightly and kissed her forehead. "Thank you," he whispered in her ear.

"You don't need to thank me," Amira retorted with a smile. "I'm not a call girl."

“That’s not what I meant!” Alex said quickly, his skin morphing from the indigo hues of lovemaking, to a slightly more embarrassed shade of red-orange. On the verge of being cold just a moment ago, he suddenly felt even warmer than before as his humiliating lack of experience crowded in around him once more.

“Oh, that...” she trailed off with a sudden realization of his prior ‘innocence’. “It was no big deal, really,”

“It was a big deal to me...” he rejoined with a dead seriousness, reaching over with his right arm and holding her that much closer. “Okay, I’m cold now,” he laughed, trying to shake off the dampening breeze. Together, they sat up, and in but a few brief moments had rearranged the slightly disheveled blanket so that it now covered them both. Instead of beside him however, Amira now sat between his splayed-out legs and cuddled in a ball against his chest. It was strangely quiet for a long, long time; but not necessarily an awkward silence, more a tranquil reflection of what they had just shared. It certainly wasn’t the best Amira had ever had; but somehow it had meant more to her – like this time it had actually mattered. So many other boys had just used her; her beauty a target for the jerks and the jocks of the world that were oft times just looking for an easy score.

“Why did you wait so long?” she asked at length, again without any hint of the malice that Alex would’ve expected from a girl of her station.

“Well, it wasn’t necessarily by choice,” he half-laughed. “I just felt awkward, shy.”

“Afraid?”

“Yeah, I suppose, though I don’t really know why.” He shifted uncomfortably. “It’s a difficult sensation to describe. I was never good at picking up on the vibes, the subtle clues... until weeks later of course,” he added with an ironic smile. What Alex couldn’t admit to was the complete lack of self-confidence that gripped him every single time he walked out the door. Whether it was poor self-esteem, or a complete lack of self-love, it had crippled him ever since puberty. It was a sense that no one was interested in him, or anything he had to say... but more than that, the feeling that no girl out there would find an interest in anything he had to offer. Perhaps only a psychologist

could say how this type of negative self-image began, but it was a self-perpetuating demon that snowballed within the consciousness until it became a part of who you were. It was a paralyzing lack of self-worth that cut to the quick.

Another long period of silence, then finally: “Where do you find such confidence?” Not really sure yet what he was feeling towards this, the most popular girl in school, Alex had presented his query as more of a statement perhaps, than as an actual question. To him she had always seemed so secure and self-assured, so poised, so comfortable around others – and indeed, so uninhibited by all the hang-ups that he would consider just a normal part of his own life. To him, the girl was everything that he ever wanted to be – popular, outgoing, strong, liked by everyone – and pretty in the sense that he never once thought himself handsome in any way. There was a certain sex appeal to girls like Amira (and in the jerks and jocks as well) that quite frankly, Alex just did not possess. It was an animal magnetism shared by others that guys like him always found elusive and just out of reach.

“I tried to kill myself once when I was a fourteen,” Amira said suddenly, shocking Alex back to the reality that was now. At first, he could not speak, just sat there stunned, as the once confident girl enfolded in his arms slowly transformed herself into some kind of timid creature he felt the sudden need to protect.

“Over a stupid boy?” he unintentionally sneered, the rashness of it a knee-jerk reaction perhaps to the abrupt shattering of his once-certain perceptions of her. His gaze inadvertently fell upon the constellation of Jetteila Al’Emori, ‘The Star-Crossed Lover’, and he was overcome suddenly by this most bizarre pang of anger and jealousy.

“When my dad left...” she said instead, making him feel suddenly stupid.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he half-choked, not knowing what else to say.

“I felt like it was my fault y’know... and my Ma, she was just such a fontan mess...”

Alex didn’t know what else to do, so he just hugged her instead, even tighter than before. There was a certain comfort in their

togetherness that had been lacking in his life for a long, long time – and perhaps in hers as well. Still nude, their skin formed a barrier against a cold world and generated a heat that encapsulated them in newfound sharing. The undeniable importance of Touch. He had never let such closeness creep into his broken heart until now, and now he wished hadn't waited so long. This girl was not at all what he had expected, and he regretted not getting to know her sooner. But how? All the old hang-ups still remained, in spite of it all, and by dawn they would both go back to their same old dreary lives... or be a cloud of formless dust in the void. His heart broke at the thought of this. *By the Guardias, he swore, Moira Ananti must succeed!*

In a blinding light that startled them, an entire column of atmosphere collapsed into a single string of plasma and leapt forth into the cosmos. Even from hundreds of selims away, the sudden bolt of otherworldly lightning lit up their plateau like daylight, sending them both crawling backwards and away from it in fear. With a reverse flash, the light was gone almost as soon as it appeared, leaving them once again in deeper darkness. Alex's mouth fell open. The great dish had fired! Eyes still readjusting, his head fell back and he gazed up at the heavens, expecting to see the very fabric of space ripped open at the seams. He blinked once, twice, three times, and tried to focus on the precise spot in which the Rogue should be. At first, he could not make it out in the afterimage glare that clouded his retinas and he jumped to his feet in excitement. *She'd done it! The crazy fonz had actually done it!*

"Sweet Guardias," Amira spat out, "what in thee *font* was that?!" She stood up, still naked, and brushed the dust and gravel off her rear end, more than just a little bit annoyed. Bubbling over, Alex grabbed her by the hands and began to do a little dance.

"That was the graviton beam!" he practically shouted. "Whoooo-hoooo!" Amira couldn't help but giggle as his excitement became infectious. "She did it, she did it, she did it," he chanted, still spinning around her in a dizzying circle.

"Show me," she insisted at last, shaking his hands and giggling. Together they looked back up at the piercing starlight, and he zeroed in on the precise spot, pointed. Then he saw it, that one pinprick of

light that shouldn't be there, and his heart momentarily fell. She saw it too, or at least thought she did, and her countenance fell to join his. "I don't understand..." her soft voice trailing off, that chronic habit threatening to return. Trailing off was easier than stating the obvious. It was easier than admitting the truth. A sudden dull roar began to work its way through the thicket below them, and again they backed off in uncertain fear of it. They were hit all at once by a wavefront of unnaturally heated air and somewhat crouched as an otherworldly thunder shook the very ground on which they stood. Still buffeted by warm winds, they felt suddenly naked in the stillness that followed.

"I need to think," Alexna whispered finally in desperation. *What went wrong?!*

"I don't understand," Amira chanted again, almost as a prayer.

"Think you idiot... Ugh!... I'm so stupid," Alex chided himself, "too many Videoplay sci-fi stories... you're forgetting the basic rules of physics," he muttered to himself, bringing webbed fingers up to his mouth in further contemplation.

"Tell me!" Amira pleaded on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He grabbed her by the shoulders and stared at her through the dark.

"It's basic physics," he explained with growing excitement. "An object will continue to travel in a straight line until acted upon by another object... we were expecting it to blow up, or get swallowed up, or something crazy like that... we just can't see it turning yet because it's too far away!" His feet shuffled in the gravel as he threatened to dance around her again. Dr. Ananti had saved them all!

"You mean it worked?! We're saved?!" The girl was breathless, on the verge of tears.

"It worked!" he shouted to the heavens, throwing his arms around her and spinning her off her feet in a massive twirling bear hug. The suffocating weight of two years of unbridled anguish was suddenly lifted from their shoulders, and they felt at once weightless and carefree. Their world was saved! They kissed and danced for several long moments, their unfettered nakedness as liberating as a swim in the warm muddy swamps below.

And then they heard laughter in the darkness behind them. A

mob of laughter.

“Amiiiraaa...” a gruff voice called out into the stillness of the night.

“Oh, my Guardias,” she whimpered, cowering at once and searching for her clothing.

“What? Who are they?” Alex whispered, a deep well of instinctual fear exploding suddenly from within him.

“It’s my ex-boyfriend, Arba,” Amira hissed, fumbling at last with her one-piece suit, unseen tears streaming down her cheeks now in great rivulets. Arba. Rumor had it, he led the local rape gang... and perhaps worse. Alex stiffened in the cool night air. Rarely do we see those defining moments in life, even as they’re upon us.

## *T-minus 09...*

The mind of Detector Fraca Novachi was an ever-evolving place.

He was back in his triwheel now and racing through the black and glassy city streets towards the Palace of the Primari. His initial effort to locate Subguardia Al'Embri at the United Churches Tabernacle had met with failure, and in a near-panic now, the detector was speeding into the heart of the capital at a breakneck velocity that taxed his weary brain. Deserted of all other vehicles, the meandering avenues were still a veritable minefield of debris, and even the occasional body. He swore quietly to himself as a heavy metal trash-can flew off his left bumper and clattered away into the darkness. He was presently passing through one of the blacked-out neighborhoods and his dim headlamps did little to illuminate the rain-soaked highway. The cold damp air puffed unremittingly into the cab of the vehicle by way of the blown-out windows and made him feel chilly and altogether annoyed.

Novachi still could not figure out where all this passion was coming from! His nearly two-year investigation into these serial murders had somehow become almost an obsession to him. Like a man possessed, and often on two wheels, he dodged debris and menacing monuments, trying to reason through what little he did know. The Golden Ratio had been the map, the reproduction medal of the Zenthi Prize indicated target, *but what of the mutilated organs?!* Hearts and brains removed. Meaning had suddenly become the driving force behind the detector's obsession – but what *meaning* could there possibly be in that? Nothing in Novachi's life experiences would ever pair the two dissected organs together. Yet, there was meaning there, he could sense it; he could *feel* it with everything within himself that it meant to be a detector.

On the steps of the tabernacle however, it was the pink swag that wound its way up the pillar far into the darkness that first set his mind on its newest tangent. *Reproduction medal of the Zenthi Prize on pink ribbon around the neck.* Something about that pink ribbon felt so

familiar to him, almost personal; like it had been meant for him, and him alone to see its meaning within the convoluted pattern of these murders. Though it did not make the least bit of sense to him, his heart was telling him that this somehow was the answer to the whole fontan thing. His overburdened brain was suddenly seeing things under a whole new light, but the solution just wasn't quite there yet. He was still being tricked by the misguided belief that good must do good, evil must do evil. He was not yet quite ready to accept the fact that sometimes these light and dark extremes must dissolve themselves into a world of gray.

Be that as it may, the mind of Detector Fraca Novachi was an ever-evolving place. The Zenthi Prize was handed out to those citizens that showed profound courage in the face of overwhelming fear. This he knew. The prize had been created in the first days of the United Front by a grateful new government that wished to honor the memory of Conflict Marshal Chrusa Zenthi. His fatal charge up the hills of Quid in the final days of the Liberation War was legendary. The medal would *never* be threaded with a pink ribbon however, because the Liberation Wars had been fought against the United Churches! The pink ribbon was thus significant, and its pairing with the Zenthi Prize was an important clue. The ever-evolving mind of the detector was slowly beginning to see a pattern within the pattern now, and he was simply spellbound. This was becoming a far more complex case than he had ever imagined; the effect of which was almost intoxicating.

At this point his mind began to drift to the victims, almost as an afterthought, as he came to a screeching halt at the end of a cul-de-sac. "Font..." he muttered to himself, *I must pay more attention!* The detector did not wish a repeat of his earlier encounter with that unruly group of wayward teens. There was no bravery in using group tactics to assault a single individual. That's what differentiated a hero from a petty thug. The wet and dark streets became momentarily unfamiliar to him as he tried to get his bearings. He had lived in this city his whole life, yet it was funny how foreign things became when a world of order suddenly becomes a sea of disorder. A single lamp remained to light the surrounding area, and he was grateful for that much at least. He saw a few dark wary silhouettes peeking out at him from a scattering

of windows and decided to move on before these scattered silhouettes grouped themselves into a menace.

Spinning around sharply, he coasted to the end of the street and stopped at the intersection, trying in vain to make out the signs in the dim light of his headlamps. Lost – in these, the final hours – Novachi smirked at the irony of it. Is this how he would spend *his* final hours? Driving aimlessly around the capital city like some senile old fool unable to find his way home? Disgusted, he turned right and headed towards a brighter sector that still seemed to have power. Looking up at a sky dark and deeply overcast, he still wondered if there would be any sense of death when the Rogue slammed into their planet at a tenth of the speed of light. Thinking of the Zenthi Prize, he wondered at the courage of those few that had decided to witness their fate out in the open, on rooftops, rather than cowering in their basements like all the others. Courage in the face of death – it was a question everyone should ask themselves.

That was one thing the victims did have in common, he decided: they had each in their own way faced death; and each with a varying degree of courage inherently congruent to their own personality. Perhaps then, it was only fitting that they should each have a Zenthi Prize placed around their neck. *But what of the pink ribbon?!* This all-important clue spoke to him in a fundamental way of the United Churches and it suddenly opened up an all-new avenue for his ever-evolving consideration. *Come to confession, my son*, Al’Embri had encouraged him back in the precinct, not too many hours ago. “Oh my Guardias,” Novachi said out loud with swiftly evolving realization. Each of the victims would’ve likely gone to confession! That was the connection between them; *that* had been the clue that his stupid feeble brain had been missing all along. Good must do good, evil → evil... *but not always*. Sometimes these definitive extremes dissolved themselves into a world of gray.

But by the Guardias, could Al’Embri really kill all those people? To strangle someone would be challenge enough, but then to dissect them as well? These kinds of acts would take a sick, sick mind, and Novachi simply could not make himself believe that his old friend and mentor was capable of such heinous deeds. And at what motive?

Love, money, sex, or vengeance? The first three were out of the question for a Subguardia, or at least they should be, plus they did not fit within the established pattern – maybe for one victim, but never for thirteen. Vengeance? But against whom? In these sick and twisted times, many a parishioner had sinned in the eyes of the Church, so why would Al’Embri have singled out just these thirteen, and these thirteen alone, to mete out his unholy wrath? There was still an important piece of the puzzle the detector was missing. He began once again to review the facts as his triwheel passed into a suddenly bright neighborhood.

How quickly the unfamiliar becomes familiar again with just a little bit of light. The broad avenue he was on led directly to Conflict Square, at the heart of which lay Chrusa Zenthi’s sarcophagus beneath a great arcing spire. Once there, the Palace of the Primari was but a few more blocks. The Golden Ratio – this had been Novachi’s map to the center of the city. The Zenthi Prize had been a pretty good indication of the final target... Primari Quarta Zenthi himself. But if indeed the primari was Al’Embri’s final intended target, there still was no motive! Even vengeance failed this test, as near a Novachi could tell anyway, and why kill the others first? Why not just strike out at the primari directly? And why all the fontan mutilations?! *How little we know someone, how little indeed.* “Font, font, font!” Novachi shouted, slamming his webbed hands repeatedly against the steering wheel. With a squealing of tires, he peeled into the brightly lit square and came to a screeching halt.

Before him was a crowd of dozens, perhaps hundreds. *The courageous ones.* These people had decided to meet death head-on, out in the open – and indeed, gathered together as one in unfettered brotherhood. Perhaps there was hope for their civilization yet, Novachi mused. For the first time in many hours, he thought of Dr. Moira Ananti and wondered at her progress. For a few brief moments, the sight of all these people gathered together in peace pulled at his heartstrings and for the first time he hoped that she might actually succeed after all. It had been a very, very long time since the hardened heart of the detector had held any hope at all. For a moment he considered just stopping here, abandoning it all; why not join these defiant people and spend his final hours out here in the open, awaiting

death – or the coming dawn – with courage and dignity.

The fleeting thought of it really did tear at his withered old soul. To feel connected again; that was the heart of the matter, and his mind reeled at an incoming flood of fresh new emotions. His had been a lonely life. A few acquaintances to be sure, but damn few good solid friends in his many long years serving this faceless city. A couple girls in his younger days, but not ever any one serious, until he had found himself here – a fat old man, way past retirement, who had nothing to show for his life but a grungy old flat, and this battered up old triwheel with half the windows smashed out. Novachi began to laugh now, in spite of himself, and shook his head at what life had doled out for him. Did these things just sort of ‘happen’ – or was it fate – or destiny – or just the simple act of giving up slowly, day after day, until routine became so comfortable that it was never again challenged.

Do you blame yourself for a lifetime of unrealized dreams, or do you blame all those myriads of forces that exist around you, and beyond your control? So many questions to ask the Guardias when the time came... if indeed you even believed in the Guardias. Perhaps that was the true basis of faith, Novachi realized – that someday all your questions would be answered; that someday, all this heartache that you so staunchly endured throughout your long and lonely life would at last make some small semblance of sense. Novachi found himself looking unconsciously out the window at that black and faceless sky, wishing for stars. These people gathered here tonight deserved nothing less than clear skies to lift their heavy hearts. They deserved to look death square in the face – or to see the rising new dawn – with a clarity of thought and perception that went beyond this rain-soaked night.

He wondered if they would find it. These were the heroes in his mind, that infinitely small percentage of the population that had the courage to face their fears out here in the open, rather than cowering in darkness under a haze of drugs, alcohol, and fallaciousness. It was time for him to move on. To his left he could see the brightly lit fringes of the Palace just sticking up above the treetops. He was close now, but out of respect, decided to skirt the very edges of the square to the right instead and circle around the crowd until he came to Quid Street. This main thoroughfare ran for a half a selim and stopped on the very

steps of the Palace. It was from here that Detector Fraca Novachi would finally get some of his own answers. It was from here that he hoped he could find some kind of absolution, that from here his strange obsession would at last make some small semblance of sense.

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“If you please, Nomen Prime,” Vacilli gestured, “launch control has been set up in the Conflict Room... it is wise that you familiarize yourself with the...”

But those were the last words Tarma Vacilli would ever speak. With surprising swiftness, Subguardia Al’Embri was up on his chair and launching himself against the insignificant little man. All that Primari Qoarta Zenthi could see was a sudden flurry of pink robes enveloping his Master of Internal Security, then reducing his slight form to nothing more than a thin pink layer upon the floor. A sharp movement – and a tiny snap – were the only indication that the mass contained anything even remotely resembling a living being.

Zenthi’s throat went dry and a sudden knot threatened to choke him as he stood there in horror. His mind could not quite grasp what had just happened here. *Did I just see what I think I saw?!* After a moment more, the pink mass slowly coalesced itself back into the form of the aged old subguardia. As Al’Embri rose, Zenthi could see that Vacilli now lay dead at his feet, his head cocked at a most unnatural angle. The primari’s skin morphed now from yellow to gray, and finally to a most unnatural shade of white. His lungs emptied themselves of air as he fell back into his chair.

Al’Embri whispered the ancient blessing and made the circular sign of faith, then turned to face the primari. Only half aware of the man, Zenthi pulled at his shirt collar and struggled to breathe. Divine faith and absolute realism were at a crossroads now. A sign from the Guardia, or the work of a madman? The Golden Ratio had slowly spiraled inward over the course of many months to make its final point here; yet its message had strangely been left open to interpretation. The United Churches instilled that each life unfolded according to a preordained plan, that the Guardias guided each and every one of us

in our day to day lives towards an ultimate end. Modern dogma, however, was painting a slightly different picture – that each of us created our own destiny, that our lives could be steered in a direction of our own choosing, each according to our own whims and our own secret wishes.

So, what had guided the actions of this particular religious zealot? If the Guardias had wanted to prove a point, then they had certainly made it! Even now, as Quid continued to burn, Zenthi's own family was being incinerated in a most unholy wrath. Society of any sort had virtually collapsed. In mere hours, their world would be obliterated. *Faith*. Zenthi wondered at the meaning of it now as he stared into the cold hard eyes of one of the Church's most powerful leaders. Had this man *really* been guided by a Higher Force to commit this most heinous act; or had he instead simply created his own delusional destiny, forged according to nothing more than the whims and wishes of *imaginary* forces of faith? A sign from the Guardia, or the work of a madman indeed. Zenthi wished the Rogue would just strike them all down right now, and end forever the sickness of this mad, mad world.

Choking on his own words, the primari attempted to speak. "Wh-wh-what have you done?" he whispered, still staring into those cold, dark eyes.

"What must be done to ensure the people are led down the chosen path."

"Y-y-you're mad..."

"Am I?" Al'Embri stared at the primari with the flat featureless expression of a schoolmarm. No one would know that just moments ago he had murdered someone in cold blood; and in the Official Office no less! But the progressive policies of the Zenthi government *must be made right*. There was no more time for games, for debate, for think tanks and committees. The United Churches could no longer just sit idly by and 'wait this one out'. The time for action was now, and by the Guardias, Al'Embri would *make* this man *see* the error of his ways. The fact that the United Front had been left to flourish in these past two hundred years was sin enough, but to allow this Administration in particular to continue on, unanswered in the face of Church doctrine,

was more than the subguardia could bear. He would see this through to the end, even if that end meant total destruction.

“You are no hero,” Zenthi spat out, getting angry now. His skin flashed from orange, to red, and finally to intense blue as he rose to his feet, trembling with wrath. “You think you are working through the Guardias to effect change, but you’re just a heartless madman without the brains to see what you’ve become! Have you forgotten how to love?!”

“Tell me, Nomen Prime,” Al’Embri said coolly, “what is the brain without a heart?”

“*What?*”

“And what is the heart without a brain?” he quickly countered. “Is this not the basis for all love? Hearts and brains locked in a constant battle for control... but alas, you cannot have one without the other. The bittersweet truth of our existence.”

“Oh, spare me your metaphysical mugdashit!” Zenthi fumed, throwing his webbed hand up and turning to face the black windows. *What to do now?!* He could make a break for the Conflict Room, seal himself inside; but would Al’Embri try to stop him? Who knew what the crazed man intended to do next. It was certainly clear what he was capable of! Nearly four trying years in office, two of those bordering on horrific, and now he would die *not* with his people, but instead at the hands of a religious fanatic. Perfect irony? Or indeed, truly a sign from the Guardias? The Primari of the United Front felt his options narrowing, but he knew he must stick to his principles. If that meant he should die here in the next few moments, then so be it – at least he would go to the Secondlife knowing that he had not wavered in his beliefs. And if those beliefs differed from that of the Church, then so be that too.

“Tell me, Nomen Prime, do you remember the fields of Ansara?”

“*What?*” Zenthi murmured again, turning back to those cold dark eyes.

“The fields of Ansara,” Al’Embri repeated.

“You mean the *Battle* of Ansara?” Zenthi countered with some annoyance.

“When I was a young man, they were green and rolling fields... but then, I don’t suppose you remember that.”

“Of course I remember, you old fool,” the Primari muttered.

The Battle of Ansara was his first engagement as a young sublieutenant in the Conflict Force. It was in fact where he had met his long-time friend, Rarna Alcormi. *Oh, how he wished Alcormi was by his side now!* It was a minor skirmish between the United Front and the Northern Empire, and indeed, would not likely be remembered if it hadn’t been his first engagement. The UF battle group had bombarded the coastal hillside from shore for hours before landing troops. Subcommander Alcormi then led a strike force that quickly overwhelmed the Northern infantry, and in a daring countermove, drove them leftward and off a cliff into the sea. The tactic became instantly legendary, and it forever cemented Sublieutenant Zenthi’s undying respect and admiration for the man. Once elected primari so many years later, there was no other choice in Zenthi’s mind for the title of Conflict Marshal than Rarna Alcormi.

Subguardia Al’Embri, however, could still hear the screams. *Her name was Alora.* Ansara had been a peaceful island province, strategically insignificant, yet still an important beachhead. The residents lived in comfortable dugouts carved deep into the green westerly slopes, facing the sea and the setting sun. The Northern Empire had set up a small sentry base here many decades ago but had done nothing more to disturb the autonomy of the people there, or their idyllic lifestyle. Al’Embri had arrived as a young missionary in the early days of the base, and had quickly fallen in love with the peace and tranquility of the simple life. Al’Embri closed his cold, dark eyes. He could still hear the screams. There had been no warning the day the UF battle group arrived just off the coast. Confused, the people stared out at the mighty gray ships more out of wonder than fear. *Her name was Alora.*

The bombardment was swift, and it came all at once. Terrified, the people ran to safety, and into the only safe places they had ever known. Deep into their dugouts they fled, not knowing the peril that these damp, comfortable holes held for them. He had been picking berries with Alora just hours before. They had talked about marriage,

and of him dropping out of the missionary program. These were big decisions, and not to be taken lightly. Sometimes, the heart must not lead, where the brain has lease. And sometimes, just sometimes, the heart *must* gain lease in order to counter the cold, hard realism of the brain. Love is never just light and dark, simply right and wrong; sometimes these definitive extremes must dissolve themselves into a world of gray. Al'Embri had retired to the tabernacle to pray by the time the bombardment began. He could still hear the screams.

From his high vantage point, the missionary could see with frightening clarity the folly of his flock as they retreated deep underground. If he had been down there among them, then he most certainly would have done the same. But from up here, with his eyes closed, he could see again and again the horror of their decision as it unfolded again and again in vivid, agonizing memory... not for minutes, or tens of minutes, but for nearly two full hours as the green fields of Ansara slowly dissolved into a brown cloud of devastation. What could one man do? Even buried alive, he could still hear their screaming. *Her name had been Alora.* Even as the UF troops stormed forward, he could still hear the screams. He could hear the screams of men as they were driven off that cliff. He could hear the screams of fanatical soldiers as they pinned his pink robes into the mud. And then they just left.

Al'Embri opened his cold, dark eyes and stared at the primari. Zenthi had a sense that the Subguardia had just been to some cold dark place within his embittered soul and he looked downward in an awkward offering of respect.

"Were you on the ground at Ansara?" Al'Embri asked, voice trembling faintly.

"Of course not," Zenthi shot back defensively now. "I was just a sublieutenant, an adjutant to the Fleet Commander... one of many. I never left the lead ship... in fact we never even fired a shot," the Primari added, getting a sudden tack on what the crazed subguardia was alluding to. "Is that what this is all about?!"

In the first sign of weakness since his arrival here, Al'Embri collapsed into a chair, tired. Tired of the world, tired of the fight, tired of this prevaricating young politician and his failure to see. Zenthi's

mind on the other hand was a whirlwind now, trying in vain to remember any details at all about Ansara. Other than it being his first engagement, nothing about it had at all been memorable! The noise of the bombardment had been exhilarating to be sure, and had been intended to shock and confuse the Northern troops – and of course it had succeeded, too. The stunned soldiers were easily routed by Alcormi's strike force as it stormed the blank hillside. In fact, Zenthi could not even remember looking out the windows that day until this last final drive had sent those terrified men leaping from the cliffside. Morbid perhaps, *but it was war* – and the cheers aboard ship had been infectious.

What Al'Embri found so horrific about this insignificant little skirmish left Zenthi at a loss. He bet that if you went back to Ansara today, you would find a lush green hillside and no sign whatsoever of their passing there. A monument perhaps to the fallen soldiers? The Northern Empire had regained possession of the paltry, little island anyhow, several years later in the Treaty of Ori, so the battle in a sense had been a draw anyway. Just another forgotten moment in history. So, why would Al'Embri stand here now, in the Official Office, and murder a man in cold blood over an event that had happened nearly a half century before? What could it possibly have to do with Zenthi, other than the simple fact that he had been there? Oh, how he wished Alcormi was here with him now! That ancient old field marshal would have diffused this situation hours ago with quick decisive action.

Instead, these two men were resigned to square off here together, seemingly forever, all alone in a darkening world.

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"Amiiiraaa..." the gruff voice called out again into the stillness of the night. More laughter in the darkness – a mob of laughter.

"Your ex-boyfriend, Arba... here?" Allexna hissed in disbelief, fumbling now in the blackness with his own clothing. Arba – a ruthless bully in school, now nothing more than a petty thug in the years since. Rumor had it, he led the local rape gang... and perhaps even worse. Allex stiffened in the cool night air as he saw a flash of light. Rarely

do we see those defining moments in life, even as they're upon us. Fight or flight? It was the basic reactionary instinct of all species all across the galaxy, and even here on Directoria. Quickly gathering up the cushion and blanket, Alex was about to urge Amira over the bank towards the swamp below when they were caught in a blinding beam of light. It was too late.

"There you are, my precious," Arba half-shouted across the limited expanse of the plateau. The rest of the group with him gave out a menacing laugh.

"Go away, Arba," Amira shouted back, her voice trembling.

"Who's the little pufta with you?" the disembodied voice asked, blinding Alex directly with the powerful beam of light.

"Please, Arba, just leave us alone," the girl pleaded.

"Wait, I know you...(coming closer)...you're that little moloch from school, the brainy one." More intermittent laughter from the invisible gang permeated the air. Alex put a webbed hand up trying to block some of the light; trying in vain to see how many at least he was up against. "What the font are you doing with my girlfriend?" Arba demanded.

"W-w-we were looking at the stars..."

"I'm *not* your girlfriend," Amira said angrily. Alex wished she would just shut up and not antagonize him. But she seemed combative, defensive, like there had been some past conflict between them that Alex simply wasn't aware of. She had been hurt, clearly, and perhaps in more ways than just one.

"Easy now precious, don't get your forefins tangled."

"Font off, Arba... seriously, just leave us alone." More pleading, coupled with that same defensive anger.

"Whatya think boys?" Arba asked casually, directing the light momentarily at the ground. "...*That little fonch needs to learn some manners...*" – "...*I think the little pufta is just askin for it anyway...*" – "...*What the font are we waiting for, Arba, let's just do this...*"

More sinister laughter... there were perhaps five in all, including Arba. Rarely do we see those defining moments in life, even as they're upon us. Fear gripped Alex now more than it ever had before. This was not high school anymore. There was no protection

way out here in the dark in a lawless society. He could stand his ground now, or try to run... but either way, he would most likely be beaten to death in the next few moments, perhaps even raped first. Amira would be raped too, without a doubt, and then either killed or dragged away, depending on their whims. What separates a hero from a petty thug? *Courage*. And Alex suddenly found it welling up within him from someplace deep. It was a feeling he had never before experienced, and it set his heart racing. His protective instincts for the girl overwhelmed him in a sudden frenzy of action, and he shoved her violently off the edge of the bank towards the seemed safety of the swamps below.

*"Alex!"* he heard her shout as he charged forward with an almighty roar. With a grunt, he plowed into Arba head-on, knocking the light free; the two of them cascading down into one of the archeological ditches from Alex's youth. Sitting on top of Arba's chest now, his body went wild with violence as years of constant bullying poured out of him in great waves of anguish and rage. He reached for the light, but it was too far, so he grabbed a rock instead. Arba gurgled more than he screamed as blow after blow shattered his face whilst Alex pummeled him unmercifully in the all-forgiving darkness. But Alex would not quit. Blow after blow in the darkness vented his unforgiving rage. His fury about spent, he raised up for one final strike, but was catapulted instead by a blinding swipe from the light.

Two burly hands grabbed him from either side and dragged him to his feet. The light shown down now on the convulsing form of Arba as his unrecognizable features gasped for their final breaths. All was silence except for those awful gurgling sounds. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Arba drowned at last in his own fluids, his body going limp after one final kicking spasm. The wave of emotions that came over Alex next threatened to strangle him. Triumph, fear, shame; shock at his own actions – both the boldness of them, and the uncontrollability of them. He had just killed someone with his bare hands! He stared down at the body with a mixture of disbelief and spite – and yes, even regret. Violence was not in his nature, and he was no better now than that bully that lay dead at his feet.

"Oh, my fontan Guardias," one of the boys whispered.

*"Alex!"* Amira screamed as she was dragged up over the bank

by the other two boys. They as yet had no idea what had just transpired here as they struggled with the unruly girl. Kicking and scuffling in the gravel, the trio finally came up to the light, and all three stopped and stared agape at what Alex's anger had wrought upon the world.

"Fontan Guardias, what the *font* have you done..." one of the more belligerent boys said breathlessly. Alex's life was at a crossroads now. Either he had earned their respect – and they would leave him and Amira alone for good – or he had sparked their own wrath and it would now become a bloodbath and a fight to the death. Alex found himself amazingly prepared for the latter; though in his heart he hoped they would just go away now and leave them alone and never, ever come back.

"You crazy fontan moloch..." the belligerent boy seethed. Respect or growing fury, Alex could not yet tell.

"Just get the font outta here you defecates," Amira reproached them, tears in her eyes. But the belligerent boy grabbed her by the throat instead and cut off any further sound from that source. Alex struggled against his captors as Amira's eyes fluttered in the dim background light. The second boy quickly let go as the predominate one slowly walked her backwards, her toes just barely touching the ground. Alex struggled even harder against his own two assailants as the fear welled up within him. The third came up and kicked him in the groin, subduing him briefly, his eyes welling with tears. "*No!*" he rasped as Amira's eyes pleaded with him for help. With a sharp twist of the wrist, her neck snapped and her large eyes went immediately blank. "No," Alex whispered this time, collapsing into the arms of his three subduers. All the life drained right out of him as the predominate boy tossed Amira's lifeless body backwards into the gravel.

"Bring him," he ordered his three comrades, grabbing from them the all-important light and heading towards the gravelly bank. At first, Alex did not resist. They more dragged him than he walked. Amira had been the closest thing to love he had ever found in this unforgiving world. The graviton beam had fired! *Dr. Moira Ananti had succeeded.* And now all that Alex had ever had was gone, stolen from him in the mere moments of his life when he'd needed it most. What was the meaning of life – what was its point? He'd been miserable and

alone through most of it, and tonight at last he thought he'd found some true and lasting happiness. But it simply was not meant to be. He had wished this night would never end but knew – one way or another – that it must. Whether it was the coming dawn, or the destruction of all things, love was fleeting, and life, in the end, would get in the way.

His fate was misery. Happiness was not something that he shared with the rest of the general population. Loneliness was his only ally in a world that seemed to care so little for him. He knew intuitively that they were marching him towards his own death, and he did not care anymore. Dr. Ananti had succeeded... *so what?* His future was ruined anyway. What educational opportunities did he have in a shattered society? The experts were saying that it would take a generation or more now to rebuild any semblance of order on their shattered world. He had wanted with all his heart to work in the aerospace industry (perhaps even work with Dr. Ananti herself someday!) But what priority would that have for a bankrupt government that couldn't even feed its people? Like a cancerous malignancy, all hope had been sucked right out of the life of this world. Better the Rogue should strike them all now.

Alex was caught in a classic no-win scenario. He could never know that not too many AU's away, a Starfleet captain was caught up in her own Kobayashi Maru. Sometimes you can do everything right, *and still not win*. When the time comes, each of us must face death, each in our own way. Some face it with courage, head-on. Some cower in their basements, with their heads covered, praying for a miracle. And some look for that *other* alternative -- that road not taken. Captain Rachel Garrett, like all those captains before her, was facing death with a fighting chance for survival. It's what Kirk would do. It's what Dr. Moira Ananti had done far out on the Nogolon Plateau. It's what Zefram Cochrane had done after the Third World War. It's what separated a hero from a group of petty thugs, and it's what rekindled a small fire of hope within Alex's burned out shell. Hope must endure.

He began to struggle now as the group of thugs dragged him down over the gravelly bank towards the water. They held him firm however as a river of loose stones cascaded down to the edge with them. "Here, hold the light," the belligerent one commanded. He

grabbed Alex by the throat and left arm now and twisted him around towards the water. "You wanna know now what it feels like to drown? Hmmm, you little pufta?" The other boys all grinned as Alex was forced backwards off his feet. He stared into their cold, dark eyes, each of them, for some small measure of compassion, but they merely grinned. One looked away, the weakest one, but the other two just grinned. Alex felt his back touch the warm chocolate waters and his mind instantly flashed back to all those glorious days of youth, swimming naked and unfettered in the warm swamps of childhood.

He and his friends used to come here often, as kids, and pretend that they were great space explorers landed on some rocky world totally foreign from their own. Or sometimes they would make believe that they were famous archeologists, digging down through the pages of history, searching for bones and other artifacts of great scientific value. But whatever the adventure, each new experience was as thrilling as the last, and they had filled his boyhood days with joy. Covered with dirt, and quite often sunburnt more than was safely allowed, they would then slide back down this very same gravelly bank and slip back into the cool waters and soft mud of the surrounding swamplands and relish in the freedoms of childhood, unfettered of the harsh realities of life. *Arba had been one of them.*

Alex held his breath as he slid beneath the water. His body went limp... *why struggle?* All was quiet here, beneath the waters, save for the sound of his own heartbeat. He resigned now to die, and closed his eyes... but fate at this moment intervened. Slipping in the loose gravel, the tyrant lost his footing, and struggling to remain above the surface himself, he released his grip. With a momentous kick and a twist, Alex was free, and he swam down, down, down into the deep. Flipping back over, he buried himself into the cool mud and waited. With lungs burning, he stared up through that black, black water towards the light. It flashed once – twice – three times, over the surface, and then it was gone. All was blackness now as Alex began to see stars. He fought ever more against that instinctual struggle to survive. The blackness enveloped him at last, and at last he found peace.

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All was quiet here, deep beneath the ground, save for the sound of her own heartbeat. The blackness enveloped her, as did the dust, and at last a cough shattered the silence. The dust. The dust was everywhere. She ate dust, she wore dust, sometimes she even thought she dreamt dust. She couldn't even remember the last time she had slept though, for all memory was of the dust. In fact, the only thing she'd had to eat today was dust – *Guardias am I thirsty!* What she wouldn't do right now for a swim in some nice cool subtropical swamp. More dust settled and Moira sneezed for the millionth time. Her head hurt, her sinuses hurt, her throat hurt... even her forefins hurt. Everything hurt. Clutching the edge of her desk, she climbed out from beneath this hiding place at last and tried to take survey of her surroundings. All was blackness throughout.

"Hello," she called with a raspy voice. Silence. Somewhere amongst all the dust and the rubble she knew there must be a softlight. Every workstation had had one. But where to look, she did not know.

"Hello... Jondra... Thana..." she called out again, this time with just a little more desperation. Still nothing. Groping around in the darkness now, Moira slapped her webbed fingers all around the top of her desk searching for that all-important softlight. She found a stylus instead, lots of papers, the keyboard, her quhwah mug, and dust. Pulling open the drawers now, one by one, she found much of the same. Papers and junk, and more dust. Still on her knees, she began feeling around on the floor. The shaking of the cavern had been so violent she was surprised Everything wasn't on the floor. "*The beam has rebounded off some kind of metallic object in orbit around the Rogue!*" Crouching there in the dust, in total darkness, this statement hit Moira like the sharp edge of a knife. The cavern should not have shook at all! Her hand fell on something small and cylindrical and she breathed.

Climbing slowly to her feet with aching knees, wary of hitting her head, Moira switched on the light and prayed. Nothing. Darkness. She slapped the device several times in the palm of her other hand and it came on all at once, startling her unaccustomed eyes with its

brightness. All was dust. A brown landscape of broken machines and lifeless bodies. Thana had been electrocuted. Zillia had been crushed by a sharp slab of rock. Jondra, poor Jondra... and the others... so that was it, she was alone now. Moira forced back a sneeze, it seemed inappropriate now in this quiet place. She shone the light up at that maleficent crack and was surprised to see that it had widened substantially. Her eyes caught a glint of something strange, so she abruptly snapped out the light. They were stars, a thin sliver of them that snaked across the ceiling along the same contours as the crack.

One in particular caught her eye. *The one that should not be there.* She too had memorized the constellations and knew where each little pinpoint of light should be. But this one didn't belong, it was an interstellar interloper, and now it would crush them all. So absorbed was she in the construction of the generator, and the alignment procedures, and all those other things, she had not bothered to look up in many months. Her life had been down here amongst the dust and the dark. The stars were beautiful and twinkled with a freshness that seemed all new. And that one, that one that shouldn't be there – it looked just like all the rest – just an insignificant little point of light that held within its bowels a world of such anguish and destruction. Billions upon billions of cogents spent, uncounted hours of preparation at a cost that went far beyond money, and all for what? *Failure.*

Snapping the softlight back on, Moira gingerly approached the crack. She could reach the ceiling, probably, from Zillia's desktop, but it would be impossible to climb out even if she did. The sparkling stars still beckoned to her anyway, and she was reluctant to give them up. She sighed and spun around instead towards the door to the access shaft. It led to their quarters, the mess hall, the lounge, and eventually out. Her chances for egress were slim, she knew, but still, she must try. The chances of a rescue were even slimmer. And so, she began. Shuffling through the dust, she skirted the dead workstations and the remains of her colleagues and tried to stay focused on getting out. Her first challenge was to get the heavy steel blast door open, and as she pulled on it, she thought briefly of just giving up. She'd been given a lethal dose of radiation, and the Rogue was on its way.

But she was sick of this fontan dust! She wanted to be out, and to be outside in the open with the cool fresh air of the night; not entombed down here in the darkness and the dust with her dead friends at their deleted workstations. With a cry she put her foot up on the wall and pulled again. This time the door groaned and she fell backwards into the dust. The softlight rolled away from her and she had to crawl back under her desk to retrieve it. Then gently, with poise, she stood and passed at last through the yawning doorway and into that long suffocating corridor of her home. Home... *when had she started calling it that?* This place was nothing like her soft and comfortable home, where her children played and her husband experimented with wild new dinners. And these were not the pristine hallways of the SENSES Division Laboratories either. They were cramped and dusty and dark.

The corridors were wide and clean and bright. Miss Moira Elli was a mere postgrad the very first time she had ever walked into the pristine workspaces of the SENSES Division Laboratories, and she was admittedly overwhelmed to be here. But her theories on gravity and superluminal substrates had earned her some recognition in certain circles of the scientific community and had eventually caught the attention of some very prominent researchers. At the envy of her classmates, she had been given a grant to come here to study instead – and indeed, to prove herself against some of the world’s finest minds. It was an honor to be sure but also placed her under an incredible amount of pressure to perform. Some of her theories were, well, theories, and a lot of them were way out there on the fringes of accepted scientific belief. Proving them to anyone would not be easy.

The security officer at the door studied her young green features over and over again as he compared them to her state-issued badge. Increased conflict with the Northern Empire had put most of these government facilities on high alert lately, which only served to make most ordinary citizens feel like little more than petty thugs. Her skin began to morph slowly from green, to a shade of yellow-orange as her anxiety quickly rose. Feeling the heat rise up from her color change, Moira thought for sure now she would be denied entry. But

the guard merely sighed instead and pressed his thumb down on a concealed switch. A sharp buzz made her jump as the heavy glass door behind him began to swing silently open. Grinning, she flushed just a little bit more orange and thanked him. He merely nodded and offered her a half-hearted smile.

Moira had barely crossed the threshold when a thick-skinned older man stormed up to her and began shaking her hands vigorously. His skin was a deep, deep yellow, obviously from many years in the sun, and his temples flashed just that little hint of gray. Otherwise, the man seemed very robust and full of life.

"Miss Elli, Miss Elli," he said excitedly, "I'm Doctor Maxta Cavni. We spoke on the telcom several times... welcome at last!" He seemed rather taken with her already and Moira blushed. He was old enough to be her father, and then some, but still charming, nonetheless. Though caught slightly off guard, she still felt immediately at ease with him.

"Oh, Doctor Cavni," Moira nodded, "it's a, it's nice to finally meet you." She grinned sheepishly as he still held on to her now clammy hands.

"You were expecting someone younger," the aging scientist laughed, releasing her at last. "Please, call me Max. You'll find once you get past that henchman at the front door that we're all pretty relaxed around here." The guard huffed and turned back with a steely smile just as the thick glass door sucked shut with an inhaling sound. "Hermetically sealed," Max winked devilishly, "just like a plastic bag," he added, holding a hand up to his throat. They were instantly in love, and Moira couldn't wait to get started.

For the next hour, Max showed Moira every nook and cranny of the expansive research facility, and even some areas that were technically off limits. He trusted her instantly, and she in return was instantaneously devoted to him. It would lead to years of mutual collaboration on many far-reaching projects that would eventually take her to the Official Office, and ultimately to the Nogolon Plateau itself. But the journey all began right here.

Late at night now, and exhausted, Moira had said her goodbyes, and padded quietly down the darkened corridors. It would be so easy

to get lost here, she realized, and thought for a moment that maybe she was. Turning to look behind her in a misguided attempt to get her bearings, she backed around the next corner and fell abruptly over a mop, landing with one elbow in a pail of muddy water. With a jerk of shock, she promptly upset the bucket with a splash and lay now instead in a pool of murky water.

“What the font...” she exclaimed, her back and backside cold and wet. The man with the mop could do naught but laugh as he offered her a hand up. “Guardias, I’m such a klutz,” she self-deprecated herself as she tried to gain her footing on the slippery floor. Once standing, she held fast to his strong, calloused hand. “Moirā Elli, Junior Research Assistant.”

The man smiled, gently shaking her own soft hand. “Kenna Ananti,” he replied, “Senior Janitor’s Assistant.” He held a certain air of deep charm, and Moira laughed.

Ducking through the dark and dusty tunnels of the shattered control center, Dr. Moira Ananti scrambled her way towards the surface. Much of it had collapsed and she could just barely squeeze through in some places. Exposed to a lethal dose of radiation, with the Rogue just hours away from impact, she could easily just give up and die here deep beneath the ground. But her heart had set itself on a new mission... she would get home to her family now – if it was the last thing she ever did.

## *T-minus 08...*

They had nothing left but their own ingenuity to keep them alive.

In a spacesuit all alone in the dark, Captain Rachel Garrett floated through the corridors of the *Enterprise* on her way to Engineering. It had taken her some time to adjust to the rapidly decreasing gravity – and now she languished in zero-g altogether, pulling herself along on whatever she could find to grab on to. The going was tough, and control was not easy for someone that had not been on a spacewalk in a very long time. She'd had several crashes already and was altogether annoyed by the limited amount of light coming from her helmet; but she was still making remarkably good progress. She had quickly descended those several decks down into the very heart of the primary hull and was now heading aft towards the connecting dorsal. But she wasn't there yet. The *Enterprise* was a 39-story monster, and its captain was only on Deck Nine. From the connecting dorsal, she would still have to make her way down nineteen more levels to Main Engineering.

The captain had not felt comfortable inside a spacesuit ever since her early days as a junior officer aboard the *Starship Hathaway*. She remembered it now like it was yesterday. In the last few 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. Dizzy and disoriented by the rapidly swirling stars, the young lieutenant had had very little time to activate the airflow inside the suit, and had very nearly lost consciousness in the process. From then on, she spent the next two harrowing hours with her eyes mostly shut, fighting off space sickness and barely clinging to life. And thus she had drifted, aimlessly drifted, light-years from anyone, all alone and in the dark with only the sound of her own breathing for company.

There had been no time to send out a distress call, and the suit's comm relay was much too weak to reach anywhere beyond a few hundred kilometers. And so she could do naught but just drift there,

lonely and afraid, in the deepest darkest reaches of outer space. Scared, oh yes, scared beyond all imagining as her oxygen grew thin and she began to anticipate death out here all alone in the dark space between the stars – her body resigned for all eternity to just drift on, lost forever. The lieutenant had initially found some 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 as her air grew thin, her memories turned darker; more sinister. She opened her eyes and tried to focus not on the spinning stars, but instead on the dark space in 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, 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. In fear, she had lied. And that lie had haunted her for the rest of her life. 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* had beamed her aboard. She awoke slowly, on the floor, wrapped in the muslin draperies that adorned the entryway of the Empress Ethereal's private apartments back on Ethos. She drew a hand up slowly to her head, gripping in vain at the piercing pain. She forced herself to sit up. In the act, her vision blurred, her nose began to bleed, and she fought to remain conscious. Indeed, she fought even to remember who she was. *But this could not be!* These events had happened more than two and a half years ago. *Ethereal was dead!* The horrific Battle of Ethos was far, far behind

them – both in distance and in memory. *Yet the scars still remain.* The child had warned her of dark days ahead. *Your own endgame is at hand.* Her vision clearing, this vexed the captain anew now as she floated alone in the silence.

She remembered. She was Captain Rachel Garrett of the *Starship Enterprise*... and she'd definitely had more than enough of that krap! She must remain focused. Yet still, she couldn't help but wonder: had the Empress's statement been just another clever game, or was this right here the moment when everything ended? Her ship was dead, her crew fighting for survival in lifeboats; and she herself all alone in the dark with time running out. *Your own endgame is at hand.* Had the Empress merely planted these seeds deep within the captain's subconscious mind simply to cultivate her own sick and twisted pleasures? Or had there been some meaning to that dire warning of so long ago? How much stock could she – or should she – really place in the predictions of that maniacal child, especially now, all these years later, when so much about life was so unpredictable. Hope. The captain was still clinging to it even now.

*Your crew will need your love, not just your guidance in the few short years to come.* She had definitely given them her love – and more than enough leniency – and now she was beginning to wonder just where had it gotten them? In her complacency, and in her affection for them, the captain had abandoned her principles to uphold the Prime Directive at all costs. And now the people of Directoria would pay the ultimate price for her short-sightedness. She had failed. And now even her crew must pay, all of them. --Garrett fought once more against that cancerous malignancy that slowly gnawed away at her hope, and scolded herself now for being so self-deprecating. *They had at least tried too* – and that perhaps was saying almost as much about how far they had come together as one since the battle-scars of Ethos. They were a family, and Rachel Garrett would fight now to save her family, and indeed their home, if it was the last thing she ever did.

With renewed vigor, the captain launched herself over the last few meters of corridor towards a wide access panel in the floor. The next nineteen levels downward would be an arduous struggle to manually open hatch after hatch after bloody hatch, and she began to

ponder now for the first time if she would ever make it to Engineering in time before the ship exploded. The only thing left operating was antimatter containment, and even these forcefields were quickly degrading. Without main power, nothing in the universe could stop this bottled-up energy from consuming the ship from the inside out... *instantly*. Swearing at her awkwardness, Garrett overshot her mark and slammed against the rear wall of the ship. Slowly and carefully making her way back, she at last attempted to pull on the stubborn access panel. But all she could do was imaginary pushups, no matter how hard she tried.

A little-known fact of weightlessness is, there's nothing to push against! She cursed again as she pulled a small tool from her belt. Holding on to the handle of the panel, she stuck the little bar in the seam and pried against the floor. It took her some moments to get the right angle before the large door cracked just a little bit. Swinging herself around now on the handle and twisting like an acrobat, Garrett flipped over and planted her feet. In this classic transference of kinetic energy, the panel flung open – and quite unexpectedly, flung her up against the ceiling. Dazed, and even more annoyed than before, she finally spun herself around and prepared to open that first cumbersome hatch of many... but much to her surprise, it was already open! In fact they were all open, for as far down into the bowels of the ship as the little lights on her helmet would shine.

“Bless you Skyl,” Garrett whispered to herself. In those last dying moments before the *Enterprise* went dark, the Vulcan chief engineer had had the presence of mind to use what little power he had left to throw the ship wide open. It was almost as if he *expected* his captain to make her way to Engineering. “Oh, my old friend, you know me too well,” she smirked, taking in a deep breath. Grabbing the edges of the yawning hatch, Captain Rachel Garrett pulled herself quickly through it and cleared the next one too. She was on a roll now, with all the fires of hope still burning deep within her heart.

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In a spacesuit all alone in the dark, Andy Dardanelle stared up

at the lifeless form of the *Enterprise* with all the wonder of an Alberta schoolboy. It looked a little closer now, which meant that its orbit was definitely decaying. What in the world could have happened to the mighty flagship in just the few short hours since they'd left it? He thought he could spy a few tiny pinpricks of light in formation around it. *Lifeboats perhaps?* If they had indeed abandoned ship, then there truly was some serious trouble brewing; the wider consequences of which had not yet quite settled in on the young lieutenant. He suddenly felt very, very alone out here though, with only the sound of his own breathing for company. Behind him, in the airless void, the doors to the rotunda had slammed shut and locked with a silence that naturally aroused no suspicion. Reflexively, Andy looked again at the pressure gauge on his wrist. Air was precious and time was short, and he really hated being alone.

Flipping the switch on his collar, he called out into the night. "Dardanelle to *Enterprise*..." A long moment of silence. "Dardanelle to Batanides..." Still nothing. "This is Lieutenant Dardanelle on the planet's surface... can anybody read me?" All he could hear was his own breathing and it began to annoy him, strangely enough. With a sigh, he looked back down at that gray, lifeless surface. *Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink*, he mused, thinking of those ancient mariners lost at sea. He hated being alone – especially since his harrowing experiences aboard the submerged *Ambassador* – and he was really beginning to hate this suit. Turning, he started to wade back again through that powdery spacedust that blanketed everything here. He was walking through layers of ageless time, he realized, and he allowed this briefly to fascinate him. For thousands of years, this planet had been adrift in deep space. And the hologram had been running all that time. *Alone*.

Walking back up to the heavy doors at last, Andy reached up and gave the nearest one a tug. It wouldn't budge. *That's strange*, he thought, *I coulda swore I came out this one?* Reaching up with his left hand now, he pulled hard on the adjacent door, but it too held fast. Thus, he tested each and every one of them, with increasing alarm, a dozen in all, all across the entire face of the massive building. The young man fought against a sudden panic now that threatened to

overwhelm him. He wanted desperately to be out of that suit and back in the company of friends. He wanted especially to be back aboard the *Enterprise*, to roam free in its warm and cheery corridors, and far away from here. Breathing heavily, he didn't know what to do. He looked back down at his pressure gauge and wished he hadn't. Air was precious and time was short, and he really, *really* hated being alone.

Flipping the comm switch once again, he began to gasp. "Come on guys, this isn't funny!" – "Somebody answer me, please!" – "God Dammit, let me in!" In the airless silence, he pounded his fists on the heavy doors and began to pant. An alarm went off inside his helmet and pierced his ears, scaring him stupid. "*Warning: elevated CO<sub>2</sub> levels – decrease respiration immediately.*" Hyperventilating now, Andy started to see stars as his world went slowly dark. Staggering under the heavy weight of the suit, he turned around just in time to fall against the doors. Sliding down them, he collapsed into a total heap on the ground. What scared Andy the most was the total and absolute darkness. 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 just 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? A surge from the warp core pushed the lights beyond standard intensity and it hurt his eyes for a second before the circuits finally 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. The ship around him let out a dreadful moan and the deck beneath his feet shuddered. Forcefields began collapsing in sequence. Water began pouring down the core shaft in great torrents even as a still, calm voice came to him out of the darkness. It somehow appealed to his Vulcan quarter, and made him listen. Defenseless now against the darkness, he began to shiver uncontrollably. The waiting had begun. The shuddering warp core became but a dreamy pantomime in the torrents of crashing water that cascaded down the seventeen-story core shaft.

Eventually it too went dark. Death comes to all things in the

end. An eternity passed as Andy just stood there in that darkness waiting to drown. Waiting. Just waiting. The sound of the intruding 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. He was up to his chest now in icy water and every moment became more surreal in nature than the last. He could feel the Vulcan's fingertips on his face, felt his consciousness slipping away even as this new voice slowly filled the darkness.

*"It's all right, Ensign,"* the Vulcan's voice said softly, calmly. *"Meld with me, it will ease your discomfort."* 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 began slowly to regain consciousness, a part of his mind stayed behind, buried there forever with all the others beneath a million tons of water.

His mind clearing, his respiration slowed, Andy had no idea how long he had been out. He was grateful to Skyl though, that even after all these years, the mind-meld still held strong and kept him calm. In his saddest hours, throughout his long recovery, he had often drawn upon the strength of that most basic connection he held with the ship's chief engineer. Andy's one-quarter Vulcan side had itself become more of a presence in his life after that simple meld, and the young lieutenant often felt that he was all the better for it. Struggling to get back on his feet under the weight of the heavy suit, Andy resigned himself now to patience. Someone would come for him eventually, this much he was certain. *The Enterprise takes care of her own... always remember that.* He resisted the urge to look at his pressure gauge, and instead trudged forward towards the broad steps that swept down off the vast portico to the streets far below.

Surveying the tumbled remains of the city once more, he kicked away a spot in the heavy dust and clumsily sat down on the topmost step to contemplate his surroundings. He continued to remain

fascinated by this Kurlan philosophy that Ensign Enyo had explained to them. *The Kurlans believed that each individual is a community of individuals... that inside each of us are many voices, each with its own desires, its own style, its own view of the world.* How true that was, especially for Andy who was part ‘alien’ himself. He wondered what his Vulcan grandfather would think of this very renaissance philosophy. Logical, or no? It could be argued either way Andy supposed with a laugh. *A laugh.* Richard Castillo had taught him that naughty little habit. Andy had grown up in a conflicting world of swirling human emotions centered around a more traditional Vulcan upbringing. Learning to see the humor in life had been one of his greatest challenges since coming aboard the *Enterprise*. He was all the better for this too, he surmised.

Andy really started to miss his old pal at this point. He was sure Castillo would have some sort of glib comment to make right about now. He even bet that they’d already be playing some kind of game in the powdery dust just to pass the time. Sledding down the steps maybe? Andy chuckled again. *Many voices... each with their own style – their own view of the world.* By extension perhaps, that was the very definition of the *Enterprise* herself. One group mind, one cohesive crew – *one family* – with many voices. This filled him suddenly with an overwhelming sense of belonging. *The Enterprise takes care of her own.* He craned his heavy suit backwards and looked up again at the stricken starship. He hoped everything was all right, that no one was hurt. And if it was broke, he was certain someone would fix it. Reflexively, Andy looked again at the pressure gauge on his wrist... air was precious and time was short – but everything was going to be okay.

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Crammed inside a tiny lifeboat the size of a small bedroom, Commander Spencer Stadi and Ensign Cecilia Garrett struggled to coordinate with the hundred and fifty or so similar lifeboats that had ejected themselves from the dying starship. All of their efforts had been hampered, however, by a complete lack of working

communications. The graviton beam had quite literally shattered subspace and had flooded the entire area with intense interference. It would be another hour at least before the rogue planet drifted clear of the distortions. Nevertheless, not all was lost. Over half the crew was from Betazed, including their first officer, and Stadi was now using his exceptional telepathic prowess to keep the lines of communication open. In carefully relayed mental messages, the commander was slowly drawing the tiny craft together. But it was slow going, and required incredible discipline.

Starfleet lifeboats had been designed to link up in a vast raft, so to speak, in order to pool resources and to allow some interior movement. Stadi and Cicely had been somewhat lucky – they had this particular vessel all to themselves – but some of the bedroom-sized craft had upwards to eight people crowded inside. If Richard Castillo didn't find some kind of habitable world for them to land on, they could be stuck in here for weeks, if not months... and perhaps even *years*. As far as communicating with Lt. Castillo himself, they all had the imaginative young Orion ensign to thank for that. In the ancient days of old sailing vessels, signaling crews would use a shuttered light to instantly flash messages back and forth from ship to ship. Likewise, Cicely had used the marker lights of the lifeboat to flash instructions to Castillo in his nearby runabout. Due to the interference, transport was impossible, so he was on his own.

The Away Team was on its own too, at least for the time being; but they were still foremost on Spencer Stadi's mind. The oxygen generators the team had taken with them would last for weeks, if not months... but they did not have weeks, or even days. In just a few more short hours, the Rogue would slam into Directoria at fifty-eight million miles per hour. Nothing could stop it now. (*...unless of course the Directorian's had another surprise trick up their sleeves?*) The Away Team and all the little lifeboats would have to be far, far away from the two planets by then, or face certain destruction themselves. Stadi stared out the tiny porthole at the gray and lifeless *Enterprise* now. All of the lifeboats were scattering at this point, trying to get away from the sleeping giant before the antimatter pods exploded and blew the ship to bits. No one knew which would be worse, the

shockwave... or the shrapnel.

Two people were still aboard her – the captain, and the chief engineer. Stadi feared for their safety too. Time was running out. He wondered at the folly of trying to bring the dead ship back to life, but he had no doubt in his human captain's intractable hope, or in the Vulcan engineer's indefatigable stubbornness. If a miracle could be performed, it would be those two working together that would make it happen. It bothered Stadi profoundly that he and Garrett had parted on such uncertain terms. She was his *Imzadi*, and he, hers. It was the Betazoid term for beloved, and it went far beyond any physical forms of love and attraction. But he had hurt her, profoundly, and he regretted it now as he looked out that little porthole at their dying starship. It was entirely possible that they may never see each other again. How would he ever cope with such loss? She had always been the stronger one.

"I guess I really mucked things up, didn't I, Ensign?" he mused aloud, whether he intended to or not. The telepathic mind can sometimes confuse thoughts with words, and he was immediately embarrassed by his lack of discretion in thought *and* word. He hoped Cicely hadn't heard him, but still the young ensign paused and stared at him thoughtfully. She, for a moment, didn't know what to say. Stadi's misdeeds had thrown everyone out of their character – even this unflappable young lady, so innocent, yet so wise. But that perhaps was why he *had* spoken aloud... he truly did value her input.

"Do you love her?" she said at last. The question somewhat shocked him and he prevaricated. He guessed, in truth, that he hadn't even really thought about it. It had all just sort of 'happened'. But without a doubt, he did genuinely enjoy her company, that much he did know for sure. The couple had spent many a long night over the past two years just simply talking. Enyo was certainly mature for her age; and for his part, Stadi had felt a certain rebirth in her youth and vibrancy. While alone, they were very well-matched.

"It wasn't just about sex," he finally said, "if that's what our asking..." His face turned red and he attempted to hide his embarrassment by looking back out the porthole.

"That's not what I asked, sir," Cicely replied softly. "Do you

love her?”

“Yes, of course I do,” he spat out, somewhat defensively, “...as far as it can go anyway...” He tipped his nose downward and put his forehead against the ice-cold glass. He could just barely see the Rogue from this angle, and he thought now of her trapped down there in such danger. It was easy to use the term ‘Away Team’ to mask the fear of sending real live people into potentially hazardous situations. He may never see Enyo again either.

“So, you fell in love,” Cicely shrugged, “no one will deny you that.” Her voice held within it an undeniable compassion... but... “But whether or not it is right and proper aboard a starship is another matter, and I think we both know the answer to that,” she said lastly, almost scolding him.

“She filled a void,” he said, mostly to himself. It was quiet now for many long moments. It did not take a telepath for Cicely to sense his melancholy, and she allowed him his moment. But moments cannot last forever. At length, and with a softness of voice that soothed his troubled thoughts, she spoke again.

“Commander, it might surprise you to know that we all understand.” She paused. “We are a family, all of us, and though we may all have our own differing opinions on how right or wrong your relationship may be, we all still stand behind you, and Enyo... and the Captain too of course...”

“But that’s the hell of it,” he rejoined, facing her. “We got soft, all of us, and just look where in the hell we are now!” He smacked a fist on the bulkhead of the lifeboat and shook his head angrily.

“We *tried*, sir,” Cicely argued, “and that’s all we can do is try. ‘Don’t try to be a great man... just be a man... and let history make its own judgments.’”

“Zefram Cochrane,” Stadi mused, smiling at her.

“The humans sure do love their grand quotes,” Cicely giggled.

“The humans, what would the universe be without them?” He looked back out the porthole at the gray and receding shape of the *Enterprise*. It looked so very small now, against the Rogue – and against the even greater blackness of space. But a very big human captain was aboard that ship, and by the gods, Stadi knew she would

save them all if it was the last thing she ever did. "I will, of course, break it off with Enyo," he said quietly, thinking now of his friend Rachel Garrett. It had gone on long enough, his selfishness. He must always think of the greater whole if he were to remain an effective first officer. While he cowered here in a lifeboat, his captain was alone in the dark trying to save their home.

"We're all behind you, sir... your friends."

"And Enyo too?"

"Of course, sir, always." Stadi had a real sense that he'd just witnessed the birth of a new friendship between the two young ensigns. Not necessarily at odds, Cicely and Enyo had always had a somewhat unspoken competition brewing between them ever since they'd first come aboard two and a half years ago. An old favorite, versus a new; but Stadi knew the *Enterprise* could not operate without them. Between them both, the two girls practically ran the ship, and he and Captain Garrett had mused many times over about how far their careers would take each of them. Working together now, instead of head-to-head, they would be an unstoppable team; much like he and Garrett had once been... and would be again. Perhaps some good had come out of his injudiciousness after all.

"*Please, if anybody can hear me...*" a breathless voice suddenly came in over the comm system. Stadi's bottomless ebony eyes flashed Cicely a startled look, and she immediately jumped up and ran to a blinking panel on the opposing wall.

"This is Ensign Garrett, who's calling please?"

"*Please, Cicely, I'm trapped on the outside and I'm running out of air,*" Andy gasped back at her, clearly in distress. "*You have to help me...*" Her green features stricken with fear, she looked now to her superior officer for guidance. The lifeboats had no transporters, and the *Genesee* was far, far out on the very reaches of the solar system by now. Local communication was clearing, but it would still be another hour before they could ever hope to contact Mr. Castillo. Stadi looked again out the porthole at the dying *Enterprise*, then again craned his neck to look down at the Rogue. Out of limited options, he had none. A cancerous fear began to slowly gnaw at his hope. Time was running out for them all.

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Behind them, in the airless void just beyond the forcefield, the door leading out to the rotunda slammed shut and locked with a silence that naturally aroused no suspicion. Once Andy had departed, the rest of the Away Team had returned their attention to the hologram, and as such, hadn't noticed that they were now locked inside with this devilish apparition. The overlarge but gentle eyes of the hologram still stared at them and blinked, while narrow lips still curled up in that same old polite smile. He appeared to be the epitome of patience as he just stood there and waited. He had, after all, been waiting for a very long time. To question whether a machine can become insane is a hazy subject. It requires a definition first on whether or not simple programming can gain the necessary level of self-awareness to even become sane. And what is the definition of insanity?

The Library had been left running for thousands of years, all alone, with no one to talk to but itself. In its memory banks, it held a vast repository of knowledge on every subject then aware to the ancient Kurlan Civilization. There was much food for thought. Couple this with the Kurlan belief that within each individual there were many voices, each with their own desires, their own style, their own particular view of the world. Had the Kurlans incorporated this particular belief into the programming of the Library? It's one thing for a person to be diagnosed with multiple personality disorder, but what happens when a machine is *programmed* with this type of disturbia? These types of questions harkened back to the days of Dr. Richard Daystrom and the disastrous M5 computer tests. There is a certain self to sadness, inherent in its own searing sense of madness.

"All right," Marta said to her remaining team, "we need to gather as much data as we can... this type of interactive holographic technology is years beyond us, and Starfleet research could certainly make use of it."

"I-I-I could definitely see this, um, being used in th-th-the medical field as a type of d-d-diagnostic tool... a-a-a holographic doctor perhaps..." Ann Grey sputtered, still looking warily up at the

greenish shade. She didn't like the way those overlarge eyes kept looking at her, especially now. There was a certain sinister aspect to them, despite that polite smile. It made Ann think of Xavier Hawk.

"Right," Marta agreed. "Ensign Enyo, see what else you can glean from tricorder readings... perhaps you can gain access through the projection matrix somehow."

"Commander," Onovan offered, still itching within the cumbersome confines of his hot and heavy suit. "We may have to consider sending a small detachment into the catacombs below to look for an interface... perhaps when Mister Dardanelle returns." Ann Grey cringed at the mention of the word *catacombs*. Her mind's eye began immediately to visualize dark tunnels filled with dusty old bones and the scurry of long-tailed squeaky rats. She shivered within her own spacesuit as Marta glanced at the chrono on her wrist. They had time yes, though she'd still prefer a pretty wide margin of error, all things considered.

"I guess we'll see, Counselor... but not until communications can be restored," she added with some concern, flipping again that all-important switch. "Batanides to Dardanelle, come in please..." Still nothing. Silence. It left her feeling strangely empty.

"*Your ship went silent some time ago,*" the hologram repeated. "*Is there anything we can do to help?*" Its tactics had changed slightly, and Marta found this somewhat interesting. It was adapting, almost *trying* to be more interactive and engaging. This indicated that the programming may be a little more advanced than originally anticipated. She ignored those overlarge expectant eyes, and instead crossed over to the far corner where Enyo and Ann Grey were now working together with two tricorders. This left Onovan all alone with the hologram, and he decided to start testing it.

"Library," he said cautiously, "do you know *why* our ship went silent?" He was hoping perhaps to catch the hologram in one of Andy's so-called logic loops. If it had indeed cut communications, then maybe the counselor could get it to slip up somehow. He doubted the machine could lie, even after a thousand years of solitude.

"*A subspace discharge rendered your vessel inert.*" Onovan ignored the fact for a moment that the Library apparently had

knowledge of subspace phenomenon, and instead kept his focus on the *Enterprise*.

“And what was the origin of this subspace discharge?”

“*The main deflector dish.*” The hologram said this flatly and without any hint of emotion or untoward malice. Onovan stood there now for a moment speechless and deep in thought. Why would the ship fire its main deflector with the Away Team still on the surface? As he understood it, the interphasic rift that they were attempting to open was a hazardous phenomenon that had the potential of swallowing the rogue planet whole. It didn’t make any sense that they would make their attempt with people still on the ground. Yet he, like the rest of the *Enterprise* crew, had completely failed to take into account the actions of the ten billion people of Directoria. Fear can be a powerful motivator for survival, and the people of Directoria were certainly afraid.

“Library, why can’t we contact Lieutenant Dardanelle outdoors?”

“*A subspace discharge has rendered your communications inert.*” At least the disturbing little photonic construct was *consistent* in his lies – if he was indeed lying?

“Is he alright?”

“*I do not have that information.*” Also consistent with their previous theory that the hologram could not sense things anywhere outside this particular room.

“I wonder why he hasn’t returned,” Onovan mused quietly to himself. Reflexively, the counselor turned and looked at the open doorway out to the rotunda... but it wasn’t open! “That’s odd,” he muttered to himself. Right at the moment however, it didn’t truly catch his attention, that closed door... and it certainly didn’t occur to him that it might be *locked*. It had probably swung shut naturally on some ancient spring-loaded mechanism. He did though glance at his own chrono and wondered again why Andy hadn’t returned. But he decided against raising any alarms just yet – the young lieutenant hadn’t really been gone *that* long after all. Onovan decided to change his tack a little with the hologram for the next round of questioning.

“Library, you say all the people left you...”

*"They left us here alone."*

"...yes," Onovan acknowledged with a slightly annoyed nod. "Access your historical database... was there any indication that something was wrong? Is there any historical record of *why* they would have left you?"

*"Historical information unavailable. They left us because they were afraid."* The counselor was beginning to see again what Andy meant by 'logic-loop'. Information unavailable could have a multitude of meanings... was the information not there, or could he simply not access it through some fault in the ancient circuitry?

"Afraid of what, Library?"

*"The coming dawn."*

"Oh, for cryin out loud," Onovan spat out exasperated.

"Counselor?" Marta asked him with an all-too-knowing smile. She of course had been listening from a distance and was amused by his lack of headway.

"The thing is worse than a Vulcan," he answered her, turning away from the placid projection and pacing away. He was tired of holding his helmet, he was hot and scratchy inside his heavy spacesuit, and now he had to pee. He cursed Captain Garrett again for the fact that he was even here in the first place. He knew she only did this to him because it made him feel so uncomfortable. 'It pushed him outside his comfort zone.' *Sick, sadistic woman!* The counselor was not meant to be an astronaut for Pete's sake; he was meant to be the ship's counselor! There should be no spacewalks on a starship anyway; that's why they built starships in the first place! He could never know, however, that even now his captain was floating along in a spacesuit of her own, fighting for survival deep inside their dead starship. It was a perfect irony that could be humorous, if it wasn't indeed so serious.

"Counselor," Marta said suddenly, "why is that door shut?" But Onovan did not have a chance to comment.

*"The portal was shut in concern for your safety,"* the hologram answered her instead.

"Our safety?!" Marta said aghast.

*"We detected a fluctuation in your forcefield, so appropriate measures were taken."*

“That was our friend leaving,” Onovan tried to reason with it.

*“They, too, left us here alone.”*

“What’s that got to do with it?!” Marta spat out with increasing anger.

*“You will not leave us here alone... we do not wish to die.”* The finality of those words stunned them both into silence. Through its uplink with the *Enterprise*, it had sensed its impending doom. Fear can be a powerful motivator, and the hologram was definitely afraid.

~ ~ ~ ~

All alone in a runabout at the farthest reaches of the solar system, Richard Castillo searched in vain for a habitable world for the tiny little lifeboats to settle down on. Even a moon would do, as long as it had somewhat of a breathable atmosphere. The lifeboats could keep a crew alive for weeks, maybe even months – but not the years that it would take for a rescue starship to arrive. Rationing would have to become a priority too. Rarely had crews been lost this far out, so the very act of survival itself could turn into a true test of their character and resolve. The *Genesee* would now become an invaluable asset as well. The sturdy little craft did have a small replicator aboard, not to mention warp drive; Castillo had no doubt that he would be making many survey runs in the weeks to come out into the adjacent star systems. Though he couldn’t move the entire crew, he could perhaps ferry back precious supplies from some other nearby class-M world.

Normally it would take days to probe an entire solar system and catalogue its many worlds. But Castillo being Castillo of course, he was more inclined to shave some time off this tiresome process. Rather than doing it strictly ‘by the book’, so to speak, he was instead using a little technique he’d been refining since the Battle of Ethos. The lieutenant was employing a new skill he called “spot jumping” – it wasn’t exactly standard procedure, and Skyl would probably skin him alive if he knew about it. Be that as it may, Castillo would pick a distant spot in the solar system, then make a warp jump to that spot. He would then make a quick scan of the area before jumping on to the next spot. He had programmed the runabout’s computer to rapidly

assess the incoming data, and alert him to anything of interest. It was taking hours off the usual time it typically took just getting there at normal impulse speeds, not to mention all that bothersome time searching in between.

The downside was, the warp engines were running hot already and so far, he was coming up empty-handed. Of the ten worlds in the system, the first three were much too hot and close to the sun, and the fourth was about to be destroyed, so the lieutenant had quickly disregarded these. This left six outer planets to survey. Unfortunately, however, most of the outer planets in a solar system are typically gas giants, and that made them a little tough to land on. But not all was lost, this still left *hundreds* of moons and small asteroids to look at. With a sigh, Castillo plotted his next jump spot and hit engage. Another thing ordinary people rarely consider is that planets don't just sit out there in a pretty little line. They are almost always scattered across the solar system at various points in their respective orbits. It had taken a significant amount of time to simply 'spot' them in the first place, and only then could the complex calculations begin. And complex they were.

Making a warp jump within the confines of a solar system was a risky business to be sure. Thousands of fragments of comets and other bits of rocky debris littered the so-called empty space in between the larger planetary bodies. At normal impulse speeds, these could of course be easily avoided. But at warp, well, that was a different story. A vessel at warp is traveling millions of miles per hour, and within a solar system, this could have potentially catastrophic consequences. At warp, all of this dust and debris is passed in mere seconds, instead of hours. The shields and main deflectors did their best to clear a path, but it still took a pretty skilled pilot to navigate this treacherous terrain. Therefore, it didn't help that the lieutenant was more than just slightly distracted. He had taken risks before, but a man that is irritated and on edge will perhaps take a few more than are necessary.

The longer Richard Castillo spent alone out here, the more annoyed he became. His mind kept flashing back to the staff briefing when the impending crisis had first been described to them. The tenets of the Prime Directive had been drilled into each cadet since their first

days at the Academy, but that still didn't make it any more right. Yes, he agreed the basic principles of it were sound, but he often felt there should be more flexibility in its application. If Earth was faced with this very same crisis, dozens of starships and the resources of a hundred worlds would come to her aid. But simply because Directoria was a pre-warp civilization, they were somehow excluded from this same sort of security? It might be different if the Rogue were just some small asteroid, and the people had some sort of a chance at survival... but in this instance, it was a matter of *extinction*.

There would be no lingering death of a species over the course of a millennium like the Neanderthals – no, this culture would die instantly, with absolutely no record of them whatsoever ever surviving into the distant future. These people would quite literally be erased from time. Something about this galled Richard Castillo. He even considered the incoming rogue at this point. It, too, held an ancient culture, as discovered by Andy Dardanelle... but at least the captain had allowed them a brief chance to catalogue this long-lost civilization before it was lost forever to the dusts of time. Why not the same compassion for Directoria? These were living, breathing people! – not just some nameless faceless rubble in the dark. His mood had softened a little when she'd at last acquiesced to their daring rescue plan, but all that seemed moot now that the *Enterprise* was dead in space.

The lieutenant knew he should probably be more concerned for the lives of his comrades and friends right now... but at least they were safe for the time being in their warm and comfortable lifeboats. The people of Directoria did not have that luxury. Their doom was still forthcoming – and in not too many hours' time now too. Frustrated, Castillo looked down at his latest readings. Another gas giant; more poisonous and/or dead moons. He studied his broad overlay of the rest of the system and plotted his next jump. His next target was on the far side of the sun and would thus require a mid-flight course correction. The calculations were consequently that much more complex, and it garnered just a little bit more of his attention. He wondered, though, if some brainiac at Starfleet would ever name this brazen technique after him and he broke into a devilish grin... *The Castillo Maneuver*.

The miniature warp core was still running hot, and the engine

nacelles were showing a buildup of corrosive waste particles, but he pushed engage anyway. He knew he was damaging the engines, but for some reason he didn't care. The visual display out the window was sure quite a show though. Not entirely making the full-scale transition into warp, the path ahead was more of a rainbow-streaked tunnel than it was the more traditional warp stars. This was putting increased stress on the hull however, especially as he curved around the sun, and this time Castillo had to silence an alarm. He decided that after this jump maybe he better cool it for a while. *Why was he so annoyed?* He thought back again to that staff briefing and it hit him suddenly – *he was more annoyed with himself than anything else.* It was a difficult admission, and he felt suddenly embarrassed. By calling Commander Stadi out about Enyo, he had sure dug himself into a mighty deep hole.

His conversation with Cicely afterwards had mollified him slightly, but he still felt quite the fool. Their talk had centered on the right and wrong of it all, but as yet, no one had really called the lieutenant out on *his* role in the whole sad affair. Everyone gets bored with life sometimes yes, but still, deep down, we all like the status quo. Their lives would all be much different now that rumor had become truth. The senior staff, at once a family, would now have to move forward in a changed form – and all because Castillo had reacted in anger where he should have behaved with discretion. He couldn't imagine what things would be like now that they would all be crammed together for months inside those tiny lifeboats. It would be tough to get away, that's for sure! This sobering thought held Castillo's hand as the *Genesee* fell out of warp in orbit of the fifth planet. Best to protect his assets! – for this little ship would probably provide him with many hours of escape in the years to come.

Almost immediately the runabout's computer sprang to life and provided him with exactly what he wanted to see. The fifth planet was a gas giant, just like all the rest, but one of its pint-sized moons was showing water and traces of oxygen! He quickly directed his svelte little craft into orbit and began an analysis. The moon was class-P, basically a vast frozen glacier, but it was water, nonetheless. The atmosphere was thin, much too thin to breathe, but there was still enough oxygen present to compress into breathable air. The lifeboats

could be linked up now and landed to create quite a nice snug little base camp. The quarters would still be cramped, yes, and cabin fever would become a real problem after a while, but at least they had a place to go now until help arrived. Elated, Castillo began mapping the surface for an ideal landing site, and again, he let his mind wander.

No one could say when the decision had actually been made; perhaps subconsciously many hours before – but Castillo was formulating a plan now that would probably get him from the frying pan into the fire. But he simply could not get the people of Directoria out of his mind, no matter how hard he tried. Something of their world *must* be saved, he was determined of that. Let the Prime Directive be damned. He could not just sit idly by and watch them get erased from history – could not just sit there and watch as the Rogue blotted them out of existence forever. *Yes, let the Prime Directive be damned.* By God, he would act on their behalf if no one else would – but he needed some help first, an accomplice perhaps?

“*Ensign Garrett to Lieutenant Castillo...*” his comm system suddenly crackled. “*Return to the Rogue at once... Andy needs your help.*” With that, he had just found his accomplice.

## *T-minus 07...*

Two tired old men, all alone in a darkening world.

The dead body of Tarma Vacilli still lay at their feet, and indeed, would probably stay there all through the night until the destruction of all things, or the coming new dawn. He had been the last remaining staff member in the palace other than the Primari, and his passing had left the building cold and dark and empty. It had once been alive with the voices of hundreds, all working together towards a common goal, though not always necessarily in agreement. Running a nation as large as the United Front took an incredible amount of coordination and personnel, and though Zenthi's administration ran smoothly for the most part, they certainly had their fair share of hang-ups. But they were friends, all of them, and their vision by and large had been the same. This had been the most progressive government elected in decades, and the primari was proud of what they had accomplished in just the two short years before the Rogue came.

The Rogue. The very definition of the word conjured visions of dark tidings and worrisome times ahead. The second two years of Zenthi's term in office had conversely been a nightmare. Civilization, as anyone knew it, had collapsed despite his and their own best efforts to the contrary. It had been a definitive moment in their history, and they had failed, all of them. Even Tarma Vacilli had the best interests of the people in mind, in his own way, but all attempts to keep order in the face of such destruction had proved fruitless by anyone's poor power to add or subtract. Fear had been the driving factor, and had taken on a life all its own amongst the terrified population. Fear of destruction soon became a fear of almost everything else, from war, starvation, and plague, to fear of law enforcement and the military, and finally, ultimately, fear of one's own neighbors. Trust and common decency had been thrown right out the window as the basic tenets of civilization slowly spiraled downwards into chaos.

There was the personal factor too, and this perhaps had dealt the most grievous blow to everyone's hope. The divorce rate had skyrocketed; many people simply throwing their hands up and walking

away from their lives that were. The number of orphaned and runaway children just dumped out into the streets had reached staggering proportions, overwhelming an already overwhelmed government. Even the United Churches of the Firstlife had turned these street urchins away (contrary to their own teachings), but they too were overcome by an internal hemorrhage that could not be sated. Desertions inside the Church rivaled even those within the military itself as priorities made a sudden polar shift towards the more selfish. Certainly, Primari Qoarta Zenthi had not been immune either. Amidst all his struggle to hold the government together, he had fought all that much harder to just keep his own family together.

He turned now away from those cold black windows and looked down at his lower right-hand drawer. Inside were his resignation papers. Six months into this crisis he had quite simply had enough. It was too much for any one man to bear, and he could no longer cope with both the external and the internal struggles of his life. Staring at that drawer, Zenthi could remember the day like it was yesterday. After many long, horrible hours in the Official Office, listening to report after report after report of nothing but death and destruction, he had at last retired to the private apartments. Zoella didn't know yet, but Qoarta had already had a half-dozen secret meetings with the Subprimari about the transference of power. Zenthi would sign the papers and make his announcement tomorrow. A cop out? Perhaps. A failure, most definitely; but the crisis at home had reached a head and he had decided to bow out now in favor of something far more precious. His family.

But Zoella was gone. She had left sometime that morning and taken Xanda and Arnedra with her. Zenthi was devastated. All he could remember was just falling face down on their soft bed and sobbing and sobbing and sobbing, for hours. He suspected she had gone to Quid, but it would be months and months before he would hear from her again. The next morning, Zenthi had resumed his duties as the Primari of the United Front with a newfound vigor that had at once startled, and indeed, somewhat troubled his colleagues. There can be a certain self to sadness evident in its own searing sense of madness. Burying his feelings deep down inside, he redoubled his efforts to hold their

society together. It had taken every last ounce of coercion available to him to get the point-source generator finished, even at the expense of other perhaps more important priorities. But sometimes a few must be sacrificed to save the greater whole... he never saw his family again.

And now, in these final hours, he was locked in a seemingly life and death struggle with Al'Embri over the classic separation of church and state – of all things! For fifteen hundred years, the United Churches of the Firstlife had been the driving force behind nearly every national government that had graced the face of the planet Directoria. For centuries, the will of the subguardia had often superseded even the will of elected officials and their administrations. They alone had dictated policy for the greater good, for the betterment of the people; but unfortunately, their policies had often fallen quite short of this, and instead, had served only the betterment of the Church. The United Front had stood against this storm for over two hundred years now, and Zenthi would be damned if he lost this battle in but these few final hours. No, he would hold on to his principles to the bitter end.

Over the course of many months however, Al'Embri had somehow taken it upon himself as his own personal calling to unseat this infidel from power. The Guardias of the Secondlife demanded it from him. There could be no other way. While Al'Embri represented the beautiful rewards that came from a life of faith and subservience, Zenthi represented the cold hard stranglehold of scientific thought and irrational reasoning that led to eventual destruction and Nolife. Very much surprised, Al'Embri had thought for sure that the primari would've most certainly caved by now to a sudden resurgence of faith – would undoubtedly recant and fall back into the folds of the Church – and bring the government back in line with him – but Zenthi was proving most stubborn in his need to cling to his own existentialism. The people of Directoria could not afford in these final hours to have their souls held at such mercy by a man such as this.

The aged old subguardia regretted the death of this man at his feet. Al'Embri had not killed him out of malice, oh no, but of love; if for no other reason than to free his soul from the bonds of Zenthi's evil mysticism. He regretted the deaths of all those others as well, but that

too had served its purpose. The Golden Ratio had demanded the sacrifice of those thirteen in order to save the one. This one was the key to all the rest. Al'Embri had no delusions of grandeur, he knew that his chosen path was but an insignificant milestone on the road to transcendence. But his divine role in laying out that road had been a masterstroke of artistic legerdemain, even he had to admit. *Hearts and brains removed*. For what is the heart without a brain, and what is the brain without a heart? The two were separate, yet equal – one in the same, yet distinct – the focus of love, yet its only detriment.

The soul was the binding force that held these two independent lenses together. Once bound, only then were they able to focus in on love. It took courage to love, and courage only comes from faith – faith to believe in your own worth, faith to believe in your own importance in the universe, faith to believe that you matter. Thus, faith held the key to the soul, and only faith. No amount of transcendental existentialism could replace faith in the divine order of things as laid out by the Guardias. We do not shape our own destinies; our destiny is shaped by how strongly we believe. Zenthi was none of these things. He was a heartless, soulless man that would lead his people to ruin merely for the satisfaction of his own ego. What did this primari know of love? Al'Embri had lost much, had sacrificed much, and he, and *only* he could see the path to enlightenment. It was arrogant presumption for the faithless Qoarta Zenthi to believe that he could save anyone. *Her name had been Alora!*

Al'Embri could still hear the screams. What he had done over the past two years, all those people he had murdered – he had done this for love too. All of his actions had been carefully orchestrated for the coming of the one. The savior. The one that had unwittingly been groomed for this all-important task that lay ahead since childhood. The one that would deliver them all from evil, and would do so very soon now. It was an apotheosis, the elevation of a man to the level of a god, and it would all be at Al'Embri's own hand. Yes, he, and he alone had been the instrument of the Guardias to bring about this fundamental shift in the way the people of Directoria would think from now on. In mere hours now, *All* would be enfolded back into the pink robes of the Church, whether here, or in the Secondlife, and they would all have

Subguardia Albatana Embri to thank for their salvation. There may even be a place in this new order for Qoarta Zenthi! Love is not binding.

On the primari's desk, the telcom rang and both men eyed it speculatively. It rang again, and still the two men stared at it with a certain fascination akin to forbidden expectation – Zenthi for success, Al'Embri for failure. Doctor Moira Ananti had either succeeded, or she had failed, and the future of the whole of Directoria now hinged on this single incoming call. Who would be rewarded on this night for their undying faith and devotion to a thing completely out of their own hands? The telcom rang a third time and the primari grabbed up the transceiver with a sudden intake of air and a sweaty palm. Al'Embri slid forward on the edge of his chair and stared up into the eyes of Zenthi like an expectant child awaiting a piece of candy... or a beating. The reflection of the clock in the window read the reverse of T-06:47:40. This was not a number of the Golden Ratio. Al'Embri's faith faltered.

"This is Zenthi, go ahead," the Primari breathed into the mouthpiece. There was a long moment of silence as the faceless voice at the other end laid out the details of the explosion to the most powerful leader of a terrified world. Every single telescope and tracking station on the dark side of the planet had focused on the incoming rogue for over an hour since. There was no change in its trajectory. It was still steamrolling towards them at fifty-eight million miles per hour, and now there would be no stopping it. Zenthi would launch the nukes, sure, if he were able – but every reputable scientist on the planet had rebuked this folly ever since its first suggestion. But there was always that miniscule unforeseen chance, and the primari would be negligent not to act on it... if he were able. Without a sound, he placed the transceiver back in its cradle and eyed Al'Embri speculatively.

How would the Subguardia react to this new information? Indeed, Zenthi debated for a moment whether or not he should even say anything at all. Al'Embri was not privy to state secrets, and the destruction of the point-source generator could easily be construed as the mother of all state secrets. No, by sheer fact alone that this was the

United Front, a nation *founded* on a hard-fought independence from the Church, Al'Embri was not entitled to this information at all! In fact, if Zenthi should divulge it now, it might even be a detriment to his next duty, which was to launch the nukes. *What to do now indeed.* He could certainly make a break for the Conflict Room, seal himself inside; but would Al'Embri try to stop him? Who knew what the crazed man intended to do next. It was certainly clear what he was capable of, looking back down now at the broken body of poor, poor Vacilli.

The Primari of the United Front felt his options narrowing even further than before, but he knew he must stick to his duty, if for no other reason than to honor the memory of his wife, his children – his family. If that meant he should die here in the next few moments, then so be it – at least he would go to the Secondlife knowing that he had tried, that he had not wavered in his beliefs against a mounting wall of opposition. He would take his chance.

“Tell me, Nomen Prime, what news from the Nogolon Plateau?” Whether it was gloating, or a genuine question, Zenthi could not tell. The subguardia still sat on the edge of his seat like an expectant child (or poised to strike?) and this left the primari on guard.

Al'Embri took note of this, as well as the hesitance in the man's words, the uncertainty of his actions. *Moirra Ananti had failed?* Yes! The fact could not have been plainer to Al'Embri if Zenthi had made a live videoplay broadcast. The Guardias had spoken. *Let thy will be done!* The path ahead was clear now, and the United Churches of the Firstlife were holding all the cards. The Zenthi administration would now be brought to its knees, and the people of Directoria would be brought from the dark at last. The time was right for the messiah, and Al'Embri would see this through to its conclusion. Very soon now *All* would be enfolded back into the pink robes of the Church, whether here, or in the Secondlife, and Al'Embri's own chosen one would lead them there. He was their savior.

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Detector Fraca Novachi was undergoing an evolution of mind,

body, and spirit. What he had just witnessed in Conflict Square had reignited something within him that he had not felt since childhood. *Hope*. Those people standing out there in the rain had decided to meet their deaths head-on, out in the open – and indeed, gathered together as one in unfettered peace and reconciliation. *The courageous ones*. Perhaps there was a glimmer of hope for their civilization yet. He thought again of Dr. Moira Ananti and wondered once more at her progress. For a few brief moments, the sight of all those people gathered together in harmony had pulled at his heartstrings, and for the first time since all this had begun, he hoped that she might actually succeed. It had been a very, very long time since the hardened heart of the detector had held any hope at all in anything. For a moment, he had considered just stopping there, abandoning it all; why not join those defiant people and spend his final hours out in the open, awaiting death – or the coming dawn – with courage and dignity?

Noooo, he must press forward and see his task through. The life of the Primari was at stake - and by extension perhaps, the lives of each and every other person on the planet. Al'Embri must be stopped, (if in truth he was the murderer - Novachi still couldn't quite make himself believe it!) for the very future of their civilization hinged on Zenthi's continued leadership. Qoarta Zenthi's progressive administration had come right when their nation had needed it most; even before the arrival of the Rogue. At the time of his election, it seemed like every single aspect of their once-great society was in flux. Technology and information sharing was breaking down barriers and challenging even the staunchest of the old beliefs and traditions. The 'old way' of doing things just did not seem to apply anymore. It had been time for something new to take hold. The United Churches had rallied against this growing new movement of course, but the will of the people had ultimately prevailed.

And then the Rogue came. The fact that this man had remained in office throughout two of the most grueling years in the history of their planet had certainly earned him the right to see this thing through to the end. Many would have caved under such pressure, but not Qoarta Zenthi. After fighting an uphill two-year battle against stalwart conservatism, the primari had hit a brick wall, so to speak, and spent

the next two years fighting on behalf of their very survival. Many times, his solutions to the nation's mounting problems had been challenged by conservatives and the clergy alike, but Zenthi had stayed his course nonetheless, as modeled after his first two years in office. He had stuck to his principles, against all odds, and blazed forward anyway. The world truly had him to thank for the point-source generator, the global launch initiative, and indeed, for the fact that, by and large, there was still food on most everyone's table. He of all others *must* survive this.

*When did I become such a political activist?* Novachi wondered with a smirk. The aged old detector had spent so many years now not caring, that this newfound interest in their preservation caught him somewhat unawares. Far from praying, he still found his thoughts focused more and more on Moira Ananti and his will that she should succeed. He had a sudden fleeting feeling that he had let too much of his life slip by over the past twenty years. He had taken so much for granted in his youth; and then in middle age, he had just sort of started 'coasting'. Though not necessarily keen on death, Novachi had always found his life outside of work to be so pointless. And now he found himself wishing for that little bit something more; and indeed, for some of that time back. The dreams of youth had slowly been replaced over the decades by a morbid sense of the status quo. *Don't rock the boat.* It amused him on this final night that he suddenly found himself so filled with life. This murder case, and tonight's chase, had reinvigorated him somehow. He felt so alive!

Wheezing in the cool night air, Novachi heaved his heavy body up over that last infernal step onto the portico of the Palace. "Guardias, I'm fat," he muttered to himself. Why had all these great government edifices always been built atop a flight of never-ending stairs? The architects must've taken their cue from the builders of the United Churches! Day one, tomorrow – he would put himself on a diet and an exercise program. He thought once more of his long-time friend and mentor, Subguardia Al'Embri. Given the nature of Zenthi's progressive administration, the detector could certainly see how it would've stoked the ire of the Church establishment. Though the United Front had given its citizens the freedom of choice in these

matters long ago, many of them had still lived under the yolk of Church teachings for generations. Be that as it may, nothing the Administration had done over the past four years deserved the merits of primarian assassination. It was *survival!*

Novachi stopped for a moment to catch his breath and survey his surroundings. Despite all those damnable steps, the Palace of the Primari did offer a pretty commanding view of the city, he had to admit. Though he could not see the brightly-lit Conflict Square itself, he could still spy the great silvery spire of the Charusa Zenthi Memorial sticking up above the treetops. He knew that under that spire, hundreds of courageous citizens were gathered in peace awaiting the coming dawn; and dawn *would* come – he had a real sense of that now. Looking over towards the North, Novachi could really get a feel of the original city layout from this vantage point, and his mind flashed back to that antique map he had so unceremoniously snatched off the precinct wall. The main thoroughfares really did travel away from the palace like the great spokes of a wheel, and this fascinated him now like it would a schoolboy. In all his years living in the capital, he had never once come up here.

Many districts were black, but still many more were brightly lit – more proof that the government had done its best to maintain some semblance of normalcy in these, the most trying times in the history of the world. These blacked out districts had probably only gone dark in the past week or so when the public infrastructure had really started to break down. A great portion of the populace had still refused to believe that this calamity was actually even happening until these very last few days. Hope was not so easy to kill as some believed; and now that all hope seemed lost, the detector thought it perfect irony that his own hope should suddenly make a miraculous recovery. He'd never admitted it to Al'Embri, but the detector had lost all hope that night his parents had been killed and he'd never gotten it back since... until tonight. He wondered why? That had been a night much like this; rainy and cool, darker and more ominous than usual.

Surveying the horizon, his eyes fell at last upon the United Churches Tabernacle. Looming on the crest of a far-off hill, it too was dark and ominous, and looked down on the city like a great stone

vulture set upon a high perch. Despite spending his orphanage in that bleak stone edifice, Fraca Novachi had never quite gotten used to living inside its damp, cold walls and dark interiors. It had never been *home*. Growing up under the strict and lifeless regimen of the monks, there had been very little time for playing, and even less time for love as his teenage years were crushed under the jackboots of an ecclesiastical education. The detector had spent many a long night alone in his dark damp chamber, never really quite understanding what his mentor Al'Embri had against the mysteries of the opposite sex that Fraca so often asked about. Al'Embri and the other monks had certainly kept him busy throughout the years of his matriculation, but loneliness unrecognized is still loneliness.

Perhaps that truly was what his feelings in Conflict Square had been all about. To feel a connection somehow – to someone, to anyone – to something, or anything – for just once in his life. To feel warm and to feel loved, and to feel, if even for a moment, that he was part of the greater whole. He thought again of returning there, just giving up on this fruitless venture once and for all; but immediately chased the idea out of his mind. No, he must press forward, he must see this through to the end. Meaning had become the driving force now in Fraca Novachi's mind, and he *must* find meaning in Al'Embri's murder of those thirteen innocent victims; if for no other reason than his own salvation. He must find meaning somehow in Al'Embri's now apparent intentions to assassinate the Primari of the United Front on the eve of one of the most important events in the history of the world.

Turning now with some urgency, Novachi made his way across the vast portico towards a set of imposing copper-green doors. The Palace soared above him like the ramparts of a great ivory-colored mountain, and it all made him feel very small. He had seen a picture book once of Directoria's only mountain range in the far-off steppes of the Northern Empire. He made it a point now to travel there when all this was over. Upon reaching the imposing doors, the detector was very surprised to see the left-hand one slightly ajar; almost as if the last person to enter had not cared to shut it. He pulled on it, and it swung open the rest of the way as if floating on air; not at all what he expected from a heavy metal object that stood another fifteen feet at

least above his head. Entering now a brightly lit antechamber, he was unnerved almost at once by the near deafening silence, and the bone-chilling sense he got that this magnificent building was just plain empty.

At the security checkpoint marking the crossover from the antechamber into the grand rotunda, Detector Fraca Novachi found his first body. The man's neck had been broken, judging by the unnatural angle of the head, and Novachi's mind immediately flashed over to the photographs of the victims – *strangled, with hearts and brains removed*. The detector shivered, which was uncharacteristic for his nature; but a change was slowly coming over him after all. He felt a sudden compassion for this man; it was a feeling he had slowly lost in all his years on the detector force. He had seen so much violence and brutality over the course of his career that he had slowly become desensitized to it without ever even realizing it. It was possible, he surmised, that this desensitisation had begun right from day one with the murder of his parents. With a sad sigh, he left this poor hapless soul behind and pressed forward towards the internal offices.

The rotunda was huge and graceful and beautiful, and he wished now that he had more time to admire it. He cursed himself more and more with every passing moment for never having taken the time to see some of these sights right here in his own home city – much less the rest of the world. At the far end, he passed another security checkpoint and was much relieved to see this station abandoned. At least no one else had been killed here, but he was really becoming concerned now for the safety of the primari. *Am I too late?* Picking up speed, he hoofed it down a long, lonely hallway towards the executive wing. Office after office was vacant, with papers scattered all about, much like it was back in the precinct. Over the course of the past year (the past few weeks especially), people had just sort of gotten up and left. With no definable paychecks, and the many temptations of a decaying society, all had been claimed in the end by the provocative allure of 'freedom'.

Novachi at last passed into Tarma Vacilli's workspace, directly adjacent to the Official Office. He had actually met Vacilli once at a capital city security seminar, long before the coming of the Rogue of

course, and the two had hit it off quite well. He was a greasy little man that few people liked, but Novachi was fat and gruff and didn't much care what other people liked, so they had become fast friends in spite of themselves. Given the impending crisis though, it had been quite some time since the two comrades had met up at their favorite pub to exchange barbs. Vacilli's office was precise and to the point, much like the man's personality, and it was clear that he had been working here right up till now. Cautiously, Novachi approached the door to the Official Office. Something made him draw his firearm, though he didn't quite know why. It was just a feeling. This door too was slightly ajar, and it gave the detector a most uneasy feeling. He pulled on it, and noiselessly, it too glided open as if floating on air.

Novachi's heart leapt. At the feet of the subguardia lay a body. *He was too late!*

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Ducking through the dark and dusty tunnels of the shattered control center, Dr. Moira Ananti scrambled her way towards the surface. Much of it had collapsed and she could just barely squeeze through in some places. She knew she must press forward though. Exposed to a lethal dose of radiation, with the Rogue just hours away from impact, she could easily just give up and die here deep beneath the ground, entombed forever with the rest of her fallen comrades; but her heart had set itself on a new mission... she would get home to her family now if it was the last thing she ever did. Moira's heart was as shattered as the rest of this complex. They had all fought so hard and given up so much that this might succeed. Yet it had all been for nothing. *Failure*. And now all those things that she had fought so hard for would be destroyed, crushed into oblivion.

*"The beam has rebounded off some kind of metallic object in orbit around the rogue!"* Thana had said this just moments before he died, and now Moira wondered about it anew. *Something metallic around the rogue?!* It was estimated that that planetary body had been drifting out in deep space for millennia. *Something metallic?* Certainly, any satellites or the space station of an ancient culture could

not have remained in orbit for all that time? And whatever it was that the beam had rebounded off of, it must have been pretty darn big. Technically, the beam should not have rebounded at all. It was almost as if the object had fired *back* somehow, and from almost the precise focal point of their targeting parameters. This sent a chilling feeling all up and down Moira's spine as she had to stop for a moment and dig her way through some rubble. *Was there some alien intelligence at work here?*

Her webbed hands felt raw against the coarse, dusty rock, and she wondered if her soft fingertips were bleeding yet. Her husband had often teased her about her soft, delicate hands. His were coarse and calloused from many years of hard work, and had remained so even after he'd taken over the family's domestic duties. Oh, how Moira missed him now! He would've had her outta here in a heartbeat. She continued digging though, in spite of the tenderness, and kept thinking. *Something metallic.* The skeptic in her could not quite allow herself to believe that this unknown object could in fact be some kind of alien craft. And even if it were, what could these aliens ever hope to gain from interfering with her attempts to save their doomed planet. They made her angry now, these fanciful creatures, for destroying so quickly something that she had devoted two years of her life to building. How could she express the pain to them of everything she had lost?

Moira thought she had dug enough free now to try wriggling herself through, but she became immediately stuck. She fought against every fiber of her being not to panic. It was hopeless, she was slowly beginning to realize. She was lost in this tunnel and had no idea how much farther it was to the surface. How many more hours of digging would it take before she could feel the cool night breezes drifting across her face? She wondered if she even had hours. She had started to feel weak in the past half hour, and slightly more nauseous with each passing moment. Acute radiation poisoning was beginning to take its toll on her body. As desperate as she was to see her family one last time before the end, all hope was waning as she thought of how vain in fact this idea truly was. Even if she were able to somehow miraculously dig herself out, how would she then instantaneously transport herself halfway across the continent to her home?

Moira laughed now, in spite of herself and began kicking. Riding on the crest of a miniature avalanche, she suddenly slid down the other side of this mountain of rubble and tumbled out onto the floor. It was cooler here and she began at once to feel just a little bit better about life. Pulling the softlight out of her jumper pocket, she snapped it on and prayed. Its light was dimming, its batteries slowly going dead, but about fifty feet down the corridor she thought for sure she could spy some blast doors. She fought the urge to bolt at them like a schoolchild for the exit, and instead coolly and methodically made her way forward. She hated to hit her head on something and get knocked out, or trip over some other debris and break her leg when she was this close to her goal. Each step became harder than the next as fatigue definitely settled in around her. Perhaps she was just plain tired?

Not surprisingly, the blast doors proved to be stuck. *Ugh, my kingdom for a stick of dynamite!* Moira was at her wits end now. At the SENSES labs she had needed a keycard to enter. It suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't been outside this facility since she'd first entered it. She had no fontan idea if she needed a keycard! And even if she had one, there was no power to operate the fontan locks anyway! Had they even issued her one? "Oh, for Guardias sake," she muttered in the dim glow of her softlight. She began looking around on the floor for a piece of pipe, a rock, a stick – anything to use against those seemingly impregnable doors. Nothing. It was like someone had just cleaned in here. "Go figure," she sighed, thinking back to the half mile of rubble she'd just passed over. She sure as hell wasn't going back! A wave of indignant frustration began to build up within her now.

With an angry kick, Moira struck out at her nemesis – and much to her surprise, it actually popped open! It was just barely enough to squeeze through, but squeeze through she would do, nonetheless. She'd squeezed her way through this far! With an exasperated grunt and a wriggle Moira was free at last... or so she thought. Unbeknownst to her, the great dish had collapsed in on itself, and all of this twisted steel had piled itself high in front of the doors. But the air was cool and fresh, and she could see a few brief glimmers

of starlight, so she started climbing. She felt a newfound surge of energy envelope her now that she was outside and in the fresh air, and free of all that dust! She kept climbing, and the higher she got, the more stars she could see. But Moira kept her eyes focused on just one – that one that should not be there – and she cursed it now with all her might. So much had been lost, so much sacrificed, in the name of that nameless star. Moira just wanted to wish it right out of existence, and she concentrated hard on doing just that.

At last, she reached the peak of this twisted metal mountain and found a perch thereupon which to rest and contemplate a moment. *Something metal in orbit had deflected the beam.* Moira's mind quickly scanned every conceivable possibility for this strangest of occurrences. Max and she had once had a long late-night conversation on the prospects of alien life. They had put aside for a moment the limitations of light speed and considered the implications of an advanced culture with warp capabilities. By all accounts, Directoria Primari was an average world circling an average star. So, would an advanced alien culture ever deign to visit them? Admittedly, they had little to offer a race that had conquered the insurmountable goal of a true warp drive, but what about those cultures out there that may solely be bent on conquest? This had raised an interesting question for the two colleagues.

Either the Directorians were first in the galaxy, they were last, or they had as yet remained simply undiscovered. Whether first or last, this was a sad irony now that they were sure to be destroyed in just the next few hours. But she and Max had pondered that other possibility. Perhaps they as yet had remained largely anonymous. So, should they then be broadcasting their whereabouts out into the cosmos? Should they really be sending all those probes out into deep space with precise maps aboard as to their location? Perhaps they had indeed gained some attention out there and this metal object was some kind of ship. But why deflect the beam?! By doing so, this alien race had virtually sealed the fates of ten billion people. It was hardly worth conquering a planet that was about to be blown to bits. Why now, of all nights, had they come? And why the *font* didn't they help?!

Angry again at her imaginary aliens, Moira began looking

around for her next course of action. In the dim light of the stars, all she could see was an ocean of twisted metal debris. The control center had been close to the middle of the immense dish, and it would take her days to crawl that distance over all its crippled remains to the outer edge. She did not have days however; she had only mere hours, perhaps less... especially the way she was starting to feel. All hope was now draining from her as she thought once more of her husband and her dear, sweet children. It settled in at last, once and for all, that all-too-knowing feeling that she would never see them again. Melancholy and despair began to wash over her now and she looked back up at those twinkling stars. The scientist in her still pondered those imaginary aliens, but the scientist too thought about that fanciful idea of warp drive. If it hadn't been for the Rogue, Moira would've likely cracked this puzzle by now with her own theories on gravity and superluminal substrates. *The inventor of warp drive*, she mused.

Moira snapped back to attention and began to wonder if in fact she was as bad a mother as she thought she was. Even before the Rogue came, she had spent many long hours at the office, leaving her husband alone with the children. Many a weekend had also been lost to her countless hours working from home. At the time, it had all been about her work, her exciting new theories, and of course, the money. But now she wondered if any of it had been worth it. Sure, if the beam had been a success and Directoria had been saved, then it most definitely would have been worth it. But she could never get that time back now, and she could never ever hope to get home to her family in these final hours for that last fateful goodbye. This left her feeling suddenly empty and frightfully alone. It occurred to her for the first time that the Rogue would strike *here* first. Right here, on this plateau.

She shrank away from it now, suddenly terrified. Moira wanted to hide, she wanted to run away; she even considered crawling back down into the command center – anything to get away from that most ominous menace that was glaring down at her from the heavens above. In anger, she shook her fist and swore at it. She didn't even know she knew such foul words! She cursed the Guardias for abandoning them, in this their most needful hour. She screamed at the top of her lungs at a world full of subguardia that had lied to them all since childhood,

leading them to believe that the Guardias were just and true and would reward them for their lifelong subservience. “*What a bunch of mugdashit!*” Moira cried out into the darkness. Anguished beyond belief, she now began to sob – and sob and sob and sob. So prolific were her tears, that she did not hear at first that far-off distant thumping.

It was a rotolifter, and it was coming for her.

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In a rebirth of self, Alex pulled himself up out of the tepid water and collapsed on the gravelly bank. He gasped there for many long moments feeling the life-giving oxygen flood back into his lungs. He rolled over onto his back finally and stared blankly up at the stars. There was no thought for many long moments, just an empty stare up into the darkness and the great beyond. All was silence surrounding him, save for the usual sounds of the night. Once as a child he had laid out in the backyard with his eyes closed and started counting the sounds... he had lost count somewhere in the thirties. The warm swamps and gravelly banks of Directoria Primari simply teemed with life, not to mention the more mundane sounds that so often go unnoticed. The wind itself – aircraft, triwheels, children playing – the full gambit of a world filled to the brim with people and animals and plants of all types and varieties. It was a world alive, and Alex appreciated life now anew.

He could not bring his shattered mind to think about Amira, so he thought about the Rogue instead. His eyes once unfocused on the black space between, he focused instead on that tiny little pinpoint of light that should not be there. It had taken so much from him already, and now he found himself wishing that Dr. Ananti had not fired her beam after all. What was there worth living for now? The Rogue had been deflected (or so he thought) and now a new dawn would come and bring with it just more misery, loneliness, and suffering. Nothing in his life would change – and if anything, now it had been made marginally worse. He had found love, only to lose it hours later; he had murdered someone in cold blood. He should have fought harder;

he should have done more to help her! He could still see her black lifeless eyes staring back at him, still pleading even in death for him to save her. *Ugh!*

He shook his head and his vision blurred. Better for the Rogue to strike them now, right now, and end forever this world of such suffering. His mind unfocused, he thought once more of his future prospects... if you could call it that – for prospects, he had none. What advanced educational opportunities could Alex ever hope to have in such a shattered society? He had not even finished high school (since the schools had all closed.) The experts were saying that it would take a generation or more now to reestablish any semblance of order in a world so lost. Once he had wanted with all his heart to work in the aerospace industry, perhaps even work at the SENSES Division Labs someday alongside his hero, Doctor Ananti. But what priority would a bankrupt government have in the sciences when it could not even feed its own people? Like a cancerous malignancy, all hope had been sucked right out of the life of this world, and Alex thought he would drown in its effluent wake.

Coughing, chest and throat sore, he forced himself over onto his left arm and feebly tried to rise. His limbs were shaky, and once on his feet, the very same gravelly bank that had saved him now threatened to reclaim him. Stumbling, and at times even clawing with webbed hands, Alex was at last able to make the summit. The night was still black as pitch, but he had been out here in the dark for many hours now and his eyes were quite accustomed to the dim light of the stars. He could see that the rest of Arba's petty gang had left the plateau (minus their leader) to move on to other mischief, no doubt; Alex doubted they had even claimed his body – why would they? There was no sign of their light anywhere in the distance, and he could hear no sounds other than those of the night. He was alone here again, and more alone than ever he felt. For a brief instant his heart leapt that he might be ambushed here in the dark, but a few more moments of silence mollified him at last.

His family had never been of the religious sort, but Alex couldn't help but ask himself now why the Guardias had so forsaken him throughout his whole bedamned life. Nothing had *ever* gone right

it seemed, and luck was not something that often graced his doorstep. The chances that Amira should show up here tonight were infinitesimal at best, and what had transpired in the interim went beyond all imagination. And then to have it all just ripped away by such violence and such senselessness... his very soul cried out to the Divine at the unfairness of it all and to the cruelty of their immortal wisdom. By extension, his broken mind railed against the very idea of the Rogue itself. Why would the Guardias unsettle their people and their world with such a calamity?! To test them? What test was it to Alex's eternal soul to be denied all his dreams, to have found love and to have lost it in a matter of hours, and to be nearly drown at the hands of a group of malicious thugs? *Bah!*

His soft feet crunching in the gravel, he slowly made his way over to where Amira lay – cautious still not to make a sound. Off to his left on the far distant horizon, he could see the soft orange glow that was the Quid Firestorm. Everywhere else in a vast 360° circle was absolute darkness. Alex had grown up in very rural environs, and where this had protected him in some ways, it had also hindered him in others. He had not been exposed perhaps to all the harsh realities of a larger life (until tonight), but he had also not had some of the opportunities made available that someone else his age might've had in Quid, or in the Capital even. There comes a certain naïveté with growing up in the country, but also a very well-rounded understanding of the world as a whole. It is a strange contradiction that has both its strengths and its weaknesses. Until tonight, Alex had only seen such violence in Videoplay. Yet tonight, he had killed someone in cold blood, with his bare hands, and now he stood shivering in the cold with the dead body of his girlfriend at his feet.

He looked down at her black shape, covered with its slightly brighter one-piece suit. His girlfriend. *Could he even call her that?* In truth, Alex hardly knew a thing about her until tonight. Always admiring from a distance, he had never drawn up the courage to talk to her, to approach her, to even say hello to her, in the halls of their school. She had always been a class above, that upper crust, that clique in which he would *never* belong. Yet tonight he had discovered such a vulnerability in her, such a sweetness, such an approachability that he

would never have suspected in a girl of her station. It had startled him, and it had made him question everything he thought he knew about the hierarchies of the high school social scene. None of these things he would have ever known if she had not come up here tonight. In the end, it was she that had reached out to him, had changed him, and in her vulnerability, had taught him such courage, and given him such confidence.

Sitting on his feet now, Alex could barely see her soft features in the dim starlight, but he thought her beautiful, nonetheless. Supporting her head, he reached beneath her and drew her body up to his chest. She had already gone cold and this caused him to shiver. But he held her still for several long moments. In the night breeze he could still smell that light fragrance she had first brought with her, but he hadn't really noticed at the time. Whether it was a perfume, or the softener in her clothing – or just simply *her* – he could not tell. But he vowed to hold on to that smell for the rest of his life. He was too young to know that such sentiments do not last, that they only become the whiffs of long-forgotten memories that haunt us in our waning years with no apparent origin. We've all had that smell we could not place, that errant aroma that causes us to give pause and contemplate for a moment times that have faded into the distant recesses of mind and soul.

Alex refused to cry, he refused to cry out into the night like he had seen in so many cheesy late-night Videoplay dramas. He merely hardened himself and carefully scooped her up, surprised at her lightness. Rising slowly, he crossed over to his cushion – their cushion – and laid her down gently on it. He looked once more at Quid, not really thinking about it, then glanced back up at that star that shouldn't be there. It had not changed since he'd first spotted it. It blended in, just like all the others, and became one with the night. So sinister and sneaky; *he hated it*. Treading quietly, he retrieved the crumpled-up blanket and returned to Amira, then knelt to wrap her body nice and warm inside it. She seemed lonely there, all by herself now, but he was not so sick of mind that he was about to curl up with a dead body. Once dawn came, and the world was safe, he would come back for her and take her home.

Standing, he crossed over to that archaeological ditch of his youth and looked down into it at the mangled form of Arba. Even in the dim starlight Alex could still see how his rage had so deformed that wayward lost soul. They had been friends once, in grade school, and had probably dug this very same ditch together in one of the many adventures of their childhood. But Arba had always had that darker side to him, even way back then, and as they got older, Alex had started to instinctually distance himself from ever-increasing levels of mischief. They had not spoken in years, except in a few instances of bullying, and in fact, Alex had not even known that Amira was dating him. He decided that this had to have been some form of strange rebellion in her, for it was nothing like the sweet personality he had encountered from her tonight. In a fit of anger he immediately regretted, Alex kicked a foot-full of loose stone down on the corpse, then let out a deep sigh. Yes, in the morning, he would retrieve Arba's body as well and take it home.

Staring back up at the stars, Alex made the decision that he would resume his mission. He would sit back down now and watch that fontan Rogue sail by their planet and out of their lives forever. The beam had fired. There was nothing more to be said. And good riddance to it too! Perhaps tomorrow would be better, perhaps with a coming new dawn his people would experience a rebirth of freedom from fear and despair. Yes, things would *have* to be better. Tomorrow all would be born again, life would begin anew. T+1... In time, all wounds must heal, and even though the scar tissue yet remains, we emerge from the other side stronger and wiser for the experience. Life is not an easy task, but it can forge us and teach us things that we never thought imaginable just a few short hours before.

## *T-minus 06...*

Her ship dead, she was all alone in the dark with time running out.

Grabbing the edges of the next yawning hatch, Captain Rachel Garrett pulled herself quickly through it and glided on to the next one with ease. She was getting quite the hang of it now as she descended ever lower into the bowels of the stricken starship; though from her perspective, in weightless zero-g, she was flying straight ahead, not down. Admittedly, it was somewhat of an odd sensation for the brain to process – without gravity, there was no up and down – she merely coasted along on the level, adjusting her course as necessary. Thus, onwards she flew, counting each deck as she went. The limited light from her space helmet did not shine very far ahead however, so she had to check her speed occasionally; but she was still making excellent progress. Yet here all alone in the darkness, it was easy for the captain to let her mind wander. *What to do about Spencer Stadi?* she pondered.

Her heart was broken, she had to admit, and this sensation was as unsettling as being trapped inside this dying starship. There was also that certain element of shock... this affair had gone on for over a year (perhaps two?) right under Garrett's nose, and she had no inclination of it whatsoever until now. Was she really that out of touch with her crew, even still, after all they'd been through together? The fact no less that this was her first officer, her best friend really (not to mention a full-blooded Betazoid telepath!) astounded her that much more. The rest of the senior staff obviously knew, judging by their reactions, and this left the captain feeling a little bit betrayed, and also a little put out. She was out of the loop, so to speak, and as much as a stable command structure should be maintained, she also felt shut out from the lives that swirled around her. This made her a little sad.

Distracted, Garrett nearly collided with the edges of the next hatch and had to slow herself down; paused even to check her deck number. She had just a few more to go and now hoped that Commander Skyl would actually be there waiting for her. This was a gamble that she had not wished to admit, even to herself. Her mental

calculations told her time was quickly running out, and if Skyl wasn't indeed there, she wondered if there would be enough time left to make it to a lifeboat herself. '*Risk is part of the game if you wanna sit in the captain's seat,*' or so James T. Kirk had once said. That had been Kirk's final mission strangely enough, Garrett noted, and she tried to push the irony of this out of her mind. Grabbing the edges of the hatch, she propelled herself forward again, still preoccupied with the Stadi Dilemma and its consequences.

Ensign Enyo, of course, was hardly blameless, but the young Andorian girl could hardly either be held fully accountable for the seductions of a much, much older senior officer. *Had Stadi really seduced her though?* Aye now young Horatio, there's the rub... Rachel Garrett had lived and worked with Commander Spencer Stadi for twenty years now. They had both been young themselves once when all this had started – when the ship, their ship, this *Enterprise* – was brand new. She was his *Imzadi*, and he was hers, and their telepathic bond ran deeper than most, even despite the fact that she was human. Thereto fore, she thought she knew her first officer fairly well... and thus concluded that 'seduced' was not necessarily the right term for what had happened. He himself had stated that he, too, was broken, that his mind had been just as shattered as hers – perhaps even more so. The Empress Ethereal had made a train wreck out of them all. Enyo had simply filled a void... but nothing in life is that simple. There was love there too, Garrett suspected.

"The pain was not yours alone," he'd stated flatly, "mine was just as much to bear." The death of Zora McKnight had hit him hard, harder Garrett now supposed than he'd ever actually admitted to her. Another indication of just how out of touch the captain was with her crew, even still. She must do better! So, what to do? Starfleet's rules about the fraternization of senior officers were somewhat vague... they could hardly be expected to be saints or celibates, any of them – but there was a certain line there that should perhaps *not* be crossed. This was all the more true aboard a deep-space starship. The relationship would have to end, without a doubt; especially now that it was blown wide out into the open aboard a ship half full of telepaths. But as far as any disciplinary action? Garrett thought not. Stadi's

embarrassment would follow him (almost haunt him) for many months to come now. That perhaps would be punishment enough. But poor, poor Enyo... *the poor child will likely die of mortification*, Garrett sighed. It hadn't occurred to her that perhaps Enyo had seduced him... the woman's role is so often overlooked. Innocence is not gender specific.

At last, the captain reached Deck Twenty-Eight and put these thoughts immediately out of her mind. She must focus fully now on the crisis at hand. Time was short, critically short, and as she sailed through those dark empty corridors towards Main Engineering, she hoped time was not *too* short. She hoped especially that Skyl was there waiting for her. In a final breathless moment, she coasted around that last corner and was relieved to see her Vulcan chief engineer standing in his small office like it was just another ordinary day at work. He too wore a pressure suit, of course, and was standing over the only lighted workstation on the entire ship. He was already working his magic to bring the great beast back to life, and Captain Garrett was eternally grateful for it. Skyl betrayed no sign of being startled, or even surprised at his captain's presence there, as she came to a screeching halt on the bulkhead right next to him.

It was almost comical, Garrett thought, that she was horizontal and he vertical, but decided not to test the Vulcan's humor in this and merely activated her magnetic boots instead. Swinging herself downwards, her feet stuck immediately to the heavy metal deck plating of Skyl's small office. He indicated a wire hanging down from the side of his helmet, and Garrett quickly surmised its use. Grabbing it with her gloved hand, she fumbled trying to plug it into the side of her own helmet, and the engineer finally had to pause in his critical work to help her. Once connected, they could finally talk... all other communications were still down. It was comforting, Garrett mused, to at last hear the sound of another person's breathing inside her lonely helmet, other than her own. Her mind for a brief second flashed back to that shuttle accident aboard the *Hathaway*, and the loneliness she'd felt then, and this renewed her gratefulness that she was once again here amongst the living.

"Sorry I'm late, Commander," Garrett said, "but my driving

skills just ain't what they used to be."

"Why did you not simply walk, Captain?" Skyl almost scolded her, always the technical Vulcan engineer.

"Come on Skyl, everyone knows it's faster to fly," she smiled at him. He merely paused briefly and looked at her, before resuming his all-too-important work.

"I have extended the life of the antimatter pods," he said in passing, "but we still have limited time." Garrett looked over his shoulder and studied his work with her usual amazement. The man was a whiz, hands down, and the captain had oft times wanted to tell her chief engineer how proud she was of him over all these years they had served together. But it seemed too pretentious to offer such sentiments, not only to a Vulcan, but to a man that was almost fifty years older than she. Skyl had put this ship back together more times than Garrett could count, and indeed, had virtually *pieced* it back together after the Battle of Ethos. Those scars ran almost as deep as the psychological ones, and perhaps even, the two were interrelated. In fact, the *Enterprise* had taken such a sound beating in that last skirmish that the captain feared Starfleet might even be forced to scrap the legendary flagship after this tour... if it didn't explode first.

"You're in charge, Commander," Garrett offered, "what would you like me to do?"

"I am formulating a plan, Captain, but it may require a small amount of human imagination." Garrett turned to him in her heavy suit and eyed him with surprise, but he merely kept working, his efforts somewhat hindered by the thick gloves he wore.

"I am truly intrigued, Skyl," she said, almost mocking the Vulcan's most favorite word. A light illuminated the small room from somewhere behind her, and the captain turned to see that Skyl had brought yet another station to life. *Baby steps*, she mused.

"Please take that station, Captain," he ordered and she complied without protest. The *Enterprise* was his baby now, and Garrett was not about to question his authority. Forcefully pulling her sticky boots off the deck for each molasses-like step, she quickly concluded that she much preferred flying over driving any day of the week. Careful not to pull out the communication wire connecting

them, she approached the station with some effort and paused there before it.

“Ready, sir,” she said lightheartedly, but the audience was lost.

“There is a program running at that station that I would like you to monitor...”

“Yes, I see it...”

“It was our initial uplink with the holographic computer system down on the surface.”

“Okay?” Garrett offered with a somewhat puzzled tone. She couldn’t see how one insignificant little program could ever be helpful in restarting a dead starship; especially a program that was thousands of years old. But it is often a common misconception to believe that simply because something was developed centuries before humans had come down out of the trees, that it was somehow primitive. Many advanced cultures in the galaxy had come and gone long before mankind (*and even the dinosaurs*) had so much as dreamed of walking the Earth. It had also been argued for many decades in the 20th Century that the Great Pyramids could never have been built by the ancient Egyptians, or that mankind could never have landed on the moon. Captain Garrett however, like so many others, had quickly learned to appreciate the almost unlimited power of human ingenuity... and she was now about to get a first-class lesson in the limitless power of *Vulcan* creativity.

“Are you familiar, Captain, with the human concept of ‘The Ghost in the Machine’?” Garrett could see that this was where her human imagination would have to come into play.

“Yes, vaguely,” she responded, her curiosity definitely piqued. “It is a philosophical concept, I believe, that wonders at the relationship between the independent forces of body and mind, and how the two mysteriously interact.”

“Correct, Captain,” Skyl acknowledged, “and by extension, this concept has often been ascribed to the complex interactions between advanced computer software with the limited power of its hardware. It has become the basis for artificial intelligence.”

“Fair enough,” Garrett conceded, “but I fail to see where you’re going with this Skyl.” She could not see nor hear behind her

that the chief engineer's gloved fingertips were flying over his work console like a master pianist at his keyboard. Lt. Commander Skyl had a gift with computers that few people understood. He was a virtuoso even by Vulcan standards, and few people had taken the time to truly watch him work. It was almost as if the man could see inside the programming like it was a living breathing thing... and that's exactly what he was banking on.

"I am currently working under the premise that the *Enterprise* has the will to live..."

"Huh?" Garrett said incredulously, turning to stare at the back of the man's helmet.

"Every living object in the universe," he explained, "has an instinctual determination to survive, Captain. I believe that the *Enterprise* is no different."

"Skyl, are you sure your oxygen is adjusted properly?" She said this with none of her usual cheeky humor and continued to stare at the back of his helmet with a mounting level of concern. Time was running out, and the safety of her crew was on the line here.

"Please keep your eyes on the screen," he half-scolded, almost as if he had eyes in the back of his head like some old school marm. She abruptly turned as instructed and was shocked to see the ancient computer program changing right before her eyes, almost as if it indeed was alive. It was quickly becoming apparent to her that Skyl was working on a different plane now, almost as if he were in a fugue or a trance, so she decided to keep her mouth shut and just pray that her Vulcan turned Buddha chief engineer knew what the hell he was doing.

"Bottom left of your screen, Captain... please begin inputting those parameters into your console... speed is of the essence... quickly now..."

"Skyl, what the hell is going on?" Garrett asked with increasing fascination, her own gloved fingers doing their best to keep up with his complex and ever-adaptive programs.

"The interactive hologram down on the surface has been running for thousands of years, Captain. All that time it has been adapting and learning and integrating into its consciousness a very

complex philosophy based on the concept of multiple, harmonious personalities. It has also developed a very keen desire to survive...”

“Oh, my God,” Garrett whispered, her fingers increasing in speed to keep up with his own. Before her, the very heart of the hologram’s matrix was transforming itself into a sort of medic for the *Enterprise’s* own computer core. She could see it now as if she too were inside the program with Skyl. It was giving her the chills, just watching the master at work.

“Faster now, Captain, faster... there it is...” Skyl intoned... “faster...” She did her best to keep up, but the programming was evolving beyond her feeble comprehension. As far as she could tell, Skyl was injecting the hologram’s own will to survive into the very heart of the *Enterprise*. And he was doing it so fast now that she could no longer follow along. She marveled at the speed he was able to work in his gloved hands. Tears began to roll down her cheeks now as she began to sense the very real lifeforce stirring within the starship around her. They had all referred to the mighty ship as ‘she’ from the very beginning, of course, like it truly was a living, breathing thing. Generations before them had done the same for all other vessels, both great and small – but it had always been as an abstraction, an anthropomorphication of an object that was not really alive. But the *Enterprise* was alive! And Garrett could see it now as plain as day. It was her ship, she was its captain, and she found herself praying, hoping, wishing now with all her might that it might survive.

Like an expert surgeon, Skyl injected the holographic matrix into the *Enterprise* mainframe. Her work done, Garrett could do naught but just stand back and watch in awe as the medicine quickly spread through the computer core like a powerful drug through the veins of a comatose patient. Almost instantly she could see it take effect. The *Enterprise* was coming awake right before her eyes. She could feel its pulse increase, could sense it regaining consciousness, could feel the lifeforce within it stirring and fighting for survival. It was an awakening in every sense of the word. Energy began to flow. All around her lights and stations began to pop on, illuminating the darkness with a newfound sense of hope. It was a rebirth of mind, body, and spirit – not only for her – but for the mighty flagship as well.

Life, in all its many forms, will fight for survival against all odds. The *Enterprise* was no different. Like a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam, Rachel Garrett floated now in all its radiance as the *Enterprise* burst forth into the heavens like a bright new emerging star.

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His mission complete, and distress call received, Lt. Richard M. Castillo was returning now with great haste to the incoming Rogue. He had decided to risk one more warp jump for the mere sake of his friend, Andy. He was currently on the far side of the sun, and many hours away at normal impulse speeds, which posed sort of a new problem. Somehow, he would have to explain to Commander Stadi how he'd managed to complete his survey so fast. He sensed that the ship's first officer would not likely be entirely pleased at the risk the brash young lieutenant had been taking with the only warp-capable vessel remaining to them. Harder still would be the explanations to Skyl as to why the engines had been so obviously and so deliberately damaged. Castillo began to wonder now if his so-called sacrifice to the cause had actually been worth it after all. They were likely to be stranded in this system for months and months to come now anyway, so what had been the big hurry?

Of course, he knew in truth that his agitation had been to blame. He was becoming more and more annoyed with himself with every passing moment, of that there was no doubt. By calling Commander Stadi out on Enyo, he'd sure dug himself into a mighty deep hole, and he wondered how he'd ever be able to climb out of it... not to mention lying to Captain Garrett, something he never thought he'd do. He had kind of a sick feeling knowing full-well that he truly was the bad guy here. Poor, poor Enyo... she was a such sweet girl, how would she ever show her face on the Bridge again? Because he'd reacted in a moment of anger where he should have used discretion, everything would change from here. Bad enough aboard ship, but now he was trying to imagine what things would be like with them all crammed together for months inside those tiny lifeboats. He'd sure made a mess of things... and against his own better judgment, he was probably

about to make it worse.

With Andy as his accomplice, Castillo had every intention of going to Directoria and saving *something* of that doomed world. It would, of course, be in direct violation of the Prime Directive – and his captain's orders – but Castillo didn't care. He couldn't just let ten billion people be wiped right off the map without preserving something of their culture and history. If he lost his commission and got kicked out of Starfleet because of it, so be it, it was still the right thing to do. At least all those people wouldn't simply be erased from history. He was still a firm believer in the basic principles of the Federation's most important code, yes, but he was also a firm believer that it had never been intended to be as rigid as it was currently interpreted. Like Kirk, he viewed it with much more flexibility than did all that heavy brass at Starfleet Command. Life was different out here on the frontier. It didn't always fit into the strict parameters of the law. James T. Kirk knew this intuitively.

The visual display out the front windows of the runabout was still quite a show though and Castillo took a brief second to marvel at it. Not entirely making the full-scale transition into warp, the path ahead was more of a rainbow-streaked tunnel than it was the traditional warp stars, and it made him feel a little giddy. Piloting was his one true love, and perhaps he had sacrificed too many other things for it. It was not uncommon for officers on the command track to remain single, it was sort of the unwritten price that went along with a career of so much risk. Their current situation was a perfect example. It's lonely at the top, or so they say, and this caused Castillo to give pause. So worried was everyone about Enyo and Stadi, that none of them had really given much thought to how Captain Garrett must feel. Embarrassment. Betrayal. A certain amount of loneliness to be sure.

He also paused to consider for a moment how his upcoming actions might truly affect his career. It was something he hadn't considered. Piloting was his one true love. By violating the Prime Directive, he could quite possibly be putting all of that in jeopardy. If they drummed him out of Starfleet, he could still find no end to work in the merchant fleets, but those slow and bulky freighters didn't shine a candle next to flying an *Ambassador*-class starship. He was provided

some protection from all his antics by the simple fact that they were way out here on the frontier, hundreds of light-years from home... but what of the long-term? When they were rescued, and they would be rescued eventually, he would likely face a court martial – maybe even spend the eighteen-month trip home in the brig of some other starship under the command of a much less forgiving captain.

His console beeped once and caught his attention, and he keyed in several commands to bring the svelte little craft out of warp and into orbit of the Rogue. The *Enterprise* still appeared lifeless, but it hadn't exploded yet, so that was a good sign. There might yet be some hope left after all, especially if Captain Garrett and Skyl were still aboard. He thought again of that fateful staff briefing and how Skyl had finally pushed him to the edge. Castillo really did respect the Vulcan engineer, but sometimes the man just pushed all of his buttons at once. After all this was over, he would have to make amends.

"This is Lieutenant Castillo calling Lifeboat Two..."

*"Richard, this is Cicely, thank the Great Bird you're here..."* Cicely's voice was still crackly in the remaining subspace interference, but at least they could now communicate.

"It's nice to be back," Castillo smirked, in spite of the urgency in her voice. "So, what kind of trouble has my little buddy gotten himself into this time?" The lieutenant was forced to suppress a chuckle... it was usually Castillo that got Andy into trouble, not the other way round. There was a wee bit of irony here on multiple fronts.

*"He came outside to make contact with us, and now somehow he has been cut off from the rest of the team,"* Cicely explained. *"Oxygen levels in his suit are low, and he is understandably upset."*

"Oh, no doubt he is," Castillo chuckled, thinking of the months of razzing to come.

*"Please, Richard, this is serious..."*

"Roger that, Lifeboat Two... subspace interference is still too high for transport, so I'll have to swing down and pick him up." *And it's gonna cost him too,* Castillo mused with a sinister smile. Oh yes, months and *months* of razzing to come.

*"Acknowledged... hold please..."* – a pause – *"Mister Castillo, this is Commander Stadi..."* The suddenness of Stadi's voice inside

the cockpit caused Castillo to sit immediately erect, almost as if at attention, even despite the crackliness of it.

“Castillo here, sir, go ahead...” he half-fumbled, though he didn’t really know why... but then, they hadn’t spoken, or even hardly looked at each other, since the ‘incident’.

*“Status of your mission, Lieutenant... any luck finding us a home?”*

“Uh, no, sir...” he paused, “...no luck yet... but I think there may be a promising candidate on the far side of the sun.” For the second time today, he had lied to a senior officer and he found himself hoping now that Stadi’s powerful Betazoid mind couldn’t reach this far out into space. It was unnerving serving with telepaths, especially when you had something to hide. Castillo could feel the heat rising up in his collar as the usual lag in communications slowly stretched itself out into a long pause.

*“Understood,”* Stadi said finally. *“Now make haste towards the surface, Lieutenant.”*

“Aye, sir, *Genesee* out.” Even after all these years, Castillo still couldn’t quite figure out just what the ship’s first officer *did* and *did not* know sometimes – but he often suspected that Stadi routinely knew more than he ever let on. Fortunately, human protocol somewhat held the commander’s psionic prowess in check. All the better for them both perhaps. Complicity in a crime is almost as bad as committing the crime itself, and Richard Castillo was about to commit the mother of all crimes. Violating the Prime Directive was almost a sin in fact, and he hoped that someday he might find some redemption for what he was about to do. There would be no turning back once the course was set. ...*Engage.*

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*“You will not leave us here alone... we do not wish to die.”* The finality of those words had stunned both Marta and Onovan into a momentary silence. Through its uplink with the *Enterprise*, the hologram had sensed its impending doom and acted accordingly. It had locked them inside; cut them off from their ship and from safety. Fear

can be a powerful motivator, and the demented little program was definitely afraid. Yet even still, it appeared to be the epitome of patience as it just stood there now and waited. The overlarge but gentle eyes still stared at them and blinked, while narrow lips still curled up in that same old, polite smile. It was unnerving to say the least as the fear became palpable amongst the two officers. But their fear was of a different sort. No creature in the universe likes to feel trapped, yet the Away Team was now ensnared in a trap of the most devious kind.

By now, Ensign Enyo and Ann Grey could sense it too as they stopped what they were doing and stared across the room at their two seniors. Instinctively, they both began to move around the dais, giving the menacing apparition a wide berth, so as to join Marta and Onovan on the other side. They were a group now, which placed them in a much more defensive position. This was not even Starfleet training, this was just natural instinct at its finest, and the petite chief of security was grateful the two young women had responded so quickly to this almost sixth sense. Marta could protect them now, as she was trained to do... but how do you defend yourself against a 10,000-year-old schizophrenic hologram? Rapidly assessing the situation, Marta was forced to conclude that, for the moment, they were in no real danger. So, it had locked them inside, big deal, that was the extent of its bite, and someone would come for them soon.

"Library, please open the door," Marta tried to reason with it anyway, "we are in no danger, our forcefield is stable."

*"He left us... you will leave us... we do not wish to be left alone any longer."*

"Yes, I understand that. We are trying to find a way to transfer you to our ship... but we need an uplink to do so." Marta was really beginning to wonder now if it was in all actuality the hologram that was responsible for the communications blackout. She began to curse herself for the peril she'd placed Andy in. With the doors locked, he was all alone out there in that airless void with his oxygen in very short supply. She had underestimated the threat.

*"Your ship went silent some time ago,"* the hologram droned on again, same as before. None of it made any damn sense whatsoever, but she must think of Andy first.

"At least open the door and let our friend back in," she pleaded now. "His pressure suit will only sustain him for a limited time..."

*"He left us... you will leave us... we do not wish to be left alone any longer."*

"Logic loop," Onovan whispered behind her. The counselor eyed it with a mixture of both pity and disdain. "There's no reasoning with it, Commander... it has worked itself into a corner." He didn't like smart machines – but one couldn't help but feel for it either.

"Dammit," Marta hissed. She did not like this lack of control. They must gain the upper hand somehow. "All right, fine," she said at length, "let's move over here and just ignore the damn thing for a while." With arms outstretched, she herded her charges over to the farthest corner; they all then stood with backs to the hologram, attempting to exclude it from their very exclusive club. The four of them to a tee were sick of the suits at this point. They were hot and heavy and left uncomfortable itches in places that simply could not be scratched. Onovan thought for sure his bladder would burst at any moment, and the bulky helmets had become an annoying hindrance to movement. Ann's glassy brown hair was in a complete state of disarray, and hung in her eyes even more than usual, while Enyo's twin antennae had begun to wilt like two blue daisies in the sweltering desert sun. *Screw this!*

"Enyo," Marta said at length, "can you get any readings at all outside this room? Any indication of what happened to the uplink?" The young ensign flipped open her tricorder and began scanning above them, around them, but the frown on her face was answer enough.

"I *am* detecting minute fluctuations in subspace," she offered with a failed shrug.

"That would be consistent with the *Enterprise* firing her main deflector," Onovan added, "...or with a warp core breach..."

"Yeah, but why?" Marta mused, choosing to ignore for a moment that menacing comment about the warp core. "I can't think of any reason why they would open the rift with us still on the surface..."

"P-p-perhaps they had to," Ann Grey said nervously. "P-p-perhaps the s-s-situation had, um, ch-ch-changed somehow?" She too attempted a shrug in her heavy suit.

“Certainly possible,” Onovan eyed Marta.

“So, does that mean they’ve failed, or have we been swallowed up for all time in interspace?” Marta speculated. Ann Grey’s face blanched to white as the panic slowly settled in. She could barely stand another minute in this suit; much less being trapped inside this room with that menacing shade up on the dais... the fact that they may be stuck here now for all eternity made her feel suddenly sick. A thick knot formed in her throat.

“With all due respect, Ma’am,” Enyo pointed out, “we could speculate all day.” She said this with her characteristic cool smile, and it somewhat eased Ann’s obvious malaise. Marta marveled at its effect. The girl had a definite knack for working with people. Marta, Garrett, and Stadi had had several key discussions over the past couple years about Enyo’s forthright confidence and level-headed presence of mind. A result of her mind-meld with Skyl? Or just the simple fact that she had been thrust into command of the *Enterprise* during one of the most horrific battles of its career? Whatever the case, the fresh young ensign, so fresh out of the Academy, would go very far in Starfleet, especially with all the nurturing that can only be gained from serving with the finest crew in the finest ship in the galaxy. Whether Enyo knew it or not, the senior staff had already put her on the fast track to success. She would easily make captain by thirty.

“Fair enough, Ensign,” Marta conceded, then at length: “Well we can’t just stand around here, regardless of the situation outside... any suggestions?” she queried the group, but she was really looking at Enyo, fascinated with how the girl might proceed next. But Onovan answered instead.

“Well, I for one would love to get out of this miserable suit,” he said with a lighthearted grin, a few beads of sweat now forming on his brow. *He really needed to pee!*

“Still not so wise,” Marta warned, feeling almost as uncomfortable. “I still don’t trust that thing...” She cast a wary eye in the direction of the hologram, and it stared back at her with that same old placid smile.

“Commander, perhaps I can talk to the hologram.” Enyo was looking at it now with a sort of compassion that hadn’t occurred to

either Onovan or Marta. “Maybe bring it out of that loop its caught in...”

The two senior officers looked at each other and smiled, then Onovan spoke: “We were thinking that maybe Doctor Grey could reason with it...” A momentary pause.

“Wait. Wh-wh-what? Me?!” Ann Grey turned even whiter than before and looked like she could crawl out through a crack, any crack, in the stone walls, spacesuit and all. “Ah, da, da, uh, duh...” she sputtered. Surprisingly, Enyo was the first to burst out into laughter, which was *not* necessarily in her character. But there was something in Ann Grey’s stunned look that struck a chord with her, and she chortled now with a sweet giggle that betrayed her young age. Onovan couldn’t help but join in with his own deep thrum, and even Marta was forced to drop the pretenses of security chief for a moment and giggle away like a schoolgirl caught up in some mischief.

At first, Ann Grey merely stared at them, then as the joke caught on, she twisted up her face in an embarrassed sort of smile, bringing up a gloved hand to swipe away some of her errant hair. Still, she did not for a moment take the corner of her eye off that threat that stood not too yonder distant. The effect on the hologram was becoming apparent as the exclusive little club maintained its exclusivity. All it could hear was their slowly fading laughter and his once placid features began to contort themselves now into a queer sort of frown. It was obviously taking the full skills of its programming to accomplish this, its first ever real facial expression. The light projectors that gave the form some substance flickered and wavered slightly as a noticeable amount of power was redirected towards this unnatural new task. But it was not indeed the light projectors that were creating all the draw, but the massive computer banks themselves as they attempted to process this strange new sensation. It was perhaps a new awakening for its ancient software, next in the step towards true self-awareness.

Enyo eyed its contorting features with renewed fascination. As just a lowly ensign, she had remained largely silent, but was now looking forward to the opportunity to interact with it – partially she supposed because her father had been so fascinated with the Kurlan mythos. As a child, she had hardly listened to his many longwinded

oratories on ancient cultures of the galaxy, including especially the Kurlans. It had all been so abstract and distant to a girl of that age. Like many young teens, the expression – *who cares?* – was a resounding theme amongst her and her older brothers for their father’s most favorite hobby. As she got older, she certainly appreciated his zeal, but still had never quite gotten the bug for his archeological obsessions. The zeal was for real now however as she stood on one of the archaic Kurlan homeworlds and stared at one of their greatest achievements. This right here was why she had joined Starfleet.

*An individual is a community of individuals... many voices... each with its own desires, its own style, its own view of the world.* Serving in Starfleet had certainly taught Enyo this much... and much, much more. And serving aboard the *Enterprise* had been an experience she would not trade for anything. Combined with her time at the Academy, Enyo had been exposed to cultures and ideas in the past six and a half years that were so foreign to her life on Andoria, yet so enriching and fulfilling at the same time... it was almost like experiencing archeology in real-time. Just the ship alone was a goldfish bowl of new ideas and styles... and forbidden desires perhaps. Spencer Stadi had filled her with such joy, had broadened her horizons and made her feel wanted, had enriched her life in ways that she probably wouldn’t even realize for many years to come. It was sad that she, of all people, had no idea that the whole thing had come crashing right down around her in just the past few short hours. Life would have to adapt and adjust, just as it always has.

“Hello, Library,” she said cheerfully to the hologram, its placid smile having now returned. Off to her distant right, her three colleagues had resumed their work with tricorders trying to figure out just what in the world had gone wrong outside this building. Ironical perhaps, because that was just what the hologram had been trying to do for the thousands of years prior! *They had simply left him there all alone.*

The hologram blinked its overlarge eyes at Enyo. “*How may I be of assistance?*” Already a change had come over it, just interacting with this sweet, blue-skinned girl.

“I think I’m going to give you a name,” she said. “How bout

Thy'lek after my great-uncle? He was an interesting old fellow..."

"*A name?*" Again the hologram's face contorted away from that usual placid smile.

"...you remind me of him. He was a veritable fountain of information... stacks and stacks of useless facts, he used to call it," she giggled. "I think he stole that phrase from the humans though," she mused, looking down at its feet.

"*Thy'lek?*"

"Yes, Thy'lek, I think that'll do nicely," smiling back up at it. "How d'ya do Thy'lek, my name is Enyo." For a moment, the hologram was speechless. It was an experience that had never before happened to him. His interactive software was required to respond to any query placed before him, but the ancient circuitry beneath his feet had come up short this time... he did not have an answer for her. His shimmering green features crunched themselves into a sort of frown... it was an expression these alien visitors had made numerous times since their arrival here and he tried to emulate it now. But emulation is not necessarily understanding. Self-awareness was but the first step to being truly alive. The next was emotion, and many souls alive have spent a lifetime trying to understand them. His frown deepened as these stirrings within him slowly began to manifest themselves. The hologram stared down at the girl now with a look that could almost qualify as disbelief.

"Where should we begin?" Enyo continued unabashedly, grinning from ear to ear.

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*Engage...* at Castillo's practiced touch, the runabout *Genesee* began a downward dive towards the surface of the Rogue to rescue Andy. Panting heavily now in the airless void, Andy would neither see nor hear the craft coming, however, so his friend's impending arrival did little to assuage the growing fear that was threatening to overwhelm him. There are few deaths more horrific than suffocation – other than drowning (which is just another form of suffocation). That tiny needle embedded into the arm of his suit was buried deep in the

red now, and Andy had to force himself not to keep looking at it. It was almost as painful as looking at a real needle buried deep within the flesh of the arm. He had finally silenced the audible alarms at least that had startled him both with their suddenness, and their regularity. Time was short and he could almost feel the noose around his neck. He fought that urge that many suffocating astronauts feel to simply remove the helmet. As much as it was a lifeline, it could also turn suddenly to feel like the very root cause of the strangulation.

Thus, there Andy sat on those ancient steps and stared out into the dim city below him. It was not unlike ancient Rome he supposed, or better yet, Pompeii just after the ash had started to fall. His mind's eye could just see a panicked populace running ever here and about, searching in vain for safety. The ancient Kurlans must have left in a big hurry as well, and Andy wondered if they too had suffered the same naïveté that the Pompeian's had felt towards that yonder rumbling mountain. Right up till the end, many had thought it just a hiccup in great Vesuvius's stormy personality, and had thus been buried alive. Heretofore, could there still be dead Kurlans huddled en masse inside these many crumbling buildings laid out before him? The thought of this fascinated Andy immensely! He'd been to Pompeii once with equally as much fascination. *Oh, the fear those poor people must've felt!*

He placed both gloved hands on the sides of his helmet and threatened to twist it. Fear can be a powerful motivator for survival – no different for a man all alone in a spacesuit slowly choking on his own last breaths. No creature in the universe likes to feel trapped, yet Andy was now ensnared in a trap of the most devious kind. Take the helmet off, and he would die instantly... leave it on, and he would suffocate slowly. Far, far above him, the *Genesee* was rapidly descending; but with no atmosphere, there was no fiery trail to mark its arrival, no sonic booms to signal its approach. If Andy could just wait it out but a few more minutes, he would be saved... but his hands remained still on the sides of that menacing helmet. He felt he couldn't stand it a moment longer. He needed to be out! He needed to be free! His respiration spiked and he began to moan those suffocated death-wail moans that drowning people make. His field of vision narrowed

into a tunnel of frightful lonely darkness... but not before seeing a bright white angel pass right before his eyes.

The sleek and graceful *Genesee* circled around him and landed with a silent puff in the heavy dust behind him. His legs weak and wobbly, Andy was barely able to force himself onto his feet. At the end of that long dark tunnel, he could see light, and began to trudge forward towards it, half-stumbling in the powdery dust. If he fell, he knew it would be his end, so he pushed himself onwards and onwards for what seemed like miles. This was the drowning he had so narrowly escaped aboard the downed *Ambassador*; and it was a requiem perhaps for all those souls he had left behind. As the forcefields collapsed one by one, those tiny little red dots had blinked out in sequence. Maybe it was time for his own tiny dot to go out? What had been the fairness of him being the only survivor of a starship of eight-hundred-and-forty? Onovan had spent many a session trying to comfort him – but secretly, Andy still felt that he'd wrongfully cheated the natural order of things somehow, had cheated death.

Yet, he would do it again. With a stumble, he fell onto his knees into the tiny airlock. Behind him, the outer hatches clamped shut like a great yawning mouth. *Jonah and the whale*... the oxygen-starved brain can come up with so many bizarre images! The lights still glowered red however, and Andy felt for sure he would die right here and now before the tiny room could become pressurized. Mere seconds blurred into endless hours as those damnable lights stayed red. Castillo must be putting him on... had to be putting him on... damn him! *Damn him all to hell!... come on man, come on...* **Green** came at last and Andy at once developed a real fear that he wouldn't have the strength now to twist off that damn helmet. No creature in the universe likes to feel trapped, and now Andy was ensnared in a trap of the most devious kind. Air on the outside, death on the inside... but fear can be a powerful motivator for survival, and with a whoosh the helmet was off and on the floor.

In a rebirth of self, Andy rolled over onto his back and collapsed, head against the airlock wall. He gasped there for many long moments feeling the life-giving oxygen flood back into his lungs. Presently, he pushed himself up into a sitting position and stared

blankly up at those blinking, green lights. There was no thought for many long moments, just an empty stare up into those lights and the great beyond. All was silence surrounding him, save for the usual background sounds of the runabout. Once, as a child, he had laid out in the backyard with his eyes closed and started counting the sounds... he had lost count somewhere in the thirties. The warm dry deserts of Vulcan simply teemed with life, if anyone cared to listen; not to mention the more mundane sounds of life that so often go unnoticed. The wind itself – aircraft – children playing – the full gambit of a world filled to the brim with people and animals and plants of all types and varieties. It was a universe alive, and Andy appreciated this gift of life now all anew.

At long last, he stood and pressed the release to open the inner hatch. There was a tight *Cha* sound as the pressure equalized and the narrow door slid aside. Stepping out, he was not surprised to see his best friend (and savior) sitting at the helm. Andy couldn't help but break into a broad grin as he started to wriggle out of his cumbersome spacesuit. It appeared they were already back up into space... which was a surprise.

"Bout time you showed up," Castillo scolded him, without turning back.

"Got lost in the airlock," Andy grinned, his neo-Vulcan ears rising high up on his scalp as if trying to run away from this most curious human expression.

"Have a seat, buddy o' pal," Castillo rejoined, facing Andy finally with a most conspiratorial look painted on his beaming face. He was genuinely happy to see his friend again.

"Where we headed?" The young lieutenant took a quick look out the broad forward windows as he settled comfortably into the co-pilot's seat. There was no sign of the Rogue, or of the *Enterprise* for that matter, just black, empty space. His heart leapt for a moment at the return thought of all those apparent lifeboats... *had the ship exploded?* He found that his lips were brimming with all sorts of questions. But Castillo spoke first.

"I've got a little mission proposal for you..."

"Oh, boy," Andy rolled his eyes. More mischief was on the

horizon, he could tell. The dynamic duo (as they were now called) had become fast friends ever since their very first meeting back at Ethos, and their friendship had only grown stronger since. Somewhat ill-disciplined at times, the two cohorts rarely missed an opportunity to get into trouble, much to the consternation of the rest of the senior staff. Why Captain Garrett tolerated it was beyond anyone's comprehension (even theirs sometimes), but so far, they had tested their boundaries to the absolute max without much consequence. Admittedly, Andy with his one-quarter Vulcan stoicism, felt a little uncomfortable with some of their pranks, but he always went along with his pal regardless. *A follower?* Perhaps, but that was not necessarily a bad thing because Castillo never treated Andy with any less respect than that of an absolute equal. They were best buds in every sense of the word.

As such, Andy listened intently to every word of Castillo's most audacious plan. Violation of the Prime Directive was a mortal sin to any Starfleet officer, yet Andy heard him out nonetheless, and pondered all the consequences, both good and bad, with perhaps just a tiny bit of that Vulcan stoicism as his guide. Andy hadn't been present for that original staff briefing when all this had been argued the first time – and maybe Castillo used this to his slight advantage – but Andy was an intelligent young man, and like-minded, so the chances of his collusion were almost inevitable. He was, of course, worried about the Away Team, but had been reassured that there was more than enough time to get to Directoria and back before there was any real danger. As far as the *Enterprise*, well, that was out of their hands anyway, and the lifeboats were perfectly safe for the time being.

Thus, our two heroes headed towards their destiny... yet sometimes it seems there can be hidden consequences to our actions. They were not gods and should never have thought of themselves as such. 'Tis a slippery slope down to the water's edge...

## *T-minus 05...*

At the feet of the subguardia lay a body.

*He was too late!* Novachi's heart leapt into his throat, threatened to strangle him. The heavy metal door had opened with such silence that the detector could peer entirely into the Primari's office now quite unnoticed. Quickly surveying the room, he was much relieved to see Qoarta Zenthi seated at his desk; not dead after all, as Novachi had at first feared. For his part, Subguardia Al'Embri sat in a chair directly across from the haggard looking primari, looking much haggard himself – so this could leave no one else but Tarma Vacilli lying dead at his feet. *Pity*, Novachi thought to himself. He'd met Vacilli once at a seminar, long before the coming of the Rogue of course, and the two had hit it off quite well. He was a greasy little man that few people liked, but Novachi was fat and gruff and didn't much care what other people liked, so they had become fast friends in spite of themselves. It had been quite some time since the two comrades had met up at their favorite pub to exchange barbs, and Novachi regretted this now, like so many other things.

His weapon still drawn, and he as yet still undetected, the detector did not quite know how to proceed. What exactly was the protocol for storming into the Official Office with a loaded firearm? Zenthi at the moment did not appear to be in any real danger, and other than the dead body at his feet, Al'Embri did not appear to be posing much of a threat. As to the question of the subguardia being the serial killer Novachi had been looking for all this time, of that there could no longer be any doubt. Two dead bodies with broken necks right here in the Palace of the Primari was proof enough of that! But *why*? What would drive a revered Subguardia of the United Churches to commit murder in the first place? And not just *a* murder mind you, but many – and mutilations as well. These were heinous acts that were fortunately very rare on this planet. *Hearts and brains removed...* what in the world could it possibly all mean, and how the font did it relate to the primari?

Detector Fraca Novachi was about to find out. Neither of the

men were speaking at the moment (they appeared to be exasperated with each other?), so Novachi decided to take the nonchalant approach. Holstering his firearm, he very casually knocked on the heavy door. Startled, both men jumped and turned at once. Relief was instantly painted deep across their faces at their recognition of the intruder. Novachi would have expected this reaction from Zenthi, certainly, but he was caught somewhat unawares by the same expression so emblazoned across the features of Al'Embri. The aged old subguardia should at the very least be alarmed at the prospects of being caught; or what's more, *stopped*, before he could go any further. Yet the old man's features, in fact his whole countenance, was indeed truly relieved to see the detector as he took his first trial steps into the room.

Novachi glanced from the old man's face down to the body of Vacilli, then back up into Al'Embri's tired, sullen eyes. No one said a word, not even the primari. Al'Embri had been the detector's mentor, his surrogate father – his friend even – since Fraca had been but a child. Orphaned, Novachi had grown up surrounded by sullen monks, each with those same old tired eyes. Maturing under the strict and lifeless regime of these men, there had been very little time for playing, and even less time for love as his teenage years were crushed under the jackboots of an ecclesiastical education. The detector had spent many a long, lonely night alone in his dark damp chamber, never really quite understanding what his mentor Al'Embri had against the mysteries of the opposite sex that Fraca had so often asked about. He'd certainly been kept busy throughout the years of his matriculation, but loneliness unrecognized is still loneliness. A tiny amount of hatred was welling up within him now, and he fought to suppress it. So much life lost to regret.

In turn, Subguardia Al'Embri stared back at his young protégé with so much pride... and also just a little bit of disappointment. He had long hoped that Fraca would someday hear his own calling during those long years at the United Churches Tabernacle, and thus become a subguardia himself. But in a show of willful defiance, the boy had left at his majority to join the detector force instead. Al'Embri had been devastated, though he'd never openly shown it. Fraca had been

like a son to him, and every father wants his boy to follow in his footsteps. Their relationship had been forever strained ever since, especially since Fraca refused even still to attend bi-weekly services. It was a defiance that Al'Embri had never understood. But loneliness unrecognized is still loneliness, and the subguardia had never recognized what loneliness a teenaged boy must've felt, locked up for years within those cold dark walls, with no one else for company except a group of sullen old monks with tired old eyes. For a fleeting moment, those tired old eyes closed themselves.

The tired eyes remembered. *Her name had been Alora.* He could still hear the screams. From his high vantage point, the missionary could see with frightening clarity the folly of his flock as they retreated deep underground. If he had been down there among them, then he most certainly would have done the same. But from up here, with tired eyes remembering, he could see again and again the horror of their decision as it unfolded again and again in vivid, agonizing memory... not for minutes, or tens of minutes – but for over forty years the green fields of Ansara had dissolved into a brown cloud of devastation. What could one man do? Even sleeping, he could still hear their screaming. *Her name had been Alora.* He had been picking berries with Alora just hours before. They had talked about marriage, and of him dropping out of the missionary program – of them raising a family together. So, yes, Fraca had been like a son to him... the son he was never able to have.

*Hearts and brains removed?* What is the heart without a brain, and what is the brain without a heart? The two were separate, yet equal – one in the same, yet distinct – the focus of love, yet its only detriment. *Her name had been Alora.* The soul was the binding force that held these two independent lenses together. Once bound, only then were they able to focus in on love. It took courage to love, and courage only comes from faith – faith to believe in your own worth, faith to believe in your own importance in the universe, faith to believe that you matter. Thus, faith held the key to the soul, and only faith. What he had done over the past two years, all those people he had murdered – he had done so with faith. All of his actions had been carefully orchestrated for the coming of the one. The savior. The one that had

unwittingly been groomed for this all-important task that lies ahead since childhood. The one that would deliver them all from evil, and would do so very soon now. It was an apotheosis, the elevation of a man to the level of a god, and it would all be at Al'Embri's own hand. Fraca Novachi would bring about their salvation; of this he had the utmost faith.

Primari Qoarta Zenthi stared at these two men now with wild wonder in his eyes. What were they both thinking?! He knew Al'Embri of course, but this overweight man from the detector force he had never met. Was the detector trying to figure out what to do next? A dead body at the feet of a subguardia within the confines of the Official Office was enough to confuse any man, Zenthi supposed. But the two seemed to be stunned, just staring at each other as they were. Did they know one another perhaps? Zenthi stole a quick glance up at that fateful clock on the wall, then over towards the door to the Conflict Room. Time was running out for them all. With the point-source generator destroyed, he must launch the nukes, and he must do it soon. Against all odds, he would try, and he hoped now that with the detector there with him, he might have a chance to do it without getting his neck broken by that crazy old man. He threatened a start towards the door, but then thought better of it. For some reason, the burning city of Quid entered the primari's tired mind.

He turned away from that all-important door, and looked down instead at his lower right-hand drawer. Inside it still were his resignation papers. Six months into this crisis he had quite simply had enough. It was too much for any one man to bear. Staring at that drawer, Zenthi remembered again that horrible day like it was yesterday. After many long, horrible hours in the Official Office, listening to report after report after report of nothing but death and destruction, he had at last retired to the private apartments. Zoella didn't know it yet, but Zenthi would sign the papers and make his announcement tomorrow. A cop out? Perhaps. A failure? Most definitely; but the crisis at home had reached a head and he had decided to bow out now in favor of something far more precious. His family. But Zoella was already gone, never to return. She had left sometime that morning and taken Xanda and Arnedra with her. Zenthi

closed his own eyes – he would never see his family again.

Behind his eyelids, the Quid Firestorm still raged. He could still feel the heat on his skin. Within his mind's eye he watched as first Zoella, and then Xanda and Arnedra, burst into flames right before him and disintegrated into ash. Zenthi sat forward with a start, the image of the conflagration still so vivid in his mind. His skin immediately morphed from its splotchy yellow, to the orange of angry frustration. Frustration at his own helplessness as a leader, frustration that the generator had failed after all they'd put into it – frustration that this priest still continued to harangue him about decisions that did not seem to matter anymore. His wife and children were dead! And soon so shall be their world. His sudden start had attracted the attention of the priest and the detector, and they both stared at him now. Staring back, Zenthi fought against that malignant hope that slowly crept back into his tired soul. Would this new stranger help him? All was silence for a moment more.

“*Whyyy*, Father,” was all that Novachi could finally utter, redirecting his gaze back to the aged old subguardia.

“It was all for you, my son,” Al'Embri replied with perfect placidness.

“*What?*” The detector's face crunched up into a pained sort of frown. *All for him?* What the font was that supposed to mean?! Two years' worth of murders and mutilations, the death of Vacilli his friend – threatening the life of the primari... how could any of that be for *him*? Novachi allowed a little bit of that suppressed hatred to surface now. How *dare* he make him complicit in any of these most disgusting crimes! His anger was instantaneous.

“You are the Chosen One, my son,” Al'Embri said with a faint queer smile.

“He's out of his mind,” Zenthi offered at this point.

“Are you *out* of your *mind*?” Novachi half-shouted almost simultaneously. He demurred to the primari for a brief second, before returning his hardened gaze back to the subguardia. “Chosen for *what*?” he growled. The detector's grayish old skin had made a miraculous transition from splotchy yellow, to orange, to full-on red now as decades of anger and anguish welled up within him. He hated

this man, and he never realized how much until just now. It was sacrilege, he knew it, and he would no doubt go to the Nolife for it – but by the Guardias, *he did not care!*

“Calm yourself, my child... you were always prone to such fits of anger...”

“Enough!” Novachi shouted. “Now explain yourself to me old man... you brutalized those people,” he gasped now, “it was sick and twisted and depraved... How could you?”

“I was testing your worthiness, my son,” was his frustratingly placid reply. By now, Zenthi was sitting on the edge of his seat. *Brutalized people?* Those words hung over the primari’s desk like a storm cloud ready to burst. *Vacilli had not been the first?* He had greatly underestimated this old man in all his religious fanaticism, and Zenthi was quickly beginning to realize just how close he was in fact to assassination.

“What do you mean *brutalized*, Detector?” he blurted out, quite unexpectedly.

“He strangled them, Nomen Prime,” Novachi spat out, “and then he removed their hearts and brains before dumping their naked bodies out into the streets.”

“H-h-how many?” Zenthi stuttered.

“Thirteen in all, Nomen Prime... I believe you were intended as the final target.”

“B-b-but why,” the Primari directed towards Al’Embri. The last few harrowing hours of this ordeal made even less sense to Zenthi now than they did before! The subguardia was even more of a madman than he thought! How could any one person ever truly be that passionate towards religion? After all these years he thought he knew Al’Embri fairly well, but clearly not! Al’Embri ignored the primari, spoke directly to Fraca, his son.

“It was a test, a test to see if the Chosen One was worthy... and you passed my son... you discovered the Golden Ratio that led you here. The Guardias look down on you favorably, my boy, they always have...”

“Th-th-the *chosen one?*” Fraca said with deep-seated incredulity. “Stop this metaphysical mugdashit at once you old fool...”

you *killed* those people, Father!”

“All will become clear soon enough, my son...” Al’Embri attempted. He had lost much, had sacrificed much, and now he, and *only* he, could see the path to enlightenment.

“I am not your son!” Fraca shot back angrily. “My father was gunned down in the street when I was seven years old... he was *murdered*, Father... do you understand that... *murdered!*” For a moment, the subguardia looked hurt, like a deep pain was growing in his chest and running down his left arm. No one likes to have their illusions shattered, not even a priest of the United Churches. The billowing pink robes of Al’Embri’s station wilted a little like a burnt-out old carnation, but the effect lasted only seconds. In a resurgence of faith, he built himself back up again. All of his actions had been carefully orchestrated for the coming of the one. The savior. The one that had unwittingly been groomed since childhood for this all-important task that lay ahead. That savior was here with them now. It was an apotheosis. Fraca Novachi would bring about their resurrection. And soon enough, *All* would be enfolded back into the pink robes of the Church – whether here, or in the Secondlife – and they would all have Subguardia Albatana Embri to thank for their salvation.

“Detector,” Zenthi interrupted.

“Yes, Nomen Prime, sorry... are you all right, Sir?” Fraca’s skin had started to cool slightly by now, but it was still a shade of bright splotchy orange.

*Am I alright?* Zenthi wondered. Behind his eyelids, the firestorm yet raged, so he refused to close his eyes. Death was banging at his every doorstep. The Rogue was still steamrolling in at fifty-eight million miles per hour. A madman sat across from him ready to snap his neck at the next ill turn. An armed detector stood just feet away from him with a loaded weapon. Just feet away in the other direction his (former) Master of Internal Security lay dead on the floor with his neck broken. Millions of his fellow citizens had died in just the past two years... billions more would die in just the next few hours. His wife had left him and taken the children... they were now just ash and a distant memory. He could not even remember what Zoella looked

like anymore, much less how she smelled. And the children, oh Guardias the children... how quickly the memory fades! Was he all right indeed?

“Yes, Detector, I’m fine,” Zenthi answered. “But time is of the essence... I must activate the Global Launch Initiative.” He directed his gaze over towards that fateful door to the Conflict Room to indicate his objective.

“Noooo, Fraca, you mustn’t!” Al’Embri pleaded. “You are the Chosen One, my son, you must bring this infidel’s government to its knees... only then can we find salvation from this calamity that has befallen us.”

“Oh, my Guardias,” Zenthi muttered. He’d been hearing this tired out old litany for hours; maybe even years, if he really thought about it. Al’Embri had been pestering Zenthi and his advisors since before he’d even taken the oath of office. For almost four years, this tired old man had been harassing the Administration about its progressive policies and the new directions it was taking – a direction even further away from the Church, mind you. He’d gone on so long about it that he was now thought of as little more than a crackpot – an old curmudgeon just so lost in his ways that he couldn’t find his way out of a dark closet. He’d become a joke. The office staff even had a secret sign for his approach; security had assigned him a special codename that was almost as comical. Yes, they had indeed underestimated him. But all of this was new to Fraca Novachi, and the portly detector paused now and stared at the primari. He’d had enough of games; it was time for answers.

“What is he truly on about, Nomen Prime? What don’t I know?” On any other day such brashness within the Official Office would not be tolerated. One did not just stand there and interrogate the Primari of the United Front. But the man eyed him levelly.

“I am a progressive,” Zenthi answered flatly. “I assure you, Detector, I am guilty of no other sin than that.” He would not be ashamed of his views, not even now.

“Father?” Novachi looked down on the old man like a librarian looks down on a fifth grader. Al’Embri’s lower lip quivered faintly. *Her name had been Alora!* But, No! He mustn’t dwell on the past. He

was here to save the souls of all those billions outside this room. The Guardias had chosen him as their martyr, and Novachi would be their messiah.

“Don’t you see how this man has twisted our views, my son? He is leading us all down a path to ruin. What did I teach you about the Beguiler of the Nolife?”

“That he appears in disguises and comes to us in many forms...”

“Yes!” Al’Embri shouted hoarsely. “Here, here before you is the Beguiler himself!” He outstretched a boney hand, palm upward, towards Zenthi “Do you not see him for what he truly is?! He must be stopped! The Rogue is a test, my son, sent by the Guardias... and the next few moments will decide the Fates of *All* of us in both the here and in the hereafter. Only you, and you alone, can decide our destiny. The Guardias have chosen you for this task, *no other*,” he emphasized. “Do not stray from this golden path.” The subguardia’s impassioned plea had left him winded, had silenced him at last. Novachi stared at him for a long hard moment; this man that had been his mentor, his surrogate father, his friend. All the hatred of before now dissolved itself into pity. It was he that was twisted, not Zenthi. Somewhere over the many years, Al’Embri had lost his way, had gotten lost in the darkness.

“You murdered those people, Father,” Novachi said finally, “in cold blood... and then you dissected them. I am a Detector, Sir... I swore an oath to protect... just as you once swore an oath to ministry... but you’ve lost your way,” Fraca’s voice cracked. His skin paled to a dull gray. “I’m no savior, Father,” he finished off coldly, “and I am certainly not your messiah.”

Again, Al’Embri looked hurt, like a deep pain was growing in his chest and running down his left arm. He struggled to breathe. Eyes downcast, he looked at the lifeless body of Vacilli. He closed his eyes. The green fields of Ansara turned to dust before him. A life of so many regrets. *Her name had been Alora – he had to keep telling himself that so he would not forget.* He could not even remember what she looked like anymore, much less how she smelled. Do you blame yourself for a lifetime of unrealized dreams, or do you blame all those myriads of

forces that exist around you, and beyond your control? So many questions to ask the Guardia when the time came. Was Zenthi the Beguiler of the Nolife? Yes, of this he was convinced... but Fraca was not the Chosen One after all. He sighed.

"Nomen Prime," Novachi said at length, "is this the way to the Conflict Room?" he gestured towards that quiet, unassuming door.

"Uh, yes, Detector... Detector?" Zenthi answered with a question, slowly rising. He was not without heart however, and he paused to eye the old man with a small measure of sadness. They had sparred with each other for four long years, but he still respected Al'Embri, admired him even, for his undying devotion to faith. He should not be condemned perhaps. Pitied yes, but never condemned.

"Frac will be fine, sir," Novachi responded.

"It will take two of us to activate the launch keys," Zenthi instructed, moving around the end of his desk. He glanced only briefly at Vacilli's broken form.

"Noooo!" Al'Embri half sobbed, rising and taking one step towards the primari. Novachi immediately withdrew his firearm and pointed it at the subguardia... he was going to the Nolife for sure.

"Sit, back down, Father," he commanded. "There'll be no more trouble from you." With a weary sort of desperate whimper, Al'Embri complied, and half fell back into his chair. Eyes and weapon trained on the suspect, the detector gradually made his way around the subguardia's chair, then backed slowly towards Zenthi at the door. As the primari opened it, he turned to follow through and was struck full-on suddenly by the frail weight of Al'Embri's withered old frame. *How the font did he move so fast?!* But it was a simple matter of physics – Novachi had almost 200 pounds on the old man, and with little more than a shrug from the detector, Al'Embri was in a pile of pink robes on the floor. "Quickly now, Nomen Prime," Novachi warned, stepping briskly up to the control console.

"There," Zenthi pointed to the other key. "They must be turned at the same time."

"Yes, of course, sir," Fraca half-laughed. He'd seen enough Videoplay flickers to know how to launch a nuclear missile. Both men placed their webbed hands on the control keys at the same time. Out

of the corner of his eye, Fraca could see that Al'Embri was back on his feet and standing in the doorway. He was closer to the primari than to Fraca... it was a bad defensive position. *Now turn*, he heard Zenthi say, and he turned his key. *Nooooooooo!* he heard Al'Embri shout, and then a blinding flash of light. The vest of explosives that Sub-guardia Albatana Embri wore under his pink robes flared outwards like a mini supernova, consuming the old man at once, and shredding Primari Qoarta Zenthi to bits within a fraction of a second. Half the Official Office and half the Conflict Room were destroyed almost instantly, and there was a massive cave-in that buried all the rest. Those brave souls gathered at Zenthi Square all heard the explosion and marveled at it. *The courageous ones*. They had decided to meet death head-on, out here in the open – and indeed, gathered together as one in unfettered brotherhood. The countdown to their destruction had begun.

~ ~ ~ ~

*It was no small irony perhaps,  
that for the first time in almost 200 years,  
the people of Directoria Primari were completely free  
from the threat of Nuclear Proliferation.*

Every single missile on the planet had launched.

~ ~ ~ ~

So prolific were her tears, that she did not hear at first that far-off distant thumping. It was a rotolifter, and it was coming for her. Doctor Moira Ananti sat on the crumpled up remains of her massive deflection dish and simply sobbed out two years of pent-up anguish. So much time and effort wasted. So much sacrificed to the cause. And it had all been for naught. She had failed. In all her heartache, she could not decide what hurt the most. The destruction of her career, the destruction of her planet, or the destruction of her family. She had lost all these things to the Rogue, and very soon now she would lose her life. She was beginning to wonder now if she would even live long

enough to experience impact... fatal radiation exposure was making her feel fainter and more nauseous with every passing moment. She had no idea how long it'd been since she'd eaten, since she'd even slept. And now this Guardias-awful crying was sapping the remaining life right out of her, but she simply could not seem to make it stop.

What hurt the most, however, was the fact that she couldn't even remember what her children looked like, how they smelled, or even their ages for that matter. Kenna had been too good to her over the years, even before this crisis began. He had, for all intents and purposes, become a single parent as Moira's career had slowly taken flight. She was a brilliant theoretical physicist, and her theories had caught the attention of many high-level officials. Had she married and started a family too soon? Perhaps, but how do you retract on something that was already such a beautiful gift? To find true love is hard enough in itself, but then to give birth and raise three beautiful children is a singular experience that should be cherished, in spite of all the troubles that may go along with it. That perhaps, was why this was so hard, and why Moira could not stop crying. So much time lost to her career, so much more time lost devoted to this massive project that had failed so utterly.

She would never see them again – and in but a few short hours, yes, even they would become dust in the cosmos... her precious babies, so innocent and naïve... it broke her heart. Such guilt; such regret. The rotolifter sailed in at speed, startling her, then circled around and blasted her with a superbright spotlight that caused her to cringe. Shielding her eyes, Moira for a moment was dumbstruck as to what it was. And then, with realization, that malignant hope began to creep back into her heart. *They had come to take her home!* By the Guardias, she didn't know who she had to thank for this, but she prayed nonetheless for their wellbeing and safety. Radiation sickness or not, Moira would rally now for the sake of her children... she would live long enough to get home to see them if it killed her. For a moment, the rotolifter just hovered there, and she was afraid they might just leave her here to die after all. But then, with their light scanning, they at last found a relatively flat, safe place to land amongst all the jumbled-up metal debris.

With weak knees, Moira forced herself to begin climbing over the bent pipes and twisted wires of the destroyed dish. A soldier came quickly out of the rotolifter and began making his own way over to help her. The distance was not that great, but the terrain was hazardous (not even mentioning the dark). Much of the metal debris was sharp, and at random intervals, the wreckage opened up into jagged crevasses that fell for dozens of feet to the rocky desert ground below. It did not seem like that long ago that she and Maxta had stood at the center of this massive impact crater, in the hot blazing sun, and made plans for this very dish she was now crawling over. So much had happened since then. This errant thought of Max made her feel suddenly sad. They had fought just days before that fateful expedition; their first and only ever fight. Fortunately, they had patched things up before... before... She did not wish to relive that awful memory. Leaving his body just lying here in the hot sun and the dirt was one of the hardest things she'd ever had to do.

The conflict soldier reached her at last and began helping her back across his own tumbled terrain towards the rotolifter. So loud was the machine, that there was no room for talk, no time to make acquaintances... she would have to properly thank him later. After many more arduous minutes, Moira was half-pulled, half-pushed into the massive thundering machine. Before she knew what was happening, she'd been strapped into a seat and the thing had taken flight with a great roar. *Oh, how sick she felt!* But no, she would force herself to hold on, force herself to remain conscious until she could see her kids again. Strangely enough, Kenna's was a face that she would never forget. The subtle shading of his eyes, the thin line of his mouth, the way his forefins flared back just so. She loved him so very much, ever since the word go, and couldn't wait to fall back into his strong arms for probably that last time.

Beneath her, the powerful beam of the ship's spotlight washed over the remains of the dish. They had just passed above the molten crater that had been the nuclear reactor, and Moira could not believe the level of destruction. How she'd survived this calamity was beyond her imagination. Poor old Jondra, her beloved friend, and Thana... and even Zillia... so many had been lost already, and they were not even

to the endpoint of ultimate destruction. *Something metallic had deflected the beam.* This made Moira angry all anew. She was almost convinced now of some kind of malevolent alien intent... it was the only rational explanation. Only intelligent spacefaring beings could've created the necessary feedback within the point-source generator to lead to its destruction. How could they be so cruel? Did they have some sick and twisted desire to just sit back and watch this heavily populated planet get pulverized to dust? Was all this being broadcast back on their homeworld like some kind of perverse Videoplay docudrama? If she could get her hands on just one of these aliens, she would strangle them to death!

The rotolifter banked heavily to the left and Moira could see a private aerostreamer sitting on the dirt runway already waiting for her. *Boy, she thought, someone really has pulled out all the stops!* Zenthi perhaps? She had no doubt that the Primari had heard of the generator's destruction. There was nothing more to be done here but go home, so she was grateful to him. It was a pity that she'd never likely have the chance to thank him personally; not only for this, but for all the faith and scarce resources he had dumped into her failed project. She had a brief fleeting thought that she'd let him down somehow, that she was the daughter that broke her daddy's heart. In a sense though really, she'd failed them all... every last person on this planet of ten billion would die tonight because of her. Moira felt suddenly nauseous, she needed to be out of this wretched machine and out on the solid ground for a moment and in the fresh air. She fought back the returning tears.

There was so little time left. For her even to get home, the aerostreamer would really have to tax its engines. *Come on,* she silently urged the pilot of the craft as it slowly settled in for a landing. They sat there for several long moments as the great engines gradually wound themselves down to a stop. Moira was at once grateful for the blessed silence. Now if they would just let her out of this contraption! In her weakness, she began fumbling with the straps... she could feel a full-on panic attack rising up within her and she just wanted out. Such a funny sensation... these men had given up their lives too for this project, had come out into the darkness to rescue her on this night,

the last of all nights, and now all she wanted with all her might was to just be free of their bloody machine and these infernal damn straps.

“One moment, Ma’am, I’ll help you,” her soldier-hero offered as she began to struggle. He came quickly, sensing her distress, and she calmed herself a little.

“Thank you,” she offered meekly as he quickly freed her, “I just need some air.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I understand,” he said softly, easing her out of the stiff seat. Gently, he and one other helped her out through the hatch and down onto solid ground. Taking a few feeble steps away, Moira paused and took several deep breaths of cool night air. Despite the bright lights of the aerostreamer, the stars shown across the heavens with a sharp desert clearness that she had grown to love. So much of the night sky is washed out by ‘progress’ in the modern age that few people have a true appreciation of what a night sky is really supposed to look like. It truly was a blanket of soft shimmering light. It was the middle of the night here in this remote part of the world and not so much as a soft glow showed anywhere on the horizon. Moira craned her neck upwards and took it all in as a broad sweeping circle. Beautiful. And then her eye caught glimpse of that one that should not be there. She cowered now and threatened again to weep.

She felt herself being guided towards the aerostreamer, heard the soldiers mention something about medical attention once on board. “How long will it take us to get to Jenera?” she asked feebly, with a hoarse voice. *Guardias I’m thirsty!* She felt listless.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am?” her champion enquired, more puzzled than asking for pardon.

“Jenera... how long will it take us to get there?” Moira reiterated.

“Jenera, Ma’am?” he said softly. “We’re not going to Jenera. You’ve been guaranteed a slot in the Caverns at Chalybeate by the Primari... we’ll be taking you there, Ma’am.” The soldier was obviously under the impression that Moira was in some sort of a delirium, so he was somewhat caught off guard when she suddenly stopped, even resisted a little.

“No, you don’t understand,” she protested, “my children, my

husband... they are in Jenera, I must go there.” Stunned, Moira as of yet hadn’t even raised her voice. It was more like she was reasoning with them. Surely, they would see that her family was more important to her than any ridiculous ploy to hide people away underground.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am,” he replied, the two men reattaching themselves to her arms. “We have orders to take you to Chalybeate without delay.”

“No, you don’t understand,” she began to struggle now, “I must get to Jenera... my children, my husband... *I must get there now!*” she finally screamed, breaking free from their grip. Panicked, she didn’t know what else to do but run – and in a swiftness that caught both her escorts by surprise, Moira ran off into the darkness and away from the aerostreamer. For many long minutes she ran, fueled by adrenaline, and the terror that they would come after her and force her into those ridiculous caverns. Who’d ever dreamed up such an idea anyway?! Her eyes blurred by tears, the darkness out here was absolute, and she was lucky not to stumble in the brush, or over the rocky ground. She found herself longing for a nice warm swamp. She would feel so much better if she could just dive under the water for a few brief moments and clear her head. Perhaps then everything would make sense. As exhaustion overtook her, she finally stumbled and was forced to stop.

Looking behind her, expecting full well to see those two soldiers standing right there, she was surprised instead by how far she’d traveled. She had dropped down over a slight rise, and could just barely see the aerostreamer glistening there in the darkness. With a dull, distant thumping, the rotolifter slowly lifted off and Moira knew intuitively that they would catch her for sure now with their blinding light. In fact, she resigned herself to it. *So be it*, she sighed. Yet, much to her astonishment, they banked hard to the right instead, and flew off into the West. Almost simultaneously, the aerostreamer began to move forward with a muffled shriek... and then with a thunderous roar of dust and flying gravel, it too launched itself into the night sky. Within moments, it too was gone, and Moira found herself all alone in the deafening silence. *Oh, my Guardias, what have I done?*

The stars glimmered like sunlight on a late-afternoon lake. They almost hurt her eyes with their piercing brightness. She was so

tired now. Perhaps there was nothing left to do but sleep. She knew she'd never wake, but somehow, she didn't care. It no longer mattered. All hope was lost at last. The darkness was shattered suddenly by hundreds of pinpoints of piercing light, almost as if the stars had come down to greet her – to transport her away to the Secondlife. She climbed up onto the rise to welcome them and was much dismayed to find that they were floating away from her instead. They too were leaving her behind. Moira resigned herself finally to spend all eternity here alone in the Nolife. The Global Launch Initiative had sent forth every nuclear missile in the planet's arsenal in this last-ditch effort to combat the oncoming menace, but all Moira could see was the never-ending darkness as she collapsed unconscious onto the ground. Her time had run out.

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His fate was misery. Happiness was not some *thing* he would ever share with the rest of the general population. Loneliness was his only ally in a world that seemed to care so little for him. Alex fought hard against these recurring dark thoughts as he sat there in the darkness not really looking at the stars. What was the meaning of life – what was its point? He'd spent the better part of an hour asking himself just that, and he still had no clear definitive answer. Not too far off in the darkness, the girl, Amira, lay wrapped up in a blanket – her lifeless body gone cold now – what of her hopes and dreams? Whether it was the coming dawn, or the destruction of all things, love was fleeting, and life in the end will ultimately get in the way. This he had known intuitively, and it had proven correct. He looked once more up at that single point of light, the one that should not be there, and his heart sang a silent lament for all the time lost. So many chances not taken. So much love gone astray to the fears and the anxieties of youth. *What of his hopes and dreams?*

What separates a hero from a petty thug? *Courage*. But Alex no longer found it welling up within him. His heart no longer had the strength to fight, his brain no longer the will. *Amira had attempted suicide at fourteen...* he'd been so stunned, that they hadn't really

discussed it any further than that. Perhaps she didn't want to, perhaps he didn't... Shame? Perhaps. It wasn't like the thought hadn't ever crossed his own mind many times. What is the value of a single life? The subguardia all seemed to place such great value on the soul of a single individual, yet oft times they gave little thought to the thousands that died daily overseas; the victims of war, pestilence and plague, and all-around indifference. Perhaps their minds, like those of their flock, simply could not cope with such suffering on a global scale, so they compartmentalized it, compressed it down into manageable little packets. Yet, on a planet of ten billion, how do you truly quantify the value of just one? There was perhaps no more important time than right now to ask these hard questions.

Millions had died in just the past two years. Millions more would perish in the years to come. (Alex still did not know Moira had failed.) So Alex sat there now and wondered: how do you indeed value just one? He had often heard it said that suicide was a long-term solution to a short-term problem. He found this mindset to be ridiculous and shortsighted, and it made him very angry when he heard it. It takes suicide to understand suicide, and the fortunate ones are those who do not have to endure life under its toxic spell. Like Amira, he had perhaps wrestled with this internal struggle since his earliest teenage years, just as he was wrestling with it now. It was a fatalistic approach to life, he supposed. Yet somehow early on he'd made the conscious decision that he would fight against its alluring magic; but sometimes the battle grows weary. The older he got, the easier the battle became, but it is something that never leaves you. It slowly becomes a part of you until the pain, in time, presses itself into compassion and understanding. It humbles you with its strength. If anything, he would forever admire Amira for her *courage*. In a situation where the control for her own life had been taken away, she'd attempted to take the ultimate control. This is bravery, if only in a different form, and right or wrong, no one should perhaps condemn her for it. She'd become his hero, and her courage had become his own when he'd fought Arba.

Alex considered for a moment how many people must be taking their own lives right now, on this most awful of nights. Could

the numbers ever be calculated? And what of tomorrow? Once the Rogue had sailed away and the crisis passed, he had no doubt that thousands more would not be able to cope with *that* reality either. So many sins to be absolved, so much done in the name of destruction that could never be forgiven or forgotten. Alex himself had committed a murder here, on this very night, so what of him? Would he be tried? How could you try just one, when so many thousands more were guilty of the same heinous act? Alex felt his life at a crossroads... no prospects for his future, Amira dead... and blood on his hands. These are the memories that haunt – and they sure seemed like long-term problems to him. He looked up over his shoulder at the constellation of Jetteila Al’Emori. According to legend, the subguardia had thrown himself from a high waterfall after being forbidden by the Church to wed his one true love.

But suicide was a sin, so he’d been frozen for all time instead, mid-leap, rather than punished for his transgression. His nameless lover followed close behind, the stars mere water droplets to be frozen forever in this cosmic tragedy. Was there anyplace left in the heavens for Alex? What of all those millions of others? It seemed to him that the Guardias had gravely miscalculated by throwing this crisis at them. He guessed it was a test after all, and knew in his heart that he, like so many others, had failed. If he hadn’t, Amira would be here still on his comfortable cushion; not wrapped all cold and stiff in yonder blanket. Arba too would be living... Alex should’ve just gone with his first instinct and bolted from the plateau with Amira in tow. But had he hesitated in some misguided attempt at machismo? Shame on him if he had, for nothing can be gained from violence except more violence.

“Returning violence for violence [only] multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to night already devoid of stars.”<sup>4</sup> Wise words. It is indeed a descending spiral we should *all* avoid.

So yes, the question still remained, how do you quantify the value of just one? Who gets to make the decision of who has value, and who does not. Was Alex a bad person? No. But he had committed

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

murder. Was Amira a bad person? No. But she had attempted suicide. Was Arba a bad person? Probably, but did he deserve to die for it? How do you indeed value the life of a single individual? Unbeknownst to Alex, ten billion people would die tonight. They would be erased for all time from the history of the universe. There would be no record whatsoever of their passing here. So, in the end, what was their value, either taken as a whole, or each as an individual? Do our lives cease to have meaning when there is no longer any record of them? Does a world have any meaning when nothing but dust remains of it? For countless millennia, the black body had spun on its course. Its origins had long since been lost to the histories of the worlds it had so peacefully passed on its long and lonely journey. And now its end would be here, at Directoria Primari.

The darkness was shattered suddenly by hundreds of pinpoints of piercing light, almost as if the stars had come down to greet him – to transport him away perhaps to the Secondlife. Alex marveled at those little lights as they slowly rose up from the surrounding landscape. He twisted left and right to see that they were rising up in a complete 360° arc. Their white fires trailed behind them as they rose, and the beauty of it caused Alex's mouth to inadvertently fall open. Slowly they turned, and one by one began to converge on a single course. He projected that course forward and was very surprised to see that it ended at that sole point of light, that one that should not be there. *Oh, my Guardias*, he suddenly realized, *they're missiles!* He'd completely forgotten! He'd read about this initiative on the Planetary Information Network in the months before it had finally gone offline for good. The PIN was fraught with conspiracy theories, and one was that the government was planning a Global Launch Initiative. He didn't believe it of course, what would be the point?

But it was true! Every single nuclear missile had been launched at once, and he marveled at the folly of it. *Leave it to the government*, he thought. Every reputable scientist on the planet had denounced this idea. All it would accomplish would be to send a highly radioactive Rogue falling towards their planet instead of just a dark and dusty one. But wait... if this initiative had indeed been launched, did that mean Doctor Ananti had in fact failed? According to all the conspiracy

claptrap on the PIN, this was the government's last-ditch plan if the point-source generator didn't work. Alex thought back now to that phenomenal bolt of lightning that he and Amira had been so startled by. Upon reflection, it *did* seem awfully short-lived – he'd been so excited at the time that he hadn't really given it much thought. And that peculiar rebound flash, that had been a little bizarre as well... even from this faraway distance, something hadn't seemed quite right about it. Instantly, Alex's entire countenance began to wilt. *She had failed.* He was overcome now with emotion.

Craning his head upward, he zeroed his focus in on that one malicious star, that one that should not be there. It was coming for them now, and there would be no stopping it. For so many months he had followed the developments out on the Nogolon Plateau. He had every spec and diagram, every fact sheet and detailed drawing. Step by step he'd watched as the great dish grew out of the middle of the desert. As if a Videoplay flicker star, he'd watched the progress of Dr. Moira Ananti as she built, seemingly with her own bare hands, that great device that would save them all. She was his ultimate hero – beautiful and sophisticated – intelligent and resourceful – straightforward and practical. She had it all, and he was simply enraptured with her... and now she had failed... and Alex wasn't quite sure how he felt about that. No one likes it when their favorite sports star gets busted for drugs or beats his wife. They seem tarnished somehow forever after that; lose their luster.

But it was more than that... Alex felt complete and utter loss now. He supposed that deep down his hope had always been there, in spite of it all. Even after all the heartache of his adolescence, the low self-esteem and the crippling lack of self-confidence. Even after all the loneliness and self-loathing. Even after the loss of Amira and all the other violence's of the night. Even after all this, he had still been clinging to hope. There is always that dream that we all carry with us that tomorrow will be a better day, that next year will bring some new form of happiness. But that cancerous malignancy that had slowly been eating away at their hope had finally claimed even his in the end. There would be no future, only death.



## *T-minus 04...*

‘Tis a slippery slope down to the water’s edge...

The runabout *Genesee* was racing towards Directoria at well over full-impulse speed. At the helm, Lieutenant Richard Castillo did not wish to risk another warp jump; the engines were still showing their damage from his previous jumps, plus they were relatively close to the planet by now anyway. Yes indeed, time truly was running out. Though he hadn’t necessary lied to his pal Andy about the finer details of the past few hours, he’d certainly stretched the truth a little bit when it came to Captain Garrett’s stance on the Prime Directive. She’d been willing to fudge it a little so many hours ago when the Rogue was still far, far away, but now she would have no choice but to let history take its course – provided the *Enterprise* survived. That’s why Castillo had decided to step in on her behalf. He would save something of this doomed world, even if it cost him his career... and maybe even his freedom.

The Prime Directive was the very foundation of Starfleet, and it had been forged slowly after many mistakes and many more mishaps. It protected the Federation as much as it protected all those unexplored worlds scattered throughout the galaxy. Numerous Starfleet officers had tested its premise, especially in the early days. Some for personal gain, some in a misguided attempt to help; but in the long run, the basic tenets of the principle had held firm against every test. Even Captain Kirk abided by its beliefs, though he may have stretched them once in a while. It had almost become a religion of sorts and was taught in every classroom across eight thousand lightyears of free space. Castillo felt, however, that this was a special case. Directoria Primari was about to be obliterated – erased forever from the history of the universe. They were a pre-warp civilization... they had no deep-space colonies. Nothing of them would remain in just the next few hours. Yes indeed, he would save something. He felt it was his moral duty, if nothing else.

For his part, Lieutenant Andy Dardanelle was thinking little of the Prime Directive. His experiences down on the Rogue had left him

addled. Perhaps the only thing worse than the fear of death, was the absolute fear of suffocation... and he had come damn close to it. It brought back a flood of memories from the downed *Ambassador* that he hoped he'd never have to relive again. He'd had numerous sessions with Onovan in those first few sleepless months aboard the *Enterprise*, but those visits had become few and far between. Andy was not relishing the fact that he may have to begin all over again. There had to be another way out of the trap. The mind can be a tricky place, and just when you think you've worked your way out of a sticky situation, it can rear its ugly head, and you realize you haven't actually escaped after all. Sometimes in the night, those voices still called to him from the deep.

Out the front viewport, Directoria was still just a pinpoint of light. Like a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam, Carl Sagan had said. They weren't really that far away from it now, in astronomical terms, so it just went to show how small a full-sized planet can be when compared to the absolute vastness of space. Ten billion people lived on that world that was no bigger than the head of a pin from this distance. Space travel was a humbling experience, and sometimes Andy couldn't help but wonder what the appeal of it was. For him, he supposed, it was because he was the victim of two worlds. At three-quarters human, it was kind of a contradiction of sorts that he was raised on Vulcan. He'd felt mostly out of place there, and when he visited his human grandparents back on Earth, he didn't really feel in place there either. It was only logical perhaps that he join Starfleet, the only true and lasting amalgamation in the galaxy of the two Vulcan/Terran cultures. Out here in space, the two worlds were practically inseparable.

"Right," Castillo said, breaking the silence, "this is gonna be your typical smash and grab."

"Say what?" Andy returned with a laugh.

"A smash and grab..." – a pause – "y'know..."

"No, I don't know..." he replied, scrunching up his face in a most un-Vulcan like way and still laughing at his partner.

"Oh, brother," Castillo sighed, shaking his head. "Smash the glass and grab the jewels..."

“If you say so,” Andy chuckled, his friend still eying him reproachfully.

“We’ll sail in at full impulse, do a quick sweep, and beam up anyone out in the open alone,” Castillo explained. “Then we’ll sail back outta there without anyone on the surface ever suspecting a thing. So there, the Prime Directive will be satisfied.”

“That’s going to be tricky,” Andy warned. “At that speed it’s going to take some pretty sharp eyes... and what if it turns into thousands of people?”

“We’ll be lucky if we get one,” Castillo admitted. The herd instinct was another force that seemed to permeate the galaxy. People tended to gather together, particularly in times of distress. Castillo suspected that someone out on their own alone would be a rare find indeed, especially this close to destruction.

“Don’t you think beaming up a set of encyclopedias might be a little less dramatic?”

“No sense of adventure, I’m telling ya,” Castillo scolded him. Andy had heard this argument a thousand times over and it still made him smile every time. Something made him think of his old friend Sam Galloway and he paused for a moment in quiet contemplation. He had set Sam up on a date with Sally just days before the crash. She was a flighty, off-the-wall sort of girl – cute, yes, but not really Sam’s type. She was kind of like a little bird, and rarely stood still for more than just a moment. Andy had chuckled inwardly the next morning as his friend relayed the details of the experience in full, play by play Technicolor. Rock climbing had been followed by a strenuous swim in the pool, and finally dinner in the *Ambassador’s* own Starboard Café. And Sally had not shut up for one single second... not even underwater, or so Sam claimed. As much as he and Castillo were pals, Andy still missed his old friend Sam sometimes. They’d had their own adventures too.

“Whatya think about Ensign Enyo?” Andy said somewhat unexpectedly. Castillo got immediately hot under the collar and wondered just how much his pal was aware of recent events. Other than what the senior-most staff knew, the details of the Stadi Affair was little more than just scuttlebutt to the lower decks.

“Uh, why?” Castillo asked somewhat demurely.

“I don’t know,” Andy replied, suddenly shy, “I think she’s cute... wondered why you haven’t made a move on her yet?” Castillo laughed out loud now in a big open-mouthed guffaw that left Andy somewhat puzzled. Sometimes his one-quarter Vulcan side missed the joke.

“Tell me about Ann Grey,” Castillo teased Andy instead. “She’s pretty hot... and Marta and I have both caught you two eying each other up.” He looked at Andy with a broad, toothy grin and was happy to see the young man had turned a nice shade of red.

“Hmmm, maybe,” Andy laughed. “I don’t know... she’s a little too timid for me... nervous y’know... but definitely hot.” He grinned.

“I say go for it, she might surprise ya,” Castillo advised before being silenced by an alarm from his console. “Sensors are detecting a swarm of objects on an intercept course...”

“A meteor storm?” Andy offered, leaning forward and consulting his own readings from the copilot’s seat.

“No, they’re metallic...”

“Radiologic alarm!” Andy half-shouted, squinting out the forward viewport.

“Nuclear missiles, almost two thousand of them,” Castillo whistled.

“Heading for us?”

“Of course not,” Castillo half-laughed. “I suspect they’re heading for the Rogue, but I don’t see what good it’ll do.”

“No, but I suppose they have to try,” Andy said glumly. “What about the Away Team, and the ship... don’t you think we should warn them?” This placed Lt. Richard Castillo in a hot spot now as he typed in several commands to alter the runabout’s course. Strictly speaking, as far as Commander Stadi knew, he and Andy were still out looking for a suitable place to land the lifeboats. They shouldn’t be within a million miles of Directoria, for any reason whatsoever. If they sent a message back to their comrades now, the gig would be up. Stadi would be furious and would no doubt order them back to retrieve the Away Team and help steer the lifeboats out of danger. But they still had time, he was sure of it... Castillo bumped up their velocity to half lightspeed

and steadied himself to stay the course. The race was on to save something of this world, and to save their friends as well. This was one of those times when Andy's one-quarter Vulcan stoicism wished he wasn't such a follower. But they were best buds in every sense of the word, and Andy must indeed follow.

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The Bridge was dim and empty... and oh so very quiet. Gone were the usual sounds of people and machines working together in harmony. Gone were the motions and the commotions that usually went along with the management of a ship of this size. Gone were the hearts and the brains and the courage that made the whole damn thing work. Right now, it was just a single lonely captain and her starship, all alone in the dark, searching for an inner calm. She was free from her spacesuit now (environmentals and gravity had been restored), and simply sat in her command chair communing with the silence. And it was certainly quiet, probably the quietest she'd ever heard the great ship. There was not much more she could do in Engineering, so the good captain had just sort of wandered off into the dark corridors of the *Enterprise* and gotten lost for a while. The ship seemed so peaceful, almost as if it were at rest after a long, weary journey. And perhaps it was resting, for it had been a long journey indeed – and the road had not been an easy one.

As she'd wandered the corridors, the captain thought back to her most recent experiences in Engineering. The ghost in the machine... was the *Enterprise* really alive? Not in the traditional sense, no, she supposed; but she could certainly feel its energy flowing through her now. What she had just witnessed with Skyl had certainly given her a newfound appreciation for this *Ambassador*-class starship. It was so easy in the modern age to take all of this technology for granted, to forget sometimes the importance of the symbiotic relationship the crew shared with this mere machine. One could not live without the other, and it most definitely went both ways. But in a larger sense, did the ship *miss* the crew now that they were gone, as much as the crew missed the ship? This was their home – some of them

for only five years – but for many others, a decade or more. Outside of its thin shell was certain death, no life... inside though was life, and most of the time, happiness. A home.

The ghost in the machine. Far off in the distance, in the dim lighting of a long, lonely corridor, the captain thought she saw a shape – and more importantly, she thought she saw it move. Her heart leapt for a moment as she stopped with a start and kind of hung there behind a bulkhead. A house can have ghosts, why not a starship? *Great*, she thought with her usual devilish smirk, *I'm in command of the only haunted starship in the fleet*. Her memories reflected briefly on a very young Cicely who had stowed away aboard ship for weeks. You never know what's lurking in the dark, or hiding in the shadows underneath your bed. With guarded trepidation, the captain crept a little further down the corridor. She knew she was being ridiculous, but at the same time, it somewhat fascinated her that the ship may not be as empty as it seemed. The undying explorer in her? Very little of the galaxy had been charted. Very few of the millions of life forms had been catalogued. Was it really beyond the realm of possibility that she was not alone here after all? Hmmm.

Humanity had once held a very narrow view of what constituted life. To them it was what was simply found on Earth, and nowhere else. But those early explorers quickly discovered that life utterly abounded... as long as you knew where to look. From the very first microbes on Mars, to the megalocetacea located under the ice sheets of Europa and Enceladus, and finally, ultimately, to first contact with the Vulcans, life in its many varied forms was undeniably everywhere... so why not here? Not all things live in the light; some thrive quite nicely in the shadows of the night. Her heart pounding, the captain continued to creep down that long, lonely corridor, allowing her mind to play tricks on her. Fun? Maybe. Why do people watch scary movies? Rounding that last corner, she was confronted face to face with a blood-curdling scream. The turbopumps for the port-forward reaction control thruster sprang suddenly to life and scared the ever-lovin' bejesus out of her. With a cry, the captain stumbled backwards and half-fell against the wall, trembling from head to toe. *Okay*, she quickly concluded, *that's enough fun for one day!* In a most

uncaptain-like way, Garrett turned and fled. Let those dark and sinister creatures of the night have the dark, they can keep it!

Eventually she'd found her way back here. It seemed only natural in the end that Rachel Garrett should be on the Bridge, for ultimately, Rachel Garrett *was* the Bridge. She was the heart of it, she was the soul of it, and all the rest drew their strength and courage from her. She was the base of a mighty pyramid, and all at once its apex. She was as much their foundation as they were hers. In the end though, no one can stand alone, and sitting here alone in the darkness, Captain Rachel Cecelia Garrett was slowly beginning to feel the stark emptiness of her home with all its children gone. A starship was a living, breathing thing that thrived on a perfect symbiosis with its crew. But now that ship was a song whose melody had gone, and Rachel could sense the loneliness of it as keenly as a big, old, empty house feels the lonely drag of time. Do these things we create – these houses and buildings and starships – do these mere things have a soul? If not, then how do you explain the hollowness of them once all the memories have faded and all the substance has gone? Why does a house left vacant slowly give way to the ravages of time? Does it die of loneliness perhaps?

Nothing had felt emptier than Rachel's childhood home after her brother died. It was almost as if some great force had simply sucked the life right out of it. There'd been a hollowness in that house too as a family trying to cope with grief slowly fractured like a field of ice in a springtime thaw. Her father became absorbed in his work; left earlier, stayed later, almost as if away was easier. Her mother became eccentric, unpredictable, disjointed; almost as if her mind had decided that detached was better. Even her beloved grandfather settled into a pattern of pensiveness that was not always approachable. Rachel spent much of her time alone, slowly letting the scar tissue bandage over what she'd done. The pain lessens, memory fades, but the scars will always remain. Ethan, his name had been Ethan, and Rachel had been disturbed beyond all belief that she'd had to look that simple fact up after Ethos. The persistent drag of time... it pulls like a dark river under the ice.

There'd been a certain level of shock that reverberated

throughout that whole hollow house the day Rachel announced she was joining Starfleet. Her mother went into one of her usual unpredictable fits, shouting from room to room, her detached disjointed thoughts switching subjects almost as quickly as she crossed thresholds. Sometimes she mumbled, sometimes she wailed, the makeup running down her face in thick, black rivers. Her father sat twitching at the kitchen table, sucking down great black gulps of bitter coffee and puffing away at contraband Rigellian cigarettes. Little was said as those last threads of her family were slowly pulled apart. Her grandfather became even more pensive than usual that afternoon, leaving Rachel all alone. Finally, she went for a walk, down to the river, and stood on the bank where her brother had gone in. She found herself suddenly hating him, and this filled her with a profound anguish. She fled that day – fled from the river, from New York, from Earth – and as she sat here now on the Bridge of her starship hundreds of lightyears from home, she really began to wonder if she had ever truly stopped running since. Time is like a river.

Betazed had become her home, just as it was the *Enterprise's* home, and her returns to Earth had become more and more infrequent. Eventually the great house had burned to the ground (a victim of her mother's unpredictability?) Her grandfather's great desk had been one of the few things to survive, and sat now in her adjacent Ready Room... sometimes if Rachel closed her eyes just right, she could just smell the lingering smoke in its ancient wood. Her mother withered away slowly in an asylum and passed; her father relocated to Rigel X and died suddenly of a pulmonary embolism. Only her beloved grandfather had been at her promotion ceremony to captain. The great desk had been his gift, the legacy of a brooding old man that had devoted nearly seventy-five years of his life to the education of young minds. Rachel often thought that the only things in life that were truly important, that really mattered, had been conveyed to her by this one single person. She would not be where she was today if it hadn't been for his steady guidance through such turbulent times.

*Oh, Spencer,* Rachel sighed. She missed so much his comforting presence, especially now. He had become her lifeline, and had become such a part of her life now that she could not ever imagine

them being apart. He was her *Imzadi*, and she his. The telepathic mind can create a powerful bond, and deep down sometimes Rachel couldn't help but wonder at the healthiness of it really. When does such a close working and living arrangement move from healthy relationship to an unhealthy situation of codependence? They had been far out on the frontier during their first five-year mission when Rachel's grandfather had finally succumbed to the persistent drag of time's lonely river. She'd never had that chance to say goodbye, to lay his body to rest; only Spencer Stadi had held her up while the grief consumed her. She sometimes felt that the commander had gotten way more than he bargained for when he signed up to be her first officer. Did he feel saddled to her? She certainly hoped not.

The Battle of Ethos... nothing had so altered the trajectory of both their lives more than did those few brief days in May. *The pain was not yours alone*, he'd stated flatly to her, not so many hours ago, *mine was just as much to bear*. The death of Zora McKnight had hit him hard, harder Rachel now supposed than he'd ever actually admitted to her. Just another indication of just how out of touch she was with him, even still. Was their relationship really that lopsided? She must do better! She had always had this thin streak of selfishness running through her; her grandfather had warned her of it often. It governed many of her actions – and reactions too, she supposed, when she thought of her feelings towards his affair with Enyo. It had shocked her more than anything else, she guessed, that his mind had focused for a time on someone else other than her. More selfishness on her part. Stadi's embarrassment would follow him (almost haunt him) for many months to come now. She must set aside her rage, her jealousy, her hurt, and be there for *him* this time.

Before her, the viewscreen suddenly blinked on, as well as a few stations, and Rachel mouthed yet another silent thank you for Skyl's continued diligence. A 3D image of the Rogue loomed there in the dim lighting of the Bridge and almost taunted her with its very existence. It had won against her, and in just a few more short hours, it would obliterate an entire planet of ten billion souls. As Captain Garrett, Rachel had been forced to harden her heart against the fact that the *Enterprise* had interfered and thus doomed these people to a

horrifying death. No one would ever be able to say for certain that their graviton beam might've worked, but those poor people had certainly deserved the chance to try. And now so damaged, the *Enterprise* would be lucky to get out of the way itself before the moment of impact. Even if Rachel approved a full-on violation of the Prime Directive now, the stricken ship was still in no position to help. The guilt and shame of their complicity in all this would follow them now forever. Perhaps it was indeed time for Starfleet to scrap the ship... to scrap her; let time's river drag her into obscurity, perhaps she deserved it.

She thought now of that ancient culture that had once thrived down on the surface. Who were they? What caused their downfall? And more interestingly perhaps, what sort of cataclysmic event had sent their dead planet hurtling halfway across the galaxy to meet them here, at this particular point in time? It was no small measure of irony perhaps that their own destruction so many millennia ago would ultimately lead to the destruction of another culture so many millennia later. It was almost like a 'butterfly effect', albeit on a cosmic scale. And what of the chances that the *Enterprise* should arrive just hours before impact and so dramatically change the course of these events? Sometimes Rachel really had to marvel at the concepts of fate and divine intervention. Some forces in the universe seemed to go way beyond just the random probabilities of statistics. Some things seemed guided, almost destined to happen. It really raised the question: what had these people done to so piss off the gods? Like Zeus hurling a thunderbolt, let thy will be done. There was no stopping it now – no more than there was any chance for Rachel to stop her own destiny.

At the front corner of the Bridge, the turbolift doors opened with a whoosh and somewhat startled the good captain. Spencer Stadi and Cicely slowly emerged from it looking a little tired, but none the worse for wear. Garrett noted that the Ops station was up and running and Cicely made an immediate beeline for it, causing the captain to smile. *Happy to be home*, she mused. Stadi merely nodded to his captain, then moved over to the ACP to get a feel for the ship and its status. *He's a little more reluctant... good.*

"Well," he finally said, "looks like Commander Skyl has been busy." He turned and smiled at Garrett and she smiled back. His

telepathic paracortex could sense that she was in a better mood, so he made a few careful attempts to capitalize on it. She was still partially blocking him, however, leaving him feeling somewhat empty and a little dismayed. Judging by the way she was piercing her lips though, he could tell she was putting on more of an act than she would ever admit to. He knew his *Imzadi* all too well.

“Cicely,” Garrett said at last, rising, “status on the rest of the lifeboats please?”

“Dockage at sixty percent, Captain,” she replied, happily studying her readouts. “The rest will be stowed within a half-hour... some of the stragglers a bit longer.”

“Thank you, Ensign... oh, and Ensign...”

“Yes, Captain?” Cicely paused and turned to look into Garrett’s beaming face.

“Welcome home, it’s good to have you back.” The Captain’s smile was genuine, and Cicely broke into a broad grin to mirror it, her white teeth shining in bright contrast to her green skin and brown, curly hair. Garrett took one step down off the command level and paused there thinking. Finally, she sighed, then turned to Stadi. *My Ready Room*, she ordered, then said aloud: “Cicely, you have the Bridge... we shan’t be long.”

“Yes, Captain,” the young girl acknowledged. She knew as well as anyone that this reunion of souls must take place, and that it must run its course naturally. The next few harrowing hours would be hard on them all, and Garrett and Stadi must stand together as one throughout it all. A structure cannot stand without its foundation, and they were the bedrock that held so many great things together...

Including themselves.

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Doctor Ann Grey was slowly becoming accustomed to her bulky spacesuit as she worked around the dais trying to understand the matrix of the hologram. She was grateful to Marta for inviting her along on this away mission... despite her initial trepidation, the importance of it was clearly a much-needed boost to her confidence.

It truly was remarkable how far she'd come since joining the *Enterprise* two and a half years ago. Through her friendship with Marta, she'd slowly become more outgoing and more assertive at the staff meetings. She'd also begun to interact more with the crew – other than the obvious doctor/patient relations that went along with the job. But there was no doubt she still had a long way to go. The quiet machinations of her father and Xavier Hawk had haunted her early career almost to the point of a nervous breakdown. These scars ran deeper than anyone knew and Ann still fought with those demons that only haunt at night.

The silence was only occasionally broken by the quiet murmurings of the others as she tried to reason through the jumbled thoughts that always raced through her jumbled mind. Ann often shook her head in frustration, even here and now, only to tuck unruly strands of her long brown hair back behind her ears in her usual way. If only the world knew what it was like inside a mind such as hers, perhaps only then would they 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 inadvertently smacked at her left temple and drew the sudden attention of Onovan and Marta, who eyed her speculatively. The good doctor was an odd sort of creature on a good day, so rarely did anyone give much notice to her strange little tics. Marta merely raised the corner of her mouth in a half-smile, then resumed her own work. Marta was one of the few people that Ann Grey had ever felt truly comfortable around and Ann felt lucky to have found such a patient friend. She was not ignorant of the fact that Andy Dardanelle was attracted to her either, but like most men, she could never be too sure of what his true motives might be. Her young appearance and shapely figure had attracted all sorts in her high school years, and

especially later at the Starfleet Medical School. Her voice was quiet, almost what the humans would call ‘meek’, and she moved in a somewhat jerky motion that stood in sharp contrast to her latent beauty. This, plus her history, made her a prime target in every sense of the word, and so she had learned to trust few.

Yet, despite all her faults, Ann Grey was still an amazing doctor. A number of her ‘medical miracles’ had already gained her some renown in the medical community, and even garnered her a few mentions in a number of prominent medical journals. What she lacked in personality, she more than made up for in skill. That perhaps was one reason why she had taken up such a sudden fascination in this hologram. If she ignored for a moment its most creepy stare, she could see a definite potential for an application such as this in the medical field. Certain crises aboard the *Enterprise*, such as the Battle of Ethos for instance, had left them dangerously short on medical staff. Work was already progressing at the Jupiter Station on emergency medical holograms that could potentially help fill in during alert situations, but none of them had even come close yet to this level of complexity.

At once focused, her mind wandered again as it always did. Ann thought now of Skyl and her almost bizarre fascination with him as well. Andy Dardanelle was no doubt the better choice for her, but rarely do we see the merits of such choices at the times when we need to most. Marta had not necessarily discouraged Ann’s love interest in the Vulcan engineer, but she had definitely encouraged the greater merits in pursuing a relationship with the perhaps less stoic one-quarter Vulcan lieutenant. Andy would provide for her the strong base which she needed, but he would also give her the level of love she required that Skyl would quite simply be incapable of. But Ann didn’t see it that way. She didn’t trust Andy – or any man for that matter – but somehow, she trusted Skyl. Inside her jumbled mind, he had slowly become that lighthouse that stands firm against the bitterest winter nor’easter that her unsettled mind could throw at it. Perhaps he could make it all stop.

On the far side of the dais, Ensign Enyo still prattled on to the hologram like it was her new best friend or something. Ann’s heart kind of went out to that foolish young girl though – Enyo had been

seduced by a much older man just as she'd once been. Though Spencer Stadi was no Xavier Hawk, he was still tall and dashing and debonair, and like all men, he had used his position of power to take advantage of someone meek and innocent. Enyo would have to learn, just as Ann had, that men were not to be trusted. Deep down, Stadi was a rogue just like Hawk, and as much as her heart went out to Enyo, Ann couldn't help but sneer at the girl now for her own sluttish behavior. The ensign could have just as easily said *No*. But what Ann Grey was failing to take into account was the love factor. It had not even occurred to her that the two star-crossed officers might've actually *fallen in love*. The undeniable importance of *Touch*. It was sad perhaps that the good doctor, so caring and so kind in the operating room, had never known true love for what it was in the outside world. She had never been touched in any way other than by men that had wanted to take advantage and control of her. Andy could've perhaps changed all that...

The Kurlans believed that an individual is really a community of individuals – that inside each of us are many voices, each with their own desires, their own style, their own particular view of the world. The only binding force within this discordant cacophony of voices is love. And in its many varied forms, perhaps love should not be denied. But love takes trust, and trust is not always an easy thing to earn. Fear can be a powerful motivator for survival, and sometimes in survival mode, we forget how to love. Yet every so often, courage can be more exhilarating than fear. It takes courage to love, and courage only comes from faith – faith to believe in your own worth, faith to believe in your own importance in the universe, faith to believe that you matter. Doctor Ann Grey suffered from a profound lack of faith, and it had crippled her soul from the very beginning. So filled with fear was she, that she had forgotten how to love. She had never learned to trust. She had never learned to have faith in herself, and in the end, it would lead to her ultimate ruin. Andy Dardanelle could've changed all that, but she chose Skyl instead. Fate or Faith?

On the other side of the dais, Ensign Enyo simply beamed. The hologram was unaccustomed to such brightness of personality, and it

stood there perfectly perplexed as she continued to interact with him on the most basic of levels. This blue-skinned girl was nothing like the Kurlans, so placid and calm and uninteresting. Oh no, this girl was quite simply a tiny little bundle of energy, and the ancient circuitry of the hologram was having no small measure of trouble keeping up with her. It was arousing strange new sensations within him, and he began more and more to marvel at the complexity of their interaction. His database contained volumes on feelings and emotions, but to read about a thing is not the same as experiencing it. Were these sensations, these twinges, the first initial stirrings of real emotion? Could it be possible after all these millennia to begin to feel and not to just experience? Where is that dividing line when a machine moves from circuits to soul?

Nearby, Marta surreptitiously showed Onovan the new readings on her tricorder. Without a word, they both themselves marveled at the changes that were taking place in the datastores far beneath this tiny room. Power consumption had doubled, processing speeds had quadrupled; it was almost as if they could see the machine fighting to gain true self-awareness right before their very eyes... whatever it took to distract him long enough to release the doors and restore communications, that was Marta's only concern. She made no motions to Enyo to either distract her, or to urge her on, merely left the young girl to carry on unabated with her usual wit and charm. Onovan's own tricorder was showing that the subspace interference of before was also clearing, and he was increasingly doubtful that the hologram had anything to do with the communications blackout after all. Now the doors, however, that was a different matter. They had most definitely been closed and locked by this complicated, if not maleficent machine. Fear can be a powerful motivator for survival.

Trust. Enyo chatted away to the Hologram as if she would to any other individual. But what the others perceived as just idle prattle, Enyo viewed as a genuine attempt to build trust between her and this machine that was their captor. Spencer Stadi had taught her to trust (as well as so many other things). Trust in the command structure, trust in one's colleagues... trust in oneself. Neither one of them had intended, or even expected, their relationship go anywhere beyond those first

few innocent lunches and strolls in the arboretum. In fact, their first few times together had been strictly about business... reviewing the events of the Battle of Ethos and discussing the different things that had gone right, and also, gone horribly wrong. But as their time together progressed, so did their relationship, as it naturally would. The finer arts of command were soon eclipsed by the deep-seeded feelings that had haunted them ever since the battle. The scars ran deep.

As a senior officer, Stadi had certainly never expected their burgeoning friendship to develop into anything further. He understood completely the pratfalls of older men and younger girls, and how idle crushes can get in the way of sense and reason. The death of Zora McKnight however had left a great gaping hole in his soul that quite simply, Rachel Garrett could not fill. There was no malice in this, not even necessarily any conscious forethought. As for Enyo, a bright-faced young ensign fresh out of the Academy on her very first mission, the battle had scared her in ways that no lecture hall can ever prepare you for. No amount of training can prepare you for that one single moment when you stand alone on a smoky Bridge and stare the Angel of Death square in the face. They had both been addled, their confidence shaken, and the scars ran deeper than even they realized. And so, it had just sort of happened. Should they be condemned for it? Perhaps. But no one should deny that the love was real, or that there was any less level of caring simply because of their age.

In the back of her mind, Enyo was remembering now their first kiss. Surprisingly, (even to her), she had initiated it, and the commander had been somewhat taken aback. They did not talk for many long moments after, and perhaps he felt even more awkward than she did. It had been a long time since he'd allowed such emotions to bubble to the surface. There was very little room for feelings of this sort within the upper command structure of a Federation starship. Frigates and transports maybe, but never aboard ships of the line like the *Enterprise*. It's not that it was discouraged necessarily, but it invariably led to problems later on when a situation called for callous command decisions that sometimes pitted the needs of the many against the needs of the few, or the one. Yet still, very few can deny

the undeniable importance of *Touch*, especially when the fear becomes much too overwhelming to bear. They had both needed each other at that rare moment in the history of time, so yes, it did indeed just sort of happen... and perhaps they should not be condemned for it. Love is indefinable, indelible, and sometimes irreproachable, and they had each slowly become the other's addiction. For this, an antidote is never an easy find.

"Thy'lek," Enyo said, "did you ever have any friends?"

"*Friends, Ma'am?*" The hologram blinked his overlarge eyes at her. Quite outside his notice, he had just recently taken to calling her *Ma'am*; yet another indication of his growing outside awareness thanks to the initial uplink. His shimmering green features crunched themselves into a sort of frown. "*No, Ma'am, I do not believe I have ever had a 'friend.'*"

"Well then," she replied, "can we be friends?" Enyo smiled brightly up at him and her twin blue antennae twitched in anticipation of his forthcoming answer. For his part, the hologram paused for longer than usual as his ancient circuitry delved down deep into his database and researched the meaning of 'friends' and all the inherent rights and responsibilities that went along with it. After a moment's contemplation, his features made a dramatic change to mirror hers. A smile.

"*Yes, Ma'am, I think that would be lovely.*" Enyo actually giggled, and the hologram frowned once more, unsure how to process her response. Was she mocking him?

"Thy'lek, since we're now friends, you may call me Enyo..."

"*Enyo?*" Still the frown.

"Yes," she answered, "that is my given name, just as I've given you the name Thy'lek."

"*Ah, yes Ma'am, I understand...*" He mirrored her smile once more. "*Enyo, are these others in your group also your... friend?*" He almost stumbled on the foreign new word; but the more interesting thing was, it was the first truly creative question he had ever posed to anyone, other than to offer assistance. It caught the definite attention of Marta and Onovan behind the dais, who both looked up at Enyo now in unison.

“Yes, Thy’lek,” she replied, without missing a beat, “they are also my friends... as is the young man locked outside... his name is Andy.”

“*Andy,*” the hologram repeated. “*He abandoned us, just as all the others abandoned us... this is not the definition of a friend.*” The hologram’s mood turned palpably glower as he reflected back suddenly on the thousands of years he’d spent here in solitude.

“No, no, no, Thy’lek,” Enyo quickly corrected, “Andy did not abandon us, he was ordered to go outside so as to try and contact our ship...”

“*Your ship went silent some time ago...*” In the background, Onovan sighed. The young girl had made some excellent progress, but now he feared the stupid machine might fall yet again into another logic loop.

“Yes, Thy’lek,” Enyo said soothingly, “Andy went outside to find out why.”

“*Enyo, please explain this concept of ‘ordering’... friends should not order friends around... it is not kind.*” Marta’s mouth actually fell open. The hologram’s cognitive abilities were growing in leaps and bounds, and this particular leap had been a pretty impressive one. Nearby, Ann Grey also studied her readings with increasing fascination. Technology like this in the emergency medical field would be invaluable! Enyo spoke with continued patience.

“Access your data on regimental structure in military organization... good,” she paused. “Our society has evolved into a complex interaction between these two disparate ways of life. Understand?”

“Yes, Enyo, I understand,” he finally said at length. “*So, if Andy is your friend, then why did he disobey orders and abandon you here to die?*” The starkness of the statement somewhat startled her and for brief second, she was held speechless. Admittedly, it somewhat cut her to the quick that *anyone* would accuse Andy, of all people, of abandoning them here, and especially abandoning them here to *die*. It took a small measure of strength for the young ensign to keep in check the budding annoyance in her voice.

“No, Thy’lek, you do not understand,” she responded levelly,

not herself actually understanding. “He did not abandon us, he was *ordered* to go outside to contact our ship.” She, like Onovan, was also beginning to fear another logic loop. It is difficult to explain every single cognitive step to a consciousness when it is incapable of making even those tiniest of leaps of imagination that a biologic brain so easily makes throughout the course of every single day. Artificial intelligence was not such an easy thing to master, even still.

“*A vessel retrieved your friend some time ago,*” the hologram explained – somewhat flippantly, Enyo was quick to notice. “*My brief uplink with the vessel has indeed confirmed that they both abandoned all of you, even your friends far above.*” Was there malice in his voice? Enyo could not be sure, but he did seem rather contemptuous towards this whole new concept of friendship. So much for building trust, she thought.

“Thy’lek,” Marta offered cautiously, not daring to move around to face him. “In your uplink, did you get the name of the vessel that retrieved Andy?”

“Yes, Ma’am, *it’s given name was the Genesee, after a river on your home planet.*”

“Yes, Thy’lek, that is correct,” Marta smiled broadly, smacking Onovan heavily on the back of his spacesuit. At least the young lieutenant had been rescued from certain suffocation out on the planet’s surface – that was one less worry on her mind. They still had a little over three hours left to get themselves off the surface now... no problem, they had plenty of time. Marta was quick to note that the hologram had also made mention of their friends ‘far above’ too, so that was a good sign as well. Marta’s confidence never wavered; they would be rescued in time. The *Enterprise* took care of her own. They would be safe. She coaxed Enyo to continue.

“Thy’lek,” the young girl said, beaming again from ear to ear, “let’s talk next about love.” The hologram’s greenish ghostly features crunched themselves up into another frown as his overlarge eyes looked down on the beautiful young girl and blinked. The word stirred strange new feelings within him that his ancient circuitry found suddenly intoxicating. He was an instant addict, and became immediately enamored with her. Yes, love is indeed indefinable,

indelible – and sometimes without a doubt, it is truly irreproachable.

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Captain Rachel Garrett stood behind her great wooden schoolteachers desk and allowed her eyes to close for just a minute. Sometimes if she shut them just right, she could just smell the lingering smoke in its ancient frame from the fire that had consumed her childhood home. Her grandfather's desk had been one of the few things to survive, and it was one of the last things she had left to hold onto from a childhood fraught with misery. Oh, (she sometimes had to scold herself) it hadn't really been all that bad. There'd been happiness there too, especially before Ethan had died... but there had been good times even after that. It's easy sometimes to allow the dark memories to creep in and overshadow some of the good ones. There had been many family trips throughout her high school years; and boys, and sports, and dances, and parties. No, she couldn't say that it'd all been bad, but the dark memories still remained, nonetheless. They can be the hardest to shake.

In every human mind there is a dark spot, a stain perhaps. It is the one thing about humans that Spencer Stadi 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. 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 still there, nonetheless. 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 so continuously live in fear of that inner self?

"There may be no simple reason why," Garrett said plaintively, startling him from his silent reverie. "We can all be victims of our own demons, can we not?"

"Yes, Captain, indeed," he answered, blushing. Yes, his

embarrassment would indeed follow him (almost haunt him) for many months to come now. She must set aside her rage, her jealousy, her hurt, and be there for *him* this time. Her grandfather had warned her often of her selfish streak. They would both need each other's strength in the days to come. In just three short hours the unimaginable would happen.

"We will have to formulate a plan with the Counselor to cope with the crew's distress in the times that are... coming." She knew she was stalling – didn't know what else to say.

"Yes, Ma'am, of course," Stadi merely acknowledged. Her mental block was slowly melting, but trust was not something that just reappears with the coming new spring... no, he knew it would take him quite some time to re-earn that. He wanted to apologize, but knew the gesture would be hollow. Love is at once indelible, indefinable, and irrefragable.

Garrett exhaled a breath through tightly pierced lips, steepled her fingers on the insurmountable desktop. "My love and respect for you is undiminished, Commander." The captain made eye contact with her first officer for the very first time. "Perhaps I need not convey my feelings to you, of all people, but as you Betazoids like to say: 'no thought can gain substance without physical form.'" She half-attempted a smile before continuing:

"I *need* you Spencer, now more than ever before... and I think that you need me too. We are all a long, long way from home, but more than that, we are all harboring a deep hurt that is about to get worse. Now that you must... *part ways*... with Enyo, I want you to know that I am always here for you, and we'll get through this together. You are my best friend."

Spencer fought the tears welling up in his eyes as one slowly rolled down Rachel's own cheek. She was his *Imzadi*, and he was hers, and he was sorry now for hurting her. He would never apologize for his relationship with Enyo, he had loved her perhaps as much as he had ever loved anyone else... but he would forever be sorry that he had so hurt his long-time friend. He wanted to reach out now and hug her, but the insurmountable desktop stood between them. They would always be captain and first officer, come whatever may.



## *T-minus 03...*

Arnedra Zenthi was staring death square in the face.

Beneath her, the City of Quid was a swirling inferno that was slowly creeping its way up the last tall building still standing. With Xanda's help, she and her mother had ultimately made it here, to this building, as the fire quickly circled in around them. Both of them had been horrified when a massive brick storefront collapsed and crushed Xanda to death right before their eyes. They had been just steps away from the relative safety of this last standing edifice. Irony or fate? Her father would've debated that for hours at the family table, if allowed. Xanda had been so brave. Arnedra stood here on this rooftop and wept for him now more than any other thing. He had been such a gentle and kind person; so learned and quiet, yet fierce if pressed into a corner. He'd found a path through a panicked mob for them, and used his brains rather than brawn to get them here. His heart never wavered, his courage never waned, as he guided his sister and mother through a literal hell.

Forced to move on, Zoella had been shocked to find a working telcom once inside the building. She bade Arnedra to start climbing without her as she made a desperate attempt to contact her husband. Arnedra could never know that her mother had ultimately gotten through. Arnedra would never know that her mother had held on to that desperate line even as the inferno blew out the lobby windows and incinerated her. The fire was climbing now, floor by floor, and the tar on the rooftop was beginning to bubble beneath Arnedra's feet. She knew the end was near, and she had in fact resigned herself to it. She had seen the missiles launch from this high vantage point, so she knew intuitively that Dr. Ananti had failed. Whether Arnedra burned to death here, or was crushed into oblivion in just a few more short hours, her fate would be the same. She climbed up on top of a heavy cooling unit. It was the highest she would ever get. And now the waiting began.

Out before her, for as far as the eye could see, was smoke and burning desolation. Of a newer generation, Arnedra had been raised to have little belief in the Secondlife, or equally, in the Nolife. The

Secondlife was supposed to be a perfect paradise where all your wishes were granted, and all your dreams would come true. The Nolife was quite simply that – nothing. No light, no life, no sound, taste, or smell – just nothing. Sitting here now though, with death so close at hand, Arnedra began to question everything she had ever been raised to believe. Science said that she would simply die, her body would turn to ash, and she would be forgotten for all time. Nothing would remain. For the very first time, she began to understand how closely this correlated with the teachings of the Church and their definitions of Nolife. Could they have been right all along? She closed her eyes briefly and imagined that perfect paradise. Flames burst through the roof and began licking at her perch.

The heat became even more staggering than before. In her mind's eye, she was slipping into a nice cool subtropical swamp. Upbeat calypso music was playing off in the distance as beautiful people milled about a beautiful resort wearing beautiful clothing. The air smelled of colorful flowers; the colorful fruits tasted sweet and succulent. Arnedra's green skin flushed to a soft shade of indigo as a dashing tall man swept up from under the water and moved to embraced her. His yellow skin glistened in the heat of the sun as the water ran off his sleek form in tiny sparkling rivulets. She could feel the warmth building between them as he pressed his firm skintight against hers. The undeniable importance of *Touch*. This was her paradise, this was her Secondlife, and even if it only lasted but a few moments, she would hold onto it forever. The flames began to make her flesh crawl. It felt like the stinging of a million little ants. As hard as she tried to hang on to that succulent smell of flowers, all she could smell in the end was the burning of her skin. It was time.

The tingling sensation increased as the Life slowly passed from her body.

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All was quiet here, deep beneath the rubble, save for the sound of his own heartbeat. The blackness enveloped him, as did the dust, and at last a cough shattered the silence. The dust. The dust was

everywhere. He'd eaten dust, he was wearing dust, he even thought he'd dreamt dust. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept though, for all memory was of the dust. In fact, the *only* thing he'd had to eat today was dust – *Guardias, am I ever thirsty!* What he wouldn't do right now for a swim in some nice cool subtropical swamp... and he wasn't even a resort person! More dust settled and Fraca sneezed for the millionth time. His head hurt, his sinuses hurt, his throat hurt... even his forefins hurt. Everything hurt. Clutching the edge of some great metal beam, he climbed out from beneath this hiding place at last and tried to take survey of his surroundings. All was blackness through and through. He looked up and could see a few stars peaking at last through the heavy cloud cover. *Well, thank the Guardias for that at least.*

Detector Fraca Novachi had no idea if the nuclear missiles had launched or not. The bomb blast had pretty much coincided with the turning of the launch keys. What he did know for certain, however, was that Primari Qoarta Zenthi was dead. It that brief half-second before all went dark, he'd seen the primari's body virtually disintegrate within the all-consuming wrath of Subguardia Al'Embri's final vengeance. That man had once been his mentor, had practically raised him as a son... for the aged old Church leader to commit all of these most heinous crimes was beyond Novachi's feeble power to reason. He decided to just put it all out of his mind now. There was nothing more to be done. For lack of any other viable course of action, Fraca began to climb. In his resurrection, he was reaching for the stars, and by the Guardias, he would get there if it killed him. It sure beat staying down here in this perpetual cloud of dust! *Guardias, what a wild ride this night has been!*

Whether the nukes had launched or not, for the first time in his life Fraca Novachi felt like he had accomplished something. It was ironic perhaps that he felt more alive now than he ever had before. He even seemed to have a certain lightness in his step as he heaved his heavy frame up and over another twisted girder. Those stars were getting closer and it fueled his progress. He thought back to those people standing out in Conflict Square. By the Guardias, he would join them after all. Font the government, font the nukes, and font Al'Embri

and his insane theories. Fraca was done with it, all of it. He'd devoted his entire life to the detector force; had even kept working way past his retirement. Well font that too, he was retired now, *so don't ever fontan call me again!* He knew it was decision time – he could dwell on regrets and try to wish back the past, or he could move forward from here and enjoy the few precious hours he had left. A loner his whole life, he could think of nothing now but getting to Conflict Square. Yes, that was where he wanted to spend his final hours. Amongst people, a part of the crowd, with others. He was tired of being alone.

It was an evolution of mind, body, and spirit. What he had witnessed in Conflict Square earlier had reignited something within him that he had not felt since childhood. *Hope*. Those people standing out there in the rain had decided to meet their deaths head-on, out in the open – and indeed, gathered together as one in unfettered peace and reconciliation. *The courageous ones*. Perhaps there was a glimmer of hope for their civilization yet, even if it did only come to them in the Secondlife. He thought once again of Dr. Moira Ananti and wondered if she was still alive. The sight of all those people gathered together in harmony had pulled at his heartstrings, and he had started hoping that she might actually succeed. Now he found himself hoping that she was simply well and amongst friends. It had been a very, very long time since the hardened heart of the detector had held any hope at all in anything. Why not join those defiant people and spend his final hours out in the open, awaiting death – or the coming dawn – with courage and dignity? The last of the black clouds blew off the stars and opened up the heavens.

As he climbed out onto the shattered rooftop, he began to experience a strange sort of tingling sensation. *Go figure*, he thought, *now's when I'm finally gonna die from that massive heart attack!* Around him, the world began to slowly dissolve and disappear.

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She awoke some time later and was surprised to find that she was still alive. Some of the nausea had subsided, but she knew

intuitively that her end was not too far off now. Struggling against her weakness, Moira forced herself to roll over and look up at the stars. The Rogue was by now most definitely the brightest star in the night sky. Its existence could no longer be denied, even by the most ardent deniers. But it no longer scared her like it did before. She just eyed it speculatively and thought of all it represented. Very soon now it would be the destroyer of all things. All of their history, all of their religion; every leader great and small. Every poet and philosopher, every subguardia and reverent churchgoer. Every scientist such as herself, every teacher. Every father, mother, child, and grandparent. In just a few more short hours, all of this would be snuffed out like a candle in the wind.

This was not a nuclear holocaust either, or a great world war. This was not a simple virus or a plague... this was destruction complete – not even their planet would remain. If a spacefaring civilization passed through here tomorrow, all they would find was dust. This made Moira profoundly sad. Sure, their world had had a few hiccups, it was far from a perfect place, but there was an inestimable beauty here too. And she wasn't talking about scenic beauty either, or the plethora of lush wildlife. Moira was referring to the thousands of years of rich history that stretched back into the early pages of time. Art and architecture, writings and music, science and discovery – even she supposed, religious teachings of all kinds. All of these things and more had made Directoria a unique gem in the jewels of the heavens. The fact that all of it would simply be erased now made her furious. It was not fair. Statistical probabilities be damned, it simply was not fair! *Guardias be damned!*

She closed her eyes and tried again to picture the faces of her three children. It was like a word lost on the tip of the tongue. Perhaps she was trying too hard at it, but the desperation was beginning to overwhelm her. If she'd the strength, Moira would just get up and start running. She knew that if she ran fast enough, that if only she could run hard enough, she could get to them before this ultimate destruction consumed them. She wondered what Kenna would have them all doing right now? Had he simply just put them to bed like normal, never to wake up again? What was the best course of action to take with your

children when you know the destruction of all things is so near at hand? Death would come for everyone at exactly T-00:00:00, regardless of age, economic background, or religious beliefs. Fear... how do you shield your children from such pure and unadulterated fear? If Moira were there, she would build them a fort and fill them with snacks, then laugh and tell stories till they could no longer keep their eyes open. And light, yes, lots of light... no one should die lonely and afraid and all alone in the dark.

She shuddered as a stream of tears traced their way down her temples and dripped dirty onto the dry desert ground. She could see them at last, all gathered there in their fort with Kenna... she couldn't believe how much they'd grown! She crawled in beside them now and hugged and kissed each one in turn. *Oh, my babies, my precious, precious babies, I am so, so sorry.* She had failed them, just as she had failed all of the other ten billion people on this planet. Moira had not realized the weight she was under until just this very moment. She struggled to breathe as it slowly began pressing down on her like a great concrete slab. *Ten billion people!* And they all had been counting on her. This great weight would serve as her tomb. Damn those aliens, whoever they may be. They had brought all of this ruin upon her. The beam would've worked, she was sure of it! Her entire life had been leading up to that moment, and for what? To have it all just snatched away just like that. *Damn them!*

She was choking now on her own fluids as the radiation damage slowly took its final toll. Her body began to tingle as she started to lose consciousness. All the world around her dissolved away, and she resigned herself fully now to a lonely suffocating death.

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There would be no future, only death. Alex felt complete and utter loss now. He supposed that deep down his hope had always been there, in spite of it all. Even after all the heartache of his adolescence, the low self-esteem and the crippling lack of self-confidence. Even after all the loneliness and self-loathing. Even after the loss of Amira and all the other violences of the night. Even after all this, he had still

been clinging to hope. There is always that dream that we all carry within us, that tomorrow will be a better day, that next year will bring some new form of happiness. But that cancerous malignancy that had slowly been eating away at their hope had finally eaten away at even his in the end. For him, all hope was lost. He was falling into a depression now deeper than any he had ever experienced before. He thought of Amira lying nearby in that blanket and thought perhaps that it was time to join her. The subguardia taught that suicide was a sin, but let the subguardia be damned. This was his life, and he would do with it as he chose.

Such dark thoughts. Alex had been working for many years to lift his dour spirits. He knew that life was a precious gift that he should be thankful for – but at the same time, he had a hard time sometimes finding the joy in life. Even on the good days, there was always something hanging there in the background, some darkness lurking there in his subconscious telling him that even the happiest days would be followed by some new form of misery. He'd started out this night excited, exhilarated even that he was poised with a front row seat to watch history in the making. This alone had been enough to bolster his spirits... Amira had just been an extra bonus. He couldn't believe then his luck, and he realized now his folly in thinking that it could last. He'd had his first kiss, right here on this very pillow. He'd made love for the very first time, right here on this very spot. And now Amira was dead and he had murdered someone in cold blood. He dared not even mention that in just three more short hours their entire planet would be destroyed. *What a night!*

Suicide... ha! He realized now that he didn't even have a way to do it, even if he wanted to. He realized too that he didn't have the courage, he never had. But was this truly a lack of courage, or actually a profound hope? Such an interesting thought, and an even more interesting sensation. Yes, there is always that dream that tomorrow will be a better day, or that next year will bring some new form of happiness. But what do you do when all the tomorrows are gone? There were no more tomorrows – next year would *never* come. This was the stark reality that Alex and ten billion other people all over Directoria were coping with on this dark night. Curiously though, half

the planet was bathed in daylight; not too many people in the United Front had considered this aspect of the collision. Half the population was living their final *day* in fear... and they couldn't/wouldn't even see it coming. Their planet would disintegrate from *beneath* them – the ground under their very feet would dissolve many seconds *after* their brethren on the dark side had already perished.

Alex laid back, arms behind his head, and studied the Rogue. It was by far the brightest star in the night sky now. It was remarkable to think though, that that tiny little pinpoint of light was nearly the same size as his homeworld. How truly vast space must be! It would not even resolve itself into a definable disc until the last few seconds... and then it would simply *loom*. His science teachers had taught him that all this vastness had precluded space travel. The distances were simply too great. But Alex still had his doubts. In all those billions of stars throughout the galaxy, there must be someone smart enough to come up with a way. His teachers had argued that it simply wasn't possible, that physics had proven time and again that nothing could travel faster than light... and light moved incredibly slow, all things considered. But Alex still refused to believe it. Another form of hope? Perhaps. In his heart he hoped that maybe *they* had gotten it right at least. His world was such a font'd up mess, maybe someone else had done better. Maybe they had figured out war and crime and disease. Maybe they had found a way to get along and live together in peace. Maybe they had found a way to travel the stars. Maybe.

He would wait. He'd made it this long without offing himself, he supposed he could go a few more hours. *Look on the bright side, at least I have a good seat*. The tingling started and he sat up. All around him the darkness dissolved into a soft white light.

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“Well,” Castillo said with an uncertain smile, “I guess I should go back and greet our guests.” The runabout *Genesee* had screamed past the dark side of Directoria at a little over half the speed of light. In those few brief seconds, its targeting scanners had locked onto only four lonely individuals out of ten billion – two males, and two females.

There were probably more, no doubt, but their great speed had precluded a second look, and they were already well on their way back to the *Enterprise*. Andy typed in several commands to take over helm control, then offered Castillo his own uncertain smile. He still wasn't sure that this was the best course of action for preserving a piece of this doomed world. As Andy had concluded earlier, a simple set of encyclopedias would've probably just as easily done the trick. Four lonely individuals was not a broad enough genetic base to rebuild a civilization, so in a sense perhaps, Andy and Castillo had now consigned this lonely culture of four to die out slowly over decades, rather than all at once with the rest of their kin.

Castillo let out a sigh, and then, almost as if reading Andy's silent thoughts, he offered only this: "It's going to be fine, trust me." The lieutenant nodded to his faithful sidekick, then squeezed him on the shoulder as he slowly rose and turned aft. Stepping away though, even Castillo himself began to have a few misgivings. Again, almost as if reading Andy's thoughts, he too began to think of the long-term consequences of his actions. Sure, they had saved a bit of this world – these four people could record the history of their planet and describe its lost beauty to Federation scholars in ways that a humble encyclopedia simply could not do. They could provide a first-hand account of their culture that would normally take planetary sociologists months (if not years) to glean from the more conventional orbital and duck-blind studies. But setting all these pluses aside, there was still that other thing. Four people cannot breed and make a viable genetic base... not even mentioning that love and attraction cannot be forced under any circumstances.

Castillo began to feel slightly sick now as he passed through the first set of doors into the runabouts mid-section. This area contained a small head and a few stacked bunks for long-duration trips. He paused for a moment in this tiny, cramped corridor and realized just how nervous he was. First Contact scenarios were delicate situations that required no small measure of patience and skill. Usually, only captains and other ranking officers were trained in these procedures, and suddenly Castillo was feeling completely out of his element. This was another aspect of his little scheme that he had not

considered. This could go very, very badly in the next few moments, he quickly realized. If these people freaked out completely, (or even became violent!) he and Andy could have a potentially serious problem on their hands. His mind began to envision the extremes... what if they had to lock them up back here? Even worse, what if they had to gas them for the protection of all, including the ship? His head began to swoon at the myriads of no-win scenarios now flooding through his mind.

Taking a deep breath, the lieutenant used his thumbprint to unlock the aft doors, then pressed the smaller button just above to open them. With a quiet whoosh, the narrow doors parted and Castillo was confronted at once with a nightmarish smell that he had not in a million years anticipated. Looking down, his hand inadvertently came up to cover his nose and mouth as he espied first a smoldering corpse lying in the center of the compartment. Next to its blackened form lay another prone body, this one green, but not looking a whole lot healthier than the first! "*Sweet Jesus,*" he uttered, looking up finally to see the final two gecko-like creatures huddling in the back corner. These two had yellow skin; one obviously younger than his portly and much older looking companion. They both stood about five feet tall, no more, and looked at Castillo as if he were the devil come home to roost. Stunned speechless, the lieutenant could do naught but just stand there and stare for many long moments. Finally, the green one on the floor moaned softly, and thus startled, Castillo at last sprang into action.

Tapping his commbadge, he cried for help. "Andy, my God, get the f--k back here now!" he shouted. The two in the corner jumped, and huddled in even closer, obviously frightened out of their wits. *Well so much for this First Contact*, Castillo thought darkly. Pulling a tricorder from the belt at his waist, he flipped it open and began immediately to scan the two bodies on the floor. The first was obviously dead – third (fourth?) degree burns covered most of her body – meanwhile, the moaning one was suffering from acute radiation poisoning and barely clinging to life. *Where in the world had these two young women come from?!* Panicked, Castillo didn't know what to do. *My God, what have I done?* The aft doors opened and Andy

rushed in with a sort of yelp. It was only by the grace of his one-quarter Vulcan heritage that he didn't lose it completely like he sensed Castillo was about to do. Andy quickly flipped open his own tricorder, made his own quick assessment, then practically dove for the med kit attached to the forward wall.

"Stand aside," he ordered his senior officer as he breezed back and knelt down next to the moaning woman. Flipping open the kit, he grabbed out a small device and placed it on top of her heaving chest. Activating it with thumb and forefinger, it hummed to life and with a buzz, enveloped her sleek form in a shimmering, body-tight forcefield. The moaning stopped, and she seemed at last to fall into a deep, restful sleep. "There," he said finally, "I've got her in stasis till we can get her back to the ship."

"G-g-good," Castillo croaked, shaken and feeling nauseous. Andy pulled out another one of the handy little devices and did the same for what had once been the beautiful form of Arnedra Zenthi. Mercifully, encased as she was within the protective forcefield, the enviro systems were able now to swiftly cleanse the air, and the awful stench of burning flesh was at last washed away. Slowly crouching, Castillo ultimately fell back onto his rear-end and hugged both his knees with trembling arms. All he could do was stare down at the two prone bodies lying before him. This was not at all how he wanted it to be! Andy made one final check with his tricorder, then stood slowly and carefully faced the two petrified, gecko-like creatures still huddling in the aft corner. Aided by the tricorder, his Vulcan side made its own quick objective assessment – which his human side then enfolded into a shell of deep compassion for what they had all clearly been through.

One was a teenaged male (judging by the hormonal readings), while the portly one was also male, but of a somewhat advanced age; his mottled skin was even shaded in spots to a soft hue of gray. *Males were yellow, females green – interesting.* The boy appeared to be nude, and Andy made a quick mental note to retrieve a blanket for him as soon as possible. The man wore a disheveled sort of suit that was both scorched and shredded, and Andy noted this as well. Much like the two women, he must've also been through hell and back on this night.

Yet, as much as he was tattered and frightened, the older man was also holding back the threads of some very deep-seeded anger. Andy and Castillo would have to keep an eye on this one. For his part, the lad simply appeared to be profoundly sad, and it was a sadness that ran soul-deep, even Andy could see this. Perhaps in some ways Andy could relate to this sadness, and so, he decided to reach out to the young man first.

“Castillo, get me a blanket, *quick!*” Andy hissed, becoming increasingly annoyed with his comrade’s behavior. This was, after all, his idea! Castillo rose somewhat lethargically, then passed into the open passageway and retrieved a blanket from one of the bunks. He couldn’t imagine what Andy needed it for, but he wasn’t about to argue. Slowly marching back, he handed it to him from behind, trying his best to keep his eyes off the blackened corpse especially. The two blinking creatures eyed him warily and his shame increased.

Andy proffered the folded blanket towards the young man and at first there was not even a hint of understanding. He just stood there in the corner with his arms crossed across his body and his hands cupped over his groin. Andy could not see any readily apparent sex organs, surmising instead that they were tucked inside, but it was obvious that the poor kid still felt self-conscious about his nakedness regardless. Gripping its corner tightly, Andy let the rest of the blanket fall towards the floor and the boy’s face lit up with sudden understanding. He peered up briefly into the eyes of the older man, who nodded, then a long arm darted forward and eagerly snatched the makeshift garment away. As the young man wrapped himself up, Andy spoke to him directly now for the very first time.

“Good,” he said, “that’s better. My name is Andy... can you speak? I need you to say a few words so the computer can interpret your language...” Andy placed four fingers in front of his mouth, then drew them away three different times towards the boy, indicating speech. Both their features changed as they looked at each other with a sort of frown, and then again, the old man nodded – he seemed content to study the two officers for the time being and let the boy do all the talking. The boy spoke now in a sort of hissing croaking tone that was not too unlike several other member species of the Federation.

“Excellent,” Andy smiled, “now please, just a few more sentences and we’ll have it...” And again, he made the gesture for speech. This time there was growing amazement on the faces of the two aliens as the computer picked out a few choice words here and there for translation.

*“hisssss croak click click hisssow did we get here?”* the boy said sheepishly.

“Say that one more time please, I think we’ve got it,” Andy replied with a grin.

“Who are you people, how did we get here?” Alex insisted this time. His skin flushed to a slight shade of orange, as did Novachi’s – the sudden advent of speech quickly emboldening them both to demand answers. It is always funny how quickly a newfound understanding in communication can change the aspects of an uncertain first encounter.

“We are space travelers,” Andy replied. Alex’s face immediately lit up as his features broke into a bright smile. Novachi’s however, crunched themselves up into a skeptical frown that Andy could see would not be easily swayed. “We rescued you from the planet’s surface using our vessel,” Andy continued, using a sweeping arm movement to indicate the *Genesee*. Envious, Castillo was fast building up the courage to speak now, but thought better of it somehow. He had botched this entire situation, clearly, and he was forever grateful that Andy had been there to save the day. He resigned himself to just hold his tongue for now and let the boy-wonder keep working his magic.

“No way!” Alex grinned excitedly, his face flushing a bright yellow.

“Mugdashit!” Novachi belched. “What sort of twisted Videoplay game is this?! You people got some nerve playing a trick like this tonight of all nights!” His skin flashed now to full-on red as his anger rose, and Andy stared at him fascinated; and also a little cautiously.

“I assure you, sir,” he replied levelly, “I speak the truth. Look out the back window if you don’t believe me,” he shrugged. Alex twirled instantly towards the indicated portal and plastered his face against the cool alumglass. The whole of the dark globe of Directoria

was receding slowly away from them. Alex could see the various strings of city lights – even the dull glow of the Quid Firestorm. Behind and slightly to the left of a purplish-blue ring, the sun shone brightly in a black, black sky. Away from its brilliance, Alex could see the pinpoint light of thousands of stars. There was no way that this could be Videoplay trickery! It was too real, it was too surreal, and it was much too beautiful! For his part, Novachi refused to look. He merely stared back at Andy and Castillo with a festering anger that mottled his aging skin into various shades of orange and red. He looked down now at the blackened corpse and the other woman that looked to be dead now too. The Detector in him rallied against such fantasies, and he refused to join the foolish boy in his revelry.

Taking a few steps forward instead, he demanded: “Who are these two women?”

“Unfortunately, we do not know,” Andy answered him honestly.

“Our vessel picked you up randomly,” Castillo spoke finally. “You four were all alone in your respective locations.”

Novachi’s color softened and his countenance sagged with a sudden sadness. “This poor imp was probably in Quid,” he whispered softly. “This truly is a sick and twisted game you’re playing.” By now Alex had come away from the window to examine the two bodies alongside his kinsman. The corpse was unrecognizable of course, but there was something familiar about the other one. She was dirty and all disheveled, and her clothes too were tattered and somewhat shredded, but the features were undeniable nonetheless...

“Oh, my Guardias,” Alex choked, “that’s Doctor Ananti!”

“What, boy, don’t be absurd...” Novachi barked. There was no way she could be here... it was just one more deception of this Videoplay hoax. The detector was threatening to burst with rage if this went on much longer. He could feel his sidearm pressing comfortably against his ribs. Yes, if this charade went on, *he* would soon have the upper hand.

“No, sir, it really is! ...and you fontan molloch’s killed her!” Alex snorted suddenly, jabbing a blood-red webbed finger out in the direction of Castillo and Andy. Novachi studied the body more closely,

then too stared darkly up at the two lieutenants. His skin skipped right over to vexed cobalt, causing the two men to instinctually step back. With a swift practiced movement, the detector withdrew his firearm and pointed it directly at Andy.

“All right you two defacates, this mugdashit ends right now,” Novachi ordered. “I wanna speak to whoever’s in charge of this disgraceful sideshow and I’m not kidding!” In the movement, Andy caught a glimpse of a sort of badge inside the man’s jacket and quickly surmised that he was some kind of law enforcement officer. He would definitely *not* be an easy one to win over. With a sigh, he backed up a half step, arms raised, and tapped Castillo in the chest with his wrist. Unfortunately, there was only one course of action.

“All right, sir, just stay calm,” he tried to say as warmly as possible. “We’ll take you through this corridor so you can talk to our superior officer.” *That oughta do the trick*, Andy thought. People always wanted to talk to the manager, even if the answer never changed. Turning to the left, he forced Castillo to turn around with his left arm, and then the duo proceeded into the narrow corridor, both with arms upraised.

“I don’t want any funny business from the likes of you two,” Novachi barked from behind. Alex for his part decided to remain silent, not only still a little uncertain about his surroundings, but also obviously intimidated by Novachi’s much older authority. With a forlorn glance, he reluctantly left the broad sweeping windows and the dreams of outer space, to instead follow the solemn parade into the dim corridor. The tallest one at the head of the procession was just passing through a set of doors when, with a quiet whoosh and a click, two more doors slid shut behind Alex, startling him. To his credit, Novachi kept his cool in spite of this, and also kept his sidearm trained solidly on Andy’s back. Andy too soon passed through the open doorway and continued on as normal – but unseen to Novachi, Castillo had adroitly darted to the left and taken up residence at the aft science station. Quickly typing in a half-dozen commands, he waited but a half-second more.

In front of Alex, the Detector passed through the open doorway and came to a stop... and then began to glow with a

shimmering white light. Frightened, Alex stopped, then took a step back, just as Novachi vanished into thin air. "What the font?!" he exclaimed out loud, and quite unintentionally darted forward. He now stood just where Novachi had been standing, but wasn't at all frightened somehow, just astonished more than anything. He had no doubt now that he was among aliens. Out the front windows of the runabout he could see more stars, and off in the distance, a solemn dark globe... the Rogue. He knew its face as if he had known it a lifetime. It had taken so much from him in the past two years, how could he not recognize it? Silently he cursed at it as the two aliens moved forward and sat down in two identical seats in front of two identical consoles filled with strange blinking lights. He marveled at the technology almost as much as he marveled at the thought of being in space.

"The weapon has been rendered inert," Castillo said, somewhat relieved.

"Anestizine gas concentration at ten parts-per-million," Andy replied stoically.

"Releasing the transport beam... our guest is asleep," Castillo concluded with a heart-heavy sigh. He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes, placing two balled-up fists into his eye sockets. For several long moments, all was silence. Neither one of the two officers had wanted it to go down this way, but they were clearly out of their league. They would have to get back to the *Enterprise* and get proper help. *What a f-----g mess*, Castillo thought, *what the f--k was I thinking?!* Too late to go back now. Both of them for the moment had forgotten entirely about Alex, who crept forward now, his soft bare feet padding silently on the carpeted floor. Still wrapped in his blanket, he did not need to stoop to see out the forward windows. He really was in space! No one could tell him differently now. Next to the Rogue, he could just start to make out a silvery graceful form... that must be their ship!

"Don't be afraid," Andy said softly. "Come on up and get a good look... that's our starship, it's called the *Enterprise*."

"A *star* ship..." Alex whispered, then excitedly: "Then you've done it, you've mastered warp drive?"

"Yes," Andy chuckled, smiling into the boy's round face. "And

don't worry about your friends either, they're going to be fine." He gestured towards the aft compartment.

"Even Doctor Ananti?"

"Even Doctor Ananti, she's just sleeping... our own doctors will treat her shortly." Andy again smiled, even as the boy's countenance changed.

"And what of my planet?" he asked solemnly. All Andy could do was sigh, and Allex took that as answer enough. With a deep sigh of his own, he looked out the windows once more at the Rogue and thought of Amira just lying there stone-dead, all cold and alone in the dark. It wasn't fair. Now who would take her home?

~ ~ ~ ~

"I'm picking up the runabout Captain," Cicely reported, somewhat hesitantly.

"And?" Garrett responded levelly, looking over her left shoulder at the green-skinned Orion ensign. She could tell by the inflection of the girl's voice that the *Genesee's* approach was sure to be filled with Richard Castillo's usual surprises. In her wildest dreams however, she could've never imagined what the brash young lieutenant had been up to his time.

"They are coming back from the direction of Directoria, Ma'am," Cicely said sheepishly, "and I'm reading multiple lifesigns aboard..." Cicely cringed as if about to be struck. She could sense Commander Stadi come up immediately behind her and this raised the temperature under her collar. She knew that things were about to get a whole lot worse aboard this ship – just when everyone thought it couldn't possibly get any worse. *What had that stupid clod been thinking?!* Even Cicely was dismayed by Castillo's newest actions.

"Please tell me..." Garrett said, rising slowly and turning towards Stadi, (and thankfully, not Cicely.) The girl still cringed anyway and held her breath.

"Confirmed, Captain," Stadi answered her, his own jaw clenching... Cicely could see the muscles in his cheeks and temples flexing, causing his jawbones to flair outwards. "Sensors are showing

three alien lifeforms aboard, and apparently one other... deceased.”

“God dammit,” Garrett hissed, clenching both her fists and turning towards the viewscreen. She said nothing more, just began pacing back and forth on the command level and not once taking her eyes off that tiny little pinpoint that was the approaching *Genesee*. Cicely could sense that her captain was tempted to fire a volley of photon torpedoes at the hapless little craft, while Stadi continued to clench his teeth, his cheekbones pulsing in and out with each angry movement. They were hundreds of lightyears from home, it would take them two and a half years to get back to Betazed... that was a very long time for a group of people to live together as one, tightly contained within a tiny tin bubble of air. There was no escape, no way to get away for a few hours or a few days. They were captive to their own folly, and they would have to get along. Like a lioness, Garrett continued to pace. It was lucky for Castillo that they were still a couple thousand kilometers off, or the fearsome captain might’ve ripped out his throat with her teeth. As such, she paced.

“Well,” Stadi said at last, “I guess he’s gone and done it this time.”

“I’m gonna kill that little son-of-a-bitch,” Garrett spat out. She would’ve no doubt had more restraint if there had been anyone else on the Bridge save Stadi and Cicely. As it was, the two lonely officers were still somewhat taken aback by her outburst. “I mean, what in the world was he thinking?!” she continued to mutter, mostly to herself. “And Andy, my God, I thought at least that kid had more sense!” The captain threw her arms up and spun around in a circle before plopping down in the command chair. She sat there now with arms and legs crossed, tapping her right foot in the air with no small amount of earnestness.

“What do we tell them?” Stadi proffered, not really sure of her answer.

“Tell the little dickheads to dock, what more can we do?!” Garrett replied with exasperation. “We certainly can’t send those people back home now, it would traumatize them... not to mention opening us up to contact from their government.” Stadi could sense that his captain was much angrier at herself than she was at those two

foolish boys out there. She had become too lax since the Battle of Ethos, and perhaps so had he. Was he merely following his captain's lead, or had he too been led by those events to lighten up on the reins just a little? He suspected some of both as he thought of Enyo still trapped below on the surface. He missed her, wished she were here on the Bridge now. Yes, he had been affected, no doubt about that... and now it must end. Castillo had taken it too far this time. They would have to pull in the reins, draw the crew up short and put things back to right. As much as they were family, they were still Starfleet, and perhaps they'd forgotten that.

Startling all three from their indelible focus, Marta's vacant tactical station began to beep frantically, vying to be heard. Tied into its readouts, Cicely's Ops panel began, too, to beep feverishly. Garrett jumped up and whirled round to face her two companions on the upper level. A look of *'what now'* was painted all over her careworn features.

"Sensors are detecting a swarm of objects on an intercept course, Captain," Cicely reported, her face crunching up at the strange readings.

"A meteor storm?" Garrett offered, hoping for the best – no doubt, at this point, expecting the worst. Her ship was, after all, still crippled and only slowly getting better.

"No, they're metallic..."

"Radiologic alarm," Stadi stated urgently, looking over Cicely's shoulder but a second more, then stepping quickly away to squint out the forward viewscreen.

"Nuclear missiles, almost two thousand of them," Cicely added wistfully.

"Heading for us?" Garrett asked, for the moment somewhat struck dumb. She too had turned to face the viewscreen; was squinting much like Stadi for a first look.

"Doubtful, Ma'am," Cicely answered her diplomatically. "I suspect they're heading for the Rogue." Even the ensign paused for a minute now to stare forward at this new menace. "But I don't understand," she finally said, "what good do they think it will do? The weapons will only impact on the surface."

"I suppose they have to try, Ensign" Garrett replied glumly.

“It’s a last-ditch effort, and as desperate as it may seem, it’s the only thing left to them.” She thought sadly of the graviton beam and the likelihood that it would’ve probably worked. It *definitely* would’ve worked with the *Enterprise’s* help... another pang of regret... perhaps they should’ve contacted the government of this planet after all – with coordination, it might’ve been saved!

“Shield status, Ensign?” Stadi said, still mindful of the great ship’s precarious position. Lights and gravity had been restored sure enough, but little else. Commander Skyl was doing his best below decks, as per usual, but the graviton beam had packed one hell of a punch; much was still inoperative, and they were fast running out of time.

“Shields are still offline, as are warp and impulse drives...” was the verdict.

“Transporters?” Garrett whispered, and Cicely almost did not hear her.

“No, Ma’am,” she replied without even checking.

“Damn,” the Captain mused. “Communications to the surface?”

“Still nothing, Ma’am... blocked from below.” That great mystery had been baffling them for the past hour at least. The graviton beam had certainly flooded subspace with intense interference, but even that had cleared quite some time ago. They hadn’t yet had a chance to talk with Andy Dardanelle though about his experiences, so they were still in the dark about the malevolent hologram that was currently holding the Away Team hostage. If Captain Garrett had indeed known about this little hiccup, she would’ve had even more reason to skin the incorrigible Mr. Richard M. Castillo alive. As it was, however, she was held hostage herself by limited options. She let out a deep angry sigh. She had no other choice.

“Open a channel to Mister Castillo,” she ordered, “priority one...”

Aboard the runabout *Genesee*, the incorrigible Mr. Richard M. Castillo was no doubt crapping his pants. “The *Enterprise* is hailing us,” Andy reported, “priority one...” Both lieutenants gulped in unison

and stared at each other. They forgot all about poor Alex.

*"Lieutenant Castillo here, Captain,"* he replied across the interstellar void. Garrett eyed him speculatively, took note of the gecko-like alien standing behind him.

"The 'lieutenant' part of that is debatable, *Mister* Castillo," the Captain said with a certain sharp edge to her voice that could've slit throats. The alien backed up a step.

*"Yes, Ma'am..."*

"Shut up and listen to me... we have two thousand nukes on an intercept course and have lost all contact with the Away Team. Transport your... *passengers* (more sharp edge) ...directly to Sickbay, then go at once to the surface and find out just what the hell is going on down there. Those are your orders Mister, no *deviations* (more edge), do I make myself clear?"

*"Yes, Captain,"* both lieutenants replied as one, and their images blinked off. Garrett had the very real sense that Andy was even more scared than Castillo. *Good*, she thought, *because he's gonna get a sound belt-whippin' too*. She could hardly contain her fury, and she didn't even know yet about them abandoning the Away Team several hours earlier. For his part, Spencer Stadi flinched at her anger, and knew perhaps that he was equally as culpable. His telepathic paracortex had known something was up with the lieutenant, but out of respect for human sanctity of thought, he had not probed any deeper than that. He wished now that he had, for Garrett's anger once fanned could not be easily quenched.

"Commander Stadi, take the helm please," the Captain ordered, startling him. "Use the maneuvering thrusters to move us behind the Rogue... that should shield us from the atomic blast."

*"Yes, Ma'am, of course..."*

"Captain," Cicely called out, "I'm receiving a priority message from Starfleet Command..."

"That's odd," Garrett replied as Stadi paused in his transit to stand beside her.

"Message reads: *Lady Lucille Grey, mother of Lieutenant Ann Grey, died this morning at the border colony of Dulisian Four. With*

*condolences, Admiral Stillwell, Starbase 105.*” Cicely brought a hand up to her mouth as she finished reading, holding back tears... by the Great Bird, just when things couldn’t get any worse! Rachel Garrett slouched ever so slightly and for a moment, Spencer Stadi thought he may have to catch her. *How much more pain can this crew take?* she asked him, on the breaking point herself of absolute weariness. Stadi could do naught but take the helm, for he did not have a soothing answer.

*T-minus 02...*

STARFLEET COMMAND SPECIAL  
INVESTIGATION  
TOP SECRET  
VIA SUBSPACE - STARDATE 19848

Who am I? I am Rachel Cecilia Garrett. I was born on Earth in the year 2292 along the banks of the mighty Genesee, and nestled amongst the great forests of New York. These once vast farmlands were abandoned after the Third World War and the trees slowly returned – and once the radiation dissipated, so slowly did the people. Always rural, the area is now wild, and in our childhood adventures, my brother and I never dared venture far from home. My grandfather told us often of Indian days, when the Seneca ruled this land supreme, of Mary Jemison, the White Woman, whose golden hair was legend, and of the white deer, the ghost of an Indian princess who leapt from the Falls in pursuit of lost love. If you're quiet, you can still see her from time to time. He fascinated us with stories of canal days, of wild towns that sprang up almost overnight. In the age of steam, railroads then crisscrossed this land too, adding new definition to the multifaceted landscape. I learned more from my grandfather than I ever learned from any textbook – especially that the only thing unchanging in this great land, the only thing immutable, is the great river itself. It sees and bears all.

Ethan. My brother's name was Ethan. We had been warned to stay away from the river that day. It had not reached such a frenzied state since the Great Flood of '72. But I persisted, and at last he followed. We had been out playing all day, and I guess I was annoyed with him. We all make choices, we all do things that we later regret, but sometimes forgiveness can be the hardest part. Have I ever forgiven myself for his death? *"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."* I guess Rose Kennedy said it best. A family destroyed, and I started running. Maybe I never stopped. Starfleet took

me away from all the hurt and the pain, and I ran out into space as far from that river as I could get. But at night sometimes I can still hear it rushing in my ears, I can still hear its almighty roar as it swallowed my brother whole.

It took the Empress Ethereal of Ethos to remind me of how important family can be. I am captain now of the Federation flagship, the *Enterprise-C*, and like Kirk and Harriman before me, my honor is singular, but also wrought with extraordinary burden. It's a trap with no escape, a drug with no antidote, a reward with no ecstasy – and I would not trade it for the world. My senior staff has become my family now, and though I walk that fine line between commander and doting mother, the love is just the same. We all need each other, no one likes to be alone, and out here in the vast blackness of space, the need is all that much greater. I gave up long ago pondering the meanings of fate and why things happen the way they happen. Why did we arrive at Directoria just hours before its destruction? To learn something about ourselves and where we came from. To appreciate the fact that our world is but a fleck of sand against the vastness of the cosmos, not for a moment to be taken for granted – to know that in a heartbeat it can all be crushed out of existence forever.

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Who am I? I am Spencer Stadi, Son of the Second House, Holder of the Sacred Stone of Destiny, Heir to the Divine Swords of Betazed. I was born in the year 2296 on the continent of Galatea, just thirty years after civil war had ravaged my world and left millions dead – and an entire continent destroyed. Am I royalty? In a sense, yes, I guess – but all vestiges of the Great House Consensus were already losing their power to common rule by the time I came along. At my majority, I had a choice to make: take my seat in the Consensus by my father's side... watch the years turn into decades as moldy old oligarchs gave moldy old speeches about how *Great* things *Used* to be... or I could join Starfleet and escape all that for a life of adventure out amongst the stars. My father was furious, my younger brother Luther... overjoyed. He had always been the better orator anyway, the

one more liked. He relished in the pomp and the circumstance and the ostentatious garb, while I for my part felt perfectly comfortable in uniform. How could I know that my career, indeed the entire trajectory of my life, would be forever altered by the love of a single woman?

Zora and I were practically inseparable. We scheduled classes together, studied together, even took our mid-semester and summer breaks together. I had never before in my life experienced such passion. There is something about the human mind that we Betazoids find intoxicating, and that perhaps is why so many of the younger generation is marrying offworld – much to the chagrin of the moldy old oligarchs. Even Lwaxana Troi shocked the establishment and married a human! Boy, I can remember *that* day when my father came home from the Consensus. I never told my parents about Zora, and perhaps that was for the best when our simple senior prank nearly got us expelled and imprisoned. Zora wanted me to lie, begged in fact, but my integrity would not allow me to do it. It is amazing how quickly love can fade when challenged by the insurmountable. We parted coolly, and went our separate ways after graduation. But while my career languished, hers soared. I would've likely been a lieutenant forever if it hadn't been for Commander Rachel Garrett.

She was serving as first officer aboard the *Starship Gettysburg* during the Mordan IV hostage crisis. I guess she was impressed when my negotiating team helped free the sixty-five passengers of the *Starliner Lavinia*, because three years later she promoted me to Lieutenant Commander and made me her own first officer aboard the *Enterprise*. This time Admiral Xavier Hawk was furious! But life can be a funny thing. Who would've ever guessed that twenty years later she and I would be inseparable and Admiral Hawk would be disgraced? There is something intoxicating about the human mind, and Rachel Garrett has become my *Imzadi*. This is not a term that I or any of my brethren take lightly. Sometimes Betazoid compassion and human desire can create an inexplicable bond. Where she goes, I will always follow. I am content in this. The *Enterprise* was in orbit of a planet of ten billion about to be utterly destroyed. What better reason to think about the ones you love? Life is fleeting, and it can be gone in an instant. Hold on to it, for clearly tomorrow may never come.

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Who am I? I am Marta Susan Batanides. I was born in the year 2306 at Sagan Station on the planet Mars. I grew up under carefully engineered biodomes on a world whose face was slowly being changed by human ingenuity. There have been many terraforming projects over the past three hundred years, but Mars was the first, and I guess therefore it's kind of mankind's baby. I lived in a world where the temperature never changed, the humidity was always perfect, and the skies were always a filtered blue. It didn't take you long to get to know everyone's name growing up either... it was like every American small town, only all the roads led right back into town. Looking back, I guess maybe that's why I decided to join Starfleet. It rained my first day in San Francisco, and for the first few moments I was terrified that something had gone horribly wrong. But as I grew more accustomed to my new surroundings, I became enamored with the beauty of a 'real' planet... and also keenly aware of how fragile it was. So many things in such delicate balance, for what is Earth but a biodome of its own, only on an immense scale?

I had hardly ever left the Terran System before Richard Castillo and I reported for duty aboard the *Enterprise* at Betazed. Since I am technically from Mars, I guess I don't have the nostalgia for Earth that many of my brethren have, so therefore I can say without much shame that I didn't know beauty until I saw Betazed. Such a lush, tropical world! So much water, and so much green. I still miss it from time to time, but the *Enterprise* has been my home for almost fifteen years now... and I suppose I am more accustomed to its predictable atmosphere anyway. Space may seem so black and empty at first, but it is filled with so much adventure. The story of my life aboard this starship would fill many volumes this size, and the worlds I've seen would blow the imaginations off anyone that ever tried to write about them. What is there in a name? I've never served aboard any other ship, but I suppose any other name is just as important. It's all about perception, I guess. The *Enterprise* gets all the glam because of Kirk of course, but there are a hundred thousand other Federation ships out

there, each with their own story to tell... one just needs to listen.

My life changed forever that day I saw Johnny Picard get stabbed through the heart by that surly Nausicaan. Me and Johnny and Corey Zweller almost lost our lives over a stupid game of dom-jot! So dumb. You really begin to value life as your best friend is rushed to a med center, unresponsive and not expected to live. That event changed us, all of us, and I still have nightmares about it sometimes. Picard still beat me to the captain's chair though, the crazy bastard – but that event encouraged me to get into the security field, and I haven't regretted it since... being a captain can wait. The destruction of Directoria is one of those types of events in which you know exactly where you were when it happened. Living under the biodomes gives you a real sense of the fragility of life; one crack, one impact from a micrometeoroid, can spell disaster to a fragilely contained atmosphere. In space, no one can hear you scream. Ten *billion* people. Another reminder to value life... another reminder of how quickly the beauty beneath that delicate dome can be forever extinguished.

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Who am I? I am Onovan. I was born in the Earth year 1974 on my homeworld of El-Auria; but that appellation is actually Federation shorthand for the full name of *Tor Umbria Omri Nexus El-Auria*. Loosely translated, it means: The Moon's A Window to Heaven – heaven of course being our homeworld. You see, when our weary space travelers would return home after a long journey, they would proclaim as they approached our planet: '*Tor Umbria Omri Nexus El-Auria*' ...the moon's a window to heaven. By some accounts, it was the most beautiful planet in the galaxy... and then the Borg came. We were a peaceful people, a race of listeners. We traveled the galaxy far and wide just to hear the stories of other worlds... my wife Guinan even visited Earth once, but that's a story for another time. As is evident, my species lives an exceptionally long time, in the thousand-year range, so I suppose that makes us very wise. But one should be careful not to take wisdom for granted, for we are not clairvoyant, we do not see the future... if we could, then we would have the ability to

prevent a great many things. Perhaps no one better than I can tell you about the destruction of a world. It scares me sometimes that Starfleet Security has forbidden me to talk of such things. But panic is often prevented by nothing more than the sheer ignorance of the populace. One cannot fear what one does not have knowledge of, so secrets are kept.

The Borg. It is fortunate for the time being that El-Auria *was* about seven thousand lightyears away. This gives the Federation some breathing room for at least another century... perhaps by then they will be ready. But if there is one thing I have learned in my thirty plus years in Starfleet, it is to never underestimate human ingenuity: they could be ready *now* if pressed into a corner. Ultimate destruction is a powerful motivator, so when their time comes, I have no doubt that they will indeed be ready. Such a compassionate people, these humans... and the rest of this part of the galaxy owes them for it. Nowhere else in the Milky Way does peace reign supreme over such a truly vast area. And we El-Aurians perhaps owe more to their compassion than any other... when my people were scattered to the solar winds, only Earth would take us in. I joined Starfleet to repay some of this kindness. If I can help guide them, even just a little, then a debt is thus fulfilled. I owe them that.

The Prime Directive. No greater wisdom exists in all the universe. I have seen my captain stretch this prerogative from time to time, but never openly defy it. When confronted with Directoria, she was faced with probably one of the most difficult command decisions of her career. Perhaps no one better than I can tell you about the destruction of a world, and if I could go back and save even a shred of El-Auria, I would not have the strength to uphold the principles of this Directive like Captain Rachel Garrett has done in all her years past. Can anyone truly fault her for at least *trying* in this one particular instance? Many scholars in the decades to come may fault us for our involvement here, but no one shall condemn us for *her* compassion. She *tried*, and nothing in the universe has ever been lost for trying. I have traveled far and wide in my nearly four hundred years, and have witnessed firsthand the destruction of worlds. Be not too quick to judge someone for having some compassion in this. It is not something

to be taken lightly. It can all be over in a flash.

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Who am I? I am Skyl, son of General Seti. I was born on the planet Vulcan in the Earth year 2245. My father was home very little throughout my formative years as he was otherwise engaged in various special ops missions with Federation Defense & Security. This left my mother to care for me and govern my education. It has been suggested by my peers at the Vulcan Science Academy that this upbringing made me ‘soft’ in regards to my emotional control, but nevertheless, I graduated with high honors in warp field theory and advanced starship design. My early career was spent at the Vulcana Regar Spacelabs designing the transwarp engine nacelles for the much larger *Excelsior*-class starships then being developed. After the failure of the Excelsior Transwarp Project, however, I was reassigned to Outpost Seran-T-One on Pluto to work on next generation warp cores. This was my first experience working closely with humans, and despite my ‘soft’ upbringing, I found the entire experience to be somewhat challenging. Humans can be so emotional.

After the Tomed Incident of 2311, it was decided that the Federation needed to design much larger and more powerful starships to combat the Romulan threat, and I was selected to oversee the new top-secret *Ambassador*-class Starship Development Project then underway at Betazed. It was here that I cultivated a very positive working relationship with Commander Orfil Quinteros, who was instrumental in procuring me a field commission in Starfleet, with a provisional rank of Lieutenant Commander. Due to the sheer size and complexity of the *Ambassadors*, planning and construction took nearly a decade longer than expected with the *Ambassador* herself coming off the line in 2321 and the *Enterprise* a year later. I spent a year aboard the *Ambassador* conducting field testing of her engine parts and warp field components... I was then transferred to the *Enterprise* for another year of field testing. In those days, the only thing less agreeable to me than humans were the Betazoids, but the young and fresh-minded Captain Rachel Garrett intrigued me somehow, and she convinced me

to stay aboard for the *Enterprise's* first deep space trials.

If you had asked me then if I would still be aboard this ship twenty years later, I would have said no. I was content to conduct the field testing of each new ship off the line, but there was something profoundly compelling about observing a working spaceframe age from a purely hands-on perspective. To say that Rachel Garrett has put this starship through its rigors is a significant understatement; each new adventure seems to stretch this spaceframe well beyond its design limits... one wonders when it must end. The only thing more fulfilling about my career as chief engineer aboard this ship has been my interaction with its crew. Command leadership comes from the top down, and Rachel Garrett has shown exceptional skill over the past twenty years at guiding this crew out of some challenging situations. Every crewmember aboard this ship is indebted to her leadership and integrity. I have learned over time to tolerate the humans and the Betazoids, and have come to appreciate that this ship is just a simple machine... it is the people within her that truly matter. If these statements make me 'soft' in the eyes of my Vulcan brethren, then so be it.

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Who am I? I am Richard Marcos Castillo. I was born on the border world of Archer IV in the year 2308, just four months after my father was killed aboard the *Enterprise-B* at the attack on Station Salem One. When you're younger, you try not to believe that these things don't haunt, but sometimes I think they do. As a single parent, my mother fought against my angry rebellious streak until she finally had to send me away. I spent much time traveling with my paternal grandparents on relief missions to some of the seedier worlds of the Federation, and the remainder of my time was spent with my maternal grandparents in St. Augustine back on Earth. I used to beg my grandfather to take me down to the ruins of the Kennedy Space Center and go through the museums there for hour after endless hour. This is where my love for nostalgia bloomed, and I began to lose myself in ancient films, and in books about the very early days of space travel.

A simple five-minute trip to Mars today would take our ancestors over two years! Just imagine.

When I joined Starfleet, I guess I thought it was the right fit. But sometimes our past haunts, and more than one shrink has told me I was just trying to live up to the memory of my father. Whatever you say Doc! Regardless, nothing in the galaxy provides the opportunities that Starfleet does; unfortunately for me, my behavior... and my mouth... were the only things standing between me and graduation. In fact, Admiral Uhura pulled me into her office one sunny day in May of my junior year, and I thought for sure it was Expellsville for me, but much to my astonishment, I was told that the *Enterprise* needed a helmsman and the job was mine if I wanted it. Never look a gift horse in the mouth as they say, so I booked the first transport outta there before somebody changed their mind! On this first trip to Betazed I met Marta Batanides and we became fast friends. We talked about romance for a while, but it never really worked out; I guess she thought I was a little too brash and cocky at the time, and I probably still am sometimes.

Marta has still become the most important person in my life however and I don't think I could ever live without her. I thought I had lost her at the Battle of Ethos, and this affected me profoundly. Our friendship changed then, became deeper somehow, and you really do learn to appreciate those around you. Ethos was where I met Andy Dardanelle too, and in my nostalgia for the Ancient West and Billy the Kid, I started calling him my 'pal'. But through and through, he is the best most loyal friend I have ever had, other than Marta of course. He brings out the mischief of my youth in me though, and I'm not really sure why. I mean, I like Commander Stadi and all, and I certainly respect him, but I really like to get his goat sometimes too. As first officer, crew behavior and discipline are his responsibility and Andy and I sure do have fun with that! Andy's that one person I can always count on, that one friend that I know will always have my back. I know I got us both into deep shit with my little abduction scheme, but it'll blow over. If these events show us anything, it's the value and the importance of friendship. The world sure is an empty place without it.

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Who am I? I am Ann Louise Grey. I was born on the border world of Dulisian IV in the year 2314. Dulisia lies in a hotly-contested region of space along the Klingon border that was unceremoniously divvied up following the First Khitomer Accords, much to the never-ending consternation of my father, Sir Brandon Grey. He claims to be British nobility, but all rights and titles were relinquished as soon as he left Earth. Now he just likes to agitate. I grew up with three older brothers that showed my mother as little appreciation as my father did. She has toiled in her kitchen for almost fifty years, the old-fashioned way, just as my father insisted, never once raising her opinion on anything. She knew better. Backtalk in our house was not tolerated. Why she has stuck with him for as long as she has, I will never know. My father fancies himself quite a revolutionary, and we spent many a long hour on the floor of the family living room listening to his dissertations on politics and all the wrongs of modern society. My brothers all ate this sweet crap up by the spoonful, but I was always the lone dissenter in the group, and such they harangued me unmercifully.

Why did I decide to become a doctor in Starfleet? Well, the Starfleet part is easy... it was the only way for me to get as fast and as far away from Dulisia as I could possibly get. Such a backwards border world with its archaic beliefs! The doctor part is not such an easy answer, and I don't know if I even have an answer. My compassion for my mother and all her toils perhaps? I wanted to be better than that, and also find a way to help people in the process. But life off of Dulisia was not exactly rosy either. Life is never simple for an innocent 'country' girl like me, so fresh and naïve, and raised in such a tight environment that I couldn't pee without permission. Many took advantage of me in those early years, and No doesn't always mean No when you're just plain tired of fighting. Regardless, there was something about medicine that just clicked for me, and now my name is quite well known throughout the medical field. As Chief Medical Officer aboard *Starfleet One*, I was even the President's personal physician... but that all changed with Joran's sudden death.

The *Enterprise* was an opportunity for me to really spread my wings and soar, far from the reach of my father and his diabolical machinations. For the first time in my life, I have found a certain amount of peace and contentedness. Five years out on the frontier! I really feel like I've made friends too, like real friends, that actually enjoy my company, even despite my nervous little ticks. I am more relaxed now, though it doesn't always show, and Marta has taught me to nurture the confidence within me that before I only ever really felt inside a Sickbay. I can't wait actually to return home and see my mother again and prove to her how much I've grown as a person... maybe even my father will finally be proud of me. In Starfleet Medical School they don't really hammer the importance of the Prime Directive like they do at the regular Academy... maybe they don't want to cloud our compassion when it comes to potentially treating an alien species? Whatever their reasoning though, I really feel that more could be done sometimes. This business with Directoria is sad and shameful.

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Who am I? I am Cecilia Renee Garrett. I was born at an undisclosed Orion breeding facility in the approximate Earth year 2317. I was bred and trained to be a slave-girl in the lucrative sex trade market. I never knew my parents, or even who they were. My early childhood was not necessarily an unhappy one though... we were well-fed and well-treated, and lived a comfortable lifestyle in dormitories of a dozen or so girls each. Our early years were spent learning the histories and the customs of the dozens of worlds that are part of the licensed sex trade franchise. This made us more well-rounded and appealing to any potential customers, as we were, by the age of nine, capable of carrying on fully adult conversations in varying subjects. Training in the sexual arts began at age nine and lasted until the age of twelve, at which point we were then considered eligible for selection and sale. Depending on our handler, some of us girls were sold into some very reputable houses, but many more of us were not that lucky. After my ovaries were harvested, I was sold to the

unscrupulous and abusive captain of an *Antares*-class freighter.

My career there ended quickly, as I escaped at our very next port of call. An escaped slave-girl can bring a heavy bounty, and I was worth more as a fugitive than I ever was as that captain's whore. He hunted me unmercifully for a short while (I had cost him a year's earnings), but he soon gave up and left the real dirty work to the scores of bounty hunters that benefit from the courageous ones like me. I was very nearly captured at Farspace Starbase Earhart, but I got a lucky break when a Federation starship overstayed there for a night, and I was able to stow aboard. Life aboard a Starfleet ship is every stowaway's dream. Food replicators make sure you never go hungry, and ample cargo holds provide a never-ending supply of hiding places. I spent months aboard the *Enterprise* before I was discovered purely by chance by Richard Castillo. I attempted to entice him to maintain my concealment, but there is some strange code of conduct amongst these human men that I have never quite understood. They will deny themselves many pleasures for the sake of chivalry.

What can I say of Rachel Garrett and her senior staff? Not only did this Starfleet captain give me her name, but she nurtured me like the mother I never had. Richard became my surrogate brother, the others, an extended family that each in their own way taught me a new life free from fear and servitude. By the end of that five-year tour, I had gained a new sense of identity, and I was sent to the Academy as the first member of my species to do so. It was not without challenges of course, but by my senior year I excelled, and my family used their collective pull to get me assigned to the *Enterprise*. The things that I have seen and learned and experienced in the two and a half years since, make all that came before it pale in comparison. Having never had a family of my own, Captain Rachel Garrett has made this ship a home for all of us in every sense of the word. I do not think she realizes sometimes how truly important she is to the other 839 people aboard this vessel. The events of the past few days only makes us appreciate our joint companionship that much more. Take a look around... it is a strength of togetherness to be envied.

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Who am I? I am Andrew Solok Dardanelle. I was born on Vulcan in the Earth year 2310. Though mostly human, I was raised on the world of my birth because of my half-Vulcan mother's position in the Vulcan Ministry of Justice. To say I had a difficult childhood is an understatement. Human blood of any degree is still considered a sacrilege on that world, even after all these generations of peaceful coexistence, so I was bullied and discriminated against from my earliest memories. My human father used to tell me though: "What don't kill ya, makes ya stronger," and he encouraged me to learn from these experiences and find strength in them. Much to my surprise, it worked, and by secondary school I was team leader in several sports and played an important part in student government. I learned very early however, to keep my emotions closely in check, for any emotional outburst amongst my peers – even so much as a laugh – could set me back months in the respect department.

Despite these difficulties, I would not say my formative years were unhappy ones; my sister and I at home were much freer to allow our true personalities to surface, and we had a lot of fun growing up with my father's witty Southern charm and personality balancing my mother's more austere temperament. When it was time for me to choose a direction of my own, my mother of course wanted me to be a lawyer, and my father wanted me to be a farmer like him. Well, let me tell you, farming on Vulcan isn't exactly easy, and law bores me to tears... my sister was actually the one that encouraged me to join Starfleet. I was always tinkering and puttering with things, and she thought I'd make a good engineer. At first, I only enlisted for the standard four-year tour, but after only a few months of training I was encouraged by a much-respected chief petty officer to join the Academy and become an officer. That decision paid off four years later when I was assigned to the *Ambassador*.

The day that ship crashed still scares the hell out of me. I started to lie to Onovan towards the end of my counseling sessions, because the nightmares never did stop and the panic still grips me almost daily. But what am I to do? The *Enterprise* is on a five-year mission into deep space. There's no resigning, there's no giving up, there's no just

walking away. Like my father used to say, “You just gotta buck up son, and get back in that saddle.” (I don’t think he ever rode a horse in his life). Why I lived and 839 other people didn’t will always confound me... always haunt me. My only saving grace has been Richard Castillo. He taught me to laugh again, to be comfortable with those emotions that I spent so many years trying to hide. He’s the reason that I get up every morning, because he’s the only thing keeping the panic at bay sometimes. My friendship with him is the only part of me that I’m proud of right now. Why did I go along with him on his little abduction scheme? Because 839 people died and I didn’t. Somewhere, there has to be a balance.

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Who am I? I am Enyo... my first name is unpronounceable by non-Andorians. I was born on Andor in the Earth year 2315. I guess I should talk about the fire. Andor is a cold world, and my species has adapted very well to living amongst the glaciers and the icecaps. Fire is a concept that we as a people discovered very late in our development, and thus I suppose we have an almost instinctual fear of it. How that particular fire started that day I never told, but I was like a human child with matches in a barn full of hay. There is that certain fascination that all children have with this, the most basic element in the universe, and I was no different. I had every intention of putting it out shortly after it started of course. But fire has a devious way of tricking you into this false sense of security. That is all just part of its nefarious nature that lures you into its dangerous trap. I cried out to my mother again and again even as I began to smell my own flesh burn. I was beamed out with only seconds to spare, and was rushed by high-warp medical transport to the burn unit on Luna.

For the many months of my recovery all I could do was just lay there, and I would stare out the windows for hours at Earth. Liquid water! And in such abundance that it covered nearly seventy-five percent of the planet’s surface! Oh, how I wanted to visit there, yet upon my release, I was immediately taken back home to Andor. But the dreams of children never die, they just fade, and as I grew older, I

never forgot about that blue world outside my hospital room window. A traumatic event changes you, and you go home never quite the same person. The rest of my growing up on Andor was restless, unsettled, and fraught with a desire to be out from under the ice and feel the sun on my face, or the rain on my skin. I took the Starfleet entrance exams without telling my parents and was accepted into the Academy before they ever knew I was leaving. It's difficult to describe the expressions on their faces the day I left... fear, pride, disappointment... more fear, all behind a smile.

Earth was everything I thought it would be, and more. It became a drug, and I only wanted more. During my summer and mid-semester breaks I didn't go home like my classmates, I traveled to the other various core worlds in the Federation to experience the flavor and the life of each of them first-hand. Once I visited Betazed, however, I was instantly addicted. When it came time to request assignments, I chose the Galatea Space Center. I guess I should've perhaps been more specific since technically the *Enterprise* is attached to Galatea as its home port. I was sick to my stomach the first day I came aboard this starship; all I wanted was to become an inhabitant of Betazed, and instead I found myself here on a five-year deep space mission! But the Battle of Ethos is another one of those traumatic events that changes a person. There is such danger and excitement to be had on this ship, and like a child with a book of matches, something within me definitely lit some fires. But my heart will always long for the lush and tropical beauty of Betazed. Seeing Directoria out the window for the first time made me think of Earth, and those long lonely days of longing.

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Who am I? I am Moira Ananti. I was born in the Keck Province on the last day of the third intercalary. I spent my childhood watching Videoplay space adventures and went to the Flickers every end of the long week to see the latest sci-fi sagas. I couldn't get enough of it, much to my parents' continual frustration. Nothing would come of it they told me... it was all just flights of fancy... if the Guardias wanted

us to chart the heavens, then they surely would've given us wings. But I never stopped believing, and when it came time for me to choose my advanced training courses I went into the graviton research field. In those early days, it was believed that a vessel could ride a graviton field into orbit, and then on to the nearby planets. Most of the funding went into rocket research though unfortunately, and we at the SENSES Division had very little in the way of resources to conduct our studies. That all changed of course when the Rogue was detected making its first pass through our solar system. How does a world so completely unprepared for destruction prepare itself?

There is only one thing in your career that can be entirely unanticipated, that can change the direction of your life's work virtually overnight, and that is raising a family. All of us that have a family do indeed take it for granted sometimes, especially when the demands of a career supersede all those little events that add up little by little into a little person's lifetime. Before you know it, your children have grown by leaps and bounds, and you begin to wonder where all of that time has gone. Each and every one of us that have sacrificed family for career should be ashamed of ourselves, for it can all change in an instant. For me, it was a double-edged sword... the arrival of the Rogue made career a necessity. I no longer had a choice. Family was no longer in the equation, my work *Had* to come first... but in hindsight, how much truth really *is* there to that statement? Surely on a planet of ten billion, someone else could've done the same job... and maybe even done it better.

My work was the most important technological leap of a generation, if not longer. I sacrificed so much for it, including my family, and for what? *Failure*. It is one thing to fail by your own shortcomings, and quite another to have your life's work fail because of the negligence of others. The Guardias teach us that vengeance is a sin, so how does one cope with the knowledge that your failures are not because of your own ineptitude, but because someone else has destroyed your hopes for you? Failure because of ineptitude is almost an easier pill to swallow. The Guardias also teach us forgiveness, but how can one forgive an unforgivable sin? My life, and any possible future of it has been forever altered by the negligence of these alien

invaders. How do I not take vengeance for the wrongs committed against my children? How do I forgive what was taken from me?! My family, my career, the lives of ten billion... all this and more. Take my advice – take none of this for granted.

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Who am I? I am Fraca Novachi. I was born in the capital city on the thirteenth day of the fourth transcalary. By now you know most of my story, and since I am a man of few words, what more is there to add? I suppose a host of psychologists could delve deep into my childhood and come out with many volumes this size. Yes, my parents were gunned down in the street right before my eyes over nothing more than the few cogents in their pockets, and maybe some cheap jewelry. We can talk about this if you wish, but what more can I tell you that you can't already imagine? Did I cry? Of course. Was I hurt inside – did this event profoundly affect my life? Why don't you psychologists take off your dunce caps for a minute and look me in the eyes... do I looked disturbed? We each cope, each on our own way. My brain could've cracked like an egg, but it didn't. So why don't you tell *me* why not? Sometimes though, where the brain doesn't crack, the heart can break in its place.

I spent my formative years locked away in that monastery with a bunch of monks that wouldn't crack a smile if the room was filled with helium. Let's talk about that. Take a teenage boy riddled with hormones and lock him in a room full of celibates... sounds like a recipe for sex education to me. I know that deep down Subguardia Al'Embri meant well for my upbringing, but even the dingiest of foster homes would've done more for my emotional development than that stony old church full of stony old clods. And people ask me why I never married. You call me cynical? Well, it's been a trying couple of years. While the rest of the world was living out their deepest darkest sins in anticipation of the End, I was hard at work trying to solve a string of serial killings that turned out to be a setup for me all along! The nerve of that man to call me the Messiah. The moloch is lucky *I* didn't blow *him* up. I can no more change the direction of a planetary

body than I can make a decent cup of quhwah... it's just not in my nature. Leave the work of the Guardias to the Guardias.

So, where do we go from here? My future always stretched out before me with the certainty that each and every morning I would wake up and trudge my fat ass down to the office just like I'd always done for the past forty years. I had every intention of dying from a massive coronary right there at my cluttered desk... let all those brash young upstart detectors with all the answers stare at my festering body for a while and try to figure out just how the font they're going to get me out the front door. Sideways? I guess I won't have the satisfaction though. I don't know how to take these aliens. They have rendered me obsolete. They have forced me into retirement more effectively than any chief detector or expired contract ever could. I wonder if these molochs have any kind of a pension plan? Cynical? You bet the Guardias I am. What is a life without meaning? My entire adult life has been the detector force. I've known nothing else. How am I supposed to relax here aboard this 'starship' with nothing to do but get older and fatter? Seems to me that someone didn't think this plan through very carefully. Don't let go of what you have till you are sure that what comes next is going to be better, even if aliens do come and abduct you.

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Who am I? I am Allexna Orri. I was born in the very rural Yoming Province on the sixth day of the fifth midcalary. My life before the Rogue was pretty ordinary. There was nothing special about me growing up, I was just your typical small-town kid that never hurt anybody and never made a splash. But sometimes perception can be everything. Most of the time I *felt* like I could vanish off the face of the planet and no one would ever even know I was gone. I was actually a pretty popular boy in my primary years, but as the pain and the awkwardness of pubescence set in, I began to cave inward on myself. No one can ever really say why this happens I guess, for it isn't just one really big thing of a childhood that changes the course of your life, but instead all those million and one tiny things that slowly adjust your

trajectory bit by bit with each passing day, and quite without your knowing. By the time I was halfway through my secondary education, I was already a downhearted loner and a hopeless introvert that was as afraid of social situations as he was of the dark.

A funny thing happened though... I became enamored with outer space and the stars. I developed a serious passion for science fiction and anything space related. My fear of the dark was the first of my fears to be conquered, and many more fears would slowly follow as I aged and matured... but who would ever guess that that fear of the dark would turn out to be the easiest one to conquer? I first read about Doctor Moira Ananti in one of my science magazines and I became enamored with her as well. But this wasn't some kind of sick and twisted obsession, it was true admiration not only for her work, but for her unfaltering capacity to push through even after disaster struck. The Primari's announcement that day is one of those events where you will always remember just where you were and what you were doing when you first heard about it. We were all gathered in our science classroom in front of a Videoplay monitor, I was doodling with a stylus not really paying attention until the hush of my classmates made the seriousness of it suddenly palpable. The videocaster then went on to lay out for us the details of what the world's brightest minds had concluded. It truly was the end of the world. Hope is the first victim when a cancer strikes.

How do you describe the feelings that you first have when you find out that your planet, indeed your very future, will be destroyed in less than two years' time? Is it a sinking feeling? A sort of sick feeling? A bizarre fascination with the sudden pronouncement of your own mortality? I for one wanted to know everything they knew and began to scour the PIN for any shred of information that I could get. Once I heard that Doctor Ananti had been selected to save us all, I knew then and there that it would be so. Not soon after, the schools all closed, and I found myself without a future long before I was prepared to accept it. My hopes and dreams were the hopes and dreams of Moira Ananti. I wanted to be there first-hand to assist in her work... and after the world was saved, I wanted to be there still as the work was furthered into true exploration of the stars at last. But without a proper education, all of this was denied to me. A future can end sometimes

without even trying.

What could I do but watch from a distance as the world descended into chaos around me? I thought many times of making the trek to the Nogolon Plateau to volunteer my help. I wanted to be *there* while history was made... not for glory or recognition, but for once to be part of something truly important. A life in stagnation is no life at all. But any attempt to travel that distance through a minefield of violence would have guaranteed me death, so I remained in my own little corner of the world to watch from a distance. What drew me to that little plateau of my own on that last fateful night? What better way to witness history in the making than with your own two eyes, outside and facing the stars. The sequence of events that transpired next were beyond the wildest imaginations of even my imaginative mind. It's almost as if a microcosm of my entire life, past present and future, all occurred in but those few brief hours. Am I a changed person because of it? No one emerges from a traumatic event ever quite the same... but no, traumatic is not necessarily the right word. *You* pick a word to describe how *your* life can be turned so completely upside down in the span of a single night. *You* describe to yourself how *you* would feel when everything you ever believed is turned so completely around that you have no choice but to look at it from an entirely new direction. You put yourself in my shoes... and allow *your* mind to dream.

I am standing now on an alien starship! I have loved and been loved; I have seen anger and been angered. I have seen destruction and been destroyed... and what I choose now to build up in its place is for me and me alone to decide. To take control of your own destiny is perhaps the hardest step you will ever take. And though the rewards may not always be immediately forthcoming, one needs only to have the courage to try. My fear of the dark was the first fear I ever conquered, what will yours be? You need only try.

You must be a hero to yourself before you can ever be a hero to anyone else.

~ ~ ~ ~

Who am I?  
I am all of these people and more.  
Who are you?

~ ~ ~ ~

## *T-minus 01...*

What strikes the heart leaves the brain to languish.

The nukes were getting uncomfortably close now as the *Genesee* landed with a silent puff in the foot-deep dust that covered the vast ancient city. Castillo and Andy had adroitly deposited their guests within the protective Sickbay of the *Enterprise* before making their breakneck descent to the surface. Poor Allex had been petrified to leave his newfound friend Andy, while at the same time being filled with a bubbling excitement to not only visit their starship, but to also be ‘transported’ over in a beam of energy. Andy tried to comfort the young man as best he could, seeing there the profound sadness that filled the boy’s eyes, yet not knowing its cause. Ultimately, with time short, Castillo had been forced to cut off long goodbyes and energize before Allex was entirely prepared for departure. With Onovan and Ann Grey off ship, Doctor Blaine would certainly have his hands full for those first few harrowing moments as the gecko-like creature adjusted to his new surroundings.

But the two lieutenants could not concern themselves with that now. There was still no contact with the Away Team, and the forcefield containing their precious oxygen supply was preventing all attempts at transport. One of them would have to go in on foot. Andy began to perspire and his heartbeat began to palpably thump in his throat as he slowly pulled on the bottom half of his dusty spacesuit. Trying to put a strong face forward for the benefit of his old pal, Andy was in reality scared beyond belief about ever being confined within that suffocating suit again. For his part, Richard Castillo was grinning from ear to ear at the obvious discomfort his cohort was beginning to show about suiting up. Castillo knew that Andy had only just barely flopped into the airlock during his last spacewalk, and it gave him some kind of sick, sadistic pleasure to see the one-quarter Vulcan so physically altered by the prospects of another. Castillo could never how however the core of Andy’s distress. No one could ever know the panic he’d felt as the waters of Ethos came crashing in on him.

With a grunt, Castillo lifted the top half of the suit up over

Andy's head, then helped lock it in. Neither said a word to the other, but Castillo still could not stop grinning. Andy thought long and hard about throwing up on him, but he hadn't eaten in days it seemed like, so he just felt uncomfortably nauseous instead. As an alternative, more for spite than anything else, he sneezed and showered his comrade with that fine spray that is always sure to disgust. Castillo stopped smiling now, wiping his face on his uniform sleeve. Then with a hard thump, he securely lodged Andy's helmet down onto the neckband. A slight twist, and all was locked safe. Andy regretted the sneeze now because Castillo hadn't given him a chance to wipe his own face. There was no doubt a level of tension building between the two long-time friends. They had in fact said very little to each other since their brief communication with Captain Garrett. Andy knew they were in deep shit, and he somewhat resented it now. He sensed that Castillo had somewhat played him in his culpability.

With a profound trepidation that shook his very soul, Andy turned and entered the tiny airlock. He wasn't sure what was worse, the suit, or the cramped space. His own familiar breathing was no more comfort to him now than it had been before... each breath took him one step closer to suffocation. But somehow, he mustered the courage to activate the airlock controls. His friends were out there, trapped, and he was their only hope. Very soon now this entire landscape would be transformed into one big molten mass. His old friend, the green light, began blinking red, faster and faster until it lit solid. He was his own space capsule now, and the only thing separating him from instant death was the thin fabric of the suit, and the clear alumglass of his helmet. In the silence of the vacuum, the exterior hatch yawned open and Andy took his first tentative steps out into the dust. Much like it did before, other than the grayness of it, it furrowed over his feet like fluffy, new fallen snow. Within moments, he'd fallen into step with his old tracks.

Reflexively, Andy checked the gauge on the arm of his suit. The tiny needle was this time pegged in the green, but it still gave him little comfort. He made a pact with himself never to check it again, and instead stared forward to those imposing twelve doors not too far off in the brightening distance. He was fascinated for a moment at how

much brighter it truly was out here, but also had to keep reminding himself that it was only because the Rogue was just that many more hours closer to destruction. Again, his thoughts turned to Pompeii just after the ash had started to fall. There was real fear, he supposed. His mind's eye could still see a panicked populace running ever here and there, searching in vain for safety, only to be buried alive by hot pumice and ash not too unlike what he was wading through now. Perhaps that's why the Kurlans had left in such a hurry? This was a story they would never know.

At last, he arrived at those heavy metal doors, and with a tug, still found them to be locked. "F--k this," he said into his helmet, his voice sounding all echoey and muffled. From a pocket on his right sleeve, he pulled out a phaser, took a step back, and prepared to fire...

"Thy'lek," the young girl said, beaming again from ear to ear, "let's talk next about love." The hologram's greenish ghostly features crunched themselves up into another frown as his overlarge eyes looked down on the beautiful young girl and blinked. The word stirred strange new feelings within him that his ancient circuitry found suddenly intoxicating. He was an instant addict and became immediately enamored with her. Enyo was unlike anyone he had ever known. Unlike the drab and disinteresting Kurlans, she was vivacious and full of life. Her blue skin and twitching antennae dazzled him, left him craving more. Shifting on feet of pure light, he wanted to reach down and touch her skin, feel its softness, experience its warmth. The undeniable importance of *Touch*, and he was only just now beginning to realize that this was beyond what his ancient programming was capable of. The effect on his features became noticeable as he was suddenly filled with a profound sense of... what? Melancholy? Yes, that was it, melancholy. Deep and utter sadness.

Behind the dais, both Marta and Onovan registered a sudden change in readings. It was almost indefinable. Something within the vast datastores was changing, and changing fast; even Dr. Grey noticed it and began instinctively to move over to join her two comrades and the relative thought of safety. There was a spike in power flow, and then a cascade failure began to wash all across the ancient circuits. It

was like a flood, and once started, there was no stopping it. The Hologram's image wavered slightly as the torrent raged within its internal memory. What is the brain without a heart, what is the heart without a brain? The two were separate, yet equal – one in the same, yet distinct – the focus of love, and also its only detriment. The undeniable importance of *Touch*. The Hologram did not have a heart, and now its mind was reeling at the prospects of it. What is love without touch? The Hologram was drowning now in a sea of repression, drowning in a sea of silent non-possession. Love without touch – it was too much to bear.

“*Enyo*,” the Hologram asked with a perfectly placid stare, “*what does it feel like to die?*” Placid as the stare may be, it was becoming increasingly a blank one.

“Thy’lek, what do you mean?” She had no idea the hurricane she had unleashed within the vast memory banks beneath her feet. Love at a distance is love denied. The Hologram continued to stare down at her as always, but something within it had changed.

“*Please don’t leave me, I do not wish to die here all alone...*” Enyo began to sense real fear emanating from the shimmering green apparition. She had no explanation for it, could not know what he knew. Two thousand nukes were just moments from impact. The Rogue was just moments more from ultimate destruction. Andy was in the Grand Rotunda now and in just moments would set them all free. The Hologram sensed all this through his uplink with the *Genesee*, and it left him feeling naked and afraid and all alone in a spiraling darkness devoid of any stars.

“Thy’lek, what’s wrong?” Enyo was becoming scared now, too. In her fear, she looked across the dais to her superior officers – saw the look of death painted all across their stoic features. Their tricorders were showing them what she was only slowly beginning to realize instinctually. The Hologram was dying right before her very eyes. Not however from the age of his hardware, but instead from a broken heart. He had loved her like he had loved nothing else, and now he would lose her. Behind her, just beyond the forcefield, the door to the antechamber vaporized in the silence of the vacuum. Andy walked up to the shimmering energy field just as communications began to

clear.

“No time to lose, Commander,” he said through the now open commlink. The urgency in his voice said it all. Enyo looked up at the wavering hologram with tears streaming down her cheeks. He looked back at her with that same placid stillness.

“I’m sorry, Thy’lek, I’m so, so sorry,” she said to him, but he did not answer. His face merely curled up into a slight smile, and then he was gone. In the end, she hadn’t left him.

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In a forward lounge aboard the *Enterprise*, three gecko-like aliens stared out the vast sweeping viewports at the distant glow of their homeworld. In the foreground, they could just barely make out the pinpoint lights of two thousand nuclear missiles heading seemingly straight for them. To the right, and looming, the Rogue was slowly rotating. They had been told by the young guide that brought them here that the great starship was moving around to the backside to hide from the holocaust that was about to be unleashed on the front. All three of them had known instinctively that this foolhardy plan would not work, and now their fears had been confirmed by this shipload of aliens. All hope was indeed lost. Apparently, the ship was crippled, crippled by Moira’s own beam, and now it was simply struggling to get out of nature’s way like anything else in the universe. They had seemed kind enough, all that they had met so far, and their technology, even crippled, was impressive to say the least... but that was little consolation to any of them on this dark night. They were alone.

Moira supposed she should be grateful. In a less than an hour her health had been restored, the fatal radiation poisoning cured. In fact, she had never felt better. But she was still mad as hell at this shipload of supposedly benevolent creatures that had managed to destroy her life’s work in a matter of mere seconds. In fact, destroy her life altogether. The image of her children once retrieved could not now be erased. If she closed her eyes, she could still crawl inside their makeshift tent, tickle them, and relish in their closeness as they giggled in her ears. Kenna was there too – *oh how she missed him!* Profound

regret began to settle in around her as she thought of all the time lost. *And for what?!* Moira was nearly as mad at herself as she was at these alien invaders. All she had worked so hard for over the past ten years paled in comparison now to all that she had lost. She would trade it all back in a heartbeat just to have those few precious minutes with her husband and kids. How could she just stand here aboard this warm and comfortable ship and watch them vaporize?

Detector Fraca Novachi on the other hand, was a man without a cause. It somewhat irked him that he had been so easily neutralized back aboard that tiny little craft. What place was there here for him in this brave new world when he had been rendered so completely ineffectual by the simple slight-of-hand of their technology? It made him feel useless, archaic. He'd devoted his entire life to the detector force. He knew nothing else! Getting up every morning, putting on that same old disheveled suit, walking those same wet streets to the precinct – that had been his life for over forty years. By the Guardias, he knew nothing else. What the font was he supposed to do now? Retirement was not a word that a man like him used lightly. With a sigh, he stared out the viewport at Directoria, convinced at last that this was indeed *Not* some kind of trick. The world was so large, yet so small when compared to the much larger darkness surrounding it. He'd never in his life left the capital city, never ventured even as far as Quid, which glowed now like the eye of a great dragon. So much of the world to see. And now there was no time. He sighed again.

Alex for his part stood just millimeters from the cool alumglass like a kid at an aquarium, his webbed fingers pressed tight against the glass. The emotions racing through his mind were equally as profound, but they had been tempered by the fact that he was now living a life-long dream. He was in space! And once this sad business was over, this great starship would leap into warp and move on to the next star system like one might stroll down to the local grocery store. He wanted to see it all, experience it all; and much like Dr. Ananti's point source generator, he wanted to study every spec and diagram of this massive vessel from stem to stern. He wanted to know how it all worked, especially the warp drive. *And they said it couldn't be so!* It was exhilarating, and as much as the hurt of the past few hours pressed

against his chest, he truly would not miss their world once it was gone. So much hurt, so many generations of indifference and suffering, so much uncaring for the people and the planet around them. His only regret was that Amira was not here with him, and he stared now at the spot that approximated their plateau. It seemed funny now to think that her body lay there still, wrapped up in his own blanket, and only feet away from the beaten form of Arba. It seemed like a lifetime ago, all of it, including his entire life.

The *Enterprise* was slowly picking up speed, and Directoria was quickly being eclipsed now by the dark form of the Rogue. Covered as it was by gray ash, and lit on this side only by starlight, the three lonely companions could make out very little on the surface. A mountain here, strange shapes that could've once been cities, long lines that were what? ...canals, roads, aqueducts? It struck all three of them almost simultaneously that this had once been a world of life. They could relate to it now, and to all its lost people. What sort of cataclysmic event had erased *them* from time? And what force in the universe could've ever possibly hurled their world halfway across the galaxy? What sick and twisted form of fate had sent their planet here, so many millennia later, to wipe out ten billion innocent lives on an out-of-the-way planet at the edge of nowhere? The fairness of it made them all question the laws of probability and faith. It was the butterfly effect, albeit on a cosmic scale. Directoria Primari today, what world would suffer tomorrow? A flutter of the wings.

Directoria had disappeared completely from view now and the three companions in silence agreed that they'd better start getting used to the idea. Just around the rim of the Rogue, they gained the sense of multiple, high-energy discharges that sent tendrils of plasma snarling far out into the blackness of space. It was altogether beautiful and terrifying. The pyrotechnic display went on for better than five minutes and humbled them all. What if this barrage had been unleashed against the people of Directoria, instead of this dark menace? Each of them had lived under the specter of nuclear war their entire lives – it had been a dark spot on the back of their minds that had become almost abstract in its residency, like water to drink and air to breathe. But to witness it now, even from this obscured vantage

point, left them sick at the thought of ‘what could’ve been’. It was a warning they hoped these peaceful people might spread throughout the galaxy. Behold, the fury of man.

The fury ended, and as expected, the Rogue was still there. The dark side in fact had not been affected at all. With no atmosphere to contain them, the atomic blasts had merely evaporated out into space. The face of the planet had no doubt gone briefly molten, but again, with no atmosphere, this heat too quickly dissipated into the cold recesses of outer space, and the changed face solidified. Now highly radioactive, the Rogue would still strike Directoria just as hard, and just as fast, as it would’ve if they’d never even tried in the first place. It sickened them all to think that Moira’s beam had been the only best solution, and it angered them anew that these upstart aliens had so interfered. Even *if* they truly had been trying to help, they would *never* be forgiven. Ten billion lives might’ve been saved on this dark night – instead, ten billion would be lost. Even Alex in all his excitement was harboring a deep resentment, though he may not even necessarily know it yet. They’d had no right to interfere! It was shameful that they had no directive against this.

“Oh, my Guardias, I can’t watch this,” Moira breathed, turning her back to the viewport and walking away. Even despite her restored health, she felt faint, her slick skin clammy. *My precious babies!* She couldn’t get their faces out of her mind! Alex turned briefly away from the glass and stared at her. She had been his hero, his inspiration – his motivation to keep going these past few years. He’d looked up to her. Now she just looked weak and frail... but he could not know the torment she was in, the absolute anguish. His youth perhaps shielded him from all this, but Fraca Novachi could perhaps sense some of her pain. With age comes a certain wisdom, and in an uncharacteristic move, he too turned away from the glass and walked over to put a great arm around her. She was practically dwarfed by his portly frame, but she still turned and buried her face into his chest. Though strangers, there was comfort in their sameness aboard this unfamiliar ship full of aliens.

Although there was no physical perception of motion aboard this huge vessel, Alex could still sense that they were moving again,

this time forward. As he turned back to the glass, a thin sliver of Directoria reappeared around the rim of the Rogue and he was at once startled at how much closer they were to the planet already! Their speed must be terrific! Directoria was quickly taking on the dimensions of the Rogue itself, which could only mean one thing — they weren't too far off from impact now. Alex felt a sudden pang of melancholy and regret. Though his life had never felt fulfilling, like he had been robbed of all the best parts, his instinctual inner self was still crying out suddenly for the world of his birth. He suddenly didn't want it destroyed after all. He wanted to be back with Amira — he didn't want her just lying there all alone in the dark, uncared for and forgotten and left to disintegrate like a rotten old sack of potatoes. He wanted to see the world, visit its exotic places, tour the SENSES Division Labs, visit the Capital, see Quid in all its former glory. There was so much he hadn't experienced, so much he hadn't seen! He just wanted it all back now, including Amira.

He dropped a clenched fist on the glass, drawing the attention of Novachi and Moira. The two comrades turned and were also startled by the sudden closeness of Directoria; close enough in fact that there was the barest perception of growth in its diameter, moment by sickening moment. Without speaking, all three were at that impenetrable glass now, almost clawing at it to get out. They could almost jump from this height; they were sure of it. Alex would go back to Amira, lay there next to her for these final moments; and like Jetteila Al'Emori, he would join her in death and be frozen in that moment for all the rest of time. Fraca Novachi would leap back to Conflict Square, stand beneath the Zenthi Spire with the rest of his brethren and face death with courage, out in the open, eyes towards the heavens, feeling the last moments of life coursing through his veins. *Alive!* Until the bitter end. And Moira, *by the Guardias*, she would go back to Kenna, to her children, and she would hold on to them so very, very tight, and never let go. *Damn this fontan starship, and all aboard it!*

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Rachel Garrett stood behind that impregnable wooden desktop, fingers steeped, and waited. Its polished surface felt cool to the touch, almost waxy, and it was a feeling that she usually enjoyed. The room was dimly lit, which was the way she usually preferred it. Sometimes the harsh lights on the Bridge hurt her eyes, made her weary, but this room, her Ready Room, was her solace. Despite the never-ending stack of padds, and all the other mundane facets of daily command scattered across the indomitable surface, she came here often to relax, to get away from the noises and the commotions that had governed every single day of her life for the past twenty years. *Twenty years!* Where had *that* time gone? She'd lost track long ago of the number of star systems they'd visited, the hundreds of thousands of lightyears they'd traveled. Many of the faces had faded too. Dozens upon dozens of officers had come and gone; some because they simply couldn't hack it aboard the *Enterprise*, and some because they'd moved on to even bigger and better things.

Her senior staff as it was today was the best she'd ever had. Maybe it was the nostalgia of old age? But they all seemed to fit like the tightly-bound pieces of a finished puzzle. They'd had their rough patches – bad days, bad weeks even – but that could be expected in any aspect of life, especially cooped up for months upon months inside this tiny tin bubble of air, so far from home. So far from home. When does that transition from friendship to family take place? It had happened quite unnoticed by probably all. She hated to dwell on the Battle of Ethos, in fact tried not to think about it at all, but that singular event had been the last binding brick in this great structure... and it had also introduced certain cracks into its foundation. A structure cannot stand without its foundation, and with Captain Garrett as capstone, it was time to make some repairs.

She knew this could wait – should wait – but her fury could not be allayed. Perhaps it was her fault for blunting that razor sharp edge of Prime Directive Law just a little, but what Richard Castillo had done was a capital offense. By rights, he should face a court-martial, be imprisoned – probably for the remaining duration of their voyage, if not longer. He should most definitely lose his commission in Starfleet. His career was technically over... yet something was staying the

captain's hand. The nostalgia of old age? Ultimately, the behavior of the crew came from the top down, through good leadership, so how did this reflect on her? At Khitomer, even Kirk had proved that he was ultimately responsible for the actions of those that served under him. So far from home. How could she put her helmsman in the brig for two and a half years? *No*, she decided, perhaps his punishment should be much worse. She would strike at the heart, and leave the brain to languish.

The chimes to the doors rang out and she inhaled deeply. "Come in," she said after an effectual amount of time. They parted with a quiet whoosh, and the bright light flooded in. Two silhouettes stood in the opening, one behind the other, and they hesitated there, sensing the doom within. The dimmer light of the Ready Room always made it hard to see inside, cultivated a feeling of menace. We are all afraid just a little of those dark corners, those dimly lit holes in the brighter light. Finally, Richard Castillo stepped forward, like a condemned man facing an electric chair, and after a moment, Andy Dardanelle too stepped into the captain's chamber. After quiet steps, they came to a stop before that massive desk and stood at attention; neither daring to look their captain in the eyes. The doors whooshed shut behind them, sealing them in. It was time to settle accounts.

Fingers still steepled, Garrett in truth didn't know what to say. Her anger had somewhat mollified, strangely enough, when they'd entered, and now she was standing there not quite knowing where to begin. She could see Castillo beginning to perspire, beads were forming on his brow, his upper lip glistening. But he dared not move. *Good*. Andy Dardanelle on the other hand, with his quasi-Vulcan features, was visibly trembling. The captain had to hide her usual wry smile at this particular contradiction. She looked down at the desktop, at the clutter, and she wondered again for the hundredth time which was more fearsome to her officers: herself, or that ancient wooden schoolteachers desk? She suspected more of the latter than the former. She thought of her grandfather now, a teacher for nearly seventy-five years... how would *he* handle these two brash and upstart young men?

"You two gentleman have put me in quite a pickle," she said coolly at last.

“Yes, Ma’am,” they replied in unison, still not daring to make eye contact.

“There are choices to be made in life, some meek, and some very profound...”

“Yes, Ma’am...”

“Well, now I too have a choice to make, a very profound one... what to do with the two of you.”

“Captain...” Castillo began, making eye contact for the very first time, only to be silenced by ‘that look’.

“*Mister* Castillo, save it! It’s obvious that *you* were the mastermind behind this witless exploit.” Garrett could feel her temperature rise; the anger was welling again. “But *Lieutenant* Dardanelle is equally capable of making choices... is that not so Lieutenant?!”

“Yes, Ma’am,” – meekly, looking now at the floor.

“I can’t hear you, Lieutenant!” Garrett shouted, startling them both.

“Yes, Ma’am!” he repeated, looking her in the eyes finally with a sadness that nearly broke her heart. The so-called lucky one, the sole survivor. Yes, she would strike him too in the heart, and leave his brain to languish. But she could see within him already that he would ultimately be the better for it in the end. Such fierce courage that he did not even know he possessed yet! She would cultivate this, while Castillo would suffer her malice.

“By rights I should bust both your asses down to junior crewman,” she said with a menacing growl, “and lock you away for the rest of the journey home...”

“Yes, Ma’am,” they both said meekly now, staring down at the floor.

“Your ranks of Lieutenant shall remain provisional for the time being until you can regain my trust... Understood?”

“Yes, Captain,” they both replied clearly, succinctly, standing again at attention.

“That trust will not come easy. I have never in my life been more disappointed in any two people than I am in the both of you right now. *Shame on you!*” she said with a coldness that chilled the room,

made Castillo in particular shiver. But out for blood, now it was time to strike at the heart – and deep she must pierce, for a lesson must be learned.

“From this time forward,” the Captain continued, “you two are *no longer friends*. You will work opposite shifts on the Bridge. In your off-duty time, you will occupy opposite corners of the ship. You will have absolutely no communication with each other whatsoever from this time forward, not even so much as a hello, do I make myself clear?” They both nodded. “If there is any violation of this decree in even the slightest degree, you will both serve a mandatory sentence of one month in the Brig. Any further offense shall earn you two months, and so on.” She threw up a hand. “You no longer exist to each other, *period*.”

The final stroke, and they wilted.

“Now get the *f--k* outta my sight... remain on the Bridge until this whole mess is over (another thrown up hand), then say your goodbyes.” She glared at them and they jumped. Without a word, they turned and fled leaving her standing all alone and exhausted. She looked at the chrono in the replicator terminal and sighed. It was nearly time. Ten billion people were about to be erased from history, and they could do naught but watch. In the end, however, she must protect her own. They were hers and hers alone to care for and watch over. With a melancholy sigh, she reached up and tapped her comm badge.

“Captain Garrett to Commander Stadi...”

“*Stadi here, Captain*,” her first officer replied with a somewhat vacant, distant sound to his voice, like he wasn’t really there. She decided to ignore it.

“Make sure Onovan gets a copy of our recent communiqué from Admiral Stillwell.” Ann Grey’s suffering would be two-fold on this dark, cold night, as would Castillo’s and Andy’s. The captain felt like the harbinger of death as she plopped down at last into her soft chair. She didn’t even notice Stadi’s reply. What a bone-weary journey this had been.

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“Yes, Captain,” Stadi croaked into the commlink. He stood now in the secluded VIP quarters he shared with Enyo and waited. He knew this could wait – should wait – but needs must... and they must now say their goodbyes. Their suffering would be two-fold on this dark, cold night, and Stadi’s heart sang a silent lament for love lost. As much as he thought about Enyo, he was also thinking of Zora McKnight. She had been his one true love in all the universe – though he was never quite certain that she had felt as strongly for him as he had for her. Perhaps that’s why it had been so much easier for her to say goodbye all those many years ago. He feared now for Enyo. He was ashamed to admit that this time the goodbyes would be easier for him. But then, there had been many times over the past two years that he’d underestimated Enyo’s strength of character. Perhaps she would cope even better than he thought. The beauty of youth. Love is so fleeting, and comes again so easily when you’re young. It would likely be a long, long time before Stadi ever found love again.

He thought back now to that night in the arboretum when they’d first kissed. It had been on a bench under a tall Andorian Soliel tree. Its large, hand-like leaves cradled delicate blossoms in a dizzying array of purple and blue patchwork and filled the air with an intensely sweet, but almost pungent smelling fragrance. It caused his nose to involuntarily scrunch up and twitch, but Enyo had reveled in it, relishing in the memories of home. An intense combination of sights and smells awoke both their senses as they inhaled deeply and gazed at a shimmering lagoon in the distance. The environmental controls of the large chamber had been programmed to simulate the spring season so commonly shared by so many Federation worlds. The trees and shrubs transplanted from these worlds were now abloom in every conceivable color of the spectrum. They all swayed placidly in the coolness of a simulated breeze. The ‘sky’ was a blaze of orange as a simulated night approached.

They had been talking and laughing for better than an hour, but now they just sat there and enjoyed the quiet, enjoyed the closeness of their togetherness. Neither one of them had expected to find so much in common, so much to talk about, so much happiness. Quite unintentionally, Spencer had leaned back and placed an arm on the

bench behind her, and within but a heart's breath, Enyo had slowly leaned in and molded into his chest. It had been such a perfectly natural fit, like the final two pieces of a puzzle finally falling into place. They sat there like this for many long minutes before Enyo suddenly sat forward, turned, and kissed him, her hands pressed tight up against his body like she was pushing him away at the same time. After this brief and spontaneous commingling of spirit, she backed away with a smile, blue antennae twitching, and fell back into the comfort of his embrace while letting out a long, contented sigh. Nothing was said for many long moments after that.

The mind of Spencer Stadi was a whirlwind. Not only was he her senior officer, but she was also twenty years his junior. Everything about this was wrong, but something inside of him clicked. They'd fallen in love, quite without realizing it, and there was no going back now. To deny it would have been a crime against the passion of the soul. To fight against it would be a strike to the heart and would leave the mind to languish in the *what ifs*. And what had started out as so simple, so precious, had grown into a complicated web of deception that could never have lasted forever. They'd been found out, and now it had lost its luster like some tarnished old bell found deep in the bottom of the ocean. What was once so beautiful and clean and innocent had been sullied by the hard realities of life. People tend to shatter what they simply do not understand, and they *had* been shattered.

Enyo entered their private quarters now with all the beauty and innocence of her youth. She let the doors close behind her before she spoke; her voice soft like breeze through shimmering trees. "Spencer, what is it? We shouldn't be here right now..." Time froze for a moment as he stared at her.

Look down, blink and sigh, they were consumed again by the passage of time. Alas, the simple truth yet remained, *I can never be hers, nor she mine*. He eyed her speculatively for a moment, then said softly, simply: "The Captain knows."

"I see," looking down with a blink and a sigh. Sometimes words can be clutter where silence has lease and quiet contemplation gives pause. Much like that blissful evening in the arboretum, they

stood there now in a silence that lasted a very long time. Only this was no longer bliss. Trauma doesn't just have to happen to the body. *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... the humans sure did love their quotes. Their hearts had been dealt a death blow, and now there was nothing left to do but recover. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her and Enyo wept into that comforting embrace. But consistent with her character, there were no sobs, no wails, just a soft and tender weeping, and Spencer Stadi could sense intuitively that her tears were as much for him as they were for herself. His memories flashed back to Zora, to Ethos, to love lost and found and lost again. And now their own love was a song whose melody had gone, its simple caress now coarse with regrets.

After several long moments like this, he finally released her and dried her tears with the soft part of his index finger. "Okay?" he said softly as she sniffled.

"Yes, I'll be okay, you know that," Enyo giggled, and it made him smile. She thought briefly of the hologram, and her antennae wilted slightly.

"Me too," he lied, then wrapped her up in one more tight hug. And then they both released the other at the same time, and it was over. Just like that. Enyo walked quietly into the bathroom to freshen up, while Stadi crossed over to that familiar viewport next to the bed they had shared for so long. Less than sixteen hours ago they had made love with a passion that in retrospect perhaps was an indication of what was to come. Sometimes the mind can know intuitively what the heart is unwilling to admit. One only needs to have the courage to listen. He stared again out that viewport into the black darkness of outer space. Sometimes he saw the stars, sometimes he saw only the space in between, depending on his mood. Sometimes the truths of his life left him staring at that infinite blackness with a melancholy all its own. He had been in Starfleet nearly thirty years now, first officer of this ship for almost twenty of those. He knew nothing else, and often wondered if a career in stagnation was truly a career at all. But he was slowly realizing he truly did love it here.

Their burgeoning love affair over the past two years had made him feel so alive again but had also filled him with such remorse. Flashbacks of his beloved Zora still flooded his consciousness – her dark skin and golden eyes. The way she smelled. The sound of her thoughts in his mind. The profound importance of *Touch*. Life is full of so many profound choices that we all give so little thought to at the time, yet they still affect us for many years to come. He had denied love since then, until now, and as he stood there staring out at the stars, he decided that this time he would not regret a gods damn thing. He loved Enyo, and he always would, and as she emerged from the bathroom he looked again into her soft sweet eyes. He saw there such hope, such childish optimism. He admired her for this above all else. His telepathic mind reached out now and grabbed ahold of that hope and held it close to his heart. That would be their bond, now and forever, and come whatever may, Spencer Stadi would never again let melancholy cloud his soul.

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Some time later, Commander Spencer Stadi and Ensign Enyo entered the Bridge together, without shame, and all of their gathered colleagues could see that the universe had made its amends. All would be right again, given enough time. Everyone was just where they should be now and it soothed Stadi's thoughts to see them all gathered together as one. *Family*. Captain Garrett sat in her command chair and glanced at him briefly. His telepathic paracortex reached into her mind and felt what she was feeling, and was not at all surprised to know that it was exactly what he was feeling too. Their senior staff as it was today was the best they'd ever had. Maybe it was indeed just the nostalgia of old age, but this core group all seemed to fit together like the tightly-bound pieces of a finished puzzle. Marta Batanides sat at her tactical console with all the confidence of her position. Richard Castillo sat next to her, visibly shaken – but the commander knew intuitively that he would rebound from his own melancholy a much better man. What he sometimes lacked in brains, Castillo more than made up for with heart. *The road to hell is paved with good*

*intentions*... another human quote, and Stadi smirked. They sure did love their quotes.

Enyo moved up onto the upper level and sat down next to Andy at one of the aft science stations. A little less shaken perhaps because of his one-quarter Vulcan heritage, Andy had a strange new aura of peace about him that Stadi found fascinating. We all cope, each in our own way. Near to those two fresh-faced young officers stood Lt. Cmdr Skyl, ever stoic, ever vigilant. He was still monitoring the repairs his ever-vigilant engineering teams were making to the rest of the ship far below decks. The Vulcan chief would've preferred to remain in Engineering of course, but Garrett had insisted. It seemed only fitting that they should all be together for these final moments before *Impact*. It would be a comfort somehow, to be together, and Stadi agreed with her wisdom as always. Onovan for his part stood next to Ann Grey and Stadi could sense that the counselor had given the good doctor her horrific news. What he sensed from the young woman was as compelling and peculiar as ever. Her mind had always proven to be such a mystery to him, right from day one.

There were those usual feelings of anger and denial welling up within her, naturally, plus all the other facets of such deep and traumatic grief... but there was always that something more with Ann Grey that Spencer Stadi could never quite put his finger on. That dark spot in every human mind was almost a stain in hers. It bled out black little tendrils into the rest of her personality and left everything else just slightly askew. He sensed that the doctor's life had been a whirlwind, that her mind was always locked in a constant battle for control. The word *dangerous* flashed briefly through his consciousness, but he passed this off as folly. The doctor was as timid as a church mouse, even if she was just a little bit strange. This left only Cicely, and the commander moved now to cross the Bridge and stand behind her as he so often did. Many humans would feel uncomfortable with someone always 'standing over their shoulder', but Stadi and the young Orion girl had sort of become a team over the years. They often scanned her Ops panel in unison and complimented each other in so doing. There was no incompetence or condescension in this in any way. It was all just part of the carefully oiled mechanism

that Rachel Garrett had built over twenty years.

What Cicely's Ops panel was showing was how very close they now were – not to the Rogue, or to Directoria – but to the point of *Impact* itself. In that quiet lounge many decks below, their three passengers were torn between the fascination of seeing their homeworld from orbit for the very first time, and the horror of knowing that it would soon be destroyed in just but a few more moments. The great starship had slowly moved off to a safe distance, and the three aliens were afforded a much better view... though not one of them was sure just how much they should appreciate this. They and they alone would survive, they would live, while ten billion others of their race would die in the most frightening way imaginable. The very soil beneath their feet would vaporize, and the farther away from impact they were, the longer it would take. Most frightening perhaps were all those souls on the dayside of the planet. There would be no indication of the impact until the very ground beneath their feet liquefied and incinerated them into a cloud of interstellar dust and vapor.

Doctor Moira Ananti was trembling almost uncontrollably now, even despite Fraca Novachi's comforting arm around her. Hard as she may try, she could not get the images of her children's faces out of her mind. She pictured their house burning now as the heat of impact instantly boiled the atmosphere off the planet. Would they feel any pain? How truly instantaneous is an instant death? Was there a chance even to be scared before they were atomized by the shear energy of the collision? She wished now that she could have just thirty seconds to call Kenna, tell him she loved him – had loved him always from the very first time she'd laid eyes on him. She'd ask about their last night, what had they done for fun? Had they built a fort, played games and laughed, filled up on snacks until they'd simply fallen asleep from exhaustion? Or had he simply put them to bed early, promising them a warm and sunny tomorrow that would never come. Everyone wishes to go in their sleep, even the soft and innocent minds of children. Just a phone call, just thirty seconds! *Please!*

Fraca held her tighter as Moira visibly twitched and continued to tremble within his comforting embrace. The detector did not know

for certain why she was so visibly moved... guilt perhaps. But it was hardly her that should feel guilty. These aliens had done nothing less than a criminal act in his mind, and they should be punished for it... but by whom and what form are such superior beings punished? It had often been the case for generations on Directoria that the very powerful preyed on the very meek and powerless. Novachi's own parents had been gunned down in the street over nothing more than the few cogents in his father's pocket. And why? Because his father had been a kind and gentle soul that would not have resorted to violence even when threatened. So, the powerful had taken from him what they wanted, and left him to bleed out in the street next to the lifeless form of his wife. Fraca had joined the detector force just to combat such ills in their society, so how now would he ever, could he ever, combat these aliens that were little more than petty thugs in his mind? He felt so helpless, so useless, so old. And oh, so very, very *angry*.

Hands and face still pressed to the cool glass, Alex's focus had not wavered from the perceived location of his tiny plateau for quite some time now. As the Rogue moved ever closer, it became clearer and clearer to him that the point of impact would occur very near to where he had been sitting just a few short hours ago. It seemed to him that everything important in his entire life had happened right there on that plateau in but the span of this one single night. He'd made that transition to manhood in every conceivable way possible, and now as a man he was finding such adult feelings just a little bit too hard to take. He'd made love and murdered in the span of a few hours. He'd watched a former friend snap the neck of the woman he'd loved, and so he'd killed him for it. It seemed so simple now, so matter of fact, and this made Alex somewhat sick to his stomach. His lifelong dream had been to work with science, maybe even go into space someday, and now that he was here, all he could feel was the emptiness that surrounded him. For as far as the eye could see was the nothingness of black space. The only safe haven in all this never-ending dark was Directoria itself... and soon it would be gone. *Amira!* He wanted to scream out her name.

On the Bridge, Captain Garrett twitched. Her heightened psi-awareness was as energized as the rest of the telepathic minds aboard

her ship. Over half the crew was from Betazed, and the other half was being flooded now by wave after wave of psychokinetic energy. The blood of billions coursed through the veins of the 843 wayward souls aboard the *Enterprise*. How could one not feel such anguish and absolute loss of life? Every bird and tree, every creature under the sea, every mind living... “everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of... The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every ‘superstar’, every ‘supreme leader’, every saint and sinner in the history of [their] species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam...”<sup>5</sup> And now all of it was about to be snuffed out like a candle in the wind.

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In the end, all of the clocks on Directoria had been wrong - the impact came a minute early at exactly *T-minus 00:00:01:12 and 35 microseconds...* the Golden Ratio. Not a single scientist on the planet had anticipated the gravitational tug their own homeworld would give to the Rogue, drawing the two star-crossed lovers together at last in a sharp pirouette of death.

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Captain Garrett sat in her command chair, elbows on knees, chin on clenched fists, and watched the impact with as much awe as she did dismay. No one in recorded history had ever witnessed such an event. Enraptured, it was one of those things that people want to look

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<sup>5</sup> Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994)

away from, but can't, and the senior staff all paused in what they were doing now to face the devil's eyes. The point of impact occurred exactly where Alex thought it might. Amira and Arba's bodies were incinerated almost instantly by an atomic blast of atmosphere just milliseconds before the Rogue itself burrowed deep into the heart of his plateau. Alex stood in stoic silence against the glass as Moira wailed into Fraca's chest, pounding on his portly frame with a single clenched fist. Time slowed down, the annihilation of the two massive worlds occurred now frame by sickening frame. A wave of superheated plasma encircled the globe in slow motion, burning off the atmosphere, boiling away the seas. Much denser, the Rogue resisted the heat for a moment, before it too finally began to glow in shades of orange and red. The mantles of both the worlds fractured, then bulged upwards into space in a tsunami of molten lava akin to dropping a ball into the mirror image of a puddle. Ten billion people screamed into space at once, and were silenced forever.

Tear after tear raced down the cheeks of Captain Rachel Cecilia Garrett. If her ship had not interfered, this, all of this, might have been prevented. The Prime Directive was a burning match now that struck at the tinder of her mind, burning her heart, sapping her of her courage. She could no longer watch, so she closed her eyes... but the image still remained, searing itself into her conscious memory like a superheated brand. The two planets below her ship burned themselves out like two embers falling into a dark pond, leaving nothing in their wake save a cloud of vapor and dust. It was over, and the minds of 843 people quaked in the aftermath. Moira collapsed into unconsciousness as Fraca guided her gently to the floor. He stood back up now and joined Alex at the window. Placing a thick hand on the boy's shoulder, he too wept in spite of himself as Alex stood resolute.

"Where will we go now, Sir?" Alex said finally, staring out at the black emptiness.

"I don't know son, I don't know..." Family was an alien concept to Fraca – his work had been his family, and now his work was over. The three of them in this room were all that they each had left though, and by the Guardias, Fraca would hold on to that with all his might. They would be his family now. No longer would loneliness

shadow his languid soul.

## *T-plus 01...*

They had danced on that razor sharp edge of Prime Directive Law.

“I’m picking up a signal Captain...” Cicely reported suddenly, startling everyone from an almost perpetual silence. All on the Bridge refocused their intensity on her now.

“What... from where?” Garrett said incredulously, slowly rising. She wiped her face clean with the palms of both hands and looked at Stadi. The commander stared back with a sadness all his own that would not yet be swayed by anything so frivolous as hope.

“I’m not sure yet, Ma’am,” she replied, still frowning. “Interference is still high... but it’s broadband, lower frequency... radio I think.” Garrett spun on her heels and looked again out the viewscreen at the rapidly dissipating dust and vapor. Survivors? Absolutely *not* possible. All life on Directoria had been extinguished even before the planet broke up. The superheated wave of plasma had enveloped the world in seconds. The seas had boiled, the atmosphere had incinerated – she closed her eyes and could see it still, burned into her very consciousness like staring too long at the sun. She reopened her eyes to confirm that what she’d seen had actually happened. Only black and empty space answered her back.

“Dammit,” she said with rising anger, “will somebody else please confirm that?” Frustrated with the situation more than with her staff, she had not intended to be so blunt. Even so, though stunned for a moment, Marta at once jumped up and darted forward to the Auxiliary Control Pedestal. Her slim fingers raced across its polished surface, searching in vain for the answers that her captain so desperately sought. Finally, she spoke, hesitantly.

“It looks like a metallic object, Captain, approximately one hundred meters in length... distance, eight thousand kilometers...” Marta panned the image on the viewscreen over to the appropriate area and all on the Bridge squinted into the abyss. They could see nothing at all until she enlarged the image. A cylindrical tube now spun slowly before them in the darkness, its vast array of solar panels tattered and

torn and drifting mostly free.

“Signal confirmed, Captain,” Cicely stated confidently, “it’s a distress call from that space station.” Her green face broke into a bright smile as almond eyes sparkled.

“Why I’ll be God Damned,” Garrett harrumphed, hands on hips, shaking her head at the chances of it all. In front of her, Richard Castillo was also smiling, albeit inwardly... his sacrifice to save those three had not been in vain after all. They would now be joined by more of their kin. It was a small vindication perhaps for the selling of his soul to the devil.

“How many?” Stadi asked with a fascination that mirrored his captain’s own.

“Five individuals of mixed gender,” Cicely answered, still beaming.

“Commander Skyl,” Garrett threw over her left shoulder towards her chief engineer, “transporters?” The now less than stoic Vulcan consulted his repair readouts, then reported to his captain in a voice that bordered on the narrowest margins of pride and enthusiasm.

“Coming online now, Captain.”

“Well then, by all means Mister Castillo, let’s go get them!” The excitement in her voice was contagious as the great ship began to move. Sadness for a time had been somewhat mollified. Their focus instead lay ahead on life, on the unwavering prospects of hope.

“Counselor,” the Captain continued, “gather up our three guests and escort them to the transporter room. I believe we have some people they’d like to meet.” Even as she grinned, Onovan merely let out a long melancholy sigh. His job in this was only just beginning.

As Skyl returned his attention to his repair readouts, Ensign Enyo couldn’t help but notice a peculiar program he was running. There was something altogether familiar about it, like it was something she had seen somewhere before. Puzzled, she studied it for many long moments, not necessarily afraid to ask, but hesitant for reasons she wasn’t even sure of yet. Her heart was broken, though she was trying very hard not to show it (especially to Stadi); pretending to fixate on something other than her hurt kept her weary mind focused

and alert. She knew not how much longer she would be forced to stay here on the Bridge, but deep down all she wanted to do was go back to her quarters and crawl under her bed. Other than that brief twenty-minute nap after the flush of lovemaking, she had not slept in almost twenty-four hours. Mentally and physically exhausted, the young girl didn't even think she had the strength to cry. She just wanted to be alone in the dark and the silence.

"Skyl," she said at last, apathetic to rank, "what's that program you're running?" Standing, the Vulcan looked down on her, studied her cool blue features. Gained a sense of her mental state, the anguish she felt. His mind-meld with her back at Ethos had formed a bond that had never really gone away. His heart went out to her now on multiple levels.

"It is a modified copy of the holographic matrix you studied down on the surface," he answered her finally, voice neutral, a century of training masking all perilous emotion.

"Thy'lek!" she exclaimed, recognizing the program at once, causing Skyl to raise a single upswept eyebrow at her. "He still lives," Enyo mused with a softness that somewhat mollified his concerns for her wellbeing. "Thank you, Skyl, for saving a small piece of him." She looked up at him and smiled, her eyes glistening. Not all was lost after all. More hope.

"Indeed, Ensign," was the only reply Skyl could make, content to be utterly confused.

Near to them, Andy Dardanelle was lost in his own little world. A little less shaken perhaps because of his one-quarter Vulcan heritage, Andy had a strange new aura of peace about him that even he found fascinating. We all cope, each in our own way. His friendship with Richard Castillo had always held him on that razor-sharp edge of feeling just a wee bit uncomfortable. Somehow, he'd always fueled an almost bizarre streak of misbehavior in his old pal, mischief that he didn't always necessarily want to go along with but felt he must. He'd never quite figured out what the driving force was behind Castillo's rebellious side, but a small part of him was glad now that Garrett had finally ordered an end to it. Something in his mind had been set slightly

askance two and a half years ago when he'd nearly drowned aboard the sunken *Ambassador*, and that had perhaps somewhat guided his misdeeds. But his near suffocation down on the Rogue had reignited those feelings of panic that he'd never truly mastered. Though he'd never admit it to anyone else, especially Onovan, Andy's brief mind-meld with Skyl was the only thing holding him together most days. He had decided in just the past few hours to cultivate that, if for no other reason than to save his sanity.

"Commander Skyl," he said thoughtfully over his left shoulder, "might I have a word with you, sir?" Still standing, the chief engineer looked down on the sandy-haired young man, studied his neo-Vulcan features, the slight rise to the ears – gained a sense of his mental state, the anguish he felt. His mind-meld with Andy back at Ethos had formed a bond that had never really gone away. As with Enyo, his heart went out now to Andy as well.

"By all means, Lieutenant," Skyl answered him finally, his voice neutral, a century of training still masking all perilous hints of wonton emotion. He must remain vigilant.

"I need to find an inner peace, sir," Andy sighed. "I was hoping you might work with me on mastering some of the finer points of the *Kolinahr*?" Skyl could tell that Andy's human side was fighting against a profound embarrassment, almost as if ashamed that his one-quarter Vulcan side needed a little help. The *Kolinahr* was a strict mental discipline designed to purge all emotion. Skyl was thoughtful for a moment – perhaps he himself could use a little refresher course. Ethos... and now Directoria... had taxed even his stoic mind. Vigilance was waning. He noticed Ann Grey staring at him and his heart fluttered.

"That would be agreeable, Lieutenant," and just like that, Andy had made a new pal.

Studying them both from a distance, Doctor Ann Grey had made a choice. Andy Dardanelle was no doubt the better match for her, but rarely do we see the merits of such things at the times when we need to most. It was decided – she would cultivate her love interest in Skyl – who knows, maybe someday it would pay off. Maybe she too

could finally find peace. With an awkward glance, she tucked an unruly strand of hair behind her ear.

At the high arc of a great parabola, their course had at last been set for home. They still had a long way to go though... but then again, perhaps some adventures were never meant to end.

*The End.*

*Author's note to follow...*

## Author's note:

When I was first developing the concept of a dark body barreling towards a planet at breakneck speed, I knew it would have to be moving at a pretty good clip to cover the vast distances of outer space in a meaningful amount of time. I ultimately decided on the velocity of 58,000,000 miles per hour purely from a literary standpoint; this would allow for a rogue planet to descend into the heart of an average solar system in 16 hours' time. Admittedly, I really didn't give much thought beyond that to the absolutely colossal Point of Impact itself until I was making my final proof of this story...

The mean diameter of the planet Earth is 7,918 miles. At a speed of 58 million miles per hour, a rogue planetoid would cover this distance in 0.49 seconds... in other words, it would pass completely *through* the Earth in *one-half a second!* Quite honestly, I don't know if the human mind can truly wrap its consciousness around not only the speed, but the absolute energy of an impact of this scale. Without a doubt, the Earth and any comparable sized black body would be vaporized in the blink of an eye. A sobering thought when one reviews Carl Sagan's immortal quote.

A few reference points for further consideration... the International Space Station orbits the Earth at 17,000 miles per hour. Earth's fastest space probe, Voyager 1, is currently plowing into the barest fringes of deep space at 38,000 miles per hour. The planet Earth orbits the Sun at 66,600 miles per hour, and the Sun is orbiting the Milky Way Galaxy at 514,000 miles per hour. However, even at the incredible speed of 58 million miles per hour, the Rogue would still only be traveling at 9% of the speed of light and in the span of 12,000 years (*the destruction of the Kurlan civilization*) it would have only travelled 2.8 light-years... this sadly is where the tenets of science fiction fall apart. The Sun's nearest neighbor, Proxima Centauri, is 4.26 light-years away. Nevertheless, this still gives us an important scale of the immense size of the universe... we truly are but "a mote of dust."

On a more personal level, an incoming rogue the size of Earth moving at 58 million miles per hour would only become a clearly discernable disk at about one minute before impact; it would **visibly**

swell in diameter with each passing moment after that, and would be the size of the full moon at about 25 seconds out. From that point forward, it would grow exponentially in size at a truly alarming rate, blotting out the entire night sky, second by crushing second, until it simply *loomed* overhead. It would strike the upper atmosphere a mere 6 milliseconds before impacting the surface with an energy incomprehensible to human reasoning. Despite any allusions of grandeur in my novel, the people of the far side would meet their fates at almost the same instant as their dark side companions, vaporizing together in that same awful half-second long before any plasma wave of atmosphere could envelope the globe. It is doubtful even that an orbiting space station could survive.

-WM-