

The  
**Inean Debacle**

**The Price of Peace**

By  
**Henry Eaton**

*For*  
*Lori, Samantha, Heather & Matthew*

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## Introduction

### Nebraska, August 2221.

As the sun slowly approached the distant western hills, shadows from endless rows of corn crept across the parched and cracked ground. A slight breeze picked up from the north and rustled the long, stiff leaves of the corn. The breeze promised much needed cooler weather. It was the end of another uneventful Nebraska day.

The sun inched its way toward the horizon while a mechanical whirring sound came from the ground. Muffled at first, it grew stronger while thousands of rusty sprinkler heads pushed through the parched soil. Once the sprinklers protruded through the ground, the whirring stopped and was replaced by gurgling and sputtering as thick rust-red water spit and oozed from them. The sprinklers shook slightly while hissing and popping from their nozzles, purging the stale air and water from the system. The water began to flow stronger and clear after a minute. The cracks in the dry ground filled in quickly with the much needed water. Groundwater pulled from hundreds of feet below was all these plants would see this season. It had not rained in months and probably wouldn't for weeks to come, long after this crop would be picked. The wilted plants responded to the fresh, cool water rather quickly as the leaves began to firm up from the water flowing into the genetically engineered plants. Corn was one of the few plants engineered successfully to survive and grow food in the Great American Desert of the twenty-third century.

Climate changes over the past 200 years forced the jet stream high into western Canada, taking with it every storm that would normally bring rain to this part of the country. It also pulled warm air from Mexico nearly year round, adding to the ecological collapse. While the jet stream rode high in the western part of the continent, it plunged southward over the Great Lakes and traveled eastward over Maryland and out to sea. This pattern varied slightly during the year, but not enough to ease the stressed environment and people.

The primary culprit for the jet stream's behavior turned out to be the collapse of the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream carried warm water from the equator along the eastern seaboard of North America and on towards Europe. With its collapse, North America from Baltimore northward turned frigid. Europe froze and crops failed. Both parts of the two continents plunged into an ice age including Iceland (which recently regained its namesake), and Greenland that no longer was. Even with global temperatures soaring to record highs across the equator and southern oceans, the most densely populated regions of Earth froze. Crops failed and did not produce enough food for the shrinking population of Earth.

Recent years have seen numerous mass animal die offs. Millions upon millions of animals died, ranging from bees, to small rodents, to birds, to larger animals including cows, which have been nearly wiped out from a disease similar to mad cow disease. The die offs have accelerated in recent years and there was no end in sight. Soon it would be humans.

In the distance, the sun, bloated and distorted as it was about to set, seethed and boiled in space. Dark spots visible to the naked eye marred its surface, the result of massive explosions that began over 200 years ago, before the third global war. These explosions belched billions of tons of matter and ionized gases off the sun and towards Earth on a regular basis. No one knew why the pattern changed or how long it would continue, yet everyone on Earth felt the effects as the planet was scorched from each of these blasts.

Named Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs) back in the twentieth century, no one from that era could have imagined the magnitude in which these explosions would blast off the sun. As the decades passed, scientists abandoned the old scale to measure these storms and now longed for the day when all that struck Earth would be an X-class flare which would have been extreme in the twentieth century. These megastorms were striking with more frequency and strength as the sun appeared to be tearing itself apart. Prior to the twenty-first century, the sun would go through cycles every 10 to 11 years, but now it was constant, no reprieve from the danger. Barely a month went by without a government warning of the dangers

of yet another eruption aimed directly at Earth. The current phase of hyper-solar activity created much more heat in Earth's atmosphere from the hot gases and particles striking the upper atmosphere, conjuring up another very warm day for this time of year.

Several CMEs yielded enough power to slightly alter Mercury's much closer orbit to the sun, which was already highly elliptical. This orbit was believed to be elliptical from solar bombardment early in the solar system's existence, long before the sun "settled down." Many scientists had been scared into believing that with the right assault on Mercury, the CMEs could dislodge the planet from its orbit altogether and hurl it towards Earth, destroying both planets in a cosmic game of pinball.

The cloudless sky began to fade to hazy, layered shades of red, pink and orange as the sun finally ducked behind the distant hills. The arching solar flares were still visible above the distant hills as they blasted millions of miles above the sun and looped back towards the surface, an eerie spectacle to say the least.

In the opposite direction just above the eastern horizon and not nearly as far away, a dull gray object floated in Earth orbit. Even from this distance it was easy to recognize it was the new Earth Alliance space station under construction. Nearly 70 years in the planning, it was now in its twenty-second year of construction. The station, shaped like a giant bicycle wheel, connected via wide spokes to a silver and white central column, rotated slowly in space less than half the distance to the moon. It was the most popular design for a space station going back to the twentieth century in fiction. Now it was finally real. The whole complex measured two miles in width and twice that in length. It was easy to make out many details of the mammoth station with basic binoculars, including the large doors on the long vertical column that allowed the new antimatter-powered starships to enter and exit the port. It was designed to protect our planet and fleet from attack if needed. In the end however, it was to be the first step in the most adventurous undertaking in human history: find a new home or find a cure for the dying planet, quickly. The human race's very survival depended on one of those two options. Scientists warned daily that the Earth would become uninhabitable in less than a hundred years if nothing changed. That would leave the already shrinking population of 2½ billion starving people little time to find a solution or perish from the universe, forever.

The new starships were the latest, and many would argue, last hope for the human race. With the advances in technology, humans now had the capability to traverse the great distances between the stars in just a matter of days instead of decades. The new starships had a dual purpose: one was to search for a new home for our race and the other was to protect it from alien invasion. These ships boasted an extensive array of weaponry including antimatter-tipped missiles and nuclear missiles, fighter squadrons and laser cannons that could vaporize a small city in an instant. They were barely enough of a deterrent to hold some alien races at bay, many of which had declared to wipe the human virus from the galaxy the first chance they got.

Unfortunately, the new starships were too large to be built on Earth. They needed to be built in space which was a slow and dangerous process, especially with the current level of solar activity. Consequently, the main shipyard orbited the planet Mars on the small, rocky moon Phobos. It was designed this way to use the moon as protection from the dangerous radiation the sun threw out into space. The facility took 10 years to construct and was located in the large Stickney crater on the end of the potato-shaped moon. The base had been in use only five years and had produced four new ships. The hope was to have a hundred ships in the fleet over the next 50 years, all with the purpose of finding a cure for Earth or a new home for our race. Even with the settling of a half-dozen planets around similar "G-type" stars, many still didn't feel comfortable with that option as none of colonies managed to be self-sufficient. The push continued for finding a way to save Earth.

The first colony had been settled in 2154 on the third planet orbiting Alpha Centauri-A. This colony had been attacked and destroyed by an unknown alien race just eight years later. It took an additional 14 years to reestablish that colony, but life there remained difficult. In the 53 years since, the population had only grown from the original 54 to just 70 people. There was talk of abandoning it because it was becoming too costly to operate with many of the necessities of life still needing to come from Earth.

The next step away from Earth occurred in 2187 with the settlement of Beta Capricorni-2, a bizarre world with three moons that tugged and pulled at the planet creating the most violent weather and geology ever found on a habitable planet. This colony had been settled with over a hundred hearty souls. Only half of them remained today. Most had been wiped out by flash tornadoes that remained difficult to predict.

The most promising planet orbited 55-Virginis over 33 light years away. The Alliance sent ship after ship to the third planet of this system bringing thousands of people to what was being touted as "New-Earth." The uniqueness of this system lies in the fact the fourth planet was inhabited by a space-faring race called the Xannan who were beginning to colonize the other half of the planet at the time of our first colonist's arrival. This led to a brief war with both sides agreeing to share the

planet. The tension still remains between Xannan and the Earth colonists and deadly fights occur on a regular basis. Still, this colony managed to hold its own and start to grow with little help from Earth.

Several other outposts had been established during this period, but most of those had been created as stepping stones on our way outward from Earth. Most of these outposts could never be self-sufficient and needed constant contact and supplies from Earth to survive.

What had led to this undertaking was an unprecedented alliance of all the world's governments. Everyone on Earth understood the implications of failure even though countries fought amongst themselves often. The Alliance held and began to prosper in spite of human greed and human nature, at least for now.

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# 1

**Monday, August 20, 2221.**

The sound of children playing in the distance echoed across the expanse of fields. They ran about the freshly cut corn fields laughing, chasing each other, playing an endless game of tag. They were dressed in old, soiled clothes that needed a good washing. It brought back memories of old black-and-white photographs of how people lived during the Great Depression of the early twentieth century and the greater depression in the mid-twenty-first century, but the children didn't mind, it was all they knew and all they had.

A middle-aged woman sat upon an old, diesel-powered John Deere tractor that chugged its way among the rows of ripe corn. The tractor, for the most part, was so covered in rust that very little of its original green paint remained. Black smoke puffed from its exhaust stack while ears of corn flew through the air into the hopper that followed behind the tractor. The woman guided the tractor between the rows while leaning to peek through the puffs of smoke. This would be a great harvest, the best in years, she thought to herself as she watched the plants disappear beneath the worn-out, struggling tractor. She reached down and leaned on a wooden handle tied to a metal bar, and the tractor shifted gears with a crunch and slowed as she struggled to turn the machine around to start the next run. As she turned the tractor she held her breath as she watched the left front wheel wobble on its shaft. The bearings that held the wheel onto the shaft had disintegrated over the years and what held the wheel on now was just weight of the ancient iron machine. She prayed for the wheel to stay on long enough to finish the job. Deep down she knew it probably would not.

The wheel wobbled and wobbled as she gingerly guided the tractor around for her next pass. She could not hear the metal grinding because the tractor was so loud, but in her mind she did. She could feel the metal grinding from the wheel's hub as it chewed into the dry, rusted shaft. She straightened the wheel and shifted gears again. The tractor picked up speed and she began her next run. She pulled the throttle back and the engine belched a dense cloud of black smoke as it picked up more speed. She let out a sigh of relief and sat back in the metal seat attached to a very simple rusted spring. She considered

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having the tractor repaired at the end of the season, if they made enough money.

Farmers historically had the toughest time earning a living. It was worse now in the early half of the twenty-third century as the climate of Earth continued to change. Crop failure was the norm and a successful crop came with a high price. Scientists remained confused by the events of the past two centuries and had no idea how to stop or reverse the damage. Temperatures soared to record highs during every month of the year. Droughts lasted for years and were more severe between climate cycles. At least for this season, things seemed good.

A middle-aged man walked past the farmhouse that hadn't seen fresh paint in over 20 years. Some of the windows had been plugged with scraps of wood. The roof was in need of repair as several of the asphalt shingles had long since blown away. The wooden clapboards had been sandblasted bare from the many violent windstorms. The woman had done her best to maintain the farm with what little she had to work with.

He walked toward the field amid a few straggling strands of grass as a military transport craft lifted off the ground in a cloud of dust behind him and headed away quickly. He was in a full navy uniform as he moved with a slight limp. The woman saw him out of the corner of her eye and stopped the tractor's engine with a bang as loud as a gunshot. She jumped off as it rolled to a stop and ran to him, nearly knocking him over as he dropped his bags to hug her. The children heard the bang and saw their mother bolt from the tractor, and they froze in their tracks as they watched her run. They were concerned for a moment and then they saw their father walking towards them. They instantly took off in his direction squealing and yelling with joy.

Their father was home from the navy for good. They hadn't seen much of him the past few years as the country was continually on alert from threats from other nations as well as from the sky now. It was good to see him walking up the path, taking an early retirement to be with his family. Deep down he knew this would be the last generation to inhabit Earth. He didn't know why he felt so strongly about it though, but the desire to be with his family got the better of him.

The whole family greeted and hugged him and walked back to the farmhouse. They all listened to the stories of his latest missions on a North American submarine. One of his children, Tamora, listened intently and daydreamed that one day she would be a part of the excitement. However, for her the goal was space. All she wanted to play with her brother and sister was

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space rangers and even though she was the middle child, she took control of the game every time they played.

After the children had consumed an entire platter of cookies and a giant glass of synthetic milk each, they went back to playing space rangers which was the latest halo-video program to hit the airwaves. As usual, Tamora, who was barely nine years old, ran around pretending she was the woman captain of the spaceship. She had long wavy blond hair that floated around her as she ran. She was unusually tall for her age, standing almost as tall as her older sister. She giggled as her younger brother tackled her to the ground pretending to shoot her with a fake laser made from a few sticks and string.

He jumped up and ran off hoping she would follow and get him next. She rolled to her feet and began to run. Suddenly, she was knocked back to the ground with a thud by a blinding flash of light. She was on her back in the dirt and too petrified to scream. She was engulfed in the light and could see nothing else. An image appeared in the disturbance of an older woman that looked like her in a strange, yet familiar, uniform. She recognized the bars on her collar as being military, similar to the navy bars her father wore. The uniform resembled a navy officer's uniform with its white shirt beneath a dark blue jacket and black trousers. Tamora studied the symbols on the uniform and they were not navy. Because of her father, she had studied all different types of uniforms, and these were some she had never seen before. The symbol on the collar was of ship streaking away from a planet. The awards normally pinned over the left breast meant nothing to her except she knew they meant the woman had achieved many goals, judging by the number of them.

There was a medium-built man with crew cut brown hair there and she determined he was a captain by the four gold bars on his shoulders. His was not a navy uniform either. It wasn't any uniform she had seen before. They were not on Earth either, because this place was blindingly bright and seemed very hot by the way the people were squinting and perspiring. Hideous creatures surrounded them that scared her. Their skin was scaly and cracked with grayish-green color. They looked reptilian with stubby rough horns protruding from their heads that made her think of the devil, especially when they spoke. The obvious hiss to their already deep voices was accented by a snap of their forked tongue. Definitely demons, she thought. The creatures eclipsed the people by nearly a foot in height and at least that much in width. Their arms were as thick as human legs and surpassed them in strength. One thing was glaringly obvious: they hated the man and woman. Tamora knew the woman was in trouble or about to die. She watched as one of the aliens grasped the woman by her throat and held her against a glass wall. The alien

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then tossed her aside with ease like unwanted litter. She watched as the woman smashed into the wall and slid to the floor. Probably dead, she thought, and the urge to cry came over her. She had never seen anyone brutalized like that before. She had been sheltered from much of society by her parents. She knew this was real and her body began to tremble from fear.

The scene abruptly changed and she saw the same people on a strange-looking ship, that was being ripped apart by strange spaceships she had never seen before, not even in the movies. Sparks flew from smoking control panels and people were tossed about as the ship rocked from side to side by the assault of alien lasers. Suddenly, the blinding light and visions disappeared. She was back laying in the dirt on their farm in Nebraska. She stood up on trembling legs, heart pounding, and she could not catch her breath. She turned and bolted for the farmhouse screaming. Her mother flew from the front door and down the porch steps and caught her running. She hugged her mother and cried on her shoulder.

Her father ran from the door with a shotgun in his hands. He checked the chambers and snapped the barrels down. Without looking up, he cocked the hammers back and stopped. He scanned the area looking for an animal, something, or someone who may have frightened or hurt his child. He had been watching the local news and there had been reports of wolves: starving, mangy, diseased wolves in the area attacking anything that moves. He saw nothing.

“What happened, Tamora?” her mother asked as her brother and sister came running from opposite directions wondering what had happened.

“I saw people being hurt on a spaceship. I think they are dead,” she said, trembling, glancing at her father who knelt beside her. He continued holding the double-barreled shotgun in one hand.

“Oh, it is just your imagination running wild, Sweetie. Come, help me with the dinner,” her mother stated with a glance to her husband.

“No, I saw them; there were these huge aliens hurting them!” she cried.

“Okay, lets go inside where it is safe.” Her mother put her arm around her and off they went to the house. The others followed. It was no fun playing space rangers without Tamora.

A few days had gone by, and the visions she had were replaced by playing in the corn fields once again. She was laughing and having fun when she was suddenly engulfed in another flash of light that threw her to the ground. This time she saw the same woman and man walking through a desert city. They were not in uniform. The street was lined with bright colorful buildings no

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more than two stories high. Trees that looked like palm trees lined the streets and alleyways. Every building was surrounded by flower beds that were tended by many people. There were large open spaces where people walked about talking and smiling. Much like parks in an Earth city except on Earth there would be a mugging or rape and no one would be smiling. The parks had many stone statues of people in robes with some sort of plant wrapped around their heads. She had seen pictures of Roman statues that looked like these. These statues looked worn as well, probably from many hundreds or thousands of years of weathering, and some still had a working water fountain. She looked up and the sky was crystal clear and blue, a darker blue than she had ever seen and not a cloud to be found. People just like her walked about the city and they were content and happy. Something not found anymore on Earth. A peacefulness not heard of in hundreds of years. Everyone in her vision wore sheer, silky white robes that tied around the waist with a simple rope or sash and sandals. She noticed many of the women wore a ring of flowers in their hair like a head band. She thought this was odd, no one dressed like this on Earth. Besides, the robes did little to hide what was beneath and it embarrassed her to see people like this. Still, she couldn't turn away. The odd thing was they didn't care or seem to notice how much the robes revealed. Walk around like that on Earth and you would find yourself in jail or beaten by an angry crowd or even killed. Seeing someone like that on Earth was relegated to strip clubs and sex bars. It was okay on Earth as long as there was money to be made, that much the young Tamora already knew from her mother's days in the pulpit.

Tamora remembered her previous vision of what she thought was Hell, and now she thought she was seeing Heaven. The bliss of this vision didn't last long and was replaced by another scene. Now the city was burning. Smoke billowed from several buildings and bodies were scattered about in pools of blood, others smoldered from being burned, and others, well there were others in her vision that ended up in pieces. She tried to scream at the sight, but all she managed was a squeak. People ran screaming, not knowing what they should be doing except being easy targets for the bright pink laser pulses coming from the sky. She began to cry, and still she could not move. She couldn't even close her eyes. It was like she was being forced to watch the massacre for some sick reason. She tried to cry out, and couldn't. The image flashed before her again. This time the same woman and man from her first vision stood on a platform, a warm breeze blowing their hair. The woman wore the ugliest patchwork robe, it looked as though it had been put together from scraps. She laughed at how ugly it was and then she noticed that her arm was in a sling and the woman's eyes had been blacked by a punch she guessed, probably by those hideous aliens. The woman's long blond hair was blowing

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in the breeze while she bent over slightly to receive a flowered ring for her head. It looked like the couple was getting married. The scene was quickly replaced by the same scary, hideous-looking devil aliens from the vision she had had a few days before. She couldn't believe how big they were; they resembled Neanderthals with sunken eyes and heavy, protruding brows. Something she didn't notice before: Their bodies were covered in a leatherlike garment that was gray with blotches of a lighter color randomly placed. Physically speaking, they closely resembled humans with two arms, two legs, two eyes and so on. They tossed the woman around harshly. Tamora knew she was being hurt. These aliens were much bigger than the woman, who was fairly tall as well. However, they tossed her around with ease. She tried to fight back. It was useless. She was too small and too weak to resist them. Tamora tried to scream again. Nothing came out as the aliens pinned the woman down onto a large sofa in a room with many books on one wall and large jars on another wall. They choked her until her arms went limp and she stopped kicking. The aliens slowly released their hold on her until they walked away. Tamora couldn't move and that frightened her. It was like she had been paralyzed. The last image was of the same man and woman and another couple on a frozen planet. She watched as the same woman stumbled through waist-deep snow, she was yelling something. The young Tamora could not make out what she was saying. All during this time she realized there had been no sound, just a visual. Then the woman stumbled and fell, and turned. Tamora followed her eyes to a frozen parka, the woman rolled it over and it was the man, the captain, frozen. Then the light was gone with a whoosh. She ran back to the house screaming once again.

Another week passed and Tamora was anxiously waiting for the school transport to pick her up for the first day of school. Her brother and sister waited as well as her mother. She was giggling and laughing even though she was nervous about the first day. As the transport rounded the corner and headed their way, there was a flash of light and once again Tamora was shown scenes from the future- her future. She was sitting in the captain's chair of a spaceship that was being attacked. People around her scrambled about while flames erupted from several of the consoles around her. She could see the woman, herself, in the future barking orders while red lights flashed from control panels from what she believed to be the bridge of the ship. Then her eyes were enticed to the main screen at the front of the bridge. In it was the East Coast of North America. She watched as bright flashes replaced cities: Washington, DC; Boston; New York; Chicago. Then she realized the problem: she couldn't stop it from happening. She was in command of a starship, but

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was powerless in preventing the destruction. All she could do was watch while her own ship was wrecked. In the distance, she saw a spaceship like none other coming towards hers, and then it exploded without being hit by anything. A piece of it flew by on her screen and the Alliance flag painted on the charred chunk of hull. She was horrified once again at what she was seeing, only this time her mother saw it, too. Her brother and sister, having been knocked to the ground, struggled to their feet to see their sister and mother engulfed in a ball of light. They ran off to the house yelling for their father. Her mother was shown all of the other images as well and she knew her daughter would play a major roll in the future of the world. Unfortunately, not a very bright future as it was shown to them.

The visions ended and the pilot opened the doors. He gave them an odd look. Her mother stood there and she was as white as a ghost. Tamora was scared. She clung to her mother and refused to get on the bus. After several minutes, her father came from the house and looked at his wife. Tamora saw her father and knew if she were to be as tough as him someday, then she would have to be tough now and get on the bus. She took a deep breath and released her mother and slowly made her way to the door with her brother and sister close by. She stepped in and made her way to a seat.

Her brother and sister looked at her and wondered what had just happened. They didn't see anything more than the brief flash of light, however they knew something did happen by their mother's expression. The bus lifted up off the ground raising a cloud of dust and flew off to the next home which was miles away. Tamora sat clutching her hands together nervously and stared out the window until her parents faded out of sight.

Her mother grabbed her father's hand and walked with him towards the house and told him everything she saw and now she understood what scared her daughter so much. He had a hard time accepting what his wife was saying. It sounded too far-fetched. Besides, a few planets had been colonized already and nothing like what she described had happened. Beings like she described had never been encountered. He said he believed her, deep down he didn't.

Her mother had been the minister of the local church. Not a very well-attended church; in the twenty-third century, not many were. Some weeks it was just her family that attended. Other weeks, especially around Easter and Christmas, there may be as many as a dozen people. That was all. Most people didn't believe anymore and didn't raise their families to believe either. Many people grew up without ever knowing religion. Tamora's mother did instill the strong belief in her daughter and the visions may be proving it now. Her

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mother also told her to keep it quiet because a movement sponsored by the global government was slowly, and methodically, making life difficult for those who still believed. A few years ago they had been forced by a newly formed government agency to remove the steeple and take down the cross that stood on the front lawn or face heavy government fines. The representatives of the government went about and smashed all the stained glass forcing the Bensons to board up the windows. They had been ordered to remove all outside religious symbols and lastly, they were forbidden to talk about God outside the church. Mrs. Benson knew it was only a matter of time before they would be forced to close altogether.

# 2

### **Thursday, September 17, 2246: Twenty-five years later.**

High above Earth, the nerve center of the Alliance floated against a backdrop of stars, galaxies and nebulae. The space dock was home to over 10,000 beings from more than a dozen star systems, most of which came from Earth. It was the focal point of all traffic going to and from Earth. The space port had changed since it was built 25 years earlier to include a large saucer much like two inverted pie pans put together with two large doors that allowed the enormous third generation starships to enter and exit the port. Along the outside of the saucer was a large narrow ring used for ships to dock and undock quickly from the port. Many ships did just that constantly to the outer ring throughout the day. Under the saucer was the tall cylinder that connected the saucer to a spherical power center at the bottom. The cylinder contained the living quarters for all the permanent residents as well as visitors. The very bottom of the station housed the main tactical systems for the entire quadrant. The power plant between the cylinder and the tactical section was a highly shielded fusion nuclear plant. The Alliance still used the old-style reactors because of the tremendous amount of power created, and by this time nuclear power was extremely safe and efficient for large “off Earth” complexes. Gone from the structure was the thin wheel the center had originally been built with. It had been outgrown quickly and the newer, larger ships could not be housed in the smaller docking port any longer.

At the bottom of the spaceport, several long antennas protruded for nearly another mile. These allowed the Alliance to remain in constant contact with various planets around the quadrant. The port rotated around a vertical axis that provided most of its gravity. The space dock was large enough to house over 10 full-sized starships and a variety of smaller ships. From Earth, the space dock appeared brighter than the moon. The space dock was also the last line of defense in protecting Earth from a space-bound invader making security a harsh reality for the first-time visitor. Several fighter squadrons called it home year round, and the fighters could be seen buzzing around the spaceport like bees around a disturbed hive. The spaceport was also heavily shielded and boasted the most powerful laser cannons known. A single shot from one of these cannons could tear a ship to bits instantly. A minimum of six, short-range, heavily armored battleships patrolled the perimeter around the

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port and Earth keeping a watchful eye on every ship coming and going.

Inside the space dock, a lone starship, the U.A.S. *Saratoga* was docked at the central docking hub. The *Saratoga* was being readied quickly for another grueling mission back to a planet called Inea-four.

On the observation deck, the captain of the *Saratoga*, Shawn Hackett, stood with his arms folded in front of him while looking out through the 20-foot-high glass windows towards the *Saratoga*. His ship was directly in front of him. His ship! It still had not sunk in yet even though he had been the captain for six months. At 35, he was the youngest person to ever command a starship. Many people thought he was too young to be in command and sometimes he agreed. Still, he stood, staring in awe over what he was trusted to command.

Shawn Hackett was in his tenth year as a starship officer. He began his career as a lieutenant on the U.A.S. *Hawkings* and established himself as a hands-on leader. He took charge of several missions while on the *Hawkings* and managed to win the approval of Admiral Hodges.

His next assignment came just a few years later as he moved up in rank to lieutenant commander. He accepted a transfer to the U.A.S. *John Glenn*, which at the time was the ship assigned to the most daring and difficult missions on the outer reaches of the Alliance territory. Having learned how to live on the edge, Hackett was quickly promoted by Admiral Hodges to the first officer of the *John Glenn* when the position became available. There he stayed until the captain of the *Saratoga* mysteriously died in his sleep several months ago while the ship was in port. Many people, including Hodges, suspected foul play. The previous captain was extremely outspoken in his dislike for the current President of the North American Union (a merging of the former United States, most of Canada and half of Mexico). He frequently accused the President of siding with a race called the Ineans in their quest to take over Earth. Now he was dead and he wasn't the first nor would he be the last to mysteriously die.

The *Saratoga* was the oldest ship in the fleet. It was also considered one of the toughest. It was a modified generation-II ship and was scheduled to be decommissioned after this next mission. The newer ships were so far advanced that it made the *Saratoga* a museum display after only 10 years of service. Hackett had wondered to himself if he would get another command when the ship was decommissioned. He heard rumblings from above recently that he was reckless with no regard for following procedures when it wasn't convenient. Some of this was true. It was his training from the *John Glenn* that

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led to this attitude. Because the time it took to communicate with Earth was prohibitive, people needed to take charge and sometimes bend the rules slightly. It was that attitude that won him the job, it would be that attitude that would lose it for him.

For now however, “his” ship was in port for supplies, fuel and some new personnel. He hadn’t received their new orders yet, and he wondered why so many supplies were being loaded in the ship. Crate after crate of supplies was being transported up to the central column that connected the quantum drive section to the main part of the ship where the crew lived. Several transports had been docked to the underside of the craft unloading their cargo. Hackett knew by watching that this was not going to be any local mission. It would be a mission to the far reaches of the Alliance’s territory. He wished he knew where.

He was also concerned that the repairs from the last mission had not been completed and they were being hurried out of port. He hoped it would not involve a fight. Deep down, he knew better.

The *Saratoga* was an original Colombia-class ship that was a second generation starship that had been retrofitted three years before. The ship was comprised of five major components.

The first part or forward section housed the bulk of the living space for the crew of 300. It also contained the forward torpedo rooms mounted at the bottom of the wedge-shaped part of the ship. It contained the bridge, multi-directional laser cannons and the secondary power energizer, which provided power to the forward half of the ship and weapons. Beginning in this part of the ship was the particle accelerator which shot particles of ordinary matter at nearly the speed of light into a matter/antimatter chamber at the rear of the ship that produced the power for the main engines.

Next, the middle of the ship was designed as a long, wide column that connected the front of the ship to the drive module. This column acted as a shield to protect the crew from exposure from the quantum drive. The space wasn’t wasted, however. The column acted as the main cargo hold for the ship’s supplies. It also contained the bulk of the primary particle accelerator.

Third, the rear of the ship was the most complex and busiest place of a starship. The under-side of the drive section housed the main landing bay with its opening facing the rear. The landing bay held all the transports on the *Saratoga*, and in times of war a modest contingent of fighters could be launched from here as well. Just above the landing bay, three large round thruster ports configured as a triangle protruded from the body of the craft. The thrusters derived their power from the waste energy produced by the

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matter/antimatter reaction from the quantum drive.

Since the early part of the twentieth century, people have known that the efficiency of antimatter for a propellant was not to be rivaled. It did take another 200 years before they could produce and contain enough to make long distance space flight practical. The antimatter was based on plutonium. It replaced anti-hydrogen as a propellant that had been used for nearly a hundred years.

Fourth, because of the highly explosive nature of plutonium and anti-plutonium, the design of Alliance ships kept the propellant away from the engines and in the field generator nacelles on either side of the drive section. The field generators produced a magnetic field strong enough to contain the antimatter and keep it from contacting normal matter. The nacelles also produced the necessary energy fields that made the quantum star drive a reality. The quantum drive was housed in the middle of the drive section just above the main hangar. It produced enormous amounts of power from the combining of the anti-plutonium and normal plutonium. The power from the quantum drive fed into the field coils housed in each of the nacelles producing an energy beam that shot from the front of the nacelles to a focal point in front of the ship. The beams tore open normal space producing a wormhole that allowed the ship to travel between the stars in days instead of decades.

The entire ship measured more than sixteen hundred feet in length and five hundred feet wide. It was only a hundred feet high and the forward part was shaped somewhat like a rounded wedge with a bump at the top that housed the bridge and some of the forward lasers.

The *Saratoga* was capable of sustaining speeds of quantum 6.3 which was equal to 4.2 light years traveled per day for long periods of travel and could burst up to 7.0 when needed. At these speeds, Alpha Centauri was just over 24 hours from Earth.

The *Saratoga* displayed numerous battle scars. The hull was burned in many areas and some spots had burned completely through and needed to be repaired with new hull panels whose color didn't quite match. Thousands of dents covered the ship as well as 10 years worth of pitting due to collisions with microscopic space debris. To the casual observer, the ship looked like a salvaged wreck, but to the crew it was still a very versatile and potent spacecraft that wasn't to be messed with. Its latest retrofit beefed up its energizers and added more forward weapons as well as larger torpedo launchers. While it was the oldest ship in the fleet, it was more than able to hold its own in a fight, which lately was often.

Much of the previously mentioned damage came from the last mission to

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Inea. While on the mission to stop the slave trading of humans, the *Saratoga* encountered several Inean battleships. The *Saratoga* managed, to barely get away from the fierce Ineans.

The Ineans are the beings envisioned by the young Tamora. No one knew about them except for Tamora and her mother until eight years ago when they attacked and destroyed two Earth outposts. The first was HD156384, the farthest from Earth at 24 light years away. Ceta HD was a newly established colony on the fourth planet of its system. Very similar to Earth's system in many ways, it was the hope that it could insure Earth's human race's survival when Earth no longer could.

The second was much closer to home. One of the first Earth colonies settled outside of the local group, 3A-55i-Virginis was a mere 33 light years from Earth. This was a much different system in that the only habitable moon circled a gas giant bigger than Jupiter, which in turn orbited its parent star. The colony at the time was home to nearly five thousand people. Now none remained. The moon's atmosphere was poisoned from the Inean attack and a perfectly good moon was rendered useless to everyone.

A flimsy truce had been signed quickly, however the Ineans still had sights on Earth. They viewed the expansion of humans in the sector as a virus that needed to be wiped out until the Ineans discovered that humans resembled the Ardons, perfectly. The Ardons were a race that nearly brought the Ineans to extinction a thousand years before. Now their focus had changed. Their goal was still conquest of Earth, but they needed to enslave the humans to keep their precious commodity from going extinct. By now, human slaves were fetching a high price on the galactic black market and the proceeds funded the expanding intergalactic war the Ineans were fighting with the Kosuan. That war was the only reason Earth still existed. Without that war, the Ineans and the Kosuan would be leveling the Earth and wiping out the human race. It was in Earth's best interest to make sure that the war never ended.

Back on the observation deck, Captain Hackett continued to observe the activity through the windows while a faint, unmistakable reflection of Admiral Hodges grew in the glass and stopped beside Hackett. "Captain Hackett?"

Hackett turned and saluted the slightly overweight Admiral. "Yes, sir," he said firmly as he remained at attention. Hackett noticed the beginnings of a white beard on the Admiral. He also noted his hair was becoming white quickly. No doubt the pressure of keeping the peace and preserving the human race was taking its toll. Hackett noticed the stress in the man's face, or was it fear?

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“At ease,” Admiral Hodges stated. “I have your orders.” Hodges pulled an envelope from his jacket pocket and handed it to Hackett. He took the envelope and opened it and began to read.

He looked up at the Admiral in disbelief, hoping it was a bad joke. “A diplomatic mission to Inea? That’s impossible, Admiral! Unless you’re sending the entire fleet, I don’t see any reason to go back to that hell-hole! They are the most vile animals!” He exclaimed hoping not to go back to that place anytime soon.

Hodges turned toward him and glanced around to make sure no one was listening. “Captain, the head of the fleet is concerned that you are not stable. This is a test to see if you are ready to resume your command. Between you and me, they are watching everything, Captain.” the two-star admiral said as he closed in to lower his voice.

“Admiral, this is suicide!” Hackett fumed.

“Captain, you and your crew have the most experience dealing with them. There is no other crew we can send,” Hodges said calmly.

“Admiral, our last mission was failure. For some strange reason we made it out alive. I still can’t explain how,” Hackett pleaded.

Hodges displayed a brief moment of anger and then replied, “The decision is final! You are the best we have for this mission.”

Hackett knew there was no arguing with Hodges and let it go, for now. “I understand, sir. We can complete this mission and I will keep the previous experience under control, sir,” Hackett replied with military firmness.

“I know you can, Captain. However, the first sign of trouble and there are people in place that will take over the mission. You are taking Ambassador Wilcox and Ambassador Channing to Inea to finalize a peace agreement with those “vile animals” and secure the technology they claim will help us cool the Earth down. Please do not get into a shootout with the Ineans, Captain. It will make matters worse. Also, the head of the fleet is going to be an honored guest at the Angowain celebration of holy month on their planet right after you wrap up the peace agreement. Your presence on Inea will be closely watched by the Angowains and any trouble could affect the vice admiral’s trip. So be careful.”

“I understand, Admiral,” Hackett said, nodding that he understood the orders. “You wouldn’t happen to be able to share with me who I need to watch out for on my own ship?”

“No, I can’t. The vice admiral is involved with that. I would assume that they would be new to the ship as of today, however you can’t rule out anyone.

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My guess would be a handful. You are smart enough to know who they are right away. Besides, the vice admiral's reach extends deep into all Alliance affairs and none of them can be trusted," Hodges replied.

"Thank you, Admiral. It's time for me to get on board and check on progress. It looks like the ship is almost ready." Hackett knew it was time to get away from Hodges before the snoops got suspicious. For all he knew there might be a hidden microphone nearby.

Hodges was on Vice Admiral Maxwell Griffin's "watch" list, and everywhere he went he was monitored. He had also received death threats recently, and he knew it would only get worse before it got better.

Hodges was frequently outspoken in his displeasure with many of the vice admiral's dealings and decisions. This drew much scorn from his peers who as military people knew the rules about questioning orders from a superior officer. This also made Hackett a target as well. He, like Hodges, did not support Griffin and more privately questioned many of his decisions. Hackett found himself defending Hodges to other captains who provided the vice admiral with ample criticism of Hackett.

Hodges stared out the window beside Hackett. "Tough old ship," he said with a grin.

"Old?" Hackett exclaimed.

Hodges laughed and patted Hackett on the shoulder. "You'll be fine." They saluted each other. Hodges turned to walk away, stopped and turned back. "Captain?"

"Sir?" Hackett replied, turning back to the Admiral.

"The Angowains will have a delegation there as well as the Kosuan. You will have your hands full on this mission," Hodges added.

"Understood, sir. Nothing like an easy mission to make us soft," Hackett said with a nervous laugh.

An easy mission it would not be. The Ineans and Kosuan were locked in a fierce and nasty war that was devastating many planets in their region. Many feared it would soon spill over to include the Angowains and the Alliance. Hackett's underlying job was to make sure that didn't happen. He knew deep down that it was impossible. It was not a secret the Ineans had desires for Earth. They had publicly stated it. He knew the Alliance would have to fight them at some point in spite of the appeasements by the Global Council. He just didn't want to be the one to start the war. The war the Alliance could not win. A war the Alliance could not avoid.

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Hodges continued to walk towards the elevators in the central column. Hackett watched the admiral fade away and said to himself, *I can't let him down. He put a lot on the line for me and I need do to this perfectly to prove him right.* As Hodges was about to enter the elevator, a woman stepped out and spoke briefly with him. She was a tall, thin, blond-haired woman. Hackett's first thought was that she was a courier. Then the doors closed after Hodges entered the elevator and she started walking towards Hackett. He glanced at her for a moment as she approached and turned his gaze back out the window toward the *Saratoga*.

She approached with a confident gait and came up beside him and saluted. Hackett returned her salute and faced her. "Lieutenant Commander Tamora Benson reporting for duty, Captain," she snapped with a firmness of a well-trained officer.

"At ease, Lieutenant Commander," Hackett replied with no emotion as he looked at her briefly.

She remained at attention. "Here are my transfer papers, sir."

Hackett had to look up slightly to meet her light blue eyes. *Damn, she's tall,* he thought, but too skinny to be the kind of officer for a mission like this. Most races they came across would snap her in half instantly, especially the Ineans. The Ineans would also do far worse before killing her. Hackett was average in height at about 5 feet 10 inches and this woman had him beat by an inch at least. Her long blond hair was pulled back and braided into a single pony tail that hung past her shoulders. She was slim, too slim he thought, and looked young for her reported age. He quickly noticed she wore a U.A.S. *Saratoga* cap already. Standard fleet issue, she wasn't officially a member of the crew yet, but she had already been issued one. He wasn't sure why this bothered him, but it did. He also found her to be very attractive. He instantly decided she was the one to watch.

Hackett looked at her for a moment and opened her folder. He flipped through some pages and stopped at a few key points. "Lieutenant Commander, you have piloting skills, tactical skills and quite an impressive resume, including high marks for self defense, and high scores for hand-to-hand combat."

Hackett flipped through her file some more. Then he looked up. "Miss Benson, don't take this the wrong way. When I look at you, I don't see what this folder says. This is correct? I've only been the captain of this ship for six months and we already have a reputation for taking on the missions no one else wants. The one we are going on beginning today has a high potential of failure including the fact we may not come out of it alive." She went to speak

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until Hackett held up his hand to stop her. He needed to make it clear with this woman because he was concerned she wasn't ready for such missions yet and he continued. "Why in the world would you want to transfer to our ship? It's older than what you are used to." Hackett stopped to allow her to answer.

"Captain, if I may speak, sir?" she asked. Hackett nodded yes. "I know what I look like, I know what people think, and I know many people feel that this is a dumb move to make, but let me tell you what I am made of." She waited for Hackett to give her permission and he did so by nodding. "As far as my looks go, I don't consider myself any different from anybody else. I don't "cry" at the slightest bump or bruise and my nails are short so I won't be fussing over breaking any of those either. I have worked hard to get where I am today and, quite frankly, I am bored with the missions I have been on. I long to be on the edge. I want action and adventure. I want to be in the thick of history as it's being made. If I die up there doing those things then fine, so be it. I have no desire sitting behind a pretty console out of harm's way, that is pathetic." She was quite firm and voiced her opinion well.

Hackett looked at her for a moment. He liked this woman. She was tough and spoke her mind. She wasn't going to be a pushover after all and she knew what she wanted. He did pick up on her constant usage of "I." It bugged him and he knew she was career minded. The first thing that came to his mind was a lecture by his first captain stating there was no "I" in team. The team concept stuck with him and he knew he would have to instill it in her. "Miss Benson, you won't have any problems on this ship. Just remember one thing, this is a team you are joining. That is all." With that he signed her transfer orders and saluted his new officer. "Welcome aboard, Lieutenant Commander."

She saluted back and picked up her duffel bag. "Sir, may I go stow my gear and get acquainted with the ship and crew?" she asked.

"Yes, please do, and I want you to pilot us out of space dock. We haven't received a new navigator yet and we are short-handed there. So I want you on the bridge for departure," Hackett replied and went back to looking out the window as his voice trailed off.

His thoughts were quickly replaced by the horrible memory of their previous navigator. Another woman, slightly older than Benson and as attractive. She was built tougher and trained constantly. That toughness and training didn't help her though, as the Inean soldiers that guided them from the meeting to their transport quickly overpowered Hackett and his crew and ripped the woman away. They dragged her into a crowd while Hackett struggled to his feet. He was being blocked by other Inean males and could not help her. The woman was quickly subdued by the soldiers beating her. The last

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thing he remembered before he was knocked unconscious was her screaming as he saw the top of her uniform flying over his head. He knew what they did to her and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. The thing that concerned him was they never recovered the body. She was most likely dead by now, probably that very day, but something told him otherwise. It would have been better if she had died then. A life as an Inean slave was a horrifying prospect. There was no proof of either case and it ate away at Hackett.

Benson turned towards the window and stared out as well towards the activity surrounding the *Saratoga*. Then she looked at Hackett and said, "Will do, sir." She turned and walked towards the escalator that would bring her to the long glass walkway and to the ship. Hackett watched her walk away. He thought to himself that she sounded like quite a woman and wondered for a second if it was possible? Then he remembered fleet rules about fraternization and there was no way they could get involved. The fleet had strict rules on dating which was consistent with many branches of the military. He flipped open her folder again and looked at the comments pages from each of her previous captains. Neither had written anything regarding her personal life in respect to dating. A look at her academy days revealed that she dated a fellow cadet early on, but nothing since. Hackett came to the conclusion that she was career-minded only and had no need for anyone in her life. *Too bad*, he thought to himself. For the first time in a long time he had an interest in a woman and she was hands off. He shrugged and went back to watching the activity around his ship. He thought back to Sasha sitting at the nav-con joking with Carol Davies, the ship's helmsman. Many on the ship looked forward to her pranks and off-color jokes. He recalled how she lit up the bridge with that devilish grin. He resolved that very moment that no woman was going down to that planet on this mission. That would eliminate the gruesome fate Sasha Young could not escape.

Benson walked towards the escalator and looked back over her shoulder towards Hackett. He seemed familiar for some reason. She knew him. She wasn't sure from where though. He was looking out the windows again at his ship. Benson was attracted to him the same way he was to her, however she also remembered the fleet's rules. She watched him for a minute and realized he was married, married to that ship. She saw it in his eyes. That ship meant everything right now to him. She shook her head and continued walking. For the first time since Cadet Harrison in the academy, she had an interest in someone. Sadness overwhelmed her for a moment as she thought back to Harrison. Just a week before their wedding, the base commander had knocked on the door of her dorm room at Annapolis. She knew as soon as she opened the door why he was there. She remembered it like it was yesterday, the pain

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of that day still fresh. The commander handed her an envelope that she opened with shaky hands. In it she read the letter from the fleet how Harrison died that morning on a training mission. No other details, those would come later. She crumpled the paper into a tight ball and threw it at the commander. He pulled her to him and she broke down and cried on his shoulder.

She glanced back at Hackett as she was about to step on the escalator. There was something familiar about him. Something that was luring her in and deep down she was tempted to explore that urge that had been absent for nearly ten years. Unfortunately, she knew she couldn't even attempt it. She was being watched like a hawk and was expected to fail because of her looks. To get involved with a captain while under his command would mean certain court marshal and she'd be kicked out of the fleet.

She made it to the long, glass-covered tube that would bring her to the *Saratoga*. She stopped and looked around at all the people scurrying about their various tasks. She stepped into the tube and onto a magnetic-levitation floating platform about four feet in length. She dropped her duffel bag at her feet and grasped the handlebars on either side of her. The front and back were open so passengers could walk on and off. She held on and squeezed the button on the left handlebar and the small cart zipped off toward the ship several hundred feet down the tube. She held the control right up until the end. The platform had sensors on it that told it when it was closing in on another object and it slowed automatically and stopped against the platform in front of it. She released the handle and the brake applied. She stepped forward onto the next one and so on until she made it to the hatch. A total of five platforms had stacked up at the opening.

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Benson paused and studied the hull around the hatch. The armor plating was thick beneath the gel coating used to collect microscopic particles before they sandblasted the hull. The hatch itself was thick and plated. It was a rugged ship in spite of its age. A moment later, she ducked through the main hatch and paused. She studied the activity before her: crew members hurrying about to make the ship ready to leave port, technicians scrambling to get their tasks completed and get off the ship. She marveled at how crowded the ship was. She walked towards the center of the ship, turned a corner, proceeded down a corridor and immediately she was lost. She had never been on a Class II starship before. The newer ships had maps and touch pads along the walls that provided guidance. The codes above each hatch didn't make sense to her either, although she vaguely remembered them from the academy. Unfortunately, none of the ships she had served on used the obsolete codes. The newer ships had dropped the naval codes for deck, compartment, and relative position to the center line of the ship. However, this ship still used them. *This ship is old*, she said to herself as she glanced back towards the hatch she had just passed through to get a reference point before proceeding further. What the ship lacked in conveniences, it more than made up for with its thick hull and tough-as-nails crew. It would take time to adjust and relearn what she had forgotten. She held a hand up to block a crewman from passing, "Excuse me!" she said firmly and the crewman stopped as he tried to scurry by. "How do I get to deck five from here?" she asked him.

He looked her up and down and shook his head, and he told her how to get there. She thanked him and began walking. She wondered what his problem was. Probably the same one everyone else had when they looked at her. Most people assumed she moved up in rank because of how she looked. No one considered she might deserve it, or that she didn't have to pay special favors for the bars on her shoulders. In some ways she accepted it, in other ways it made her furious the way she was treated by fellow officers and subordinates.

The corridors on this ship were narrow. She was not accustomed to the structural ribs protruding into the walkway every 30 feet. It wasn't as cramped as an old submarine, but very close to it. She tripped on a few of the ribbed supports and nearly fell. This drew snickers from passersby until they noticed her rank and hurried away. Benson bumped several people with her duffel bag as she pushed her way through the mass of people, apologizing to each one, yet several still gave her an annoyed look, if they bothered to look at her.

She looked down one corridor and checked the code above. She turned the corner into another without looking and flattened an enlisted crewman with

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her duffel bag. This sent his box of small glass tubes with small corks in each one spilling all over the floor. She apologized and went to help him. They bumped heads while bending over to pick up the test tubes which were filled with water and air samples from throughout the ship. When the last of the tubes had been retrieved, they both stood, he saluted her and she returned it. She then turned and tripped over her duffel bag and fell flat on her face. She heard a man laughing and she bolted up quickly, her face red from embarrassment. She noticed his rank and quickly snapped to attention and saluted him. He was still laughing when he saluted back.

Benson was a perfectionist. She strove to be the best and it irritated her when she failed. She became embarrassed at her mistakes, especially when people were watching, and now everyone in the corridor was watching as she pushed herself from the floor. The pain in her forehead was mild to the pain of her humiliation.

“Lieutenant Commander Benson I presume?” asked First Officer Bill Morris.

“Yes, I am, um, sorry, sir. I ah... I’m not used to these narrow corridors,” she stammered, cursing herself for acting like a fool.

“Yes, I can see that. I’m the ships Ex-oh, Commander Bill Morris. May I help you with anything?” he asked with a more reasonable tone.

Benson was embarrassed and mad at her first few minutes on board. She was also frustrated with not being able to find her quarters. “Well, I am trying to find my quarters. I’m in room five-dash-twenty-one ‘B’ dash thirty-four, but I can’t find it.”

“Let me help you. I’m sorry for laughing. It’s so easy to spot the “noobs” on the ship, because they all make the same mistakes. Follow me,” he said. They both reached for her duffel bag, he got there first. He picked it up and threw it over his shoulder. They began walking along the corridor and had to step sideways through some partially closed blast doors and around another corner to the outer ring of the primary hull. He stopped in front of her door and punched a code on the pad and the doors slid opened.

“The code is the last six digits of your fleet ID number. Mine also works for these doors because my rank is high enough to allow it,” he stated as he backed up to let her pass. She turned to accept her bag back, and while her back was turned, the doors slid shut. She turned and abruptly stopped as she walked into the closed door with a thunk! She huffed and threw her bag down and punched in her code and they opened again.

Morris was trying his best not to laugh. She saw the smirk on his face and

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didn't find it amusing. "Let me show you a trick. There are only a few automatic doors on this ship so you will be doing a lot of that in the first week. If you drop your bag in the doorway, the sensors will keep it open indefinitely."

"Thank you for your help, Commander. Now, how do I get to the bridge?" she asked hoping he would just tell her and not guide her like a lost little girl.

"Go to the end of this corridor and take a left," he pointed. "The elevator is on the right about two hundred feet in. Take it to deck zero-zero, that is the bridge. Also if you go to the ship's schematics on your terminal, it will show you the places every newbie needs to know about." He was having some fun with his slight digs into this new person on board.

"Thank you, Commander." She saluted and waited for him to respond, when he did she stepped into her room. She grabbed her duffel bag and allowed the door to close behind her. These quarters were small in size compared to what she left on the *Challenger*. The walls were bare and a dingy battleship gray color. The lighting appeared to be set low. She cleared her throat. "Lights up!" she commanded. Nothing happened. "Computer, lights up," she commanded again, still nothing. She looked around the room and spied the switch on the wall next to the door she just entered. She huffed and went to it, and turned the control and the lights got brighter. "Manual lighting, how archaic," she mumbled. She continued the tour of her new quarters. The bed was on the left under a small rectangular porthole and a dresser was on the right. There was a short partition between the dresser and her desk. The desk had an older 3D computer terminal on it with a pullout keyboard just below the polished desktop. Opposite her desk was the closet for her belongings and between the bed and the closet was a doorway. Curious, she went up to the door and pressed the button and it opened. There was a man standing there with his back to her, naked and drying off.

"Oh crap! Excuse me," she said as she turned around.

"You're new," he said as he rolled his eyes. It wasn't the first time it had happened to him and his response was more matter-of-fact than Benson could understand. He grabbed another towel and wrapped it around himself and put his hand out to shake Benson's. "Hi, I'm Lieutenant Commander Dan Giovanella. I'm the head communications officer of the *Saratoga*."

Benson kept her back to him and said "Pleased to meet you. I'm Lieutenant Commander Tamora Benson. I ah, um... I am sorry. I didn't know where that door went," she fumbled for the words.

Giovanella checked the towel around his waist before replying. "It's OK,

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you can turn around.”

She first turned her head and looked quick. She noticed he wrapped a towel around his waist and he was reaching for her hand. She grasped his hand firmly and apologized once again while shaking it.

He laughed. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll learn to knock first. This is an old ship and doesn’t have many of the conveniences of the newer ones. You know, like private bathrooms, automatic doors and so on. This is a shared room and my quarters are through that door there.” He pointed to the door and looked back at Benson. Her face was still red and she was trying not to look at him. “Let me close the door so I can finish dressing.”

Benson stumbled again. “Oh... Uh... Yes, of course,” and she turned away and the door closed behind her. “Damn it, Tamora! What the hell are you doing?” she huffed in frustration as she grabbed her duffel bag and tossed it onto her bed. She walked over and dumped it out and began putting her belongings away. After several minutes, she returned to the bathroom door and knocked. There was no answer. She pressed the button and the door slid open. She peeked around the corner. *Good, nobody here*, she said to herself. She reached down and picked up a box of her personal items and turned around and walked into the door as it slid shut with a smack. “Son of a bitch” she cursed out loud. She shook her head in wonder at what else could go wrong. She hit the button and walked in. She took some time to clean up a bit and splash some water on her face hoping it would make a difference.

It had been a lengthy journey from her previous ship back to Earth. It began 10 days before when the *Challenger* left her behind at the Vega outpost and she had to wait for a transport back to 61 Cygni, where she had to wait again for a transport back to Earth. While the trip was uneventful, she still wanted a good hot shower.

On the bridge, Commander Morris tapped Hackett on the shoulder to get his attention. Hackett followed Morris back to his station behind Hackett’s chair. “Sir, have you met our new navigator?” Morris whispered.

“Yes, I did. Is there a problem, Commander?” Hackett asked not knowing whether he was talking about her looks or the fact that she was a woman navigator after what happened to Sasha Young.

“Ah... No, sir, just thought I would ask, that’s all,” he said thinking twice about what he was going to say.

“Yes, I noticed her qualifications, Commander, quite impressive. I think

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you should review her folder, that should answer all of your questions. The bridge is yours, Commander.”

“Aye, sir.”

Hackett grinned slightly and walked to the elevator. Morris stood and shook his head and laughed to himself assuming Hackett thought the same thing about her.

Morris remained at his station behind where the captain sat. From here he could monitor everything that went on across the ship, including all major systems. He punched up the day’s duty roster and watched it scroll across his monitor. He noticed that it was modified by the captain. He read on and noticed that he put Benson at the navigator’s console for departure. *Hmmm, perfect*, he said to himself and he closed the file. He began his preflight check list and paged climate systems to send theirs in. He proceeded to study each report in preparation of the ship leaving port.

As was his custom before leaving port, Hackett began his usual walk around of the ship. It gave him a feel for the condition of the ship and its crew before a mission began. He regarded people he passed and stopped to talk to a few that were new to the ship to see how they were acclimating to their surroundings. All of them seemed to be finding their way okay and had no questions. He was also trying to find out who the spies were. None of the people he met seemed to be the ones to watch. He made a mental note to check them off “his list.”

Hackett pulled open a hatch in the wall near the elevators and stepped into a small, dimly lit tunnel. He reached down to the deck and turned a round handle and lifted the hatch. He looked down for a moment and stepped onto the silver rung of the ladder. He continued down while the wall opening closed with a hiss and a click behind him. He pulled the hatch shut over his head with a solid click. He progressed downward to deck five. Hackett never took the same route twice as he wandered about his ship. He was amazed at what he found hidden in the dark, secluded corners. Besides, he was impatient with the elevators and seldom took them, preferring ladders and stairs. It seemed he was always in a rush to get around the ship and couldn’t waste time waiting for an elevator. He began his walk around the deck when he noticed an ensign wrestling with several conduits. He was trying to stuff them back into an overhead compartment where they belonged. He walked up to assist the ensign who wasn’t sure how to get them back in.

As they discussed their options, Benson rounded the corner while looking

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around and nearly ran them both over. She stopped short and saluted the captain. He saluted back and pulled her aside. “Miss Benson, it isn’t necessary to salute me every time we meet in a hallway or anywhere in the ship. I am more lax in that area than most captains.”

“Yes sir, sorry, sir, I won’t let it happen again, sir,” she said with a nervous tone.

Hackett shook his head. “That’s okay. Please do me a favor?”

“What is it, sir?” she asked.

Hackett looked at her for a second. “Lighten up.”

Nervously she stammered “Yes, sir.” She cursed herself knowing she was overreacting.

Hackett and Ensign Wolaski went back to their conversation and ignored Benson standing behind them. She listened in for a minute because she felt awkward and couldn’t think of a way to excuse herself. Then she spoke up. “Captain, sir?”

“Yes Lieutenant Commander?” Hackett replied without turning to look at her.

“I couldn’t help overhearing. I might be able to fix that for you.” She was hoping to start atoning for her clumsiness by helping them fix the problem.

Hackett stepped back and put his hand out to bring Ensign Wolaski with him. “Please, Miss Benson.” He motioned to her to step forward and try.

Benson stepped up on the short ladder and reached into the cramped overhead compartment. She poked around in the compartment, studying the cables and moving them so she could see what there was. She found a large blue conduit and knew if she unplugged it, the other cables would slide around it and then she could reconnect it. She was thinking that blue meant low priority, which it did on the newer ships, so the worst thing that would happen is they would get a warning and reroute message. She unplugged it. Alarms went off, then the lights went out and the red emergency lights came on. Morris was on the PA instantly wanting to know what happened. Benson hurried and stuffed it all back in and reconnected the cable that brought everything back too normal. She jumped back scared stiff.

“Well Lieutenant Commander, that’s a unique way of solving that problem. Please, in the future do not disconnect the energizer relay control cable,” Hackett said studying her. He knew what she was thinking and it was something he would have done six months before.

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“I’m sorry, Captain, I thought blue meant low priority! I’m really sorry, sir.”

“Ensign, you can put that together now.”

“Aye, sir,” Ensign Wolaski replied.

Hackett turned to Benson. “Come,” he said firmly. He knew she was getting frustrated. The look on her face was obvious.

She uncharacteristically slumped her shoulders from the tone in his voice and she knew she was in deep trouble, or worse. What could be worse? she wondered. Getting kicked off the ship after only being there less than an hour would be worse. It would make her the laughingstock of the fleet if that happened.

“Lieutenant Commander, I know what you are going through. I would have done the same thing six months ago. You will have to go through the tech manuals for this ship before unplugging things. Yes, blue means low priority on a new ship. On this ship it means energizer. Please don’t touch anything violet, yet,” he finished with a glance her way. She was upset. “Also, I know you’re frustrated. The first week is the toughest. So stick with it and it will all come together. Okay?”

She looked at him. “Yes sir, thank you. I thought it was me. I just seem so out of place here.” Then she bit her lip wondering if that was too much information.

“That’s fine. Where are you heading?” Hackett asked.

“Bridge, sir. I wanted to go over the nav-con before we ship out. That way I can eliminate another surprise.”

Hackett glanced up at her. “Well, you can’t get there from here. Come this way,” he said as he turned a corner “and watch out for...”

Crack! He was too late. She stumbled forward and cursed, dropping an uncharacteristic f-bomb as she grabbed her head looking back at the pipe she nearly imbedded in her forehead.

“...The pipe that is hanging down,” he continued.

“Thanks!”

He glanced over his shoulder at her and she forced a smile back at him. “So, it takes about a week to get used to this ship?” she said as she rubbed her forehead.

“No, it takes a week to figure out where the big hazards are. I still walk

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into things myself. I'm not going to tell you how many times that damn pipe got me." Hackett smiled back and took her to the elevator area. "Take this to deck zero-zero and you'll be on the bridge."

She held out her hand to Hackett. "Thank you, sir."

Hackett took her hand and shook it. It was warm and soft he thought. He quickly forced the thought from his mind and said, "No problem. I have to finish my walk around before we get underway." He nodded and walked off, glad to be away from her before he did something stupid. He was afraid he was going to start acting like a schoolboy where the girl touches his hand for the first time causing the boy to act like an idiot.

Benson stood and watched him until he disappeared around the corner. She was thinking about how nice he was and if he ... *No, never mind Tamora. Don't even think that way about the captain.* Hackett was only a few years older than she was and her mind kept wandering.

Once the elevator doors opened, she turned and nearly flattened a person trying to get off. She excused herself and waited. When the coast was clear she stepped in. The elevator went up briskly. To her it seemed rickety as it rattled and groaned its way to the bridge. She leaned against the wall and let out a sigh of relief that she didn't get busted back down to lieutenant for nearly blowing the ship up, especially in port. The captain was treating her well she thought and she wanted to know if it was just her or did everyone get treated that way. She was brought back harshly as the elevator stopped quickly at the top sending her stumbling to the side. The doors opened and she pulled herself up and looked. *Good, nobody saw that,* she said to herself. She straightened the top of her snug-fitting uniform and proceeded on to the bridge.

The bridge was much smaller than the *Challenger*. However, it seemed cozy to her. She walked around briefly and looked at each station and introduced herself to a few of the people there. She also made mental notes as to how the bridge was arranged. This ship was completely different from the *Challenger*. She walked over to the nav-con, which was not occupied. She slid the chair back until it clicked and locked into position. She sat in the seat and pulled the short armrest down which activated the HUD (heads up display). The HUD displayed numerous details and settings. She leaned forward and began to study the controls.

Commander Morris walked over and knelt beside her. He told her to get comfortable with the controls and showed her how to place the control panel in demo mode and how to take it back out.

"Thank you, Commander," she said.

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He went back to his station to continue prepping the ship for departure. Benson spent nearly an hour running the test simulations and for the first time since she arrived, she felt confident.

“Commander Morris?” Benson asked.

“Yes Lieutenant Commander?” He acknowledged with a casual glance towards her, wondering what her question was.

“When is the ship leaving port, sir, and when should I report back?” she asked.

Morris looked at his panel for the answers and said, “In six hours, Miss Benson. However, I want you back in five. Any particular reason you want to leave the bridge?” he asked.

“I am familiar with this console and I wanted to get familiar with the rest of the ship, sir.” It was the truth. There was nothing more annoying to her than someone who didn’t know where anything was on a ship and she least of all, wanted to be that person.

He looked back down at his console and displayed her simulation scores and he was impressed: Hundreds across the board. She learned that fast he thought. “Very well, Lieutenant Commander. Good idea, you may go.” He went back to his reports.

“Thank you, sir.” She raised the armrest and lifted herself out of the chair that slid back towards the console while she headed for the elevator. This time she held on.

Lieutenant Daniella Larson walked over to Morris. “How did she do, sir? Is she as good as they say?” Morris glanced at her and displayed Benson’s scores on his monitor. Larson leaned close to him, “Damn, how did we get her. Those are perfect scores. Has anyone done that before?” Larson asked while glancing up at him with her dark eyes. Larson was known to wear a little make-up to enhance her look. She enjoyed making herself look good, especially when Morris was around, even though he never responded to her subtle advances. Today, as with most days, she had her hair pulled back into a short, single braided ponytail, and her shirt and jacket hugged her body perfectly. She left the top two buttons of both undone displaying enough cleavage to get Morris’ attention, and it did. Unfortunately for her, he didn’t take the next step which continually left her frustrated.

Morris closed the file. “Not to my knowledge. I had a chance to review her file and you’re right. She is good and she wants your job,” he said smirking back at her as he glanced down toward the obvious cleavage between

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her breasts.

Larson wasn't sure how to take that, so she glared at him for a moment. She thanked him and went back to her station. She continued to stare at Morris out of the corner of her eye. She was studying him to see if he was joking or not.

Lieutenant Commander Dan Giovanella looked up from his communications console and turned toward Morris. "Commander, the ambassadors are ready to come aboard, sir. These are the last of the people we are expecting."

Morris glanced toward Giovanella. "Thank you, Lieutenant Commander. Contact the captain and have him meet me at the main docking hatch." Morris secured his station. "Larson, you have the bridge."

"Yes, sir," she replied. Larson was frequently handed the responsibility of being the officer of the watch and she enjoyed being in charge. It was a responsibility handed down through generations on American naval ships and now starships.

Giovanella paged Hackett. "Yes, sir. Out, sir." He punched off the comm. "The captain will meet you there, Commander."

"Thank you, on my way," Morris replied and he turned toward the elevator.