

— STAR TREK — ENTERPRISE

While Enterprise is at Betazed in trade negotiations, Reed investigates a murder mystery when one of their own is implicated.

*Fire
or
Water*

J. Jekel / 

MEDIE

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We wish you a pleasant time reading this story.

The city was hardly deserted. The streets were crowded, vehicles zoomed around, and people were bustling to and fro, just like in any big city, but there was next to no sound. The babble of voices one would expect was conspicuously absent. Sato had mentioned to Archer that Betazoids preferred their natural telepathic communications to the spoken word, and that showed in their surroundings. With the exception of their hostess, few voices carried on the wind.

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Revision 1

Medie

Fire of Water

The complete EVS5 collection :

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...

Enterprise Virtual Season 6 to be edited in 2006 - 2007

CHAPTER

1

She had been told that the noise was the most unnerving part of the first moments, and she could believe it.

The cacophony unleashed in her mind seconds after stepping onto the street of San Francisco convinced Navarra Sel that silence was not something humanity had much of. The ambassador took a moment to steady herself, finding her center and building up the walls she rarely had such urgent need for, blocking out the strident, badly disciplined thoughts of the aliens who surrounded her. She had managed to block the thoughts of her six-person entourage, but to experience this wall of humanity in such close physical proximity...

"Ambassador?" The solicitous voice of her aide, a human Starfleet officer, broke her concentration. She wasn't yet used to the title. "Are you all right?"

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She smiled faintly and nodded. "Yes. A friend warned me, but I hadn't quite expected it to be quite so..." She hesitated in an attempt to find the right word. It seemed impolite to say it, but she sensed he would not mind. "I had not expected it to be quite so loud."

The young man, the lieutenant, nodded quickly. He was young and eager. "Ah, right, telepathy."

Alarm swept over her in a wave, and after that first shock, she had to fight back a grin of amusement as thoughts bombarded her shields and she glimpsed the thoughts behind those emotions. Her aide was so very eager, and so very determined not to fail. She saw a flash of the ship, Enterprise, the ship she had just disembarked, and she felt the young man's burning desire to serve aboard her, and before she blocked it from her mind, she sensed an understanding... an understanding she had lacked before. She felt an overwhelming sadness that this understanding had to come through so much pain and so much confusion.

"It's not..." the lieutenant was saying.

"No, it's not an insult to mention it," she assured him. During her trip on Enterprise to Earth, she had learned the duplicitous ways of these people, which she now understood to be ways of coping for people who existed as solitary beings, unlinked to those around them. Her aide would be insulted by anything but straight honesty, and she was beginning to understand the difference between honesty and lies told for the sake of politeness and smooth relations. Humans were unnerved by abilities such as telepathy, but they

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adapted quickly. The irony of that realization stung. "Would it be insulting for me to inquire as to the fact you have hair upon your head?" He shook his head, and she smiled, trying to soothe him. "Well, it's nothing different. My people's telepathic abilities are as unremarkable to us as... as pointed ears are to the Vulcans, or as the hair on your head."

Her words sent a ripple of merriment through the humans who surrounded her, and Navarra felt encouraged and saddened at the same time.

If only this had been before...

CHAPTER

2

THREE WEEKS EARLIER

Jonathan Archer was bored. It was not something he had much experience with during his career. Captaining Enterprise had seen to it that... very few moments passed where he had even had occasion to relax, never mind achieve actual boredom. But, just the same, he could think of a few of those moments, and the lion's share of them mirrored his current situation.

Resisting the urge to start counting rivets in the ceiling, he dropped his gaze to his first officer's face and found her regarding him with something akin to disapproval and maybe... maybe... a little amusement.

"Have you found something within this room's structural integrity that causes you concern, Captain?" she asked politely, placing the PADD she'd been holding on the table between them.

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"No, no, not at all." He coughed to clear his throat and straightened his posture, feeling very much like a kid caught daydreaming in class... not a bad metaphor for his current situation, all things considered. The idea of T'Pol attempting to wrangle a classroom full of human children... He tucked that one away for later. Trip Tucker would enjoy the hell out of that image. "Please, Commander, continue. You were saying something about the Betazoids' telepathy and its influence on their society?"

T'Pol gave him a vaguely chiding look... the entire meeting had largely been about exactly that... but humored his distraction, "Indeed, Captain. Because of their telepathic abilities, Betazoid society has evolved to be very open. They have little need for privacy, and they place great emphasis and value upon intellectual pursuits." She looked discomfited when she reached the discussion of the Betazoid view of privacy, and Archer suspected that particular habit caused the intensely private Vulcans all manner of problems.

His suspicions must have shown on his face: she raised a brow at him in apparent response. "It has, on occasion, resulted in misunderstandings between our peoples. Vulcans are not in the habit of sharing our innermost considerations as easily as the Betazoids, and in our early dealings, it became a source of disagreement."

Try as he might, Archer couldn't hold back a faint chuckle, "Sorry." He held up a hand to forestall comment. "I'm not trying to be rude but..." He chuckled again. He could only imagine the magnitude of the

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disagreement. "Given your people's habit for understatement..."

"In this situation, Captain, it is not an understatement. The Betazoid race is not a particularly combative one. Indeed, they are true pacifists. Betazoids abhor violence... even more so than my people. They believe this abhorrence results from their ability to sense and perceive the impact of such conflict." T'Pol warmed to her subject. "They have worked quite deliberately to eradicate such conflict from their society."

Intrigued, Archer picked up the PADD again and let skimmed the condensed information on the planet that was their next destination. He had to admit, he was looking forward to a chance to meet a new species and just... explore. Although it was being done under the pretext of trade negotiations, he was more than happy to leave the negotiation to the delegates from Earth that Enterprise carried and play tourist for a change. More and more of what T'Pol was revealing to him about Betazed had him anxious to see it. "It sounds like a utopia," he murmured thoughtfully.

"Hardly." His first officer sounded regretful. "Their distaste for violence is renowned, but it has left them vulnerable to repeated attacks from raiders." She gave him a meaningful look. "The Orion Syndicate chief among them. It is quite likely, Captain, that the Betazoids' interest in an alliance with humanity will involve the protection of Starfleet in some capacity, but in this, I think the Betazoids are not unique. Such will be a common theme with many species."

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A myriad of races and faces went through Archer's mind... people they'd met over the years of the mission... and he nodded. "With good reason."

CHAPTER

3

"Lieutenant, it appears we have a little problem."

Malcolm Reed lifted his gaze from his book, only to find Harris's face looking at him from out of Reed's console with an expression of pained consternation. Reed blinked in surprise... but of course Harris would have his ways of contacting him on Enterprise. And ever since he'd been briefed on their mission to Betazed, an entire planet of empathic telepaths, Reed had suspected that Section 31 would interest itself in the matter. He should be surprised not at Harris's call, but that he had waited this long. He kept his tone of voice cool. "Actually, I was having quite a lovely evening. The only problem I can find is your intrusion into it."

"You're going to Betazed." The troublesome spy frowned. "You can see the trouble we would have with that, can't you?" The unwitting species was quite literally the Section's worst nightmare. The risk for dis-

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covery was indeed grave.

There was, of course, the rather unfortunate fact that Reed was having great difficulty finding it within himself to care.

"I'm not scheduled to have any particularly prolonged contact with them, if that's your concern," Reed responded irritably, giving in and putting his book aside and moving to sit before the console. "They're unlikely to be able to sense anything incriminating from me. My understanding from the brief is that although the Betazoid propensity for honesty does lend itself towards accidental discoveries, they are not in the habit of purposefully scanning one's most innermost secrets. I'll thank you to leave this within my discretion." His hand went to end the communication, but before he did so, he added, "I've no interest in revealing the more unpleasant side of humanity to these poor people. We should leave them some illusions as to our better nature."

Harris snorted. "You can leave them with whatever illusions you wish, but quite frankly, there are more than a few people here who would very much like to see these negotiations called off. Since that seems to be impossible with our Vulcan friends apparently hell-bent on making this little alliance idea of Archer's work, we believe certain preparations need to be made lest one of those 'poor people' wander into the wrong mind and see the wrong thing. We've worked very hard to set up this little operation, and none of us is about to allow anyone to destroy it with one stray thought."

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Reed resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "I can assure you, the very last thing any of us will be doing on this particular mission is concerning ourselves with devoting any thoughts to 'this little operation.' Contrary to what the view may be from your sector, we have far more important things on our minds than just how we might bring about the end of the Section. No one here is going to betray you into telepathic hands... unless, of course, aggravation over your repeated contact is the stray thought that attracts their attention." He sat back and allowed disdain to creep into his words. "Now, unless you've some pressing danger to the galaxy for Enterprise to attend to, my book is again calling me, and as it is far more interesting company..."

Not giving Harris a chance to argue, he stabbed a finger down onto the control and cut off the communication. The whole thing left a rather nasty taste in his mouth... and even more questions in his mind. Harris was not a man given to idle paranoia, but an argument could be made that his concerns in relation to their upcoming mission were hardly idle. Captain Archer would have little contact with their Betazoid hosts beyond cursory diplomacy, but there would be contact as they made the expected cultural exchanges... receptions, dinners, and so forth. There was also the matter of Trip Tucker, the eternal tourist: he would no doubt be poking about every nook and cranny that the Betazoids were of a mind to show him, asking questions about everything.

Reed had undergone a great deal of training to

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prepare for the eventuality of dealing with a telepathic species, but Archer and Tucker had not. Section 31 thought of such matters, but the rest of Starfleet very rarely did, and, in all likelihood, that was where Harris's true concern lay. No doubt he was expecting Reed to play some sort of nanny role and ensure that the Section's safety remained secure.

"Bloody hell." Picking up his book, he settled in on his bunk again. "And I was looking forward to this one, too."

CHAPTER

4

"Looks like home... Kind of."

Eager to get his first view of Betazed, Tucker was on the bridge pestering Hoshi Sato, ostensibly checking on a glitch she'd complained about, when they arrived at their destination. He wasn't alone: with the exception of the helmsman, Travis Mayweather, who was hard at work, the majority of the bridge personnel had ceased the usual flurry of activity to take in the sight of the planet filling the view screen. It was a beautiful planet, and as he'd said, it strongly resembled Earth. The most immediate noticeable difference was in the shapes of the landmasses, but that didn't do much to alleviate the sense of homesickness the hauntingly familiar sight evoked.

"It's beautiful," Sato agreed. She would have said more, he thought, but she cut off whatever it was she might have said and then pressed a hand to her ear-

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piece. They all watched her as she listened intently for a moment before she turned to the captain with a smile. "Captain, there's a Minister Anandra Chal on the comm and she wishes to greet us in the name of her people."

"On screen." Archer stood to greet the minister as she appeared on the viewscreen. "Minister Chal, it's an honor to meet you. I'm Captain Jonathan Archer."

The raven-haired, black-eyed woman on the screen beamed a smile at him. "The honor is ours, Captain... the honor and the privilege. Welcome to Betazed. We have so been anticipating your arrival. Our mutual friends, the Vulcans, have spoken very highly of you." What might have been mirth twinkled in her dark gaze as she added, "As much as they speak highly of anyone."

The captain snuck a guilty look in the direction of his first officer before chuckling. "I can only imagine what they've been saying."

"All good, I can assure you," Minister Chal promised with a light laugh. "As I said, we have been anticipating your arrival, and as such, we'll be hosting a dinner to celebrate your arrival. I trust the delegation as well as your senior crew will be able to attend? We might as well enjoy ourselves before we're bogged down in the mire of bureaucracy."

He smiled and looked about him before agreeing. "I think that might be arranged. Just name the place and the time, and we'll be there."

She smiled again and inclined her head. "I have already transmitted the details. We await your arrival."

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With that, the screen briefly blacked before returning to an image of the starfield and the planet beneath.

"Nice enough lady," Tucker commented, meandering over to his friend's side. "Those eyes sure are somethin'."

T'Pol interjected, "They are a trait of the species."

"Bit like those ears of yours, huh?" he countered, imitating her infamous brow lift.

"Indeed," she returned, refusing to give way.

"Play nice, you two," Archer scolded as Tucker gave him an unrepentant grin. "T'Pol, anything I should know before we go to this dinner?"

"The Betazoids are fond of tradition. Expect to be greeted with it in force."

Tucker met his friend's eyes as the captain sat. "Ah, enjoy it, Cap'n," he advised sagely, thoroughly enjoying the rare moment of levity. "As long as you don't have to dance around in seaweed and chant while you cut up a tree, we're having a good day."

His grin widened when Archer's gaze turned just the slightest bit aggravated. "You had to bring that up," Archer protested with mock weariness.

"Better Porthos's mixups than mine... he's got less of them than I do," Tucker countered cheerfully. "So, please tell me we're not going to have to break out the dress uniforms for this? She did say we were supposed to have fun before the work starts."

"You should be so lucky," the other man countered. "It's dress uniforms for all Starfleet personnel, so it looks like you're just going to have to grin and bear it, Commander."

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"Look at it this way, sir," Sato piped up, laughter in her eyes, "you won't have to worry about what to wear."

Tucker grinned over his shoulder at her. "That's not a whole lot of comfort, Hoshi." He didn't mind, of course, but he was the one who was supposed to make the jokes, and all things considered, with the events of the preceding months, they could all use a laugh or two. He wasn't surprised that Sato was one of the ones picking up on that. She had a knack for fading into the background and seeing what everyone else missed. Now, he almost laughed as she lifted her chin slightly in playful challenge.

"Not for you, maybe, but I'm breathing a sigh of relief," she responded.

"And the rest of us are goin' into mourning," he assured with a faintly wicked look, picking up the challenge and running with it. "Travis is fair heartbroken over not gettin' to see you in your Sunday best."

As if he were surprised to hear his name, Mayweather looked over from where he'd been focusing entirely too much attention on keeping their orbit stable. A moment or two passed before he caught on to what they'd been saying, and somewhere within himself, he found a smile that was a shadow of the one they'd come to expect. "Yeah," he agreed, "absolutely."

The smile Tucker offered in response was supportive and friendly. He didn't say it, but any Betazoid within a parsec had to have heard it.

Atta boy, Travis...

CHAPTER

5

Lush.

That was the very first thought that entered Archer's mind upon setting foot on Betazed's surface. The very air felt lush and rich. The prep materials the Vulcans had provided had indicated that it was a verdant world with copious and vibrant vegetation... the opposite of the harsh and barren homeworld that had birthed the Vulcans. Betazed certainly lived up to its press. "Lush" and "vibrant" were but two of the words Archer could use to describe it, but he summed it up with a muttered, "Wow."

He was not the only one impressed by the sight: he heard similar comments being uttered by his companions... Doctor Phlox, T'Pol, Tucker, Reed, Sato, and last of all their pilot, Mayweather... as they disembarked from the shuttlepod. Betazed was certainly an impressively beautiful sight.

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"It looks even better down here," Tucker observed, clapping his hands together and taking a deep, cleansing breath. "Y'know, this goes well enough, the words 'shore leave' are going to start going through the crew." He slanted a gaze at his friend. "They sure as hell could use one."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Archer cautioned, even though he was considering the idea himself... assuming their hosts were amenable, of course. With everything going on... one spy after another, the Romulans making trouble at every turn... the crew was in dire need of a rest, and part of him would have very much liked to give the order. "Let's get this first diplomatic foray out of the way before we start worrying about that."

His best friend held up his hands in innocence and smiled. "I'm just sayin', Cap'n, it'd be a nice place for it."

"And we certainly have no objections," Minister Chal interjected politely, smiling as she walked forward to greet them. Behind her, several other Betazeds, all with the striking black eyes Sato had commented on, hung back politely. "Ours is a peaceful world, and you all seem tired." She held out her hands in greeting to the captain. "Please, we would very much like to offer such to you." She looked them over as she continued to speak. "I make no intrusions on your thoughts, please understand this," she assured. "But your weariness is hard to miss, and we have never been a people to withhold relief when we may offer it."

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Remembering T'Pol and Sato's coaching, Archer stepped forward to accept her offered hands, smiling as he did so. "Minister, we don't wish to insult you by refusing such a generous offer... quite the opposite, we're touched by it..."

"But you wish to be cautious." Anandra's expression softened and she inclined her head in understanding. "I agree." She straightened up, released Archer's hands, and stepped back, her expression suddenly more formal. "Welcome to Betazed, specifically the city of Rixx. This is our capital, where we thought it would be most appropriate to hold the negotiations. I had you land here, in this park, rather than at the spaceport so your first view of our world would be of its beauty. Allow me to present my colleagues." She turned to gesture her companions forward, introducing each one in turn and naming his or her duties. Archer filed away their names, associating each face with the dossier he'd read to prepare himself. "When it comes to government," she explained, "Betazed isn't terribly interested in such. We do what's required of us, but little more. Follow me, please." She turned and led them along a path through a formal garden, their meandering pace giving Archer a chance to take in the beautiful landscaping. "I'm sure that our Vulcan friends have informed you of that, just as I'm sure they've mentioned our penchant for honesty."

"That they have," he agreed. "Your abilities leave little room for little else, according to them."

"They're right," Anandra said matter-of-factly, "We consider deception to be pointless."

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"Of course. Why lie when you can just hear the truth behind it immediately?" Sato put in, earning an approving nod from their hostess.

"Yes, precisely!" The minister flung open a gate. "Through here, please... we now enter the city proper. We respect privacy, of course. Honesty is all and well, but without being tempered by privacy, it may become a dangerous weapon... something we would never condone. We have very firm ideals within our society that have grown into over many centuries, and we are not of a mind to change them now. They have evolved to suit our needs and our way of life, and we have found they do that admirably."

She paused as the last person in their party came through the gate, giving them a moment to observe just how quiet their surroundings were. The city was hardly deserted. The streets were crowded, vehicles zoomed around, and people were bustling to and fro, just like in any big city, but there was next to no sound. The babble of voices one would expect was conspicuously absent. Sato had mentioned to Archer that Betazoids preferred their natural telepathic communications to the spoken word, and that showed in their surroundings. With the exception of their hostess, few voices carried on the wind.

"There's a but?" Archer inquired, prompting the minister, who gazed on the cityscape, seemingly lost within the thoughts of her own mind.

"There are many of those," she responded. "But we will discuss those later. As I said, there should be merriment before there is the frustration of business."

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You are eager to see our world, and we are eager and proud to show you." Anandra gestured to the city that surrounded them. "If there is one thing my world is rich in, Captain Archer, it is what you see before you: people. The true bounty of Betazed lies in the wealth of my people's knowledge, and it is something we have much of to share."

"Yes, I have been hoping to have the opportunity to review your latest research on xenopsychology." Phlox jumped into the conversation with the eagerness that the minister had just been speaking of. "I've been corresponding with some of my Betazoid colleagues involved with the interspecies medical exchange, and I've heard some extremely encouraging things about your universities here." He beamed a smile at her. "I was hoping I might be able to enjoy a tour, if there is time."

"Of course, Doctor Phlox," Anandra responded, turning to look at him. "That can be arranged for you very easily. In fact, my associate, Minister Riel... " here she indicated a woman walking with them, one she'd introduced earlier... "is in charge of our medical facilities and has been telling me that she has been approached by a number of physicians who hope to speak with you. If the winds are with us, we might be able to pull together a small, informal symposium. We can thus give you healers something truly useful to do while those of us in the political area engage in our chatter." At this, she looked to the woman in question. "Chandra, if you would?"

The willowy redhead, as black-eyed as Anandra

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herself, smiled and fell into step with the Denobulan. The two immediately put their heads together, and the rest of the delegation was clearly forgotten. Instead, they focused their attention on planning just what the minister had suggested. As the delegation walked on, behind them, they could hear snatches of talk that focused on various illnesses and treatments.

Archer was eavesdropping when the minister looked over at him with a hopeful expression in her eyes. "Perhaps, Captain," she murmured, "this may be the beginning of many such exchanges. Betazed... indeed, all of us... is on the cusp of a new age, and a choice lies before us." She smiled faintly. "I hope this choice is the right one."

"Me too," Archer agreed, only too aware of the choices his people were making. "Too much blood and too many lives are on the line for us to make the wrong one."

CHAPTER

6

At night, Rixx came alive. The city had bustled before, but it was the bustle of business and commerce. This was something else, with lights and shimmering holograms brightening the streets and skies.

"Damn, but these people know how to throw a party," Tucker commented lightly to a smiling Sato as she joined him at the stone railing of a balcony overlooking the city. Both wore their dress uniforms. "I was thinking it was going to be a disaster with the chanting and stuff at dinner, but..." He looked back at the swirling sea of color that were the dancers on the floor. "They surprised me with this little shindig."

"They've managed a near-perfect blend of their history and traditions with their present-day society." She smiled wider, clearly delighted by it all. "One of them, Manon, has promised to teach me their lan-

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guage. They don't use it a lot in day-to-day dealings, but of course they make a point of learning it." She turned her gaze to the horizon. "They don't want to lose it. It's of historical importance at the very least, and of course it's a means of cultural expression... poetry and singing."

"Smart bunch of people." Tucker gave her a sly grin. "Matriarchal society and all."

She laughed. "They don't concern themselves much with that anymore," she pointed out mirthfully. "It's not a conscious division in their society."

"Like I said," he agreed amiably. "Smart bunch of people." He took in her profile. "You're enjoying yourself here."

"I am. I really am." She shook her head slightly, as if shaking off the events of the previous few years. "For a long time, I felt like all I could do was sit on the bridge and look busy. After a while, that was what I was doing... just going through the motions." She sighed. "You don't know how many times I thought about giving up and going home. If we hadn't been in the Expanse, I might have. Last year it got better." She smiled, as if having shaken off the stress. "It's incredible. We're the first humans to ever set foot on this planet. I'm the first human to ever try and learn their language. This is why I stayed out here."

"This is why I convinced you to stay out here," he teased, chuckling as he recalled the conversation with a shaken young ensign, one who bore little resemblance to the woman standing beside him.

"Did I ever thank you for that?" She turned to look

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at him. "Because if I didn't, then I really should. What you did for me..."

"Yeah, well, you kind of repaid me for that. About a dozen times over with all the linguistic life savin' you've done since." Tucker leaned over to grip her shoulder. "I owe you a few these days, Hoshi. For that, and for makin' mighty good company. I can't think of anybody I'd rather nearly die with, even if you scared the hell out of me."

Even in the dark, he could see her blush at the reminder of her feverish escape attempt. "Malcolm still reminds me of that," she admitted, embarrassed. "I think he's convinced I'm a security risk."

"You are," he teased. "A pint-sized, innocent-lookin' security risk. We're wastin' those lock-pickin' talents of yours on the bridge openin' comm signals. We should just up and go be pirates. You'd make one hell of a thief."

"Right up until Captain Archer arrested us," she pointed out, grinning.

"Nahh, he'd let us go, for old time's sake and all." Tucker winked. "We got connections and history. The Cap'n's not about to turn in a good old friend for a little thing like theft."

They shared a quiet laugh, and Tucker turned to look at the city. He could see why everyone was so enamored of Betazed. He was a bit awestruck by the place himself. The duality of it was striking. On the surface, the Betazoids appeared so very much like humans... more so than the Vulcans, with their cold reserve. But the differences ran deeper: the architec-

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ture, their society, their silence, everything. There was a lot about the place to explore.

"I think this was the perfect place to come," he commented quietly, letting his thoughts spill over into words. "We needed to visit a place like this." He looked over at Sato with an expression that hinted at his own thoughts. "You're not the only one who thought about leaving." He smiled. "I don't just mean that transfer, either." After everything that had gone down in the Expanse and everything that had happened aboard Enterprise afterward, a part of him had wanted to get as far away from Starfleet as he could possibly get, and it had been damn tempting. They were the kind of temptations that led a man to think about taking some engineering job on the lunar colony, or working at Utopia Planitia.

"I'm glad you stayed too," Sato said quietly. She turned her gaze from the horizon to look at him. "I'm glad we both did."

Tucker met her gaze, figuring that maybe the Betazoids weren't the only mind readers around as he saw the unspoken message waiting there.

He smiled and nodded, reaching over to cover her hand with his, giving her a supportive squeeze. "Boldly going, right?"

Sato mustered up a laugh and nodded. "Right."

CHAPTER

7

Negotiations were the realm of the diplomat, and Jonathan Archer ordinarily preferred to leave it in diplomats' capable hands. The problem was, he always kept getting dragged into things, no matter how hard he tried to avoid them.

"You look like you're being sent to the gallows, Captain."

Standing in the launch bay, watching the delegation being herded into shuttlepods by Reed, the captain looked over at Earth's chief negotiator. Rachel Pike smiled back at him amiably. For the most part, the official and her people had spent the trip to Betazed in their quarters, poring over the research and information that the Vulcans and the Betazoids had supplied. He didn't have much of a sense of her, but she seemed capable enough, and he was more than happy to leave the negotiation to her.

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He returned the smile she was offering. "I'm not much of a diplomat."

"Oh, I don't know," she responded. "From what I hear, we should swap jobs. You work out the details; I sit in the big chair. Any man that can get the Andorians to the table must have a knack for diplomacy, Captain Archer. And any man who can do it on his name alone?" She huffed a breath, impressed. "That's a minor miracle. I'd expect, if I were you, to be pulled into this job before too long, Captain. You've proven far too good at this not to be."

The comments she was making were nothing new. He'd heard the same from countless officials and Starfleet officers alike. Admirals Gardner, Novotny... Hell, even Shran had said as much. "Maybe," he allowed with a nod. "I think, for now, I'll leave the diplomacy to you." He gestured around them. "And you leave the captaining to me."

Pike regarded him with a shrewd gaze, and he felt more than a little relieved that she would be sitting on Earth's side of the negotiating table. "All right," she agreed with a slow nod and a smile, "you've got a deal." She stepped forward to accept the hand Reed was holding out to her. "But think about what I said, Captain." She looked over her shoulder at him as she boarded the shuttle. "You haven't heard the last of it."

Watching her step inside, he felt T'Pol move to stand behind him. "She's right," he commented, without turning to look at her. "That's not the last I'll hear of it."

She responded evenly, "Ms. Pike is correct. You

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have shown an unusual, if unorthodox, aptitude for diplomacy. There are certain situations where the traditional methodologies of diplomacy do not apply, and in those situations, you excel."

He turned to look at her with a faintly amused expression and just a hint of mischief. "Now, that sounded almost like a compliment, Commander."

The look on T'Pol's face was more composed but, maybe, just maybe, there was a hint of something in her gaze... nothing he could put a finger on, but there was something. "There is no logic in pretending you lack a skill you have previously displayed on many occasions." She tilted her head slightly. "Even if it is one I have expressed a measure of doubt about."

He chuckled. "All right, so it is a compliment... just a reluctant one." He gestured. "C'mon, we don't want to stand the Betazoid delegation up, now, do we?"

T'Pol nodded her agreement. "We do not." They started toward the second shuttlepod. "You are considering approving shore leave for the crew?"

"Limited. The crew needs a break and the Betazoids are more than willing to let us, but I don't want to run roughshod over their generosity either." Archer ducked to enter the shuttlepod.

"Eighty humans on a planet of billions does not statistically qualify as 'running roughshod.'" T'Pol ignored the extended hand of the pilot, stepped into the pod after Archer, and took a seat across from him. "They are unaccustomed to human minds. You are correct to be cautious. Betazed has had a great deal of

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contact with my people but limited exposure to other species, and yours has been known to confound even those who are very experienced with interspecies relations."

"So you're recommending against shore leave?" he asked, confused by her conflicting comments.

"No. I agree with you. I believe the best tack is to send down small parties for short periods of time... perhaps twelve hours. I'm sure Minister Chal will be able to provide a list of appropriate destinations."

"She already has." Archer produced a PADD, passing it over. "She's quite the intuitive woman."

"The minister is a skilled diplomat, and by her own admission a talented telepath," T'Pol explained. "She has had extensive experience combining both backgrounds in her duties. Vulcan has had its own difficulties in dealing with Betazoids in the past, but she has always proven creative in finding solutions to those problems." She looked down at the PADD, scanning the destinations listed. "I am familiar with several of these locations; the crew will find them quite pleasant. I suggest we hand-pick a small group to begin."

"Fine," he agreed. "Let me know who you come up with." He smiled pleasantly at her sideways glance. "I'm going to have my hands full observing these negotiations. It's the least you can do."

She pressed her lips into a line and lifted one brow, but to his amusement, she said nothing in response. Instead, she moved her attention to the PADD and began inputting information. Apparently she was-

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n't about to argue the assignment. Whether that was because of her pleasure to receive it or because she was more than content to leave attending the negotiations to him, he wasn't sure. Either way, she was hard at work, and the assignment was in good hands.

Satisfied with the result, Archer sat back and turned to watch as the pilot lowered the shuttlepod from the ship to begin its descent.

CHAPTER

8

"Imzadi." Sato turned away from the artwork and looked questioningly at the man standing beside her.

"Yes." Manon smiled pleasantly and inclined his head toward her. "The exhibit was created with this in mind. Ordinarily, we do not wish to color someone's perception of the art, as each piece is meant to be interpreted through the filter of the viewer's own history. But in this case, you are a complete outsider to many of our traditions and concepts, so... as you have said, I will make an exception." He gestured toward the painting. "'Imzadi' is a revered concept in our society. It is..." He paused, searching for the right word. "Do you have a term for a connection between two souls? It may be merely romantic, but it may also transcend such concepts."

"Yes... soulmates."

He frowned, and Sato knew that Manon was read-

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ing not only the word, but the emotion that the word evoked within her. "Soulmates. Yes, that is somewhat of an accurate representation, but it is a bit simplistic to describe the concept of 'Imzadi.' I doubt there is a real, literal translation; the term is so specific to our telepathic abilities." He stopped and looked at her, seeing her expression. "You are troubled? Have I done something improper?"

Sato stepped back a bit, not shrinking away but simply needing a little distance. "I'm sorry, it's just..." She looked away, trying to push the unpleasant memories from her thoughts. "A few years ago... I had..." She tried to smile but failed, realizing that everything she didn't want to remember was rising to the surface. The look of horror that was filling Manon's black eyes said those thoughts were impossible to miss. "His name was Tarquin, and it..." She gave up attempting to tell him, suspecting he already knew.

"I can see what he did," Manon managed to say hoarsely, clearly stunned by it. "I can see it in your thoughts... I do not mean to intrude, Ensign, you must understand this. But you are right: it is there on the surface of your thoughts. It is as loud to me as though you were screaming at the top of your lungs." He reached out, his fingertips brushing the fabric of her uniform sleeve. "To do these things to you..." He shook his head. "There are no words to describe what kind of abhorrence my people hold for such an act."

This time, Sato managed to find a real smile as she caught his hand in hers. "I know. It took me a long time to get over it, and I guess I didn't do as good a job

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as I thought. I know this isn't the same thing, Manon. I know you would never do what Tarquin did. It's just..."

"It brought up the memory for you." He nodded, calming down, as she'd hoped. "I am sorry for this. I had no intention to stir such up such unhappy thoughts."

"You couldn't have known," she pointed out. "Not without doing exactly what he did, and you'd never do that."

After a moment, he returned a hesitant version of the smile she was giving him. "Of course not."

Sato turned to the painting. "Tell me about the artist," Sato prompted, eager to turn the discussion back to Betazed's art. "Did he have an Imzadi in mind, or is this an abstract representation?"

"Ah, that is a complex question," Manon said, following her lead.

They'd both just begun to relax when everything exploded into screaming.

CHAPTER

9

The peaceful silence that had enveloped the planet had shattered, leaving behind an uneasy tension. Minister Chal rose from her knees, ignoring the dirt and blood that stained her elegant suit, and looked at the investigator standing before her. "What happened?" she asked in a clipped, angry voice.

"The reports are confused," the other woman responded calmly, although it was clear that the calm was hard won. "Witnesses report hearing the woman's scream and seeing images. The thoughts were disjointed and scrambled, hard to make out, but they all report seeing the same thing. And of course, there is this." She held up the patch found clutched in the woman's hand.

Staring at it, Archer closed his eyes and sighed. "Son of a..."

"Please tell me, Captain." Anandra turned, anger

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fading into pleading. "Please, say that your crewman could not have possibly committed this atrocity."

"Who else could have?" one of her aides demanded, his voice carrying the anger hers lacked. "None of us would have ever... None of us could ever do this!" He gestured angrily at the body. "She has been brutalized, and the man was found unconscious by her side!"

"Minister," T'Pol interjected coolly as the investigators covered the dead woman's body. "With all due respect to your personnel, might I suggest that Enterprise's own security staff become involved in the investigation? We may be able to offer resources your officers lack, as well as... "

"I understand what you are trying to say." Anandra cut her off. "You wish to be certain we do not unfairly prosecute your officer. I agree with this."

"Minister!" the aide snapped, only to be silenced with a look.

"Minister, please accept my apologies for this tragedy." Archer finally spoke, wanting to reach out but forcing himself to hold his hands back. "We want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do, and my first officer is right... we might be able to help. Unfortunately, my people have more than their fair share of experience in investigating things like this. We've done so on many worlds, including our own. And I assure you that the fact that the suspect is a member of my crew will in no way bias us. We only want the truth, just like you."

Anandra took a step back, looking at the patch the

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investigator held for a long moment. "Investigator..."

"Sel, ma'am," the other woman answered gravely. "Navarra Sel."

"You will be sharing investigative duties with," here she looked at Archer, "a Lieutenant Malcolm Reed. Find out what happened here." She turned and looked at the young man sitting nearby, head in his hands. "Captain, when your doctor is finished examining the crewman, would he be willing to submit to a mind scan?"

T'Pol and Archer shared a long look.

Anandra answered the question he had yet to ask. "They are not looking for any personal details, merely information relating to the murder."

Archer thought about it for a long moment, then looked at the ensign. "Only if he's willing. I won't have him scanned against his will."

"And we would never conduct such a scan against his will." Navarra assured solemnly. "Not even now."

CHAPTER

10

"Crewman, think carefully. Are you sure you want to do this?" Standing over Michael Rostov, Reed folded his arms and looked from him to the Betazoid woman standing at his side. "She will be entering your mind. There will be no hiding the truth from her."

"I'm telling you, sir, I didn't kill that woman!" Rostov insisted stubbornly. "I didn't! I don't know what happened... I... I... I can't..." He looked desperately up at Navarra. "Please, miss, you have to believe me, I can't remember. I've tried... I can't..."

Reed watched skeptically as she extended a sympathetic hand, clearly despite herself. "I can sense that," she assured. "And I can promise... I am not going to violate any confidences you might hold."

He nodded. "I understand."

"Lieutenant." Navarra turned to look at Reed. "I obviously cannot permit you to experience it as well,

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but I hope your crewman will be able to relate to you his recollections. Either that, or in the case that he is being duplicitous, I will."

Reed didn't like this one bit. The idea that this woman was being permitted to wander willy-nilly about in someone's mind, potentially using his own thoughts to incriminate him...

"It's the only way we know," she said softly. "And I wish I did not have to do this."

"Are you..."

She shook her head. "I don't need to. I can see what you are thinking. What is in your thoughts is on your face." She sighed and turned away from him. "A woman is dead, and unless we can find out what has happened, this young man will be blamed, and the truth will be swallowed in anger."

"She's right, sir... the negotiations and everything. There's too much riding on this." Rostov sat up and squared his shoulders. "Let's just do this before I lose my nerve."

Navarra looked at him for a long moment. "What is a root canal?" she asked with interest, then nodded as if he had explained. "It will not be that unpleasant, I assure you. In fact, you may hardly notice my presence." She glanced over her shoulder. "Do you wish your doctor to observe? I was told he is standing by should he be required."

"He's near enough," Reed assured. Phlox waited in the next room. "Your Minister Chal suggested that the fewer people present, the better for all concerned."

The investigator nodded. "Very well, we'll begin

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then."

She sat before Rostov and closed her eyes, and a moment later, Rostov closed his eyes too, leaving Reed to stand, watch, and stew. Somewhere, Harris was no doubt fuming. This had been precisely what he'd warned of: a situation where Reed had been forced into close quarters with a telepath... and a strong one, by all accounts. This entire situation was an unmitigated disaster, another in a long line. In addition to a tragic death, valuable negotiations had been endangered. He could not help but think of the sabotage of Starbase 1's grand opening. This case was parallel: an important event symbolizing close relations between species had been disrupted.

Frustrated, he forced his attention to the notes he'd made. By Rostov's report, he had met the woman... Alixa Toras... at a local market. He'd been looking for a present for his mother and had asked the young woman, a student, for advice. Alixa had ended up offering to give him a tour of the bazaar and surrounding area. They'd been walking along the lakeside then Rostov had awoken surrounded by people and no idea of what had happened. His memory was a complete and utter blank, offering no explanation of how the woman had been killed. But the testimonies of the eyewitnesses told a chilling story. All reported hearing the scream of terror in their minds, along with a dizzying array of images, including snatches of what Alixa saw during her death. One image had been Rostov's uniform. He had been moving, but his patch marking him as a member of Enterprise's crew was clear and

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visible, making him the prime suspect.

"I don't understand..."

Navarra's murmured comment drew Reed from his thoughts, and he looked up, only to find her staring off into space in confusion. "You don't understand what?"

"He remembers nothing, as he said." She frowned again, rubbing at her temple. "Absolutely nothing."

"Well, that corroborates his story," he said, disheartened. He'd hoped she'd find something... at least some idea of what role Rostov had played in the woman's death, if only as observer. "It doesn't help much, but..."

"No, you misunderstand me," she interrupted. "I mean to say he remembers nothing. There should be scraps of images, even sense memory, something. The mind does not become so clearly blank unless..." She inhaled deeply looked up. "Unless it has been purposefully erased."

CHAPTER

11

In sickbay, Archer looked from his chief of security to his chief medical officer and back again. "You're telling me that his memory has been erased... deliberately erased."

"Yes, sir." Reed nodded at him. "Ms. Sel reexamined his mind to be certain, and she called in a number of healers more experienced in these matters to confirm it. They all agree. The time Rostov would have been witness to the crime is blank... too blank to have been the result of trauma or drugs. Just to be sure, we had Dr. Phlox and one of their physicians run some tests. They're testing blood samples for drugs, and Phlox performed some brain scans to look for signs of tampering."

"Neither they nor I found anything in his system that would imply he was drugged in any way." Phlox tapped a command to bring the reports to the screen

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above their heads. "Mr. Rostov is in perfect health... allowing for the trauma of the incident, of course."

"It doesn't entirely clear him, of course," Reed sighed, "but it would indicate that something else happened, and that someone else was present... someone who deliberately interfered with Mr. Rostov's memory so he would not be able to accurately recount what happened."

"A Betazoid." The captain stepped forward to better view the report. "T'Pol would be the only other person capable of this, and she was with us the entire time." He lowered his head. "Minister Chal is not going to be pleased."

"You're quite right, Captain," Anandra commented from sickbay's doors. "I am not pleased. I am shamed." She looked around the room with unrestrained curiosity as she walked forward to join them. The action reminded Archer that they'd scheduled a tour that very day as a break from the rigors of the talks. "One of my people is, at the very least, guilty of tampering with the memory and mind of one of your crewmen... actions potentially committed to cover up a crime that is virtually unheard of among our people." She looked sorrowful. "I am sorry you have been involved in this."

"You aren't the only one, Minister," he responded. "This should never have happened, and for our part in it... I apologize."

"While we are both sorry, Captain Archer," Anandra squared her shoulders and pursed her lips, "sorry is not enough. The impact this may have on the relations

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of our two races could be disastrous. Nor have I forgotten we must have justice for the victim, and for your crewman. It seems our fire-and-water moment has come after all, but not in the form I had expected."

Archer understood her reference. They'd spent time at the dinner the night before discussing the concept, a moment in a person's life where a defining choice had to be made: his or her choice to go the way of fire... hot, consuming, and impetuous... or the way of water... cold, calm, and considered. "It seems it has," he agreed gravely. "The question is, Minister, which choice will we make... and which one will you?"

"You ask whether I believe your man guilty of this crime, or one of mine?" She closed her eyes briefly. "A part of me very much hopes that your Mr. Rostov is guilty, and another part fervently hopes otherwise, even knowing what that would say for my own people. But above all, I cannot ignore the impact that either outcome will have on the relations between our worlds. Ms. Pike and I have spoken at length on that subject as well, and we agree: either way, damage will be done."

"My people call it being caught between a rock and a hard place."

Anandra smiled sadly. "Wise words, and very apt for this situation, no matter the outcome. There will be some who insist this would not have happened had your people not been present."

"And you?" Phlox asked, reminding the two leaders they were not alone.

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She turned to him. "I think that this crime was one of opportunity. Your people were a convenient target. It is hard to believe in a society that embraces acceptance and peace that someone could do this. It's more than murder of a body; it's the violation of a mind and a will. It's an obscenity... a stain that cannot be wiped away." Drawing in a breath, visibly shaken by her own words, she looked at Reed. "Navarra has delivered her report to me, as you know, and wishes to invite you to accompany her when she interviews the woman's family. My personal shuttle is available for your use. I will not be leaving your ship for some time." She lifted her chin, a universal gesture of stubbornness. "Ms. Pike and I have the business of negotiation to attend to."

He looked surprised. "You intend to continue on with the meetings?"

"I will not allow this to deter the future of my people, Captain Archer," she insisted. "The investigation is in the hands of competent personnel, and if all I can do is sit and await their results, then I do not intend to waste that time."

For a moment, Archer stepped outside the duties of his position and the situation to admire the woman behind the minister. Anandra Chal was caught up in the midst of the worst moment of her career, but she was hanging on with everything she had and plowing ahead. The determination she was displaying was impressive.

"Minister, if your people have even an inkling of your strength..." He gestured her forward. "I believe the conference room is free."

CHAPTER

12

"Investigator!"

As he emerged from the minister's shuttle, the hot, fragrant air striking him almost physically, Reed found Navarra waiting for him with a grim expression on her face. "You don't look pleased," he told her, falling into step with her as she headed away from the landing pad and into the spaceport.

Her features softened, and she looked apologetic. "I'm sorry; I am not looking forward this meeting. I have spent the morning looking into Alixa Toras's background, and I am troubled by what I have found." She passed a file to him. "A pleasant enough girl, but some trouble has been reported in her family."

"They had some flooding," he commented, looking over the report. "It damaged the farm run by her father."

"Not so much damaged as wiped out." They exited

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the spaceport, and she opened the door of a vehicle waiting by the curb. "The rains are a yearly occurrence... but never so bad as it has been this past year. I have family in the area." Getting in, she recounted the Toras family's story of the farm's failure and their battle to recover and rebuild. "She moved to Rixx to live with her father's sister while she finishes school, leaving behind her intended."

"Which, in my experience, is never something that ends well," Reed mused, barely noticing as the car lifted off the ground and began racing forward at breakneck speed.

"I suspect that that is a universal constant," Navarra agreed sadly. "Imzadi should never be the source of tragedy. A picture is beginning to form in my mind, Lieutenant Reed, and it is a mockery of something that I and my people hold dear."

"Yes, Ensign Sato mentioned that term last night. I confess I did not hear all that she said on the subject." Putting down the file, he turned and looked at her, awaiting her explanation.

Navarra shrugged. "That is because there is so much to say on the subject that one could never hear it all." She leaned forward to check their progress, apparently in silent communication with the driver. She leaned back and said, "Imzadi is something every Betazoid hopes to encounter and embrace before they pass beyond. Some say Imzadi means the first love that truly reaches the soul. Some say Imzadi is the only love that truly reaches your soul. And some say Imzadi is the very soul itself. I say Imzadi is all of

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these things, and more. But whatever it truly is to us, when a Betazoid meets Imzadi, there is no denying it, and no escaping it, even for those who try."

"And the victim tried?"

"No." She gave her head a brief shake. "No, excuse me, I am not clear. Forgive me... I am not used to explanations with words. Her intended was not Imzadi. Rather, she found Imzadi when she came here to Rixx. Her aunt told me that she met someone whom she believed was Imzadi, and Alixa contacted her father to tell him. Her father had arranged the marriage with her intended, and her aunt believed that Alixa wanted his approval to dissolve that promise. What she doesn't know is what her intended's response to the news was. That is what we are going to find out."

Reed flipped through the file, searching for information about Alixa's intended. Here it was... an up-and-coming sculptor named Abraxas Grax. News that your intended loved another was certainly a motive. "And when we do?"

"We find out whether or not my suspicions are true." She looked tired. "For the sake of both our worlds, I want to be right, but..."

"But for your people's sake, you hope you're wrong." Reed understood. "I find myself in a similar position, Ms. Sel, in that I wish for your sake that you are wrong, and yet for the sake of Crewman Rostov and the negotiations, I wish you are not. There's no way out of this. Someone will pay the price, and through him, so will we all."

CHAPTER

13

"You have a beautiful world, Minister."

Anandra turned away from the window in the conference room to look at him with a sad but proud smile. "I do at that."

Joining her, Archer handed her a steaming mug of coffee and watched as she sipped it, a curious expression on her face. "Watch it," he warned when she pulled the mug away quickly. "It's still hot."

"What is it?"

"Coffee. It's revered on Earth." He chuckled. "Not to mention on this ship."

"It's a most peculiar beverage," she commented, taking another cautious sip. "Bitter, but not unpleasantly so. I think I could get used to it." Sighing, she turned to look at the planet below. "Do you think your world as beautiful as ours, Captain Archer?"

"Forgive my arrogance, Minister, but I think it's

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even more beautiful." He offered a smile and received one in answer. "Which is probably what everyone's answer would be when asked that question."

"True enough," she agreed. "I would like to see your world some day and determine that for myself."

"After this is all said and done, I think that can be arranged. You've shown us your world; we'd be delighted to show you ours."

"After this is all said and done, as you say, I am not sure our worlds will even be speaking."

He stopped, stunned by her words, and turned to meet her gaze. He'd thought the negotiations were going well. The day had been spent profitably discussing tariffs. "You think it will get that bad?"

"I think the shame will be that great." Anandra turned her back on the window and slowly circled the table, skimming her fingertips along its the smooth surface. "Navarra shared her suspicions with me before I boarded. I said nothing at the time because she asked me to give her time to confirm them. I will not voice them now, but I will say this: if she's right, my people will be shamed by the betrayal and crimes of one of our own. It's not our way to lie and to incriminate someone else for our actions. Deception is unheard of. Murder is unheard of."

"Minister, your people can hardly bear the blame of one person's actions any more than mine can. Each person makes her own choices and bears the consequence of her actions. The fates of two worlds should never rest on the mistakes of just one person, whether that person is human or Betazoid."

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She put down her mug, clearly ready to speak, her gaze on his, but the chime of the comm cut her off. She hesitated for a moment, her eyes going to one side, and he realized she was listening, reaching out from beyond the room. "They're here," she said.

He moved to stab the console with his thumb, opening the channel. "Archer here."

"Lieutenant Reed and Investigator Sel are here, sir," Sato reported. "They have someone with them. I've sent them to you in the conference room as instructed."

"All right. Send Commander T'Pol down. I want her here for this. Archer out." He thumbed the channel closed and turned to the minister. "You're right."

She looked grave. "I wish I weren't."

He watched her take a seat at the table, fold her hands before her, and compose herself. Although they had never ceased using their titles, he hadn't missed the fact they had both relaxed in each other's presence. That was now slipping away. Watching her, he had the feeling she knew something he had yet to find out. Whatever it was, he felt sorry for her.

CHAPTER

14

The man that Navarra and Reed escorted into the conference room was a pitiful creature to say the least, but Archer could find no sympathy for him. He was the one who bore the responsibility for the trouble brewing on the planet beneath them, and for ending the life of an innocent woman.

"This, Minister, Captain, is Abraxas Grax." Reed gestured to the downcast man before them. "He was to be the husband of the young lady until just this last week, sir." He slanted a look at his Betazoid companion then at their prisoner. "She wanted to dissolve the engagement because she had encountered someone she believed to be..." Again he looked at Navarra, not certain if he should use the word or not. It seemed to have resonance beyond itself, evoking strong emotion in the Betazoids.

"She had found Imzadi, Minister." Navarra spoke

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with the prompting. "An artist whom she had met in the city."

Anandra sighed and nodded. "So your suspicions are true."

"Yes, Minister," Reed agreed. "You see, Captain, when he discovered this, Mr. Grax... well, I'm afraid he took leave of his senses and quite lost his mind. He traveled to the city with the intent of convincing the woman otherwise, and when he arrived, he had the unfortunate luck of discovering her with Mr. Rostov."

The captain lowered his gaze, already seeing where this story was going. Minister Chal did the same. "Continue, Mr. Reed," he instructed, his voice more composed than Reed felt. "Let's hear the rest."

"Well, sir, the way this gentleman tells it, things got quite heated between Abraxas and Alixa, and Mr. Rostov attempted to intervene. Mr. Grax doesn't quite recall how he managed it, but he subdued Mr. Rostov, and the next thing he was consciously aware of, the girl was dead and Mr. Rostov unconscious."

"At this point," Navarra picked up the story, "he realized who your man was and he panicked... the uniform, you see. Realizing what he had done, Grax entered his mind and erased all evidence of what he had done so that your Crewman Rostov could not incriminate him. At the time, he gave no thought to what his actions would do to the negotiations, or how it would appear when the body and Mr. Rostov were discovered. He simply fled home and attempted to erase any sign of his trip into the city."

Reed spoke next. "When the controversy over Ms.

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Toras's murder erupted at the highest level, Captain, he realized that he had inadvertently planned what was perhaps the perfect murder. Mr. Rostov was the perfect target... an offworlder, someone likely capable of murder. The anger over an offworlder killing one a Betazoid would carry everyone forward, and by the time anyone thought differently, any chance of discovery would be long gone." Reed smiled unpleasantly. "It appears he thought very little of his own law enforcement."

"That is not all he thought very little of," Minister Chal interrupted, anger apparent in her voice. "Look at me, sir," she ordered Grax, rising to her feet. When he hesitated, she glared, and his head snapped up as if he'd been slapped. Reed didn't much want to know what she'd thought at him to get that kind of reaction, but by the expression which crossed Navarra's face, it was not at all pleasant. "How can you have so little comprehension of what you may have done here? So little comprehension of how you've shamed us, of how you've shamed yourself. You have taken a life and nearly ruined another in the process. All of Betazed will bear the mark of your sins in front of offworlders, and all you were concerned for was your own skin?" She turned away from him contemptuously. "Get him out of my sight."

Reed looked at his captain, seeing the grave expression that awaited him there. "Sir?"

"Escort Investigator Sel to the surface with the prisoner," Archer responded. "This is in the hands of Betazed's justice system now. We'll join you when

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we're are ready. Contact Ensign Sato with your location."

"Yes, sir." Reed grabbed the young man's shoulder, Navarra simultaneously laying hands on the other. Together, they propelled him to the door. There they stopped, and Reed reached over to open the door. He happened to catch sight of the captain turning to the minister, laying a hand on her shoulder in a gesture very different from the one Reed and Navarra had just made. Navarra didn't miss the moment either, and she offered a faint smile to him as they stepped through, the prisoner between them.

There was hope for their worlds yet.

CHAPTER

15

"Captain's log, continued: The USS Columbia has arrived to escort the trade delegation back to Earth, along with one important addition. Given the situation involving the murder and crewman Michael Rostov's subsequent incrimination, Minister Anandra Chal has appointed former investigator Navarra Sel as Betazed's first official ambassador to Earth. It was the judgment of both Minister Chal and the Betazoid government that Ms. Sel's work with Lieutenant Reed and her own previous work with their government demonstrated a capability and aptitude that would suit her well in such a position. There may be some question of her inexperience with offworlders, but the minister and I are agree that we all have a lot to learn, and the galaxy's not going to give us a lot of time to do it in. We're out here now, and we've got to make it work, whether we like how we do it or not.

ENTERPRISE VIRTUAL SEASON 5

"Personally, I hope to return to Betazed again, despite our bumpy first meeting. There's a lot we can learn from those folks, and just as much they can learn from us. Frankly, I'm looking forward to those lessons."

End.

— STAR TREK — ENTERPRISE

Fire of Water

While on their first diplomatic mission on the Betazed planet, Archer and its crew are implicated in a puzzling murder. In a society where crime has been eradicated for centuries, who can have committed this ?

At the eve of creating the interstellar alliance, a new adventure begins for the NX-01 Enterprise crew, by Medie.

ENTERPRISE VIRTUAL SEASON 5