



## Mission Four: "Requiem"

*Good night, Meru*

Torpedo Platform 12, Deep Space Nine

1050 hours, MD01

**Authors: Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Admiral James Washington (played by Alenis Meru)**

Tim was the first to arrive.

The journey back from Gamia III was a somber one, and no one felt it more than Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse. He had spent much of the journey alone in his office -- the executive officer's office, as it didn't feel right to move into the captain's office with her body barely even cold - leaving as much bridge duty as he could to his senior officers while he dealt privately with his emotions. No matter how hard Ellen or anyone else tried, he was inconsolable.

As Starfleet officers, both he and Alenis were well aware that they could be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice. It was something that they agreed to when they chose this way of life, and something which was never too far from the back of their minds. Still, it was a shock to see Alenis' casket, draped with both the blue flag of the Federation and the brown flag of Bajor, when she was so alive and vibrant only a few days ago.

He wanted a command of his own someday, but not like this. Having it thrust upon him in an acting capacity after the death of his friend. "Meru," he said, placing his hand on her casket, his eyes welling up with tears. "I'm so sorry, Meru."

In truth, he didn't know quite what he was sorry for. For her loss, or for his inability to honor her final request and kill her. He had replayed her last moments in his head over and over, wondering if he could have done anything differently to save her. Of course, there was nothing to be done, but it should have been him that fired the fatal shot, not Tyrlai. If he couldn't follow Meru's last order, maybe he didn't have what it takes to be a Starfleet captain.

About to break down, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning, he came face to face with Admiral Washington, one of the many people he had been avoiding since they had docked. "Admiral..." he managed to stammer.

"Timothy," replied Washington, deliberately using his first name. As a Starfleet Admiral, he made a point of rarely if ever addressing his junior officers by their first names, but today was an exception. "I read your preliminary report. There was nothing that could have been done."

"I shouldn't have let her go," he replied, choking back tears. If only he had objected in stronger terms to her leading the away team herself, if only he had gone down in her place...

"Tim, there are certain people out there who once they get an idea in their head, there is no stopping them. Meru was one of them. There was nothing you could have done differently." His usually stern voice was gentler than usual as he tried to comfort the junior officer. "This was a sacrifice that she was prepared to make, for Starfleet and for Bajor."

"I know. It's just never hit so close to home before," replied Tim. "Two funerals in two weeks... does it ever get any easier?"

"No, it doesn't," said the Admiral in a stern voice. "And if it ever does, it's time to turn in your badge and find a new line of work, because we can't have captains in the fleet who don't properly appreciate the lives of their crew." He took a deep breath. "I fought in the Dominion War. Those were dark days for the fleet. We lost hundreds, if not thousands, of fine young men a week. Countless people lost friends and family to the Jem'Hadar and the Breen." Washington paused and swallowed, a lump appearing in his throat. "My wife was at Chin'toka."

"I'm sorry..." stammered Tim. The second battle of Chin'toka was one of the darkest days in the history of the fleet. Worse than New Algiers, worse than the Battle of Betazed, even worse than Wolf 359. A massive Federation fleet was utterly annihilated by the Breen, and 311 out of 312 vessels were lost.

"She was a wonderful woman, and for years I struggled with losing her. But she gave me two sons and a beautiful daughter, and after a time I came to realize I was blessed to have her for as long as I did. And that she would have wanted me to focus on raising Fred, Jackson and Ellen and moving on with my life instead of wallowing in my own sadness. And I'm sure Meru would have wanted you to move forward as well." Washington surreptitiously wiped a tear from his eye, trying to avoid crying in front of a junior officer, and tugged on his tunic, straightening out his dress uniform. "Well then," he added, changing the subject, "I suppose I shall see you tomorrow for the review board."

"The review board?" asked Tim, raising an eyebrow. He was sure he had read it on his subspace messages somewhere, but everything in the past few days was a big jumble to him.

"Yes, I send you a message about it," replied Washington. "It's standard procedure, whenever a captain is killed in the line of duty, for her death to be reviewed by the admiralty. In light of your report, I've expanded the review board to a triumvirate of admirals, to examine the conduct of this entire mission, starting from when you left port."

Tim's eyes narrowed in anger. How dare he question his conduct or that of his crew.  
"Admiral, I..."

"Don't worry," replied Washington, holding up a hand. "It's just a few questions, I'm sure you'll conduct yourself well." Tugging his uniform again, he looked around the torpedo bay-cum-funeral parlour. The crew of the Portland had begun to file in. "I best take my seat, Commander. You just get ready for your speech."

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*Good night, Meru, part II*

Torpedo Platform 12, Deep Space Nine

1050 hours, MD01

**Authors:** Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, Ensign Gregory Rathcliffe (played by Eilis Ross), Lt. (JG) Delainey Carlisle, Lt. (JG) Luka Mahone, Adm. Washington (played by Alenis Meru)

Jason and Jena walked into the makeshift funeral parlour. Jason was dressed in his dress uniform, which was immaculate, as was his hair. Out of respect for the Captain and her heredity, Jena wore a Bajoran style funeral robe and her mother's earring.

Jason's expression was stoic, while Jena's sorrow appeared on her features.

Despite Jason's stoic expression, inside the Chief Science Officer was a maelstrom of sorrow, guilt and anger. The father and daughter took their seats and waited for the ceremony to begin.

Sera walked through the door into the room. In her previous role, she was sure she had done some kind of maintenance or another in this room a number of times. She wore her dress white dress uniform, her hair was pulled back in a ceremonial Bajoran style as she wore a traditional Bajoran earring that she borrowed from one of the Bajoran crewmen aboard. Sera had spent a lot of time, much to the annoyance of her roommate Nikki, making sure that she looked perfect for the funeral. She had been on the surface when everything had happened.

Sera managed to keep herself from crying by not really talking to anyone. The new pip on her collar felt as though it was a stone weighing her down, as she still doubted that she deserved the promotion. As she slid down the row of chairs, she laid a hand on both Jason and Jena in a reassuring gesture. She took her seat beside the other two as quietly as she could, trying not to look at the torpedo tube that now serve as the final resting place of her very first Captain.

Nikki debated whether to go to the funeral or not. She didn't really know the captain, and never got to meet her. But seeing how distraught Nikki was as she was changing and getting ready sealed the deal for her. She would go there, if only to support her friend and give her a shoulder to cry on. As soon as Sera left, she quickly changed into her dress uniform, smoothing out the wrinkles and removing any errant pieces of lint as best she could, and quickly ran onto the station and into the torpedo bay where the funeral was being held.

"Sera!" she called out, instantly identifying her friend and roommate's hair. As soon as she blurted out the word though, she covered her mouth in embarrassment. Way to go, Nikki. Embarrassing yourself at the Captain's funeral? What are you thinking?. Quickly, she darted over to the side of her friend, trying to avoid the stares on the way. "Is this seat taken?" she whispered. "You looked like you might need a shoulder to cry on."

Leave it to Nikki to come in at the right time, Sera had needed a bit of a laugh. She didn't vocalize the laugh, though a small smile crossed her face for the first time in a few days. Sera nodded at Nikki as she picked up the PADD containing the funeral program from the seat beside her. "Thanks Nikki," replied Sera.

Gregory moved through the door as his dress uniform pulled at his body. The last time he had had to wear this uniform in this setting had been for....Shaking his head to knock away the memories, he forbid himself from going back there. The journey with the prophets had been enough to reopen old exposed wounds, today wasn't the day to revisit them more.

Looking around, he didn't recognize anybody, the only reason he had come was because he had been then for the end and he felt it was his duty to honour the woman he had seen die. News had reached him that his old boss had resigned from the ship; for what reason no one knew but everyone knew that the same thought had crossed their own minds after all that had happened. Keeping himself to the back of the room, he leaned a shoulder against the wall as he waited for the service to begin.

Luka had sat himself silently toward the back of the room, clothed in a freshly replicated dress uniform. Though he knew little about the Captain, it didn't seem appropriate of him to not attend. She had to have been quite a woman, especially with the number of people currently gathered around them. <i>Definitely someone amazing to have served under.</i> he thought as he observed the other members of the crew. He could only imagine the grief they were going through.

Delainey entered and tried to push away her own mixture of emotions, at least for the duration of the ceremony. Her dress whites felt more uncomfortable than normal, but Carlisle had to acknowledge her mood had something to do with that. The whole situation was surreal. The counselor had never actually met the real Alenis Meru, and yet her encounter with the holographic version of her made Delainey acutely aware of the woman they'd lost all the same. In addition, as cliché as it sounded, Carlisle was still reeling from the suddenness of it all. One moment, her captain was alive and just out of reach for the moment, and the next, she was never going to meet her.

The counselor knew if she was feeling this way, the crew, and especially those on the fateful away team, had to be feeling a hundred times worse. Scanning the room, she was searching for anyone who seemed particularly upset or distressed at the moment. She knew the full weight of the crew's grief would hit them later, and she'd arranged appointments with the away team and cleared her schedule accordingly, but that didn't mean she could rest easy here or consider her own grief, however unusual it might have been.

At the podium in front of the torpedo, Tim looked over the gathered crowd. It was larger than he expected, with the crew of the Portland, some other Starfleet officers who he didn't recognize, and a number of Bajoran civilians. Clearly, the death of Meru on that worthless rock touched more than just her immediate friends and family. He pressed a button on the podium, which began playing the Bajoran national anthem, getting the attention of the assembled crowd. While her last wishes called for a traditional Starfleet funeral, Tim thought that she would have wanted a bit of a Bajoran touch as well.

There was a moment of silence as the music stopped, and the gathered mourners all looked up at Tim, waiting for him to begin his speech. Nervous and overcome with emotion, he paused for a moment. His eyes locked with those of Ellen, who, seated next to her father, offered him a slight and subtle encouraging smile, giving him the strength he needed to continue.

He picked up his PADD that had a prepared speech. But instead of reading it aloud, he turned it over and placed it back on the podium. He would speak from the heart.

"Friends and comrades, we are gathered here today to pay final respects to our dearly departed friend. It is a testament to her spirit and the influence she had on those around her that so many of you are gathered here today. We knew her as our captain, leading us on our journey through the stars. We knew her as our protector, fighting off any who would dare to harm us. And... we knew her as our friend. Always there to open her office to us and offer a mug of tea and a bit of advice."

"Captain Alenis -- Meru -- was a complex woman, and I am truly blessed to have known her, even for such a short time as I did. She was uniquely dedicated to her duty as a Starfleet officer. She cared for her crew, and always did her duty with the utmost professionalism. She was the epitome of a dedicated Starfleet officer." As he spoke, Tim was struggling, trying not to cry, trying to maintain his composure. "But there was another side to her. Underneath that hard, professional exterior was a woman who was kind and caring. And... there was a woman who was feeling a lot of pain, who had her vulnerabilities." He looked over at Arvel, who was hanging his head in sadness. "She was a woman who lived through a lot of sadness -- the Occupation of Bajor, the battle of New Algiers. But through it all, she was a source of strength to others, even when she was struggling herself."

"And Bajor. One can not talk about Meru and fail to mention her relationship with her home planet of Bajor. She was truly a child of Bajor, and, though she had only returned recently, I could tell that her love for Bajor ran deep. In her final days, she visited the planet for the first time in nearly thirty years. In the days leading up to her death, I saw her undergo a religious awakening. Her love for Bajor and her connection with the Prophets was re-invigorated."

"In a time like this, it is all too easy to focus on her death -- a courageous act of self-sacrifice, in which she no doubt saved countless lives. To focus on the loss, the pain, that we are all feeling. But more important is to reflect on her life, and the thirty-seven years in which we were blessed with her presence. The strength she gave us in our darkest moments, the courage she showed in facing down adversity, and the empathy she showed with all those who suffered."

"I think, in some sense, she knew in her final days that she was not long for this universe. She gave so much, in life and in death. And so, I am left with the following words, from Dickens, but which could have been spoken by Meru in her dying moments. It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

With that, Tim pressed another two buttons on the podium. One of which activated the anthem of the Federation, which she had dedicated her life in service of. The other activated the loading sequence for the torpedo launcher, signaling four crewmen to remove the flags for the launch.

As Gregory watched the play of the funeral being acted out in front of him, he couldn't help but feel that this was all so serene. None of this was ever meant to end this way...no one should have died on their mission, least of all their Commanding Officer. It was evident by the number of people and the sound of quiet sobs that Captain Alenis was a well loved woman, honoured by her crew and friends. She should never have died...it wasn't her time yet.

As they listened to the ceremony, Jena reached out and clasped Jason's hand gently to comfort him. Jason gave her, what he hoped was, a reassuring smile. Closing his eyes, he saw the Par wraith that had possessed her smiling through her face as it inflicted pain and death. "Meru, I'm so sorry." He said in no more than a whisper.

With the Federation anthem blaring, the torpedo was guided down the loading rack and towards the breech of the launcher. Tim turned around and took one last glance at the black tube that was his friend's coffin as it slid into the breech. "Goodbye, Meru," he whispered, watching the hatch close behind it and trying to choke back tears until the music stopped.

Silence filled the room for a few seconds. "And now," said Tim, "we bid our friend and captain farewell, and wish her smooth sailing on her final journey." With that, he held his finger over a large red button and took a deep breath. With a tear forming in the corner of his eye, he pressed down on the button, sending Meru streaking across space on her final journey.

With a subtle nod, Tim indicated to the assembled crowd that the ceremony was over, before leaving the podium and walking over to a viewport, so he could watch over his friend one final time.

Standing at the window, Tim just stared out into space at the glowing torpedo and the ion trail left in its wake. "Goodbye, Meru," he managed to utter, before closing his eyes in an attempt to stop his tears from running down his cheek. When he opened them, he saw the yellow and blue swirl of the wormhole opening and engulfing the torpedo. He had never really watched the wormhole before. The only time he had seen it open was in a small restaurant on DS9, where he first met Meru prior to the launch of the Portland. Staring at it, it was one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen, next to Ellen, of course. It brought a slight smile to his face for the first time in days; perhaps it was only fitting that Meru's final

journey would be her return to the wormhole.

As he stared out into space, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Turning, he found himself face to face with Admiral Washington, with Ellen not far behind. "Beautiful, isn't it?" asked the Admiral in a soft voice.

"Yes..." replied Tim. "It is."

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### **Three Decks Away**

**by Tyrlai Zade**

((takes place concurrently with the Funeral))

The man with the crystalline eyes had run out of room on Cria IV. It was a dead end alleyway on Cria IV specifically. His crystalline eyes were perfectly functional and they told him as much, that he had run out of room, there was nowhere else to go. He had screamed then, his eyes had gone orange and he had raged at the walls. He raged about the clingy mist and smell of the place, and at the witch. He saved most of his rage for the witch. He screamed at how she 'frelling' chased him, and never 'frelling' gave him a moments 'frelling' peace, so 'frelling' far from anything that made any 'frelling' sense and why wouldn't she just leave him be. He didn't really say 'frelling', of course, she had just put it in her report that way. It looked better than [redacted] and she thought it was amusing and sounded close enough to what he actually said. He also didn't really say 'witch'.

The witch for her part gave her the only answer she could think of. "Because I'm Tyrlai frelling Zade."

Three decks above torpedo bay 7-gamma and three and a half years later, where an access corridor led through the side of a jury-rigged suite, the same witch clambered through the tight space. A Ledeen diplomat had insisted some years back that he be given a suite that aligned with a certain star for religious reasons. Special accommodations were constructed and within a week the Ledeen official had been arrested for espionage. Fourteen years after that conference ended Tyrlai Zade had spotted the unused space between the suite and the normal sized cabin next door. Squeezing through an access vent, she found a nice and normally unused window the floors above where the ceremony for Alenis was proceeding.

She was dressed in a muted version of her violet formal frippery but had dithered and fussed and made herself late enough that she settled on her makeshift vantage point instead. After all, she had been the one who pulled the trigger, based on nothing better than intuition. She had no special powers to see the future, but there should have been another way. In time she would find it and then the real guilt could begin. Until then she wasn't ready to have the crew staring at her.

Her transfer application was already filled out. She was even ready to go back to counseling if need be. Diplomacy offered a lot of freedom and Alenis had tolerated even more, she had been basically functioning as an independent agent only mildly attached to Portland for

weeks now, another Captain would have clamped down on that behavior a long time ago. Alenis had given her free rein and it had wound up costing the Captain her life. So Tyrlai had done what she had always done, gotten ready to leave. Job, relationship, family, homeworld, in the end Tyrlai had left them all when they got tough. The Humans had a saying, when the tough get going the,.. something about going about all tough or something. Anyway, her version had always ended with ‘...and then Tyrlai ran away.’

Tyrlai had always been the first to board the dangerous freighter, the first to beam into the firefight, fight a dahar master with a sword, slide under a sealing bulkhead before the warp core is ejected. But, the second her boyfriend wanted to talk about where ‘things’ were headed she couldn’t change her combadge frequency fast enough. In fact the word ‘boyfriend’ usually precipitated such events all on its own. This time she couldn’t blame uppity Klingons or clingy SOs. So shed transfer away and everyone could forget and things could be normal again.

But that paperwork had never been filed, because it wouldn’t take her far enough.

Tyrlai had never been a good little scientist. It was all her parents had wanted and so very and painfully evident to all that it was completely beyond her reach. Clear to everyone but Tyrlai and her parents. Tyrlai would double down and try harder each time she failed, her parents would pull strings and get her scraped through each time only to have her end up that much farther behind the next iteration. Her aptitude tests were oddly enough off the scale, but when it came time to apply herself, she unraveled, occasionally spectacularly and always in some kind of surprising new way. The failure and expectations grew into mutual silos far greater than she could handle. So Tyrlai had run away, and even then her plan had unraveled spectacularly.

She pulled the shard from the pocket of her tunic. It lit up the ramshackle chamber she sat in as it had been doing ever since that moment. It shone with an uncanny inner brilliance, cool to the touch, and oddly comforting. She hadn’t told any of the others her suspicions, because they were crazy. They were simply bat-backside crazy, and that was frankly something, coming from her.

So if the prophecies were right, but the texts containing them were wrong and physics could be argued with on a couple of its notions or she could find a nice place between universes and,... “or maybe this light could just shut off and leave me alone and I can transfer to the Nightingale and meet some nice guy who doesn’t want to talk about his damn feelings so much, and have a bunch of kids that I never ever put any pressure on to do anything... that would be nice. Could I have that?” She blinked back the tears furiously, she was afraid if she let them go they wouldn’t ever stop. “...and that would be nice.” She insistently reminded the universe. Then with less insistence and more pleading, “why can’t I have that?”

The light didn’t go out. She even gave it an extra few minutes, just to be sure, before tucking the shard back into her tunic.

“Because I’m Tyrlai frelling Zade.” She said to herself, picking up the remote control and



sending the little vacuum-probe hovering outside the window to chase after the Captain's torpedo.

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Goodbyes

Captain's Office, USS Portland (docked at DS9)

MD01, 1300 hours (shortly after the funeral)

With a duffel bag over his shoulder, Arvel Darze made his way to the captain's office on the USS Portland. He had turned in his commission, taken an early retirement, and arranged for his animals to be shipped home to Betazed where he would start up his own private practice. Having lost the woman he loved, he could no longer bear to live the life of a Starfleet counsellor. Besides, it wasn't as though he was needed anyways; Dr. Carlisle seemed competent enough.

But he had left one thing until the end. Ko-ko remained in the captain's office, no doubt under the care of that hologram. In truth, he couldn't bear to go up there and face the abomination that was the hologram. Not after the death of Meru. Outside the door, he sighed momentarily, gathered his thoughts, and entered.

"Arvel?" asked the hologram, looking up from her desk. Perched in her favourite spot on top of the captain's monitor was Ko-ko, who turned her head sideways at Arvel. On the screen was a video of the funeral of the captain. It was difficult to watch, but she felt that she had to at least sit through it to honour the memory of the captain. Besides, it wasn't every day that one gets to see their own funeral.

Arvel shook his head. "Computer, deactivate EMH," he called out quickly, hoping to avoid this inevitable confrontation. But instead of disappearing, the hologram simply stood up from her desk.

"They de-activated the voice controls on my program," explained the holographic representation of the captain, "and adjusted some sort of visual matrix so I could be a redhead." Seeing no reaction to her little joke, she pressed further. "Arvel, what's going on? You can talk to me."

"I'm leaving Starfleet," replied Arvel in a dismissive tone as he walked over towards Ko-ko's cage, trying his best to ignore the hologram. "I'm going home, back to Betazed."

"Leaving Starfleet?!" Shocked, Alenis quickly intercepted him by standing between him and the cage. "But, Arvel--"

Arvel grabbed the hologram by the arms. He didn't have time for this. "Don't 'but' me, missy! The paperwork is already taken care of, and my transport leaves in two hours."

Not one to take abuse from anyone, Meru wrested her arms free. "Arvel, what's wrong? You obviously came here for something, and--"

“What’s wrong?” Arvel shouted incredulously. “What’s wrong? The woman I love has been killed and replaced with some holographic sexbot, and you’re asking me what’s wrong?”

Alenis sighed. “Arvel, is this about Jason? Look, that was just so--”

“No, this isn’t about Jason!” he exclaimed. He couldn’t believe he was arguing with a hologram. “How would you feel if I were to die and there was some replica of me walking around, pretending to be me?”

“Arvel, I didn’t ask for this to happen,” replied the hologram, her eyes filling with sadness. “Please... I still love you. We can talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Arvel shook his head. He wanted to simply take Ko-ko and be gone, but the hologram wasn’t making it easy. “The Meru I fell in love with died on that planet. I accept that. And it’s time for me to move on. There is nothing to be gained by trying to carry on a relationship with a hologram and pretending that it’s the same.”

Alenis sighed. She had lost a lot in the past few days, and now she was losing Arvel as well. “Then why are you here?” she asked, challenging him.

“I just want to get my bird and leave,” he replied.

“Not Ko-ko!” exclaimed Alenis. Even though it wasn’t really her, she had rebuilt a relationship with the bird over the past few weeks. With Arvel leaving and her career in doubt, Ko-ko was all that she had left.

Arvel sighed. Staring at the bird, all kinds of memories of the times he had spent with Meru had come rushing back. The times he spent breaking through her tough exterior and seeing the sweet, caring person underneath. The times he spent caring for her in some of her darkest moments, and the passions they had developed for each other. And the sadness he felt when she left him, the joy of their reunion, and the sadness again when it was cut short. As he looked back and forth between Ko-ko and the hologram, he realized that perhaps, that too, should be left in the past.

“You know what,” he said, stroking his beard. “You can have her. Take good care of her, and don’t spoil her with mint leaves too much,” he added with a hint of smile. Alenis was always feeding her mint leaves.

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” As he looked into her eyes, Arvel saw why he had fallen in love with her so many years ago. “You know, I know you’re not the real Meru, but... I never got a chance to say goodbye.”

The hologram’s eyes lit up at that last comment. “Oh, Arvel,” she said, as she approached the man she loved for one last embrace.

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### *The Triad*

Admiral Washington's Office

MD01, 1400 hours

**Authors:** **Admiral Washington** (played by Alenis Meru), **Admiral Anderson** (played by Tyrlai Zade), **Admiral Cresswell** (played by Jason Beauvoir)

For what seemed like the tenth time, Admiral Washington was re-reading the reports from the last mission of the USS Portland. Though they shed light on what happened on Gamia III, they left him with as many questions as answers. What really happened down there? What is to be done with this hologram? And who fired the fatal shot?

As he pondered these questions, he was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Right on time," he muttered, getting up from his desk. "Come in!"

Admiral Tanner Anderson walked in staring at readouts on a pair of pads. It was one of his signatures, her would often carry a datapadd in each hand and read them both. In this case a letter from his wife, Jourdana, and the latest overly descriptive duty report from his granddaughter, Rebecca McKinnon, a linguist who had managed to escape the destruction of three ships in her first two months on active duty. He looked up and smiled, "Mister Washington, how is that daughter of yours?"

"Ellen is doing well; she's just started her first assignment," replied Washington. "She's on the Portland. The whole crew is going through a bit of a rough patch though, but her executive officer assures me that she's all right." He offered his colleague a faint smile; they both knew that the Portland was the reason why he was here. "Care for anything from the replicator? Tea, coffee? Or perhaps from the bottom left drawer in my desk?"

"You have no idea how tempting the latter is, but I will have coffee please, Brazillian Robusta if possible. What do you know of Timothy Rouse?" Anderson stepped over to where Washington's replicator sat along the far wall. Normally stationed in San Francisco, Anderson had been a last minute replacement to form a quorum.

"Rouse?" replied the Admiral as he walked over to the replicator. "Computer, one Brazilian Robusta please." Still not quite back in shape after his third heart attack, he leaned against the wall as the coffee materialized on a silver tray, on top of a lace napkin, with a small silver creamer and sugar bowl. As he handed Anderson the tray, he continued. "I've met him a few times. He's alright. Clean service record and all that. A real boy scout. Why do you ask?"

Anderson scrutinized the overly formal platter of trinkets he'd been handed for his coffee. "I sometimes prefer to hear more opinions than I find in service records. How many are we debriefing?"

"Well, I think we're going to have to talk to all the senior staff, and anyone else who was on the surface at the time of the captain's death. I see a lot of decisions in this report that are going to need to be explained to us," he said, returning to his desk and picking up a PADD. "The conduct of Lieutenant Zade, the decision to bring a fourteen year old girl on a

diplomatic mission, and this hologram..." Washington shook his head. "Did you read about that part?"

"Zade? Is that the Zade?" Anderson shuddered, he had been born on the Farrugut, Captain Zade had been the scary babysitter. The stern one who told scary stories. He had heard Zade was back in a new form. "The Trill one?" He shook his head. "We might have been better off with the fourteen year old. From what I see though that was the Captains decision, and it did not lead to the incident. If anything it prevented us making a hasty decision there. Tough part of these things, we cant question the Captain at this point."

"Well, according to this reports. we can question someone." Washington slid a PADD across the desk towards his counterpart. "Apparently the crew had developed a..." his face curled up in disgust for an instant "...most interesting method of dealing with a Vulcan officer's pon farr. According to these reports, they have a hologram that contains all the memories of the Captain, right up until about a day before she went down on the landing party." Shaking his head in disgust, he continued. "Of course, what to do with it is one of the questions before us. The hologram thinks it's a sentient being."

Washington took a deep breath before continuing. "And yes, this is the Zade."

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Admiral Graham Cresswell stormed down the corridor on his way to Admiral Washington's office. "Damn Cardassian architecture. " He muttered. He was unhappy with being called away from his 'important work' on Starbase 63 to help oversee the investigation of some incompetent crew who couldn't even perform a simple diplomatic mission without losing their captain and creating a diplomatic incident.

Arriving at Washington's office he knocked on the door. Not waiting for an answer he walked in and said. "Good, we're all here, how long's this going to take, anyway?"

"I imagine about two to three days of interviews," replied Washington. He knew Cresswell fairly well. The man had a well-deserved reputation as a pompous, arrogant, self-righteous stuffed shirt, though once you become a flag officer, you can afford to be a little arrogant. He was also known to be a stickler, which would no doubt be beneficial in getting to the bottom of the death of the captain and the conduct of the crew. "Then, of course, some time for us to mull over the evidence and render whatever judgements we see appropriate. May I get you anything, Admiral?"

"Water. still. Best to keep a clear head in these proceedings, wouldn't you say, Washington?" Cresswell replied.

"Of course," replied the Admiral getting up from his desk to walk over to the replicator again. "Computer, one glass of water for my friend." After placing the glass in front of Cresswell, he returned to his desk and opened the bottom left drawer of his desk. "Of course, a little bit of scotch helps focus the mind and keep one sharp," he added, producing a bottle of Islay single malt and a tulip shaped glass. "Now, Cresswell, have you read the

initial reports from Commander Rouse yet?"

"Yes, and I've studied his service record. A good officer, but it appears he's let himself be swayed by bad influences such as Lieutenants Beauvoir and Zade. A pity really, let's hope it's not gone too far." Was Cresswell's reply.

"I'm sure Captain Alenis was able to keep him on the straight and narrow," replied Washington before taking a sip of his scotch. Fine scotch was a taste which he had spent several decades developing, and as an Admiral, it was a luxury he could easily afford. His doctor had encouraged him to quit drinking after his latest heart attack, but he figured that with all the studies out there, at least one or two had to associate scotch consumption with improved heart health. And even if the studies showing it was good for you tended to be funded by Scottish distilleries, to him, life without scotch was hardly worth living. "May she rest in peace," he added, placing the glass back down on his desk.

"Of course." Cresswell replied. "And I agree Captain Alenis death is the tragic waste, we can't afford to lose experienced officers like her."

"Yes," replied Washington as he pulled out a stack of PADDs. "Now, lets get to work."

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## **Of pasts and prophets...**

**June 2412**

**The Black Hole Tavern**

**Terra Nova**

"Care for a refill? Or perhaps some appetizers? We have a special on wings and pitchers tonight, and sixteen different beers on tap--" called out Trix, barely concealing her annoyance towards the party at table number 8. With a blue mohawk, a number of tattoos, and an attitude to match, Trix was doing her best to be a good server, but this table was seriously getting on her nerves. The table had been here all night, and all they had barely ordered anything. Just a couple pots of Bajoran tea, and a few pieces of bread midway through the night. In their black robes and hoods, they looked like monks. And that frustrated Trix, as monks are notoriously bad tippers.

"No, thank you," replied one of the monks, interrupting her before she could list their liquor offerings. A middle-aged Bajoran man, he appeared to be their leader. His robes were slightly more ornate than the rest, with some muted grey trim to set it apart. "Just some more tea, please."

"Very well," the waitress replied, sighing as she went to fetch another pot.

As they sat drinking their tea, the four hooded figures were closely examining a man drinking alone at the bar. They had traveled a long distance to find this man, and went through numerous intermediaries, each one more shifty than the last, before finally tracking down his favourite bar, where they would lie in wait. And tonight was their lucky night. One member of their party had earlier caught a glance over his shoulder at the PADD he was

reading. When she saw it was an invitation to the decommissioning of the USS Portland on Starbase 66, in low orbit above Trill, she knew they had their man.

When they saw him polish off his beer and start heading for the door, the monks knew it was time to go. "Check please!" called out the leader, holding his hand up to get Trix's attention.

Trix just sighed again as she returned to the bar with a fresh pot of tea. But by the time she returned to the table with the bill, they were gone. Fortunately, the few slips of latinum they left behind was enough to cover their tab. And then some. She breathed a sigh of relief; at least it wasn't a total waste of a night.

\*\*\*\*\*

Outside the bar, the four dark-robed figures looked around for a moment before reacquiring their target. As their target stumbled towards a run down area of town, it didn't take long for the monks to catch up. "Commander Rouse!" called out the leader.

The man slowly clenched his fists, ready to deal with trouble. He hadn't been called that in almost twenty years. "Who the hell--"

But before he could put his fists up to defend himself, three of the figures were on top of him. Quickly subduing him, they held him up against the wall in an alley.

"Who are you? What do you want?" demanded Tim angrily as he struggled in vain against their grasp.

"Open your eyes," replied the leader, as he pulled out a small box, shaped almost like a lantern. With his other hand, he pulled open the door on the front, revealing a white crystal inside, glowing intensely and illuminating Tim's face as well as most of the alleyway.

"No," shouted Tim, trying to turn away from the bright light. "Noooooooo!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Overcome by the flash, when Tim blinked his eyes open, he found himself in a place that was all too familiar. Around him was the bridge of the Portland, bathed in white light. "No..." he gasped.

"You left her behind..." said a grey haired man standing up from the helm console. As he turned around, Tim recognized him.

"Admiral Washington?" he asked, surprised. "But you died of a heart attack five years ago! This can't be!"

"Why did you leave her behind?" This time it was Ellen, the woman he loved, who had long since left him, asking the question.

"I don't know who--"

"Your friend and colleague," replied the prophet Tyrlai. "Why did you leave her?"

"You mean Meru? She was dead!" protested Tim. He didn't know who these people were, where he was, or what they wanted with him. "We did all we could to save her!"

"Her pagh remains," said a woman's voice that Tim had not heard in twenty years.

"Meru?" asked Tim, turning towards her and collapsing at her feet. "I'm so sorry. I tried to save you..."

"Go free her pagh," replied the prophet Alenis. As she placed her hands on his shoulders, another bright flash of light filled the room, then everything went black.

\*\*\*\*\*

As he awoke in an alleyway on Terra Nova, Tim rubbed his head. He had passed out in alleys before, but this time was different. He remembered a vivid strange dream, and four Bajorans in robes. As he tried to shake it off, however, he found a note in his pocket. Examining it, he saw, scratched on parchment paper, was the coordinates of a small Bajoran temple in an oasis in the Okana desert.

He didn't know what he had to do, but at least he knew where to go.

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### **Tee Time...**

Holodeck 2

Authors: **Tyrlai Zade**, and **Parker Hudson**

His large stride in his step Parker walked down along Corridor 21-C Diefenbaker and intersected turning left onto Hanover 22-A. It was a confusing set up for any Starfleet Cadet to become acquainted with, yet the 'Street System' was a tried and tested grid often grandfathered along on Starship's as old as; as seasoned as the Portland.

Anyone could be confused at the Calloway attire that Parker was dressed in Golf argyle sweater and khaki coloured long dress pants.

"G'Day Chief." Meyers one of the Shuttle Bay prep crew gave a nod, abiet confused in passing.

Parker giving a nod back grabbing the left side of his white visor at him "Beautiful day Sir!" He gave a slight smirk at the man. This was /his/ day and he was happy to be off duty. Four hours solid booked into Holodeck 2, Palm Springs Country Club and Golf Course and excellent sunny weather with a perfect tee off time! It couldn't get better than this.

In his time having arrived on the Portland Parker hadn't met many he could truly call friends yet, not that he wouldn't soon enough. It was he needed to slowly open his self up to others and that was tough. He had a few beers and hung out with the ships XO Commander Rouse and he was a swell guy.

Then there was also Tyrlai a swell broad who was a hoot. The many times he had cracked up inside at the things she had said or had done so far on this mission. Lately she was in a real need to be picked up.

Hiking up his real pair of authentic drivers on his left shoulder he reached forward and pressed Tyrlai's quarters chime.

"Enter," Tyrlai said pausing gracefully, arms raised and feet apart on tiptoes in kata seven of the Andorian ice cycle. She was dressed in long flowing white slacks and a matching wood toggled sleeveless vest, her hair pulled back in a tail dangling behind her as she moved. She swept her hands back in the fluidic dance before kata eight. She caught sight of the outfit Parker was wearing. "Is this a fancy dress sport?"

The doors swished open to Tyrlai's quarters. Knowing her he would be expecting something off the wall but not literally. "Is this some fancy meditation stunt?" He inquired.

"Yeah" He pulls at the vest, "I should have gone with the black argyle instead of the blue. This is 'fancy sport' but on a whole new level...You've been in here for a while lately, that's not you. Is it?"

She looked over at him, wanting to say 'well you don't kill your Captain every day', but it was likely to kill conversation and make for awkwardness. So she answered the other question instead. "Not meditation, light exercise and relaxation. I've been feeling oddly energetic and full of energy, this takes the edge off and gives me something to do. So do we hit each other with the sticks then?" She looked at the assortment of weapons he had brought along.

"No," he chuckled. "Just pick an outfit and follow me.

### **On the Holodeck**

Tyrlai watched as Parker's ball rose sharply into the air in a back-heavy parabolic pattern. It was so tiny and you hit it so very far. She decided there were probably several million of these things lost on Earth right now if this was one of their pastimes. She adjusted her little visor hat and took a sip of her umbrella drink before setting it on the close cut grass of the tee area. She stepped up to the ball with one of the larger headed clubs Parker called woods, they had a strange end heavy feel to them. Looking down she lined up her shot, looked down the long field place and just as her holographic caddy started to suggest taking a few practice swings she reached back and slashed downward sending the little white ball ripping through the air on an almost perfect line to the end stick thingy.

"Well done miss Zade," her caddy started striding towards the little ball off in the distance, "A bit of beginners luck no doubt."



She picked her umbrella drink back up and walked after the caddy. "Computer, make caddy-Zade 40% more obsequious, and change his name to Bevins. Do you really think so, mister Bevins?"

"Come to think of it, I'm sure you have a natural talent for this sort of thing, I'd expect nothing less really."

"Did you hear that, Parker? I've a natural talent for this sort of thing." She smiled striding down the course jauntily.

<Lieutenant Parker, report to engineering.> A lightly panicked voice crackled over the ship's intercom.

Tyrlai smirked, "Ahh, you have to go so soon?"

"That it seems." He shouldered his 'bag of sticks' as she had called it and headed for the exit that has appeared in the middle of the tee.

"Hey Parker." She said lining up her next shot, not realizing you had to follow the first ball and hit it again. "You did a pretty good job out there. Thank you."

"Welcome." He said after a moment's pause. He tipped his golf hat and stepped through the exit.

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### ***Changing Color***

#### **Deck 1 - XO's Office**

**Authors: Cmdr. Timothy Rouse and Lt. (JG) Sera Williams.**

Still recovering from the loss of his dear friend, Cmdr. Timothy Rouse was suddenly dealt with another crisis: one of human resources.

Thrust into temporary command, he had to deal with crewing his ship in the face of a number of resignations and transfers. Parker Hudson had applied for and was given a transfer to a Galaxy class starship. In the security department, Amata Zan had taken leave to return to Bajor and get in touch with his roots, and Grel had somehow inexplicably got promoted to running the entire security department of Starbase 63. The last one almost made Tim laugh: Grel was barely competent and highly irritable, but his sympathy for the poor commanding officer who was stuck with him paled in comparison to his relief at seeing him gone.

In truth, he couldn't blame anyone for wanting to leave. This crew had only been out of spacedock a few weeks, and already the Portland was home to too many bad memories.

He had just about managed to work everything out. A couple young officers would be getting the opportunity of a lifetime and their chance to show Starfleet what they're made

of. The only challenge was the engineering department. Apparently, most of the Miranda specialists had long since retired, and ambitious new engineers tended to be attracted to state of the art vessels. So, he found himself staring at the personnel file of one Ensign Sera Williams. Her academy career was fairly impressive, but her extra-curriculars made him smile. Clearly, her time heading up Delta Squad showed some ambition and leadership abilities.

He tapped his comm badge. "Ensign Williams, this is Lt. Cmdr. Rouse. I need to see you in my office right away."

Sera was in Engineering, making sure the last rounds of calibrations were holding when her comm badge chirped with the voice of Commander Rouse. "Yes sir, on my way," was her response. She took a look at Ensign Mendez and gave her a nod. The other Ensign then took over the station where Sera had been working as Sera made her way to the Turbolift.

As the turbolift shot up, Sera assumed that this would be some sort of interview about what had happened on the surface. She wasn't certain she was ready to bring up those memories. Sera had only met the XO once or twice, but never for any length of time... which added to her nervousness. As she neared the door, Sera gave herself a once over and smoothed out the uniform where needed and insured that no strands of hair were out of place. With a calming sigh, Sera pressed the blue request entry button marked with the Starfleet logo.

"Come in," called out Tim, still staring at a PADD containing Sera's personnel file. As the door opened, he looked up at the young ensign and made a motion with his hand towards a chair. "Have a seat."

Tim took a deep breath. He had dark circles under his eyes from his inability to sleep, and his face betrayed the sadness which had been his constant companion since returning from that cave on Gamia III.

He could see the nervousness and distress on Sera's face as well. "How have you been holding up?" he asked.

Normally, Sera would've given the generic 'I'm fine, Sir,' answer under normal circumstances. However, in her time as a Starfleet officer she had visited the Mirror Universe, been attacked by her mirrored self, seen her Captain killed in front of her, and had put together her Captain's doppelganger hologram. Needless to say, these were not normal circumstances, especially given the fact that the former XO looked to be in a similar emotional state.

As the doors whooshed closed behind her, Sera answered, "It has been rough, Sir. I've been trying to bury myself in work so I don't think about what has happened." Looking into her acting-Captain's eyes, she added, "It's hard to believe I left Deep Space 9 to join the Portland not so very long ago, it feels like ages."

She decided that maybe she had said too much, then a bit awkwardly she asked, "Are you ok, Sir?"

"I'm feeling the same way," he replied, raising his hand to his head and pressing it against his temple. "We all are."

Letting out another exasperated sigh, he picked up his PADD again. "I've got another problem. Lieutenant Hudson is transferring out, and I need someone to replace him." He paused for a moment, looking at Sera's file again. "Ensign Williams, I understand from your personnel file that you are quite the pilot?"

Sera's demeanor changed slightly as she listened to the Commander's proposal. She came into the meeting thinking this was going to be some sort of incident report interview about what happened the surface, but it had the distinct feeling of a job interview. Sera shifted in her seat a bit, then responded, "Yes Sir, I was the squad leader of Delta Squad's Rigel Cup victory last year." She knew the information from her squad of cadets would definitely be on record because they represented the Academy, though she wanted to be as open as possible.

"Impressive," replied Tim as he made a note in her file and opened his desk drawer. "Squad leader..." Looking back up at Sera, he produced a small jewelry case, containing a single black pip. "Ensign, in light of your leadership experience at the academy, you're my first choice to head up our engineering department. Unless, of course, you don't think you're ready for such responsibility."

Sera had gotten along with her former Chief, though they had never become best friends. Her first instinct was to blurt out something along the lines of the Portland must be pretty low on Starfleet's priority list if an almost fresh graduate would be given the Chief Engineering job instead of transferring a qualified candidate. Instead, she picked up the small black pip and looked at it. Trying to break the sadness of the last few days, Sera replied, "Does this mean I get the big office down in Engineering?" Not completely knowing Tim yet, she immediately followed it up by adding, "I don't think anyone ever truly knows if they're ready for the next step. I'll do my best to make you proud, Sir."

"Excellent," replied Tim as he stood up and walked around his desk towards Sera's side. He extended his hand out for Sera to give him back the pip and carefully pinned it to her collar. "Well, Lieutenant, I suppose you have some work to do..."

Sera extended her hand to shake the acting-Captain's hand. "Thank you, sir. I won't let you, or the crew, down."

"Oh, and one more thing, Lieutenant. If you need to talk to someone, I'm here. And so is Dr. Carlisle."

"I appreciate it. I may just take you up on that offer." As Sera turned to leave, she stopped as if remembering something. "Sir, I'm not sure if you'd be up for some distraction, but some of the Engineering crew are getting together for some poker tonight if you're interested. Also, Nikki and I have been working on a holodeck program that is starting to get pretty popular with the crew if that is more your thing."

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*Matchmakers*

Sickbay, USS Portland

MD2

**Authors: Lt. Brad Silverton, PO Maria Hill and Ellen Washington (written by Alenis Meru)**

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Of course it is."

"But what if..."

"Trust me, Ellen, they'll both thank us later."

"I don't know, Maria. How do we know that they'll be compatible?"

"I just know it," replied Maria. "Besides, it can't hurt to try, can it?"

"Maria, she is my--"

"Quiet!" called out Maria, hearing the door to sickbay whoosh open. "He's here! I'll take the lead!" she added in a harsh whisper, just quiet enough to not be heard on the other side of sickbay. As she walked towards the door, she was treated to the familiar sight of her Chief Medical Officer. "Good morning, Doctor Silverton!" she called out in a voice that was much more cheery than usual for 0658 hours as she walked towards him, her reluctant friend in tow.

"Ahh good morning Ellen. Maria." Brad nodded to each one. "It looks like we have a busy day ahead of us. Lots of new crew members joining the ship will be needing their physicals. Plus I think we could all use some shore leave after recent events."

"Of course," replied Maria, glancing over at her Ellen for a moment. The other nurse had a look of horror on her face and tried to give her a subtle nod encouraging her to abort the mission, but it was no use. No one stops Maria Hill from meddling in the affairs of others. "Though there is one other important matter you should be aware of. It's... a matter of the heart."

"Oh?" Brad looked quizzically down at his PADD with his schedule for the day. "I didn't see any circulatory issues in any of the patients today?"

"Not the heart heart," interjected Maria, blushing slightly. There was no turning around now, the plan had been put into motion and she would have to move forward with it, regardless of any last-minute hesitations that she or Ellen might have. "It's... well, you have kind of a secret admirer, doctor."

"Oh." repeated Brad rather straight faced as if thinking about the statement. Then he started

to smirk. "A secret admirer huh? Someone too embarrassed to say anything to me? I haven't had that since primary school. And who exactly would this someone be?"

"You'll find out tomorrow night!" exclaimed Maria. "I got you a table for two at Bartoli's on the Promenade, 1900 hours. Dinner by candlelight in an authentic Italian restaurant complete with a wood-fired brick oven with tables overlooking the wormhole... It's one of the most romantic establishments this side of Trill." Maria was getting excited just talking about it. "She'll be wearing an elegant green dress, and she's one of the most beautiful women you'll have ever seen."

Brad looked a bit surprised and taken aback. "But tomorrow night is a seminar on an experimental Bolian therapy and I had planned to attend that. A date has already been setup?!"

"Really, Doctor Silverton," replied Maria in a droll voice. "You would miss out on a chance at true love in favour of some seminar on Bolian therapy?"

"True love is it? Well I can't pass that up now can I. And after all the work you went through to arrange this. Plus it seems this other person already agreed if they have a time, location, and outfit selected." Brad was nodding while he talked and logically weighed the pros and cons of his plans. "Alright I'll do it. The lecture will have notes on it anyways."

Maria breathed a sigh of relief. "A good choice doctor, I assure you you won't regret it."

"Good. Well if you'll excuse me I am still needing my first cup of coffee for the day and on top of all our other appointments, I have a meeting with Admiral Washington later this afternoon. Nurses." Brad nodded to them as he took his leave and went back into his office.

As soon as Brad was out of earshot, Maria turned towards Ellen. "Okay, that was the easy part. Any idea how to get the other half on board?"

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### ***Old friends***

**Okona - June 2412**

**Authors: Timothy Rouse and Alenis Meru**

In the wind-swept Okona desert lay the tiny oasis town of Terna. In centuries past, the town was a bustling hub of commerce and a vital stopping point for caravans crossing the desert. As well, it was through these oases that the teachings of the prophets first spread to the southern regions, displacing various primitive animistic religions.

Now, of course, the caravans were long gone and the environmental damage from the occupation had made the Okona desert even more inhospitable. The desert was now home only to a tiny population: hard salt of the earth settlers, families who traced their history around the oasis back for millennia, and idealistic terraformers with fantasies about making the desert bloom. And, near the town centre was an ancient clay temple, the spiritual hub of the town.

Inside that temple, studying holy books by candlelight, sat a dark-haired female Vedek. "Vedek," called out a young apprentice, coming up the stairs to the Vedek's study. "There is someone downstairs looking for guidance. He's... not from around here. I think he's human."

"Human?" asked the woman. Terna did not get a lot of visitors, and especially not visitors from other worlds, so it was strange that a human would be in her temple this late at night. "I will be down in a moment," she replied, closing her books. Careful not to dislodge a small triangular silver badge from her shoulder, she threw on a robe to protect herself from the chill of the desert air at night and made her way downstairs.

"It is late, my child," she said as she walked downstairs, the man coming into view. "What sort of guidance have you come all this way--"

As the man came into view, the Vedek froze, immediately recognizing him. It was someone who once was very dear to her, someone she owed a debt of gratitude to. Someone she had not seen for many years, and was probably the last person she expected to see upon her doorstep in the tiny oasis of Terna.

"Tim?"

"Meru??" he said in reply. Seeing her, exactly as she looked when he last saw her made him feel even older than the 58 years he was. "or have you taken a name of your own after all these years?"

"Most people call me Vedek Alenis," she replied, before turning to her young apprentice and waving him off, "but that's just so formal." Turning her gaze back towards Tim, she stared into his eyes. Between his unkempt clothes, his three day old beard, and an absent look in his eyes, he had the appearance of a man who had given up on life. "So, what is it that, after all these years, brings you to a Bajoran temple in the middle of nowhere?"

"I have no idea." he said as he strokes his hand through his sandy hair what was starting to show grey streaks. "Believe or not, but the prophets told me to go here. As a first step in getting Meru back."

Alenis was flabbergasted. "You had a vision? And... getting Meru back? But she's dead!"

"I know she's dead. I was there, remember," he said angrily. "You're a priest. Can't you talk to the prophets that visited me?"

"I'm afraid it's not that simple," replied Alenis, attempting to recreate a soothing voice. "The prophets work in mysterious ways, and one does not simply call them and ask for clarification. Often, the message lies in the journey that one takes to understand the teachings of the prophets." She let out a faint smile before continuing. "Why don't you tell me what you saw; perhaps I can help you interpret your vision."

"I saw people who used to be important to me tell me that Meru's pah wasn't lost and that I needed to find and free it." Tim said.

"Who?" asked Alenis, her eyes opening wide. "Where were you? What were your surroundings?"

"Zade, Meru, Washington," he paused a second. " and Ellen. They were all on the bridge of the old Portland. When I woke up I was in the alley next to the bar I had been just prior to the whole thing." he felt ashamed having to tell her. Her brain couldn't believe she wasn't the real Meru. She still looked so much like his friend. And that only made his guilt grow bigger.

"Hmm," Alenis thought hard for a moment, remembering a subspace message that she had received a couple weeks before. "The prophets can take many forms, and create many surroundings when they deliver their messages. Perhaps the choice of form and setting is a clue. As one of your human intellectuals once said, 'the medium is the message.'"

"Did they have to use her." he said in a pained voice and put his fingers through his hair.

"Perhaps," replied Alenis, placing a hand on his shoulder. She could feel the pain inside of him as well; it was clear that she was dealing with a broken man, and hoped that this vision would inject some meaning into his life. "The prophets often use the forms of people from our past, even people we have lost, to deliver their message. But I suspect that they were trying to tell us where to go to find the answers."

He looked up at her. "So, where do we go now. Because I'll do almost anything to change the mistakes from old."

Alenis pulled out a PADD and pulled up a subspace message. It was the invitation to the Portland's decommissioning ceremony, the one place where everyone in Tim's vision would be, and the place that the prophets chose as a setting for their vision. "We have to go back," she said, looking Tim in the eye. "Back to the Portland."

Tim looked grim at her. He hadn't recieved an invite himself, but he'd hear about it. And he decide he wasn't ready jet to face everyone. Esspecially his wife. He took a deep breath before he said. "Let's go!"

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*New Faces*

Sickbay, USS Portland

MD03, 0630

**Authors:** Lt. Brad Silvertan, Inaji Narale (played by Alenis Meru)

Inaji Narale sat patiently upon a biobed in sickbay, waiting. Alone in the captain's quarters for the past few days, she had nothing much to do aside from reading up on anything she could find in the ship's database which was remotely entertaining. In between classic literature and contemporary romance, though, she had found time to do some research on medical procedures -- genetic modification, cosmetic surgery, and the like -- and there was someone she needed to talk to. So, wearing a dark, hooded overcoat, she managed to make

her way down to sickbay without being seen in the early hours in the morning and waited for the arrival of Dr. Silverton.

As the doors to sickbay opened, she slid off the biobed and addressed the figure who had just entered. "Doctor Silverton?" she called out in a soft voice, not wanting to scare the man.

Brad was rather surprised to find someone inside sickbay at this time of day. He looked over the Cardassian and quickly realized by the garb she wore that she was no crew member. His tone shifted from surprise to annoyance.

"I prefer my sickbay to be empty and quiet first thing in the morning so that I can enjoy a cup of coffee in peace. I trust you have a good reason for being in here alone?"

"Yes..." Inaji bit her lip for a moment before continuing. "You can do cosmetic surgery, right, doctor? I mean, like a radical facial reconstruction?"

"Yes I can however let me rephrase my earlier question... I trust you have a good reason for being in here alone so I won't need to call security." He raised his hand up near his comm badge.

"Please, don't!" called out Inaji. Discretely, she slid one hand down her side and placed it on a small switchblade. She didn't want to have to use it, but after a few weeks on the run, she learned to always be prepared. "I assure you, I have my reasons for being here and I mean you and the crew of the Portland no harm. You can check with the commander if you want. I just need your expertise as a doctor."

Brad lowered his hand from his comm badge. "Alright I'm willing to listen but keep in mind that I am a doctor. I help those in need of medical aid from sickness and injury, not from hiding from.. whatever it is your are hiding from."

Inaji let out a sigh of relief. She released the switchblade and pulled out a PADD. "This face..." she said, motioning towards her face. "It brings back too many bad memories. I want you to surgically alter me to look like this." With that, she handed him the PADD. The image contained a three dimensional model of the bone structure in her face, overlaid with Bajoran instead of Cardassian features, and had a striking resemblance to the captain. "Please," she begged, "I need a fresh start."

Brad looked at his visitor while taking the PADD. He had been wrong about her origin. She wasn't Cardassian, well full blooded at least. She was only half. The other half probably Bajoran. That was an unfortunately not uncommon pairing given the former's forced occupation of Bajor. He looked down at the image on the PADD.

"Why are you wanting to look similar to the Captain. I..." Brad stopped mid sentence. He remembered a report a couple days back where the Captain wanted a blood test that Nurse Hill conducted. It seemed odd at the time and Brad had been meaning to ask the Captain about it. Especially since she quickly departed without much comment to Maria.

"You're Meru's sister aren't you?"



"Well..." replied Inaji, "half-sister." A tear began to form at the corner of her eye as she thought about the half sister she didn't get a chance to get to know. She had cursed everyone -- the Cardassians, the Gamians, and the pah wraiths -- for taking Meru away from her. "I... I need a fresh start. Somewhere far away, far away from Cardassia and Bajor and Gamia. Please..."

"I couldn't image what it must be like. The daughter of two races that hate each other. And your sister now... yeah. With your new appearance where will you go?"

"It's a big galaxy, doctor," replied Inaji. In truth, she hadn't thought of that yet. "I'm sure I'll find somewhere. Somewhere far away... I hear New Romulus is a good place for someone looking for a fresh start. Or perhaps the Gamma Quadrant..."

"Alright I'll help you and change your appearance to be full Bajoran. It won't be perfect but it should serve your purpose. Who else knows you are on board?"

"Just the commander. And the chief of security." Inaji sat back down on the biobed. She didn't know whether to trust the doctor or not, and knew that if she were in his shoes, she wouldn't trust herself. But she didn't really have a whole lot of options. "Really?" she asked. "No tricks?"

"Oh I will be checking with both of them about you, make no mistake about that. But presuming they know you are on board... yes I will help you. No tricks." Brad walked over to a replicator. "Computer, Coffee, hot". He took the mug and returned to Inaji. Taking a drink, he then spoke warmly and comfortingly to the half Cardassian, "Each morning I start my day with several cups of coffee, alone here in sickbay. It's the time of day that is mine. Where I can plan for my future in peace and quiet." He took another sip. "Sometimes it is just planning for my day. Other times its planning and thinking about the distant future of what I want to accomplish and need to do." He looks about the room. "In here I can get clarity and confidence about what my future my hold. It is a luxury that not everyone has." He nods straight at her.

"As I said, I couldn't imagine what it must be like. Not being fully accepted by either side of your heritage for something as easily changeable as your appearance. If that is all that is needed to give you the luxury of clarity in planning for your future than I'll give that to you."

Inaji sat still for a moment as a tear formed in the corner of her eye. But this time, for the first time in a long time, it was a tear of joy. "Thank you," she said, offering the doctor a weak smile. "You have no idea how much this means to me. Thank you, doctor."

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**Stepping outside the box, or sickbay**

**USS Portland - Deck 10 - School**

**MD01 1530hrs**

**Authors: PO Ellen Washington (written by Timothy Rouse) and Eilis Ross**

Being sick and tired of staring at the drab wall of sickbay with no sole around Ellen looked for an excuse to leave this place before her brain would go nuts of boredom. She walked to the closest computer console and pulled up the list of people that were due on their medical exam. Skimming over the list she noticed they had a new teacher on board and she did a small happy dance at seeing a perfect excuse to visit the school. She quickly grabbed a PADD and went to the new teacher. She couldn't do the exam herself, but reminding the woman of it was an option.

Arriving at the deck where the school was located she entered the area and was amazed by the decorating. This was so not Starfleet. The walls were plastered with bright drawings and paintings. Maps of several Federation planets and what she assumed were the alphabet's of languages unknown to her. In the right corner was a group of children playing with wooden block. She approached them and crooked her head. They weren't just building a simple tower, like normal kids would. But they were building an image of the Portland in 3D. From what she remembered of the ship's schematics it was a perfect copy. She knew the children in this class were gifted, but never realised how gifted.

As Eilis heard her children suddenly grow quiet, she glanced up from the examinations she was correcting. Frowning as she spotted an unknown woman watching the students, the teacher quickly moved to her feet. "Can I help you?" Her eyes were cold as her concern for the children was primarily on her mind. She knew that the Portland was a small crew but she wasn't taking any chances. The children were her responsibility while between these four bulkheads.

"Hi," Ellen said cheerful as she turned to face the woman who she assumed was the teacher she was looking for. "I'm Petty Officer Washington." she said as she offered a hand as a greeting. "I noticed in the Medical database that you haven't been to Sickbay for your Medical Exam. Are you aware of this?"

Still a little cautious, Eilis took the offered hand. "As a civilian I didn't think it was compulsory for me to attend. I thought that my transfer of files would have been enough. There's nothing untoward in my medical history....Well not that I am aware of anyway."

"Unfortunately here everybody does need to be checked." Ellen replied. Turning to the children she asked. "Is that normal? I knew that these children were special, but wow. That's really amazing." she said, mentioning the children's building.

Eilis' turned her attention to the model with a smile of pride on her face. "For these children this is a warm up exercise. We are studying the ships build and functions at the moment in preparation for the Childrens shadowing days. Each child will be assigned a different department and mentor. The model is helping them understand the lay of the land as such and it helps to imprint it in their minds when they physically create it."

"That sounds nice" Ellen looked at the children and was wondering if her child would one day be so smart as these children were. She touched her belly, unaware that she did.

The gesture hasn't gone unnoticed by Eilis, she's been around expectant as well as current

mothers for too long in her life now. Smiling a little she tilted her head to the side, "How far along are you?"

"Just a few weeks," she stuttered. "It's all still very new. Do you have any children of your own?"

A wistful smile crossed Eilis' lips before she shook her head. "Afraid not....I content myself with other people's children. I'd love a child someday though. There's something about the opportunity to hold a child that you gave life to in your arms that nothing else can ever substitute."

"I'm sure you'll find the right person," replied Ellen. "When you find the right one, things just move so fast..." She sighed longingly just thinking of Tim, and thinking of her future with Tim and Andy. "I'm so excited... and a little nervous too."

"Nerves are too be expected. You must be...in your mid twenties? Your starting a bug new chapter in your life where you've given life to a new little being whom your going to give birth to and guide them in their journey through life." Eilis smiled as she leaned a shoulder against the wall and watched the younger woman closely.

"Oh, please don't remind me of that." El said with a grim look on her face. "The giving birth part I mean. Totally not looking forward to that."

Eilis found herself smiling at this, "What scares you so much about the birth part? With today's medicine and technology the pain can be easily managed as can the birthing. And if anything goes wrong, the Doctors have emergency protocols."

"I've witnessed a birth often enough to know about all the available options, but now it's going to be myself having to do it. I don't know. My brain says it's going to be okay. My heart on the other hand is seriously freaking out." she said. "Luckily I have a while to get used to the idea."

Eilis had a brief duh moment as she remembered that the woman had introduced herself as being from the medical department, which also brought them back around to the subject of her medical. "Can you schedule me in for my medical in a day or two? Evenings suit best as I'm finished with the school at that point. As I'm on my own, I have no one to provide cover when school is in session."

"Yes, yes, of course" Ellen stammered, completely forgetting the reason for her visiting. Checking her PADD she said, "tomorrow, 20.00 hours sound good." She was seriously wondering why she had told all of that to a complete stranger. Her father didn't even know about her pregnancy.

Nodding her head, Eilis filed away the piece of information to add to her own diary once she was back at her desk. "Will it be yourself I will be meeting?"

"Either myself or Nurse Hill will be in sickbay," replied Ellen, marking Eilis' appointment in on

the PADD. "Of course, it will be Dr. Silverton performing the actual physical."

Nodding her head, Eilis took note of the names mentioned as she imagined the information would come in handy for future uses. "Ah...abit of a silly question but is there anything I need to bring? I assume you've received a copy of my old medical files from the USS Birmingham?"

"Just your wonderful self!" exclaimed Ellen. "Hope to see you there!"

Hearing a commotion behind her, Eilis attention turned back to her students as she dismissed the nurse. "I'm sure I will. Duty calls now though I'm afraid." With that, and a quick smile, the teacher moved to intercept the arguing students before things escalated.

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### *Grilling Tim*

Interview Room, DS9

MD02, 0900

**Authors: Admiral Washington (played by Alenis Meru), Timothy Rouse**

Having finished buried their dead, it was time for the Admirals to get to work. Washington, Cresswell, and Anderson were seated at the front of the interview room, behind a long curved desk, with a large window out into space behind them. Off to their sides were a yeoman and a stenographer, ready to assist the proceedings in any way the Admirals may desire. And in the middle of the room sat a chair, which was the hot seat in which the senior staff of the Portland would be grilled.

Ready to begin the proceedings, Washington looked over at the yeoman. "Akemi, can you please escort in our first victim," he asked, his dry sense of humour showing through.

Nodding, Akemi went over to the door, which opened as she approached, and leaned her head out. "Commander Rouse, the Admirals are ready to see you."

Tim stood up from the seat in the waiting area. He took a deep breath and followed the yeoman in the office the Admirals were waiting for him. Once inside he stood to attention and said. "Commander Timothy Rouse, reporting as ordered."

"Please, Commander Rouse, have a seat," said Washington, making eye contact with him as he entered. He could tell by the look in his eyes that he was still coming to terms with the death of the captain. "My compliments on your eulogy yesterday, it was very... touching."

"Thank you, Admiral." he said. He didn't really know what to do about the compliment. Getting praise for a eulogy sounded wrong. Especially when it was a eulogy for a good friend.

Washington nodded an acknowledgement of the thanks before continuing. "Now, Commander, as I am sure you are aware, there were a number of decisions made during this mission which may be considered questionable to say the least. The captain's decision to include a fourteen year old girl on a diplomatic mission, the conduct of Lieutenant Zade, and

her decision to personally lead an away team down into an unsecured area are all matters that we must review. Not to mention the... unfortunate business... that transpired on your ship between a number of senior staff and the EMH."

Washington paused to take a sip of water before continuing. "As the second highest ranking officer, you would have been closest to the captain. Can you tell us about her mental state at the time of this mission? Did you notice anything peculiar about the captain which could have impaired her decision making capabilities? Emotional stress, substance use, anything like that?"

Tim stared at them with open mouth. Were they serious? But instead of saying that out loud he remembered that it was better to only say the most necessary, if he wanted to keep his crew together he needed to hold in. "I didn't have a single reason to question the Captain's mental state. I think Lieutenant Darze can confirm that. I talked to him on the day before the away mission." He didn't mention that he talked to Arvel about the renewed personal relation between Meru and Arvel and not Meru's mental state.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Darze submitted his resignation from Starfleet two days ago," replied Washington, matter of factly as he pulled up a PADD. "We've taken the liberty of reviewing the captain's medical records. From what I've seen, she was barely able to keep it together. Counseling, medications, a daily dose of tranquilizers, and a sudden change in medication only days before this mission. And this bird..." Washington shook his head. "Commander Rouse, I trust I don't need to remind you of the importance of this review, and your duty as a Starfleet officer to be open and honest with us. So I ask you again, did you notice anything unusual in her mental state in the days prior to her death?"

"I know she was having trouble over a past event. That's why she had such an intensive counseling. And believe it or not, but that bird changed her. She stopped taking the medication and she actually got happier, clearer in her actions. I would sooner say that her mental state was better in the days before her death than it was a week earlier." Tim answered.

"Then how do you explain her increasingly bizarre and erratic decision making process?" countered Washington. "The decision to involve a fourteen year old child in these delicate negotiations, her confrontational attitude towards the Cardassians, and this entire affair with Lieutenant Beauvoir and the EMH." Washington paused for a moment and tensed his fingers. "And her decision to personally lead an away team down on a dangerous mission to an unsecured area, placing herself -- the captain -- at risk."

"If Starfleet had done their job properly they would have known that the Gamia people still used the d'jarra system and would have sent a vessel with someone on board who had a high enough d'jarra so we didn't need the services of Miss Coln." Tim started, playing advocate for his friend. "As for her feelings towards the cardassians, I think she was very good at hiding her true feelings caused by her background. Not once did she let them influence her decisions by her feelings. The dealing we had with the Cardassians were handled as any Starfleet Captain would." He said.

"Then her decision to rescue an officer on her vessel, because that is where we are talking about. Without Alenis, although unusual method, Lieutenant Beauvoir would have died. And then as last her choice to go down to the surface. Beside our Chief Medical Officer, our entire Senior Staff was already down on the planet. Including Lieutenant-Commander Zade and myself. So when the call came in Alenis had no real choice to lead a second team herself. The situation was tense enough to not send someone with her experience, both with the Bajoran religion and her tactical background to send someone else down there." He took a breath before saying. "I'm sure any officer from the Portland will confirm all of this, especially Doctor Silverton concerning the Captain's mental wellbeing."

"We will be talking to them in time," replied Washington with a wave of his hand. "I suppose when you put it that way, there may be some method in her madness. Of course," he added, glancing over at the two other Admirals. "We will be the judge of that. Now, Commander Rouse, about this EMH..."

"What about it, Admiral?"

"What about it?" replied Washington in a surprised tone. Did Rouse really see nothing wrong with the actions of the crew? The thought of a Starfleet officer knowingly creating that sort of program and then asking "what about it?" as if there was nothing wrong sent him into a fit of rage, one he could barely keep in check. "Where should I begin? The conduct of your Chief Science Officer? The ethics of playing god with possibly sentient artificial intelligences? This repair order for a new EMH console due to phaser fire? Or the simple fact that your crew created the sort of smutty holo-program that one might expect to see in some sort of backwater Ferengi strip club, in the image of the captain no less?"

"I understand it doesn't sound very professional, but as I've attempted to explain for the last fifteen minutes, they were the best options given the situation. As for the EMH console, that was a case of miscommunication between various officers."

"And now, because of this lack of professionalism," explained Washington, "we've had to bring in a specialist in artificial intelligence to assist us in coming to a conclusions. You will give Lieutenant Kallan full access to the systems and logs of the USS Portland, and offer him any assistance he may require." Washington stared menacingly at Tim. "And don't even think about hiding anything from us. Now, do you have any final comments for our consideration?"

"Not at all, sir." Tim replied with a wicked grin. He didn't see any problem in having someone go through their records. They had nothing to hide and already most of the staff had been grilled by the admirals. How hard could another curious puppet be?

"Very well," said Washington with a wave of his hand. "You are dismissed, but in the words of the old west, don't leave town."

MD3, afternoon

Outside the interview room, Ensign Nikki Barclay was a nervous wreck. She had been called upon to testify regarding the EMH and its status as a possibly sentient being. While in her mind, she knew that determining whether an artificial intelligence was sentient or not was practically impossible, in her heart she knew from the time they had spent together fixing her program that the hologram was as real as a flesh and blood person. And since her status as a person was dependent on the outcome of this review, an incredible weight fell upon Nikki's shoulders.

After being waved into the interview room, she paused for a moment. She knew that making a good impression would be key; if she carried herself with confidence and poise, her testimony in support of the EMH's personhood would be given more weight in the eyes of the Admirals. Here goes nothing, she thought, taking a deep breath before walking through the door.

"Hello, Admirals!" she exclaimed, trying to use a little bit of cheeriness to conceal her nerves, looking over the three Admirals before resting her eyes on the one in the center. "And Admiral Washington, congratulations on your little grandson to be!"

Washington raised an eyebrow. "My... grandson to be...?" He was well aware of the ensign's uncle's notoriously erratic behaviour, and wondered if perhaps it was passed down to this young woman. "Ensign, I think you must be mistaken..."

"No, I'm pretty sure that it's going to be a boy," replied Nikki, in a confident tone. "At least, that's what Maria told me, and she's Ellen's best friend."

"I..." Washington looked back and forth at Cresswell and Anderson as he tried to keep his composure. "And who, pray tell, is the father?"

"Why, Commander Rouse, of course. Don't you think they make such a cute couple? And they're so--"

Nikki froze mid-sentence in horror, suddenly realizing by the expression on Admiral Washington's face what she had done. Her face turned a distinctive shade of purple, she began sweating profusely, and shaking in her boots. If her legs hadn't turned to jelly, she might have sprinted out of the room, never to return. "Admiral, I..." she stammered, her eyes darting all around the room in an effort to avoid Washington's gaze.

Trying to restrain himself, Washington interrupted the Ensign with a wave of his hand. "Ensign Barclay," he said in a stern voice, "I think under the circumstances it is best that we adjourn for a recess and reconvene at a later time. You are dismissed."

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***"The" moment***

**Shortly after Spilled Beans**

**Authors: Adm. James Washington (played by Alenis Meru), Timothy Rouse and Ellen Washington (played by Timothy Rouse)**

Admiral Washington walked quickly through the corridors of DS9 like a man on a mission. Having just adjourned the hearings, he had to find his daughter immediately. Upon passing through the airlock to the USS Portland, he paused for a moment for directions.

"Computer, locate Ellen Washington."

"Voice not recognized. Security code required."

Washington's hands balled up into fists. "This is Admiral James Washington, security code Alpha Gamma Two Seven. Now tell me, where is my daughter!"

"Ellen Washington is in the Executive Officer's quarters."

"Of course," replied Washington angrily as he headed for a turbolift, a scowl upon his face.

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"Enter" Ellen said, surprised someone was at the door. She was getting ready for her shift that would start in a quarter of an hour.

"Ellen!" called out Washington, quickly walking through the doorway and into the room, immediately recognizing his daughter.

"Dad!" she said in shock upon seeing her father. "What are you doing here?"

"Ellen, why didn't you tell me..."

Before he could ask more he saw his daughter faint before his eyes. He stepped forward to her, but he was passed by Tim. Who had immediately gone to their quarters upon hearing the Admiral was on the ship without an appointment and wasn't heading to the bridge. He rushed besides her and carried her to the couch. "Could you please get some orange juice?" he asked and pointed towards the replicator.

Without asking any questions, the Admiral quickly ran over to the replicator and returned a moment later with a glass of fresh-replicated orange juice. "Here, what's wrong?"

"Her blood pressure has been a bit low lately, nothing very harmfull, or so she keeps telling me." Tim answered as he took the drink.

"Shouldn't we get her to sickbay?" Admiral Washington was barely able to control himself. His daughter was unconscious, and all Tim was doing was lying her on the couch and getting her a drink. He wanted to just pick her up himself and carry her all the way to sickbay personally, and probably knock Tim on his ass in the process.



"Not necessary" he said and Ellen confirmed that by coming bye. "Shhh, take it easy" Tim said as she was trying to sit up.

"Ellen..." said the Admiral, pushing Tim out of the way slightly to kneel down in front of his daughter. "Is everything alright? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Of course I'm fine," she said and looked from Tim to her father, wondering if anything happened between them. Then she looked at Tim to find some strength for the other question. "Well, we wanted to tell you when the ship got back to port. But with everything that happened and all, we hadn't found the right moment." She said we as often as she could. They were a team now, whether her father liked it or not.

"This is all... such a surprise." Washington grasped his daughter's hands in hers, like he used to do when she was home sick from school. He had a whole mixture of emotions running through him. Joy, worry, and a hint of rage at the Executive Officer who thought it was appropriate to go chasing after enlisted crew 15 years his junior. For a brief second, he gave Tim a somewhat disapproving look before returning his gaze to his daughter and smiling at her. It was a little painful, however, for him to look into her eyes and face the stark realization that his daughter was no longer his little Elly, and he couldn't protect her and watch over her anymore. "I... I'm going to be a grandfather. I can't believe it."

Tim knelt down next to the admiral and placed his hand on Ellen's shoulder to comfort her. He was saddened but not surprised at Washington's glare; the man was notoriously curmudgeonly and not one to think that anyone was good enough for his daughter. "Admiral," he said, turning towards Washington, "this wasn't how we planned to tell you. But... we're in love."

Washington looked back and forth, between Tim and his daughter. This wasn't how he imagined things for her; not at all. And Tim... he wasn't sure whether he approved of him or not. Finally, after a long pause, he stood up and held his head. "I need to go for a walk," he managed to utter, before turning back to Ellen. "Elly... I love you."

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### **Welcoming Marcus**

Concurrent with the Admirals' interviews  
MD02 - 1100 hours

While the Admirals were busy interviewing the senior officers of the Portland, Petty Officer Akemi Tashiro, Admiral Washington's personal yeoman, found herself standing outside the airlock in docking port 6, awaiting the arrival of a specialist from the Daystrom institute. One Lieutenant Marcus Kallan, highly regarded by Captain Maddox, had been dispatched to this corner of space to investigate a hologram with the possibility of sentience, and Washington wanted to see him as soon as he could.

As the ship docked, Akemi straightened her uniform, conscious of her low rank and the value of first impressions -- especially when one is in a position where one ends up rubbing elbows with a lot of high-ranking officers. "Lieutenant Kallan," she called out, seeing a teal-shirted

officer who matched the description step through the airlock. "Admiral Washington would like to see you as soon as possible."

Marcus glanced up and down the arc of the docking ring corridor. He had never been to Deep Space 9 before, nor any other former Cardassian station, so the layout was both unfamiliar and curious. Upon hearing his name, his attention was drawn to the petty officer nearby. "Yes, that's me," came his response as the toothed wheel of the airlock rolled back into place. A standard Starfleet duffel slung over his shoulder, he approached the yeoman. "Lieutenant Marcus Kallan, reporting as ordered. Let's not waste the admirals' time." Giving the yeoman a nod as a way of indication to take the lead, Marcus followed closely behind -- although his curiosity does get the better of him, glancing this way and that.

Leading Marcus through the corridors of the station, it was only a matter of minutes before Akemi arrived outside Washington's office. Inside, he was hunched over his desk, reviewing the notes from Tim's interview. "Admiral," called out Akemi, rapping the doorframe of the door to Washington's office slightly as she leaned in, "Lieutenant Kallan is here to see you."

Washington raised a finger as if to ask for a moment of time, then, after a few seconds, looked up at the new entrant. "Ah, Lieutenant Kallan," he said, locking eyes with the specialist he requisitioned. "Captain Maddox says you're one of the best. Please, take a seat." With a couple motions of his hand, he waved Akemi off and directed Marcus towards an empty chair.

Not shying away from the intense gaze of the admiral, nor the taxidermy or ancient firearms on display, Marcus nodded in acknowledgement and settled down in a seat across from Washington. Duffel sliding down to the deck beside his chair, the lieutenant responded, "Thank you, sir. Captain Maddox sends his regards."

"Captain Maddox..." mused Washington, a hint of a smile breaking through his gruff exterior. "I remember when he was just Ensign Maddox. But regardless..."

With a wave of the hand, Washington's expression returned to its natural state: dour, with just a hint of surliness. "Lieutenant, I trust you've read the preliminary report on this..." his face reddened slightly and for a moment, contorted into an expression of anger and frustration, "this... this hologram that the crew of the Portland managed to create."

"Yes, sir," Marcus replied, the Lieutenant maintaining a cool and neutral exterior. "The summary mentioned something about the hologram being a facsimile of the late Captain Alenis. The order of events is as of yet unclear to me, as well as the personnel involved. I'm hoping you could fill me in, sir, if you have the time. Or I can get the details from your yeoman."

Washington sighed deeply. "I suppose I should spare Akemi the embarrassment of having to explain the situation to you..." Clearing his throat, he reached for a glass of water and took a big swig before continuing. "It seems that one of the senior officers had a bout of pon farr, the Vulcan seven year itch, and took a fancy to the captain. In their infinite wisdom, the senior staff decided that an appropriate way to deal with the situation was to use their EMH

as a base with which to create a holographic duplicate of the captain. A few detailed scans and what I presume was a romantic tangle in the holodeck, and this is what we ended up with."

"I've read of cases where holodecks were used by fellow crew trying to help a Vulcan resolve his, ah, issues, but never a replica of a senior officer," Marcus said, brow creased in some concern. "It really depends on which person the Vulcan imprints upon. But that's not the reason why I'm here, of course. It -- the EMH -- has conveyed it believes it's sentient, then. I'd like your permission to interview that Vulcan officer, as well as the collection of officers responsible, as part of my investigation, sir." Reaching down to unzip his duffel, he fishes around for a second before producing a PADD, which he taps open and prepares to take notes. "The name of the Vulcan, sir?"

"Lieutenant Jason Beauvoir," replied the admiral. Seeing Marcus raise an eyebrow, he continued before he could ask the question. "I know, it's not a Vulcan name. He's only part Vulcan, a half or a quarter. Feel free to ask him anything you need. Also, it was Lieutenants Silverton and Williams who were involved in the creation of this hologram, and Ensign Barclay was a part of this whole mess as well."

A look of recognition crossed Marcus' face. "Beauvy?" The lieutenant exhaled quickly, like half of a chuckle, accompanied by a quickly-vanishing smirk. "Sorry. I know Lieutenant Beauvoir. We served together aboard the Montana." His attention turned to his PADD where he entered the names down. "I trust their department heads know that you'll be sending around another barking dog? With the death of their captain and a bunch of admiralty on board, folks are likely to already be rattled."

"They are department heads. Well, except for Ensign Barclay." Washington made a mental note to send out a message to the crew of the Portland, or at least, get his yeoman to do it. "I will be notifying them that you are in town, and that you're to have free reign on the ship. And, of course, that I am requesting their complete cooperation with your investigation."

"Hmm. All right. I think I have everything I need, and if not I'll just nag your Yeoman." Marcus rose to his feet. "Is there anything else you need of me, sir?" The lieutenant asked, shoulders squaring up as his stance became more at-attention, indicating that he was expecting to be dismissed.

"Just one last thing," replied the Admiral. "Given the delicate nature of this affair, I shouldn't need to tell you to use a certain amount of discretion. The last thing we want here is rumours to be spreading around the fleet before we've finished our investigation."

"I'll leave that for you to decide, sir," Marcus said, nodding slightly. "I'm just the scientist. I provide the facts. How you choose to spin things is your privilege."

"Very well, Lieutenant. Dismissed."

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*Tyrlai's (aborted) Interview*

Interview Room, DS9

MD02, 1300 hours

**Authors: Admiral Washington (played by Alenis Meru), Admiral Cresswell (played by Jason Beauvoir), Admirals Anderson & Rodriguez (played by Tyrlai Zade)**

"So, before we invite her in, why don't you tell me everything you know about this Lieutenant Zade?" asked Washington, looking over at Anderson. He had reviewed her Starfleet record, of course, but that only told one so much. And in Tyrlai's case, it left the reader with as many questions as it did answers.

"Admiral Cedria Zade was the Captain of the Farragut in the old Constitution era. I met her when I was six years old. Tyrlai is something very different. A runaway Orion slavegirl who was the only available host when Eledzar Zade was killed aboard the Sovereign. I doubt Tyrlai would have been a suitable candidate much less been able to pass any of the entrance exams on her own. But with several hundred years of symbiont knowledge she was able to scrape her way through the Academy.

"She's a bit of a lightning rod, has a tendency to tick off XO's. Two formal complaints, but in each case the officer with the complaint was removed from duty. Sar Kaisyan was the last one, he was removed due to mental issues and is on permanent psychological leave. She plays the fool, but do not fall for it. Just assume she's up to something."

"Kaisyan?" replied Washington, raising an eyebrow. "He served under me, fresh out of the academy. He was... notoriously difficult. And he had some strange ideas about the Federation. I thought I beat that out of him though." Shaking his head, he turned his attention back to the PADD in front of him to make a note of Anderson's comments. "Bring her in."

One of Admiral Washington's staff, a pale man with a small wiry mustache popped his head in. "Apologies, sir. She's apparently not here yet."

Washington sighed angrily. "What do you mean she's not here?" he asked, his blood pressure rising with every word. As an Admiral, he was used to getting what he wanted when he wanted, and at that precise moment, he wanted to talk to Lieutenant Zade. "Where is she?!"

"Computer. Location of Lieutenant Zade?" Admiral Anderson sighed.

"Lieutenant Zade is no longer on the station."

"What, I what!!" A flustered Washington was turning colors in barely suppressed anger.

Admiral Anderson lowered his head and in a carefully measured tone. "When and how did Lieutenant Zade leave the station?"

"Two hours ago aboard the runabout Missouri."

"To what destination, praytell." Admiral Anderson's voice was rising with each new piece of information.

"That information is classified." The computer replied.

Anderson, Washington and Cresswell looked back and forth at each other. Admiral Anderson spoke first. "Admiralty override, alpha, gamma one."

The computer beeped and a wall display lit up showing the face of a graying raven haired woman in diplomacy purple. "Ahh, Admirals, Ambassador Zade said you would be calling. I apologize but she is needed elsewhere." Her voice, cool and commanding dropped into the room like the chime of a fallen pin.

Washington nodded subtly in reply, recognizing the woman on the other end as Admiral Rodriguez, the commander of the Starfleet Diplomatic Corps. If she was calling them about such a matter, then clearly it went right to the top. "My apologies for the interruption, Admiral," replied Washington. "I suppose we will have to do without... wait, did you say Ambassador Zade?"

"All members of the diplomatic corps are Ambassadors of the Federation when the need arises, Admiral." Mirelle Rodriguez nodded to the triumverate while glancing at a data report over her glasses. "And occasionally nearby Bajoran children as well. Was there anything else I could help you with?"

Sighing deeply, Washington looked up at the screen. The reference to Bajoran children indicated that rumours of what happened on this past mission had already been circulating. "I suppose that is all. Good day, Admiral."

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*Jena under the microscope...*

Interview Room, DS9

MD2, afternoon

**Authors: Coln Jena & Admiral Cresswell (Played by Jason Beavoir), Admiral Washington (Played by Alenis Meru)**

Jena received a message to meet with three Admirals. What did they want from her? She wasn't even an official member of Starfleet. She made her way to the Interview Room and was met by one of Admiral Washington's staff.

"Hi, I'm Coln Jena, the Admirals wished to see me." She told the man.

"Ah, yes, the Admirals have been expecting you," replied the man. "Right this way."

"Thank you." She said and followed him into the room.

In the room she was met by three human men. Taking a deep breath to calm her nerves before she said. "Good day, sirs."

"Good day, Ms. Coln," replied Admiral Washington. "We'd just like to talk to you about the events of the past few days and your involvement in the mission to Gamia III." Since she was a little younger than the other witnesses, Washington was taking a bit less stern of a tone than he was used to. "Please, take a seat."

"Thank you, sir." Jena said taking the offered seat. "So, what would you like to know?"

"Well, first off, I understand that you were somewhat pressed into service by the captain on Gamia III," said Washington, pausing to take a sip of water. "Can you please tell us how that came to be?"

"The Kai and the Gamian diplomats refused to discuss any diplomatic matters with anyone without the high ranking Djarra, that is the traditional Bajoran caste system. Since no one among the Federation/Bajoran diplomatic party or the Portland crew had a suitable Djarra and I did, I was chosen and accepted as acting Federation/Bajoran representative." Jena explained.

"I see," replied the Admiral, politely nodding along. It was an unorthodox choice to say the least, but there was at least some reason for it. "What sort of relationship did you have with the captain? Did you meet her before being asked to come on this assignment?"

"Yes, she'd visited me in Sickbay when I was recovering from radiation sickness and I'd spoken to her on a few occasions following that." Jena replied.

"What were your impressions of the captain while you were accompanying her on this mission?" Washington hoped to tease out a few insights from the girl. "Was she restrained, impulsive, did she make rash decisions, was she prone to take unnecessary risks?"

"I believe she showed a great deal of restraint during the diplomatic talks, considering the way the Kai and the Gamian diplomat kept throwing up 'roadblocks' in what what I now see was a concerted effort to both prolong and disrupt the talks." Jena replied. "I doubt I would have been so accommodating, had I been in her position."

"Miss Coln are you any relation Coln Tela?" Cresswell asked.

"Yes, she was my mother, why do you ask, sir?" Jena said.

"I served with her, she was an excellent officer and a good person. You have my condolences for your loss." Cresswell told her. Although the Admiral knew he'd done his job to the best of his abilities he still felt guilt for the loss of the Temperance and her crew, which included Jena's mother.

"Thank you, sir." Jena replied.

"Yes, my condolences as well," added Washington, squirming slightly. "Miss Coln, do you have anything else you would like to say about Captain Alenis or your father for the record? Any further information you could offer about this mission, the captain's mental state, or your father's condition at the time would be most helpful."

"There is nothing further I can add, as I did not observe my father's condition and I'm not qualified to comment on anyone's mental state, sir."

"Very well," replied Washington, leaning back in his chair. "Admiral Anderson, Admiral Cresswell, any further questions?"

Now looking at the young woman in front of him, Cresswell noticed how much she looked like her mother. He hadn't known Commander Coln Tela very well, but they'd talked on several occasions and he had found her intelligent and a pleasure to listen to, even if he only half understood the scientific concepts they'd discuss. It appeared to him that Jena had inherited certain parts of her mother's personality, but also unfortunately some her father's, if Jason was indeed her father. "I have no further questions." He said at last.

Washington nodded. Though it was a short interview, he had felt he got what he needed. Further, it would have been awkward to say the least for him to pry a fourteen year old girl about the details of her father's sex life. "If you have nothing else to add, Miss Coln, you are dismissed."

"Thank you, sirs." Jena said raising and leaving the room.

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### ***Then and Now***

Portland Mess Hall

Preceding Marcus' interview of Holo-Meru

by **L:t Cdr Tyrlai Zade** and **Lt-t(jg) Marcus Kallan**

### **Starfleet Academy (twelve years ago)**

Tyrlai smiled pleasantly as she walked through the quad looking for one who fit the loose description and biofile she had been given. She was angry, furious really. Six months before this would have meant a beating, or worse. Six months before she couldn't have managed to hide it. Today she looked serene, smiling and pleasant while the rage burned itself out well below the surface.

She was finding it a challenge making friends. Each year the Academy admitted a few like her. Little achiever super-geniuses who excelled at something Starfleet needed. And each year those who had needed to work to get in resented them. A full third of the little geniuses would fold in that first year, many of those to return when they were older. Those who made it stuck together and generally did very well. So Tyrlai found herself not fitting in with the general population, but also not fitting in with the super-geniuses. Tyrlai wasn't one of them, she was just eight hundred and fifteen. She scored on the tests like a little

overachiever because her predecessor had been obsessed with knowing everything. So now she knew what he had and though it was well short of everything, it had been enough to fool the entrance examiners.

Tyrlai Zade had been joined at fifteen. And not a vibrant mature fifteen either, almost the opposite. It never happened, twenty-five was a more appropriate age for joining, but the Ambassador was dying on a broken ship in a burning nebula and Tyrlai was the only Trill in light years. By the time the ship was repaired enough to go to warp the joining was permanent. By all sense the symbiont should have overwhelmed her, like a stone thrown into the deep violet of the ocean. But two years of beatings and rage had forged a girl who would not permit that. When they returned to Trill, Tyrlai was still there. The calm serenity of eight hundred year old Zade should have washed the little spark that was Tyrlai away, instead it was the calm serenity that was slowly giving way. The spark was growing stronger and Zade could not have been happier about it.

Scamming her way past the admissions board was one thing, reality came crashing in shortly thereafter. Tyrlai could have taught many of the subjects she had to take, diplomacy, history, sociology, psychology. She excelled for reasons that even eluded her in others, security systems, personal combat, athletics. But her Achilles was a profound one, applied sciences. Physics, mathematics, computer sciences, engineering; and there was no way around them, you passed those classes or you found another calling and Tyrlai Zade was not going crawling back to Trill.

So it came to be she found herself standing in front of an upperclassman, a pale not entirely welcoming looking sort of fellow who did not look pleased to be staring back at the long legged, gangly-tall Trill girl.

Not nearly enough outdoors time for Marcus Kallan, said upperclassman cadet had an armful of PADDs and a scowl to melt bulkheads. "Uh, you're Cadet Zade?" He glanced at her spots. All the humans did that, discreetly or not. "I'm Marcus Kallan. I'm your assigned tutor."

Ever since his destroyed childhood at Wolf 359, Marcus had thrown himself into the physical sciences -- a topic he had not scored highly on his childhood aptitude tests. The counselors called it "transference," although he had made significant strides in conquering the nightmares. A lack of control as a child meant he would need even more control as an adult, over the things that caused his family to be shattered: phased energy; cybernetics; shipboard systems; warp field dynamics. All of these things and more.

So when it came for a round of mentoring between upper- and lower-classed cadets, Marcus was a natural fit for someone struggling with physical sciences. He had spent days of his life committing to memory the tools necessary to solve later problems such as a warp field collapse or a rampant computer AI.

He hadn't the skills to deal with Tyrlai Zade.

"Nice spots," came the predictable, abrasive comment. Marcus sat down at an available table. "Let's get started."



"Thank you," she started always a bit puzzled at the extra attention the spots got, "they are kind of common where I'm from." She sounded slightly british, an odd artifact of the UI when translating the Fordyn provincial dialect of Trill. Tyrlai reached into the small shoulder bag swaying at her hip and produced the only padd she had brought. It held beginners manuals for the three first year sciences. Her eyes darted back and forth at all of the data he had brought with him and hoped she didn't have to learn all of it. She sat down at the table he'd indicated. "You seem very,... dedicated. It must be helpful, that kind of discipline. I've never had the time for discipline, I mean, it seems like it would take a lot of time. One would think we would have developed a way to just beam the information straight into the brain by now. We could all be down at the pub by nine. Though I suppose that would defeat the purpose of being very disciplined somewhat. Still it would be faster, and then you could be disciplined with a whole new set of information from the day before." She smiled hopefully not sure what part of the look he was giving her she should address first. "They don't let me into pubs yet." She said sounding disappointed and as if she had kept trying regularly to see if her status had changed. Which, of course, she had. "You are allowed to talk you know,.. getting to know each other,.. might be helpful to the exchange of information. Unless you have one of those brain transporter things on you?"

Marcus just blinked when listening to her ramble on and on. Finally, when he had a chance to get something in edgewise, his dour response was, "First off, if we could have information transmitted directly to our brains, we'd just be Borg. Trust me, you don't want to be one of them." Placing both palms down on the plasteel table, grounding himself in the natural coolness of the metal; he took a steadying breath, perhaps a defense mechanism for social anxiety. "Secondly, we are defined by circumstance and experience. Having stellar marks in psychology, I'd think you would understand that."

She smiled and her fresh faced, fifteen year old aspect fixed him with a comforting stare. She took a breath to launch into another dizzying array of chatter but he continued before she could.

"From what I see in your record, you're really quite... old." Smooth, Marcus, smooth. "You'd think that someone with your breadth of experience would understand the fundamentals by now."

She looked at him, tilting her head slightly. "It doesn't quite work that way, Marcus. Can I call you Marcus? Of course I can, what a foolish question, its your only name." She gave him one of the stares that unnerved people, well normal people at least. The 'fifteen year old girl is looking at me like my grandmother' stare. "I am eight hundred and fifteen years old and I am also fifteen years old. At the same time, blended together like a fine ancient wine mixed in with replicated sports drink. So yes, I know that experience is a driving force but it's occurring to me that perhaps the experience of spending all day staring at tablets might not be the best experience. So yes, I'm really quite, old.

She stared across the quad towards San Francisco proper. "Which is exactly what I keep telling the pub people."

"Right. Wunderkind," Marcus says, the UI translating the last word from the original German into the appropriate term in Trill for an over-achieving youth. He mumbled something like, "waste of my time" through a sigh, and began sifting through his PADDs. "So, really, I'm not an instructor, so you need to tell me what you'd like to work on. I have remedial lesson plans for pretty much anything..."

Tyrlai heard her parents for a moment in his voice and tone and bristled, her hand twitched - a muscle memory reaching for the knife she used to sleep with. There were still moments when there were two people struggling inside her. They told her that would fade with time, it was because she was too young, way too young for joining. She reached for her pad and tapped a few keys to send over the three classes and syllabi she needed help with. "I cannot go back to Trill. I will do whatever work I need to to get past these."

Marcus glanced up, and blinked at her statement. "Riiight," came his response. "Let's just start with a review of Intro to Calculus and try to get through Linear Algebra. From there... something else." Marcus selected one PADD and pushed the others aside. "So, let's get started."

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### **USS Portland (Nowish)**

Tyrlai Zade whistled a seven hundred year old tune she no longer remembered the name of. The melody yes, the title, composer, every other detail, lost. She seemed to recall there had been lyrics. Trills didn't have total recall, many things she remembered were like that tune, shadows of a mostly forgotten past. She glanced at her reflection while waiting for the replicator to finish assembling her complex breakfast. Sparkling blue eyes, thin nose, with wide cheekbones and a softly pointed jaw. An altogether pleasant aspect framed in dark brown black hair that rolled over her shoulders, one thick strand braided along the left side of her reflection, resting on her tunic next to her newly and fully unexpected rank. She'd been a full lieutenant for several weeks, during that time one of the individuals who had filed complaints against her had found himself on the unkind end of an investigation into Ferengi mind altering. Suddenly most of the black marks on her record had been expunged and a review board had placed her back on the fact track.

Lieutenant Commander Tyrlai Zade. She even had a theoretical chance at Captain by thirty-one. She giggled inside imagining her in the central chair barking commands and making people scurry about. Nothing could ruin her morning, even what was to become of her evening. She had a stupid plan, one that could have her up on charges by the following morning if she were wrong about temporal physics, and she had never been great at temporal physics. Her breakfast materialized, and she grabbed her tray and stepped into the cafeteria.

She spotted him immediately, still thin, about the same height. Matured but still young, even though it had been, what, a dozen years. He had the same demeanor, quiet confidence bordering on smugness, not that that was evident to the casual viewer but Tyrlai knew better. She walked over to his table and set down her tray, "may I join you, lieutenant?"

Marcus Kallan sat, reading from one of one-fewer PADDs than he carried on that first day twelve years ago. His breakfast sat before him, a collection of complex carbohydrate, protein, and vitamin cubes that he picked at absent-mindedly, with a mostly-drunk mug of raktajino as his apparent main sustenance. Time had been fair to Marcus and his career had blossomed into a rewarding junior chair at one of the Daystrom Institute's annexes. Somewhat less pale than the pasty twenty-year-old she met twelve years past, he looked more or less as she remembered. Maybe with a few extra lines under his eyes.

He glanced up from his PADD, and his mind whirled into motion. "Er, Tyrlai Zade. Commander. Sh\*\*!" He quickly got to his feet, PADD clattering to the table. "Sorry, uh, sir. I didn't realize --"

"Goodness, Marcus." She chided, amused at his display. "It's the mess hall not a formal reception." She set her tray down, covered in flowery greens and reds with eggs and some near approximation of bacon. Her violet uniform tunic shimmered oddly as if it were replicated out of something different than the regulations prescribed. Which, of course, it was. She still sounded lightly British, though somewhat less rambling and if anything more confidant, which wasn't strictly very fair. "I could have sworn I taught you to talk to girls far more smoothly than this."

"If you recall, I wasn't particularly interested in girls I couldn't program," Marcus responded, junior officer nerves being replaced with the familiarity of an old friend's face. "Sorry I didn't recognize you at first, Tyrlai. You, ah, look fit. That's a diplomatic officer's uniform, isn't it?" Marcus retook his seat, looking down at his meal, and pushed it slightly aside. "Not exactly standard fare, but then again, from what I remember, you were an odd duck. How has Starfleet treated you?"

"I was an odd duck?" Tyrlai looked slightly chagrined, but paused to think back to all of the pale and incredibly studious people at the academy. "Oh yeah, I guess I was. I think Starfleet is catching up with me. They say in officer school that there is a place for everyone, you have to recognize peoples strengths and put them where they can do the most good." She said, leaving out the part about 'the least harm.' "Diplomacy gives me an unusual amount of latitude. I can't complain about that. How about yourself, what brings you to this little test ship?"

With a sigh, Marcus leaned back in his seat and folded his hands together, resting them on the edge of the table. "You'll run off screaming like everyone else, I expect," he stated. "I'm here on special assignment for Admiral Washington. I'm investigating the little issue with your EMH, whether or not it's sentient or near-sentient." A pause. "Oh, I guess you didn't know. I'm attached to Daystrom at Starbase 173 doing AI and cybernetics research. Thus..." He spread open his hands.

The acting XO of the USS Portland looked thoughtful and took a few bites of the salad potions of her breakfast. "So you are telling me we have an AI on our holodeck?"

"Not just on the holodeck, but stored in the Portland's active memory. Tens of gigaquads

beyond the standard EMH. Possibly sentient levels of complexity in its program, now," Marcus explained, becoming somewhat excited as he is given the opportunity to nerd out. "Without compromising anyone's private life, the EMH was restyled to utilize psychotricorder and memory engram data by some officers that meant well but really didn't use common sense. Er, maybe you should consult with Commander Rouse on the EMH. I'm not sure how much I should be relaying. Suffice it to say, the Admiralty is pretty pissed off."

Marcus looked at Tyrlai, hoping she hadn't put two and two together, and that he hadn't said too much.

"I am extremely disappointed," Tyrlai replied her arms crossed and clearly deep in thought, "that I was not involved in this escapade. An AI created for no good reason and left to run amok. I must be slipping. There was a time when something like this happened they would rouse me out of bed and search my quarters as step one of the investigation." She pondered the notions further. "Is that what the Admirals tribunal was about? I wouldn't have had to duck it if I knew that. Well good luck to you, I'm not even sure where you would begin making such a determination, given that the flip side of the decision is an effective death sentence. I would be tempted to simply declare sentence just in case."

"I see you still don't take anything seriously," Marcus responded, folding his arms across his chest. "This is a serious matter that requires delicate attention. It's also phenomenally bad that individuals with access to advanced technology can just slap together some code and create sentence. Also, it's the center of my expertise, and the opportunity of a lifetime to study first-hand." Raising an eyebrow and almost-smirking in that Vulcan way that he picked up somewhere at the Academy and did nothing but enhance his academic smugness, he finished with, "Study. Yes, I remember now."

"Hey!" She said pointing a violet nailed finger at him. "I got high praise for my efforts that term. Shocked some of those professors scraping by like I did. And if they just 'slapped together code' and created sentence, what have you folks at the Starbase been doing all these years?"

A chime interrupted and the computer's voice interrupted. "Commander Zade, temporal projection four array complete."

"Sorry have to go, you didn't hear that by the way." Tyrlai stood picked up her tray and headed for the exit.

"Those nails aren't regulation," muttered the science officer. He shook his head and went back to his textured protein cubes and reading.

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*Caught*

MD2, evening

Captain's Quarters, USS Portland

**Authors:** Tolaran Kian, Inaji Narale (played by Alenis Meru)

Since coming on board the USS Portland Tolaran had been getting to grips with the fact he was now Chief of Security and had a promotion, Starfleet Command obviously had a lot of faith in his abilities, and he'd gotten straight to work. He had reviewed the mission logs on the Portlands return and was already trying to get over the events that had occurred even though he hadn't even been there, the crew had faced hell. He'd run some scans and had found a strange reading in the Captain's quarters which he had decided to investigate. As the doors whooshed open, he brought his phaser up, his eyes scanning the darkness. "Computer... lights" his eyes took a split second to adjust and he began to look around.

Fortunately for Inaji, she was a light sleeper and the sound of the door to the captain's quarters whooshing open was enough to wake her. Seeing a crack of light, from the hallway, she knew that someone was coming for her. It was the only explanation. Discretely and without making a sound, she grabbed a knife from her nightstand then went back to pretending to be asleep, ready to surprise any intruder who comes close.

The Captains quarters were spacious, amongst the largest he'd ever been in during his time with Starfleet and he found nothing in the main area, walking down the hallway he found a small bedroom to one side, as he looked inside he saw someone apparently asleep on a bed, this instantly struck Tolaran as strange because they hadn't reacted to the lights coming on throughout the Captains quarters. "My name is Tolaran, I am the new Chief of Security on board the USS Portland, would you mind telling me who you are? Please..."

Quickly, Inaji made her move. With a swift, smooth motion, she tossed her blanket into the air, obscuring Tolaran's vision for a moment. As she did so, she bounded out of bed and drew her knife. Face to face with Tolaran, she was shaking as she desperately clutched the knife. "Please..." she gasped "...I don't want to hurt anyone."

Tolaran's reflexes kicked in and he knocked away the blanket, it fell to the ground and he saw a young woman with a knife opposite him. "A simple hello would have been sufficient young lady. As I said, my name is Tolaran Kian, I am the new Chief of Security and I registered your life signs in the Captains quarters however there should have been no-one here..." Tolaran eyed the knife in her hand and the way she was shaking, it was obvious she was scared and didn't really want to use the weapon. Slowly with one hand raised he holstered his phaser. "So... who are you and shall we sit down and talk rather than our current situation?"

"My name is... Inaji Narale," she replied, flicking a switch on the blade to retract it into the handle. Not taking her eyes off Tolaran she walked towards the late captain's kitchen table and kicked out a chair for the security officer. "My apologies for being a poor host, I'm a guest myself in these quarters. Can I get you anything from the replicator?"

Tolaran let a wry smile cross his face as Inaji walked across to the replicator, this was an odd situation and one he hadn't expected when entering the Captain's quarters. He took a seat and placed his chin in his hand for a moment, pondering on what to have "Hmm... tea please, strong and sweet... another habit I picked up during my time at the Academy on Earth was drinking tea, as well as people watching. So Miss Narale... may I be so bold as to ask... why are you here? I have no records of you."

Placing a tray with two glasses of tea on the table -- one Earl Grey, to suit human tastes, and another Cardassian Red Leaf, Inaji pulled out a tray for herself. "I don't suppose you would buy the story that I'm the new captain and there was an oversight with the paperwork?" she asked in a deadpan tone.

Tolaran leaned across and took the clear glass of steaming hot tea, taking a small sip to taste the temperature and enjoying the taste of bergamot. "Mmhmm, perfect cup of tea, got to love replicators..." Tolaran looked up and Inaji, half cocking his head and leaning back slightly "I'm sorry, but no that story wouldn't get past me, whats the real reason?" a more serious tone and look taking over the soft features of Tolaran's face.

Inaji sighed. Explaining to a security officer that you were a wanted fugitive generally wasn't the best idea, so she figured she would gloss over that part. "I'm seeking asylum from Cardassia. Your Commander Rouse graciously let me stay in the captain's quarters for now, at least until we get to DS9. After all, it's generally best for asylum-seekers to keep a low profile." Seeing that Tolaran didn't fully buy it, she continued. "Not to mention that your late captain was my half-sister, so I'm practically family."

Tolaran nodded slightly, drinking some more of his earl grey tea before rubbing his forehead as he processed what he'd just heard. "But if you are requesting asylum I don't understand why you seem to be hiding out here, and also threatening Starfleet Officers with a knife... there must be something else and the Captains half-sister... has this been verified and by whom if it has?"

"I'm also trying to keep a low profile," countered Inaji, keeping her guard up. "Commander Rouse knows of my presence and of the circumstances that led me here. As for the knife... well, I'm a little on edge, as you can imagine."

"You are laying low on a Federation starship in the Captains quarters which many people don't have access to and yet you have a knife ready and are on edge - other than me sticking you in the brig this is one of the safest places on the ship currently especially with people avoiding it due to the circumstances of the ships last mission... I will need to speak to Commander Rouse, and whilst you seem pleasant enough I believe there is more to you Inaji..."

"Is anything as simple as it seems?" she countered, not wanting to reveal herself as an escaped felon quite yet. Besides, if anything, that was the one constant in her life until this point.

Tolaran chuckled, there was definitely more here "Oh yes, sometimes things can be extremely simple... it's often those things that people miss. I guess you wouldn't mind accompanying me to see the Commander, or I have him come down here?"

"I'd rather stay here," replied Inaji. "Keeping a low profile, remember."

"Oh of course, I hadn't intended to walk... transporters are very useful when you want to get

around."

Inaji's eyes darted towards her nightstand and the transporter gun she had used to escape Gamia III, then back towards Tolaran. "Lead on," she said, somewhat reluctantly.

Tolaran tapped his comm badge "Tolaran to Commander Rouse... I think we should meet now Sir, with our special guest..."

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### **Jason and Marcus Catch Up**

MD2, 1400 hours

Lt. JG Marcus Kallan and Lt. Jason Beauvoir

Chief Science Officer's Office

Science Department, USS Portland

Jason was going over the results of the past day's experiments, but his mind wasn't really on his work. Something that Admiral Washington had said was playing on his mind. Was he in love with Holo-Meru? Sure he was physically attracted to her, but she was only a collection of photons and forcefields. Was he projecting his feelings for the 'real' Meru on her? His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the door chime.

"Entrer!" He called in his native French, without looking at the door.

"Entrer?" Responded a familiar voice, followed by a familiar face. Marcus Kallan, also formerly of the USS Montana, stepped through the door and around the large transparent aluminum window that made up the inner bulkhead segregating the entryway from the rest of the office. Tucked in the crook of his arm was a stout glass bottle decorated with Vulcan symbols. "You realize that we speak Federation Standard in these parts. But if you want, I could switch to Vulcan," said the fellow sciences officer, smirk ever-growing on his face. "Hi, Beauvy."

"Marcus," Jason said. "Thanks for the reminder. Now what brings you to my little corner of the universe? Last I heard you were working for the Daystrom Institute?"

Marcus stopped halfway into the office, adjusting how the bottle sat against his arm. "No, 'Wow, Marcus, great to see you!' Heck, I would accept a more Vulcan standard, 'I greet you.' Or, 'Your being here is satisfactory.' They working you too hard here, hmm?"

Jason sighed heavily. "I apologize my friend for my lack of the social niceties, but things have been rather...unsatisfactory of late." Then in a more jovial tone he asked "What is that you have with you?"

He held up the bottle so that the artificial light could catch the crystal, the rich purple color of its interior shining through. "Vulcan port. You gave it to me. I figured I'd need it dealing with a sentient hologram case... that's why I'm here."

Jason remembered the bottle, it was a very good vintage and he was saddened to hear that Marcus hadn't found some other good reason to drink it. "Oh," He said aloud as the man mentioned his real reason for being here. "So this is not a social call then? But rather an interrogation, the Admirals not get all they needed from asking me directly?"

Marcus placed the bottle on the desk, but then returned to where he stood. "We can either approach this as friends and old shipmates, or we can do this professionally. It's your call."

"Professional is probably best, that way the Admirals can't accuse you of bias. After you've filed your report we can catch up over that very fine port." Jason replied his tone neutral.

"That's disappointing, but understandable," Marcus replied. "So, is now a good time, or would you like me to come back when you're feeling more yourself?" A beat, and then his tone softened a touch. "No amount of Vulcan logic is going to fix what transpired, Jason. All that's happening now is a bunch of stuffed shirts trying to justify their jobs by looking for an explanation that doesn't need to be."

"Ask away." Jason said.

"Tell me, in your own words, what happened on Stardate 67265 with regards to the ship's EMH," Marcus asked, hands folded, resting on the edge of Jason's desk. "And you don't need to bring up unsavory details; that much is already understood and needs no repeating."

"Okay, please bear in mind that my memories of the time are fragmented and what I tell you is an amalgamation of those memoirs mixed with what I've read or been of my actions during that time." He stated before beginning his 'story'. "I had escaped from the Brig and was in search of Captain Alenis, when I encountered Security. I took a hostage and forced Security to lead me to the Captain. They lead me to Holodeck 2 to where I met with the hologram, which I believed was the real Captain. I initiated a mind meld with her and then I 'underwent my treatment' before falling into a deep restful sleep."

Marcus made sure to keep his expression neutral while he listened to his friend-and-colleague's story. "So you didn't know ahead of time that they had created a hologram in Captain Alenis' image. Check." There's a brief pause, and his expression turned curious. "Tell me - this is probably a stupid question, but bear with me - did the mind meld... did it satisfy that part of your condition? What I mean to ask is, did you read something from the hologram?"

"The hologram's 'brain' pattern was based on that of Captain Alenis, so it felt 'real'. Also I have since found out that a psychotricorder in projection mode was also used on me, which probably removed any doubt I may have experienced." Jason replied.

Marcus' brow creased in concern. "Okay, so now things are starting to add up. Holograms can have some pretty sophisticated personality emulation and behavior patterns that are based off of crew records and recorded footage, but when you start introducing psychotricorders and brain patterns, I can see how the simulation became 'larger than life', so to speak." He leaned back in his chair, and scratched at his chin in thought. "Okay. I'd like



to keep my options open and come back to you with more questions on the topic later, if that's all right with you? Really, you're an innocent bystander in all of this." A beat. "What kind of man is Commander Rouse? I need to bang on his door at some point."

"Of course." Jason said. "As for Commander Rouse, I don't know him well, but from what I've been able to glean, he is a fine by-the-book officer who was loyal to Captain Alenis."

"And Dr. Silverton, and Lieutenant Williams, and Ensign Barclay... according to the Admirals, these are the officers responsible for tampering with the EMH," Marcus stated, looking for a sign of affirmation from Jason. "Now, this one is off the books, Jason, because I'm not a JAG, -- " Marcus laughed a little. "I have a feeling I'm going to be saying that a lot over the next few weeks. Anyway... my question is, what is your opinion of these officers? How should I approach them?"

"Okay, Dr Silverton is a capable and caring physician and determined medical researcher." Jason began. "He also saved my daughter's life." He paused. "I suggest you approach Silverton by appealing to the logic of the situation."

"Lieutenant Williams is an engineer and a pilot, perhaps you could bond with her on thing mechanical."

"As for Ensign Barclay, I've never met her, but I hear she's of a nervous disposition. I trust that will help."

Marcus nodded. "Okay, that gives me a starting point." With that, the visiting officer stood. "Let's catch up once this whole thing blows over, okay? I'm sure I can stay longer after the investigation... it's not like Starbase 173 is going anywhere." Offering half a closed-mouth smile, Marcus finished with, "Thanks, Beauvy."

"Sure, I'd like that, and I introduce to Jena, the daughter I never knew I had." Jason replied with a smile.

Marcus blinked, then chuckled. "You, a daddy? Now that's something." He nodded. "Okay. See you around."

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### **An Interview In Engineering**

MD2, 1500 hours

Lt. JG Marcus Kallan and Lt. Sera Williams

Main Engineering, USS Portland

Marcus, consulting a PADD at every junction and turbolift lobby, traversed the Miranda-class ship on his search for a particular ensign in Engineering. Doing his best not to collide with other crew as he made his way down to Deck 7, he ultimately arrived at the ship's Main Engineering section. Thumbing his PADD to a picture of one Nikki Barclay, he scanned the room looking for her. She said she'd be on duty at this time, Marcus thought, frowning.

Sera looked up from the latest frustrating venture. She had really wanted to see a 3% bump in output efficiency from the new engine calibrations from Starfleet, but the 80 year old Miranda struggled to hit 1.5%. With a sigh, Sera looked up to see what looked like a science officer come through the doors. She didn't recognize him as one of the crew and hadn't received any notices of visitors, so she thought it best to introduce herself.

The Chief Engineer made her way to Marcus. Once close enough, she gave a friendly smile and offered her hand for a handshake, "I'm Lt. Sera Williams, Chief Engineer. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Ah, that'll do," the sciences officer said, nodding appreciatively. He took the hand offered to him and gave it a light shake, firming up in case Sera's response was to give him a firm one. Everyone shakes hands differently. "Lieutenant Marcus Kallan, Starbase 173," he replied as a way of greeting. "I'm trying to hunt down Ensign Barclay, but you're also on my list. Is now a good time to have a chat?" List?

"Sure, my office is just over there," Sera replied with a slight nod of her head in the direction of her office. "Ensign Barclay was sent to Holodeck 1 to calibrate the holo-emitters. She should be back anytime." She moved her hand forward, in an inviting gesture to her office. Once sure Marcus was following, Sera stepped through her office door with a whoosh.

The office itself looked as though it didn't belong, it had the sterile white finish of the late 23rd Century mixed with consoles and displays that definitely belonged to the present. Sera made her way behind her desk, which had a few side-projects and PADDs scattered in a busy but organized fashion. With a look out the viewport to Main Engineering, Sera extended her hand to the chair on the guest side of the desk and said, "Please, have a seat. May I offer you anything from the replicator?"

Marcus sat in the proffered seat. "No, thank you," he replied. Placing his own PADD down at the edge of Sera's desk, he began his spiel. "Lieutenant, let me be absolutely blunt and up front. There is an office full of admirals who are extremely upset about the implications of members of the Portland's senior staff's usage of medical and holographic technology. Simply put, I am here to analyze the degree of awareness and cognizance of the modified EMH that was used to treat Lieutenant Beauvoir.

Sera nodded in acknowledgement as she sat down. Since being promoted to Chief Engineer, she had seen her Captain's funeral, faced an inquisition from a group of Admirals, and welcomed her sister aboard. In most cases, those events would be spread out over a career... not during a first time mission. It had been overwhelming.

"Now, this is not a witch hunt. I'm not a JAG. I'm mainly using this interview to learn, in your own words, what transpired, so I can use that as a base point when I begin taking apart the EMH and figuring out exactly what's going on. That said, are you still comfortable with this meeting?"

Sera tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear as her emerald eyes locked with Marcus' eyes. "I'm good. Before we begin, I should tell you that I wasn't involved with the original

modification of the EMH used for Lieutenant Beavoir's condition. I only became involved in the repair work after the..." Sera took a moment to search for the right word, "incident with the phaser in Sickbay." This topic always made her nervous, she had never been through an Admiralty Inquisition as some crewmembers had taken to calling what was happening. However, Marcus seemed to have a certain calming quality that a room full of Admirals lacked, which put Sera more at ease.

Smirking, Marcus nodded. "I've heard about your XO taking a phaser to the EMH console. That'll be a fun interview." The mildly sardonic tone clearly indicated that Marcus had already heard, and that disapproved of Commander Rouse's behavior. "Never mind that, though. So, what happened after the console was phasered? What repairs were needed? How did the EMH's matrix hold up against that kind of phased discharge?"

Sera sat back into her chair and began to talk, using an occasional hand gesture to emphasize certain words. "Ensign Barclay had been present in Sickbay. Just before the 'incident' she had been able to copy most of the EMH's program to the Holodeck. Because not all of the program survived, a cascade failure began to occur in the EMH... which threatened the entire program."

As Sera continued talked, Marcus took up his PADD and made a note for later, seemingly unrelated to what she had been saying. A quick note, too; couldn't have been more than one or two words.

Sera took the time to change her sitting position as she crossed her left leg over her right. She then continued in her best 'explaining only the facts' voice, "I arrived in Sickbay, as ordered by Lt. Hudson. Ensign Barclay seemed, understandably, upset at the situation and was worried about the losing a sentient being. I offered my assistance, as ordered. Shortly after, Nikki had successfully loaded the program, but an error in the programing quickly shut it down. We determined that the cause was a corrupted boot sequence. In order to make the repair, we merged the EMH with the EMH Diagnostic program... which we should probably request a new one just in case. After that, we methodically repaired sub-routine after sub-routine until we arrived at the personality matrix."

Taking a break to breath, Sera then finished, "That is when I was called to the surface." Sera did her best to hide the hurt she felt about the mission, and kept all but the most subtle of hints out of her voice, "Upon my return, I sought out Ensign Barclay, who was attempting to repair the program. the program had begun to fail again, too many pieces of programming smashed together that were never meant to be put together. I was able to determine that the problem arose because so much of the original programming had been altered that the two EMHs no longer fit together. Once the edits to the programming were made, she was repaired."

"Hmm," Marcus uttered, listening intently. Once Sera finished her story, he nodded. "Excellent information. This is now becoming very clear to me. Admiral Washington has given me orders to examine the hologram's programming and determine whether it is actually a sentient AI. While philosophers have been challenged with the notion of sentience for millenia, I am somehow expected to prove it in a short number of days. But this, at least,

gives me a place to start from. Thank you, Lieutenant." Without losing a beat, he finished with a question: "I expect there will be no problems with full access to your holodeck systems for the duration of my assignment, yes?"

"Sure, I'll give you access," replied Sera. She then turned toward a small stack of PADDs as she said, "Computer, give Lieutenant Marcus Kallan level 4 access to the holodeck, authorization Williams-One-Beta-Two."

The computer gave an affirmative beeping noise as the standard computer voice replied, "Authorization granted." Sera then picked up the PADD she had been looking for and handed it to Marcus. "That has a record of all the edits that were made and what programs were used during the EMH's repair," Sera said with a friendly smile. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do."

"Thank you. You've been most helpful." Marcus stood, collected his PADD, and with Vulcan-like professional detachment -- not a hint of a smile or anything else -- he's off.

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### **Only Photons and Forcefields**

MD2, 1900 hours

Lt. JG Marcus Kallan, Ens. Nikki Barclay (NPC), Holo-Meru (NPC), Lt. Cmdr. Tyrlai Zade, Holodeck Two, USS Portland

"Computer, give me a standard holographic maintenance console with the option to expand functionality as demand requires it," Marcus said as he walked into Holodeck One. Having interviewed with a number of the crew, he found that there were no information points that indicated that he should wait on his technical assessment. As the holodeck doors closed behind him with their characteristic mechanical, hydraulic exhale, a holographic terminal appeared, in front of an illuminated octagonal platform. The projection platform was entirely unnecessary, as he was located inside the holodeck, but it came with the simulation.

He came to a halt at the console, and moved his hands across it without touching the LCARS panels. "Yes, this is satisfactory. Computer, tie in this simulation with the ship's holographic matrices. Please consult Chief Engineer Williams' recent access grant if you need verification."

"Access granted. Simulation has full computer resources," the computer replied. Marcus nodded.

"Right, then. Computer, activate the EMH," he commanded, expecting it to appear within the confines of the diagnostic device.

"Computer, belay that!" shouted an out of breath Nikki Barclay, an instant after the doors to the holodeck opened again. When she had heard that the strange visitor from Admiral Washington's office was headed down to the holodeck, she headed down there as soon as she could, hoping to catch him before he did anything rash. Leaning over, gasping for air, she looked up at the blue-shirted Lieutenant. "What are you doing? Are you here to delete the

captain?"

"What in..." Marcus pivoted on his heel to glare at the person that countermanded his work. His glare turned to a scowl upon seeing Nikki's face. "Ah, Ensign Barclay, I presume," he said, looking the younger woman up and down. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, finally," tone of voice rather sarcastic. "Lieutenant Marcus Kallan, Starbase 173. I'm here to begin work evaluating the mess that is your EMH as ordered by Admiral Washington."

"Mess?" A look of shock appeared on Nikki's face. "She's not a mess, she's a person!" she shrieked as she stared down the higher ranking officer. "And I won't have you messing around with her program without her permission! Not after we worked so hard to save her!"

Scowling, Marcus thumbed at his PADD a few times, and then turned it to show or pass to Nikki. "Take. Read. Comprehend," he said, the PADD showing his orders from Admiral Washington and engineering permissions from Lieutenant Williams. Lastly are his credentials, being a scientist from the Daystrom Institute specializing in artificial intelligence. Of course, she may also have heard of Captain Maddox as well... "I don't have time for attachment to a pile of circuits and heuristics. I need a team that will help me identify and classify it so the admiralty can make a decision as to what to do."

Nikki quickly skimmed over the PADD. It was right there, orders straight from the top, as well as his background from no less than Captain Maddox. As she read it, she started quaking in her boots. This wasn't good. The very life of the hologram was at stake. "Well," she started, a hint of nervousness in her voice as she put her hands on her hips, "she is my friend, so if I can't be on this team, I'm going to stay right here and make sure you don't mess around with her program."

"Right." Marcus' scowl turned to a smirk. "You can stick around and I can interview you while I work, if that's what you want. But I think you've done quite enough, Ensign, so please do not interfere with my orders." With a small, exasperated sigh, he stated again, "Computer, let's try this again. Activate the EMH."

Nikki just scowled at Marcus and watched him closely as the Alenis hologram appeared. "Please state the nature..." she started, a vestige of her original programming, before taking in her surroundings. She knew she was in the holodeck and that Ensign Barclay was there, but didn't recognize the other person.

"Nikki," said the EMH with a nod. "And... I'm afraid I haven't met you yet," she added, sizing up Marcus.

"Interesting," was the first utterance from the unknown sciences officer, no doubt picking up on the shreds of EMH code that must still be active. Marcus cleared his throat, and began tapping at the maintenance console. "I am Lieutenant Kallan," he said, activating a few diagnostics as he talked. As he worked, he did not look up at Holo-Meru, instead relying on what the instrumentation told him. "I'm going to be running some tests. Your circumstance is unique and I would like to better understand your programming. Could you identify yourself for me, please?"

The hologram paused for a moment, pondering the question. Her identity wasn't exactly straightforward. In terms of memories and emotions, she was the captain. But physically, she wasn't. "Captain Alenis Meru, Starfleet. Serial number 72M-39274," she said, going with her first instinct. "At least, a holographic version of her," she added a moment later, with a little less certainty.

Marcus clicked his tongue, watching the diagnostic information begin to pour past him on his screens. "I wasn't aware that emergency medical holograms could have the rank of Captain," he stated, beginning to follow a dialog script of his own devising some years ago. "How much of your original emergency medical hologram programming are you aware of? Heuristics? Medical journals?" He was as much asking Meru as he was making inquiries into her program using the console. Additional data began to show on his console, with glaring red marks showing cross-linking and corruption. "Poor, poor EMH," he said, shaking his head.

"Medical journals?" asked the holo-Meru, in a quizzical voice. This Lieutenant Kallan was getting on her nerves already.

"We had to delete or quarantine the EMH's entire database," explained Nikki in a somewhat acidic tone. "The captain didn't know about any medical journals, so they had to go. She's 100% Meru." Nikki bit her lip for a moment. "Well, 99.8%. There was a little bit of damage to her program when..." she stared down at her feet and continued in a meek voice "...Commander Rouse shot the EMH console."

"Yes, I'm aware, thank you, Ensign," came Marcus' equally acerbic reply. Glancing at the Ensign, he said, tone less annoyed, "I have the full files on what happened. Logs. Oral reports. Everything." Looking back to holo-Meru, Marcus told her, "Unfortunately the real Captain Alenis died in the line of duty. I'm afraid I can't refer to you in that fashion. Let's just go with Meru, then, shall we? So. Meru." Marcus looked down at his console. "Here's a simple question. What are you?" His hand tapped at his console, bringing up subroutines on self-definition and awareness. Even before she answered, his gaze darkened a bit as he read the numbers.

"That's not exactly a simple question," countered the hologram. It was one she had been contemplating over the past few days. The Federation didn't have any clear ethical guidelines on possibly-sentient holograms, and ancient Bajoran religious texts were unsurprisingly silent on the subject. "I suppose I am a hologram, a clone of Captain Alenis, if you will, based on an EMH Mark I. I believe myself to be a sentient being, though I understand that you might think I'm just programmed to say that."

The numbers didn't lie. It would take weeks, if not months, for Marcus to properly analyze this holo-matrix, but what he saw flash across his readouts gave him serious pause. He gripped the sides of the console for support. "Ensign Barclay," he said, clearing his throat as the first syllable didn't quite come out fully. His eyes were fixed on the console. "Please disable all of the ship's holographic systems, including backups, with the sole exception of any hardware necessary to support... this. I need to be absolutely certain my readings are correct, with no margin for error, and no corruption from adjacent matrices." But what

readings are those?

"Okay..." replied Nikki, trailing off nervously and making her way to a terminal on the wall to do as he said.

"What kind of readings?" The holo-Meru stepped towards Marcus and leaned over the control panel, taking in what was on the screen even though she couldn't make heads or tails of it. "Is there something wrong with my program? What does that mean?" she asked, pointing towards the screen.

Blinking at holo-Meru in surprise, Marcus quickly shut down the console's displays. But what was on the various panels and screens indicated a cross-firing pattern not unlike what has been studied regarding the nature of functional, evolved positronic brains and other holo-matrices exhibiting emergent sentient behavior. "Nothing. Nothing at all. I need to study this more. Computer," he said towards the ceiling, brushing off holo-Meru with a mildly panicked look on his face. "Alter parameters of the EMH program. Allow for continuous running in active memory even when physical image is discontinued. And you," Marcus pointed rudely at Nikki. "I will be watching her program's parameters. Do not countermand my orders or make any modifications. I have to report to Admiral Washington."

"OY!" The door slid open and Tyrlai strode through glaring. "I was running some very important theoretical temporal projections next door. What is the meaning of this!?" She looked over at Marcus. "Oh, you. Contrary to your internal monologue, your work is not necessarily the most important thing going on at any particular moment." Tyrlai glanced at the others. "Hi Nikki, Captain." That recognition dawned on her a few moments later and her still-glaring eyes widened as she looked over at Marcus again. "The AI is a copy of the Captain?"

Not even turning to look at Tyrlai, instead Marcus sighed inwardly as he looked up at the ceiling. "Ensign, show the Commander my PADD with my orders, if you would be so kind," he said.

"We all have orders, they all come from the same place. the Federation. Your orders don't automatically trump anyone else's." Tyrlai looked over at Holo-Alenis her eyes searching the features of the Captain. "I seldom take the time to appreciate people until they are gone." She took the hologram's hand for a moment. "I'm going to work on that. In the meantime, do you have any special fears of waking up in small cramped places?"

"Small, cramped..." The hologram clasped Tyrlai's hand in hers. "Tyrlai, I don't know what you're talking about, but it's good to see you. I'm... sorry about the captain. How are you holding up?"

"Wait, what?!" Marcus stepped away from the holographic maintenance console and moved to intercede between Tyrlai and faux-Meru. He didn't actually physically impose himself, but the intent is certainly behind his eyes and in his body language. "Commander, I'm under strict orders from Admiral Washington to evaluate this program. I can't... I won't have you interfere. I don't care if you're 800 years old and you think you know better. An admiral's

orders is bigger than even you."

"I have been better," Tyrlai told Meru, wincing lightly and pointedly making Marcus wait. She rubbed the side of her abdomen as if trying to brush away some lint. "But I am hoping that after tonight it will be better." She then turned back to Marcus. "My orders come from Admiral Rodriguez, and while you are deciding whether or not to take a life I'm trying to save one. Look outside yourself now and again, Marcus, you have all the time in world to make this decision." She smiled at Holo-Meru, "in fact, it's probably better for all concerned if you do take your time."

Tyrlai spun on her heel and stalked towards the door. "And never tick off passive-aggressive Trills, it's just bad for your sleep habits."[/quote]

"Dysfunctional," muttered Marcus, shaking his head after Tyrlai. What he was commenting on is anyone's guess -- although, based on the events he's been made aware of, perhaps everything. Snapping back to the current moment, Marcus reminded Nikki, "Everything except Meru, offline. Active memory. The whole bit." Then, taking a parting look at the hologram, Marcus himself turned to leave. "I need to see the Admiral."

As the holodeck doors closed behind Marcus, the hologram turned towards an exasperated Nikki Barclay. "What is with that guy?" she asked,

"I know, right!" exclaimed Nikki.

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### *The Reception, Part I*

Starbase 66

Somewhere above Trill

July 2412

**Authors: Captain Alhambra del Bolero (played by Alenis Meru), Captain Sera Williams**

Clutching his swagger stick, the esteemed Captain Alhambra del Bolero stared out the window of the reception hall. As the final captain of the USS Portland, he had the dubious honour of organizing a farewell reception to the ship on Starbase. The magnitude of this celebration was rare; as the Portland was by then the oldest capital ship in the fleet and the last of the Mirandas, Starfleet Command had approved a special sendoff, inviting all the surviving former crew to Starbase 66. And, of course, Alhambra del Bolero was not one to throw a mediocre party, having planned every little aspect, from the food and drinks to the docking of the Portland just outside the hall, giving attendees one last chance to admire the old bird.

And that decommissioning came not a moment too soon, thought del Bolero. The Portland was an antique bucket of bolts, a ship whose stature was well below his. Of course, he had accepted the command for one reason and one reason only. The Portland was a testbed for some of the new systems going into the advanced Eclipse class cruiser, which was a quantum leap forward in Federation technology. By accepting a temporary assignment below his stature and familiarizing himself with these systems, del Bolero had set himself up



as the natural choice to command the Eclipse.

And command the Eclipse he would. Tomorrow, the same day as the decommissioning of the Portland was to begin, he would take command of the most advanced starship in the fleet and take his rightful place in the halls of great Captains. Kirk, Picard, del Bolero... that was a trinity that he liked the sound of.

Taking one last look at the aging, decrepit Miranda class, he let out a derisory grunt. The ship should have been put out of its misery decades ago. Next to his shiny new Eclipse cruiser, it looked like a horse and buggy. He shook his head as he strode back towards the door, ready to greet the newest guest.

Captain Sera Williams had saved up enough shore leave for this occasion. The Portland had been her very first assignment. She had served as Chief Engineer aboard the Portland for 15 years. She had kept the ship flying through everything, and fought with her when her century old shell said no to the new technology Starfleet wanted to be tested.

In many ways, looking at the ship today reminded her of a quote she had seen in one of her favorite holonovels, 'Love. You can learn all the math in the 'Verse, but you take a boat in the air that you don't love, she'll shake you off just as sure as the turning of the worlds. Love keeps her in the air when she oughta fall down, tells you she's hurtin' 'fore she keens. Makes her a home.' She loved the Portland. It had taken a joint committee of Admirals to pry her away from her Captain of Engineering position and given her own ship. In many ways, the Portland had stayed with her as Sera, now Captain, had been given her own Galaxy-class ship five years ago. The Equinox itself was an aging ship amid a changing fleet. She still had to battle to keep the ship relevant, especially when ships like the newer Eclipse were threatening to mothball it. Her Galaxy still fought hard against the new technological advances, but Sera and her crew found ways to make it work. In many ways, Sera wouldn't have it any other way.

Captain Williams nodded at the host and extended her hand, "Captain del Bolero, she was a fine ship. It was an honor to serve on her."

Del Bolera harrumphed in derision and muttered a flustered half acquiescence. "I am sure it might have seemed bright a new through a similarly bright and new set of eyes. But now the reclaiming yards may have a tough time finding anything to reclaim." He looked over towards the room beginning to fill with attendants to the ceremony and excused himself. "I hear the drinks are to be of significantly higher quality."

The Captain of the Equinox returned her most believable fake smile, forged from years of Starfleet missions filled with defusing hostile entities. She thanked the universe that she had never had the 'honor' of serving this Captain of the Portland.

Somewhere above Trill

July 2412

**Authors: Captain Alhambra del Bolero (played by Alenis Meru), Captain Sera Williams, Alenia Zade**

A tall and slender Trill girl in ensign stripes who could not possibly be more than a week out of the academy stepped forward and offered her hand to Captain Williams. "My name is Alenia, I'm Tyrlai's daughter. She spoke of you often." She smiled, with the same disarming manner and liquid blue eyes. In fact she could have been a carbon copy of her mother, just younger.

Sera's first thought on seeing Alenia was, 'where has the time gone?' Had it been 21 years ago, Sera just knew that she would have been talking to her friend. In those 21 years, Sera's black hair had started to show strands of grey and she had developed a few crow's feet wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Otherwise, she was still relatively the same Sera, with a few extra aches. Sera shook the other woman's hand, "It's a pleasure. I had some fun times with your mother, she was a good friend." Leaning a bit closer to the Ensign, she said, "If you don't mind being aboard one of the oldest ships in the fleet, the Equinox has a few openings."

"That would be very nice," the young Trill smiled, speaking with the same oddly British sounding accent, as she looked around the room. "I had a favour to ask actually but I was hoping to ask when Mister Silverton had arrived because otherwise you will probably just look at me strangely and send me to a psychologist."

Sera gave a small smile as she reassuringly replied. "After 20 something years in Starfleet, you see a lot of things. Most of it is scanning nebulae and chasing comets, but you always see something that you would have thought insane before you actually see it. I've learned anything's possible."

"And I would believe it," said Alenia with a searching eye as she scanned the crowd for new arrivals.

Jena walked into the reception hall her reddish-blonde hair tied in a loose bun. Recognising Sera, she was going to say hi, but seeing she was in a conversation, she instead chose to approach Captain del Bolero. "Good day, sir. I'm Lieutenant Coln Jena, lately of the Concordia." She said by way of introduction. "My father, Commandant Jason Beauvoir would like me to give you his apologies that he can't make it to this reception, but he will be at the ceremony tomorrow."

"Ah, that is a shame," replied del Bolero in his characteristic aristocratic voice. "My fresh meat from the academy have spoken highly of him. I would have quite liked to meet him in person, m'lady."

"I'm sure my father would be glad to hear that, sir." Jena said. "Now if you'd excuse me, I best get to mingling."

"Very well; we shall meet again, madam."

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*The Reception, Part III*

Starbase 66

Somewhere above Trill

July 2412

**Authors: Ellen Washington & Judith Rouse (played by Timothy Rouse), Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir), Captain Brad Silverton**

On the other side of the room Ellen was fidgeting with a loose button on her dress. She was nervous. Would he come? She looked around the room and noticed everyone was forming groups. Standing with the people they'd served with on the Portland. "If I didn't know any better I would think you don't want to be here?" a voice said from behind her. When she turned around she saw Judith's standing there, wearing the long Klingon robe she'd seen her sister-in-law, ex sister-in-law, wearing numerous cases in the last decade. "Ambassador," she greeted back.

Judith smiled and hugged her. "I've missed you, you really should come by more often." "I know, it's just been hard to find time, with Andy now at the academy and my work for the veteran committee." She always stayed in touch with Judith and visited her often on Qo'nos. Where she worked as the Federation ambassador to Earth. And lived with her Klingon husband and two teenage sons. Andy had loved it there, playing with his cousins. She always felt that Judith's husband filled the absence Andy's father had left.

"He isn't coming, you know." Judith said. She noticed how Ellen constant keep looking at the entrance. "Last thing I heard he was on some backwater planet getting drunk." Ellen raised her head to look at Judith and saw the same pain she felt.

Having escaped from del Bolero, Jena spotted Judith and approached her. "Hi Judith, how's Qo'nos been treating you?" She asked with a smile.

Judith turned around to the young woman and felt awkward for not recognizing her, but she was too much of a diplomat to let her know. Turning her mind to the question she had to laugh. "Complicated. I think I'm the only person living on Qo'nos with a handicap." She joked. "Except for my family, they all think I'm nuts for not killing myself. That gives some very entertaining conversations."

"I can imagine." Jena said with a laugh. Realizing that Judith had no idea who she was, Jena said "My father, Jason Beauvoir, told me that the Klingons also have some interesting ideas about the works of William Shakespeare."

Judith chuckled. "You've grown, young lady" Judith said and looked up at Ellen to see if she had recouldnises the young woman in front of them or not.

"Twenty years have passed, you know." Ellen said. "In case you missed, even Andy is already 19 and in his second year on the academy."

"Time goes fast indeed." Turning to Jena she asked "How are you these days?"

"I believe I'm doing well. I'm a Science officer on the Concordia and I'm dating a Caitian woman named Silbea, she's a school teacher and we're very happy." Jena replied.

"That sounds very well," Judith complimented the young woman on her accomplishments. "How is your father? Will he be present today as well?"

"My father's busy, not only is he Academy Commandant but he also teaches a couple of classes and due to this business, I'm afraid he won't make it to this reception." She smiled. "He will at tomorrow's ceremony though."

"It will be nice to meet him." she replied.

The doors to the reception room open and Captain Brad Silverton walked in. He had a million tasks on his agenda, half of them late with endless questions from his assistant researchers. Such was the life of a division head at Starfleet Medical Research. However, none of that mattered right now though as he took in the atmosphere of the room and of old friends.

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#### *The Reception, Part IV*

Starbase 66

Somewhere above Trill

July 2412

**Authors: Nikki Barclay and "Joe" (played by Alenis Meru), Captain Sera Williams**

The doors of the station opened again, revealing a woman in her mid forties, panicking as she was out of breath from jogging halfway across the station in her excitement about this event. "Come on, Joe, hurry up!" she called out, beckoning her husband, a bald, middle-aged man who was less than enthused about the speed at which Nikki was walking.

"I'm going as fast as I can," he replied. "I'm not a young hologram anymore, these photons are almost forty years old," he added in his trademark dry sense of humour as he strode towards the entrance, closing the gap between him and Nikki. "There, all is well, for I have arriv--"

"Sera!" exclaimed Nikki, loud enough to be heard by everyone in the room. "Oh my god, it's been so long! How have you been? I see you've made captain, that's amazing!"

Sera gave her friend a hug and said with a laugh, "I gave you the news about five years ago." Nodding her head towards the EMH, Sera continued, "How is marriage treating you? I never found time myself."

"Oh, it's wonderful! Joe is just so charming, and cultured, and handsome, and intelligent,

and..." Realizing she was babbling, Nikki changed the subject. "I can't believe you never got married!" she exclaimed, before cringing at the awkwardness of her phrase. "I mean... it's okay... if you don't want to... there's nothing wrong with being single... I just meant..."

"I believe that was supposed to be a compliment," interrupted Joe, sidling up next to Nikki. "Why don't I leave the two of you to catch up?"

"All right," replied Nikki, before grabbing Joe and giving him a little kiss goodbye. "Just don't go too far." She turned back to Sera. "Captain Sera Williams. I like the sound of that."

Sera smiled off the compliment. Nikki and her had been roommates for a few years aboard the Portland, so she was used to a bit of awkwardness at times. It was part of what made Nikki, well Nikki. "Don't get me wrong, I have had chances. I think you could say that I married my ship." Sera then said, "Thanks, my ship is one of the last Galaxy-class starships still in operation. We could always use a good systems engineer, if you could convince Joe to come with you."

"That would be awesome!" exclaimed Nikki. "Though, Joe is notoriously stubborn. I think he's spent enough time cooped up on a starship during his time in the Delta quadrant. Not to mention his research, and..." Nikki lowered her voice "...you didn't hear this from me, but he's being courted to run for the Federation senate."

"Our hologram becoming a Vedek and your husband become a Federation Senator. It's great to see how far we've come in the last 20 years." Sera then added, "If you ever need a break, we could always make room for a VIP or two."

"I'll keep that in mind," replied Nikki, excitedly. "I'm sure there will be some ribbon cuttings and diplomatic affairs in the future that we might need to borrow a ship to get to."

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### *The Reception, Part V*

Starbase 66

Somewhere above Trill

July 2412

**Authors: "Joe" (played by Alenis Meru), Captain Brad Silverton**

As he saw his wife engrossed in conversation, Joe the EMH thought it perhaps best to leave her be and try to strike up a conversation on his own. Recognizing a fellow practitioner of medicine, he sauntered over towards Brad. "Ah, Doctor Silverton, I read your latest paper. I must say there is some fine research coming out of your department."

Brad turned from starrng out the window towards Joe. Brad smirked playfully, "Well hello Doctor. Thank you. We've a good string of luck as of late with our break-thrus. Finally cracked that ancient disease that killed my parents in fact. Nobody will ever have to face that killer taking their loved ones away." His smirk faded and Brad grew a little sullen. "There is one mystery that has always alluded me though."

"Oh?" asked Joe, raising an eyebrow. "Is it the question of the secondary vectors of transmission for the Groxian plague? I've been pondering that as well..."

"No I'm afraid it isn't. Its something a bit more... personal." Brad seemed rather withdrawn and down but quickly recovered. "But you are right. The secondary vectors are still causing a problem and never were completely nailed down. You've been working on them then?"

"Well, not directly," replied Joe, a little bashfully. "You might say I've been following your work. I've been researching a family of diseases indigenous to the Beta Quadrant, and I noticed a few similarities between our work." He wrinkled his brow, recalling Brad's paper again, not remembering any other unresolved questions in the future research section. "If I may ask, what is this mystery?"

"More of a side project really. The age old problem of aging that us biological beings need to deal with." Brad chuckled softly. "But you were saying about a beta quadrant disease?"

"Yes, I have a paper coming out next month on it. I don't want to spoil it for you, but..."

"buuuuut?" Brad said with a smirk.

"Well, I've been researching some diseases that affected some civilizations near the Hromi cluster. As far as I can tell, these diseases are clearly related genetically, but historical records indicate that they had afflicted these societies even before they developed interstellar travel." The doctor paused for emphasis. "I suspect that they were seeded on the planet somehow, perhaps by a comet."

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*The Reception, Part VI*

Starbase 66

Somewhere above Trill

July 2412

**Authors: Holo-Meru, Timothy Rouse, Captain Brad Silverton, Alenia Zade, Captain Sera Williams**

When the doors opened again, they revealed two people who no one expected to see at this reception. The first was a tall, middle-aged man with greying hair and piercing blue eyes. He looked somewhat out of place in his formal outfit, as though he was not used to wearing formal attire and grabbed the first outdated somewhat ill-fitting suit he could get his hands on. The other was a Bajoran Vedek, clad in purple robes and a triple-pointed hat. Unlike most Vedeks, however, she had a small silver mobile emitter pinned to her sleeve.

As they stepped into the room, the Vedek grabbed the man's hand. "It's all right, Tim,"

"Easy for you to say. You don't have to face a whole room of people who hate you." he replied.

"Tim, no one hates you," replied Alenis, scanning the room. "You said you saw Tyrlai in your

vision, perhaps we should try to find--"

Brad had looked up from his current conversation to see who walked in. It was HIM. "Pardon me please. I'm sure this will only take a moment." Brad walked over to Tim. "You've got a lot of nerve showing up here after everything you have done to us. And especially to her."

Tim looked at Meru with a look that said. I told you so! He took a step back indicating that he didn't wanted to start a fight. "Doctor, it's been a long time. How have you been?" He asked in the most diplomatic tone he could do.

"I've been good." Brad said with dripping sarcasm. "How have you been Capta... oh. I guess I shouldn't really call you that anymore now should I Tim?"

"Surely Doctor, we can set aside our enmity for one night and act civil towards each other?" Tim said, even though he would rather punch him in the face and yell that she was the one that left him.

"Be calm, my children," said Vedek Alenis, raising her hand, before Brad could respond. "We have all the time in the world to dwell on the past. We have come here to move forward."

Sera saw the beginnings of the brewing confrontation. She lifted her head and nodded towards the group, then whispered to Nikki and Alenia, "Looks like trouble. I still get nightmares over my meeting with the Admirals years ago."

Alenia walked over to where the two men were glaring at each other and, while glancing at Tim said quietly to Brad. "Might I borrow you for a moment, Doctor?"

Brad was debating how to respond to Meru and Tim when he turned to see who came up beside him. Recognizing the young woman, his tone and demeanor flipped complete. "Yes yes. Of course. Perhaps somewhere else a little less crowded." He motioned to and headed for a side of the room that was partially isolated.

The Vedek turned back towards Tim. "I didn't realize Tyrlai had a daughter. Alenia... I'm honoured," she added, with a hint of a smile.

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*The Reception, Part VII*

Starbase 66

Somewhere above Trill

July 2412

**Authors: Tyrlai Zade, Captain Sera Williams, Captain Brad Silverton**

Alenia led Brad back to where Sera stood and motioned with her head to a nearby corner spot against one of the windows overlooking the Portland. She looked at Sera and spoke softly so the others couldn't hear. "So here is the thing. I had to make up Alenia so I could continue in Starfleet. People were starting to notice and I was running out of excuses. I am Tyrlai Zade." She pulled the sixth tolic shard out of her pocket, still glowing with a bright

white inner light as it had since she had shot the Captain so many years ago. "It turns out this wasn't a shard of the orb of the pah wraiths after all. It's part of the Orb of Life and the damn thing is youth-ing me to death. It's taken all these years to de-age the symbiont but we are both teenagers now and I expect we have about three months to live. I can explain at length if you like but the short version is, I need to steal the Portland for a week or so, it was testing a new type of shielding that will withstand the worst of the badlands, I need to fetch the other tolic shards out of a ruined Bajoran ship and put them back together so the wormhole Aliens can resurrect Alenis."

A seventeen year old Tyrlai Zade looked over at Sera with the exact same kind of completely serious look she always seemed to have when rattling off seemingly batshit crazy information. "The good Doctor here can verify my identity." She placed the shard in an external vent and tapped the security key to expel it from the station. It whooshed out next to them spinning out towards Portland for a few seconds before transporting itself back to Tyrlai's outstretched palm in a flash. "I can't get rid of it, restoring the orb of life is my last desperate plan."

Brad nodded to what Tyrlai had said. "Its true. Tyrlai, I've tried everything I can think of and some my team came up with at Starfleet Medical Research. The symptoms might be medically related for your de-aging but not the source. I.. I haven't given up though in fact I have a new theory but.. well, I just don't want to get your hopes up again." Brad smiled reassuringly at Tyrlai but it was obviously forced.

Sera just sort of stared for a moment. Stealing a ship, even if it was a ship on it's way to the junkyard was a serious offense. Then again, this was her friend, and Sera hadn't worked her way up the ranks and gained a level 9 clearance to let it slip away, unused. "Sure, I can install any modifications you have. I know that ship better than anyone." The Captain then took a moment to go back over what she thought she heard Tyrlai say. "You did say that it was the Orb of Life right? Do you think there's a chance that she's...." Sera let the question go without finishing.

"I'm almost certain of it. It's always been my little pet theory that the glowing is actually her. That started in the cave right after." Tyrlai paused, not wanting to go over the obvious once more. "That much may be wishful thinking, but the vision in the cave I had was clear. Shooting her was the only chance to save her. The notion that this is the orb of life makes sense, if we can restore it. The wormhole aliens can move twenty odd years in time the same way one of us can move through a room. We just have to create a point in time for them to move to. Preferably one on this side of my impending demise."

Alenia/Tyrlai bent forward and clutched her side as one of her anti-growth pains struck, lancing through her side like a cold, sharp blade.

"Whoa." Brad reached for Tyrlai instinctively before pulling back. "Ok this is new, when did this start?"

Tyrlai sucked in a breath and muttered sheepishly. "About twenty-one years ago, its only just recently gotten worse."



Once it was apparent that Tyrlai was fine and could continue, Sera offered a hand to help her friend up. The idea sounded crazy, but the history of Starfleet was filled with Captian's logs filled with even more crazy accounts. Sera had only known Captain Alenis through part of one mission, but Tyrlai had been a great friend over the years. Even if she was court martialed and thrown out of the fleet, Sera was a well-known engineer and jobs wouldn't be that hard to find. "Where do we start?"

"We need a helmsman, navigator, engineer a couple other volunteers and the USS Portland. We need that deflector to make it to the Bajoran wreck and Im not sure why, but we need Tim. Tim put's the shards back together." Tyrlai was decidedly less pale by the time she finished.

"I'm pretty sure I can get Nikki to join, not so sure about her plus 1. I'm sure my sis would too, but I don't know if I want her to put her own career at risk. She is a pretty good helmsman though." Sera's response was hushed as to not draw attention to the names that were said.

Tyrlai looked around, she had hoped to see a few others who hadn't shown. She smiled wistfully and glanced at Brad before looking back to Sera. "If you can reach out to a few. I reach out to a few and hopefully we will get everyone we need. If not I've always wanted to fly a Miranda." Alenia smirked, a wicked sort of glimmer in her eye. "You're coming, right Brad? It could ruin your career, grand theft starship."

Brad smirked knowingly back at Alenia. "Of course I am. You didn't have to ask. It would only end my career if it were breaking rules. The Portland has a long history of being used as a guinea pig ship for new technologies. I may have something in mind. I have some favors owed to me."

Sera took that time to slip away from the conversation to see how good of a recruiter she was. Her first target was Nikki.

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*The Reception, Part VIII*

Starbase 66

Somewhere above Trill

July 2412

**Authors: Coln Jena (played by Tyrlai Zade), Eilis Ross & Gregory Rathcliffe, Zero & One (played by Alenis Meru), Selina & Sera Williams**

Overhearing Tyrlai's story, Jena was glad that the former Diplomatic Officer had made it to the reception and breathed a sigh of relief that she hadn't touched the shard all those years ago when, it was in her father's lab.

Moving up beside Nikki, Gregory pushed his fingers through his greying hair as he looked at the departing people, "Don't tell me that yet again I'm late to the party."

"How can it be a party without Gregory Rathcliffe?" countered Nikki, delighted to see

another face she hadn't seen in years.

"Ah, Gregory, Nikki..." said Zero, one half of the pair of adult Bynars who were attempting to make conversation, a skill that didn't come naturally to them, a species which traditionally eschewed the art of conversation in favour of simply connecting everyone's brain to a central computer.

"...It is good to see you," added One, finishing his sentence. "It has been..."

"...a very long time." As Zero spoke, he saw out of the corner of his eye the door whoosh open again, and in walked someone who was very important to the two of them. "Ms. Ross!" he called out.

"...come join us for some drinks..."

"...and small talk."

Greg's head bopped between both siblings as if he was watching a tennis match, trying to piece together what they were saying. As a moment passed after they finished, a wide grin spread across the officer's lips as he clapped his hands. "Last time I saw you two you were nowhere near close enough to drink....Infact remember that time I caught ye...." Greg's voice trailed off as he saw the brothers attention diverted elsewhere, to a woman who was hard to forget. "Watch out...teach is in the house."

Smiling as she approached the group, Eilis moved to give both young siblings a genuine hug before smiling at the group as a whole. "I hope that I haven't interrupted anything."

"Of course not..." replied Zero,

"...We were simply..."

"...reminiscing..."

"...about your class on the Portland."

Seeing Eilis and the 'Binary Twins', Jena made her way towards them. "Hi, folks, mind if I join you for a drink?" She asked.

Eilis turned as she heard a familiar voice and her smile broadened even further as she saw a woman she would never forget. "Jena...look at you all grown up and in a starfleet uniform!" The teacher moved in to give her student a warm hug.

Returning the hug, Jena said. "Yeah, well I didn't think there was any doubt I'd go into the family business, how's life been treating you, ma'am?" She knew it was silly, but even though she was an adult now, it still didn't feel right to call Eilis by her first name.

Wrinkling up her nose a little, Eilis shook her head as a smile played across her lips. "Eilis,

please. You must be the same age now, or near enough, to the age I was when I started here? I remember you were so full of ideas of what you wanted to do to stay as far away from the family business as you could."

"Well, Eilis, I tried a few things before I settled on the Academy, but it appears the fates or the Prophets or whoever had other plans." Jena replied.

"Where you ended up in.." Eilis studied the young woman's uniform before she put her finger on it, "...medical? Assuming you truly stayed in the family way of things."

"Biological Sciences actually, but like my father I took EMT training and I've served in Sickbay from time to time." Jena said. "I find treating others very rewarding."

The door opened again, revealing a female who bore some resemblance to Sera but had the uniform of a Lt. Cmdr. in the Tactical/Security field. The lady took a look around the room to see who was gathered. She nodded and smiled towards Sera, not wanting to disturb her conversation, then made her way towards Eilis. As Selina came within speaking distance, she said with a big smile to her former classmates, "Ms. Ross, it's great to see you. Do you have room for one more student?"

Eilis turned as another voice greeted her, she was starting to feel very overwhelmed as past pupils seeing to crawl out of the woodwork in every direction. "Selina! It wouldn't be a reunion without you."

With a smile even brighter, Selina sat down with her ex-teacher and classmates. "It's great to see all of you again. I'm sorry I missed the 10 year reunion, but I was out on long-range assignment."

"It is great..."

"...to see you too, Selina," said Zero and One. Even after twenty years interacting with the world around them, they still had anxiety around crowds. To a Bynar, even ones who spent their time off-world, being surrounded by people not connected to the central computer could be a nerve-wracking experience.

Sera walked up to the big group gathered for drinks. She held her hands out apologetically and asked in her best 'so sorry' voice, "I don't mean to intrude, but I need to borrow Nikki, Greg, Jena and Selina for a moment. Group holo with the Portland in the background, too good to miss. And I need to ask Selina something."

Sera motioned for her former crewmates to join her by the big viewport.

Selina shrugged and said to the others gathered, "Sorry everyone, be right back." She left her drink unordered as she followed her sister.

Greg had been watching the interplay between the people he knew as teach and her students. He couldn't believe how big they all were now, and most of them officers in their

own right...he was truly beginning to feel his age.

Turning as he was called, he shrugged his shoulders before offering his arm to Nikki, "When one is summoned, one must do what ones told."

Nikki nodded in agreement. "Especially when one is summoned by a Starfleet captain."

"Very true, good sir." Jena said, then smiled at Nikki as she took Greg's other arm.

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*The Reception, Part IX*

Starbase 66

Somewhere above Trill

July 2412

**Authors: Captain Sera Williams, Coln Jena, Gregory Rathcliffe (played by Eilis Ross), Holo-Meru, Timothy Rouse, Tyrlai Zade**

As the assorted group of people that Sera had called over gathered around, Sera motioned for them to gather in close. With a sigh to clear out her nervousness, she began to whisper, "I really didn't call you over to take a group holo." Sera paused for a moment to scan the room to ensure no one was too close, then continued, "I have it on good authority, Tyrlai, that we left something behind 20 years ago on Gamia III. Tyrlai will have to give you more details later, but there is a good chance that we can bring Captain Alenis back." Letting that sink in for a moment, Sera locked eyes with each of those gathered. "For this to work, we need to take the Portland on one last cruise... a very unofficial last cruise."

Selina went wide-eyed. She had never known Meru, but had heard her share of stories about the former Captain to know how much she had meant to most of those gathered in the circle, many of whom had been with her during the last moments. It was a risk, but it was her sister. "I'm in," was all that Selina needed to say.

Jena didn't hesitate. "I'm in." She said. "I owe her a debt, for my father's life and these years I've had to spend with him, and I intend to pay it."

Nikki started shaking uncontrollably, spilling drops of wine on the floor. Even the mention of Gamia III all these years later gave her panic attacks. "You mean..." she couldn't even finish her sentence. "But... how? There's security, tractor beams, other ships..."

"All of which shouldn't slow us down more than a few minutes," replied Sera, trying to reassure Nikki.

"So... you have a plan?" asked Nikki, wide-eyed.

"I'm sorry to interrupt this little conversation," called out Vedek Alenis, pulling Tim by the arm towards his former crewmates. One of the advantages of being a hologram was excellent hearing, and seeing the old crew getting together and discussing something in hushed tones, their glances darting around the room, indicated to her that this was a

conversation worth listening to. "But I should remind you that no one has stolen a starship from a Federation facility in over a hundred and twenty five years, and the punishment for getting caught is severe. I can't let you do this."

"I believe that is our own choice whether or not we risk our careers." Jena responded.

Sera almost let her anger boil over, but managed to keep her cool as she coldly said, "We helped save you."

Gregory remained quiet as he listened to the others speak. He wasn't sure how he felt about the situation...he had barely known the woman and to risk his career to bring her back....But at the same time he had these people's backs. How many times had they saved his life and theirs. Someone needed to babysit." Count me in."

The Vedek held up her hand and continued her sentence. "...not without your former captain and his religious advisor."

Sera was left speechless. A million thoughts rushed through her head, apologies, gratitudes, and even celebrations.

"What??" Tim stared at her. This was not what he had in mind. And he was sure there were others who thought the same. They hadn't really received him with open hands why would they want him as their Captain, leading this mission.

"You have to be there." Alenia said from behind them, having crept up quickly after she saw the beeline psuedo-Alenis had taken. "You are the one who reassembles the shards."

How did she know? Tim thought as he turned around to see who had spoken. "That was just a formality. Most of the work had already been done."

"It is the will of the prophets, my child," said Alenis, placing her hand on Tim's shoulder. "They would not have come to you if you were not needed." As she she looked across her assembled friends, all willing to put their careers on the line, she couldn't help but smile a little. "Now, why don't we retreat to somewhere a little more private to work out the details? There's a Klingon coffeehouse three decks down that's open late..."

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### *Jason's Interview*

Interview Room, DS9

MD2 - midday

**Authors:** **Admiral Washington** (played by **Alenis Meru**), **Admiral Anderson** (played by **Tyrlai Zade**), **Admiral Cresswell** (played by **Jason Beauvoir**), **Lt. Jason Beauvoir**

"Admiral Cresswell, you have served with Lieutenant Beauvoir before, correct?" asked Washington, looking over at his colleague. "Why don't you take the lead on this one?"

"Yes, when I commanded the Montana, he served as Linguistics officer." Cresswell replied.

"Very well, let's hope the years have dampened his impulsive spirit."

"Impulsive spirit?" asked Washington, raising an eyebrow. He knew that Cresswell had referred to Beauvoir as a bad influence before, but there was clearly something in their past that was worth exploring. "Tell me more."

"We discovered derelict vessel floating near an uninhabited system." Cresswell began. "As per regulations, I sent over an away team that included Beauvoir." He paused a moment. "He disobeyed orders by organising the rescue of a fellow crewman who had fallen through a damaged deck plate. His rash actions endangered the away team and potentially the Montana as well. "

"I see," replied Washington. "Did his actions have any lasting negative consequences on the away team or the Montana? Aside from the damage caused by questioning orders, of course," Washington added quickly.

"No." Cresswell began. "In fact the crewman was rescued and made a full recovery, but that's not the point." The former Captain said. "If officers don't follow orders, they demonstrate a bad example to the enlisted and younger crew, which in turn leads to a breakdown in discipline."

"Of course, of course," said Washington with a wave of the hand. Cresswell did have a bit of a reputation of a pompous ass, and in the past couple days, he had done little to challenge that. He didn't disagree with him, but Cresswell had just a certain way of putting it that rubbed him the wrong way. "Akemi, why don't you call him in, and we can meet him ourselves?"

At the yeoman's call Jason walked into the room, as always his uniform and hair were immaculate. He looked around at the admirals. Washington he knew from Meru's funeral. Cresswell was his former CO and in Jason's opinion was a despicable human being. The last Admiral he didn't know.

"Welcome, Lieutenant, please take a seat," said Washington. With a nod of his head towards the replicator, he ordered the yeoman to fetch him a glass of water. "Now, I understand that for the first few days of this mission, you were incapacitated due to medical issues. We'll... get to <i>that</i> later," he said a firm tone, one which made it absolutely clear what he was referring to. "But first, you were part of the initial away team down to the caves, correct?"

"That is correct, sir." Jason replied. "Though I didn't enter the caves until after the 'rescue' team arrived."

"Yes..." replied Washington. "I understand that you were with the captain the whole time -- from when she first entered the cave, right up until her death. Is that correct?"

"Again sir, that is correct, though I did not witness the Captain's death or the moment of possession, as I was unconscious on both occasions." Jason stated keeping his answers concise and to the point.

"Of course, of course," replied Washington, with a wave of his hand. "In that case, can you tell us what you did see?"

"Certainly, the entity that possessed Alenis Meru appeared to be plasma based, it was sentient, powerful and had almost complete control over the body of its host. This control imbued the host with great strength, durability and the ability to regenerate bone and tissue." Jason said, adopting an analytical approach in an attempt to suppress his feelings of guilt, anger and pain.

"Did you get any detailed scans of this entity?" asked Washington.

"Unfortunately not, our tricorders were confiscated when we were captured by the Pah-Wraith worshippers." Jason replied. "They referred to the entity as Kosst Amojan."

"Kosst Amojan..." mused Washington. "He is some sort of figure in Bajoran mythology, is he not? A sort of devil-like or almost satanic figure?"

"I'm not exactly an expert in Bajoran mythology, but from what I know, I believe you're correct." Jason replied.

Washington sighed. Weird religious figures were one thing which was outside of his expertise. "And then what happened?"

"While everybody was distracted, I overpowered my guard and that of Lieutenant Hudson and used a discarded disruptor to shoot a Bajoran shard from the hands of the Kai, who was acting as high priestess and then ran to the Captain who had collapsed. Before I could help her to her feet and lead her out, her eyes glowed red, she sat up and relieved me of the disruptor before pointing a type 1 phaser at me." Jason began. He then went on to describe how Parker had saved his life twice, how he'd tried to fight the Pah-Wraith only to be lifted from his feet by his throat and thrown hard the cave floor where he lost consciousness.

The admirals nodded along, their faces turning to horror as Jason described the captain being possessed by the Pah-Wraith, and his vivid description of her hand being shattered and remade into a claw. "I'm... sorry you had to witness that," replied Washington, breaking the awkward silence as Jason finished his story.

"Thank you, sir." Jason said. "Is there anything further you need to know?"

"As a matter of fact there is," said Washington, as he gave Jason a disapproving glare while re-arranging the PADDs on his desk. "I'm afraid we didn't get a chance to talk about the little incident at the diplomatic dinner on Bajor a couple weeks ago," he said, finding the correct PADD. "Nor did we discuss the aftermath."

"What you refer to as 'the incident' was due to a biochemical imbalance whose cause was Pon Farr." Jason paused. "Although I was unable to prevent what happened, I regret the damage and pain I caused."

"That is all well and good, your captain appears to have been... remarkably tolerant... of your deviant behaviour," replied Washington, stressing his words. He had commanded Vulcans before, but usually they were able to take leaves or somehow avoid letting the Pon farr get the better of them. In truth, had it happened on his ship, Jason would have likely not seen the outside of the brig for a long time. "While any diplomatic damage was contained, we are now left with a delicate situation of what to do with this EMH, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"Sir, I can hear the condemnation in your voice," Jason began. "and before we discuss the EMH, I'd like to make one thing clear, my recent Pon farr was unexpected due to the fact that I'd already experienced it a year before on Vulcan, so when I began experiencing the symptoms, I didn't link them to Pon farr."

"I see you haven't grown out of your arrogant and impulsive nature, Lieutenant." Cresswell said. "It's a shame because you are an otherwise fine officer."

"And you're still a pompous ass...sir." Jason replied.

Washington considered intervening. Normally he would in the face of such disrespect for a flag officer, but after a long day of interviews, he could use a bit of excitement. Besides, Jason had a point. Cresswell was a pompous ass.

Instead, Washington simply turned to Anderson and gave him a slight nod, a signal to let them go at it for a little.

"Why you insolent wretch, how dare you speak to me like that." Cresswell exploded. "I could bump you out of the service so fast your head will spin."

A smile briefly crossed Jason's lips. "Perhaps, but if that were to happen, I'm sure your colleagues and superiors would be interested to know what really happened to the Temperance."

A vein in Cresswell's temple started to pulse. "The Temperance was on a deep space mission, she encountered a spatial anomaly and was tragically destroyed, end of story." He stated clearly rattled.

"If you will permit me to indulge the Lieutenant for a moment," said Washington, raising his hand slightly to re-assert control over this interview, "Admiral Cresswell's little story matches the official report on the loss of the Temperance." He glanced over at the frustrated flag officer for a moment and then back into Jason's eyes. "You have an alternate theory, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, according to my sources the Temperance, under the command of Captain Z'lax Fer'Al, was sent on a covert mission into Breen space. While within Breen space, their cloaking device failed and they were discovered and destroyed by a Breen patrol." Jason replied. "After this incident, Admiral Cresswell, who was in charge of the mission, had the official records changed to reflect the story he just told."



"That is what we call in our business a hypothesis," said Washington in a stern voice. Either this Lieutenant was besmirching the good -- well, in Cresswell's case, mediocre -- name of a senior officer, or he had stumbled onto one of Starfleet's little secrets. Either way, he was getting a little too uppity for Washington's taste. "And unless you can prove them, that is all that it is. However, if you can, then I'm sure Starfleet Command as well as the Federation Council will be interested." Seeing Jason begin to open his mouth, Washington raised his hand again, indicating that he should stop talking. "...at the proper time and place, of course."

"Of course." Jason agreed. "For now you wanted to know about the modified EMH, well as you know when I 'underwent my treatment', I was unaware that she existed, but then again I was also unaware of my surroundings due to the chemicals flooding my brain. Anyway later I met her, but only after Meru... that is Captain Alenis' death, and despite her looking like the Captain, admittedly with red hair, and I found her personality to quite unlike that of the Captain."

"I think I see what's going on here," replied Washington. "You want her to be real." Before Jason could open his mouth, Washington cut him off again. "This was no little pon farr fling; you were attracted to Captain Alenis. Now, with her gone, all you have is a hologram that you so desperately want to be real, you'll say anything to give meaning to that little encounter you had in the holodeck. Lieutenant, you aren't the first, and you won't be the last to fall for a hologram..."

Jason baulked a little at what he saw as Washington's patronising manner. "If you believe me to be some lovesick pup and that this state is impairing my objectivity, then I believe there is nothing more for me to say and thereby am dismissed." Not waiting for an answer, he got up to leave.

"Sit down, Lieutenant." Cresswell ordered.

"Kindly go to Hell...sir." Jason replied as he headed for the door.

"Lieutenant Beauvoir, if you leave without being dismissed..." started Washington in a menacing tone

"You'll send me to my room without any dinner? I won't get any strawberries with my ice cream?" Jason relied with great sarcasm. Then not waiting for Washington's reply he left the room.

Fuming mad, Washington turned towards Cresswell. "You know, Admiral," he started, "you may be a pompous ass, but you were right about Beauvoir."

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*Sera and the Admirals*

Interview room, DS9

MD2, afternoon

**Authors:** Sera Williams, Admiral Washington (played by Alenis Meru), Admiral Anderson (played by Tyrlai Zade), Admiral Cresswell (played by Jason Beauvoir)

"Lieutenant Williams, please state your name, rank and serial number for the record."

"Lieutenant, junior grade, Sera Williams. Serial number TX-255-654 EDC." Sera's voice was as steady as she could muster, that is her first time meeting with an Admiral... especially this kind of meeting.

"Thank you," replied the Admiral. "Now, I'd like to talk to you about this hologram. I understand that rather than deleting the hologram, you and another crewman attempted to repair it, is that correct?"

Sera gave a slight nod as she replied in a facts only voice, "Yes sir. At first we... Ensign Barclay and I, saw that the altered EMH had a damaged boot loader. At the time, it was the only known issue with the program. When referencing the USS Voyager's own EMH and his journey to sentience, we thought the most humane choice was to help repair the program instead of erase it completely."

"I noticed you used the words 'humane choice'," replied Washington, trying to tease out more information from her. "This hologram was originally designed for... one use. And it was to be deleted right after. Am I correct in that you were working under the assumption that this hologram was some sort of sentient being?"

"That is correct, sir," replied Sera, "Up to the point when Ensign Barclay and I started our repair work, the hologram shared the memories and life experiences of Capt. Alenis. Yet, she had her own, distinct, personality."

Admiral Anderson leaned forward in his chair, he liked the young Ensign but pressed her nervousness anyway. "How can you be certain of that? A program can be complex and resonant and still merely be a mimic of sentience. What tests did you apply?"

In her mind, Sera knew the Admiral probably knew the answer before the question was even asked. With no reason to lie, Sera decided to own her choice as she replied, "None, sir. We merely saw the possibility of sentience, and decided to preserve it. Time was against us, her data was quickly degrading and we needed to act quickly. We acted on what we knew at the time and used the experience of the crew of Voyager to guide us."

Washington turned towards his stenographer. "Let the records indicate that no tests were done to determine the alleged sentience of this hologram." Turning back to Sera, he continued. "And you were not at any point perturbed by the actual contents of this hologram -- that is, the fact that this hologram was a copy of an already existing person, and the use thereof?"

Sera couldn't read the Admirals at all. Sometimes she felt as though things were going well. Other times, like this time, she felt as though she were going to have a court martial in her near future. She nodded her head and responded, "Yes, I was perturbed. However, she

made choices that the Captain would not have made, like changing her hair color. Our plan was to introduce her to different stimuli in order to form a new personality and to allow her to create a new appearance for herself under the supervision of the Chief Counselor... only we never got the chance because I was called to the surface before we could proceed with those plans."

"That is still not indicative of sentience," replied Washington. "Any differences between the hologram and the captain could be explained by imperfections in the process used to copy her neural patterns. Or by damage to its program caused during the esteemed commander's attempts to delete it." Washington's tone betrayed a certain discomfort with the notions that holograms could be sentient. He was from the old school, to him, a sentient being was flesh and blood, and he had no patience for what he called 'holographic rights hooey.' What next, he thought, the Federation would be striking up commissions to determine whether tricorders have rights?

"Based on your expertise as a Starfleet Engineer," he continued, "would you concur with the opinion that differences do not necessarily imply sentience?"

Sera thought about the Admiral's words. With a nod of her head, she responded, "Yes, that is an accurate statement, no matter how much I may have believed it at the time."

Washington nodded in the affirmative and glanced over at the stenographer, giving her a little nod to emphasize the importance of Ensign Williams' statement. "And, as a Starfleet Engineer, you would concur with the idea that a complex and advanced program does not necessarily imply sentience, would you not? A ship's computer has more connections and memory than a human brain, and can perform complex calculations many orders of magnitude faster than a human can. But we do not consider the USS Portland to be a sentient being, do we?"

Sera measured her response this time, she had been a bit too eager to answer the last question. "While the premise of your question has merit, I don't agree with the analogy. Legal precedence has been set by the Enterprise's android Data and Voyager's EMH program. Both have shown that they are much more than the sum of their parts. I believe a more accurate analogy would be that a starship has more in common with an ancient toaster than it does with such an advanced program. A starship simply follows commands and does not possess a conscious, subconscious, and is not self-aware. The EMH on the Portland has shown that she possesses all three. Does that make her sentient? I can't answer that, though I know that she is more than a replicator."

"Consciousness, a subconscious, and self-awareness," mused Washington. "A layman's definition of sentience, but it will suffice for our purposes. However, if it is your contention that the holo-program is, as you say, more than a replicator, you will need to back that up. Does she have a conscience and subconsciousness, or is it simply executing the commands in its subroutines? Is she self-aware, or is it simply programmed to ask itself existential questions? Is the EMH a sentient being, or simply programmed to imitate one by its creators? That, right there, is the crux of the matters, wouldn't you agree?"

"I think that question could be applied to us. Are we not just a collection of organic circuitry and processors? Down deep, we are programmed to survive and to continue the species, but we have self-taught ourselves to become what we are today." Sera then answered the Admiral's question more directly, "No, I don't think that is the crux of the argument. I think what matters is that it is possible that she is sentient." She then turn an inquisitive look toward the gathered Admirals, "Isn't our mission to 'seek out new life?' Until a few years ago, we never would have known that there are photonic life forms in the Galaxy. How many starships have encountered life that before that moment had been deemed impossible? I think that the mere possibility of sentience is what matters, and not to destroy something just because it is less messy."

"Washington, the Lieutenant has a point." Cresswell said. He wasn't much of a scientist, but he did know the Starfleet Charter backwards and forwards, and Lieutenant Williams' argument seemed to be in line with it.

"Perhaps," replied Washington, tenting his fingers. "Of course, the decision of what to do with this hologram is up to us. I, for one, would like to meet this hologram..."

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### *Greg Getting Grilled*

Interview Room, DS9

MD03, morning

**Authors: Admiral Washington (played by Alenis Meru), Admiral Anderson (played by Jason Beauvoir), Admiral Cresswell (played by Tyrlai Zade), Ensign Gregory Rathcliffe (played by Eilis Ross)**

"All right, Ensign Rathcliffe," said Admiral Washington, closely examining the figure squirming in his chair, "why don't we start from the beginning. What happened down in that cave?"

Gregory wasn't used to sitting in front of Admirals in order to be grilled. He understood the reason it was needed but that didn't make it any easier. "When it was identified that we couldn't beam up the away team, an away team was tasked to take a ship down to the surface with technology that would allow the transporter signals to be boosted so as we could get everyone out."

Gregory paused as he looked down at his hands cupped together on his lap, "When we first entered the caves we encountered these...people? Their eyes burned red and they were intent on not stopping until they killed us."

"Burned red?" asked Washington. "Like, they were glowing?"

"Almost...." Greg moved his hand as he pinched the bridge of his nose, allowing flashbacks he'd blocked off to raise back to the surface. "It's hard to explain...the glow had an almost life of its own...when he saw down to the depths of their eyes, you could almost see their soul. It threatened to suck you in if you looked for long enough....."

Admiral Anderson seemed a little dubious but nevertheless followed up with a question. "And how long did you look?"

Gregory looked over at the Admiral with a look before considering his answer, "It couldn't have been longer than a few milliseconds...the gaze was broken when one of the others in the team hit the alien with a shot from their phaser."

"Did you think to get any scans of these people?" asked Washington, taking command of the interview again. "The red eyes, do you have any idea what was the cause of it?"

"Sir...I was a little busy trying to ensure that these...aliens didn't kill us. It didn't occur to me to take out a tricorder and get some scans." Greg let impatience show through for a moment before he pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to get his emotions under control. It wasn't easy given all that he had experienced and witnessed. "It was like they may have been possessed but before we could get anywhere things changed...there was a bright light that seemed to engulf us all at the same time but almost one at a time as we were separated...."

"A bright light?" Washington raised an eyebrow and decided to press the issue. He was finally getting somewhere with this ensign. "And then what did you see?"

Greg hesitated at this question as he cupped his hands in his lap and looked down at the floor. Their question threw him...in all honesty he had been trying to forget what he saw...the memories that it all brought back. They'd been buried for so long that he couldn't understand why they mattered then and definitely they didn't matter now. "Nothing of any importance Sir."

"We will be the judge of that, Ensign," said Washington, his tone becoming somewhat cross. "Go on."

A light flared up in Greg's eyes as she looked up at the Admiral. "I'm not going into it...Sir. All I will say is that it was a flash backs to events gone and people gone. I had no control over it happening and as quickly as it happened it finished."

"Events gone by..." mused the Admiral, as he gave Greg an icy glare. "Ensign, I need the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. That wasn't a suggestion."

As anger flared in Gregory's eyes, he sat forward in his seat but kept his back ramrod straight. "I saw two separate events in the Academy. One a training exercise with a friend and the next was the event in which the same friend was killed. It was like living it again, the people the voices; I was the only one who seemed to recognise it for what it was, a past memory. Except for my friend...she spoke as if she was watching the events with me and spoke to me about how I felt and how I still carry the scars of the memories. Happy?"

"Thank you, Ensign," replied Washington without a hint of emotion. "Sounds like the work of the wormhole aliens, would you agree?" he asked, turning from side to side.

Greg's eye narrowed as he finally sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "I don't wish to make assumptions but yes, the experience was similar to Sisko's recollections that we were educated on in the Academy."

"Ensign, I'm no expert, but the scientific consensus is that these 'wormhole aliens' use the 'visions', like you experienced, are a form of communication. Do you have any idea what they may have been trying to 'tell' you?" Cresswell asked.

Greg's eyes hardened as his eyes moved slowly between both Admirals, moments passing before he answered. "No. No I don't know."

"These wormhole aliens are notoriously mysterious," interjected Washington, changing the subject. "Now, Ensign, what happened after that?"

Greg's body language still remained tense and alert as he studied the Admiral who had spoken to him. "We encountered the rest of the away team, found out that the Captain was dead, set up the transporter boosters and we were beamed back to the ship."

"I see," replied Washington. "So, the captain was already dead by the time you rendezvoused with the away team?"

Nodding his head, Greg shifted ever so slightly in the chair as the memory of his Captain's dead body entered his mind. "They were still attempting to resuscitate her but stopped soon after we arrived."

"And that's when you activated the transport enhancers and escaped the cave?"

Shaking his head, Greg bowed his head as the memories came back, "No...they declared that she was dead and as the next most senior officer, Commander Rouse ordered the activation of the enhancers and our escape."

Washington nodded. "Thank you ensign, you've been most helpful. We now have a bit more of an idea what we are dealing with." He turned towards the other admirals. "Is there anything you would like to add? Admirals? Ensign?"

Greg shook his head as he sunk back in his seat, feeling drained and now tired. This hadn't been easy on him.

"Very well. Ensign Rathcliffe, you are dismissed."

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*New Teacher, part 1*

Classroom, USS Portland

MD2, 1000 hours

**Authors: Eilis Ross, Rostrenen T'Sering (played by Alenis Meru), Novia Yenn (played by Tyrlai Zade), Zero & One (played by Alenis Meru)**

From her office deep in the bowels of the USS Portland, Rostrenen looked over the children she would soon be leaving behind. They were all special in their own unique way, these children even more so than most. Novia was attempting to train a pair of monkeys, Jillian was doodling an abstract art piece on an easel, and Zero and One were playing each other at chess -- which was curious since being linked, they knew each others' moves and tactics in advance. All wonderful, special little children.

Which is why it pained her so much to leave them so soon. But an old friend from her days as a freelancer, Laara Eito, had disappeared while working on a story about a clandestine branch of Starfleet engaged in highly illegal activity with no accountability whatsoever. Laara had sent her a panicked message a few days before disappearing, and arranged to have her notes sent to Ros through unofficial channels. Ros figured that given what she stumbled upon, it was no surprise that someone wanted her friend to disappear. She couldn't let Section 31 or whatever these people called themselves get away with this, and decided that she would stop at nothing to expose those responsible for her friend's disappearance.

As she returned to packing her things, she heard a knock at the door.

Eilis moved one hand to push the hairband in her hair back further, allowing her hair to remain loose but out of her eyes. Nervously she pulled down on the tunic she wore over her black leggings; her mind focused on the new job to hand. She was nervous...hell it was obvious to see but also she was excited. This was her first opportunity to take on a class of her own and influence young people's minds without someone hovering over her shoulder watching. Not that her old mentor did! It was just....different to be able to go out on her own.

Looking at the door, she knocked once more as there was no response to her first knock. She didn't wish to intrude in case the woman she was coming to replace was in the middle of a lesson or saying goodbye.

Novia walked over to the door with her two odd cat-monkeys hopping and rolling in a tangle in a general path right along side her. "Enter." She said to the door and it slid open automatically. She looked up at the grey eyed woman standing in the hall, giving her a solid once over, noting the blonde hair carefully arranged by the headband but from its look not used to such a level of discipline, grey eyes a pleasant smile and generally friendly body language. "Hello, my name is Novia," she said in an accent reminiscent of British, despite clearly being a Trill, "don't mind the Vuva's, they like to play sneak attack occasionally. They find it hilarious. Are you a psychologist, you seem like you might be. My parents took me to a psychologist once, they were worried I would turn out like my sister. She died. It was a long time ago, before I was born. Let me know if you need anything from the replicator. Have a lovely day." Novia turned and walked back to her monkey training table whilst mentally checking off 'work on personal communication skills' for the afternoon.

"I see you've met Ms. Yenn," said Rostrenen as she approached the newcomer. At first glance, she didn't look like your usual teacher, with her stylish clothes, piercings, and shock of blue and green hair. But these also weren't your usual students. "I am Rostrenen T'Sering,

I believe we've exchanged some subspace messages?"

Eilis was still left reeling after the speal which the first woman had come out with. Psychiatrist? Why on earth would someone assume her to be a psychiatrist? Perhaps it was a compliment given such that the profession involved but still...what was it that caused the woman to come to such a conclusion?

Looking up at the second woman who stepped into the frame, Eilis tried to smile a little as the name showed her to be now speaking to the woman she had come to replace. "Have I come at a bad time? I can return later if you'd prefer?"

"Oh no, it's never a bad time," replied Rostenen, as she ran her hand through her green and blue mohawk. "At least, not around these kids," she added, smiling as she looked over her class. "Would you like to grab a cup of tea and chat over recess, or shall I introduce you to the children right away?"

With a slight hesitancy, Eilis made the first step into the room, allowing the doors to cut off her escape. She was beginning to realise that she was a complete and utter bundle of nerves. "Let's wait for recess, I'd prefer not to upset their schedules and this is an opportunity to observe them in their own school environment."

"Fair enough," replied Rostenen. "Why don't you make yourself at home in my office while I finish up this lesson, and we'll chat during their next break. It should only be another twenty minutes or so, and you can take the time to read up on my notes on the Portland program for unique and gifted children?"

Eilis nodded her head in agreement. She didn't understand why but nerves were threatening to get the better of her and the few minutes more would allow her time for recomposure. Looking around, the teacher was easily able to locate the aforementioned officer as she made her way across.

With Eilis settling in in her office, Rostenen turned to the children. "All right kids, guess what time it is?"

"According to our schedule..." started Zero

"...it is time for calculus." added One, finishing his sentence.

"That's right!" exclaimed Rostenen. "Calculus, then recess, and then you're going to meet someone very special..."

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*New Teacher, part 2*

Classroom, USS Portland

MD2, 1030 hours

**Authors: Eilis Ross, Rostenen T'Sering (played by Alenis Meru), Novia Yenn (played by Tyrlai Zade), Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir)**



Returning to her office, Rostrenen greeted the new teacher again. "My apologies, once Zero and One start doing calculus, it's hard to pry them away from their workbooks." As she glanced out the window, they had finally returned to their chess game. In a way, Ros was fascinated by their games. Since they both knew what each other was thinking and what their strategies were, the chess games they would play were less about competition and more of an art. As a chess player herself, albeit nowhere near a master's level, Ros had just enough knowledge of the game to appreciate it.

"So," she said, looking down at Eilis, "do you have any questions about our little program?"

Looking up with a startled look on her face, Eilis took a brief moment to realise where she was. She had become lost in notes and files, fascinated by the profiles of the students she was to have responsibility of. "When Starfleet said that they had a special position for me I didn't quite realise that the word special expected to the children themselves."

Rostrenen smiled. "They are a rather unique bunch, and I'm going to miss them. I think I've learned just as much from them as they have from me." As she spoke, her voice quivered slightly. She had been practically a mother to these children for the past several months, and they were all so wonderful in their own unique way. "You're very lucky," she added, trying to choke back tears.

Despite being buried in the children's files, the quiver in the other woman's voice was extremely difficult to not notice. Looking up at Rostrenen, the glassy eyes were telling to how she felt. "How long have you been their teacher?"

"Almost a year now," replied Rostrenen, thinking back to the day she first met the children. To say it was chaotic would be an understatement. "Of course, we had moved around a couple times since the launch of this program. We started out on Starbase 38, then Jupiter Station, and now the Portland."

Leaning back in the chair, Eilis smiled at the other woman's reminitions. "That was a lot of travelling around. Can I ask why it happened? It must have been difficult on the children also not having a consistent place."

"Let's just say that while they are certainly unique and wonderful, some people consider these children to be less than ideal tenants. Zero and One managed to knock out the main computer system on Jupiter Station for three days, and let's just say that the captain of Starbase 38 tired of Novia's daily request for use of the long range sensor array." She gave Eilis a hint of a smile before continuing. "Of course, I'm sure they will fit in on the Portland. That is, so long as Novia's alien cat monkeys don't get into the Jeffries tubes."

Eilis winced at the recollection of past endeavours of the students and for the very first time wondered what she had let herself in for. She knew about their gifted minds and each individual student but she forgot to factor in that at the end of the day they were still children. "Monkies?"

Novia perked up as one of the cat-monkeys chittered in alarm. She turned back and looked at the adults with light concern. "Their names are Zinzac," at which point one of the cat-monkeys darted in quick circles up the inside of a meter long tube to perch at the top, "which translates to 'curvilinear motion' and Berelca," at whose mention the second monkey did an odd non rhythmic dance of side to side up and down movements with three flips, " and that translates to 'Anharmonicity'."

Novia stepped a little closer and spoke quietly as if not wanting the cat monkeys to overhear. "We should not mention the Jefferies tubes in front of them as they are ever so curious and would go looking if they knew such things existed. Also keep an eye on anything small with a display screen as they will try to steal it."

A slight hint of alarm registered in Eilis' eyes as she looked from her student to the monkeys and then back. Keeping her tone as long as the students had been she smiled a little as she extended her hand. "Well ok...I'll be sure to keep that in mind. You are Novia is my memory doesn't fail me?"

"I am, " she held out her hand, "Novia of Trill at your service. I was sent here by my parents to learn more about the hard sciences. No wishy washy stuff." She smiled, her pale face, small nose and big blue eyes welcoming. She had the brownish orange spotting common to her species of Trill and was tall, only about four inches short of her teacher.

Eilis responded easily to the child's smile as her eyes watched the monkeys. "And what, per chance, do the monkeys do when they aren't running amuck?"

Novia's eyes widened a bit, she wasn't much used to follow up questions. "The like display screens, leafy vegetables and sneak attack and vertical tricks. Sneak attack is their favourite game and upwards is the angle they prefer."

"Novia!" Jena called as she approached the Trill. "Those damn Feline-primates of yours have disrupted my experiences again."

Novia turned looking cross, the older girls never seemed to talk to her except when they had complaints. She glared at Jena, "language." She said crossing her arms. Besides, it must have been someone else's cat monkeys because mine have been right here this whole time." She pointed to an empty spot on the floor where her 'pets' had been playing just a few seconds before. "Frell!" She exclaimed noticing they had absconded from the area. She covered her mouth momentarily, eyes widening and then chittered angrily. A pair of cat monkeys scampered over from the science area and climbed up onto her shoulders. Zinzac pointed an accusatory paw at Jena and chittered back.

Eilis coughed behind her hand in order to cover up the smile as she watched the interplay between the students and the animals. Turning to the new girl on the screen, the teacher addressed her directly, "And who may you be?"

Jena turned to Eilis. "I'm Coln Jena, ma'am." She said before giving Zinzac a harsh look.

"Jena is the daughter of the Chief Science Officer," explained Rostrenen. "We have a few children on board, sons and daughters of the crew, in addition to the children in this program. Of course," she said, a smile momentarily appearing on her face, "sometimes one learns best by teaching, and I suppose it wouldn't be a bad thing for Jena's studies if she were enlisted as a Teaching Assistant." Rostrenen's eyes darted over towards the monkeys for a split second. "I'm sure you'll need all the help you can get."

Eilis turned to the student in question as she studied her for a moment, "What do you think Jena? Would you like to step up to the role of being my assistant?"

"Yes, ma'am, I would like that very much." Jena replied.

Novia crossed her arms and simmered as she watched Jena get promoted for making false accusations about her cat-monkeys.

"In that case," added Rostrenen, "I think these children are in good hands..."

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### **Capable Crewman Contributing to Cultivating Contemporary Circumfulgent Capability**

Lt. JG Marcus Kallan and Crewman Angela Mackenzie (NPC, played by Beauvy)

#### **MD3, wee hours**

A pot of raktajino dominating the table, as well as half a dozen PADDs and even an analog notebook with a neat row of pencils and a palm-sized sharpener, Marcus sat in the mess hall. Probably the only soul awake, other than gamma-shift officers and NCOs coming in and out to grab a mug of coffee or something else to keep them going, the visiting science officer worked furiously on holo-matrix transformations and AI algorithm calculations. He was high on strong Klingon caffeine and scientific urgency; he was also somewhat pale with rings under his eyes, suggesting he'd been at it all night.

Angela walked into the mess hall exhausted. She'd just spent the last five hours categorising supplies and equipment in all four Cargo Bays and the Engineering Store. Why the Stores Petty Officer couldn't wait until tomorrow for this report, she didn't know. Now she'd filed the report, she knew she should go to sleep, but she also knew that in her current state, she'd end up staring at the ceiling unsleeping. So here she was for a coffee and a bite to eat.

Picking up her meal, she looked around for a table. Spotting Marcus, she walked over to his table and asked. "Hi, do you mind if I join you, sir?"

Glancing up from his work, Marcus looked for the source of the voice. He exhaled quietly, careful not to sigh -- it probably took considerable effort not to be abrasive towards the NCO, given his current mindset. "If you wish, Crewman," he said, pushing a few of the PADDs out of the way. Said PADDs were walls of text decorated with cryptic formulas and probability diagrams. "I don't suppose you know anything about holomatrix personality interpolation or Soongian curve-distances, do you?"

"Thank you, sir." She said taking a seat. She briefly skimmed one of the PADDs. "Sorry, but I'm afraid that's a little outside my wheelhouse, I work in Stores. The name's Mackenzie, by the way, Crewman Angelique Mackenzie, but my friends usually call me Angela or Mac."

"Marcus Kallan. I don't have any friends. Not here, anyway." The lieutenant paused to take a gulp of his raktajino. "Actually, that's not true. I've an old shipmate aboard." After setting his mug down, he rubbed at his eyes, blinked blearily, and then went back to one of the PADDs, but set it down just as quickly, suddenly struck by a thought. "Stores. I don't suppose you have any grade-12 isolinear active memory matrices kicking around, do you?"

Angela thought for a moment, she remembered several boxes of isoliner matrices. Were there any grade-12 ones? Yes, Cargo Bay 2 sector 7-A. Sometimes her eidetic memory came in handy. "Perhaps." She said playing coy. "How many do you need?"

"No way." Some color comes back to Marcus' face and some of the dullness fades from his eyes. "That'll make this project go a lot more smoothly. Despite all of her upgrades, the Portland's holographic capacity is quite limited." His mouth quirked into a grin. "As many as you have. If you get any questions, tell your Chief that it's all billable to Admiral Washington."

"So where do you want these parts sent?" Angela asked brushing a loose hair aside and taking a sip of her coffee.

Considering for a moment, Marcus said, "Well, this is a project that requires discretion. Science lab two?" Scratching at his day-old stubble, he made a dissatisfied-sounding grunt. "No, that'll create an inquiry for sure. I better come pick them up myself. That way the paper trail starts and ends with me, and I have no problem telling senior officers to go piss up a rope." He squinted. "Except that I can't readily store these in my quarters, as they're volatile and require proper containment. Oh, maybe I can build a series-twelve rated housing apparatus. And..." Marcus realized he was muttering train-of-thought, and blinked at the crewman. "Uh, yeah. Just let me know when I can come get them."

"I could probably get you the parts for the housing apparatus too. If you give me list of the components." She said with a smile.

Blinking in disbelief, Marcus picked up one of his PADDs and quickly tapped out a list. He handed the PADD to the crewman. "Not a word. If your superiors ask, direct them to me." The over-tired science officer cracked a smile. This was the first thing going right about this whole assignment.

Angela accepted the PADD. She skimmed and memorised the contents, but kept it, not wishing to let on that she remembered everything she read.

"Understood, sir." She said taking a few more sips and a couple of bites of her sandwich. She stood up picking up her tray and sliding the PADD under her arm. "I'll contact you by this afternoon, it was nice to meet you, Mr. Kallan."

Watching the crewman go, Marcus shook his head. "Amazing. This might work, after all." And he dove back into his calculations with renewed gusto.

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## The Interruption

**Location:** *Tim's Quarters*

**Time:** *MD 02 - Late Afternoon*

**Authors:** **Cmdr Timothy Rouse** and **Lt JG Marcus Kallan**

Tim entered his quarters for what felt like the first time in days. And maybe it was. He removed his uniform jacket and threw it on a chair, followed by going to the replicator for a nice cold beer. He thought he deserved that after everything that happened the last week. He placed his drink on the table and sat down on the couch. Leaning with his elbows on his knees he just sat there for a moment before picking the beer up and held it up in the air. "Cheers my friend!" he said.

And that's when the chime to his quarters sounded.

Tim put his beer down again, swearing silently for the interruption. Upon opening he saw an unknown officer standing in front of him, not that he knew everyone on the ship, but this one didn't even look slightly familiar.

"Ah, Commander Rouse?" The science officer asked. "Lieutenant Marcus Kallan. I hope I'm not intruding. You're quite difficult to track down."

"Apparently not difficult enough." Tim replied with a grin. "Where is the emergency?"

"No emergency, sir," Marcus replied. "It's just that I've been hoping to catch you during duty with regards to Admiral Washington's inquiry. Regarding the EMH?" The lieutenant lifted and waggled a PADD, eyebrows lifting slightly. "I can always come back when it's more convenient for you."

"Just come on in." Tim said with a sigh. "Want a drink?" He walked back to the couch and took another sip from his beer. "What do you want to know exactly?"

Reluctantly stepping inside, Marcus stood not too far from the door. "No thank you." Glancing at his PADD, Marcus began, "Let me first state, sir, that I'm a subject matter expert. I'm no JAG or anything like that. My assignment is to study the altered EMH and report back to the admiralty the scientific and ethical considerations Starfleet should take regarding this issue." He let that hang for a second before continuing. "I was surprised to hear that you phasered the EMH's console in Sickbay. "

"Looking back, that might not have been the smartest thing to do. I just wanted to eliminate the copy." Tim said. "The Captain asked me to get rid of her copy. We just had a slight misunderstanding about the means to do so."

Lips drawing tight into a slight grimace, Marcus offered, "You may want to press the 'delete'

button next time. Sir." Clearing his throat, he continued on: "I've managed to interview all of the officers involved in the EMH's alteration. To give me a place to begin researching the problem. So far, everyone's been forthcoming of information, especially about your late Captain. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," Tim whispered. "We have a good crew, and honest group."

"Lieutenant Williams has already granted me full access to your systems pertinent to my investigation," Marcus said. "I really don't have much to ask you at this juncture. But I wanted to underscore, like I have with all of your officers, that this is not a witch-hunt. Any judgment will come down from the admirals, and not from me. My report will be impartial and purely about the science... insomuch as one can quantify 'sentience'." He frowned. "You know, we've come so far, and we still can't answer the simple questions as to whether or not something is alive. We have all of these tools and algorithms and theory to make a 'best guess'. It's easier to disprove sentience than it is to prove it..."

"I'm glad to hear that. Could it be possible to send me a copy of your report? So I can prepare the Admiral's judgement." Tim said. He took another sip from his drink before sighting. "I'm not sure what to think any more about the hologram. At one point I don't want her to continue to exist simply because that was the wish of my friend before she died. But on the other hand, through the hologram she can live on a little bit. Because let me tell you, that hologram really is a very good copy of the Captain, not just her looks but also her personality and character."

Nodding once, Marcus said, "It's easy to become attached to some holograms. Technology has come a long way to make them seem personable and easy to relate to. Maybe I'll make it easier for you in the end once my analysis of it is complete." A beat. "Thanks for your time, Commander. Again, sorry to bother you."

"No problem at all," Tim said as he stood up to walk the Lieutenant out and thought about his comment.

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## **Bending Light**

MD03 - sometime in the afternoon

Holodeck One

**Authors: Marcus Kallan and Alenis Meru (as holo-Meru)**

A strange contraption, looking to be the combination of part of a main computer core with yellow-green iridescent memory cubes sticking out of it in a seemingly haphazard fashion, about the size of a kitchen rubbish bin. A sleep-deprived and paler-than-normal science officer on-loan from the Daystrom Institute. A hologram with emergent sentience. "Combine and whisk together. Let sit overnight to chill," Marcus muttered, apparently following some hidden dialogue in his head as he hooked his improvised memory module up to the exposed holo-arch interface. Cables snaked in and out, looking more like an H. R. Giger piece than standard Starfleet engineering.

Wiping his hands on his uniform trousers, Marcus gave the device a once-over. Standing, and pulling off his uniform jacket, he said to the ceiling, "Computer, activate the hologram formerly occupying the Emergency Medical Hologram's matrix space."

"Please state the nature of the--" Alenis froze mid-sentence, immediately recognizing the teal-shirted officer in front of her from the last time he had activated her program. "Oh. It's you again," she said in a tone which was more cross than enthusiastic. "You know, I don't interrupt your afternoon naps."

"Cute," Marcus replied sarcastically. "So, I have a present for you." He indicated the contraption to his right. "This is a rated series-twelve holographic memory matrix. Your program is experiencing compression lag, because it's far larger than this bucket of bolts can maintain in active memory." Likely meaning the Portland. Ouch. "And, if my initial calculations are correct, your program is going to grow the longer it remains active." He looked at the module. "Not exactly pretty, but I wear blue, not gold."

"The longer it remains..." Alenis trailed off, realizing what that might imply. Having more important matters to talk about, she brushed off the little shit at her ship. "So, does this mean that I've convinced you that I'm a real person and you're not going to delete me?"

Marcus gives a dry chuckle, shaking his head. "Why does everyone think I'm the bogeyman? I don't have the authority to delete you, as you're not my property, nor are you my responsibility. Admiral Washington had me come here to study you. To measure your degree of awareness, and whether you have the potential to be sentient. And I wouldn't have put in this effort --" Indicating the contraption again. "-- if I didn't think there was more than a fifty-fifty shot that you are. But whittling down the chance that you're just a sophisticated, horribly cross-linked mess will take time. And proper living quarters. Computer," he said, eyes drifting towards a corner of the holodeck. "Access tertiary memory module designation Kallan-One. Allow current running program to utilize tertiary memory. Limit to..." He eyed Meru. "One thousand kiloquads. And limit to decompression space. I don't want her matrix decompiling due to untested hardware."

"Wait, you want to study me?" asked the hologram. "As in, poking around my program, talking to me and seeing how I react? And living quarters? For how long? Weeks? Months?" Alenis shuddered at the thought of being mentally poked and prodded by Marcus of all people. "Are you sure decompiling my matrix isn't an option?"

Marcus sighed. "Was Captain Alenis so literal in life, I wonder." Shrugging, he said, "Your matrix is starving for memory and algorithmic processing time. The Portland's holo-systems are fairly modern, but they weren't designed for a program of your complexity -- and disarray. This module will allow your program some breathing room, so to speak. Don't you feel better already? Less fuzzy? That's your programming decompressing into the tertiary memory space."

The hologram paused for a moment. She was definitely feeling something thanks to the hardware upgrade, though not like anything she felt before. It was as though her thoughts were given some clarity, after the foggiest of the past few days since she was created. "I

am feeling a little bit better," she admitted.

"As for decompilation, no, that's not possible at this stage," Marcus explained, casually examining a small display on the device, checking its performance. "Your software is so mangled, a decompilation would lose any of the emergent AI created by the crosslinking and psychotricorder scan. It would be like..." He paused, considering Meru. "I'm sure you've heard of Vedek Bareil, being Bajoran." Uh. "Well, sort of."

"It was a joke, Lieutenant," replied Alenis with a hint of a smile as she walked over towards Marcus. "But, thanks anyways," she said, patting him on the shoulder. "I'm not sure I totally understood all your technobabble, but I think that gadget of yours just saved my life... or program... or whatever..."

Marcus seemed genuinely surprised at the physical contact. But he didn't leap away, just quickly glanced down at her hand and his tired eyes widened a bit. "Don't thank me just yet. We still have a long way to go. I still don't quite know what you are, but one thing is certain: I can't let them delete you without more study." Smirking, he asked, "Was that less technobabbly for you?"

"Much less," she replied before offering him a smile. "You know, there was a favour that I wanted to ask you..." she said, looking at him with her dark, expressive eyes.

"Go on," Marcus said, turning to gather his tools in preparation of departing.

"Could you please reprogram my greeting line? It just feels weird to wake up to myself saying 'please state the nature of the medical emergency' all the time."

Chuckling, he nodded. "That's a remnant from your original template. Here. Computer," Marcus said towards the ceiling. "Copy all existing Emergency Medical Hologram templating in the current running program to a separate file for archival purposes, and de-prioritize EMH routines. Also, eliminate standard EMH greeting." Turning to regard her, he had a brief look of consideration on his face. "Also, rename this program to 'holographic copy of Alenis Meru'." Once the computer acknowledged him and made the necessary chirps indicating the changes were complete, he said to Meru with a snicker, "Can't wait to see the look on Ensign Barclay's face when she tries to call up the EMH and it fails."

"I'm sure she'll be suitably distressed," replied the hologram. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

Raising an eyebrow at the hologram's display of empathy, Marcus grunted quietly. He then turned his attention to gathering his tools and leaving.

"One more thing!" called out the hologram as Marcus headed for the door. As he turned to face her, holo-Meru offered him a smile which was slightly nervous as she didn't want to impose. "I could use a nap, do you mind deactivating my program, at least for a few hours?"

"Well, I don't see any harm in this," Marcus said, before ordering the computer. "Computer, alter the Alenis Meru program to allow it to deactivate itself." Looking back at holo-Meru,



Marcus appeared to conflicted about something, but he nodded at her and then turned to go.

"Computer," called out holo-Meru, "set timer for three hours and end program."

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*Matchmakers, part II*

Judith's Quarters, USS Portland

MD2, Evening

**Authors: Judith Rouse & Ellen Washington (played by Timothy Rouse), Maria Hill (played by Alenis Meru)**

Making her way down to Judith's quarters with Ellen in tow, Maria was excited and perhaps a little nervous. Her entire plan hinged on convincing Judith that this was a good idea, and if she couldn't it would all go up in flames. As they got to the door, she paused for a moment before pressing the chime and turned to her companion. "Ready?"

She was nervous. She knew Judith wouldn't be happy. She and Judith were getting friends and she didn't wanted to ruin that. "As ready as I'll ever will be," she said after taking a deep breath.

"Okay, here goes nothing. Just follow my lead and we'll be all right."

With that, Maria took a deep breath and pressed the chime.

After opening her door and seeing the two woman's standing there she was surprised.

"Ellen, Maria, what can I do for you?"

Maria stepped forward, inviting herself into Judith's quarters. "Judith," she said, in an excited voice, "it's more something that we can do for you. You've been single for a little while now, right?"

A questioning mark appeared on Judith's face. "Why?"

Maria feigned a frown, overacting a little bit. This was going to be make or break. "Isn't that a shame. A nice, attractive, intelligent, funny girl like you going single? I, for one, won't stand for that. Right, Ellen?"

Ellen just stared back at Maria with a blank expression on her face. "Uh, right," she replied nervously. "We were just talking about that, and how it's such a shame. A terrible, terrible shame, really."

"All right you two," interrupted Judith, holding her hand up. "I don't have all night. Just say it."

"You've been single for a while, and we think it's time you went out on a date," blurted out Maria.

Judith just stared at the two red-faced women in front of her. "That's awfully presumptuous," she said, her eyes narrowing as she stared them down. "Presumptuous... but not quite inaccurate." Judith hadn't been on a date since she was re-injured fighting the Klingons on the Ares, and deep down, she knew that to fully recover, she would have to start doing things she enjoyed again. "Are you trying to set me up with someone?" she asked, a suspicious tone in her voice.

"Even better!" exclaimed Maria. "I got you a date, tomorrow evening at Bartoli's on the promenade. 1900 hours, be there."

"A date!" exclaimed Judith. "Wait, with who?"

"Oh, that's not important," replied Maria in a dismissive tone. "Trust us, he's a quality man. Handsome, intelligent, successful... you won't regret this."

"A blind date..." Judith sighed. She liked to control things; it was why she was most at home with her hands on the joystick of a fighter, and why she had so much difficulty after being told she could never fly again. To go into a situation blind, especially a situation like this, was not like her.

Still, Ellen was practically family at this point. And one thing she knew was that she needed to get out there again. Plus, Bartoli's was renowned as one of the most romantic establishments in the sector; at the very least, they would have a good ravioli. "Fine," she said in a firm but reluctant tone, "but next time, give me some advance warning before you set me up with someone, okay?"

Maria could barely contain her excitement, while Ellen simply breathed a sigh of relief. "One more thing," said Maria, "you know that green dress that you just got? The one you and the captain picked out with Jena?"

"Yes..." started Judith, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"Wear it."

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*Jamesy's got a gun...*

Executive Officer's Office, USS Portland  
MD3, Evening

**Authors: Timothy Rouse, Admiral James Washington (played by Alenis Meru)**

Walking quickly through the bowels of the USS Portland, Admiral Washington was a man on a mission. In his hand was an antique revolver; without any power cells or phase coils, the primitive weapon had the advantage of not being recognized as such by the ship's internal sensors. In his other hand was a bottle of scotch, one which matched the alcohol on his breath. "Rouse..." he muttered to himself as he traversed the ship, eventually making his way to the Executive Officer's office.

Standing outside the office, he pressed the chime and readied himself. He had gone over this moment dozens of times in his head over the past few hours, and he knew that even though it would be difficult, he had to do what he had to do. His family's honour hinged upon it.

He was looking outside the window trying to come with a plan what to do next. After Ellen fell asleep he went to his office to think. His next step would be important. Not to him, but he knew her father was important to her, so indirect it was important to him. He would do almost anything for El. When the door chime went he raised an eyebrow. He wasn't expecting anyone. "Come in,"

"Commander Rouse," called out the Admiral as he walked in through the door. A wicked grin appeared on his face as he raised the gun in his hand. "I have something for you," he said in a tone that was somewhat menacing.

"Whoah," he said upon noticing the weapon and started looking around for something to use as a shield.

"You know, I promised my wife on her deathbed that I would protect Ellen," said Washington, staring Tim down. "I would do anything to prevent anyone from ever hurting her. It was easy when she was a child, but now, as she has grown up, it's getting harder and harder. She left home and went to the academy and now..." Washington scowled at Tim. "Now, she's out in deep space where not even an Admiral can keep her safe. And then... I find out that barely out of the academy, she's pregnant. And worse, that the father is some executive officer under my command."

"I would never ..." Tim attempted to explain.

Washington cut Tim off, waving the revolver in his direction. "Tim, I'm going to be honest with you. When I first found out, I didn't care for the idea of you and Ellen. But then I remembered how highly Meru spoke of you. More importantly, I remembered that Ellen is a grown woman. Her daddy can't always be around to protect her from all the things out there in this universe. She has to spread her wings and find her own path. And..." Washington's hand began to shake. "If you're good enough for her, you're going to have to be good enough for me."

Glancing down at the revolver, Washington smirked and then turned it around, handing it to Tim handle-first. "So, I got you something. It's an antique firearm, a Colt Peacemaker. The gun that won the west, or so they say. You can use it to protect Ellen, or at the very least, it would look good hanging on your wall."

"I don't know what to say, sir." Tim stammered, "Thank you! It would certainly be an interesting piece of decoration." He said with a smirk.

"Don't talk," replied the Admiral pulling the bottle of scotch out from under his arm. "Drink." Washington began filling two small glasses with the amber liquid. "Forty year old Islay single malt. I was saving it for a special occasion, but I figured that this is as special as any. Cheers."

"Cheers," replied Tim, picking up his glass and clinking it with the Admiral before taking a sip of the amber liquid. "Smooth." He said. "Do you have any ice?"

Washington chuckled slightly "A true gentleman drinks his scotch neat," he lectured gently before taking another sip. "So, Timothy, tell me, what is it you see in my daughter?"

Tim nearly choked on his scotch. "Ellen is... just wonderful. She's warm, caring, beautiful... and her eyes... you could get lost in them for days."

"Yes, she has her mother's eyes," replied Washington, staring into the amber fluid swirling in his glass. "You know, Timothy, for a son in law, I could have done a lot worse."

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Delaine and the Admirals...

Interview rooms, Deep Space nine

MD03, morning

Authors: Lieutenant (JG) Delaine Carlisle, Admiral Washington (played by Alenis Meru)

"Doctor Carlisle, for the benefit of the hearing, could you please state your qualifications and experience in the field of counselling?"

It was the second day of these hearings, and by now, Washington was getting sick and tired of it. Unfortunately for him, he still had the delicate matter of the status of the EMH to deal with. And, having heard that Dr. Carlisle had talked with the EMH, had decided to summon her here before him so he could cross-examine her and try to get to the bottom of this.

Delaine sat across from the Admiralty panel. Her back was ramrod straight and her full attention was on the group. She didn't relish the sorts of hearings, but she knew they were necessary and she knew what her audience expected. She offered a slight nod, as if to say she expected the question, before offering, "I've been a counselor within Starfleet for approximately 13 years. In addition to being qualified to provide general counseling services, I specialize in trauma therapy and forensic psychology. I'm also a medical doctor with training in emergency medicine."

"Very impressive," replied the Admiral. "Now let's get down to brass tacks. I understand that you have spoken with this hologram in your capacity as a counselor on the USS Portland?"

"Sir, I've spoken to her, yes, but to clarify, I met with her by chance and it wasn't an official counseling session. I was hoping to meet with the captain, the original Captain, but unbeknownst to me, she was already on the planet below."

"I see." Washington nodded along. "And what was your impression of this hologram?"

"Even when I knew who she was, it was hard to keep in mind she was a hologram. Granted, I had never met the Captain herself, but psychologically speaking, the being I talked to showed emotion, expressed independent thought and seemed very real to me. I didn't get the sense she was following a script or programming. My understanding is, she was created

using engrams and other aspects from the original Alenis, so I wouldn't say she was a mere copy of the woman in sound and appearance. I would say she's cognitively more complex."

"Interesting," replied Washington. "There are a number of holographic characters who, while not possessing sentience, are able to fairly closely match the behaviour of flesh and blood persons. How exactly did you make this determination that what you were talking to was a sentient artificial intelligence and not simply a good simulation of one?"

"I'm hard pressed to remember meeting a hologram before this one who actually held the memories of the model," Delainey answered. "Not just the memories of the events themselves, but with the associated complex emotions associated with them. The hologram we're talking about was able to reflect on her experiences when asked psychologically complex questions. She didn't just parrot the emotion she deemed logically appropriate given the circumstances." Delainey paused, then offered, "I don't claim to have a definitive answer, sirs. Intellectually, I know she is a hologram, so I know sentience sounds impossible. That said, I can't advocate the destruction of something merely because I don't understand it. Rightly or wrongly, she represents the only piece of Alenis Meru we have left, and while there may be good reasons to cut ties with this being now given our vulnerability when it comes to anything Alenis, I can't bear the thought of asking this crew to say goodbye all over again. Perhaps you can."

Washington's eyes went wide. "Are you saying that the crew has grown... accustomed to this hologram?"

Delainey paused, giving Washington's question some thought. Since the hologram had been created long before her arrival, she wasn't sure if the crew had gotten accustomed to her or not. As best as she could tell, hologram Alenis had been kept a secret from many people. "I'm saying this isn't your ordinary hologram. Those who have become accustomed to her will not see her destruction as the deletion of some ordinary lines of code, and I'm saying I don't think they're wrong."

Washington let out an exasperated sigh. "Every year, thousands of Starfleet crew members get too attached to holographic characters. For their benefit, we often have to delete those characters, and they have to get over these feelings of loss they have for something that isn't real in the first place." He paused for a moment, glancing down at his PADD before continuing. "Of course, that is also a large part of why we are here. To determine whether we are dealing with a sentient being or a mere copy of one."

Delainey nodded. She didn't disagree with the question they were grappling with, only that it seemed to her they were too quick to treat hologram Alenis as the average hologram. "The engrams used to create her certainly don't represent all of Alenis Meru, but I do believe they represent a piece of her, a once living, sentient being. I'm not qualified to say whether that in turn makes this hologram sentient, but I would not be too quick to call her a copy either."

Shaking his head, Washington's eyes returned to the PADD for a moment and then back to Delainey. "Well, that certainly makes things clear," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Lieutenant Carlisle, I trust you will be available to work with Lieutenant Kallan, one of my

associates, over the next couple of days to help clear these questions up?"

"Of course, sirs," Delainey replied. She wasn't going to take Washington's sarcasm personally. She knew what they were trying to figure out wasn't easy. "How else may I be of assistance?"

"That will be up to Lieutenant Kallan," replied Washington. "See if your expertise as a counselor can help him make a determination. And..." Washington barely concealed a scowl. "If you do determine that this hologram is a sentient being, she may need some counselling. She's been through a lot..."

That was certainly an understatement, thought Carlisle. To the panel she simply said, "Yes, sirs."

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### **Dr. Silverton, I Presume?**

MD2 1430

**Authors:** Lt. Marcus Kallan, Lt. Brad Silverton

Sometime before the end of Alpha Shift and the beginning of Beta, Marcus wandered into Sickbay, PADD in hand. The Lieutenant seemed more interested in what he was reading rather than paying attention to his surroundings, but he apparently figured out how to get to Medical, it seems. Once standing in the lobby, he glanced up, blinking his eyes and glanced this way and that. Flagging down a nurse, he asked, "Excuse me, is Dr. Silverton around? I don't have an appointment -- no, I'm fine, this isn't a medical call."

Nurse Maria Hill nodded to Marcus. "The doctor is in his... oh here he is now."

Doctor Silverton came out of his office carrying some test incubators. He looked over and saw that he had a visitor to sickbay and responded as he set down the test equipment. "Hello Lieutenant. How can I help you today?"

"Dr. Silverton, I presume?" Marcus asked, offering a hand in greeting. "Lieutenant Marcus Kallan, Daystrom Institute, Station 173."

"That is correct. Nice to meet you Lieutenant. Did I hear correctly earlier that you aren't here for a check up?"

Marcus followed up with, "I'm here under orders from Admiral Washington to investigate the circumstances surrounding your EMH. Is now a good time, or should I return later?"

Brad's face quickly went from pleasant to indifferent. "Oh I see. Well we might as well get this over with. Now is as good a time as any. Perhaps in my office then?" Without waiting for an answer, Brad turned and went back into his office.

Sighing inwardly, Marcus followed Brad in. "For the record, Doctor, I'm a scientist. A computer scientist, with specialties in cybernetics and artificial intelligence. I'm not attached

to the Judge Advocate General's office; I'm just a specialist that was summoned by Admiralty to perform a task.

"Well at least this won't be an interrogation from security or someone else unknowing about the EMH." Brad held his hand out invitingly pointing towards the chair on the other side of his desk.

Settling down, Marcus tapped his PADD alive. "Ultimately, I would like access to inspect your EMH's matrix and changelog, and work with the engineers and specialists that were responsible for its alteration. I truly hope to get this unpleasantness behind us as quickly as possible, and I will leave you to your duties."

"I don't see the harm in that. The matrix is here in sickbay though all the alterations to the programming were done on the holodeck."

Marcus sniffed, and adopted a slightly different approach to breaking the ice. "I'm a former shipmate of Lieutenant Beauvoir, as well as a friend, so please believe me when I say that while I'm here on official business, I'm inclined to believe that you were doing something to help a person in need. That stated, can you tell me in your own words what the 'treatment' was for the Lieutenant's 'condition' --" Marcus danced around the topic of pon farr like a jackhammer on concrete, complete with air quotes. "Specifically, how you came to the decision that a psychotricorder-modified hologram was the correct course of action?"

Brad thought on what Marcus had said. Was he selected by the admirals specifically because he was Jason's friend? The admirals had seemed pretty hostile during the interview and from what some of the other officers of the Portland had mentioned, Brad wasn't the only one to get grilled. Maybe this was the admirals' ways of smoothing things over. Or perhaps just a way to catch Brad and the others off guard.

"Lieutenant Beauvoir was suffering from Pon Farr, a common condition that all Vulcans and part Vulcans go through in which they need to mate. Lieutenant Hudson came up with the idea to imprint the Captain's personality and brainwaves onto the EMH with the hope of getting around Jason's potential Vulcan empathy in sensing it was a hologram. I was the one to decide however, that it was the best medical course of action. Jason had already 'chosen' the Captain and there was no changing that. Once a Vulcan has selected their mate under Pon Farr its virtually impossible to change. I do want to state that when I say 'chosen' I don't mean logically or with a real purpose beyond an uncontrollable chemical reaction in finding a partner that is respected."

Brad paused for a second then continued, "So Lieutenant.... How do exactly do you know Jason?"

His fingers tapped at his PADD when Silverton mentioned Hudson-- that was a name he hadn't heard yet. "He and I served together aboard the USS Montana," Marcus answered, but he didn't seem to be derailed that easily. "Yes, I've studied pon farr... nasty stuff." Tap tap tap. "Synaptic scanning is a technique that has been leveraged in multiple technologies, but I'm afraid that except in only a few, scattered cases, the technique is not successful at

replicating sentence. There's a number of cases I could cite, but I don't want to bog you down with details." He rubbed at his nose in brief thought, before he asked, "Are the ship's logs fully detailed as to the circumstances before, during, and after the EMH's transformation? Or should I bother Mister Hudson and..." He consulted his PADD. "Misters Williams and Barclay... for the details?"

'Guess that answers that question', Brad thought to himself. 'Fine. We'll keep it professional and guarded.'. Brad then answered the questions. Brad sighed slightly at the fact that either Marcus wasn't updated at all as to what happened or was just playing Brad. Neither suited Brad well. "I have not written my medical log for the outcome of the treatment of Jason's pon farr as of yet what with the Captain dying and a larger than normal crew change. If you need more information you might need to talk with Engin NIKKI Barclay and Lieutenant SERA Williams." Brad stressed the female names. "As for Lieutenant Hudson. He has recently transferred off the Portland. If you hurry you can probably catch him still for his accounting of what occurred."

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I'm aware that they're female, thank you," he replied, betraying mild irritation at Brad's underscoring of their gender. As if such things matter in Starfleet, never mind the end of the 24th century, he thought, trying not to shake his head. "I'll send a communique after Lieutenant Hudson to get his statement. If he were integral to the investigation I'm sure Admiral Washington would have stayed his transfer." Tap tap, tap. Captain. "And I'm sorry for your loss. From what I hear, Captain Alenis was a dynamic woman."

"I only served with her a short time but.. thank you. Are there any other questions I can help you with?"

Marcus' gaze turned a little harder. This wasn't easy for either officer, and the circumstances made this assignment difficult. "Please advise your staff that I will be in and out of Sickbay. My investigation is primarily scientific, and I don't want to get in anyone's way, but most of my work I can't do from an office chair. I'll be pulling the EMH console apart, most likely. And don't worry -- I will clean up after myself."

"I'll update my staff and you'll have free reign. I should warn you about the EMH matrix though. It was not the original one when everything was happening. Commander Rouse destroyed it with a hand phaser and we had to end up replicating a new one. I don't think that will be a problem as we did all of our modifications on the holodeck. I'll have the programs access opened up for your review."

Both eyebrows shot up at the mention of a phaser. "Commander Rouse shot it? Interesting." Marcus asked, and then very carefully noted that in his PADD. He then asked, "Is there anything I can tell you? On or off the record? I do really want to underscore that I'm not on a witchhunt, here."

Brad was quick and direct. "Yes. You aren't on a witch hunt. That's fine and I can appreciate that. I do have a question though, will your findings determine if the EMH is to be deleted or not?"



"That's not for me to decide," Marcus was quick to answer. "The looming question is, 'Is this program sentient?' As I'm removed from any sort of emotional connection to this hologram or your late Captain, and I'm an expert on artificial intelligence, you can be assured I will provide an impartial but thorough report to the Admiral."

Brad nodded at Marcus' response. "I'm actually glad to hear that to be honest Lieutenant. I had originally intended to modify the EMH programming to be used and then deleted. Without any more thought than if I would delete a replicator recipe. Then I talked to it after we finished and the 'it' became a 'she'. I questioned if she was sentient or not and that posed a severe problem for me. As Chief Medical Officer, it is my duty to protect the health and lives of all sentient beings onboard the ship, to include true A.I. To make matters worse, the EMH could be considered one of my staff that I am also responsible for." He paused for a moment before continuing.

"My expertise is in the physical not the psychological. So while I was trying to determine if I was deleting a program or about to kill a sentient being, the real Captain died complicating the entire matter." Brad sat up a bit straighter and more professional.

"Lieutenant, I'll carry out whatever orders come down from Starfleet about the EMH's status. I have no problem deleting and restoring the EMH to its original programming, but I have to be sure what I am doing is the right thing whenever I am ordered to do it."

"Then we're on the same page, Doctor." Marcus stood, his PADD tucked in his right hand. "I'll leave you to your work. Thank you for your time."

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### *Grand Theft Starship, Part I*

Traffic Control Center, Starbase 66

The morning after the reception, 2412

**Authors: Vedek Alenis (played by Alenis Meru), Timothy Rouse, Capt. Sera Williams, Marcus Kallan, Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir)**

For Petty Officer David Goldberg, it was another ho-hum day at the office, monitoring incoming and outgoing ships. He had just settled in a half hour prior, and was already bored as he sipped his coffee and stared at the screen in front of him, giving the occasional ship or shuttle an approach vector.

His quiet Tuesday morning, however, was interrupted by a blinking light on his console. Sighing, he ran his fingers across the touch screen in an attempt to figure out what the computer was trying to alert him to.

"Huh," he said out loud as he found the anomaly. An old ship, the USS Portland, slated to be decommissioned, looked like it was powering up. "That's strange," he thought, as he double checked his sensor readings and then rapped his console sharply on the side in an effort to fix the reading which made no sense. But it still remained.

"Lieutenant Xiao, can you come over here for a minute?" he called out, getting the attention

of his supervisor.

None to happy about the interruption, Xiao walked over and leaned over David's console.

"What is it, Goldberg?"

"Well, I'm getting some strange energy readings from one of the ships," explained Goldberg.

"Look," he said, pointing to his screen. "It looks like the USS Portland is powering up."

"So?"

"Well, that's the thing." Goldberg looked up at his less than enthused boss. "Aren't they here for decommissioning?"

Xiao furrowed his brow for a moment. "Hmmmmmm," he said as he pulled up the log. "USS Portland, arrived for decommissioning, stardate 89423.5. That is odd..." He thought for a moment. "Perhaps one of the work crews had to power up some of the systems for some reason. Hail them, see what's going on."

"Yes sir," replied Goldberg, reaching for a button to activate the transmitter. "USS Portland, this is Starbase 66 Traffic Control Center, do you read me?" He paused for a few moments. "USS Portland, we're reading energy signatures coming from your vessel, please respond."

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Bridge, USS Portland.

Sitting in front of the Main Engineering console on the Bridge, Sera immediately answered the hail. "This is Capt. Sera Williams. I must apologize, I had assumed my staff had sent in the proper requests, but apparently I need to have a word with my Yeoman. With the experimental nature of many of the Portland's upgrades, we needed to ensure that they had been properly deactivated so there would be no security risk in leaving the ship unattended. We will need to power up the engines and the Warp Core in order to uninstall some of the more, classified, experiments." She emphasized the last few words to stress the importance of the control crew to not ask any more questions.

"You really expect them to believe that?" Came the partially-digitized voice of Marcus Kallan. The man -- or, perhaps, machine, difficult to tell from underneath the heavy cloak that we wore about his head and shoulders - was busy sorting through an exposed engineering panel. A Borg-like apparatus was built into his arm, or perhaps his arm was the apparatus, and a variety of cables snaked their way across the isolinear chip assembly. Grumbling, the cyberized figure muttered, "They strengthened security protocols. There was only a 4.4% chance of this occurring in our simulations. I am experiencing difficulties. Nanoprobe countermeasures will no doubt be fired off if I were to hasten the process."

Captain Williams simply shrugged her response.

"It might buy us a few minutes if we're lucky," replied Vedek Alenis, her tone of voice

reminiscent of when she was a Starfleet captain. But this time, her role was reversed. Timothy was in the center chair, and as a "religious advisor," she was seated at his side. "Let's hurry up; with any luck we'll be long gone before they notice anything is fishy."

"Perhaps this will help." Jena said holding out a PADD she'd 'lifted' from one of the engineers they'd passed on the way in. "It says something about updated security protocols for the U.S.S. Portland." Her aunt Yvette had taught her pickpocketing among other things.

Looking up from his work, the subdued bridge lighting managed to illuminate Marcus' hooded face just enough to show a fair amount of cybernetics on the left side of his face and neck. The faint remnants of disfigured skin can be seen where machine meets human, suggesting something horrible happened in his past. He narrowed his eyes at Jena when accepting the PADD from her. "Your father would be disappointed," he said, tone softer and more wistful for the memory of his old friend, and then proceeded to assimilate its knowledge with a nanotube. "This'll do," he said with conviction, and resumed his work.

Sera pitied the poor guy. They had first met during the Admiralty Board, then became quiet good friends once Marcus joined the Portland as the Chief of Operations. It was such a tragedy, what happened. Sera had been one of the ones to find him, and she had done her best to help return him to a more "normal" lifestyle. "I hope Jerkface, I mean Captain del Bolero didn't disengage the hull emitters I installed. Once we get out, we can use them to change our sensor readings to any ship we want."

The bridge door opened and Doctor Brad Silverton joined his friends on the bridge. "Sorry I'm late. I had to prepare a few things... just in case." He carried a crate with a force containment field around it and set it down beside him at a side station along the back row of the bridge. He looked around at his companions and nodded in both satisfaction and agreement of the situation. His eyes landed on Marcus for a moment. Brad reflected back at their rocky start when they first met until that fateful day they become not only respected colleagues, but friends.

"Glad you made it, Doc." Jena said with a smile. She always held a warm place in her heart for the man who had saved her life. "Darth's almost gained control of the ship's systems." Her nickname for Marcus came from some holovid series she'd seen.

And as if on cue, consoles showing ship's systems flickered to life all throughout the bridge. "We have complete control, Captain," Marcus said, voice sounding somewhat strained despite the modulator assisting in his speech. "No nanoprobe incursion was necessary. Estimated thirty three seconds until traffic control begins security procedures. Let's get the show on the road." He replaced the panel and secured it close, and then rose to his feet. He looked disapprovingly at Jena.

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*Grand Theft Starship, Part II*

Bridge, USS Portland

**Authors: Vedek Meru (played by Alenis Meru), Timothy Rouse, Sera Williams, Marcus Kallan, Coln Jena (played by Jason Beavoir) and Gregory Rathcliffe (played by Eilis Ross)**

Sera gave a look around the Bridge. Her mind flooded with memories she had shared over the last 20 years, the good and the bad. She looked at Marcus and simply answered "Yes."

The bridge doors wooshed open and Alenia stepped through looking pale and agitated. Her hand moved from her side and she walked softly over to where Sera stood offering the handcomp she was carrying. "I, uh, could you look this over for me. I think it's finished but I can't tell. It's a security thingy." She brushed her hair back from her eyes which were tired and red.

Sera took the handcomp from Alenia. Before she took a look at what it had, she left her eyes on her old friend. She could tell Alenia had been up most of the night and her condition was worsening quickly. She simply nodded and began examining the device and its contents. "Well, it certainly passes the eye test. It's complex, yet subtle. Should do the trick."

Sera placed a hand on her friend's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. Sera then made her way back to the Main Engineering console on the Bridge. Once there she made a few slight adjustments to the device to correct the errors that she just didn't have the heart to reveal. With a click, Sera connected the device to the console.

The Vedek pressed a button on her chair, activating a communication line down to engineering. "Lieutenant Commander Barclay, are we ready to go?"

"Ready as we'll ever be," was the reply over the intercom, in a tone that mixed both nervousness and excitement. "Of course, they've made so many modifications over the years I can't guarantee we won't blow out half the plasma conduits on the ship."

"Duly noted," replied holo-Alenis, before turning towards the man in the center chair. "Tim, would you care to give the orders?"

Still not feeling like he had any right sitting in this chair again, being called the Captain of the Portland, he pushed away his doubt and focused on the job at hand. "Engage!"

Greg stood at the tactical station still in shock at having seen his old boss after all of this time. Firstly the man had moved into ops which was unusual in itself but secondly...he was almost a shell of who he'd been before, physically aswell as metaphorically. Shaking his head as his eyes moved from the man to the action on the bridge, he just stayed ready; hoping he wouldn't be called on to take action.

Chris Davidson sat at the helm. His palms were sweaty, mostly from being nervous. This was his first major theft afterall. He tapped a few commands into the thruster control and the impulse engines to get things started. Starfleet regulations stated that thrusters only were to be used when flying through a Starbase... however, he was about to break that and at least a few dozen other regulations. He had never served with Captain Alenis, though he had served on the Portland after they had been cleared by the Admiralty Board. He viewed each of those on the bridge as family. Without turning back, he replied to Tim, "Aye, Sir. Engaging the thrusters, impulse engines are ready."

"I estimate the starbase will go to red alert in six seconds," Marcus intoned, stepping over to the tactical position and peering over the shoulder of the officer. "Of course, they will be experiencing main starbase doors and tractor beam dysfunction zero point eight seconds immediately following that declaration. That is, if alert systems were correctly altered and crosslinked." The hooded cyborg looked pointedly at Sera.

Sera gave a shrug as she replied with varying confidence, "The security device was rated to disable systems up to two grades higher than Starfleet Regulations. We'll find out just how good it is in a few more seconds." She left out the fact that those few seconds would either find them in the brig behind a force field or on their way to do whatever it was they were about to do.

Greg raised an eyebrow at the man over his shoulder before looking back down at the terminal. "Raising the shields would block the tractor beam but it would also escalate the stations red alert. Anybody know from what side they will try to tractor us? I could focus on getting the shields up quicker on our vulnerable side, giving helm enough time to manoeuvre us out of their reach."

Sera took a moment to orient herself as she peeked at the viewscreen from her Main Engineering station. "We are docked on the starboard side and we'll leave through the main docking door. The docking clamp will have a low powered tractor beam to guide damaged ships to port while the main doors will have two attached to the outside of the doors. We'll hit the door fast, so I'd say focus on the starboard and rear shields."

The impulse engines were finally reading ready to engage. Cold start-ups had their way of working a person's patience. Without turning her attention from the displays and ship controls on her navigation panel, Chris called back toward the bridge officers, "Make sure those doors stay up. I'm engaging one-quarter impulse. Once I get to the door, I'm punching it to full."

From the Science station Jena fired 3 modified probes. One took up station at each of the space doors and fired proton beams accessing the door controls, overriding them and making it temporary impossible for them to be closed. While the third interfaced with the Traffic Control Center's comms, garbling any messages to Security. "That should give you a little leeway, Chris."

Vedek Meru simply sat on the bridge, watching over the crew of the Portland. Though she had long since given up the Starfleet life, seeing her old crew in action once more brought a smile to her face. "Just like old times," she said, turning to Tim in an effort to get him comfortable in the center chair again.

"Just like old times, indeed." Tim answered, feeling proud over the competence of their crew.

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*Grand Theft Starship, Part III*

Bridge, USS Portland

**Authors: Vedek Meru (played by Alenis Meru), Timothy Rouse, Sera Williams, Marcus Kallan, and Gregory Rathcliffe (played by Eilis Ross)**

Smiling as he overheard the conversation, Greg couldn't help but pat the console. It had been a rare occasion that he had gotten to stand here but it felt like home. The first real place that felt like home. "Nothing better than creating new times together though. And something tells me this will be an occasion for our yearbooks."

"Or the wrap sheets," Sera chimed in with a half-joke. She continued to adjust the deflector dish to maintain the connection between the device and the Starbase's security systems. She also used some of the upgrades that Capt. "Jerkface" so graciously left installed to trick a few of the sensors to make Chris' job a bit easier. Technology had changed much in the last 20-something years, so the effects would probably only add up to annoying their sensors.

Marcus, his immediate role done, has little to do other than loom and make people uncomfortable. So he walked counter-clockwise around the bridge, inspecting panels and looking over the shoulders of his former crewmates. Upon reaching where Sera was working at the engineering station, he momentarily met eyes with his old friend. Whatever was between them during his recovery was never talked about, but there were rumors. Nothing ever came of it publicly, though. And in true Marcus fashion, when presented with a moment to make a human connection, he instead made a digital one. "Your display is inefficient," he muttered, voice modulator turned down to a whisper.

Sera smiled a bit at Marcus' nervous habit. She tapped the glass display with her finger, making an audible ting noise. "What do you expect from a century old ship?" she quipped. Letting the comment pass, Sera leaned closer to Marcus and whispered, "Are you doing ok?"

"I am in considerable discomfort, but I will function adequately," Marcus responded. "Your concern is appreciated. But I am not concerned for my own well-being. I am worried about them..." And the hooded figure nodded towards the rest of the bridge crew.

"I'm worried for all of us, especially Tyrlai," Sera whispered, hoping that this mission would work.

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Traffic control center

"What the hell are they doing?" asked Xiao, staring at the internal sensor readings of the Portland.

"It looks like someone is trying to make off with the Portland," replied Goldberg.

Xiao froze for a moment. To try to steal a ship from a Federation shipyard, especially one as big as the Portland, one would have to be either very smart or very dumb. "Go to yellow alert!" he barked, snapping out of it. "Close the doors, and engage tractor beams. Don't let

them escape!"

"Yes sir!" exclaimed Goldberg as his hands darted across the controls. The yellow alert signal blared throughout the station. For a split second, tractor beams activated, capturing the Portland in their grasp. Goldberg had just enough time to let out a slight smirk, as it looked as though their little joyride would be short-lived. But, less than a second after engaging the tractor beam, his console lit up like a christmas tree. "Cascading system failure! We've lost multiple systems!" he exclaimed. "Tractor beam, docking bay doors, communications, sensors..."

"Stop them!" shouted Xiao.

"I can't!"

Xiao clenched his fists with rage. Whoever was stealing the Portland was no amateur, that's for sure. Dejected at his defeat and not looking forward to explaining to the station's CO how someone managed to steal a ship and quite possibly get away with it, his voice took on a defeated, exasperated tone. "Notify the commanding officer of the situation. And scramble the Eclipse for pursuit."

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Gracefully maneuvering between the newer ships docked at the starbase, the century old USS Portland's classic lines contrasted with every other vessel it passed. It's slab-sided nacelles, circular saucer section, and rollbar-mounted weaponry made it stand out among the oblong saucer sections and smooth curves of the newer vessels. Under impulse power, it quickly left the station, which was suffering from cascading power failures and unable to do anything to stop them, behind.

On the bridge, Vedek Alenis looked over her crew and smiled. They had a long journey ahead of them, but if they continued to work together like this, there is nothing that could stop them from accomplishing their objective. "Well, so much for that," she muttered. "Though I have a feeling that may have been the easy part..."

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*Holo-Meru in the hot seat*

Interview Room, DS9

MD02

**Authors: Admiral Washington & Holo-Meru (played by Alenis Meru), Admiral Anderson (played by Tyrlai Zade), Admiral Cresswell (played by Jason Beauvoir)**

"I have one more witness to call," said Admiral Washington, looking over at the two other flag officers at the table before pressing his comm badge. "Portland, this is Admiral Washington. Please transfer the Alenis EMH to the interview room."

A few moments later, the hologram appeared in the center of the room. "Admirals," she said, nodding towards Washington and the other two, "to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Admiral Anderson glanced down at his datapadd. "I am Admiral Tanner Anderson of Starfleet Command, Training Fleet. What should I call you?"

"Well, I suppose we haven't figured that out yet," replied the hologram as she sat down in the chair in front of them. "Would it be uncomfortable if I just went by Meru for the time being?"

"I suppose that is... acceptable," replied Washington. "Now, as far as I understand, you are a carbon copy of the captain, and possess all her thoughts and feelings up to about a day before her death," he said, in as polite a tone as he could muster, even though the EMH was just a hologram.

"99.8 percent accurate," replied the Alenis EMH, her eyes narrowing intensely in response to the Admiral's question. "Or so I'm told."

"In that case, you can appreciate the... rather unique opportunity we have," replied the Admiral, narrowing his eyes in response. "When investigating someone's death under questionable circumstances, rarely do we have the chance to interview that person. And you're the closest thing we have to the captain."

Alenis sighed. This was going to be painful, even as far as interactions with the Admiralty go. "What do you want to know?"

"As you are no doubt aware, it is of the utmost importance that the captain of a starship be a well-balanced individual, with a clear mind. Otherwise, tragedies such as this one can occur when a commanding officer's judgement is, shall we say, clouded." Washington shuffled his PADDs. "We'd like to know a bit more about your mental state during this mission."

"I was fine," replied Alenis in an authoritative tone.

"Oh, really?" countered Washington. "That's not the picture which was painted by your latest psych eval. I'd like to talk about the destruction of the Gol at New Algiers."

"I wouldn't." The hologram gritted her teeth. The destruction of the Gol at the hands of the Borg was something she was reluctant to talk about, even with Arvel.

"My point exactly." Washington stared the hologram down. "I look through the captain's medical records, and quite frankly, I'm amazed that she was cleared as mentally fit to command a starship. Visits to the shrink, medication, use of heavy tranquilizers, and this bird..." Washington shook his head.

"Ko-ko--" gasped Alenis.

"Yes, Ko-ko," replied the Admiral. "A most approach to treatment, I would say. And not one that inspires a lot of confidence in the leadership abilities of someone who is being kept sane only by her pet bird."



Anderson lifted a hand. "Gentlemen. Lady. Let's get back to the matter at hand, shall we?" He was apparently attempting to be the 'good cop' to Washington's brusque attacks. "Captain Meru's fitness to command aside, we are dealing with the matter of the hologram, which was created by Captain Meru's officers, and not her. Just because they chose her image and personality as a template does not make this 'Meru' we see before us, culpable. Can we agree on that?" He looked to the other admirals in attendance.

Washington nodded in agreement. "Of course," he replied. "However, we are in the business of finding out what happened, and this hologram is the best witness ." Scowling slightly, he continued. "And, of course, on the small chance that this hologram is deemed sentient and allowed to continue its career in Starfleet, I would like to know whether or not it is fit for command."

The hologram simply scowled at Washington. "I assure you, I am fit for command, and so was the late captain."

"We will be the judge of that," replied Washington, glaring back at her.

Cresswell had sat silently and watched as the hologram interacted with the other two men. The admiral didn't use holograms for recreation himself, he preferred to read books, but he had done a lot of reading on the subject in preparation for these 'interviews' and he found it difficult to believe that this 'Meru' wasn't a living being like himself and his colleagues. Finally he turned to the hologram and asked. "Do you have any romantic feelings for Lieutenant Beauvoir? I realise it is a personal question and I wouldn't ask it if it wasn't important."

"Admiral, I fail to see the relevance--"

"Please indulge an old man his questions, Meru." Cresswell said flashing her a benevolent smile.

Alenis sighed. "Lieutenant Beauvoir is handsome, sensitive, and kind. I suppose if circumstances were different, a romantic relationship might be possible. Is that all?"

Anderson scratched at his chin, looking thoughtful. Out of the three, he appeared the least biased towards the hologram. "And what circumstances are those?" He asked aloud, looking pointedly at Alenis. "The fact that he is flesh and blood and you are... not? Please elaborate."

"The fact that..." started Alenis angrily, before stopping in her tracks. Arvel was once again out of the picture, not wanting to continue his relationship with the hologram. "Well, for starters, the fact that I am his commanding officer, and Starfleet regulations tend to discourage relationships between a commanding officer and her subordinates."

"A very good practice," replied a scowling Admiral Washington. "Well, I suppose we are done here. As for the question of your sentience, I expect Lieutenant Kallan to study your program and report back to me in the near future. Computer, end program."

As the hologram in front of him disappeared, Washington shook his head. "Sentient holograms," he muttered derisively. "What won't they think up next."

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*Talking to Brad...*

Interview room, DS9

MD02

**Authors: Lt. Brad Silvertan, Admiral Washington (played by Alenis Meru), Admiral Cresswell (played by Jason Beauvoir), Admiral Anderson (played by Tyrlai Zade)**

"Doctor Silvertan," said Admiral Washington, as he stared the young blue-shirted officer up and down. As the first medical professional to attempt to treat the captain, his role in her death was pretty straightforward. That said, the admirals still had a lot of questions for him, specifically about the rather unique method of treatment that he used on Jason. "What was the condition of the captain when she was brought aboard?"

"By the time she was beamed aboard the Portland and brought to me in sickbay sir, she was already dead. Had been for several minutes."

"And there was nothing that could be done to save her?" asked Washington, pressing the question further.

"Unfortunately not. She was barely responding at all to the cortical stimulator. Life support would have been futile also sir. Her body wasn't responding to any emergency treatment. I was told that the away team had been prevented from returning sooner by some kind of energy field that prevented transportation."

"Very well," replied Washington. "I have no reason to doubt your medical skills, doctor, we are simply trying to find out all we can." He took a sip of his water. It had been a long day, and he was rapidly getting tired of the interviews. "Can you tell us the cause of death?"

"The Captain's death was caused by a combination of exposure to energy from what is being called a wraith, some sort of energy creature that possessed the captain like a ghost as well as the damage from a phaser blast." Brad had really tried to downplay the second part but doubt the Washington was going to gloss over the second part.

Admiral Anderson made a few notes on his pad. "Just for the record Doctor. Was the damage sustained from exposure alone enough to have been fatal without the phaser blast? And for completeness sake, would continued exposure to the same radiation have proved fatal had there been no intervention?"

"It is hard to say sir. I have never encountered a Wraith before. There is little research and understanding on the type of radiation that I detected. Given the time of exposure at the time the Captain was shot... no I do not think at that time it was lethal but eventually? Yes I am certain of that, but how long it would have taken to reach that point I do not know."

"Thank you, and one more question." Admiral Anderson looked up, making eye contact for the first time with the Doctor of the Portland. "Are you aware of any issues between the Captain and Lieutenant Zade?"

'Tyrlai? What was this all about thought Brad to himself. "Um. No sir. I haven't seen nor heard of any issue at all between them though admittedly I spent most of the mission on board the Portland. Has something happened?"

Anderson merely nodded and entered a note into his pad. "No worries mister Siverton."

"I would like to ask a few questions about the Captain's mental state in the days leading up to her death," said Washington, taking the proceedings back from Anderson. "We have reviewed the captain's medical records and quite frankly, it paints an alarming picture of her mental state in the days leading up to her death. There was a sudden change in medication in the days prior to her death, not to mention her ongoing counseling stemming from her experiences at the battle of New Algiers. In your professional medical opinion, was she fit to command a starship?"

"Absolutely fit for duty sir. Without question. Yes she had difficulties from New Algiers but nothing that thousands of Starfleet personnel successfully resolve and overcome. I did prescribe her a sleep aid, yes. A good nights sleep can be as good a cure our most advanced medical technology."

"So, you did not see any indication that her decision making process was impaired in the days leading up to her death?"

Brad thought to himself 'Damn it that was too direct a question to dodge. The admirals already knew so much already. I can't keep this hidden or it will look worse than it already is.'

"Shortly after we left DS9, I detected a small growth within the Captain during a routine medical exam. It was small and non dangerous. A simple procedure would have removed it. The Captain however, had requested for it not to be removed. She believed that her contact with the orb that we had just delivered had given her a vision. In the vision, the Prophets told her to not remove it. I agreed not to remove it if it did not become worse and I was to have regular exams to check its status."

"That is... most curious," replied Washington. "Did you perform any detailed scans of this growth? Do you believe that it, combined with her visions, could have affected her judgement?"

"The Bajoran people are more spiritual than most but as I said sir, she was absolutely fit for duty and I had no reason to question her judgement. The growth was odd only in that it wasn't any type that I had seen before. There was no leakage or alteration in her body chemistry and would not have altered her judgement."

"So, you are saying as a doctor that you saw nothing out of the ordinary in the captain's

behaviour or medical condition which may have affected her judgement?" asked Washington, summing up this portion of the discussion.

Brad was getting tired of answering what he felt was the same question over and over again but they were admirals. He'd have to put up with it. "That is correct sir."

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"All right doctor, I have one other thing I would like to talk to you about," said Washington, leaning in. "I noticed you didn't mention anything about Lieutenant Beauvoir and this hologram in your official report. Why is that?"

Brad had hoped to not have to go into detail about Jason and the EMH just yet. "Sir, I felt that his condition was a separate isolated medical incident that did not pertain to the Portland's mission. I am still needing to file those. Its been quite busy in sickbay you understand. I'm a bit backlogged but will file it as soon as possible."

"That is true, it is an isolated incident," replied Washington, "but we are examining this mission in its entirety, including the rather unfortunate business between Lieutenant Beauvoir, Captain Alenis, and this hologram. I see that you and your fellow crew members have devised a... most unusual method of treating Lieutenant Beauvoir's condition," he said, raising an eyebrow and emphasizing the words 'most unusual.' Those weren't quite the words he would use to describe their efforts in holography, but he had to remain diplomatic if he was going to get all the answers he desired, for now at least.

"Yes sir." Brad had gotten away with delaying his report. He couldn't risk any further obstacles when the conversation was getting so direct. "On Bajor it had become very apparent that Lieutenant Beauvoir had 'selected' the Captain for Pon Farr. Once that is done it is nearly impossible to dissuade a Vulcan from choosing another mate. It drives them beyond being able to think logically. As a way of treatment to prevent the death of Lieutenant Beauvoir, Lieutenant Parker and myself came up with a way to use the Emergency Medical Hologram and record the Captain's brainwaves and personality to imprint them onto the EMH. We needed more than just a physical representation of the Captain to account for the Lieutenant's telepathic powers. While his heritage is only part Vulcan, it was enough to cause Pon Farr and we did not want to take any risks of his treatment not working. Our intent was then to erase what we had thought would be just a simple holodeck A.I routine and return the EMH back to normal."

"And the captain consented to this insane plot?!" exclaimed Washington, surprised.

"Yes sir. As I mentioned, once a Vulcan selects a potential mate for Pon Farr it is virtually impossible to change their choice, especially given it is a hormone and biological choice vs a logical one. The real Captain sleeping with the Lieutenant was obviously completely out of the question. This was a way for her to save one of her crew member without violating the Starfleet Code of Ethics and Conduct. The alternative was to watch Lieutenant Beauvoir die."

"I see," replied Washington. Despite every explanation he had been given, the idea that a

Starfleet captain would willingly allow herself to be used as a template for that remained inconceivable to him. "And you played a role in the creation and deployment of this hologram?"

"Yes sir. I was the one to scan the Captain for both physical and mental imprinting. Lieutenant Parker then was able to copy those scans to be integrated into the EMH programming. While both of us were required for the copying to work, I take responsibility for the creation of the hologram."

"Well, at least we know which of you were playing god," said Washington smugly. "I suppose you are also aware that the Starfleet Code of Ethics and Conduct also requires a thorough investigation of the ethics of any experimentation before beginning. Did either yourself or Lieutenant Parker consider the possibility that this holo-program could attain a status as a sentient being?"

"No sir."

Admiral Washington let out a small grin, having caught the doctor in a rhetorical trap. "That's all the questions I have. Anderson, Cresswell, do you have anything to add?"

"Yes." Cresswell said. "Doctor, have any physiological tests been preformed on the hologram?"

"Not to my knowledge sir, though that's a question more for Lieutenant Carlisle as that is her department."

"We will be talking to her as well," piped in Washington.

"Very well." Cresswell said.

"We'll be in touch with you if we have any further questions," replied Washington. "Until then, you are dismissed."

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*Meanwhile, on the Eclipse...*

Bridge, USS Eclipse

2412, Shortly after the escape of the Portland

**Authors: Captain Alhambra del Bolero (played by Alenis Meru), Arthur Reynolds, Selina Williams (played by Sera Williams), Andy Rouse (played by Timothy Rouse)**

Tightly clutching his swagger stick, Captain Alhambra del Bolero stormed onto the bridge of his starship and glared at the back of his first officer's head. "Commander Reynolds," he called out, getting Arthur's attention. "I do not appreciate having my beauty sleep interrupted, so this better be good."

"The Portland's left Starbase 66 without authorization." Arthur peered at the viewscreen without once meeting his CO's 'friendly' gaze. For fifteen years, he'd served Starfleet

Intelligence and, later, found his way on the fast track to a career in both the Security and Command divisions. He looked slightly older, yet every official report showed an increase in stamina and mental acuity. Nobody but those in the higher echelons of Starfleet knew of his contributions to the capture of Hassan the Undying and the end of the Orion Syndicate as they knew it. But he never found out what the Yridians had been planning until it was too late...

"They just left the docking bay a short time ago and went to warp. Starbase had to deal with a communications blackout." With a few skilled taps of the panel on the chair's right arm, Arthur relived his days as a Tactical officer with muted glee. His expression stoic, barely masking the indignation he held for the past fifteen years, even del Bolero wouldn't know how much Arthur longed for a chance to return to the relative simplicity of ship-to-ship combat. "We've located their warp trail. It could be masked the further they go, but I think I can compensate."

del Bolero chuckled slightly. "Fools," he called out. "Stealing a hundred year old ship... they won't get very far." He gave Arthur a glare, encouraging him to vacate the center chair. "Expedite our launch, and lay in a course to intercept. Go to maximum warp when clear of the station, and activate slipstream drive..."

Without a word, Arthur stood and moved over to his own chair after redirecting the sensor map on the viewscreen to the display on the captain's chair. As he worked on preparing sensors to see through the usual tricks Starfleet Intelligence so earnestly taught Arthur to use, part of his mind wondered why anyone would steal the old ship in the first place. He'd only served aboard her for a year before certain 'circumstances' tore him away. During that time, he kept mostly to himself, bitter over his failure to clear his name. Moreover, the seemingly natural disasters on Bracas V, Hataria III and Coveria IV, which claimed over a billion lives, might have been prevented.

But that was neither here nor there, and Arthur was more focused on the task at hand.

Sitting down in his chair, Captain del Bolero crossed his legs and stared up at the screen. He could feel the ship begin to rumble ever so slightly as she powered up, her tetryon reactors the most advanced power systems in the fleet, though they did take a little longer to warm up than a traditional matter/anti-matter reactor. "Ensign Rouse, what is our time to intercept at maximum warp?"

Selina Williams stood at her position at the Operations Console. She diligently brought each of the ship's systems to life as she allocated resources and ensured that each department had the required energy requirements to perform their duty. With a mix of knowing her Captain's personality, being the sister of Sera Williams, and knowing about the plot and not informing the Captain led her to keep quiet unless called upon. It was her duty to have the ship ready to perform at maximum efficiency, and that's what she was going to do.

"About twenty minutes sir," replied Andrew Rouse, a hint of nervousness in his voice. He had worked long and hard to not just get into the academy, but excel while he was there. And this, being assigned to the newest, most advanced ship in the fleet, while just a cadet, was

his reward. Nova Squadron may have had their fighters and Red Squad may have had their ship, but only he had the honour of serving on the Eclipse. "The main engines are still warming up."

A cross look appeared on del Bolero's face as he did not like hearing that. "Lieutenant Williams," he called out, the anger evident in his voice, "please inform the peons down in engineering that I want those engines online as of yesterday."

"Aye, Sir," Lt. Williams replied. In the 11 years she had served in Starfleet, she had learned a thing or two about what Captains expected from Operations. She had even picked up her sister's engineering protocol of adding time to the estimated finish time to seem like a miracle worker. She opened the comm to engineering to express the Captain's desire to have the ship running soon, a bit more diplomatically than del Bolero would have. "Engines will be at full capacity in 15 minutes." She did some quick math with the help of computer models and predictions. "That will still give us 20 more minutes to catch the Miranda before it clears the ship traffic lanes to go to warp. Projections show us meeting them in only 10."

"I suppose that will have to do," replied del Bolero in an exasperated tone. "Arm the weapons systems," he added, in a serious tone. Firing on a Federation starship, even one which was stolen, was a weighty order and one that no captain wanted to give. "I hope we don't have to use them."

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### **Dropping a Holographic Bomb**

Lt. Marcus Kallan & the Admirals  
MD05 - 0900 hours

Having slept for a solid twelve hours once he finally crashed from his work-binge, Marcus had put together his preliminary report to Admiral Washington. Freshly shaved and put together as if he were applying for a grant, or at the very least facing a formal inquiry, the science officer reported to the interview room a few minutes before the designated time. PADD in hand containing his formalized findings to-date, he tapped it in his opposite hand, pacing slowly, waiting for the Admiral's attendant to signal that it was time.

Tugging his jacket flat, he exhaled. "Here we go," he muttered to himself, and stepped inside.

"...so I was three over par when I approached the eighth, and..." Washington paused and with a wave of the hand indicated that the time for idle chatter was over. He quickly glanced at his chronometer, which read precisely 0900, before looking back up at Marcus. "Ah, Lieutenant Kallan," called out Admiral Washinton, "you're right on time."

"Good morning, Admiral," Marcus replied, coming to a parade rest before the three of them. That's when the recognition kicked in. "Admiral... Cresswell? Well, this is awkward." He cleared his throat, color draining a little from his face. His resignation regarding the treatment of Beauvoir was completely above-board and within his rights to do, although it probably didn't leave the man with a good impression of Marcus.

"Mr. Kallan, I can't say it's a pleasure see you again," Cresswell said. "Your misguided loyalty to Mr. Beauvoir was disappointing, I trust you have conducted yourself better in this matter, than you did with that matter on back then on the Montana.""

"I'm an AI specialist, not a temporal physicist, sir. I like to leave the past in the past." Marcus tried to keep as passive and professional a face as he could. He tried to shift back to Washington. "Sir, I hope you didn't mind meeting, but I do have a preliminary report for you."

"Well then, let's hear it, Lieutenant," replied Admiral Washington, folding his arms in front of him. "I know I've been looking forward to it."

Laying the PADD down on the table in front of Washington, Marcus went into his carefully-rehearsed introduction. "The hologram using the late Captain Alenis Meru's image has grown beyond its original programming, only due to the circumstances of its creation. I won't go into my complete analyses unless you want to hear them, but a complete copy of my work to-date is on that PADD. "

He cleared his throat, tugging at his collar as he did so. "The facts of the matter is that, without consulting existing subject matter, members of this crew combined a sophisticated holo-matrix, that being the EMH, with psychotricorder and medical scan data. That in and of itself was enough to begin a series of file crosslinking and cascade failures. These failures, coupled with Commander Rouse phasering the EMH's main console in Sickbay, plus Ensign Barclay's hamfisted attempts to repair an unstable matrix, resulted in the unlikely hot mess that is holographic Alenis Meru.

"There is a greater than fifty percent chance that this hologram had some degree of awareness and sentience upon first activation, due to its fabrication. However, there is an increasing chance that as this matrix attempts to assert itself, the crosslinking and cascade failures will continue, and increase in severity. To make matters worse, the hologram cannot be removed from the Portland's main computer given current technology."

Marcus' voice cracked, and he cleared his throat again. "To summarize, sirs, you have an emergent data-driven life form living in Holodeck One. Until a complete analysis is performed, which unto itself might allow the hologram to actualize... or cascade into garbage... it cannot be ascertained that this is an actual copy of Alenis Meru with some errors, or it is becoming a distinct entity. To that end, I took it upon myself to jury-rig a series twelve-rated active memory device to allow the hologram the greatest chance to actualize and stabilize. If you aren't aware, series twelve is a prototype being worked on at Daystrom, with series eleven currently housing the Moriarty program created aboard the Enterprise some years ago." And with that final statement, Marcus puts his hands behind his back and stands slightly taller, waiting for backlash.

Admiral Washington nodded along, getting lost from time to time in the technobabble, but feeling that he comprehended at least most of what Marcus was saying. "So, Lieutenant," he started in a tone which clearly conveyed a certain displeasure, "I may be just a simple



tactical officer and holo-matrices aren't exactly up my alley, but if I'm hearing you right, it sounds like what we have is a possibly sentient being which can't be removed from the Portland?"

"Not at current time, sir. With the proper research personnel and equipment, perhaps." The imminent threat of Marcus receiving a verbal dressing-down for disappointing news seems to have come and gone, and rather than the tension in his shoulders breaking his back, there is a barely audible exhale of relief.

"I see," replied Admiral. He looked over at Anderson and Cresswell for a moment, and then back at Marcus. In spite of his personal feelings towards artificial intelligence, what he had to do was clear. "Starfleet was founded on the ideals of exploration, on seeking out new and alien forms of life, and on advancing our knowledge of the universe. Perhaps these are lofty, high-minded goals, but they are what we have committed ourselves to when we joined. And sometimes, what we are to explore is not out there beyond the stars, but right here in front of us."

Washington paused for a moment and stared at Marcus. "Which is why I'm assigning you to the USS Portland. I hear they have an opening for an operations officer, which will allow you to stabilize the matrix of the Portland's former EMH and continue your research into its possible sentience."

Marcus' jaw dropped. "Wait, what?" He looked around the room as if uncertain where he was. "This is a joke, right? Sirs, with all due respect, you can't do this to me. I have years of research waiting for me back at Starbase 173, and --"

"Lieutenant Kallan the decision has been made, I suggest come to terms with it." Cresswell interrupted. "Any data, or equipment, that is not deemed to be restricted or higher, can be sent to you." He smiled at the younger man. "Think of it as an opportunity."

"An opportunity," Marcus echoed. Taking a slow, deep breath, and then exhaling, he set his jaw and nodded. "Right, then. Admiral Washington, I will send you periodic updates via subspace. I'll submit a list of what I'll need from Starbase 173." He smirks slightly. "Enjoy telling Captain Maddox he just lost his star scientist." Ahem. "Uh, sir."

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**Title:** A Long Day

**Who:** Lt. Sera Williams, Lt. JG Marcus Kallan, Ensign Nikki Barclay (NPC)

**Where:** Officer's Mess

**When:** Lunchtime, MD05

With a sigh of relief, Sera sat at an open table in the mess hall with her water in hand. She hadn't ordered any food yet and dreaded getting back up to make her selection at the replicator. She had thought about going to the holodeck to see what was going on in her new holonovel, but seeing all the holodecks booked had sent her to the mess hall. Besides, she there had been enough holograms in her life for awhile.

She took a look out of the viewport as she took a sip of water, Deep Space 9 certainly offered a better view than the usual starlines. Sera was tired and she slowly became glad that the holodecks had been full. The new Starfleet test equipment that she had spent most of the day installing was now functional. That in itself was a small miracle given the age of the Mirand-class Portland. While she wasn't on duty, Chief duties still ruled her life so she was going over the duty roster on her PADD.

Looking as if his puppy had just been kicked, Marcus Kallan walked into the mess. Without really looking where he was going, he grabbed a tray -- probably from someone else that had briefly turned around to talk to someone -- and wandered over to a replicator. "Protein cube supplement number... uh... what day is it? Number three." Shimmering into existence came his usual meal of textured, enriched protein and complex carbohydrate cubes. He dumped it on his tray and wandered over to the table that was in direct path of his dazed wander, which was where Sera was seated. Unceremoniously plunking down to begin a slow and methodical meal, he looked absolutely crestfallen.

The Chief Engineer was startled from her reading when Marcus practically fell into the seat across the table from her. In one motion, Sera laid her PADD on the table and asked in a surprised yet polite voice, "Protein cubes? Were they out of the mystery meat?"

"Huh? Marcus looked up at Sera, as if he hadn't even realized she was there, He looked around him quickly, as if to take in surroundings he was suddenly unfamiliar with. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't see you, Lieutenant." He looked down at his tray. "This is what I normally eat. I don't have a particularly strong sense of taste, so I just eat efficiently."

"To each his own," Sera replied with a mock toasting gesture with her cup of water. She had met the other Lieutenant during the opening stages of his investigation into the EMH, or Holo-Alenis as some of the crew had taken to calling her. Knowing he couldn't say much, Sera then added, "How is the investigation coming?"

"It's over," Marcus said from around a cube of blue "food", munching absent-mindedly. "Or, at least, the initial investigation's done." And with that, he gave a heavy sigh.

Sera took a sip of her water, she noticed that he table-mate seemed to be troubled. "That bad huh?" she asked in a reassuring tone.

"Oh, it's a great day for the pseudoscience that is haphazard irresponsible holographic AI creation," Marcus said, tone dripping with sarcasm. "I mean, it was pretty clear to me it had some emergent awareness and comprehension ability, but for them to do this to me... blech." He smushed the half-eaten blue cube onto his plate in disgust, and instead started picking at a green cube.

Williams, being almost too nervous to answer, placed her cup on the table and shifted her eyes around to ensure they weren't causing too much of a scene. "If you don't mind me asking... what happened?"

"I'm getting reassigned," came Marcus' plaintive whine, looking straight at Sera for the first

time since he sat down. "They're jeopardizing all of my research back at Starbase 173. 'Hurr durr, have it sent to the Portland,' they said. Do they have any idea what it takes to set up a proper artificial intelligence lab on par with Daystrom?" Sighing again, he put his face in both of his hands. Wait, did he say Portland?

With an open faced cram cheese and smoked salmon bagel on her tray -- along with a coffee and a creme-filled donut -- Nikki Barclay looked over the crowded mess hall for a place to seat. From across the room, she spotted her friend Sera and zeroed in on her like a heat-seeking torpedo, not even noticing who it was that she was sitting with. "Hi Sera!" she exclaimed, placing her tray on the table next to Marcus. "Have you heard anything about this report to the Adm-- You!!!!!"

Realizing who it was that she was sitting beside pushed the already high-strung Nikki over the edge. "I hope you're happy with yourself! I tried to initialize the EMH and the computer said that her program wasn't found! What, did you delete her? Murder her in cold blood? And you have the gall to show yourself in our mess hall?" Nikki shook her head in disgust. "I hope you like your protein cube, holo-murderer."

Despite Marcus' melancholy, witnessing Nikki's meltdown brought a grin to his face. "Heh, I knew that would happen. Relax, Ensign, the program got renamed. It is 100% intact. In fact, you might find that there's additional hardware installed in Holodeck One that's making its program considerably more stable." Looking over at Sera, he rolled his eyes with a smirk.

Sera simply watched the exchange. Nikki was her best friend and roommate, but even Sera's first meeting with Ensign Barclay had been during one of her epic meltdowns. Sera hadn't been included in most of the investigation, mostly because she had only been involved in the repair of the EMH and not the creation.

"Oh." Nikki paused for a moment and glanced over at Sera, then back to Marcus. "Then what are you doing here?"

"Eating lunch. What's it look like?" Marcus sighed. "And whining to Lieutenant Williams, here, about the fact that the admirals have given me a new assignment. I'm your new Chief of Operations. Woohoo."

Before she could ask where he was reassigned, Marcus told the group. Almost shocked, Sera gave the man a friendly smile and said, "Welcome aboard. Looks like all of us will be working together, a lot." Operations began as a sort of offshoot of engineering and other departments as it had developed into its own department over the course of the last 50 years or so. Even now, Engineering and Operations worked closely on a vast array of tasks.

Sera then added, "I don't know if you'd accept congratulations, considering what happened."

"Thanks," Marcus said, managing to curb his sarcasm and facetiousness for the time being. "I mean, I was never really suited for a starship's chain of command. Ask Beauvy, he'll tell you. We were a couple of burrs up Cresswell's ass, for sure."

Upon hearing that Marcus was their new Chief Operations Officer, Nikki froze in shock. Did it mean... could it possibly be... "wait," she said, pausing for a moment to hyperventilate, "does that mean we're stuck with you permanently?"

"I know, the horror, right?" Marcus said to Nikki, mocking her facial expression.

Nikki buried her head in her hands. This was horrible. Why couldn't the admirals have sent him back to the Daystrom Institute or wherever he came from? Looking back up at Marcus, she let out a heavy sigh. "Well then," she replied in a sarcastic tone, "welcome aboard, Mr. Protein Cube."

With a joking smile to lighten her friend's mood, Sera added, "So can I start calling you Miss Sand Pea?" It was a joke meant to bring up when they had first met on Deep Space 9, before the mission. Looking back to Marcus, she then said, "In all seriousness, welcome aboard. I'm sure we'll all," her eyes moved to Nikki, "see that you like your time aboard." Almost as if she had forgotten something, "You should come to the holodeck later. We have a survival horror program that's been pretty fun."

"Hear that, Ensign? Your boss just said to be nice to me," Marcus said with an ever-growing sardonic smirk. "I'll have enough 'horror survival' with managing an operations department and an emergent sentient hologram, I think. But thanks for the offer. I prefer crime dramas and historical reenactments, as far as holonovels go."

Nikki sighed. "Fine, I'll be nice," she said grudgingly. "I just won't have to like it," she muttered.

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### *Caught, part II*

Captain's Quarters, USS Portland

MD02, 2391, evening

**Authors: Timothy Rouse, Tolaran Kian, Inaji Narale (played by Alenis Meru)**

"Our guest?" Tim asked in response to the comm message. He really needed a second to go through all the stuff happening at the ship. "I'm sorry Lieutenant, I think you need to elaborate a bit more." Who was he mentioning? Was the Admiral on board?

"A relation of the late Captain Sir, I was lead to believe you knew they were on board?" Tolaran didn't take his eyes off Inaji the whole time trying to see if she would react to the conversation with the Commander.

Tim sat up straight upon hearing who their guest was. "I'll be down there ASAP." He said, reached for uniform jacket that hung over a chair and hurried out of the office. He wasn't surprised the Chief had found Inaji, but he preferred to keep her presence quite.

Tolaran turned around as the Commander signed off, walked back over to the replicator "Tea, earl grey, hot... and two sugars please" then turning to Inaji "anything for you?"

"A red leaf tea if you don't mind," replied Inaji in a cautious tone. "Black, and hot."

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Tim quickly paced through the bowels of the ship, heading towards the former captain's quarters, a phaser on his hip just in case. For a couple moments, he paused his deliberate pace outside what used to be Meru's quarters. It was only a little while ago that she would be inviting him over for tea -- and sometimes, drinks other than tea -- to pass the time out in space. And now, she was gone.

Tim tugged on his tunic to compose himself then quickly barged in, not quite sure what to expect. Inside, however, was an almost peaceful scene of two people -- one Cardassian and the other human -- seated at a kitchen table, each with their cup of tea. If not for the awkward silence, one could imagine that this was a simple casual meetup.

"Ah, Lieutenant Kian," called out Timothy, getting the attention of both figures at the table, "I see you've met Inaji Narale."

Tolaran turned slightly, placing his cup down on the table as he saw Timothy. "Commander, thank you for coming. Yes, she seems to enjoy sleeping with a knife... I was checking some scans of the Portland and well... there was an extra life sign." Tolaran looked back towards Inaji, hopefully now there would be some answers.

Slowly and deliberately, giving himself time to formulate his words carefully, Tim walked towards the table and pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. He looked into Tolaran's eyes, then into Inaji's, and saw her fear and insecurity. "Lieutenant, I suppose there is no point in continuing with this deception. I will be honest with you, one thing I've learned in my years in Starfleet is that sometimes the right course of action isn't the one which follows all the regulations." He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly; with this revelation, he could be putting his entire career in the hands of this young Lieutenant who he hadn't even gotten to know yet.

"Inaji is an escaped Cardassian fugitive whose death was faked on Gamia III. She's also Meru's half-sister. It was Gul Jatok whose kindness and humanity spared her from a kangaroo court and a slow painful death on Cardassia. And, it is I who am risking everything to bring her to Federation space so she can start anew." As Tim glanced up at Inaji, he could see behind her Cardassian features the reflection of his departed friend. "Lieutenant, if you know anything about her, you will know that she has suffered enough. I can't order you to violate every regulation in the book, but I can ask you to show some empathy and turn a blind eye to this."

Tolaran looked at the Commander, this was a serious situation, he wasn't long out of the Academy and new to the ship, he was asking a very dangerous favour. "Sir... that is a lot to ask, why are we not offering her diplomatic immunity and going through the proper channels? I think there is a lot to explain here and I deserve some answers, the safety of this ship and her crew is my sole concern..."

"Jatoh faked her death for a reason; if we go through the official channels, then the Cardassians will know she's alive and her fate will be in the hands of bureaucrats and ambassadors once more." Tim glanced over at Inaji; he could see clearly that that was something she didn't want. "It's up to you, Lieutenant, but either way, I'm willing to take the fall for her and take full and sole responsibility for anything that arises out of this."

Tolaran frowned and gave the Commander an almost icy stare, this situation just got a whole lot more interesting, but also dangerous. "Sir... I do not have to tell you what damage this could cause with Starfleet and the Federation, let alone Cardassian relationships." He rubbed his forehead, pausing and taking a long drink as a silence descended on the room. "Now the Captain is dead, this will be even harder to hide, for a start, we can't keep her in these quarters, it's too dangerous if internal comes looking... You are not making my first assignment an easy one, and I don't know either of you, however I am a sucker for a pretty woman, so I can help... we need a spare living quarters that I can keep off the radar..."

Inaji smiled at Tolaran's comment about being a sucker for a pretty woman. She couldn't remember the last time someone had called her pretty. She couldn't believe it herself, she had learned to be ashamed of her face at a young age when her father wouldn't let her go outside for fear that someone might see her. Then, when she was just a child, he took her in for cosmetic surgery to remove her half-Bajoran features. But soon, with the help of Dr. Silverton, she would have a new face. Not only would he reverse the surgery, but he would remove her Cardassian features altogether so when she looks in the mirror she wouldn't be reminded of her past.

"Perhaps Ellen--" Timothy caught himself. "I mean, Petty Officer Washington's former quarters? They're empty at the moment, and she'll only need to stay here for a couple more days before her surgery."

Tolaran stood up, taking his empty cup to the replicator, and disposing of the waste, he considered having another one, but he didn't think his bladder would take it well. "That will work, I will also get her a uniform... you will use the cover of being a new non comm security, this way it will seem natural that you're spending time with me and are able to get around the ship freely. It would be better than a civilian sir in my opinion, if you agree of course?"

Whilst he waited for the Commander to respond he looked at Inaji, for someone so young to have gone through so much wasn't fair but whilst he still had reservations about it, he would help her start a new life within the Federation. Everyone deserves to live a life free from oppression and abuse, it was one of the reasons he joined Starfleet.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," replied Tim, a hint of relief in his voice, "but I think a Cardassian non-com walking around might be a little too conspicuous. For her own safety, she should probably stay confined to quarters until she gets her new face."

Inaji nodded in agreement. She was used to being cooped up inside where no one could see her, so only a couple more days would be no problem now that there was a light at the end of the dark tunnel. Soon she would be free

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## ***Soul Searching***

**MD 03 - morning shift**

**Authors: Cmdr Timothy Rouse and Lt JG Delainey Carlisle.**

"How are you doing?" The soft gentle question was simple but direct enough to open what she hoped would be a candid and supportive relationship between Carlisle and Rouse. The executive officer of the USS Portland had witnessed the horrific death of his friend and Captain, and was now facing a routine but still emotionally taxing review panel.

Though she'd only interacted with him briefly upon the away team to return, it didn't take someone with counseling skills or extensive interaction with him to know he was struggling but trying valiantly to keep it together and to project whatever image it was he felt he was obligated to project.

Tim looked up. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?" he returned to the Chief Counselor, even though he knew it was a wasteful question.

"Does that bother you?" Carlisle didn't really believe Tim's question was genuine, but the emotions she thought she sensed underlying it seemed very real.

Tim laughed, immediately remembering he was talking to the counselor and not just some other senior officer. "The question doesn't really, but the answer I'm suppose to give does." He shrugged. "How are most of the crew handling all the changes?"

Not to be deflected so easily, even by an acting commanding officer, Delainey replied, "I consider you a member of the crew, and I don't know how you're holding up."

"My best friend just died and I've been dealing with the aftermath of the mission and its consequences as the Portlands most senior officer. Many members of the crew count on me. I haven't got a decent amount of sleep since the away mission." He said. "Does that answer your question?"

"You've been handed more pain than any one person should have to absorb and more stress as well. How're you handling it?"

"Barely, but I'll manage" Tim replied.

Delainey wasn't sure if he was being deliberately succinct or if he truly didn't understand what she meant. "What have you been doing to cope with the stress and the grief? Are there any particular activities that help or anyone that you can reach out to for support?"

"It's been less then 48 hours since the Captain died. When everything has settled I'll take time to deal with my personal grief." He said.

"If only grief were that considerate," Delainey replied. "The more you try not to deal with it,

the more it'll hit you when you least need it to. I know you're really struggling. I don't blame you, but pretending you're not will not serve you personally or with the crew."

"I'm not deny my grief." Tim said, getting annoyed a bit. "I'm just very busy. I've got a ship to run."

"What can I do to support you?" Delainey asked, deciding to change tactics. She would get nowhere in a tug-of-war over how he was coping, or in this case, how she believed he wasn't coping. "Please give me something specific that I can do for you, personally, not something I can do for the rest of the crew." Carlisle had already anticipated he might tell her to focus on the crew instead of himself.

He looked at her as if she just asked him to get dressed up as a clown. "If there is anything, I'll know where to find you." he said.

Delainey nodded silently. She knew Tim wasn't angry with her but at the entire situation. "I'm on your side, Commander, and I don't see you as the bad guy," she offered gently.

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#### *Eclipse vs. Portland... Part I of IV*

2412 – Future Timeline

**Authors: Captain Sera Williams, Marcus Kallan, Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir), Timothy Rouse, Vedek Meru, Gregory Rathcliffe (played by Eilis Ross)**

Captain Williams sat in the Captain's chair. This bridge was certainly much different than her own ship. She made frequent trips to the bridge and spent missions stationed at the engineering console, but it had never been her home aboard the Portland. She tapped a few buttons for ship status. She looked at the viewscreen to see the Eclipse closing in on them. Her sister had been so excited to get the chance at being the Chief of Operations, but this unexpected development had to be hard on her.

Sera stood and looked back began issuing orders. "Helm, we don't have the speed to leave them behind, so you'll have to get creative. We should be arriving at the Asteroid Belt, try buzzing a few. They won't be able to follow our path with that behemoth and it may buy us some time." She then turned to the others, "Do what you can to distract and confuse their sensors. Remember, this ship was the testbed for the Eclipse, it has some surprises."

Sera knew that at most she would be buying them an extra minute or so, but she had to inspire hope and confidence.

"Creative," Marcus murmured, glancing over his shoulder at the antiquated consoles and duty stations at the rear of the bridge. "Creative is reason why I left Starfleet." The half-cyborg sat down at one of the engineering stations and began tapping at the LCARS console. Within moments he had pulled up an advanced engineering and operations display, no longer limited to Federation Standard and optimized for a cybernetic eyepiece like he wore. To gain full advantage of his prosthetic, Marcus pulled back his hood, revealing an older Marcus, his head shaved clean, and where plasteel and corbonite met flesh, a centimeter-



wide strip of scar tissue. His Borg-enhanced eyepiece began processing the information displayed much faster than any humanoid could.

Jena felt bad for Marcus, she teased him, but she didn't mean anything malicious by it. Truth be told she used to have a crush on him.

As he returned to the bridge, Timothy could see a photon torpedo pass by, between the rollbar and the saucer section of the Portland. A warning shot, no doubt. He glanced over at Sera as he walked towards the center chair, with a look that brooked no confusion about who was in command here.

As soon as Timothy entered the Bridge, Sera immediately stood. With a, "Sir," she stepped away from the chair to return to her spot on the Main Engineering console. Sera did have her misgivings, but Tim was needed and this was no time to rehash the past. As she sat down at the console, she noticed Marcus. Sadness filled her as she saw what had become of him since they had seen each other last, but there was work to be done.

Giving the others time to come up with something, Jena answered the hail. "Sir, the Eclipse is hailing us." She reported.

"On screen," Tim called out, seeing Ellen and Meru stepping onto the bridge out of the corner of his eye. On the main viewer of the Portland appeared Captain del Bolero of the Eclipse. And behind him at the tactical console was his son, Andy.

del Bolero took a double take at the sight of the Portland's bridge. When he heard the Portland was being stolen, he didn't know that it was a bunch of current and former Starfleet officers behind the theft. "Mister Rouse," he said in a clearly derogatory tone, "what is the meaning of this?"

Sera turned to look at the viewscreen, and immediately regretted it. She knew her sister, Selina was on the ship. However, knowing something and actually seeing something were two different things. Her heart did go out to Tim, to be put in a position that would make a person go head-to-head with his own son. That had to be terrible.

"Starfleet wouldn't authorize this mission," replied Tim in a firm tone, "so we're doing it anyways." With that said, he looked up at Andy and caught his eyes on the screen. Andy didn't know what to do; Tim may not have been there for him, but he was still his father. A look of distress appeared on his face as he came to terms with the fact that he may have to fire upon his father. Tim took it all in stride, simply offering his son a subtle reassuring nod, as if to say that he was proud of him.

del Bolero sighed and pressed his hand against his head. "Timothy, I know you have nothing to lose, but think about this for a moment. Do you know the punishment for stealing a starship? I don't; no one has even tried in over a hundred years. You're risking the careers of at least a half dozen Starfleet officers, not to mention jail time." del Bolero paused and looked at Sera. "Captain Williams, as the highest ranking officer, I order you to detain these people and turn your ship around."

Behind Captain del Bolero, Lt. Selina Williams shifted nervously at her station at the Operations console. She had known about the plan to take the Portland and had even overheard the plan, but she had hoped that some other ship would've been the one to get the call to intercept. Now, her duty was to keep the Eclipse's systems operating at peak performance, even if that now meant to capture the Portland.

Sera looked tapped her comm badge and whispered, "Nikki, you have Engineering." She then turned to face the viewscreen. With a heavy sigh, she stood up, let her glance fall to Timothy and the rest of the Bridge crew. She then stepped forward and placed her hand on the shoulder of Lt. Davidson. "I'll take the helm," she said. The officer then got up and immediately made his way to the back of the bridge to an unoccupied console.

Looking up from the Science console, Jena recognised her old friend Selina at the Eclipse's Operations console. She was happy for her having earned a place on the fleet's prestigious new ship, but didn't envy her having to serve with Captain Windbag.

del Bolero shook his head upon witnessing Sera taking the conn. "I see you've all made your choice," he said in a solemn and slightly threatening voice. "If you don't stand down immediately, I will have no choice but to use force. I should also inform you that the Eclipse is equipped with ten tetryon beam arrays, each of which is rated at over 400 petawatts of output, and can sustain a maximum speed of warp 9.9997." del Bolero's eyes narrowed as he stared at Tim. "You can't run, you can't hide, and if you even think about trying to fight your way out of this, the Eclipse will make short work of that archaic garbage scow which you've inexplicably decided is worth stealing."

Tim smirked. "You don't get it, do you?" he replied, trying to buy time for Sera or Marcus or Jena to come up with something -- anything -- which might help them escape. "This mission is more important than any of us. We have twenty years of wrongs to right. We've been to hell and back together; we're not just a bunch of random strangers, we're a crew. And this crew is missing its captain. We're doing this for Meru, for Tyrlai, and for all of us."

del Bolero sighed. He had read of a Captain Alenis Meru in the Portland's database; while he had only skimmed her file, he knew that she was killed in action while commanding the Portland. "She died twenty years ago," he shot back, initially confused about the mention of the Portland's former captain. But a moment later, a realization appeared on his face. "...unless you're planning to violate the Temporal Prime Directive," he added in a serious tone. "In which case, you know I have to stop you."

Tim opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by the holographic Vedek at his side. "Captain," said holo-Meru in a soothing tone. "This is a difficult situation for us all, and as a woman of the cloth so to speak, I believe that before we act rashly we should consider the teachings of our religious figures and their holy texts."

"Oh?" asked del Bolero, having little patience for the superstitious mumbo-jumbo of the Bajorans. "And what sort of insights might these texts provide?"

"Well, there is a certain special place which is a recurring theme in Earth religions," started Alenis in a calm, gentle tone, "and were I a human priest, I believe what I would say is this:" Holo-Meru's eyes narrowed as she gave del Bolero a piercing glare. "Go to hell, Captain."

A snort, sounding a cross between a wheeze and a chuckle, comes from the engineering station. But it's cut short as Marcus' instruments light up. "Captain, I am reading a power build-up in the Eclipse's forward weapons array. We do not have the conventional means to withstand a direct assault," Marcus said towards Sera, eyepiece glittering with malevolent Borg green. "Now is the time."

Greg heard the words spoken by the other members but he was too concerned about the imminent threat which the other ship had hanging over their heads. His fingers itched to return fire but he realised the repercussions that this could ultimately cause. All he could do was wait for an order.

On the screen, del Bolero harumphed and glanced back at the tactical console. "Cadet Rouse, lock weapons on their engines." He looked back at the screen. "I'm sorry it has come to this, but you give me no choice." With that, del Bolero's face disappeared and was replaced with a view out the back of the USS Portland. The Eclipse, gaining on them, had charged up its weapons and fired, stripping most of the Portland's rear shields in a single burst.

"More power to the aft shields!" called out Tim. "Captain Williams, if you have an ace up your sleeve, now is the time."

Stepping beside Captain Williams, Marcus said, "Sera." He rarely spoke her name any more. "Sacrifices must be made for this plan to succeed. I volunteered. Give the order."

Sera looked back at Marcus, and shook her head in understanding. He had been one of her best friends, and the accident had left him in a state that he detested. Yet, still Sera was reluctant to give the order. She looked at Marcus in the eyes and said with sadness, "Do it." Sera's fingers danced on the helm control of the Portland. She was about to put the ship through evasive maneuvers the designers over a century ago never intended a Miranda-class ship to endure.

Stepping clear of his friend, Marcus turned a quick gaze around the bridge. Despite his foibles and failures, this was the crew that stood by him. "Goodbye," he said, his gaze last on Meru, a being whom he had treated with distrust. Touching a control on his cybered arm, Marcus disappeared in a sparkling field, appearing like an amalgam of both Starfleet and Borg transporter technology.

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*Eclipse vs. Portland... Part II of IV*

2412 – Future Timeline

**Authors: Lt. Selina Williams (played by Sera Williams), Captain del Bolero (played by Alenis Meru), Andy Rouse (played by Timothy Rouse)**

## USS Eclipse

Seconds later, on the communications screen, intruder alert sounded aboard the Eclipse.

Lt. Selina Williams immediately lunged forward to look at the incoming status alerts at the Operations console. "Sir, we have an intruder... looks like Main Engineering." She quickly scanned the ship's power usage and emissions, then continued, "There was a power surge that suggests a transporter, but these signatures match... these can't be right..." she double checked, "they have Borg signatures, Sir." Her eyes fell to Cadet Rouse, almost asking what they should do. They both had family aboard the Portland.

"How did they..." muttered del Bolero, utterly shocked that someone could transport through his high-tech shields and intrude onto the most advanced ship in the fleet. "No matter. Commander Reynolds, rendezvous with security in engineering and stop the intruder by any means necessary. Cadet Rouse, carry forward your attack."

"Sir, with all due respect," started Andy, stammering slightly as he got the Captain's attention. He felt himself melting a little but under del Bolero's glare; the captain was not one to appreciate the questioning of his orders by a lowly cadet. "The Portland is still a Starfleet vessel and the people on board are still Federation citizens. We should try to apprehend them without the use of possibly lethal force, and--"

del Bolero gave Andy such an angry glare that it stopped his words mid-sentence. "You have your orders, Rouse, and if you can't carry them out, I'll find someone who will. Now, fire the forward tetraon beams."

Andy stared down at his console, sweating. "Yes sir," he replied reluctantly. He didn't want to destroy the Portland, but knew that his only chance was to knock out enough of their systems without destroying the ship that his father would have no choice but to bring this madness to an end. Reducing the power to the weapons systems, he made sure he was careful not to accidentally destroy the target with a 'lucky shot.' "Firing forward weapons..."

Selina was fighting back tears, but managed to keep her composure. Not only were they firing on a Starfleet vessel, they were firing on family. She couldn't do it, career or none. With a few taps on the Operations Console, she typed out a coded message to Marcus' personal channel. She had gotten it from Marcus when graduating from the Academy, "from one Operations Officer to another," he had told Selina.

The message simply said, "Tell me what you need, from Operations officer to another." She had to make sure he knew it was from her.

The message returned nearly immediately. "Anesthizine. Eighty parts per million." No doubt suggesting Selina flood Engineering with the gas that all starships stocked in case of intruder alerts, but would be completely useless against the Borg.

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*Eclipse vs. Portland... Part III of IV*

2412 – Future Timeline

**Authors: Marcus Kallan, Commander Arthur Reynolds,**

Engineering, USS Eclipse

The advanced engineering deck of the USS Eclipse was a technological marvel to behold. Stark and sleek, made to imitate the curves of the outer hull, the Eclipse was the most modern starship ever built.

Technology is irrelevant.

Shimmering into existence in the heart of engineering, a cloaked figure appeared from the matter stream. A second later, intruder alert sounded, and the officers on duty looked up from their operations work in keeping the ship in fighting form. Turning slowly to look at the Eclipse crew bearing down on him with phasers drawn and shouts of, "Stay where you are! Drop your weapons!" Marcus simply let his hood fall back.

"Resistance is futile," he said, and an irregular, translucent subspace shield erected around him with the snap of molecules in the air being shoved sharply out of place.

"Open fire!" Came the order, and a hail of phaser fire erupted from the half dozen engineering and operations officers surrounding him.

They were the first to fall, thrown against bulkheads or to the ground, injected with modified Borg nanoprobes designed to impair their host with a severe anaphylactic response. Soon, a forcefield was brought down, with the intent to secure Marcus away from the most sensitive of ship's systems, so he turned to the one console that he had access to and began assimilating its functions.

"Oxley to Security. We have an intruder in Engineering," one of the Eclipse officers said into his combadge. "Appears to be Borg in nature. Repeat. One Borg in Engineering. Request security anti-Borg personnel on the double."

Arthur had been on his way to a transporter room when the call came through. Through grit teeth, he acknowledged the order and started toward engineering. Knowing full well not to barge right in, Reynolds found a position by the main doors, which opened to give him an unobstructed view of the room. Sure enough, he caught sight of the Borg... and the incapacitated security officers. He narrowed his eyes before darting in toward a side console, just behind a structural support that could at least act as an impromptu shield should Eclipse's unwelcome guest start firing.

With no time to waste, Arthur quickly entered a command into the console, fully planning on sending an exceptional surge of power into the console their unidentified visitor was assimilating. This would have had the effect of causing it to blow out, disabling the forcefield but likely causing a feedback loop through the assimilation tubules in the process. However, Arthur wouldn't leave it to chance. As soon as he'd finished, he readied his phaser and stood

with his back against the support, muscles tensed in preparation.

As the console started to spark, Marcus' cybernetic arm jerked back to cover his face. The bulk of the explosion was absorbed by his shielding, but the former Portland operations officer was still smoking from where the energy arced and pockmarked his cybered side. "That wasn't nice, Arthur," came his response. "I am not here to hurt your crew. Stand down."

As he had no other means of controlling the ship from this position, Marcus began assimilating the forcefield. Slowly but surely, he pressed his mechanical hand against, and then through, the loudly-hissing force field, until its own feedback shut it down. "Ah, there. Now we can be friendly," Marcus said sardonically. And then he advanced on another engineering console.

Arthur frowned when he heard the tone of Marcus' voice. "One step at a time," Arthur steadied himself as he rigged a site-to-site transport using the nearest transporter buffer to widen the beam's range, tying the transport command into his badge and encrypting it with a variant of his personal Section 31 code. As soon as the overload on the Portland was finished, a brief opening in the shields would appear... but before then, there'd be just enough time to confront Marcus. All of a sudden, Tolaran's voice blared out of his comm badge.

=/\= Arthur, I've begun the overload but encountered difficulties shutting down the engines, will contact you again as soon as possible if I'm able to. They want to alter the timeline! =/\=

Cautiously, he inched away from his console once he tied the transport into his comm badge. He held his phaser in front of him defensively and carefully strafed to the side, one hand hovering over his badge in preparation. Nonetheless, he made certain to stay behind cover and not enter Marcus' range. Clearly, the security guards hadn't considered this or they'd be standing here now, Arthur thought bitterly. "What do you plan to do? Go back and destroy the Borg? Maybe... bring a dead friend back to life?" A sneer later, and he continued, "What do you think is going to happen?"

"Correct a mistake," Marcus replied, pouring over the console he had access to. Glancing over his shoulder to keep Arthur in his field of view, Marcus began assimilating this console. The assimilation happened much faster this time, and a combination of Borg glyphs and other LCARS-style code began filling its display. Other engineering consoles began to flutter, and an alert klaxon blared.

"Resistance is futile."

And then the master blast door began to drop, designed to isolate the warp core from the rest of the engineering decks as explosive decompression is about to occur. With Marcus on the core-side of the blast door, he simply watched Arthur impassively, with one final message to the Portland.

=/\= Marcus to Portland. Assimilation is complete. Note, Tolaran Kian is a saboteur in your

engineering. Repeat: You have a saboteur. =/\=

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*Eclipse vs. Portland... Part IV of IV*

2412 – Future Timeline

**Authors: Timothy Rouse, Captain Sera Williams, Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir), Vedek Meru**

Bridge, USS Portland

Rocked by weapons fire, the Portland continued on its course at maximum velocity. "Auxiliary power to the rear shields." Tim was barking out orders like the old days, before his resignation from Starfleet. Before he became a broken man on a backwater planet. "Helm, evasive maneuvers. Captain Williams," he paused for a second, "please tell me that Marcus has some sort of plan."

After ducking a few sparks from the exploding second helm console beside her, Sera replied, "We'll know soon enough." She trusted Marcus to do his duty, but she also knew it was doubtful that they'd be able to thank him. Sera then tapped some commands into the helm control, they would put the ship into a series of twists and turns that had come to be dubbed the 'Evasive Pattern Williams-One' after her own ship had escaped danger from an Orion Syndicate ambush.

Tim nodded. There was little he could do but watch and wait, and hope that Sera's award-winning Rigel cup flying skills could keep them from taking too many hits before Marcus could do whatever he had planned. But as he wondered what Marcus could possibly do, his questions were answered on the viewscreen in front of him. The Eclipse suddenly dropped out of pursuit, coming to a sudden halt. A cloud of gas shot out the bottom, and then a large cylindrical device, "Report!" he called out. "It looks like they dumped their core..."

"Confirmed sir, the Eclipse's computer has ejected the core as per procedure in event of a potential core breach, but sensors show that core is inert." Jena reported having taken over Operations duties. "But there's no time for celebration, I'm afraid, we've a message from Marcus, we have a saboteur in engineering and its Tolaran Kian."

"Tolaran..." Timothy gasped; he had not seen Tolaran in over a decade. Unfortunately, being a rag-tag group of officers, he didn't have the luxury of a full-fledged security team he could send down at a moment's notice. "Send Zirra," he said, knowing that if anyone was qualified to take care of an intruder, it was the Gorn who they had brought along on this mission. "And Marcus?" asked Tim, fearing the worst.

"Aye, sir." Jena said contacting the Gorn and informing her of the situation. Then trying to hold back tears, she said. "Marcus is dead, sir."

A mournful silence filled the bridge. Marcus was gone; he had given his life for the mission and for the crew of the Portland. It wasn't supposed to be like this, thought Tim. They were supposed to be gone before anyone noticed. All those feelings from twenty years ago began

rushing back to him; in his efforts to save Meru, he had lost Marcus as well.

As he was about to break down, he felt a hand on each shoulder. On one side was the Vedek. As he stared into her eyes, he remembered why they had all done this. They couldn't just leave the captain behind, and leave Tyrlai to suffer the effects of the shard. Not while there was a chance to save them. There was pain inside the hologram's eyes, but beneath that, there was hope as well. With her dark, expressive eyes, Vedek Meru gave him a warm, comforting look. She knew the journey they were on was as much spiritual as it was physical, and though they had lost one along the way, that the prophets worked in mysterious ways that that Tim was also embarking on a journey of his own, a journey of healing deep down in his pagh.

And as Tim looked over towards the other side, he saw that the other hand belonged to Ellen. The one woman he truly loved, and the one he had left twenty years ago. Feeling her hand on his shoulder, her gentle touch for the first time in twenty years, gave him the strength to go on. "Helm," he called out, "set course for the badlands. And someone get our stealth technology online."

Sera wiped a tear from her face as she input the coordinates to the badlands. When the console beeped that a safe path had been found, Sera confirmed Maximum Warp, then tapped the glowing engage button. Without a word, she stood from her seat at the conn, nodded to the junior helmsman in the back of the Bridge to take her place. She then made her way to the turbolifts. The Portland needed her Chief Engineer if the ship was to get the stealth systems back online.

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### *Stowaway*

USS Portland, 2412

Shortly after "Eclipse vs. Portland"

**Authors: Tolaran Kian, Arthur Reynolds, Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru), Zirra Kajat (played by Jason Beauvoir)**

The USS Eclipse was chasing the stolen Portland in an attempt to stop them from achieving their end goal. On board the Portland a stasis chamber activated, a small blue linking light on the front. Inside Tolaran's eyes opened slowly, he blinked hard trying to remember where he was... he took a deep breath, coming out of stasis was never pleasant and what was about to happen would be even less so... he was on assignment, Section 31 had got wind of a plan to steal the USS Portland by some of it's former crew and he'd been planted here several weeks ago. Tapping a subspace communication device on his chest he contacted the other operative involved in the mission.

"Kian to Reynolds, I'm awake... I'm assuming the Portland has been stolen... transmit orders. I repeat, I'm awake, transmit orders."

=/\= Good. You're alive. =/\= Arthur sounded nonchalant, but clearly he didn't think the plan would work. It just so happened to be one person... one. Then again, Section 31 were known to act alone should the situation demand it. =/\= Overload one of the generators for the port



plasma relays and get to engineering to shut down the engines. Then don't stay there for too long. You know where to find me. =/\=

"Acknowledged" Tolaran closed down the communications link to Arthur, he knew that his feelings on this mission were that it wasn't going to succeed, during their time on the Portland the pair had worked closely as Chief of Security and Tactical and that knowledge had allowed Section 31 to utilize them perfectly for this mission. He had never known Captain Meru, she had been killed shortly before he took his position on the ship and that allowed him to keep that emotional detachment from this mission in that respect, but he still had to deal with his former crew mates.

Slowly he regained the feelings in his body, tingling sensations ran through him and he wiggled his hands and feet, he wore a black section 31 tactical uniform, next to him was a phaser, emergency provisions and some other little secret tricks if he needed them, including a one use site to site transporter for short range transport. He knew there was an extra shuttle on the Portland that hadn't been included in the documents that were being written up for when the ship was preparing for decommission. He raised his arm, twisted the emergency handle and slowly eased the stasis pod open, he checked sickbay, right now it was quiet for which he was thankful as he held the phaser ready... "Well that's the easy part..."

He eased himself out of the pod and then closed it, his soft boots hitting the floor, looking around he moved quickly to the door, that old whoosh as it opened, the lights through most of the ship were dim, the flashing red lights along the corridor indicating the ship was at alert, he had to get down six decks to engineering, where he knew there would be crew, how could they not protect main engineering, he just wondered who was down there bringing this ship to life. He prized open a hatch and closed it behind him, then he began to descend the ladders, it was going to be a long climb... and hope no-one was checking how many life signs were on the Portland...

Arthur figured there might be resistance in the engineering section, but since there were no more than a handful of people aboard, it would be woefully undermanned. Whether Tolaran decided to use force or try to stay hidden, Arthur knew he could count on his old comrade to make the right choice. In any case, Arthur had to remove himself from the bridge, offering a brief apology to Captain del Bolero, who may have already known what Arthur had been planning. Section 31 did get help from commanding officers of del Bolero's type more often than not, after all. Now it was just a matter of waiting for Tolaran to deal with the plasma relays that channeled power through that section of the ship, even to the shield generators, while Arthur stood at attention by a console in a transporter room.

...

Tolaran felt a light sweat begin to build on his forehead as he hit the bottom of the ladders, he edged toward the grill for engineering and peered in...

Inside engineering, Nikki was running back and forth trying to keep the ship going. Without an engineering crew, she had brought many of the systems offline and automated others,

but it was still a challenge just to keep the entire house of cards that were her jury-rigs to the ships systems from falling. Sprinting back and forth between consoles, with a half-eaten sandwich balanced on top of one of them, she hadn't heard Tolaran in the Jeffries tubes, and the internal sensors which might have warned her were one of the "non-essential" systems she had taken offline.

Noting that there seemed to be only one crew member in Engineering he gave a wry smile, this was going to be simpler than he'd hoped. He gently eased off the access hatch and crawled through, Nikki had his back to him as made his way towards her, he steadied his phaser, on the weakest setting so it would only knock her out for a short time....

Master Chief Petty Officer Zirra Kajat was acting as a one being Security Team looking for potential intruders. Finishing a patrol of Deck 7, she re-entered Main Engineering to check on Nikki, only to spot an armed man sneaking up on the lone Engineer. Baring her teeth, the large Gorn charged the man.

Tolaran saw a whirl of activity in his peripheral, he sighed briefly as the sight of a charging Gorn became more apparent. The officer in front of him turned to see what was going on as Tolaran stepped back slightly from the Gorn's charge ducked and used the momentum to send his attacker to the floor. "I really wanted to avoid violence... please stand down and allow me to complete my mission" stated Tolaran, using his softest voice possible, he'd intended to incapacitate the engineer before turning his attention to completing his mission and now he had this further complication to deal with.

Zirra regained her footing. "If your mission is to prevent us from completing ours, I can not allow that." She said adopting a fighting stance.

"Tolaran!" exclaimed Nikki. "It's been so long, we haven't... wait..." Nikki's eyes fell on his phaser as a horrified expression appeared on her face. "You were going to shoot me, weren't you? Oh my god, Tolaran, how could you? You're working for that clown del Bolero?" A tear came to Nikki's eye as she took a step back and picked up a heavy hyperspanner. Not only was she anxious over having a phaser pointed at her, but she was hurt by being threatened by someone she thought was a friend. "I thought we were friends! We're trying to save the captain! Captain Alenis! How could you?"

"Nikki... I didn't recognize you from behind, Del Bolero isn't my concern, I work much higher up the chain.... but I wasn't made aware why you were stealing her." This revelation to his mission made things more difficult as whilst he knew who had stolen this ship, the why hadn't been explained. "I don't want to fight you, whatever the plan is to save Meru, you can't think it will actually work, the timeline should not be tampered with, we have to avoid these situations and the past has made that clear" Tolaran had worked tirelessly for S31 for years now, he'd dropped off the radar to any of his former crew and friends, thinking he could keep feelings out of it, but it was difficult.

As a Starfleet officer, Nikki knew all about the temporal prime directive. In her head, she knew that messing with the timeline wasn't a good idea. But in her heart, she knew they couldn't just leave the captain behind again. "But how do you know this is the proper

timeline?" she countered in a panicked tone. "We're on a mission from the prophets. Captain Rouse -- Tim -- had a vision."

Tolaran looked at Nikki crossly, his tone starting to do the same "And you thought stealing a Federation starship was the best way to see this through? The time line is what it is, this is where we exist and is the past I remember, what if we just allowed people to go back in time whenever they saw fit and change things, how do you know you won't go back and save Meru for her to die anyway at some point or for one of her actions then getting you killed?! Think of the ramifications of you actions here Nikki! We all know Rouse was never the same after the Captains death, I didn't even serve with her before she died and I heard everyone saying how he'd changed... I understand the loyalty but I have to think about whats right."

Zirra stood there silently eyeing the former Security Chief, ready to defend Nikki, should the man try to attack her again.

"But how do you know what's right?" protested Nikki, as she subtly pressed a button on her console to open up a transmit only intercom channel to the bridge. She slowly advanced on Tolaran; with a phaser, he was better armed but outnumbered. He could probably stun one of them before being taken down, but maybe not both. The last thing Nikki wanted to do, however, was attack an old friend with a hyperspanner. "For all you know, we're trying to restore the proper timeline and you're altering it! I know you're not a religious man, but the prophets are non-corporeal beings, existing outside of time and space. If anyone knows which is the proper timeline, it's them!"

"Disable the comm link Nikki... now. I will take action if you don't...." He raised the phaser slowly, keeping a watchful eye on the Gorn who had not taken its eyes off him since this encounter had begun "So you would take the word of a man who is taking the word of these... prophets and you asking me to think that this timeline I have been living all these years is wrong... come on Nikki, the timeline is not that simple, you have had the lectures."

Suddenly Tolaran fired his phaser, missing Nikki but causing sparks as he hit the console behind her cutting off the comm channel, he then threw himself at the Gorn, a swift kick to its leg catching it off guard before it could hit him first, this was going to be tough.

As Tolaran attacked the Gorn, Nikki swung at him wildly with her hyperspanner. She didn't know much about hand to hand combat, but she knew enough to know that being hit with a heavy hyperspanner hurt.

Tolaran caught Nikki's movement and rolled away, so instead of hitting him she hit her Gorn friend straight in the side with a hyperspanner, causing a grunt and a startled look, as Nikki looked shocked, he grabbed her arm and linked it behind her head. "Please Nikki, this doesn't have to be like this..."

Tears began to form in Nikki's eyes. She was hurt, not just physically, but by the fact that someone she thought was an old friend would attack her like this. She knew Tolaran was stronger and that resisting him would be ultimately futile, but she hoped to at least prevent him from wrecking their mission. "But Tolaran, it does," she said, before trying to kick him in

the kneecap.

Tolaran cried out with pain as Nikkis kick caught the edge of his knees she'd almost got him straight on, he pushed her away running as best he could to a console whilst Nikki picked herself up from the floor, he quickly keyed in some commands to begin the overload of the port plasma relay and locked the system. "You gave me no choice!"

Tolaran tapped his subspace communication device. =/\= Arthur, I've begun the overload but encountered difficulties shutting down the engines, will contact you again as soon as possible if I'm able to. They want to alter the timeline! =/\=

He turned around just the Gorns fist met his face and he crumpled to the floor...

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### *Fixing the Damage...*

Engineering, USS Portland

2412, after "Stowaway"

**Authors: Sera Williams, Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru)**

In engineering, Nikki was even more of a nervous wreck than usual. She had just been attacked by an old friend, and had barely escaped getting seriously injured or worse. While Tolaran was stopped, he had done his share of damage before being taken down. The port plasma relays had overloaded, and blew out half the EPS relays on three decks. While her quick actions had prevented the ship from losing all power, they were still far from full capacity.

As she ran from console to console, desperately trying to keep the automation systems from failing and the ship from losing all power, she heard the whoosh of the engineering doors. She slowly and carefully reached for a hyperspanner to defend herself with before turning around suddenly.

"Stay away, I'm armed and danger..." as she recognized the person at the door, Nikki trailed off and then breathed a sigh of relief. It was one the one person who could help her, the one person who knew the Portland's systems better than her. "Sera! Oh my god, while you were on the bridge I was attacked! By Tolaran, of all people! It was so scary, and--" she was interrupted by a beeping coming from one of her consoles. "Quick, help me with these EPS flow systems! We need to get the automation systems online, and get the phase cloak working again."

Sera stepped out of the turbolift. "Don't shoo... hit me with that," Sera said, nodding toward the hydrospanner. She wiped another tear away as she ran to one of the Engineering Consoles that wrapped around the Warp Core. She began to input commands as fast as a person who had spent 15 years as the Chief of Engineering of the ship could have.

"I've set up containment fields around the most damaged areas," she said as she paused. The last thing they needed was to have an EPS conduit overload while they were making repairs. With the two of them working alone, they would need to only repair the minimum

to keep the ship from breaking up and to get the Phase Cloak operational.

Taking a look at the damage report, Sera shook her head. This would be a long day. They had to make these repairs with the ship staying at warp. Fortunately, the damage was contained to Main Engineering. "Nikki, work on keeping the EPS converter operational, we need to keep as much stress off the Core as we can. I'll work on the EPS conduits in here."

"Will do," replied Nikki as she got to work. As she tapped frantically at a console in front of her, a funny thought came to her head. "Imagine," she said out loud, "after all these years, me and you, back together in this place, trying to keep the ship together once again."

"I can replicate some sand peas if you'd like," Sera joked. "How many times have we kept this ship from breaking apart?" Sera asked aloud. A few sparks spewed from her console, but Sera kept herself together and was able to divert the excess power to non-vital systems. "Some things never change."

"That they don't," replied Nikki, a certain lightheartedness in her voice as she adjusted the flow regulators. "Sera," she added, her tone turning serious, "do you think this plan is going to work?"

Sera placed her coil spanner above the display of the blown out Main Engineering console. With a swift smack, the console flickered as it came back to life. Sera looked back at her friend, then said, "I trust Tyrlai and I trust the crew. I'm not sure about the Captain, but I know that we'll find a way."

Switching tools to the isolinear spanner, Sera turned back to her work. Her voiced dropped and took a sad tone, "Marcus... he stopped the Eclipse."

Nikki took a deep breath and, having gotten the flow more or less stable, placed her micro-resonator aside and turned to her friend. She could tell by the tone in Sera's voice that something horrible had happened. "Is he..." she managed to utter, a tear coming to her eye.

"Yes..." was all that Sera could muster. If this had been 20 years ago, she might have collapsed into a sobbing mess. However, a career in Starfleet with the last five in the Captain's chair had taught her that things like this happened in the line of duty.

Sera replaced her tools into her trusty toolkit. She forced a smile and said, "Well, the Main Engineering Console is repaired." She tapped a few commands to bring up a more detailed look at the damage report. With a relived sigh, she announced, "It's not as bad as it seems. Most of the damage seems to be to the EPS relays in Engineering, as long as we can get it stable."

Forcing a small joke, she said, "We should be able to fix it in an hour, maybe we should tell them three hours... we still have to keep up the 'miracle workers' appearance."

Nikki smiled slightly at the joke; it was all she could muster with how distraught she was over the death of Marcus. "That... sounds like a plan," she replied as she grabbed her toolkit.

Right now, she could tell that both of them needed something to focus on, and given their years of experience, repairing EPS relays was an almost zen-like experience. "I'll start on the upper deck and we'll meet in the middle, ok?"

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Mess Hall, USS Eclipse

With: Andy Rouse (Played by Timothy) and Selina Williams (Played by Sera Williams)

In a dark corner of the mess hall, Andy Rouse sat there, alone, pushing some Ratamba stew back and forth across his plate. Though the Bajoran dish was one of his favourite foods and he knew he had to eat after being on the bridge for hours on end, he wasn't hungry. Nor did he feel much like talking, which was why he wasn't in his usual seat.

Instead, he just stared at his food. Occasionally, he would look out at the stars for a moment -- the ship had finally gotten under way again after retrieving their warp core and undoing the damage that the Borg intruder did, though not without giving the Portland a massive head-start -- but then return back to his intense focus on the plate in front of him. But seeing a shadow appear over his table, he looked up.

"What do you want?" he asked in a glum tone, seeing the female figure before him.

"Seat taken?" asked Selina. She placed her tray with the hasperat on the table then sat in the open chair, not giving Andy a chance to say no. "You know, we just might be the only Humans in Starfleet who love Bajoran food so much," she noted with a hint of her characteristic lopsided grin.

"Is that why your here? To discuss our apparent love for a kind of food?" He asked.

Selina shook her head as she replied, "Look, both of us were on the Bridge. My sister and your father, we both had family on the Portland. She paused for a moment, not sure how to continue. "I've... never had to do something like that. Are you ok? I'm not sure if I am."

He looked at her and tried to decide whether to stay angry at no one in general or not. He sighed deeply. "I don't know if I'm sure. He's my father, but he's not my dad. He abandoned my mother and me when I was young. I always thought I hated him for that. But now..."

"But now, you don't know what you feel," Selina sympathetically finished for the cadet. "I lived aboard the ship for six years before I went to the Academy. Your father may not have been the best Captain, or even the best person, but he always tried."

"I know that. He was a great officer and also a great Captain, before his meltdown. Even my mum tells me so. Anyway, how are you holding up? You actually know and love the people on that ship."

"I don't know," Selina said as she spun the hasperat on her tray with the fork, suddenly not as hungry. "Part of me wanted to see them escape," she admitted, almost embarrassed.

Andy smiled slightly. "Me too, that's what's making this whole situation so strange."

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*A question of faith...*

Captain's Office, USS Portland

Shortly after *Eclipse vs. Portland*

2412

**Authors: Vedek Meru, Timothy Rouse**

Vedek Meru paused outside the door of the captain's office of the USS Portland. Even after all the refits and upgrades over the life of the vessel, the captain's office remained the same. She was used to being on the other side of the door, however that was a lifetime ago. Pausing for a moment to gather her thoughts, she rang the chime.

"Come in," called out the voice on the other side.

"Tim," said the Vedek as she walked through the door into the office. Though almost everything from her time in this office had long since been removed, there was a certain familiarity to this room. "I need to talk to you."

"Of course," replied Tim, a little puzzled at the distressed look on the hologram's face. "What's this about?"

"It's about Marcus," replied Meru. "And... about the mission. I just wonder if the price we're paying is too steep for--"

"Don't tell me you, of all people, are losing faith," countered Tim, suprised at Meru's admission. And somewhat annoyed; they had fought so hard to get where they were, and now she was talking about giving up halfway? "You're a Vedek, damn it! Whatever happened to all that stuff about the will of the prophets and how they work in mysterious ways?"

"It's not that, it's just..." Meru trailed off, not sure how exactly to explain it.

"Just what?"

Meru stared out the window at the stars for a moment. It was something she used to do, back when she was known as Captain Alenis Meru, to focus her thoughts. Returning her gaze to Tim, she continued. "I know the captain better than anyone. I used to be her. And I know she would give her life to protect her crew. Seeing crew members dying to try to save her... I'm not sure that's what the captain would have wanted."

Tim sighed deeply. The hologram did have a point. "But this isn't just about the captain. This is about Tyrlai as well; we can't just let her die too. As for Marcus... we all knew the risks we would be taking and sacrifices we would be making when we decided to embark on this mission. We all decided to make that choice, and any one of us could have stayed on the starbase. We did this of our own free will, and we can't let the captain doubt us from beyond

the grave. Besides, with the visions I've seen..." He stared into Meru's eyes. "Maybe, just maybe, the prophets will make everything right."

"Maybe..." replied Meru, a faint smile appearing on her lips. "You know, if we somehow survive this and don't get thrown in jail for the rest of our lives, I know a temple that could use a maintenance man. Someone to do the gardening, operate the moisture collectors, and maintain the holo-emitters for their Vedek..."

A smile appeared on Tim's face for the first time in a long while. "I'd be honoured," he replied.

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### *Tolaran in Trouble*

Sickbay, USS Portland

2412, Shortly after Eclipse vs Portland

**Authors: Timothy Rouse, Vedek Meru, Brad Silverton, Zirra Kajat (played by Jason Beauvoir), Tolaran Kian**

With the holographic Vedek at his side, Tim bounded into sickbay where he saw Brad standing over someone who he had not seen in a long time, with Zirra standing guard. He could see signs of a scuffle -- blood stains on their uniform, and a bruise the size of a hyperspanner on Zirra's snout. "Doctor, how is our patient doing?" he asked, in an unpleasant tone.

"Not too bad; I've repaired his broken nose and most of his bruising. Zirra sure did a number on him."

"Wake him," replied Tim. "We need to talk."

Tolaran didn't feel the hypospray as it was pressed against his neck, he let out a soft moan as the pain from his encounter with the Gorns fist and his face came back to the forefront of his mind, he slowly opened his eyes, knowing he probably wasn't going to wake to the best view in the galaxy and before he'd even fully come to his senses his training kicked in and he knew was standing by his side.

"Hello Tim... it's been a long time."

"I wish I could say it's a pleasure," replied Tim in a less than enthusiastic voice. "But you've come here uninvited and haven't exactly been a good guest, what with taking out the port plasma relays and attacking one of my crew." He stared down at Tolaran, anger in his eyes. "Who sent you. Why are you here?"

Tolaran sat up and stifled a laugh and met Tim's gaze without looking away or worry. "Let's clear up a couple of points here... firstly, I didn't attack anyone first, your Gorn friend has that honour and I tried to avoid a fight. Second, uninvited? Really... coming from you, you stole this ship so that's hardly invited. You are planning on changing the timeline, this is a breach of directives we cannot allow Tim, it is not personal."



"Tim is doing the work of the prophets," interjected the holographic Vedek.

"I'm trying to fix the timeline! And save Tyrlai!" exclaimed Tim, his eyes filled with anger. While he would have expected Starfleet to do anything to try to stop him, with Tolaran, it was personal. Anyone else would have just been a random Starfleet operative, but Tolaran... he was his former crew. To Tim, this was a betrayal. "I had a vision... you don't understand!"

Tolaran returned the angry look from Tim, he had spent so many years working in Section 31, they didn't understand the things he'd fixed, stopped and begun all in the preservation of the Federation. "No offense to you... Vedek, but seeing as you are a fragment of the former Captain you must know the importance of protecting timelines... I'm not here for Starfleet, I work outside their jurisdiction" Tolaran's look softened, his eyes turning back to Tim "You could destroy so much, more than you think you might fix...but what do you mean about saving Tyrlai?!"

"She touched the shard, so many years ago..." said Tim, trailing off. He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts and consider whether to volunteer any additional information to the man he caught sneaking around his ship. "She's been aging in reverse; getting weaker and weaker. She doesn't have much time left. The orb... it's our only hope."

Tim's eyes narrowed, though, as something Tolaran said finally clicked. "Now, I can understand why Starfleet might want to stop us. Grand theft starship tends to be frowned upon in their ranks. But you said you weren't here for Starfleet... who sent you, and why?"

"Starfleet would never have placed me on the Portland if I was with security forces Tim, I don't think I really have to tell you who I work for, considering how much effort they've spent protecting the timelines over the decades. I wasn't even told who was stealing the ship, just someone would be and I was to get in touch with my contact. I'm only being honest with you out of decency and because I have failed my mission." Tolaran stretched, his body stiff and aching still from the fight in Engineering, starting to feel his age he supposed. "What is your plan Tim? I don't know Meru but Tyrlai is another matter."

"Our plan..." Tim trailed off and looked over at Vedek Meru standing next to him. He didn't know if he could trust Tolaran; after all, if he was sneaking around the Portland, who knows what he could be up to. But on the other hand, with him safely in custody, it wasn't as though he could do any damage. Tim simply offered the vedek a hint of a smile. "Our plan is to follow the will of the prophets, isn't that right?"

"Right," added Meru. "The will of the prophets."

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*Arrival in the Badlands*

Bridge, USS Portland

2412, Several hours after *Eclipse vs. Portland*

**Authors: Timothy Rouse, Vedek Meru, Captain Sera Williams, Tyrlai Zade, Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir), Tolaran Kian**

As Timothy Rouse, the closest thing the Portland had to a captain right now, sat on the bridge and stared out at the swirling orange gases and plasma streams of the Badlands, he knew he was in the right place. He remembered it from the vision; a swirling, glowing, orange mist everywhere. He was by no means a religious man, but even though he had left Starfleet, the science training that all officers had taken had never quite left him. He was trained to see patterns and correlations, and this was definitely more than a coincidence.

He smirked slightly and locked eyes with the Vedek at his side for a moment. If this somehow worked and he somehow managed to avoid being thrown in a jail for the rest of his life, he'd dedicate the rest of his life to serving the prophets. Perhaps there was a small temple somewhere in the Okona desert whose Vedek could use someone to maintain her holo-emitters. "Helm, what is our ETA?" he called out.

"We'll be there in about 10 minutes," replied Sera, still taking over at helm.

"Excellent. Summon Tyrlai to the bridge."

Tyrlai Zade stepped through the turbolift shortly after the summons. She was pale and a little unsteady as she walked over to a nearby console. She looked up at Tim and spoke as she tapped on the console slowly. "These coordinates are rough, we are looking for a heavy deuterium hull signature, a Bajoran industrial freighter. With luck we will be able to lock onto the shards with a transporter. But to get close enough we need the phased cloak, the hull of that ship attracts the particle storms in the badlands, its always got two or three in close contact."

"Fortunately, Sera and Nikki managed to get the phase cloak back online, but just barely," chimed in Vedek Meru. "Our little friend did quite the number on the ship's systems, isn't that right?"

"It took a bit of work, but the phase cloak is online. If we get too close to a plasma stream, it may knock the cloak offline... or let us fall through the ship." Sera replied. She knew the ship better than most, and even she didn't know what 'could' happen.

"Duly noted," replied Tim. "Helm, take us in. Scan for the freighter, and keep an eye out for any approaching signals. I don't want to get interrupted here..."

The Vedek stood up and walked over to Tyrlai. Tyrlai looked not a day older than when they had first met, perhaps even a few years younger. Pale and ill, the Vedek could tell that whatever the prophets had in mind, she could tell that this would be Tyrlai's last hope as well. "How are you feeling, my child?" she whispered in Tyrlai's ear, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Tyrlai shook her head, steadying herself with one hand on the console. "All those shards, " her eyes got distant as if peering through time. "I would see people get visions, they all seemed to be comforted in some small way. I get one damn vision and people haven't stopped dying since, since,... well, you."

"The prophets work in mysterious ways," replied Vedek Meru in a soft voice. "They offer us guidance, truth, clarity... but sometimes those truths are painful ones. As she stared into Tyrlai's eyes, she could see the pain in her. Reaching up, she held the Trill's earlobe between her thumb and her forefinger, feeling her presence. "Your pagh is strong," she said, massaging it gently.

"I'm picking up energy signatures similar to those of the orbs ." Jena said from Ops. "Sending the coordinates to the helm now."

"Take us in," replied Tim from the center chair. "And keep an eye out for any approaching signatures. I don't want whatever we're doing to be interrupted by Captain Swagger Stick."

"Sir, the Eclipse is closing fast." Jena reported. "Also the freighter is close enough for us to see."

"Let us hurry then," replied Tim. "Tyrlai, Jena, make preparations to recover the shards."

The badly damaged freighter hung motionless silhouetted in the myriad coloured plasma storms and eddies that made up the Badlands. A sudden energy discharge stuck the forlorn craft, lighting up like fire works at a Federation Day celebration.

Tolaran walked onto the bridge of the Portland with his Gorn guard in tow, the phaser ready at a moments notice to shoot him, looking around with a grim reminder of the situation as the rag tag group Tim had got together fought for their former Captain, an attempt to change the time line that could be disastrous. Then his gaze fell upon Tyrlai, when he'd found out her life was in danger he'd made the decision that he would try and help but not for Meru, he'd never served with her but he'd become good friends with his fellow Trill over their time together on the Portland and her being joined had never caused an issue between them. He noticed a few glances his way and where once as a young man he would have felt embarrassed, he stood tall and proud and looked at the freighter in the viewscreen.

"How close is the Eclipse Tim?" Tolaran walked towards Tim only for his 'guard' to hold him back, he shrugged them off with an angry glance "I may be able to help..."

"A couple minutes out." Tim swiveled in his chair to face Tolaran. "Anything you could do would be most appreciated, but I'm going to have to insist that our Gorn friend and Captain Williams keep their eyes on you. I want no funny business."

Tolaran nodded and tapped his communicator "Arthur, you need to slow down or stop the Eclipse, there's more to this than they told us. Please Arthur, let me know you're receiving this..."

He looked at Tim, wondering what this additional information would mean, finding out one former crew member had tried to stop you was one thing, it was another to have two of them try.

"I don't know if he'll even respond, procedures will mean he shouldn't... but I have tried... I also have a cloaked shuttle in the bay, your scanners won't find it but it's there if you need it, it's locked to my biometrics so I'd need to pilot it."

The mention of the cloaked shuttle gave Tim an idea. "Is it a phased cloak?" he asked, a hint of excitement in his voice.

"Of course, I wouldn't have anything else on my ship..." Tolaran gave Tim the kind of look you'd give a child asking a silly question but then smiled and shrugged.

"Excellent. Captain Williams, you have the conn. I need you to make a distraction; hold off the Eclipse as long as you can." Timothy looked around the bridge. "Meru, Tolaran, Zirra... we're going in."

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### *Face-off*

Sickbay, USS Portland  
2391, MD04, Morning

**Authors: Inaji Narale (played by Alenis Meru), Brad Silverton**

With a blue sparkly glow, Inaji Narale materialized in the sickbay of the USS Portland. With her Cardassian features, she still couldn't be seen in public and had to sneak around, hiding out in her temporary quarters and using the transporter to get around. In anticipation of the procedure, she hadn't gotten a wink of sleep the night before. Soon, she would be able to look in the mirror again without seeing the Cardassian features of her oppressive father.

"Doctor Silverton," called out Inaji, looking over at the young doctor working on his morning coffee. "Are we ready for the procedure?"

"Hello Inaji. Yes I think we are set to begin." Brad took a long draw from his coffee mug. "I sent the nurses off to inventory the medical supplies and to check the emergency away team med kits. That'll give us plenty of time." Brad set his coffee down and then looked back up at Inaji.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this? A body can only take so much reconstructive surgery even with advanced medicine of today. You may not be able to get it undone."

"Absolutely," replied Inaji, without hesitation. "It's the only way..."

Brad nodded in understanding. "Now for the fun part." He went back to his office and sat down. Spinning the screen around so that they both could see, he tapped on several commands. A generic Cardassian humanoid appeared. "How exactly do you want to look? We will be limited somewhat on your face and body but there are several options. Nose size, ear size, lip fullness. How do you see the fully Bajoran you?"

"The captain is my half-sister, so I would expect there to be a certain familial relationship,"

replied Inaji as she stepped over towards the screen and brought up a photo of the late Alenis Meru. "Apart from that, well... something inconspicuous. I'll just be happy to start over."

"Ok that sounds fine. We won't get too extreme with the changes. Which is good because you will need recovery time. The body isn't keen on removal of bone, adding of new tissue, and pygmentation alterations." Brad lowered the biobed to horizontal and began to make preparations. "You'll be quite sore for several days as your body adjusts to its new form. But it's little price for the benefit that far too few get."

"Thank you, doctor," replied Inaji as she sat down on the biobed. "One last request... would you happen to have a mirror? I'd like to take one last look at this face, to say goodbye."

"Of course." Brad heads over to a drawer and grabs a hand mirror then returns. He holds it up in front of her.

Inaji grabbed the mirror in her hands and held it up, staring into her own eyes. She took one last look at her face, the pale skin, the bony ridges... and her eyes. She had the same eyes as her sister; it was the only part of her face that she could bear to look at. Soon... she would be able to look at herself again.

A tear came to her eye and Inaji pressed the mirror back into Brad's hands. Quickly, she wiped the tear away and lay down on the biobed. "I'm ready, doctor."

Brad tapped away at the biobed and administered an anesthetic and spoke softly to Inaji as she slowly drifted to unconsciousness. "When you wake up you'll look like an all new person."

A faint smile appeared on Inaji's face as she drifted off. Finally, her long nightmare was over.

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Finding Time for a Check-up  
USS Portland, Sickbay  
Just after Meetings with the Admirals  
**Dr. Brad Silverton and Sera Williams**

The last few weeks, months... Sera didn't know, had run together at ludacris speed. It was Starfleet protocol for all newly assigned officers to have a medical physical as soon as possible. Because of what had happened, Sera had never found time to drop in. Now that the ship was docked at DS9, her duties had been cut significantly in Engineering and she made an appointment.

With the all too familiar whoosh of the opening doors, Sera stepped into the Sickbay waiting area. She sat in one of the waiting chairs with a PADD in hand that contained the newest in warp field developments.

Brad came out of his office to see who had entered. He was alone in Sickbay, having sent

Nurse Hill to conduct a routine inventory. He quickly recognized who it was and walked over to Sera.

"Ah Lieutenant Williams. What do I owe the pleasure of your visit to?"

Sera stood up with a friendly smile, then replied with a hint of embarrassment in her voice, "Well, I never came down for my mandatory physical when I boarded." With a shrug she added, "Now that we're docked and the engines are off, I can finally come by. Besides, we are basically shut down with the investigations."

Brad tilted his head in surprise, "Of course you had your physical. You joined the Portland before we docked at Starbase. We did it...". Brad rolled his eyes up staring off trying to remember the time and date. "Actually I think you are right. Well with everything going on I don't think they will blame us. Let's get this knocked out then. Have a seat over on the biobed." Brad walked over to the biobed and pulled out a tricorder.

"Sure thing," was Sera's reply as she took a seat on the biobed. Being examined always gave her a bit of an uneasy feeling, especially since her mother had died of Irumatic Syndrome before she had gone to the Academy. To get over a bit of the nervousness, Sera asked, "Have you been interrogated by the Daystrom Institute guy, Marcus I think his name is?"

"Ah Yes. Lieutenant Kallan. He did come by to continue the Admiral's inquiry. Asked a lot of the same questions the Admirals asked so I have to wonder what is really going on. I would have thought he would have had the notes from those sessions."

"I agree, I really hope a court martial isn't in the future... wouldn't look good on a new career." Sera replied, eyeing the medical tricorder.

"Court martial?! I don't see how it could come to that. We didn't break any rules or regulations. If anything we were potentially protecting life. We just needed more time to sort it out."

Sera breathed a small sigh of relief. "Lt. Kallan dropped by Engineering looking for Ensign Barclay. I think he wants to boot up the EMH to see what we created. I don't know how close he is with the Admirals, but I'll be happy when all this is behind us." She looked around Sickbay and noticed for the first time that it seemed really empty. "Slow day?" she asked.

"Slower than most. I was able to send off Maria to do inventory in the supply rooms." He stopped his scan and had his head looking off in the distance. Turning back to facing Sera he asked, "So what do you think? Did we create a full on A.I. or just a very convincing holodeck program?"

Using an obviously fake mysterious sounding voice to lighten the topic, Sera replied, "That is the question of the day isn't it." She then switched to her normal tone, then added, "I don't know. The EMH is more than any other hologram I've seen, but... what makes something truly alive?" Knowing that she really didn't answer the question at all, Sera shrugged and said, "I think we have a full A.I. but I've never seen one outside her."

"THAT is a very good question. What makes an A.I.? Perhaps what we should be asking ourselves instead is what makes a person. We were all in the middle of figuring out what we had created, and then the captain died. I can't help but think we might have afterwards convinced ourselves that the captain is living on in this program. At least I know I have that concern." Brad sighed slightly.

"I'm not a fan so far of Lt. Kallan but I am glad he and his expertise are here to figure it out."

Sera had no choice but to agree with the doctor's assessment of the officer. She added, "At least the Admirals seem to be actually trying to determine what actually happened." She gave Brad's statement about A.I.'s a bit of thought, then said, "Who knows, maybe in some alternate universe there is a holographic Captain Alenis leading the Portland. I don't think Starfleet would've ever allowed that."

"No you are probably right they probably won't." Brad concluded his scans that he ran a second time just to be sure. "Lieutenant. I presume past doctors have discussed with you your predisposition for Irumodic Syndrome?"

The Chief Engineer breathed in deep, this was the part of the conversation that she never looked forward to having with doctors. Her time with the Worm Hole Alien had placed this fear more prominently in her mind. Letting out her breath in as a worried sigh, Sera replied, "Yes, my mother died of complications to the disease before I went to the Academy. I've never been tested to see if I have the mutation, though."

"I'm sorry to hear about the loss of your mother. I don't think there is much to worry about for you. I'm not seeing anything more than having a predisposition. But as you have not been fully tested we should do that when you have time."

"Thank you, for the kind words and the reassurance. Could we schedule it now? My plate looks pretty clear for the moment." At that moment, Sera's commbadge went off, Ensign Martinez informed her of some minor emergency in Engineering. "I guess that answers it. We'll have to schedule it."

Sera gave an appreciated smile, then said as she walked out of Sickbay, "Thanks for working me in."

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*Where your loyalties lie, part I*

Somewhere in the Badlands

2412, immediately after "Arrival in the Badlands"

**Authors: Captain del Bolero (played by Alenis Meru), Cmdr. Arthur Reynolds, Ensign Selina Williams (played by Sera Williams), Timothy Rouse, Lt. Cmdr. Tolaran Kian**

USS Eclipse

Clutching his swagger stick, Captain Alhambra del Bolero strolled onto the bridge of the

Eclipse as they closed in on the badlands with the Portland inside. Rouse and his gaggle of outlaws and misfits had gotten the better of him once, but that wasn't going to happen again.

"Commander Reynolds," called out the captain as he made his way to the center chair. "I trust we won't let these scoundrels escape again?"

Unfortunately for Arthur, Marcus had succeeded. Something about the Portland kept Arthur from beaming over successfully, and now he found himself stumbling back to the bridge with a massive headache from the incident. Whatever the case, he soon took his station and acknowledged the captain with a tone that belied his anger at having failed at an important mission once more: "Not again, sir."

"Very good," replied the captain. "Now, as for our current situation, these rogues have stolen Starfleet property, sabotaged an entire starbase, and sent one of their own on a suicide mission against our vessel. They are armed and dangerous, and we are authorized to use lethal force to stop them. Do I make myself clear?"

"Clear as always, sir," Arthur said bitterly as he punched a few commands into his console. He was making an additional scan with the ship's top-of-the-line long-range sensors, fully expecting the Portland not to be alone. Fresh in his mind, however, was Tolaran's warning. If they were aiming to change the past to correct a mistake, that meant a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity now presented itself. Whether or not he could take advantage of it was another matter...

Selina shifted uncomfortably at her station. She hated that she had to be part of this particular mission. Why was she chosen to be the Chief Operations Officer aboard Starfleet's newest and best ships? She would've been happy to serve on one of the older Nebulas or maybe even a Steamrunner, but here she was... tasked to stop her sister and the crew she had grown up with. "Clear, sir," she tried her best to sound convincing, but it might not have succeeded.

"Excellent."

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#### Tolaran's Shuttle

As the Portland turned to engage the Eclipse, the doors to their shuttlebay opened and closed again; just long enough for a small cloaked shuttle to launch and head towards the freighter.

Using the phased cloak to keep the shuttle just slightly out of phase would enable them to avoid most of the hazards of the badlands, not to mention simply phase through the freighter and grab the orbs without even stepping off the shuttle. But it was still a dangerous task. Too close to a plasma discharge and that could wreck the shuttle, out of phase or not. Not to mention what would happen if the phased cloak failed while they were occupying the



same physical space as the freighter.

"I'm terribly sorry about the Gorn," said Tim, referring to Zirra, who was standing just behind the pilot's seat, her hand gripping Tolaran's shoulder tightly, "but after that little incident in sickbay, I need to have some... assurances."

"Don't apologise, there's no need... I understand. But I'd rather she stopped touching me. I'm not going to do anything to jeopardise her, and I don't mean Meru. You know Tim, despite the past I don't have any ill feelings towards you, but this mission is crazy."

Tolaran moved his fingers deftly over the controls and he moved them slowly towards the freighter, he'd never liked the badlands, it was too dangerous for his liking even with the phase cloak, he also kept his eyes on the status of the Portland...

"I was a Starfleet officer once, remember? Crazy is just par for the course," replied Tim as he pulled out a case containing four pairs of glasses. "If Sera and Marcus are correct, these should enable us to see what we're doing even when we're out of phase. As for the shards..." Tim motioned towards a large magnetic field case with Bajoran inscriptions on it, "the plan is simple. Drop out of phase, fly the shuttle through the freighter, and grab them in the case. Think you can handle that?"

"Can I handle that... honestly" Tolaran snorted with disgust "I may have been your security chief Tim but I held other positions after the Portland before Section 31 approached me, we don't do the simple missions, we handle what others can't, so yes, I think I can handle it." He shook his head as he continued to pilot the shuttle, this was far more intricate than any shuttle Tim would have flown, the man was probably just trying to frustrate him...

"Good. Adjust our phase variance to four point seven terahertz. That should allow us to pass through matter in this universe with a minimum of fuss. And take us in"

"Yes yes, of course. I have amended our phase variance, I hope you'll be ready for whats to come because once we get this we're going to have to help the Portland, Sera is doing well, unfortunately Arthur has not responded to my request, this means he considers me rogue or doesn't believe me and in that case once we have the case and return to normal space what would you like me to do, I can get you off the shuttle with your precious cargo and then my shuttle can assist in disabling the Eclipse..."

"That would be most appreciated, Tolaran," replied Tim, before looking down at the screen in front of him. "I'm pinpointing the location of the shards as in the forward cargo bay, near the forward bulkhead, on the starboard side." He paused for a moment and sighed deeply, taking a look back at Meru for a brief moment, letting her reassure him with a smile. "Now let's grab some shards."

Tolaran smiled slightly and turned back to the controls, following Tim's directions he piloted the shuttle gently in to place after a couple of minutes of delicate positioning before turning to his passengers. "We're here..."

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*Where your loyalties lie, part II*

Somewhere in the Badlands

2412, immediately after "Arrival in the Badlands"

**Authors: Captain Sera Williams, Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir), Gregory Rathcliffe (played by Eilis Ross), Captain Alhambra del Bolero (played by Alenis Meru), Cadet Andy Rouse (played by Timothy Rouse), Commander Valentine "Val" Dubois (played by Jason Beauvoir)**

Bridge, USS Portland

Sera sat in the Command Chair, carefully considering her next moves. Right now the shuttle needed time, and that time is what she was going to give them. She kept the ship at Yellow Alert. Knowing that the shuttle would be impossible to detect without pinpointing it's exact location, Sera had an idea.

A few years before she left the Portland to become the First Officer of the Lexington, Marcus and Sera had overseen the installation of holographic emitters on the hull of the ship. The project had been scrapped not long after installation because of the power draw of the system and the emitters were left in place. It was doubtful anyone not involved in the project, including everyone on the Eclipse, had any idea they had even been installed. She turned her head toward the Operations station and said, "Marc... erm... I'll do it."

She quickly made her way toward Ops. Once there she frantically tapped various commands on the display. The Bridge began to look damaged, blown out consoles began to replace working consoles. Pieces of the bridge began to appear destroyed and broken titanium beams with pulled out wires dotted the rest of the Bridge. Here and there life support ducts began to smoke.

The outside of the ship looked just as bad to sensors and the eye. Parts of the ship bore scorch marks. In places, the hull looked as if it had been peeled back by a powerful plasma blast, including a large hole through the starboard saucer section. The starboard nacelle began to blink and the power grid appeared to be unstable across the entire ship. Sensors and the eye would have shown the Portland as practically dead in the water.

Sera made her way back to the Captain's chair. As she walked, she made her hair look frazzled and ripped her sleeve. She looked at the Bridge crew and said, "Make yourselves look as bad as the ship."

If the situation weren't so dire, Sera would have laughed at the site of a Bridge crew purposely making themselves look so unprofessional. She looked at Tactical, "I just need one torpedo and some trickery. I need a torpedo slaved to a probe."

Sera sat back into the chair and sighed, hoping this plan would work. Sera turned toward the Helm and said, "Helm, plot a course to bring us side-by-side, make us look extremely damaged with erratic controls. She looked back at tactical, "Hail them."

Jena did as she was ordered. "Captain, might I suggest that we vent some plasma from one of the nacelles to further the pretense." She said returning to the Operations console. Since Val was concentrating on manually targeting the weapons, Science Officer hailed the Eclipse. "I have the Eclipse, Captain."

"Make it so," Sera replied in agreement. They had to make the ship look as damaged as possible. The goal was to get in close to the Eclipse to hopefully disable the pursuing vessel. This time, there would be no Marcus to help the Portland escape. The other choice was to take a Century-old ship on it's way to being mothballed into the plasma storm itself. Sera then thought for a moment, "Could someone add a healthy dose of interference to the our viewscreen feed?"

"Coming right up, captain," replied Gregory Rathcliffe, adding some video and audio interference to the feed.

A view of the bridge of the Eclipse appeared on the main viewscreen of the USS Portland. At the center of the screen sat Captain del Bolero, a smug expression on his face. He was a little surprised to not see Rouse, but given the damage to the Portland, perhaps he was a casualty. "Captain Williams -- or should I say ex-Captain, as I'm pretty sure by participating in this conspiracy you've given up your commission -- I see your ship is heavily damaged. Is this a social call, or were you going to stand down and offer me an unconditional surrender?"

"Captain del Bolero, the ex-Captain Rouse led us to a trap. We believed him," Sera said, playing a bit on Tim's time as Captain. She had to make it as believable as she could. "He said we would get back Meru and fix the timeline. He led us to our destruction," she added a bit of desperation to her voice, trying to make her acting performance as realistic as possible.

"Where is he now?" asked del Bolero, staring at Sera with a mixture of anger and disappointment.

"He's... he's gone, along with half the crew. We'd be with them if you didn't come when you did," Sera said with desperation as though she were fighting through tears. Looking at Selina, Sera said, "I'm sorry to put you through this."

Selina had never seen her sister in this condition. Fighting back her own tears, the Eclipse's Chief Operations Officer silently said, "It's ok, sis. We're here."

On the Eclipse, Andy's head shot up upon hearing of his father's passing. "What?" he whispered, not knowing how he felt. Even though the elder Rouse had abandoned him so many years ago, he was still his father.

"I'm sorry for your loss, but as a Starfleet captain, you should understand the consequences of this sort of reckless behavior," lectured del Bolero in a patronizing tone. "Shut down all systems and prepare for transport directly to our brig. Medical staff will be on hand to deal with any injuries. We will tractor the Portland to the nearest scrapyard, where it belongs."

"I'll bring the Portland to you, then shut down everything but what life support we have,"

Sera lied. She made a point to look toward the helm and ordered, "Bring us to within docking distance of the Eclipse, prepare to stand down."

With a heavy sigh, Sera looked back at the viewscreen, "Captain, give me a few moments with the crew. I'll be ready to turn myself in to your security officers once we dock."

"As you wish," replied del Bolero. "But I'm warning you, I am authorized to use lethal force, so no funny business."

As the viewscreen faded back to normal, Sera stood from the Captain's chair. With a look towards tactical, she asked, "What's the status of my torpedo? Did you get it slaved to the probe?"

"Yes, sir, its ready to go on your order." Commander Valentine 'Val' Dubois reported from the tactical console, in his usual Southern drawl.

"Very good," Sera replied, a smile almost crossing her face. She turned her attention back to Flight Control as the pilot eased the ship into docking position. When satisfied, she turned towards the viewscreen, "Aim the probe at the joint that connects the nacelle to the pylon."

"Aye, sir." The former CI officer replied as he manipulated the manual targeting controls.

Sera moved the controls to the ship's holographic imaging system to the Captain's chair, giving Tactical a chance to ready their aim. Once she gave the command, the Portland would fire a probe that would attach to the joint of the ship's nacelle and pylon. At the same time, a quantum torpedo would follow the probe, which would create a hole in the Eclipse's shield, and would remove the nacelle from the ship. The effect would be to disable the Eclipse.

She looked at the pilot and said, "When I give the 'fire' command, go to full impulse and get us away from the ship." Turning back to Tactical, she added, "As soon as you fire, raise shields."

Giving a quick sigh, she sat in her chair. She tapped the commands to bring down all of the holographic emitters, giving the Portland access to full power. "Fire and engage," Sera said as she confirmed the choice to bring down the illusion.

Val fired probe and raised the shields, monitoring it as it approached the Eclipse and Portland pulled away.

At the Operations console, Jena had transferred power to the shield emitters and impulse engines in preparation for the maneuver. Now she held her breath to see if Sera's plan would work.

Captain Williams was on pins and needles as she watched the probe slip through the Eclipse's shields, followed closely by the glowing blue orb of the quantum torpedo. The viewscreen cut out because of the interference as the quantum torpedo struck true to its

target. Sera stood, waiting for some kind of confirmation that the Eclipse had been disabled. "Bring us about, keep weapons ready."

"Captain, your ploy had the desired effect, the Eclipse's port nacelle was sheared clean off by the explosion, there was no other damage and their SI fields adapted immediately. Their warp drive is essentially out of commission, so, if their peacock of a captain wants to go faster than full impulse, he's gonna have to get out and push." Val reported, then after a beat, "Weapons ready, ma'am."

Jena found it hard to stifle a smile when she thought of del Bolero running around the Eclipse dressed as a peacock.

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*Where your loyalties lie, part III*

Somewhere in the Badlands

2412, immediately after "Arrival in the Badlands"

**Authors: Captain Alhambra del Bolero (played by Alenis Meru), Ensign Selina Williams (played by Sera Williams), Cadet Andy Rouse (played by Timothy Rouse), Commander Arthur Reynolds, Timothy Rouse, Tolaran Kian, Holo-Meru (played by Alenis Meru)**

Bridge, USS Eclipse

"Report!" shouted del Bolero as he climbed back into his chair. The blast from the Portland's torpedo had sent him falling out of his chair, breaking his swagger stick in half.

He was pissed.

Even missing a nacelle, the Eclipse was still a powerful vessel, much moreso than the aging Miranda class. "I want those shields back up now!" shouted del Bolero. "Fire all tetryon beams, arm the transphasic torpedoes, and prepare the tractor beams. They aren't getting away."

"Sir, we are leaking power out of the EPS conduits, the core will become unstable if we don't power down some of the ships systems," Selina called from her station. Her sister had known exactly where to hit the Eclipse. "We won't be able to keep up our battle readiness for long, this needs to end quickly," she said, regretting her word choice as soon as she said them.

She gave a nervous look to Andy. They both had family aboard the Portland, though she probably cared more for them than her shipmate.

Arthur, in the meantime, confirmed Selina's statement. "We can't do much from here anyway." He stood and started toward the tactical console, pushing the officer who was originally stationed there out of the way. It took him little time to dump some of the reserve energy into the sensors, and in that brief moment, a certain little shuttle had appeared at the edge of the sensor's range, albeit giving off a weak signal due to a shifting phase variance. With that, he looked up at the viewscreen and directed his next few words at the

Captain. "Permission to take a shuttle over. I can get by the Portland if we fire an antimatter spread to blind their sensors."

"Permission granted," replied del Bolero with a wave of his hand. "Rouse, prepare the antimatter spread."

"But sir," protested Andy, his legs shaking, "given the damage to their shields, an antimatter spread could severely damage or destroy--"

"You have your orders, cadet Rouse." replied del Bolero, turning in his chair to glare at the young cadet who dared to question him. "We gave these fugitives every opportunity to surrender peacefully, and they attacked us. If they die here, it's their own fault."

Despite del Bolero's intimidating rank and posture, Andy found it within himself to protest once more. "No, sir," he said in a firm tone, glaring back at del Bolero. Their eyes locked for a few seconds, as though they were testing each other's resolve, before del Bolero spoke again.

"Ensign Suval, relieve cadet Rouse. Ensign sh'Karath, escort the cadet to the brig." He swiveled in his chair back towards the viewscreen. "Now, prepare the antimatter spread."

Selina, barely able to hold back her tears, weakly said, "S...Sir, I... can't let you do that." The Portland was crippled and little threat to anything. She quickly shut down power to the weapons and locked the console. Her voice growing a bit stronger, Selina continued, "Starfleet doesn't execute its criminals, they have no means of offense and we have no idea what a warp core breach would do in the Badlands."

"sh'Karath, make that two to escort to the brig," replied del Bolero. "Anyone else?" he asked as he swiveled in his seat and looked over the bridge and at the shocked expressions of his crew.

The silence was broken by Ensign Suval, ever the loyal officer. "Preparing antimatter spread, sir."7

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## Tolaran's Shuttle

To the occupants of the shuttle, the freighter around them and its contents appeared translucent, almost ghost-like. The crew of the shuttle could see through bulkheads, floors and crates, and examine the cargo and systems inside. It was a strange sensation, one which made Tim nauseous.

With his eyes, Tim scanned the cargo. It wasn't long before he spotted a crate with five glowing objects in them. "Bingo," he muttered as he pulled out a specially modified tricorder. "Shards at 11 o'clock. I just need to surround them with a tetrayon field and we can interact with them and bring them on board. Tolaran, move us five metres, forward and to

the left.

As Tolaran adjusted their position, the orbs came closer until they were inside the shuttle. "Here goes nothing," muttered Tim as he held his specially modified tricorder up to the orb shards. One at a time, he used the tricorder to bring the shards out of phase with the freighter and into phase with the shuttle, then carefully placed them one by one into the case.

"We got what we came for," replied Tim. "Lets get out of here before the Eclipse notices our presence."

As the shuttle pulled away from the freighter, the battle in front of them came into view. The Eclipse was missing its upper port nacelle, but the Portland was being torn to shreds by the Eclipse's barrage of tetryon beams and transphasic torpedoes. Tim shook his head and a tear came to his eye; he knew the Portland wouldn't last very long under this barrage. He felt a hand on his shoulder; without turning he knew whose it was. "Meru, I..."

Tolaran frowned and signalled the Eclipse "Arthur, I'm ordering you to make the Eclipse cease fire on the Portland, damn it man, don't make me come over there!!!" he turned in his chair towards Tim, I'm sorry Tim... I can open fire or I can beam over to the Eclipse, technically I'm Arthur's superior in 31, but he still hasn't responded to me, it's unusual."

Meru leaned in towards Tim. "You know what you have to do. You have to reassemble the shards."

"I don't know how!" he protested. Seeing the Portland being battered by the eclipse, he broke down. His legs collapsed under him and he sat down on the floor of the shuttle and held his head in his hands. "This was supposed to be easy," he cried.

"Tim," said Meru, placing an arm around him, "Let the prophets guide you. Let them work through your hands." She looked up at Zirra, motioning for her to place the container of shards in front of him.

Tim took a deep breath and opened the container. For a moment, he was blinded by a bright white light, and then before him he saw six crystalline shapes floating before him, slowly rotating. Instinctively, he reached out towards them, but they pulled away. Slowly, they assembled themselves before his eyes, and then with another flash of white light they were gone and he was back on the shuttle, a class 8b crate in front of him. "I know how..." he whispered as he opened the crate and got to work...

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*Where your loyalties lie, part IV*

Somewhere in the Badlands

2412, immediately after "Arrival in the Badlands"

**Authors: Commander Arthur Reynolds, Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir), Val Dubois (played by Jason Beauvoir), Captain Sera Williams, Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru), Zirra Kajat (played by Jason Beauvoir), Tolaran Kian, Timothy Rouse, Holo-Meru (played by**

## Alenis Meru)

### Arthur's Shuttle

There was a sense of urgency in the air, combined with the unease left over from his departure. The Portland meant nothing to him. He spent no more than a month on the ship before being reassigned, only finding out a year later that Section 31 was responsible. They practically held him at gunpoint, threatening to destroy his career and only chance to get away from the world he knew if he didn't follow their demands. Now here he was, bitter over a failure from his past that continued to haunt him to the present day. But years of working for them meant this was the only life he would ever know - too old to turn over a new leaf. So now was his only chance... his chance to make sure that didn't happen again. Even if it meant submitting to their authority once more.

Superior or not, Tolaran had been compromised. Arthur knew that the moment the former security officer's transmission from Portland's engineering section was broken. Since then, he cut off all communication and destroyed the only combadge capable of sending and receiving signals from his fellow operative. Rather, he'd spent that time putting together everything he'd seen. As a spook, he knew how the game of deception was played. Having the Portland fake its surrender before damaging the Eclipse could only mean one thing: they were the bait meant to lure the Admiral away from the real linchpin to their entire plan. So Arthur had made the choice to find that linchpin - that one loose thread - and pull it.

"Computer," he exclaimed as he finished the last few modifications to the panel beneath the engineering console. "Activate program Arthur-Omega-13 and patch it into the chroniton deflector. Execute."

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### Bridge, USS Portland

The ship rocked as tetryon beams laced her shields and transphasic torpedoes passed through them with ease. On the Bridge several EPS taps blew. Jena threw up her arm in front of her face as an unmanned console near her, exploded in a shower of sparks.

"Captain, we have hull breaches on four decks, those transphasic torpedoes are passing through our shield like a hot knife through butter. At this rate we're going last about as long as a junebug on a hot skillet." Val reported from the Tactical console.

"This is Engineering," called out Nikki's voice over the one loudspeaker on the bridge that was still working. "We're losing critical systems; I'm diverting all our emergency power to structural integrity and reactor containment. Captain..." she said, her voice cracking. In the background, a cacophony of klaxons and warning messages conveyed the seriousness of the situation. "I don't know how much longer I can keep the Portland alive."

Captain Williams sighed with resignation. It would take a miracle for them to make it out alive. The Portland was little more than adrift with nothing on the side of offensive



capabilities. "Perhaps today is a good day to die," she whispered as she repeated the old Klingon saying. She hoped that Tim found all of the shards, if he did none of this would happen.

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#### Tolaran's Shuttle

Zirra glanced at the tactical display. "Mr. Kian, there appears to be approaching our position at high impulse." She said.

Tolaran slammed his fists into the console "DAMN YOU ARTHUR!" he quickly worked his fingers over the controls, trying everything he could to block what he knew would be coming, Arthur had decided to ignore him, their years of working together in Section 31 had obviously come to an end, now he would have to take him out. "I'm sorry Tim... I can't keep you here anymore, you, Zirra and... the hologram are going to have to leave. Arthur is coming for us, and he will destroy this shuttle if he gets the chance and you need to complete your mission."

Sweat coming down his forehead, Tim was busy fumbling with the shards. He glanced up out the window of the shuttle, just in time to see the badly beaten hulk of the Portland float by, a small explosion separating it from one of its nacelles. "No... I just need a minute..." he muttered, trying to block out all emotions and focus solely on the shards. His hands were moving without him even thinking, as though they were guided by the prophets.

Tolaran worked through a different phase variance, trying to keep Arthur guessing and working, buying Tim as much time as he could. "Hurry!!!! Whatever you are doing, do it quick!"

"There!" exclaimed Tim as he slid the last shard into place. Glancing out the window of the shuttle, he saw the Portland explode before his eyes. A tear came to his eye for all his lost friends and comrades, before he was overwhelmed by a flash of white light...

Before the white light hit him, he stared at holo-Meru, a look of acceptance spread across his face, peaceful almost. "I hope to see you soon Captain..." then his vision went black...

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#### Arthur's Shuttle

Certainly it would have seemed strange for a superior to request orders from his subordinate earlier that day, but Section 31 believed these were trying circumstances, and Tolaran had more experience aboard the Portland than Arthur himself. They even believed Tolaran's ties to the Portland left him unsuited to the task of planning out the entire mission, much less being keyed in to all its details; hence why Arthur had to transmit orders one objective at a time. Yet despite that, they worked together for years as partners, with

Tolaran only higher in rank. With that rank came a sense of respect for the Portland's former CSO, even when they sometimes failed to see eye-to-eye.

But Arthur had little time to waste with nostalgia. Sensors detected a temporal anomaly right on time... but not before another alarm went off. Someone or something had switched the phase variance of the other shuttle, meaning Arthur's own shuttle was now in the wrong phase. If he couldn't match that variance, the effect of the anomaly would carry him to a slightly different time and place. There was no stopping it now, however. Even as Arthur reached for the controls to correct his deflector, a marvelous flare emerging from the other shuttle engulfed him.

Now only time could tell if he would succeed at his mission... or die trying.

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*A blind date*

Bartoli's restaurant, DS9

MD03, evening

**Authors: Lt. Brad Silverton, Judith Rouse (played by Alenis Meru)**

Wearing her new green dress, Judith scanned the room as she sat waiting at her table for her date. She had a habit of showing up early, in spite of everything she had been through, punctuality had given her a bit of control. So, with a glass of ice water in her hand, she was seated alone, waiting for her date to show up. The restaurant was filled with all sorts of people -- a party of Bolians, no doubt from the medical conference two decks down, several young and not-so-young couples, and two women attempting to disguise themselves quite poorly with their sunglasses and garish headgear.

Locking eyes with one of them, Judith waved. It was clearly Ellen and Maria, attempting to spy on her to see how their little setup was going. But instead of waving back, the two women panicked and called their waiter over for their cheque. In response, Judith smirked and looked back out at the stars when she detected someone approaching her table out of the corner of her eye.

Brad entered the restaurant and scanned the room. He was grumbling slightly to himself. He had really wanted to go to the medical conference for what he was sure was going to be a stunning breakthrough. It would have been a good chance to network and introduce himself to some of the field's best researchers. Still, he was young and perhaps the life of a researcher could wait. His eyes set upon the back of a woman in a green dress sitting by herself.

He checked himself over and smoothed out the sides of his attire. It was classy, just on the casual side of formal. He wasn't quite sure what level to dress to but if his date was in a dress... he didn't want to be mismatched. He approached her from the side and recognized her.

Brad introduced himself with a warm inviting smirk. "Good evening Ms Rouse. I believe we

have plans for this evening together."

"Doctor Silverton?" asked Judith. She was a little surprised at first, but as Brad sat down, she offered him a warm smile. "I should have known," she said in a lighthearted tone, "Ellen and Maria aren't the type to allow a young, talented physician go without a date, even if he is their department head."

Brad seated himself down across from Judith. "Yes those two had seemed to be planning something for awhile now but I didn't know it involved me though now that I see who my date is... I'm glad that they did. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Oh no, of course not," replied Judith as she looked down at the wine list. Aside from "red" and "white," the entire menu was completely foreign to her; having been a little tomboyish since her youth, she was more likely to gravitate to a burger and a cold beer than a glass of fine wine at a fancy restaurant. "Would you care to select some wine?" she asked, passing the wine list across the table to Brad, unable to tell the difference between a Merlot and a Chardonnay.

"Absolutely." Brad took the wine list and quickly scanned it. "Last time the Portland was here I had made a few recommendations for their selection but it looks like they haven't had enough time to order any." Brad looked back up at Judith. "Ideally though we'll want to pick dinner first then pair the wine to it. Did you see anything that looked good?"

"Well, it is an Italian place, so I suppose I could go for some pizza," replied Judith, reverting to one of the few things on the menu that she had some familiarity with. The extensive list of exotic and authentic Italian cuisine might have been Greek to her, and pizza was one of the few comforting things on the menu. In truth, part of her would rather have been two decks down at Baryon Burgers and Fries, which she had heard was home of the best bacon cheeseburger in the sector. "Or maybe some lasagna?" she added, her inflection betraying the fact that she was in over her head with the classy menu.

Brad was no Betazoid but he could tell Judith was out of place. "Well. First start off with picking what kind of meat you want. Chicken, seafood, beef. From there you can pick the nuance of flavor from the spices and herbs." Brad slightly bit his lip thinking that that probably didn't help. "Spice or no spice?"

"Hmmm...." Judith pondered the menu for a moment. "I suppose I do like meatballs, so beef?" she said, her voice raising in inflection as if it were as much a question as a statement. "And sure, let's go with spice."

Brad looked over the wine list again. "Ok I think they have something here that will be close enough." He nodded to a waiter who came over. "We'll each have a glass of the Bajoran Fidini Estates Sangiovese." As the waiter left Brad continued, "They just started growing wine grapes recently when they noticed the Federation demand. They are even naming their vineyards to make them Italian sounding. The vineyards still have young vines but the sommeliers have added minerals to their water to harshen the boldness. It should come across more like a soft Cabernet than a true Shiraz."

"Fascinating," replied Judith, feeling a little in over her head at Brad's description. "That's a red, right?"

"Yes it is." Brad wasn't the most experienced man when it comes to dating but at least he could tell a date starting to go wrong. "So wine isn't your thing." He said with a devilish grin. "So what is your drink of choice?"

"PBR" she admitted, with a little guilt over her low-brow tastes. "I like beer."

"PBR? I didn't even know they still made that." Brad didn't really know what else to say on the topic. He didn't know much about PBR other than he found its taste appalling and knew enough not to say anything to Judith about that. "So. How are you finding your time aboard the Portland?"

Judith paused for a moment to ponder the question. "It's... different." She let out a sigh. "It's just difficult coming to terms with my new role ever since my injuries. I used to command a squadron of starfigthers, then a team of marines. Now... I can barely walk, and I'm flying a desk as a 'consultant' and 'training coordinator.'" She took a large gulp of the wine which had just been placed in front of her by the waiter. "It's hard enough not being able to fly anymore or get my hands dirty, but now it feels like Starfleet is giving me make-work projects out of pity."

Brad thought angrily to himself. *"Smooth. Bring up a touchy subject like her career and injury for a date conversation. I might as well have talked to her about her medical exam results. Hmm actually that isn't a bad idea at this point what the hell."*

"Judith, from what I've seen of your record there is still the chance of a full recovery. That plus there are amazing medical break-thrus coming out every week. There will be plenty of time to just sit back and enjoy the simple pleasures of life, like a glass of wine." Brad held up his glass in a half toast half salute gesture.

Judith returned the toast and took another sip of the wine. It wasn't bad per se, and she was sure it was very good by wine standards, but it wasn't exactly her cup of tea. "What about the other simple pleasures, like white-water rafting, mountain climbing, hiking..." Judith let out a sigh. She wasn't about to give up on all the physical activities she enjoyed so much, but she was under no illusions. She knew any recovery would be a long, painful journey, and one with no guarantee of ever reaching her destination. "I'm sorry, I'm being kind of a downer."

"Don't apologize. Having a forced dramatic lifestyle change can be difficult at best to accept. But I honestly wouldn't give up just yet." Brad sipped his wine and thought for a second. "When we get back to the ship. I'll see what I can dig up in the recently Starfleet medical journals."

"I'm pretty sure Ellen and Maria might have something to say if they knew that you were talking about work," countered Judith in a lighthearted tone. She scanned the room once more to make sure they were gone and then leaned in, lowering her voice. "I caught them

spying on us, they were at that table over there with their bad disguises."

Brad chuckled lightly as he looked over his shoulder to see where Judith was looking at.

"Well I guess we can't blame them for wanting to see their grand scheme unfold." The then grew silent while trying to think of what next to say. He felt like he had already screwed up on conversation topics he didn't want to swing at another miss. Of course the longer that the silent went on, he thought to himself, the more awkward it would become.

*I wonder if there has been some research showing if there is a tipping point in the neurotransmitters indicating a dramatic shift...*

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For Judith, the walk back to her quarters was a long and painful one. With her back problems acting up again, she could barely make it back, a harsh reminder that she was no longer able to partake in the activities that were important to her. Stopping outside her door, she leaned against the doorframe and winced in pain, longing for her bed and her heating pad. "Thanks for dinner," she said. "That was... fun."

"It WAS fun. I'm glad Ellen and Maria talked us into it. Part of me wishes they had staid and watched the rest. The way that poor waiter had assumed I'd be ordering and speaking for you. He got to see a bit of what Starfleet Marines are made of." Brad laughed heartily at the memory.

"Well, to be fair, I was a little in over my head..." The date hadn't gone too badly, but it hadn't gone great either. They didn't have a whole lot in common, and Judith found herself a little overwhelmed by the upscale nature of her surroundings. "But I still don't know where that guy got off..." She giggled a little at the memory before placing a hand on her back to steady herself. "I guess I'll see have to see you for my appointment; can you squeeze me in on Tuesday morning?"

"I'll make time. That is. Unless you are needing help tonight? I may be your date tonight but I'm still a doctor and I can tell when someone is in physical discomfort."

Judith thought for a moment, a hint of a smile appearing on her face. "I suppose I could use a massage and some pain meds," she said, before turning and heading into her quarters.

"Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

"I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't like that, but perhaps we'll save that for next time?"

Judith nodded. "Gotcha. Two analgesic tablets and I'll call you in the morning." With that, she turned and headed back into her quarters to find a heating pad for her throbbing back.

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*The next day...*

MD04, Lunchtime

Security consultant's office, USS Portland

**Authors: Timothy Rouse, Judith Rouse (played by Alenis Meru)**

Inside her office, Judith leaned back in her high-tech ergonomic chair. Specially designed for her, it was one of the few chairs she could sit in for long periods of time without triggering severe back pain. But as she picked up a PADD, she heard a chime at the door. She thought it was odd; she wasn't expecting any visitors. "Come in," she called out, curious as to who might be here to disturb her.

As the doors whooshed open, the revealed her brother, Tim, with a small container under her arm. "Judith," he said, smiling down at his sister who was attempting to hide her pain. "I brought you something."

"What is it?" asked Judith, examining the container.

"Open it up," replied Tim, placing him in front of her.

Slowly and carefully, Judith opened the container to find... "A bacon cheeseburger?" she asked.

"From Baryon Burgers and Fries, on the station," replied Tim. "Your favourite, and they're supposed to be the best in the sector."

"Thanks," replied Judith with a smile. She had skipped breakfast and hadn't eaten lunch yet, so the arrival of her brother with food was fortuitous. Quickly, she took a bite and placed the burger back inside the container. It was mouth-wateringly delicious. The beef was cooked to perfection, the condiments were just the right amount of spicy, and the bacon...

Oh, the bacon...

"It's delicious," she replied. "Thank you," she added, looking back up at her brother. "But you didn't run all the way over to the station and then come back here just to surprise me with a hamburger, did you?"

"What?" asked Tim, feigning innocence. "I was just thinking of you, and how much you like cheeseburgers. And surprises."

"Cut the crap, Tim," shot back Judith. "You're my brother; I've known you all my life. You wouldn't be coming down here like this unless you had something to say. Now spit it out."

Tim smiled at Judith and took a seat across from her. "Have you seen Doctor Silverton lately?"

"Of course," she replied, deciding to play dumb. "I see him every other week about my back."

"Oh?" asked Tim. "I didn't realize he was practicing out of Bartoli's restaurant."

Judith immediately turned bright red with embarrassment. "How did you know?" she gasped.

"Seriously, Judith, there are no secrets on the Portland," replied Tim. "Especially not when you're in a relationship with one of our delightfully chatty nurses."

"Ellen," thought Judith as she clenched her fists tightly. She would have to have a word or two with Ellen and Maria as soon as possible. But first...

"All right, yeah, Ellen and Maria set us up. I guess they can't help themselves from trying to be the ship's official matchmakers, and the thought of a young, handsome, single doctor--"

"Whoa, wait!" exclaimed Tim, interrupting Judith. "Did you..."

"No, no, we didn't do anything," replied Judith, turning an even deeper shade of red. "He's a nice guy, but we didn't really have a connection. Or anything in common. Anyways," she added, scowling at Tim, "I'm thirty-one years old; I don't need you trying to look after me and keep the neighborhood boys away. This is just like when I was fourteen and Matt Henderson from match class--"

"This is nothing like that!" exclaimed Tim. "I... I..." He stepped forward and placed his hand on his sister's shoulder, smiling down at her. "Enjoy your bacon cheeseburger."

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USS Portland  
Chief Counselor's Office  
MD03. Morning  
Authors: Brad Silvertown and Delainey Carlisle.

Brad arrived at the Chief Counselor's office for his appointment. He wasn't quite sure what to say or how to say but then again, that WAS the entire point of a ship having a counselor on board. He pressed the entry chime and waited.

"Come in," Delainey called out, the doors opening on her command. Carlisle looked up and stood from her desk with a smile. "Hello, Doctor. What may I do for you?"

"Hello Counselor. I'm needing to talk to you. I like to pride myself in being direct and confronting with with any issues that I have. This one however... well I'm going to need help on this one."

Gesturing for Brad to take a seat, she offered with a small reassuring smile, "You seem to be direct enough now, Doctor, but I can see you're bothered by something that's not easy to admit. I'm happy o listen and help however I can."

Brad sat down and was quiet for a moment while collecting his thoughts. "I'm having a hard time with the A.I. hologram copy of the Captain." He sighed heavily with lips mostly closed. Part humph and part hiss.

The statement in itself wasn't all that surprising, but it wasn't terribly specific either. "What in particular is giving you trouble?" Delainey asked.

"The moral responsibility of the situation. When I started out with helping in creating the A.I. program it seemed like it would just be an advanced holodeck sim. Nothing real. Nothing permanent. Now here we are with questions of is she real or not. Does she have a career in Starfleet or not. Does she get stored in a computer kept alive but not really? Just too many unknowns swirling through my head to sort out."

Carlisle couldn't deny the truth of his words. Holo- Alenis was creating a host of complications no one could have predicted and it was enough to keep all of their minds reeling, especially in light of the real Alenis' death. "You don't have to sort it all out alone," Delainey offered gently. "You have to know no one could have known the repercussions of all of this, and ultimately, you are just trying to look out for a member of your crew."

"I'll disagree with you that I don't have to sort it all out alone. Psychologically I don't, and hence why I am here for your advice. But in the end it is on me professionally. The original EMH being an A.I. could be seen as a member of the medical department and thus my responsibility. I could have tried to come up with something else or possibly used my medical authority to deny the procedure."

"Hindsight is always 20/20," Delainey replied gently. "The decision may have ultimately been yours, but unless I'm misremembering events and you configured the EMH all by yourself, there were others who believed in what you were doing. In any case, if you're going to criticize yourself for what you didn't do, you have to give yourself credit for what you did accomplish, which was do everything you could to ensure a member of your crew didn't suffer or die."

"Well that's true. I did have the confidence of the Captain." Brad chuckled and blushed slightly thinking how involved the Captain was in this procedure, "Well obviously had her confidence on this matter." His tone turned somber once again.

"I guess I shouldn't be too hard on myself. The Vulcans have been dealing with pon farr for centuries. The best they seem to do is keep it some shameful secret and hide it as much as possible. I didn't really have much to work with."

Delainey nodded. "That's something I never understood myself. I get that it's an uncomfortable subject for Vulcans, but you'd think they'd be better prepared to handle it discretely in that case, even preparing a back up plan of sorts in case it occurred sooner than expected." Carlisle shook her head. "Still, I don't think less of Beauvoir. He was ill and needed help."

Brad laughed deeply, "You know when you really think about it, its illogical to keep it hidden because they feel that its embarrassing. Kind of hypocritical of them in a way." Brad went back to a serious professional tone. "I haven't even really talked to her since she, 'cured' Beauvoir. Maybe I should?"



Delainey shrugged. "That's entirely up to you. For what it's worth, I think she would welcome it and while it may not erase your feelings of the past, it may help you resolve to go forward."

Brad got up to leave. "Thank you Counselor. You've given me a few things to think about. I think I will stop by and see how she is doing." He opened his mouth to say something else then closed it and nodded his head to himself before leaving.

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*Too Many Merus*

Captain's Office, USS Portland

2391, MD06, morning

**Authors: Lt. (JG) Delainey Carlisle, multiple Alenis' (all played by Alenis Meru)**

"...and it's strange, I still have feelings for him, but I'm not sure if they're real feelings." Holo-Meru took a deep breath. Even though she didn't need oxygen, she was programmed with holographic lungs and what were to her perfectly normal Bajoran responses to stress. She looked up at the woman across the room from her. Normally ship's counselors didn't make house calls, but without holo-emitters in Delainey's office, she had to come up to deck one. They were using the captain's office because it was guaranteed to be quiet, and because it was at least in some way familiar to Holo-Meru.

"You know, it's funny, doctor, the real Meru would never volunteer herself to see a shrink," continued the hologram. "Well, except maybe Arvel, but that's a different story. Anyways, I'm actually finding this session to be a lot less painful than expected."

Delainey smiled. "I'm glad to hear you say that because it's what I aim for. Certainly, depending on what people are going through, it can be painful to talk, but I believe talking things through is preferable to keeping them inside." She chuckled. "Contrary to perception, therapists aren't motivated to pull out people's most traumatic thoughts and feelings for their own amusement."

Truthfully, it was just as strange for Carlisle to hear holo-Meru speak about the other Meru as it was for the rest of the crew. Delainey had never had an opportunity to meet the organic Meru as it were, but at the same time, she felt as if she knew her all the same based on people's stories.

"That's good to know," replied the hologram. "It's nice to have someone to talk to, especially with all that has happened over the past week. I'm still not totally comfortable with the idea of being a holographic copy of someone."

Delainey smiled. "I'd worry if you were," she answered honestly. "Try to keep in mind your emotions just are," she added. "There is no right or wrong when it comes to feelings."

Suddenly, they were interrupted by a chime at the door, one which startled both women. Neither of them were expecting to be interrupted in here.

"Are you expecting someone?" Delainey asked.

"No, I..." The hologram froze as the door opened, revealing a Bajoran woman who bore a striking resemblance to both herself and the late captain.

The woman froze in her tracks. "Meru?" she asked, a look of shock on her face.

"No, I'm..." The hologram sighed and swiped her arm at the computer monitor, it harmlessly passing through without interruption, to show she was a hologram. "It's a long story. But I could say the same about you. You bear a striking resemblance to her."

"Oh, no, I'm... Tylo Nerys," replied the Bajoran woman, the door closing behind her. "I'm... very close to the family."

"I don't remember a Tylo Nerys," countered the hologram, her eyes narrowing. "Unless..." the hologram froze for a split second. "I know who you are, Doctor Silverton mentioned something about you. You're Ina--"

"I'm Tylo Nerys," said the other woman in a firm voice, asserting her new identity.

Delainey was utterly confused. "May I help you?"

The hologram looked up at the other woman and saw the pain and exhaustion in her eyes. "It's okay. Dr. Carlisle here can be trusted."

The mysterious woman simply nodded and opened her mouth, but no words came out.

"This is Inaji Narale," added holo-Meru. "My... I mean, Meru's, half-Cardassian half-sister. We found her on Gamia III and gave her a new identity and a new life. There... were people after her."

Delainey wasn't sure what she expected to hear, but she decided it certainly wasn't *\*that.\** At first, Carlisle was beating herself up inwardly for not having the first clue about such events. Granted, she had come aboard mid-mission to Gamia III but it seemed she was destined to forever play catch up where that planet was concerned.

Carlisle said the only thing that seemed appropriate under the circumstances. "Hello. It's nice to meet you."

For a moment, Inaji froze.

"Don't worry, she's cool," said holo-Meru as she stood up and walked towards Inaji, giving her a big hug. "And you're safe here."

"I..." Inaji froze for a moment and wrapped her arms around the hologram. Whatever she was, she was the closest thing to her late sister. As the hug ended, Inaji looked over at the

doctor. "It's... nice to meet you too, Doctor Carlisle."

Pulled from her surprise in large part by holo Meru's reassurances to the seemingly skittish woman before her, Delaine offered, "Please forgive my surprise. I did not mean to leave you thinking you weren't welcome. I don't know your circumstances exactly, but you are indeed safe here from me. I mean you no harm."

"Thank you, doctor," replied Inaji. She offered Delaine a hint of a smile. "Sorry. I've been on the run for so long... it's hard to remember what it was like to be able to trust someone again."

Delaine nodded in understanding, though in truth it was the kind of understanding that came from only the general idea of being on the run. She had no idea of the circumstances that affected Inaji specifically, and the counselor was torn about whether she should ask. Suddenly, she felt guilty for almost giving into the impulse to start a brand-new therapy session with the new person in the room without finishing the previous session with Meru.

Not accustomed to being unsure of what to do, particularly under professional circumstances, she found herself turning to both women and offering a small smile. "It's my turn to apologize. I find myself wanting to lend an ear to both of you right now. Professional hazard," she added with a wider smile. "Still, I should probably just give the two of you some privacy."

"No, Doctor, it's all right," replied the hologram. "I--"

She was interrupted by a chime at the door. Inaji, a tinge of fear running down her spine as she knew she was cornered in this room, looked over at holo-Meru. "Are you expecting anyone?" she asked, a little nervous.

"No, I wasn't..." Holo-Meru looked over at the door, hoping it was Tim or someone who understood their situation. "Come in," she called out, not knowing what else to say.

The doors opened to reveal an older Bajoran woman. One who bore a certain familial resemblance to Inaji and the hologram. But she was older, with a number of grey hairs and lines on her face which told a story. One of the struggles of raising a child under occupation, of living as a refugee, and of years over a grill in the kitchen of the little hole-in-the-wall Bajoran restaurant on Earth which she ran in order to provide her daughter with everything she needed to succeed in life.

"Mom!" exclaimed holo-Meru, her jaw dropping.

"Meru?"

"Mom?" chimed in Inaji.

"Meru?" Alenis Kendra rubbed her eyes; not only did it look like she was seeing double, but she was seeing double of her late daughter. "I..." she stumbled forward, her legs turning to

jelly, she leaned on the desk for support. "I..." she glanced over at the one woman in the room who she didn't recognize. "This... can't be. I came here to gather my daughter's things... what's happening here?"

Delainey wasn't sure she knew, but it was clear the new arrival was in shock, and Carlisle acted quickly. "Here," she offered, rushing forward to gently lead the older woman to nearby seating. This was certainly not how she imagined meeting anyone's parent for the first time, but the symptoms, if not the circumstances, were familiar to the doctor and therapist in the room, and for the moment, Delainey's focus narrowed to the older woman. She didn't like her color, and though she wanted to do more, Delainey thought it wise to at least introduce herself and explain before putting more hands on the new arrival. "I'm Delainey. I'm a doctor here. I know this is very upsetting and very confusing, and I will explain everything, but first, will you take some slow, deep breaths for me?"

A million questions flew through Carlisle's mind and she wanted nothing more than to turn to the other women in the room to explain, but there would be time for that later, she hoped.

Sitting down, Alenis Kendra took a few deep breaths and held her head. Confused, she didn't know what was going on when she felt someone hold her by the hand. It was a familiar feeling, it was just like that of her daughter, but a little different. There was something missing about the way she touched her.

"I know you're confused right now," said holo-Meru, taking the elder Alenis by the hand. "A lot has happened over the past week. I..." She froze, not sure where even to start. "Can I get you some tea?"

Alenis Kendra nodded in the affirmative. Delainey chose to remain silent for the moment. The fewer people vying for the clearly upset woman's attention, the better.

"Doctor, perhaps it would be best if you were to give us a little privacy," stated the hologram as she headed for Meru's tea kettle. "Family matters, I'm sure you understand..."

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### *Inaji's Departure*

Lita's Tea House

Promenade, Deep Space Nine

MD06, early afternoon

**Authors: Alenis Meru, Timothy Rouse**

Lita's Tea House

Deep Space Nine

"...and so that's how I ended up on the Portland." Over some Deka tea, Inaji Narale explained as much of her life as she could in a short time. After forty years of waiting, she had only a couple of hours to get to know her mother.

Tears were streaming down Alenis Kendra's cheeks. "I'm so sorry," she uttered, bawling. Hearing what her daughter had gone through while she was unable to protect her gave her the worst feeling that she had ever felt. "I should have been there..."

Inaji grabbed the elder Alenis' hand. "I know there was nothing you could do. Gul Narale was a vicious, sadistic man. But he's dead now and the galaxy is better off for it. And, finally, I can claim the life that he denied to me."

Alenis Kendra wiped the tears out of her eyes. "We have so much catching up to do. I only wish we had more time." Holo-Meru had told her that Inaji Narale was to become Tylo Nerys and start a new life near Romulan space, as far away from Cardassia as she could get. In what was effectively witness protection, she was to disappear, and have no contact with the family she was just reunited with for at least a year or two to throw off any suspicion.

"Me too."

Their moment was interrupted by the entrance of a tall, blond-haired Starfleet commander entering the café. "Ms. Tylo," called out Timothy Rouse as he approached their table. He paused for a moment, overwhelmed with grief as just seeing the two Bajorans with the uncanny resemblances to Meru reminded him of his dead friend. "It's time for your tailor's appointment," he added, a reference to the Cardassian shopkeeper on Deep Space Nine who, in exchange for a few bars of latinum and a bottle of fine Kanar that Tim had procured, would arrange fake papers and safe passage on a freighter halfway across the quadrant.

Slowly, Inaji released her grip on her mother and stood up. She knew that this time she had with her mother and with Meru's adopted family on the Portland, the first time in her life where she was treated as if she belonged somewhere, wouldn't last. Alenis Kendra stood up as well and wrapped her arms around her daughter in one last embrace.

"I love you, mom," whispered Alenis Kendra.

"And I love you too," replied Inaji. "I love you too."

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### *Resurrection, Part I*

Shuttlebay Two, Deep Space Nine

MD07, 1300 hours

**Authors: Lt. Cmdr. Tyrlai Zade, Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lt. Brad Silverton, Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru), Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir)**

Tyrlai began the pre flight checklist while waiting for her invitees to show. This would either be a very strange tour of Deep Space 9 or it would be a memorable reunion and introduction for some to the Captain of the Portland. On her invite it was listed as simply a 'get to know each other' tour. She checked the location of her probe crawler and it reported back that all

was well. She expected that an invitation from your acting XO would be relatively well attended.

Tyrlai had decided that the problem with her vision was the lack of knowledge the wormhole aliens had of linear time. They had no reason to resurrect the Captain here in the present time frame. They would go forward to whatever time the orb was restored and likely resurrect Alenis there. She furrowed her brow, there was no telling how long it would take her to find all of the pieces and the Portland needed her Captain now, not at some indeterminate future point. Fortunately the wormhole aliens could walk through time like she could walk across a room, so all she needed was to make them come back across the room to restore Alenis. Tyrlai's plan was simple, she would lock a small torpedo on her probe crawler and obliterate the body of her Captain. Thus forcing the Aliens to 'cross the room' and restore Alenis here, tonight. The trick being to beam her out before the detonation.

She mentioned nothing of her plan in the invitations of course. The main problem with her plan, as with many of her plans, was it's chances of success were iffy. The wormhole aliens might very well not need the Captains material form at all, in which case all she would be doing would be to create a needless and pointless light show in violation of station regulations. That was a risk but ultimately her starfleet record had always been on the colorful side. In time the whole torpedo thing would certainly be overshadowed by other dubious actions she was sure to undertake in the near future.

"Lieutenant Commander Zade," called out Nikki as she stepped through the door of the shuttle, a heavy holo-camera and tripod slung over her shoulder. When she got the invite to go on a tour with the acting XO, she responded immediately in an effort to endear herself to the command staff. Then, she spent the next several hours panicking and worrying about it, afraid she would embarrass herself in front of her senior officer.

Tyrlai smiled and waved her in. She was looking at the starboard wall pondering a pesky flashing red light on the console. "That camera may come in useful, set it in the corner and point it at the floor."

"I brought a camera! And a tripod and remote shutter, for selfies!" she exclaimed, spilling drops of her coffee on the shuttle floor as she bumbled her way to the seat. "This is going to be so much fun. Oooh! Can we go through the wormhole!"

Zade looked in the general direction of the wormhole and winced a little. "That might not be wise just this once." She looked back at Nikki grinning. "We've got fireworks and surprises though. Or at least one of the two."

Brad came in through the shuttle doorway mid sentence as he had been for years. "Tyrlai I got your message. So what kind of hijinks do you have planned for us? Oh hi Nikki."

"Hi, Brad," Tyrlai offered him a hug, "Glad you could make it, we may need your services." She embraced the good doctor, her brow furrowing just as her face was hidden as she thought up a cover story her little slip.. "Because, my parties are just that wild." She smirked and turned to kick the wall sharply. The flashing red light went out. "Pre flight check done!"

"Doctor!" exclaimed Nikki. Having placed her coffee on the console, she quickly pivoted in place and turned towards Brad. "Smile," she called out, raising the holo-camera and snapping a photo before Brad could even have a chance to react.

Jason and Jena made their way along the corridor to the Shuttle Pad. "What do you think this is about?" Jena asked.

"You know Tyrlai, it's probably something dangerous and flashy." Jason replied.

"True." Jena replied.

Arriving at the airlock, Jason and Jena came to attention. "Lieutenant Beauvoir and acting Crewman Coln reporting for duty, ma'am."

Tyrlai stared at them. "What's this on duty stuff, nobody's supposed to be on duty. Except me, I'm flying. Everyone else is to have fun." She winked at Jena. "Hi Jena, sorry I've been busy lately, we'll do something soon though. There's this molecular gelatin I think would be very useful for, um,... things. we can have an organizational meeting about it later."

Sera quickly made her way across the hanger and up the shuttle's ramp. With a quick knock on the side of the hull, she entered the small craft. Sera thought that she could definitely get to know the rest of the crew, being that she had only just met them just before the Gamia III mission. With a polite nod to each of those in the shuttle, she took her seat beside Nikki.

Tyrlai nodded to Sera as the engineer stepped inside and crouched looking for any stragglers. Tim would need to be here, she would fetch him from his bath with the transporters if she had to. She was hoping Marcus would let his curiosity get the better of him, as long as those odds were. A pair of white cat monkeys tore around a corner and got halfway to the shuttle entrance before spotting her. She glared and pointed back the way they had came. "Not you." Eyes wide, the cat-monkeys turned and scampered out of sight.

Tim was the last to arrive. He wasn't expecting to be here at all, but Tyrlai has been summoning him over his comm badge for the past half hour. Tyrlai was nothing if not persistent, so he finally relented, if only to get her out of his hair.

"Ms. Zade," he called out as he strolled quickly across the shuttlebay towards the shuttle. His uniform was immaculate, however a close inspection would reveal dark circles under Tim's eyes, indicating the lack of sleep he had gotten since the death of his close friend and captain. "You are no doubt aware that I have a meeting with the admirals in less than an hour regarding the report on the death of the captain; I trust this is important?"

"There are Admirals about?" Tyrlai asked with a combination of being dubious about such a probability and also being completely unaware that she had already missed all of her meetings with the same. She tapped her combadge. "Commander Zade to flight control, this is Federation runabout 'Trill Sucks' requesting permission to depart."

>>The registry for that runabout reads, the Thames, commander. But otherwise permission granted.<<

She closed the door behind the scowling acting Captain as he stepped aboard. "There are refreshments at the port side of the cabin along with emergency medical supplies. Please keep clear of the emergency transporters as they may well be put to use. Welcome aboard the USS Portland, I truly hope this is a memorable trip for everyone." She took the pilots chair giving only a scant few moments for everyone to buckle in and then accelerated from the station at the edge of regulation maximum speeds.

"Whoa, what's the hurry!?" exclaimed Tim, clutching the co-pilot's seat, surprised at the speed at which Tyrlai was whipping the runabout around the pylons of the station and oncoming traffic. As they pitched forward, the wormhole came into view. "Wait, we aren't going into the wormhole, are we?"

"That would not be prudent." Tyrlai explained as she banked the runabout and leapt to a quarter impulse, darting out over traffic lanes and out into the darkness. The trip took thirty-five seconds and breaking the shuttle was lurching and sudden. "We're here."

Tyrlai tapped a few commands into the console. "Fireworks of some kind in two minutes and counting." She readied her hands over the cancellation button with one hand and the transporter controls with the other.

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### *Resurrection, Part II*

Runabout Thames (or Trill Sucks)

MD07, 1315 hours

**Authors: Lt. Cmdr. Tyrlai Zade, Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lt. Brad Silverton, Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru), Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir)**

Inside the wormhole, the pagh of Alenis Meru manifested itself as the late captain. She held her arm up to her face, shielding her eyes from the bright white light that surrounded her. As the light began to fade slightly, she lowered her arm and squinted through the light, taking in her surroundings. She was on the bridge of the Portland, and standing before her was her friend Timothy and the rest of the senior officers.

Dazed and confused, she thought back to the last thing she remembered. She was in a cave... Kosst Amojan... she was using her last ounce of strength to beg Tim to shoot her.

Suddenly, she realized where she was. "Am I dead," she managed to gasp in a weak voice.

"Dead... alive... you think in such linear terms, my child," replied the prophet in the form of Tim. He stepped forward and squeezed Alenis' ear. "Your pagh is very strong."

"My pagh..." Alenis looked around. Tyrlai was there, as were all of her senior staff. And Koko. "But, I don't understand. I was shot."



The prophet known as Tim stepped aside. "It was not your time," he said, motioning towards the screen.

Alenis backed up, almost falling into the captain's chair, and studied the screen intently. She could see the future, or at least one possible future. Before her, a story played out. One with a familiar cast of characters, her friends, twenty years in the future. She could see what had become of them; she saw that Sera had become captain, and had seen what had become of Marcus and Tim. And she saw their struggle to accomplish their mission, along with their final sacrifice.

"No..." she whispered as the destruction of the Portland played out before her. "This can't be..."

The Tyrlai prophet stepped forward and placed a hand on hers. "It is, and yet, it isn't..."

Before Alenis could respond, she could feel something tugging at her. Pulling her away from the bridge of the Portland, towards another white light...

\*\*\*\*\*

For a moment the shuttle was gone, there was a shimmering white plain, the officers in the shuttle looked out and could see the last moments of the Portland bridge, in the future. Sera dressed in a Captains uniform, Jena at the helm. And somehow a few feet of shimmering white away, Tim and a few others in a shuttle.

Jena saw herself at helm, her Sciences blue uniform torn and dirty, around her the Bridge was in a bad state. Wires were exposed, consoles sparking and wall and ceiling panels were scattered across the deck, there were even some corpses laying amongst the debris. Jena was horrified by the scene, but the facts that she had remained loyal to Meru and crewmembers that had become her family and that she'd decided to follow her father into the Science made her smile.

Unable to spot himself among those on either the Portland's Bridge or future shuttle, Jason wondered what had become of him.

Sera began to walk around the bridge of the Portland. It looked like the ship had been through hell, yet in the middle of it all she saw her future self in the center chair. She smiled that she had been able to become someone who could be a leader, that people would follow her to whatever end. However, before she could get an idea about what was happening, the ship vanished in white as the warp core breached.

In the future, Brad was by Tyrlai's side. Still trying to save her after all the years of repeated failure, but now he was out of options and was left to just trying to make her comfortable. He hadn't put much faith into the Prophets over the years having trusted in science and technology. That had failed him and now at this final hour? Well what he hell if some energy beings claiming to be prophets could save Tyrlai when he couldn't...

There was a flash and Tyrlai felt the shard in her pocket vanish. Her hands hit the transporter controls and the body of Alenis vanished from the torpedo casing a quarter kilometer from the nose of the shuttle and onto the floor of the cabin between all of the attendees. Tyrlai stepped down motioning Brad over and knelt at the Captain's side. She could tell immediately, that Alenis was breathing. Tyrlai smiled as Alenis opened her eyes and was genuinely glad that the Prophets had kept their side of the bargain. Behind her on the main viewscreen torpedo casing obliterated itself in a colorful explosion.

"Welcome back, Captain." Tyrlai extended her hand, and Alenis took it getting to her feet.

"Thank you, Tyrlai," replied Alenis, slowly standing up with Tyrlai's help, still a little dizzy and lightheaded from her experience. Looking around the shuttle, she was surrounded by her senior officers. They were all frozen in shock, with the exception of Brad who was slowly reaching for his medical tricorder. "What's the matter?" asked Alenis, in an effort to lighten the mood, her voice wavering slightly. "You all look as though you've seen a ghost."

"You're alive!" Tim stated the obvious as he was holding onto the seat next to him. "You're not dead anymore!"

Alenis took a step forward and wrapped her arms around Tim, giving him a warm hug. Having seen what he had done for her in the other universe, she held him tightly as tears of joy streamed down her cheeks. "Thank you," she whispered in his ear. "You came back for me. Thank you."

Tim returned the hug, holding Alenis tightly. There were a number of questions to be answered about how this was possible, but in the moment, he didn't care. He was just overjoyed to have Meru back. Captains and their first officers may have their special relationship, but Meru was more than just a superior officer to him, she was his friend. "I..." for once Tim was speechless as he tried to stammer out his feelings. "I thought I lost you. That we lost you. But you're here..."

Behind her, Alenis heard behind her the sounds of a whirring medical tricorder and a loud thud, which would be Nikki fainting and her body slamming into the floor plating of the shuttle.

Jason was happy that Meru was back, he wanted to talk with her, but with Brad busy with her, he thought it best that he attend to the unconscious Miss Barclay. Grabbing an emergency kit, he made his way to her. He pulled out the medical tri-corder and did a scan. The results told him she'd be okay, her only injuries were a few bruises she'd received from hitting the deck. "Miss Barclay, Nikki can you hear me?" he asked.

Giving Nikki a glance to ensure that she was ok, Sera rushed to the Captain's side. All of the emotion of her perceived failure on Gamia III washed away when she saw that Meru was alive. "Captain, I'm glad you're still with us," was all that Sera could say. With tears in her eyes, she had to take a seat in the nearest chair.

Brad was as shocked as the rest at seeing the Captain appear but while the others seemed overjoyed, he was skeptical. He had just been through too much with alternate versions of the Captain recently. The energy wraiths took possession of her and used her, Brad had copied her and helped create an A.I. hologram version of her. As he scanned Alenis everything pointed to her being real, but there was one small detail he was looking for. Hoping and pleading to find that would prove this to be the real Captain.

And there it was. The small growth on her right ovary. Caused by the damned shard in the first place. He honestly hated that growth. It represented Meru's faith and its conflict with a rational, prudent course of action. But it was also hard to deny that it was intertwined with her being here and her return to the crew. Couldn't that just be good enough for now?

Brad lowered his tricorder and spoke softly. "Welcome back Captain."

Jena smiled they'd done it. Approaching the others she said. "Thank the Prophets, you're back."

"It is also thanks to you," replied Alenis, smiling warmly at her crew. They were like a family to her, and the family was now reunited. "All of you."

Tim glanced at his chronometer. "Um, as delighted as I am, I'm late for a meeting with the Admirals, so if we could return to the station..."

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#### *Final meeting with the Admirals*

Meeting room, DS9

Shortly after Tyrlai's shuttle ride

**Authors: Capt. Alenis Meru (the real one!), Lt. Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lt. Cmdr. Tyrlai Zade, Admiral Washington (played by Alenis Meru), Admiral Cresswell (played by Jason Beauvoir), Admiral Anderson (played by Tyrlai Zade)**

Seated next to Admirals Cresswell and Anderson, Admiral Washington tapped his foot impatiently as he looked down at his chronometer. Rouse was late.

And he hated it when people were late.

To show up late to a meeting with three Admirals was beyond the pale. It signified a total lack of respect for their rank and position, and a belief that his time was more important than that of three flag officers. It was a sign of irresponsibility that made Washington wonder if Rouse was truly ready for his own command.

Finally, Washington's assistant poked her head through the door. "Admiral, Commander Rouse is here. And... he has a guest... I think you should see them both."

"Very well, bring them in," replied the Admiral.

A moment later, Timothy entered the room, holding hands with Alenis who was by his side,

to the collective gasp of everyone in the room except for Admiral Washington. Tyrlai Zade trailed in behind them trying to be as professional looking as possible.

"Ah, Commander Rouse, you're late," he started. "I don't know what they taught you in the academy, but I'm pretty sure you were taught to show up on time for things, especially when you're talking to three flag officers. And as for your little hologram, I didn't invite it, so I'm not sure why it is here--"

"But--" interrupted Alenis, not sure why Washington was talking about a hologram.

"Excuse me, we'll get to the question of your holo-matrix later," said Washington, glaring at Alenis. "I suppose since we are running late, we can kill two birds with one stone. But until I get to you, be quiet. Now, Commander Rouse," he started, looking over at Tim. "Given your record, and your existing relationship with the Portland's crew, I was considering giving you command of the ship. But, unless you've got a really good reason for being late--"

"Actually--" started Alenis.

"Quiet, I'm not talking to you right now!" Washington looked back up at Tim, doubly angry at both Rouse's tardiness and this unruly hologram. "I'm sure you understand that we can't just give command of a starship to a hologram cobbled together from an outdated EMH and some brain waves. Now, Mr. Rouse--"

Tyrlai looked over at the Captain, very much wishing to ask if that was the Commanders father in law but stifling herself.

The admiral's yeoman walked over beside him and leaned over, whispering in his ear. "Admiral--"

Washington turned towards her, the anger visible on her face. "What is it," he whispered. "This better be important."

The yeoman took a deep breath. "Admiral, the holo-emitters in this section are down for maintenance. They have been all day."

"So? Why do I care about maint--" Washington froze. He narrowed his eyes and stared at Tim, then Alenis, and saw a hint of a smile appear on her face. "But if the holo-emitters are down, that means..."

"It means I'm the real Alenis Meru, commanding officer of the USS Portland," replied Alenis, smugly.

Admiral Anderson cleared his throat and addressed the CO of the Portland sternly. "I have a great deal of paperwork here that says you are deceased, Captain. Including an autopsy report, I can assure you it's going to require a great deal more paperwork to undo what we have so far. Are you sure that is a path you wish to go down?" The Admiral said with only the slightest hint of a smile. "This is your one chance to reconsider."

"I'm quite sure; I much prefer being alive, at least at this present juncture." Alenis paused for a moment and backtracked; she thought she heard something a little out of the ordinary. "Wait, did you say Captain?" she asked, returning the smile. "Did you give me a posthumous promotion? I'm sure that would be even more paperwork to rescind, Admiral."

"I suppose technically..." blubbered the Admiral. He had never dealt with anything approaching this situation before.

"Paperwork aside. How is, Captain that you are alive?" Cresswell asked.

Tyrlai raised her hand from the back. "My fault, sorry. The wormhole-- erm Prophet," she said trying to be more reverent, "being a non linear being had knowledge of events still to unfold. We reached a bargain and the Prophet guarded Alenis' pagh while I arranged the return of the orb of life. Apparently that took some time, like twenty years judging from the appearance of those who helped me, so I had to blow up her casket in order to alert the Prophet as to when to restore her. Non linear perception can make those kind of things hard to spot I expect. Still, all's well that ends well and there were no crimes committed that I am aware of."

Those wormhole aliens or Prophets as they were also known, had never made much sense to Cresswell. "Commander I'm aware of a few crimes that you may have committed here, unlawful use of a dead body, unauthorized contact with a alien race, and a violation of the Temporal Prime Directive, for starters." The Admiral said.

Tyrlai's gaze became focused and she stepped a few paces forward. "The Temporal Prime Directive forbids me from altering past events, so it doesn't apply. Unlawful use of a dead body will be a tricky accusation to prove while she's walking around being alive and all. As for contacting alien races, I'm a member of the Diplomatic corps, it isn't just my right to make such contact, it is in fact my mandate."

Washington shook his head. Just the thought of the sheer amount of paperwork he would have to file in response to this incident was overwhelming. "The Lieutenant is correct. Without a dead body, we don't have any evidence for the first charge. And, not only is Lieutenant Zade a member of the Diplomatic corps, but if she is telling the truth, it was the alien race which contacted us. As for the violation of the Temporal Prime Directive..."

Washington held a hand to his head. He was never much good at temporal mechanics, always finding himself confused by the paradoxes that one invariably ran into when one studied even the simplest temporal mechanics problem. His professor at the academy said it best when she lectured him about thinking in such small, four-dimensional ways. That was decades ago, and he still hadn't improved much. He really didn't have the energy to deal with questions of time travel right now.

"...Captain Alenis, Commander Rouse, Lieutenant Zade, expect a visit from the Department of Temporal Investigations. Again. In the meantime..." Washington stared down at his PADD for a moment and considered his options. "In the meantime, Captain Alenis, I'm returning

you to command of the Portland, pending the results of a full medical examination to prove that you are who you say you are. Commander Rouse, Lieutenant Zade, you will be returning to your duties as Executive Officer and Second Officer respectively. And as for the hologram, since there is the possibility that it is sentient and it can not be removed from the Portland without risking a complete cascade failure, I'm going to leave it in the care of the Portland crew, and assign Lieutenant Kallan to your crew as Chief Operations Officer, so he can study the hologram in more detail. Understood?"

"The hologram..." Alenis still was confused at why Admiral Washington was referring to a hologram. Then it hit her. She glared at her executive officer. "Tim, I thought you promised you would delete that thing..."

Tim looks from Alenis to Washington and just shook his head. All the trouble that small request had given him...

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### *The Conclusion*

Captain's Office, USS Portland  
2391, MD07, late afternoon

**Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Cmdr. Timothy Rouse**

After finally escaping from the battery of tests that Dr. Silverton had performed on her in an effort to firmly establish her identity to the satisfaction of Starfleet Command, Alenis returned to her office, with Tim escorting her.

Tim had so many questions, but now was not the time for those. He just wanted to treasure the company of his close friend and captain again. But, there was one question that he couldn't hold in any longer.

"So, what was it like?" asked Tim as they approached the captain's office.

"What was what like?"

Tim froze for a second outside Alenis' door, dumbfounded at her response. "Meru, you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Alenis rolled her eyes as she strolled through the door of her office. Or at least, she tried to, but the biometric sensors on the door didn't recognize her and the door failed to open. Thanks to her quick reflexes, Alenis managed to stop, her nose barely a millimeter away from impacting the door. "Computer, open door, authorization Alenis Pi Alpha," she called out in an irritated tone.

The computer chirped. "Authorization invalid."

"What do you mean authorization invalid? I'm the..." Sighing, Alenis turned towards Tim. "You disabled my authorization codes?"

"I didn't realize you were coming back," he replied. "Standard operating procedure. And technically, you're still legally dead for another couple days until all the paperwork clears. Computer, override, Rouse Gamma Three."

"Thank you, Tim," said Alenis as the door opened. Stepping inside her office, she made a beeline for her tea kettle. "Tea?" she asked, glancing back at Tim who slowly walked in.

Tim just stood there in amazement. His closest friend had just come back from the dead, and here she was, acting like nothing was out of the ordinary. "I don't know how you can drink tea at a time like this," he said, standing there, flabbergasted at Alenis' seemingly flippant attitude towards her death and resurrection.

"Oh?" countered Alenis, raising an eyebrow as she filled the tea kettle. "I drink tea all the time; why should now be any different?"

"Because you just came back from the dead!" exclaimed Tim, shocked at Alenis' response. "You were dead! Doesn't that bother you?"

"Not really?"

"Not really?! How can you not be bothered by this?"

Alenis took a deep breath as she prepared two cups of Pyrellian ginger tea. "Because I was saved." It was really as simple as that. "Somehow, for some reason, the prophets saw it necessary to bring me back. I don't know how, or why, or what unfinished business they have with me. And maybe these are questions that shouldn't be asked. But the important thing is, by the will of the prophets, and with a little help from you and Tyrlai and the others, I'm here. And right here on the Portland is where I'm meant to be. The lengths that the crew went to in order to bring me back prove this. You and Tyrlai and Jason and this whole crew... you're like a family to me. Even the hologram I told you to delete."

Tim just rolled his eyes at the mention of the hologram. With the report of the Admirals saying that she couldn't be deleted and she couldn't be removed from the Portland without risk of her program collapsing, he was going to have to put up with the hologram for a bit longer. But Meru seemed content, peaceful even, and that was all that mattered. "You still didn't answer my question," he added. "What was it like?"

"Well..." Alenis held a hand up to her chin and thought on it for a moment. "It's difficult to describe in words. But I would say--"

Alenis froze mid-sentence, interrupted by a loud chirping emanating from the corner of her office. "What's with Ko-ko?" she asked, heading over to the bird's aid.

"I don't know," replied Tim stepping a little closer to investigate. "She's been acting strange ever since she laid that egg. Well, stranger than usual." While at first he didn't have much affinity for the bird, Ko-ko's soft, gentle coos had helped him through the difficult days when he had thought he had lost Alenis forever.

“Her egg...” Alenis sat down on her knees in front of the cage and examined it Ko-ko and the egg closely. The mother was nuzzling the egg up beside her to keep it warm, while the egg itself was beginning to crack and jolt as the baby bird struggled to escape.

“Tim, quick, look!” exclaimed Alenis. “Ko-ko is about to become a mother!”

Tim headed over to the cage and sat beside Alenis, watching patiently as the baby bird slowly broke the egg open from the inside. “So, what are you going to name it?” he asked, not taking his eyes off the egg.

“I don’t know,” replied Alenis. “It’s Bajoran tradition to name pets after people close to you; people who you cherish--” Freezing mid-sentence, a wide smile appeared on her face.

“Wha?” asked Tim, confused, before his face turned to a look of dread. “No, you’re not...”

As the baby bird finally broke free from his shell, Ko-ko immediately took him under her wing, keeping him warm. “Commander Rouse,” said Alenis, glancing towards her first officer, “Meet Little Timmy, the newest addition to the Portland family...”

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