

La Belladonna

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La Belladonna

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Summary

Here begins the voyages of the Lafayette-class recon destroyer ISS (later USS) Belladonna, her captain, Zsuzsanna (Zsa-Zsa) Rosza; First Officer, Eliza Flores; and crew as they delve into a mystery that will lead them to multiple universes and even a bit of time travel. This is part of the Raptor-verse series although there will be no Mass Effect crossover for a while yet. The story begins just as Mass Effect's story starts with Shepard discovering the Prothean Beacon on Eden Prime so we've got a long way to go before V'lana and the Gallena pass through the portal into the Mass Effect universe setting the stage for the eventual collision between the two universes--and possibly many others.

Notes

Those of you who are familiar with my old Sutherland, Lexington, and Perseus series written with United Trek will recognize the names of some of these characters. For the most part, I've kept the names and basic character traits (these were characters I enjoyed writing and now they're getting new lives), but they will not be the same characters from the old stories--with two exceptions. The first exception you will see in this part and don't worry, I will write a story showing how he ended up in this universe and what he's been doing--let's just say he's been a very busy man and now has the ear of some very important people and is doing good things. The next crossover you'll see in an upcoming part. I don't want to spoil too much, but let's just say that this man was an original character of the LoneRedShirt's who was kind enough to let me have him. Any of the other characters you see, unless I say otherwise, are reimaginings of the old characters.

Many of you will note a resemblance between Zsa-Zsa and another...shall we say controversial at times...character...namely the commander of the Sutherland, Liz Shelby. Yes, I did pattern Zsa-Zsa after Liz and drew inspiration for Zsa-Zsa from Liz, but Zsa-Zsa is very much her own person with completely different experiences and at times a somewhat different outlook on things. In other words, she's not a carbon copy of Liz.

Eliza is one of the bridge officers you get when you do the Federation start in STO. I've taken quite a few liberties with her as you'll see.

Also, I've tried to make this Terran Empire something different from both the Federation and the Mirror Universes--I hope I've given it its own character and identity. Please let me know if I'm succeeding or not.

To conclude, I hope you all enjoy this tale--it's fun writing Zsa-Zsa and Eliza and giving them more depth than what they have in the current Raptorverse stories.

Prelude

La Belladonna—Part One--Prelude

Archopolis—Terra

Imperial Fleet Headquarters—Special Task Groups Command

“Are you sure you want to do this, Morgan?” Fleet Admiral Count Alexei Kuznetsov, asked, his heavy Russian accent at once betraying him as hailing from Novaya Zemlya, one of the first colonies established with the Empire’s founding in the early 22nd century. “Leaving the other names out of the discussion for now, those two...” the burly admiral jabbed his finger at the images of the two women on his padd, “...have so many reprimands for insubordination and conduct unbecoming on their records that it’s a miracle they’re serving in the main Fleet and not the Border Service or on a penal ship or station.”

“Most of those counts stem from charges filed against them by incompetent and/or corrupt titled superior officers and administrators and because they’re both of commoner birth, the charges remained on their records.” Vice Admiral Bateson countered, “You’ll also note that they have received several commendations for bravery and service—in the case of Rosza, earning the Silver Palm of Gallantry and the Emperor’s Laurel, and Flores, the Knight’s Star. Like it or not Alexei—they get results.”

“And that is the only reason why they are still commissioned officers in the Fleet—regardless of their awards and decorations.” Kuznetsov harumphed. “So...what do you think they’ll find out there?”

“I’m not sure.” Morgan admitted with a sigh, “But if it’s what I think it is...what some friends of mine from the old days ran into long ago...” memories of a lovely woman with olive complexion, luscious dark hair, a brilliant smile, and a delicate perfume flashed in an out of his mind “...then we are facing something far worse. The tip of an iceberg that could be far greater and more dangerous than anything either of us have faced before...”

“And we have both faced a lot of bad shit.” Alexei remarked with a wry grin.

“That we have, old friend.” Morgan laughed. Getting serious once again, he sighed, “I’m not sure what’s out there, Alexei. There’s only one way we’re going to find out. And that’s to send someone there to take a look.”

“And you think Rosza and Flores can deal with whatever it is?”

Nodding his head, Bateson affirmed, “With a good ship and crew and maybe a little help and some luck, yes—I think they can. They’ll get the job done, Alexei. Just give them the same chance you gave me when we first met.”

Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the Russian admiral relented, his lips turned up in a grin, “Khorosho. All right. I’ll approve their promotions and also Rosza as Captain and Flores as First Officer of the *Belladonna*.” Sighing, he remarked with a crooked grin, “I’m going to have to think of something to give Commander von Jager or I’ll have his father, the Margrave, breathing down my neck.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something, Alexei.” Morgan laughed.

“Da...Da.” The Russian admiral affirmed, “Maybe command of a starbase...perhaps Starbase 19?”

“That should work. It’s a prestigious post. Daddy should love that.” Bateson chuckled before asking, “And the others on the list?”

“I’ll approve them too—although I’m not sure why you want them—they’re a rogue’s gallery all on their own—even before adding Rosza and Flores into the mix.” Alexei agreed before sounding a cautionary note, “I hope you’re right about this, Morgan.” The burly admiral shook his head, “Because if you’re not...then everything might be lost.” After a momentary pause, the Russian admiral pleaded, “I have to know one thing, tovarisch.”

“What is it old friend?”

“Why the interest in Rosza? You’ve been following her career since she was an ensign and on at least three separate occasions intervened to keep her from being courtmartialed. What is so special about her? Granted, she is a phenomenal pilot—in all my time in the Fleet I’ve only seen a dozen or so like her, but she’s also a born troublemaker. Insubordinate, impulsive, and she makes even the most decadent aristocrat seem tame by comparison. What is there about her that makes you want to look after her?”

His lips turned up in a winsome smile, Morgan answered his friend’s question, “It’s because she reminds me of someone I knew once—a long time ago.”

“You mean before you...”

“Yes.” Morgan nodded, heaving a sigh, “From my old life. She’s just like her. Even resembles her a little in looks and...like Rosza...my friend was also of Hungarian descent—different family name though.

“Do you think Rosza might be...”

“Liz’s counterpart in this universe?” Morgan finished, shaking his head, “I thought at first she might have been, but no they’re totally different people. Leaving out details like their different family name and lineage, there’s just enough physical and I’d wager genetic differences between the two of them to rule out their being each other’s counterparts. But...just like Liz, she’s impish, impetuous, hypercompetent, hedonistic...”

“A pain in the ass?” Alexei laughed.

“That too.” Morgan responded, joining in the laughter. “But...just like Rosza...Liz was always there—as a captain...an officer...and a friend.”

“That’s who we need now, tovarisch.”

“Amen to that old friend.”

A few days later...

“Hurry up or we’re going to miss the first round!” Eliza Flores, her olive skin glistening with sweat, panted as she and her partner dashed down the street to their destination, the Victoria Arena located on Manuel Megas Boulevard.

“Don’t worry, *dragam*. We have plenty of time. The line at the gate hasn’t even formed yet.” The woman running next to Eliza laughed. An attractive, petite woman with strawberry-blonde hair and freckles and speaking with a thick Hungarian accent, her body glowing with beads of perspiration on her alabaster white skin. Zsuzsanna Rosza leered as she gazed lasciviously on the nearly naked form of her lover, dressed as she was in a fine spider silk loin cloth and matching top. “I do so love the perfume you are wearing, dahling.”

“I’m not wearing any perfume, babe. You know that.” Eliza quipped, licking her lips as she eyed her equally nearly nude companion. “It’s just little ol’ me.”

“Mmmm...little ol’ you is scrumptious.” Zsuzsanna, better known by friends and enemies alike as Zsa-Zsa, purred, “I could eat you alive.”

“You already did. Just an hour ago.” Eliza giggled, “It’s my turn next—don’t forget, you promised.”

“I always keep my word, *dragam*.” Zsa-Zsa chuckled as the pair arrived at the arena entrance, the gate opening after the duo passed their hands over the sensor, instantly transferring the admission fee from their bank accounts. “Come on, I spotted a couple of really good seats. If we move fast enough, we can nab them.”

Eliza agreed, her lips turned down in a sneer as she gestured with her thumb towards a couple who had also entered the arena “Commander Frohlich.”

“That *seggfej*. The one whose team we beat in last month’s Fleet Games.” Zsa-Zsa grimaced, “Didn’t you call him a...what was it...”

“A cross between a Klingon Hahjvav and a Cardassian gutfish.” Eliza laughed, “It was worth the ten days restriction I got for it.” Glaring at the pompous aristocrat, the raven-haired daughter of common laborers snorted, “We better hurry or that titled asshole and his whore will take our seats.”

Her lips turned up in an evil grin, Zsa-Zsa quipped, “Frohlich’s not going to mess with us—not after the ass-kicking we gave him and his crew last month.”

“Yeah.” Eliza smirked, “That Pareses Squares match was fun. Didn’t you break his nose?”

Laughing, her Hungarian lover affirmed, “*Igen*. But let’s not forget that you scored the winning points and the victory party they had to throw for us was even better.”

“That was fun.” Eliza grinned as the pair made it to their seats in time, beating out their titled rival who, deciding not to challenge the pair for the choice seats, settled for giving them a derisive glare before moving on to another section. Glancing at the program on her padd, the olive-skinned woman remarked as she showed the schedule to her partner, “This looks interesting—Ahav Th’viarhat, the Andorian Winter Festival champion is going up against a holographic Klingon houndmaster controlling a pack of wild Klingon targs.”

“Sounds promising.” Zsa-Zsa remarked as she perused the program, “Isn’t Ahav ranked in the top ten this season?”

“Top five.” Eliza corrected, “He grabbed the five spot after beating V’Sal the Reaver in last month’s Birthday Games.”

“That’s right!” Zsa-Zsa recalled, “He was dual wielding with hrisal and chaka and V’Sal was using a lirpa and ahn-woon.”

“Yeah.” Eliza affirmed, “Ahav managed to get close and took V’Sal out with a twin fangs slice and dice maneuver. If it weren’t for the arena safety protocols that were put in place a few years ago when Jerome issued that Edict, V’Sal would have been killed. Instead, he got a few bruises and cuts, but otherwise came through it okay. Last I heard, he’s still in the top 25—but just. You wanna place a bet on Ahav or the hologram? Ahav’s 30 for 35 and the five bouts he lost were close.”

“I’m thinking Ahav. He’s having a good year.” Zsa-Zsa shrugged, “So...how much do you want to put down?”

“Hmmm...how does a hundred Imperial solidi each sound?”

“Sounds good.” The Hungarian blonde responded as she tapped her padd and then handed it to her partner, “Your turn.”

“And we’re done.” Eliza grinned as she turned her attention back to the program. “Hmmm...the first bout’s a duel.”

“Lieutenant, Junior Grade Joachim Bester versus Count Ignacio Treviso.” Zsa-Zsa read from the program, “Now why do those names ring bells?”

“The two of them were stationed on the *Iphigenia*.” Eliza recalled, “I remember the subject came up when me and Bradley...the XO on the *Iphi*...we were gossiping over drinks at the club last week while you were at that meeting.” Smirking, the raven-haired Latina teased, “You missed a good orgy.”

Sighing, Zsa-Zsa moaned, “I wish I could have made it, but Admiral Bateson made it very clear to me that it was really important that I attend...that our future might rely in me being there.”

“Sounds dramatic.” Eliza probed, “Can you tell me more? What was the conference about? You never talked about it so I assumed it was classified and didn’t want to pry.”

“It wasn’t so much classified as very technical.” Zsa-Zsa recalled, “The main speaker was a physicist from the Vulcan Science Academy.”

“So what was the subject about?”

“The existence of multiple universes...interdimensional travel...time travel and temporal physics...that sort of thing.”

“Multiple universes like where those barbarians who called themselves the Terran Empire come from—as if there was any doubt as to who the real Terran Empire is.” Eliza snorted derisively, “The ones we took down at Sirach Pulsar about a year or so ago?”

“Something like that.” Zsa-Zsa nodded, “Only it got much more involved. I wish you were there, *dragam*. You probably would have understood it better than I did.”

“I doubt that.” Eliza grinned, “I’m no scientist. T’vela’s the one you should have taken with you. She eats that shit up. So...what did Bateson tell you after the meeting?”

Letting out a breath of air, Zsa-Zsa answered her lover’s query, “He gave me a padd and told me to read everything on it and that he’d be in touch when it was time. He also said that he might need both of us soon.”

“So...” Eliza prompted, “What was it that you read?”

“It’s...” Zsa-Zsa stammered, unsure of how to proceed, “To say it’s bizarre would be an understatement. Cross universal meetings and encounters...exotic advanced alien races...travel through subspace portals and gates...not to mention the entries on time travel and divergent time lines. Hell! I’m still trying to process it all.”

“Well...” Eliza offered as she reached over and grabbed her lover’s hand, “If you want to bounce any of that stuff off me...”

“Thanks, dahling.” Zsa-Zsa smiled, “I’ll take you up on that when we get back and after we’ve had our fun.” Growing serious for a moment, the youthful Hungarian admitted, “You’re damn good when it comes to putting pieces of a complex puzzle together, *dragam*. I think I’m going to need that.”

“That’s what I’m here for babe.” Eliza smiled as she waved down a concessionaire—a slender Bolian male wearing a loin cloth and ordered liqueurs for both herself and her companion.

“So...getting back to what we were talking about before we got sidetracked, what did Bradley say? How did the duel start?” Zsa-Zsa asked, changing the subject.

“It’s actually kinda sad.” Eliza replied, “He told me that before the shit hit the fan, Joachim and Ignacio were the best of friends...more than friends really...”

“Lovers?”

“Apparently so.” Eliza confirmed. “Until they went out on shore leave...and...Bradley doesn’t know for sure, but he heard that they both got really shit-faced drunk and stoned and someone said something stupid that they didn’t mean and a challenge was made.”

“And we have a duel.” Zsa-Zsa sighed, “The most common cause of duels in the Empire—next to fucking an aristo’s spouse. Did they try to patch it up? You know how these things usually go—someone says something stupid then we get a challenge and then when the two parties sober up and realize what they’ve done, they get their seconds to arrange a settlement. Usually all it takes is a public apology. Honor is satisfied and life goes on.”

“Not this time.” Eliza shook her head, “Too many people were there and heard it, so Ignacio’s family’s putting pressure on him to ‘preserve the family honor’. They were demanding that the duel be to the death, but they had to settle for first blood instead.”

“Duels to the death have been outlawed in the Fleet for the past couple of years—ever since Bateson arrived and the new Emperor appointed Admiral Kuznetsov as head of the Fleet. Not even aristos can get away with violating them.” Zsa-Zsa noted, further speculating, “Getting off topic again, haven’t you noticed that there have been a lot of reforms since Jerome took the throne?”

“Yeah.” Eliza nodded, “Can’t say I have any problems with ‘em—abolishing chattel slavery in those colonies where it hadn’t been already outlawed...setting time limits on indentured servitude and enforcing the laws against abuse of bonded servants and laborers. I know my parents were happy when Jerome got those reforms through the Diet.”

“Not to mention increasing educational and job opportunities for those like us who were born into the lower orders.” Zsa-Zsa pointed out. “Also making it easier for non-human races who were recently brought into the Empire to gain Terran citizenship, enlist in the Fleet and attend the Academy and other colleges and universities. A lot of changes have been made—most of them for the better.”

“You think it’s a coincidence that all those reforms started after Bateson appeared on the scene?” Eliza asked.

“Nem.” Zsa-Zsa shook her head. “I remember once...back before I met you—when I was still a lieutenant—the admiral was telling me one of his stories...”

“He does like to hear himself talk.” Eliza giggled.

“True.” Zsa-Zsa smiled impishly, “But usually his stories are pretty funny and...if you listen closely enough...you learn something from them. That time...” the Hungarian beauty recalled, her manner now more pensive than usual, “The conversation took more of a philosophical turn. He asked me what I would do if I were offered command of my own ship.”

“So...what did you tell him?”

“I laughed and said fat chance of that happening. You know my father disappeared when I was a year old and mother was a maid for the Radetskys. My family’s just one step up from bonded servants. I told him that it was a miracle that I even made it into the officer ranks—much less lieutenant.”

“Then?”

“He repeated the question. Told me to say the first thing that came to my mind.” Zsa-Zsa recollected, “I told him I’d kick ass. Then he grinned this big shit eating grin and told me to be patient—that my time would come and when it did to be ready.”

“Damn! I wonder what he knows that we don’t!” Eliza pondered, then her attention drawn to the arena, she pointed, “Look! The duel’s about to start.”

The two women watched as two men, accompanied by their seconds, approached each other, each walking at a slow deliberate pace. One man was of medium height and average weight, with a muscular build and sandy-blond hair, wearing black leather pants, boots, and a loose fitting white shirt. The other man, dressed similarly, but slender with dark hair and a goatee, marched forward from the other side.

“The blond must be Joachim.” Zsa-Zsa speculated as the two duelists, meeting in the middle, paused two meters apart, facing each other. “He looks scrumptious.” The Hungarian hedonist purred as she licked her lips lasciviously

“That he does.” Eliza answered with a sensuous growl of her own. “Maybe we should check on him after the duel?” the olive-skinned beauty proposed, “Help him celebrate if he wins or cheer him up if he loses.”

“I think I can get with that.” Zsa-Zsa leered as the announcer’s voice resounded through the stadium..

“Our first bout is a duel of honor between the challenger, His Grace, Lieutenant Count Ignacio Treviso of House Treviso of the Imperial Fleet and Lieutenant Joachim Bester of common lineage, also of the Imperial Fleet. This is a duel to first blood. The referee, Commander Delix of the Iphigenia is now addressing the duelists.”

“Ho hum...” Zsa-Zsa yawned as she and her lover watched the proceedings, “Here comes the standard bullshit.”

“I am honor bound to offer the duelists one final opportunity to resolve their differences without combat.” The Denobulan commander announced, “Count Treviso? Are you willing to agree to a reconciliation should the challenged offer a public apology according to form?”

“The challenge will only be withdrawn if the challenged issues an apology accompanied by a public act of submission in the form of resigning his commission and begging forgiveness on his knees.” The Count responded, a slight hitch in his voice as he uttered his words.

“No way Joachim’s going to agree to that.” Eliza caustically remarked, spitting in Treviso’s direction, “Goddamn aristo pig.”

“Heh.” Zsa-Zsa snorted, “If Joachim doesn’t kick that little prick’s ass, I will.”

“I get first dibs.” Eliza snarled, “You can have what’s left.”

“How about this?” Zsa-Zsa smirked, “Whoever gets to him first saves enough for the other?”

“Works for me.”

“Lieutenant Bester?” The referee asked according to the traditional formula, “What is your response?”

“No. I will not apologize, nor will I agree to public humiliation.” The young officer declared in a firm voice.

“Jo!” Zsa-Zsa cheered in Hungarian, “Shove that aristo’s nose in his own shit.”

“As the challenged party, Lieutenant Bester, you have the choice of weapons.” Delix gestured with a wave of his hand to a table where a variety of edged weapons were displayed.

Walking towards the table, Joachim, picking up a rapier, tested its balance and handling. He then picked up a dagger and did the same. Nodding his head, the young lieutenant made his decision, “Rapier and dagger.”

“Hmmm...Finesse with a bit of strength.” Zsa-Zsa noted. “Did Bradley say anything about what branch Joachim was in or anything about that?”

“I think he said something about him being a junior tactical officer.” Eliza recalled, “He had a spotless service record until this shit happened.”

“And now that’s all been flushed down the crapper.” Zsa-Zsa growled, “Win or lose, he’s a permanent jg if he stays in the Fleet and he can

forget about any plum assignments. He's going to spend the rest of his career in the Border Service or steering garbage scows."

"And if he resigns, he'll have a hard time finding a good paying job." Eliza frowned, "What corporations the aristos don't own or control are owned by merchant wannabes looking to one day buy a title or office."

"Good luck doing that." Zsa-Zsa snorted, "Jerome put the lid on selling offices and titles last year—remember?"

"Yeah." Eliza nodded before breathing a frustrated sigh, "But still...the best he'll be able to manage will be maybe a junior clerk's slot or something similar."

"*Igen.*" Zsa-Zsa agreed, "You're right, *dragam*. Win or lose—he's fucked."

"The weapons have been chosen." Delix formally proclaimed to the spectators. "The duelists will now take their places." As the two adversaries took their assigned places, the referee, speaking in a loud, clear voice, announced, "On guard! Begin!"

The two duelists circled each other looking for an opening. Treviso makes a lunge with his rapier only to have it deflected by Joachim's dagger.

"Slick move." Eliza noted, "He's setting Treviso up. Dinner tonight that dumbass takes the bait."

"Heh." Zsa-Zsa laughed, "Dumbass is going to fall for it, but I'll go ahead and take the bet. Either way...we both win."

Eliza cheered loudly, ignoring the glares being sent her way by higher caste spectators as Treviso fell for his opponent's trap, "Take that stuck up vole-fucker down!"

Striking quickly, the blond lieutenant, parrying his opponent's rapier, drew close enough to the count to strike with the dagger in his other hand, slashing the aristocrat's arm, drawing blood.

Laughing, Zsa-Zsa quipped, "I think they heard you all the way to Trill, *dragam*."

"You owe me dinner! You owe me dinner!" Eliza danced, lifting her loincloth and flashing her lover along with any nearby spectators watching.

"*Rendben...rendben...*All right...all right!" Zsa-Zsa chuckled, "Where do you wanna go?"

"Hmmm..." Eliza tapped her chin with her forefinger, "I think I'm in the mood for Thai. How does *Ayada Thai* sound?"

"Works for me." Zsa-Zsa replied.

"All right." Eliza grinned, "It's a date. And for dessert..." the olive skin beauty's grin turned into a leer, "A little Zsa-Zsa."

"I think I can go with that." Zsa-Zsa purred, but before she could utter another word, her comm badge chirped. Gritting her teeth in frustration, the impulsive Hungarian snapped, "Rosza! Who the fuck is it?"

"Commander Rosza?" A voice familiar to both women came from the comm badge.

"Shit. You fucked up now, babe" Eliza whispered, "That's the admiral."

Trying, but not totally succeeding in keeping from laughing, Admiral Bateson replied, "Zsa-Zsa?"

"Yes, Sir." Zsa-Zsa, blushing bright red now, responded, now in a much more deferential tone.

"Remember several years ago when I told you that one day your time would come and for you to be ready?":

"Yes., Sir."

"And then a few weeks ago before the conference and then after when I told you that our future might depend on you attending that conference and that I might need the both of you soon?"

Feeling a chill running up and down her back, Zsa-Zsa responded in a subdued voice, "*Igen*. Sir. I remember."

"Well...Zsa-Zsa...Eliza...that time is now and the future...might well depend on what both of you do. Meet me at Memorial Square in front of the Survivor's Monument and I'll fill you in."

"Aye, Sir." Both women answered in unison.

"Good. I'll see you then. Bateson out."

Taking a deep breath as she stood up, Zsa-Zsa held out a hand for her lover, helping her on to her feet. "It looks like we'll have to put off our dinner and dessert date until later, *dragam*. I have a feeling the shit has either hit or is about to hit the fan."

Hallowed Ground

Chapter Summary

Some secrets are revealed as Zsa-Zsa and Eliza receive their orders as Captain and First Officer of the Belladonna

Chapter Notes

Some more world building here as I'm trying to build up a Terran Empire that is different from the Mirror Universes. It is tougher and grittier than the Federation and it will never be the Federation, but there are forces at work trying to make things better.

La Belladonna: Hallowed Ground

Memorial Square—Archopolis—Terra

Rematerializing at the entrance to one of the most prominent and sacred sites in the entire Terran Empire—second in importance only to the Imperial Palace, Zsa-Zsa and Eliza, now wearing their standard Fleet uniforms—gold midriff top and skirt, black boots, and ceremonial dagger sheathed on their thighs, took a moment to get their bearings before Zsa-Zsa, now speaking in a soft, almost reverential tone, pondered, “It was a cadet the last time I was here.”

“I was too.” Eliza replied, her voice tone also respectful. “The Tour was required of all senior cadets before their graduation.”

“To remind us of what we lost because of the Xindi rape of our world.” Zsa-Zsa recited from memory.

“That with courage, strength, and determination, no force...no obstacle...no invader...will ever defeat us.” Eliza murmured, continuing the narration.

“And so we promise our lives to defend our sacred home from ever again being trod upon by barbarian boots.” Zsa-Zsa finished, the couple standing still, quiet, for several moments before Zsuzsanna, taking her companion by the hand, asked, “Are you ready, *dragam*, or do you need a few more minutes?”

“Let’s go.” Eliza smiled, “I’d like to know what it could be that got the admiral as spooked as he seemed to be.”

“I too.” Zsa-Zsa replied as the pair entered the gardens, passing by the many statues and monuments as they walked. Gesturing at one of the statues, the young Hungarian remarked, an undercurrent of bitterness in her voice as she spoke, “I wonder what he would think if he could see how his descendants have turned out.”

“That’s Malcolm Reed. The founder of one of the first Houses. He led the forces that drove the Xindi out of the United Kingdom, didn’t he?”

“*Igen*.” Zsa-Zsa confirmed, “Also established the colony of New Albion and led the Third Fleet to victory over the Admiral Shran and Andorians at the Battle of Sirius.”

“He was named Archduke of Andorian Province later and played a big part in convincing Emperor Jonathon I to extend citizenship to the Andorians, Tellarites, and Vulcans.” Eliza recalled, “I remember reading that the citizenship act barely passed the Diet—there was a powerful faction of nobles that wanted to limit Terran citizenship to pure-blood humans.”

“*Igen*.” Zsa-Zsa nodded as the pair paused in front of the statue. “He was almost killed in a duel by Count Deckard, the leader of the Prima Terra Party over it.”

“You know how much I hate the aristos, love.” Eliza remarked somewhat pensively.

“*Igen*.” I feel the same.” Zsa-Zsa responded, agreeing with her lover on their mutual antipathy towards the upper classes.

“Reed, Tucker, and the others were different though.” Eliza mused, “They gave a damn about the rest of us. Probably because they were us at one time and never forgot it. That’s why those two were heroes of mine growing up.”

“I understand.” Zsa-Zsa nodded in agreement. “I liked Baroness Sato. She helped Reed push that citizenship act through, partly because of her friendship with T’Pol and Phlox after the First Conquest Wars.”

“She took her share of shit over it too.” Eliza noted, “Those three also worked with Emperor Jonathon to put down a bunch of other bad ideas that were brought up at that Diet.”

Zsa-Zsa contemplated, speaking softly, “That Diet was so important. If it had gone the way Deckard and the other *seggfej* wanted it to, we might have gone the same way as the barbarians. I don’t even want to think about how things would have turned out if Deckard had been a little faster or Reed a little slower at that crucial moment in their duel. Everything might have changed for all of us.”

“And not for the better.” Eliza agreed.

“*Igen.*” Zsa-Zsa nodded in agreement before adding in a caustic tone, “Too bad the current Archduke’s a douchebag who treats his bonded servants almost as bad as the Orions treat their slaves. The only reason he doesn’t try to enslave them outright is because of the anti-slavery laws and bonded servant protection laws that were passed and he knows that Jerome is just looking for an excuse to get him stripped of his title and expelled from the Diet. He’s smart enough to stay just within the letter of the law.”

“And Sato’s descendant’s not much better.” Eliza agreed, “You remember the strip mining of Alpha III.”

“A beautiful class M planet ruined just so Hiroshi Sato could extract its resources. *Kibaszott seggfej.*”

Pointing to a bronze statue of a man, woman, and child huddled together in the center of the square, Eliza exclaimed in a hushed tone, “The Monument of Survivors.”

“And I see the admiral.” Zsa-Zsa remarked, pointing to a man who appeared in his late sixties with grey hair and beard, and wearing a simple, unadorned version of the Imperial Fleet uniform, the only thing designating him as being of flag rank the two broad and one narrow embroidered stripes on his sleeves and a dark blue sash with silver trim around his waist. “Let’s go. It’s time to find out what’s going on.”

Smiling as the two women approached him, Admiral Bateson warmly greeted them, “Zsa-Zsa...Eliza...thank you for meeting me here. I’m sorry I messed up your vacation plans.”

“It’s all right, Sir.” Zsa-Zsa replied with a smile of her own as she regarded warmly one of the few senior officers she liked and trusted. Her smile turning into a mischievous smirk, she joked, “We’ll make it up later.”

“I’m sure you will.” Morgan laughed as memories of another equally impish close friend passed briefly through his mind.

“So...” Eliza asked, getting to the point, “If we might ask, Sir...”

“Why the hell did I interrupt your dinner and...other...plans?” The admiral laughed, eliciting a chuckle from both women. Drawing his two protégés’ attention to the statue, Morgan gave it a good long look as he remarked, “I’m sure you both know the history of this monument...”

Nodding her head, Zsa-Zsa recalled from memory, “It’s a memorial to those who died during the initial Xindi attack on October 5, 2030, that wiped out this city along with all the other major cities on Earth. It signaled the start of the Xindi Invasion and the Xindi Wars.”

“That surprise attack and the subsequent invasion reduced the human population from seven billion to slightly more than two.” Eliza added with just a touch of bitterness in her voice.

“And the Xindi paid dearly for it.” Morgan pointed out, gently admonishing the young lieutenant commander. “The reptilian branch was rendered nearly extinct. The primate and avian branches still trying to recover their numbers. And the aquatic species is isolated. Not only that, Xindi still face travel and occupational restrictions. They’re not permitted to leave their home system without a passport that is next to impossible to obtain, nor can they enlist in the Fleet and are barred from employment in most industries. They can’t attend most colleges and universities out of their home systems—and those institutions of higher learning they are allowed to have are limited in what they can teach. Finally, they’re one of the few conquered species that is not eligible to apply for Terran citizenship.”

“So we should just forgive and forget? After what they did? The massacres? Slave labor camps?” Zsa-Zsa asked, her voice tone while tinged with more than a touch of anger, also carried in it an undertone of deep thought as she carefully considered her mentor’s words.

“Forget?” Morgan shaking his head, gestured again at the statue, “No. Never. We owe it to those who suffered and died to never forget. But forgive?” He paused for a moment before continuing, his expression attentive as his eyes seemed to look into the souls of both of his young charges. “Yes. Over two centuries have passed since the Expulsion and the following War of Retribution. Don’t you think that the time has come to let these poor peoples’ spirits rest in peace.”

“*Talan.*” Zsa-Zsa murmured in a soft voice as her mentor’s words hit home. “Maybe. Yes. There is no one left alive from that time. Perhaps it is time to let go of the past.”

“Eliza? Your thoughts?” Morgan asked in the same probing manner.

The olive-skinned officer breathed a sigh, “I guess. They’ve paid for it and then some. Maybe it is time to move on.”

Pleased at the two young women’s answer, Morgan requested, “Walk with me.” They walked together to what seemed a ruined temple or memorial. Speaking softly as he gazed on the collapsed structure, he recited from memory, carefully observing the expressions of his two youthful students as he spoke. “With malice toward none with charity for all with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan ~ to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

“Huh?” Zsa-Zsa exclaimed, a confused look on her face. “What was that? Is that something someone said? Who said it? Where’s it from?”

“I’ve never heard it before either.” Eliza added, her expression also one of puzzlement.

“I’d have been very pleasantly surprised if you did.” Morgan replied with a sad smile. “His...and the words and actions of men and women like him...let’s just say they aren’t very popular in some circles around here. There are quite a few Peers who would not like for those words to get out to too many people—especially those of the lower orders such as yourselves.”

“I can see why.” Zsa-Zsa mused as she pondered her mentor’s words, “They could cause a real shitstorm.”

“Yes.” Morgan smiled, “They could—and have at different times in our history. In case you’re interested, the man’s name was Abraham

Lincoln and he led his nation through a trying period of civil war fighting for the freedom of people who were enslaved for no other reason than the color of their skin.”

“I think I understand too.” Eliza commented, “The aristos would not like us knowing too much about him.”

“No they wouldn’t. Lincoln was assassinated shortly after giving that speech.” Morgan shook his head as he pointed to a spot in front of the ruined structure. “About a hundred years later another great man made another speech right about there. His name was Martin Luther King Jr. and he was assassinated about five years later for what he believed in. I’m not going to recite to you the entire speech—it—and some other works that are most definitely on the Censor’s List are encrypted on this padd I’m going to give you. You two can read it at your leisure. But here’s one of the most important parts of it. “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”

Moved by the words, Zsa-Zsa whistled softly, murmuring, “Those words would cause a shitstorm and get whoever said them shipped off to the Tartarus Penal Colony.”

“Indeed they would.” Morgan agreed, a sly grin on his face, “But I think I can trust the two of you to keep this our little secret.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Eliza asked, “You’re not going to…”

“Of course not!” Morgan declared, “I made peace with the fact that I was never going to be able to go back where I came from a long time ago. I am loyal to His Majesty and the Empire—as I know you are—that’s one of the reasons why I’m talking with you here and now and why I’m showing you this. Besides…” the old man smiled, “I think you’ll agree that Jerome’s a fine young man and he’s already showing himself to be an excellent emperor. These are ideals…Aims to strive towards—and believe it or not we are working towards those goals—slowly…fitfully…sometimes reluctantly…and not everyone will embrace them. But we will get there one day and no…we won’t become a copy of the place I came from. The Empire will remain true to itself. But that doesn’t mean there’s no room for improvement. And I think we can do so without losing our identity or who we are in the process.”

“I understand… I think.” Zsa-Zsa replied, “But again I have to ask—why are you showing us this now? When you could have done it much earlier?”

Chuckling, Morgan replied, “You already know the answer to that. You’ve both paid attention to this old man’s stories even though you might have rolled your eyes a few times at them and wondered if they’d never end. So…what did my friend, Bob Wesley always say when someone—including himself—screwed up?”

Nodding her head as she recalled those words, Zsa-Zsa answered back, “To do better. *Ertem*. I think I understand.”

“Eliza?” Morgan asked, gazing into the eyes of his other unofficial student.

“I get it.” Eliza affirmed, speaking in a soft voice.

“So…” Zsa-Zsa asked, cutting to the chase, “On the comm you said something about being ready? Ready for what?”

“Something is happening on the borders but we’re not sure what.” The admiral explained. “If it’s what I think it is then not just the Empire, but the entire galaxy—and maybe more—could be in danger.”

“Another barbarian incursion?” Eliza asked, referring to the savage Mirror Terran Empires.

“No.” The admiral shook his head, “At least not completely—although I wouldn’t rule out one or more of them being involved. This is something else. And if it’s what I think it might be—something I and some friends of mine encountered in my old life—then we all are in trouble.”

“What did your friends run into?” Zsa-Zsa asked as both her curiosity and her predatory instinct were simultaneously aroused.

“Don’t worry, I’ll explain soon enough.” Morgan replied with an air of mystery.

“So… You want the two of us to go and check it out?” Zsa-Zsa asked as both she and her lover licked their lips in anticipation.

“In a manner of speaking.” Morgan replied as he handed another padd to the young Hungarian officer. “Read it and then pass it on to Eliza.”

Reading the padd, Zsa-Zsa let out a breath of air, “*Szent szar*. Holy shit.”

“What does it say, honey?” Eliza asked.

Handing the padd to her lover, a still shocked Zsa-Zsa murmured, “Read it, *dragam*.”

“Shit.” Eliza gasped, “This is a joke—isn’t it—it’s gotta be.”

“Do I look like I’m laughing.” Morgan replied with a grave look on his face.

“No, Sir.” A still disbelieving Eliza whispered.

“But how?” Zsa-Zsa asked, “You know our record. At one time or another we’ve pissed off just about every aristo in the Fleet.”

“And more than a few who aren’t in the aristocracy.” Morgan chuckled. “Take a look at who gave the final approval—below Alexei’s signature.”

“The Emperor?” Zsa-Zsa gasped, looking down again at the padd, “How did you get him to sign on and what did it cost you, Sir?”

“Oh...the Emperor’s got a good head on his shoulders. Once Alexei and I explained just how serious the situation might be and why I wanted the two of you, he was quick to sign onboard. Alexei was also pretty easy to win over once he understood what’s at stake. That being said, I do owe him and a few other admirals a favor or two. We need people who aren’t afraid to think and step outside the box or to roll the dice on an all or nothing bet if they have to—and the first two names who came up were yours. Congratulations Captain...” he proclaimed, smiling first at Zsa-Zsa and then Eliza, “Commander.” Taking the padd back and calling up another entry, the admiral pointed out, “Here’s your new command. Take a look.”

“The *Belladonna*? One of the new recon-destroyers?” Zsa-Zsa let out a breath of air. “That’s the sort of command that goes to an aristo—never a commoner. Hell, I’d have been ecstatic with a beat up old *Miranda*. How the hell did you pull that off, Sir?”

Chuckling, Morgan replied, “I called in some more favors. It also helps having the Emperor and the Chief of Fleet Operations on your side.” Getting serious, he explained, “You’re getting that ship for a reason. I have a feeling you’re going to need its unique capabilities before this is done—especially if you have to do what I think you might have to in order to succeed.”

“I’m going to need a crew.” Zsa-Zsa put forth, “A good crew. I don’t want a bunch of aristocratic assholes who get off on smelling their own farts. I need people who are just as crazy as the two of us...” she smirked, winking at Eliza who in turn smirked back. “They’re going to have to be able to think for themselves and not be afraid to speak out when they’ve got a good idea or think that I’m fucking up, but also who won’t give me any shit once I’ve made up my mind.”

“You’ll get them.” Morgan promised as he handed the padd with the roster to Zsa-Zsa.

“Eliza, *dragam*? What do you think?” Zsa-Zsa asked, handing her lover the padd after she had read it.

Reading the names, a smile appeared on the brand new First Officer’s face. “I know a few of these and have heard of a few more. They’ll get the job done.” Handing the padd back to her lover, she whispered in her ear.

“*Igen*.” Zsa-Zsa whispered back. Turning her attention back to the admiral, the newly minted Captain pleaded, “I’d like to add one more name to the roster, Sir.”

“Who?” Morgan asked.

“Lieutenant junior grade Joachim Bester.” Zsa-Zsa replied.

“Hmmm...he’s the young man who fought that duel today against Count Treviso, isn’t he?”

“Yes, Sir.” Eliza confirmed, adding, “Sir? His career in the Fleet is over now. He defeated an aristo in a public duel. There’s no way he’ll ever get a promotion or decent assignment now.”

“You’re right.” Morgan nodded as he touched his padd. “Let me call up his service record. Hmmm...” the gray-haired admiral vocalized as he carefully perused the information appearing on his screen. “Top ten percent of his graduating class at the Academy...commendations for courage under fire...leaving out the usual piddling bullshit that pops up on just about everybody’s record no real disciplinary issues—unlike a pair of young women I know.” Tapping the padd, he proclaimed, “Done. He’s now a member of your crew, Captain Rosza.”

“Captain Rosza...” Zsa-Zsa smiled, “I like the sound of that.”

“Good.” Morgan nodded, “Meet me in my office tomorrow at 0900 hours and we’ll go over the mission brief. Until then...” he grinned as he again made an entry on his padd, “Enjoy your dinner—on me—and your new accommodations for the next couple of days.”

“The Empress Eugenie Suite of the Valerian Hotel?” Eliza whistled, “Sir?” She protested, “This must...I mean you can’t even get a basic room for less than...”

“Don’t worry about it!” Morgan grinned, holding up his hand. His expression once again growing grim, he declared in a grave voice, “Please let me do this for you. It’s the least I can do considering the risk you will probably be facing if I am right.”

“Thank you, *kis apam*.” Zsa-Zsa said in soft voice as she stood on tip toes and kissed her long-time patron on the cheek.

“Have a good night you two.” Morgan smiled warmly at his two favorite proteges. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Empress Eugenie Suite later that night

“I am flying so high right now...” Eliza sighed in contentment as she luxuriated in the warm bath with her lover by her side, the fragrant aroma of rose and jasmine in the air.

“Mmmm...” Zsa-Zsa purred as she nuzzled up to her lithe companion, caressing her, “What was that euphoric again?”

“*Lissa’s Delight*.” Eliza replied, “I was told that it’s made from a mixture of the Tellasian root and rose hips. Guaranteed to make you feel good. It’s a secret formula and can’t be replicated.”

“Let’s make sure we lay in a good supply of it before we depart. If *kis apam* is right, we might not be able to get any more for some time.”

“Count on it.” Eliza grinned as her hands began to wander. “Hmmm...guess what I found...”

Zsa-Zsa gasped with delight, “Oh! Don’t you dare stop! You know I love it when you do that.”

“Oh?” Eliza giggled, “You do?”

“Igen.” Zsa-Zsa sighed, “Oh yes.”

Fleet Headquarters—Admiral Bateson’s office the next morning

Greeting his two apprentices with a sly grin, Morgan gestured to a pair of seats before his desk, “Good morning, ladies. I trust you slept well.”

Yawning, Zsa-Zsa quipped back, “Didn’t sleep a wink, *kis apam*.”

“Heh.” The admiral chuckled as he made his way to the replicator. “You two look like you could use a pot or two of coffee.”

“I wouldn’t turn one down, Sir.” Eliza bantered back, stifling a yawn.

“Me neither.” Zsa-Zsa begged, “Please...”

“All right.” The admiral responded as he picked up a tray with a carafe, three mugs, and containers for milk and sugar from the replicator. Setting the tray down on his desk, he poured a mug for himself. “You girls can help yourselves.”

“Thanks, *kis apam*.” Zsa-Zsa smiled as she and her lover both filled their mugs, Zsa-Zsa adding cream and sugar and Eliza just cream to their drinks. Sipping their coffee, the two officers waited patiently until their mentor spoke.

Setting down a pair of padds on his desk, the admiral slid them to the two women seated on the other side. “These padds go into more detail on what I’m about to tell you—you can read them later. Something is happening near the Eleuthra System...”

“That’s in unexplored space.” Zsa-Zsa noted, “Are we talking pirates? Raiders? Someone new?”

“It could be the Klingons or Romulans.” Eliza ventured, contributing to the discussion.

“We don’t think the Klingons or Romulans are behind this...at least not openly.” Morgan responded, “At first we did think it was pirates or raiders, but our listening outpost in the Drozana System hasn’t detected any of the activity that’s normally associated to those things. Along with that is the fact that there are always ships that will succeed in evading, escaping, or fighting off pirates and raiders. There have been no reports of that either. Also, merchants and scouts talk to each other—they have to—for mutual protection if nothing else. There’s been no mention of increased pirate or raider activity from them.”

“That leaves someone new.” Zsa-Zsa concluded.

“Exactly.” Morgan nodded. His expression taking on a serious and grave countenance, he admonished, “What you are about to hear is classified at the highest levels. Other than the two of you, the only ones who know everything I’m about to tell you are Fleet Admiral Kuznetsov and the Emperor.”

“Ertem.” Zsa-Zsa acknowledged, her countenance also sincere. “We will keep silent.”

“What she said.” Eliza affirmed, “We won’t say a word, Sir.”

“I know.” The admiral replied, a warm smile appearing on his face. “Freshen your coffee and sit back, this is going to take a while.”

Much later, after their patron had finished his tale, Zsa-Zsa let out a low whistle, “If I’d have heard this from anyone else, I’d say they were crazy. But from you...”

“Yes?”

“I believe you.” Her expression now one of sincere sympathy, the young Hungarian smiled sadly, “To never see your home...your wife...your friends...again. I am so sorry.”

“I don’t know what to say, Sir.” Eliza commiserated, “I’m sorry.”

“So...” Zsa-Zsa grinned, “All those stories about...”

“Joseph Akinola, Boris Rodenko, Bob Wesley, Aliz Bathory, Jennifer Whatley, and all the rest of them?” Morgan smiled wistfully as the faces of old friends lingered in his thoughts, “Yes. All true.” A crooked grin crossing his face, he joked, “Well...maybe with just a little bit of exaggeration here and there to liven up the story.”

“And you think what we might run into could be what you and your friends ran into?” Eliza asked.

“I think it’s a good possibility.” Morgan nodded, “That’s why I’m sending the two of you and the *Belladonna* with a handpicked crew. They come from all classes and races in the Empire and maybe one or two outside it. They’re smart—sometimes maybe a little too smart for their own good—kind of like their captain and first officer,” he teased, “in short—they’re rogues, outlaws, younger and illegitimate sons and daughters, all daring and willing to take chances—but also smart enough not to take stupid chances—again like two officers I’m well

acquainted with.”

“What should we do if it is what you think it is?” Zsa-Zsa questioned.

“Contact me if you can and we’ll proceed from there.” Morgan replied, “I’ve already cleared it with Alexei to carry out an ‘inspection tour’ of the sector you’ll be working in. I’m taking the *Richelieu* as my flag.”

“And if we cannot reach you?” Eliza asked.

“Then do what you think is best.” The admiral instructed, “Whatever you do, I’ll back you up. So...any questions?”

“When do we leave, Sir?” Zsa-Zsa inquired.

“The *Belladonna* has just completed its shakedown cruise and will be arriving at the *Terra Invictus Starport and Docks* in 48 hours.” The admiral responded, “That’ll give you enough time to finish up your vacation, pack, and get to the station before the ship arrives. Your crew will be there waiting for you.” Standing up, he officially ended the meeting, “Congratulations again, Zsa-Zsa...Eliza. Good luck and good hunting.”

“Thank you *kis apam*.” Zsa-Zsa smiled, a tear rolling down her cheek as she stood on tip-toes and kissed her old mentor on the cheek. “Thank you for everything.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Eliza said as she also kissed the old man on his other cheek. “We won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t.” Morgan replied as he felt his own eyes tearing up. “Take care of yourselves and each other out there.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.”

After the door swished shut behind his two charges, Morgan pressed a button, “Ask them to come in now please, Ellie.” Moving away from his desk, the admiral respectfully greeted the two men entering his office, “Your Majesty...Admiral Kuznetsov...your thoughts please?”

“They seem so young.” The Emperor, a young man himself, commented shaking his head. “If they find what we think they might find—they might not come home again. I will issue an edict providing for their families—it’s the least I could do for them and it’ll be one less worry for them.” A crooked smile appearing on the young sovereign’s face, he quipped, “Don’t worry...I’ll disguise it as a hardship boon or something like that. That shouldn’t attract the attention of the Optimates. If anything, they’ll see it as an act of *noblesse oblige* and it might encourage them to take similar actions towards their less fortunate.”

“I hope we made the right decision.” Alexei grumbled, “If those forces you say might be converging in fact are—then those two young troublemakers and their fellow rogues might be the only thing standing between us and oblivion.”

Setting Sail

Chapter Summary

Captain Rosza takes command of the *Belladonna* with Commander Eliza Flores her first officer. In this episode you'll meet the senior officers and some of the crew of the *Belladonna* as Zsa-Zsa and Eliza say their good byes to the man who has become for all intents and purposes their father--Admiral Morgan Bateson.

Chapter Notes

While this story is in the Raptor-Verse, I've decided to branch the *Belladonna* off into her own series--mostly to help with bookkeeping, but also a lot of its adventures will be taking place either just before or during the period where V'lana is doing her thing and, for the foreseeable future, will be set firmly in the Trek-verse.

La Belladonna: Setting Sail

Terra Invictus Naval Base:

Liam Pearson and Salome Jenkins

Taking a quick glance at his surroundings, a rakishly handsome man with black shoulder length hair, accompanied by a chin beard and mustache glanced down at the padd in his hands and laughed until interrupted by a sultry voice calling out to him in greeting.

"Well...well...if it isn't my favorite fixer. How's it going, Liam?"

"Salome!" The man grinned as he kissed an attractive dark haired caramel skinned woman wearing a blue Imperial Fleet uniform. "What brings you to this jewel of the Empire?"

"Same thing I wager that brought you here, Liam." The woman chuckled, returning the man's kisses. "Reporting to my new ship—the *Belladonna*."

"Interesting coincidence." Liam Pierson remarked, the sarcastic grin still on his face, "Let me guess...the orders came from Admiral Bateson."

"Got it in one." Salome Jenkins affirmed with a cocky grin of her own. "Now...I wonder why the Chief of Special Operations would issue orders for the two of us to report to the same ship?"

"I was thinking you might know something, ducks." Liam teased as the pair walked together down the station concourse. "After all, you're the one who went to spook school and whose father is a magister."

"Sorry." Salome shook her head, "None of my connections know a thing. Hell...they couldn't even tell me who the captain and first officer are."

"Five hundred solidi that the captain's a member of one of the major Houses with a giant stick up his arse. Has to be. They don't give commands like that to anyone of lower rank." Pearson joked, passing a small flask to his companion.

"Thanks." Salome grinned as she took a sip, "Not bad. Single malt scotch?"

"Of course." Pearson smiled back, "So...your people don't know what's going on either?"

"Nope." Salome shook her head as she handed the flask back, "I think you're probably right about the captain coming from one of the senior Houses though. First officer too. I can't see them giving the command of a ship like that to anyone else."

"And it's not as if either of our families would tell us anything if they did know—which I doubt they do." Pearson snorted.

"Right." The litesome intelligence officer agreed, "Leaving out the fact that both of us are on the outs with our respective families, they're just not high enough in the food chain to be let in on that sort of gossip."

"I guess we'll find out when we find out, luv." Pearson smirked as he gestured to the station bar. "We've still got another couple of hours to kill before it's time to report on board. Wanna grab a drink or two at the bar?"

"Sure. Not like there's anything better to do right now...unless you have other ideas..." She winked coyly, her eyes drifting to an isolated booth in the back of the bar.

Leering as he placed a hand on his companions rear, the handsome engineer winked back, “What are we waiting for?”

First Impressions: Maria Django and Ian Barnes

“Why are you so down, Nakia?” Ensign Ian Barnes, walking with his best friend and fellow Fleet Academy graduate asked as the pair strolled down the station promenade together, eyeing the shops and stalls that lined the boulevard. “It can’t be our assignment. We’re going to one of those new recon-destroyers. Beats that Border Service buoy tender billet Finnegan got.”

“It’s not that.” The brown-skinned Egyptian junior operations specialist responded with a sigh.

“So what’s the problem?” Ian, not paying attention to where he was going, asked.

“It’s just...” Nakia shook his head, “I don’t know. I feel like...well...you know that my father and I are on the outs.”

Nodding his head, Ian responded, “Yeah. Didn’t he oppose you going into the Academy?”

“Yes.” Nakia affirmed, “Very strongly. He wanted me to go to madrasa in Cairo—to study theology.”

“I remember.” Ian, still not paying attention to his surroundings, nodded, “He wanted you to become a mullah—didn’t he?”

“I didn’t think I was ready for that—at least not yet.” Nakia replied, “I wanted to see more of Allah’s creation first. That’s why I applied for the Academy.” Shaking his head, the young Egyptian moaned, “My father and I haven’t talked since. And...I have a feeling we might not ever talk again.”

“Now that’s...Oof! Hey!” Ian exclaimed as he felt the impact of another human body, staggering him.

Walking in the opposite direction towards the two men, Ensign Maria Django, also fresh from the Academy with specialties in Navigation and Intelligence, focused on the padd she was reading, also walked heedless of her surroundings leading to the inevitable collision.

“What the hell!” Maria yelped as a pair of hands kept her from falling to the deck in a heap. Looking up, she saw a not unattractive sandy haired man with blue eyes and an obnoxious smirk. “Next time watch where you’re going!”

“Hey...” Ian retorted, his Dubliner accent at once betraying his Irish roots. “I might not have been watching where I was going—but you weren’t either.”

The dusky-skinned navigator, speaking with a Brazilian accent, sneered. “Fuck you. Clumsy jackass.”

“Well fuck you too!” Ian bit back, facing off against the hot-tempered Brazilian ensign.

Acting quickly before the situation could escalate, Nakia poked his friend in the ribs, “We gotta go, Ian, or we’ll be late.”

“All right, mate.” The Irishman grumbled, “Let’s get the hell outta here.”

“Yeah...go. Get outta my sight.” Maria snorted before delivering a parting shot at the two men, her gaze lingering on the blond Irishman behind as he walked away, murmuring in a low voice as her lips turned up in a quick leer, “Ass. Nice one too.”

Joachim and Nealo Mtolu

“For what it’s worth...” one of the two security guards escorting their prisoner remarked to his charge, “I’m glad you won—a lot of us were rooting for you.”

“Yeah.” The other guard affirmed, “I won fifty solidi betting on you. So...” the woman asked as the two guards escorted their charge down the station promenade, “Is Treviso is as big a dick as he appears?”

Lieutenant, junior grade Joachim Bester answered with a dejected sigh, “He was a good man once and a good...friend once.”

“What happened?” The first guard asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

“I don’t know.” Joachim replied, “We were drinking and then...” the blond tactical/security officer shrugged, “he must have misheard something I said and took it the wrong way. He...” Joachim shook his head, “It was the first time...it was like he was a whole different person.”

“Aristos.” The second guard huffed, “You can’t tell how they’re gonna react. Well...you kicked his ass and that’s all that matters.”

Approaching a muscular dark-skinned man wearing a red fleet uniform marking him as a tactical/security officer and bearing lieutenant’s stripes on his sleeves, the first guard announced, “Well, lieutenant, this is where we say goodbye. Take care of yourself out there.”

“Yeah.” The second guard smiled, “When you come back for shore leave...look me up...maybe we can do something together.”

Approaching the dark-skinned man, Joachim formally announced himself, “Lieutenant, Junior Grade Joachim Bester, reporting as ordered, Sir.”

“Lieutenant Nealo Mtolu. Security Chief for I.S.S. *Belladonna*.” The dark-skinned man responded, speaking with an accent marking him as

Zulu. "Come with me."

"Aye, Sir." Joachim dutifully replied, heaving a sigh. "Sir?" The junior tactical officer ventured.

"What is it, Bester?"

"Why me?"

"I don't know." Mtolu responded, softening his tone somewhat as he saw the uncertain look on the other man's face, "Look...this is probably the best thing that could have happened to you. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"Oh I'm not." Joachim exclaimed, "I was just curious as to why?"

His lips turning up in a wry grin, Nealo answered back, "You'll have to ask the captain or first officer that. Word is that they asked for you specifically."

"Why would they ask for me?" Joachim persisted in his inquiry.

"Maybe they caught your little arena show and liked what they saw." Nealo joked. Then, getting serious, he advised, "Listen Bester. You were looking at being a permanent junior grade lieutenant if not being busted back to ensign and most likely assigned to a buoy tender or an outpost on some rock on the frontier for the rest of your career—which probably wouldn't have been very long as they'd have gotten you on some trumped up charge or other.. Instead, you're about to embark on the mission of a lifetime. If I were you, I would be thankful."

"Oh...please don't get wrong!" Joachim protested, "I am grateful. Very. It's just that I'm not that important. I'm a nobody."

"Apparently you're a somebody to someone—or someones." Nealo responded as the pair arrived at a transport station and motioned towards one of the pads. "Come on. We'll get you situated in your new home."

Belladonna—Sickbay

"You're fit and ready for duty, Lieutenant." Dr. Knoll informed his Bajoran patient as he completed her physical. "Just be careful about putting too much stress on that elbow. It still hasn't healed from that strain you got playing springball last week."

"I promise I'll be careful, Doctor." The *Belladonna's* young tactical chief, Lieutenant Sito Lin responded with a big grin on her face as she hopped off the table. Glancing at the chronometer, she exclaimed, "I better hurry. The shuttle carrying the new captain should be docking soon."

"Better move it, Lieutenant." The Arkarian doctor joked back, "Unless you like crawling through Jefferies tubes for the next month or so." Turning to his nurse, the ship's CMO inquired, "Anyone left?"

"No, doctor." Lieutenant Tovia Sh'echikross responded, handing the doctor the padd she was carrying "She's the last of 'em."

"Thanks Tovia.." Lieutenant Commander Knol acknowledged as he took the padd and perused its contents, nodding his head in satisfaction. "Very good." The Arkarian physician commented as he pressed his thumb on the padd, officially certifying the results. "Anything else, Tovia?"

"No doctor." The pale-blue skinned Andorian nurse responded with a smile, "Not unless you have something in mind?"

"No." Dr. Knoll grinned, "Go on to the hangar deck. The shuttle carrying our new captain and first officer should be arriving soon. You don't want to be late for the change of command ceremony."

"What about you, Doc? Aren't you coming?"

"I'll be along shortly." Dr. Knoll replied with a smile, "I just have to finish up some last minute paperwork. Save a seat for me."

"Aye, Doctor. I'll see you later."

Zsa-Zsa, Eliza, and Admiral Bateson

"There she is." Admiral Bateson beamed, gesturing at the starship appearing before the shuttlecraft's main window, "ISS *Belladonna*. *Lafayette*-class reconnaissance destroyer. Not only can she fight, she's also got up to the date science labs and equipment. So...what do you think?"

"*Bassza meg holton!*" Zsa-Zsa gasped in amazement, "My very own starship."

Chuckling, Morgan joked back, "Well...technically it's the Emperor's starship, but yeah...it's all yours." His laughter fading, the old admiral admonished, "Take good care of it and it'll take good care of you."

"I will." Zsa-Zsa vowed, "I promise."

"I know." Bateson affirmed in a soft voice.

"Sir?"

“Yes, Eliza?”

“Why did they decide on *Lafayette* for the class name?”

“It’s partly my doing.” The admiral admitted, “The Marquis de Lafayette was a soldier when he had to be—but he was also a diplomat and a man of peace. I have faith that there will come a day when we will finally be able to beat our swords into ploughshares. On that day, ships like the *Belladonna* will be able to do what they do best—explore that big universe out there. Now...” Bateson added with a sly grin, “Even though we’re still not at the point where we can safely beat our swords into ploughshares, that doesn’t mean that the *Belladonna* and its new captain and first officer can’t go poking around whenever they get the chance—right?”

“I think we can work with that.” Zsa-Zsa responded with a coy wink.

“I can get with that program too.” Eliza added with a mischievous smirk of her own.

“I knew I could count on you two.” Bateson grinned, “We should be getting clearance to dock soon. Ready to meet your new crew Captain... First Officer?”

ISS Belladonna: And it begins...

“There’s nothing quite like your first command, Zsa-Zsa.” Admiral Bateson reminisced, “I remember when I got the *Bozeman*. All my friends and family were there: Admiral Wesley, Aliz—she was on the old *Lady Lex* with us and Jennifer. By the time I got the *Bozeman*, they’d gotten married and she was carrying their first child, And Jennifer...” the old man’s lips turned up in a winsome smile, “One of the two women I loved...not that I don’t love you two...” Bateson grinned, “But...you understand?”

“Igen.” Zsa-Zsa murmured in a soft voice, her companion nodding her head in understanding as well.

“Anyway...” Morgan continued his tale, “Jennifer and Denise were the only two women I loved enough to ask to marry and for some odd reason, they both said yes. I lost Jennifer when I went into that time-loop where I and my ship were stuck until the *Enterprise-D* got us out.”

“And Denise?” Eliza asked.

Chuckling, the old admiral recounted, “I was at one of Liz Shelby’s parties—you two would have loved her—and she introduced me to Denise who was her CMO at the time. We had more or less a long distance relationship for a long time and then one day, I popped the question to her. We got married and shortly after...well...I ended up here. Family’s important.” Morgan declared, sighing, “I only wish that you two still...”

“We have you, *kis apam*.” Zsa-Zsa interrupted, giving her adoptive father a warm smile. “That’s all we need.”

“What she said.” Eliza echoed, holding back a sob. “You’re our family now.”

“You’re going to make an old man cry.” Morgan held back a sob as he wiped his eyes. Approaching the dais, the admiral grinned, “Ready to meet your people, Captain?”

“Shouldn’t you go first?” Zsa-Zsa demurred.

Shaking his head, Bateson, his eyes reflecting the pride he felt for his old students, declared, “No. This is your time. Go on. Say hello. I’m going to need to see you and your senior officers when we’re done here—I’ve got your first mission.”

“We’re ready, *kis apam*.” Zsa-Zsa smiled confidently as she and Eliza strode to the podium. Gazing at her crew, the Hungarian captain took a deep breath and spoke in a clear accented voice.

“I am Captain Rosza and...” she gestured to the woman standing next to her, “This is your First Officer, Commander Eliza Flores. Each of you have been assigned to this ship because you bring something special...something unique...and because you are all trouble makers.” Pausing for a moment to allow her crew a laugh, Zsa-Zsa delivered the second part of her punchline, “Well...so are your captain and first officer. Now hear this and burn it in your minds! I don’t give a damn what class or caste you were born into: aristocrat...gentry...one of the middle orders...skilled trades...commoner...bonded. Whatever. I don’t give a shit if you’re Terran, Vulcan, Andorian, Tellarite, Trill—whatever. Everyone will be treated the same and you will treat your fellow crew with the same respect and courtesy regardless of social class or race. There is one rule on this ship and if you break it, I will personally kick your ass and then turn over what’s left of you to my first officer: Don’t. Fuck. Up. Other than that, I don’t give a shit what you do on your own time—just be ready for action when that alarm bell goes off or I call on you. Any questions?”

“Yes, Captain!” Liam spoke up, “What if we run into...problems...from the locals?”

“Because you got caught running a scam?” Zsa-Zsa answered with a sly grin, “That falls under the category of Fucking Up. So...”

“Don’t get caught, Ma’am?” Pierson interjected with a wry grin of his own.

“Right.” Zsa-Zsa answered. Then, her grin vanishing, she continued, “One of the reasons why you all are here is that none of you are afraid to think outside the box and take chances. I want that creativity and willingness to push the envelope. Just don’t be stupid and don’t...”

“Fuck up.” The crew finished in unison.

“Very good.” Captain Rosza grinned, her smile growing wider as she noticed the look of pride on her adoptive father’s face. “Senior officers... Conference Room One immediately. Everyone else to your stations. It’s time for us to go to work. Dismissed.”

Conference Room One

“Have you heard anything about this secret mission, T’Vrel?” Pearson asked the Vulcan science officer seated next to him.

“No. I have not.” The slender Vulcan responded laconically. “It is apparently need to know and until now, it would be logical to assume that we did not need to know.”

“Is that a joke?” Nealo quipped.

“Vulcans do not joke.” T’Vrel deadpanned, “But if we did...it would be a logical joke.”

“What about you, Sito?” Liam queried, addressing the blonde Bajoran tactical and communications chief.

“Not a word.” Sito shook her head, “I’m surprised you or Salome haven’t found out already. You two are hooked up to just about everything.”

“I’m just as much in the dark as you are.” Salome replied, “That alone should tell you how far up the ladder this thing is.”

“Salome has a point.” Pearson chuckled, “Our sources are good, but they’re not that good.”

As the door swished open, Nealo, at once recognizing the admiral with their new captain and first officer following behind, called out, “Attention on deck!”

“As you were.” Bateson responded, noting with amusement how slow several of the officers were to come to their feet. Taking his seat at the head of the table, flanked by Zsa-Zsa and Eliza, he activated the monitor which displayed a sector map. As one of sectors lit up, he began the briefing.

“This is the Eleuthra Sector. It’s on the frontier of Imperial space—the territory beyond it mostly unexplored.” The map then zoomed until the image of a star system appeared, “This is the Cyrus System.” The image then zoomed to the fourth planet orbiting the yellow-white G class star. “This is Cyrus IV. It has two moons—Darius and Xerxes.” The admiral then declared in a low, grave voice, “We had a colony there—Susa—approximately twenty thousand souls—mostly human and mostly small farmers and bonded sharecroppers working off their indentures.”

“Had a colony, Sir?” Liam remarked.

“Susa went dark about a month ago.” The admiral announced. “Besides the farming colony, there was/is a small scientific outpost studying some ruins nearby. It’s supposed to make routine check-ins once a month.”

“Let me guess...” Salome sighed, “It missed the last check-in.”

“Correct.” Morgan nodded in affirmation. “Other incidents—ships missing—outposts not reporting in—have been occurring in this sector for the past six months as well. Your mission is to go there and find out what’s going on and if someone or something is causing these disappearances...”

“Put a stop to it.” Sito finished.

“Captain?” Morgan prompted, gesturing to Zsa-Zsa.

“We are to gather evidence and if possible, report our findings to the admiral.” Captain Rosza declared.

“And if that’s not possible? If we’re either not able to or not given a chance to report back because of a developing situation?” Nealo queried.

“Then we take whatever action we need to take and I’ll take the hit if there is one coming.” Zsa-Zsa responded. “Any more questions?”

“When do we go?” Pearson asked.

“I want this ship ready to depart as soon as we’ve seen the admiral off and are on the bridge.” Acknowledging Bateson’s subtle signal to proceed, Zsa-Zsa rose to her feet along with Eliza and the admiral. “If there’s nothing else. Report to your stations and prepare for immediate departure.”

“Congratulations, Captain...First Officer...it’s your ship now.” Admiral Bateson remarked as he and his two escorts arrived at the transporter room. “I’ll be shipping out on the *Richelieu* a little after you head out. Keep in touch and don’t be afraid to roll the dice if you have to. And...” he added with a twinkle in his eyes, “If you should happen to get any exploring done...well...that would be good too.” Choking up, the old man embraced his two surrogate children, “You two...” he said, crying tears of joy, “You are the daughters I never had. I’d like to think that... if me and Jennifer ever got married or if me and Denise had chance....we’d have had girls like you.”

“We love you too, *kis apam*.” Zsa-Zsa said with tears in her eyes as she returned her adoptive father’s hug.

“What my baby said.” Eliza remarked as she also embraced the man who had become a second father to her.

“We won’t let you down, *kis apam*. I promise.”

“I know you won’t.” Morgan smiled beatifically, “Energize.”

Watching as the man who had been watching over them since they were teenagers departed, Zsa-Zsa, grasping her lover’s hand, gave her a quick kiss. “Ready to see what’s out there, *dragam*?”

“Hell yeah!” Eliza smiled back as she returned her paramour’s kiss. “What are we waiting for?”

The Bridge

Almost running from the turbolift to their chairs, Zsa-Zsa at once made herself at home in the center seat as her first officer did the same, taking her place on her lover’s right.

“All stations report ready, Captain.” Lieutenant Sito announced from her place behind the tactical console, “And clearance has been granted for departure by station control.”

“*Jo. Good.*” Zsa-Zsa acknowledged, giving her first officer a slight nod of her head.

“Release mooring clamps and close shuttlebay doors.” Eliza commanded.

“Mooring clamps released and shuttlebay doors closed.” Ensign Salal reported from his place at operations.

“Take us out, Mr. Barnes. Maximum thrusters.” Zsa-Zsa commanded. “Ms. Django...lay in a course for the Eleuthra sector—warp six.” Her lips turning up in a wicked grin, she reached over and grabbed Eliza’s hand, “Let’s see what sort of trouble we can make out there.”

Mystery on Cyrus IV

Chapter Summary

The *Belladonna* goes to Cyrus IV and finds a mystery.

Cyrus System—Eleuthra Sector

“Entering Cyrus System.” The *Belladonna*’s navigator, Ensign Maria Django, reported.

“Are you picking up anything from your scanners, T’Vrel?” Captain Rozsa, sitting in the center seat, inquired of her Vulcan chief science officer as she brushed back a stray lock of strawberry-blonde hair.

“A slight increase in the presence of verteron and chroniton particles and....” The slender Vulcan paused for a moment before continuing her analysis, “Dark energy.”

“Verteron particles, chroniton particles, and dark energy together...” Eliza mused, “Those items are on the list of things the admiral told us to keep an eye out for—right, Captain?”

“*Igen.*” Zsa-Zsa nodded her head, agreeing with her lover. “T’Vrel? Am I right in saying that those three usually do not occur together naturally?”

“Not completely.” The Vulcan science officer responded, “While very rare, the simultaneous presence of verteron and chroniton particles with dark energy is not unknown. Verteron particles are associated with wormholes and dark energy can be found in any number of situations, and chroniton particles...”

“With time travel.” Zsa-Zsa completed, a frown on her face.

“And time travel is possible by going through a wormhole—correct?” Eliza asked.

“Yes, Commander.” T’Vrel nodded in agreement. “It is possible. Provided one survives the trip that is-.”

“So...we’re looking at a possible wormhole and maybe a temporal incursion on the side.” Zsa-Zsa contemplated the problem, “Let’s go with the worst case and assume for now that is what we are dealing with. The question is whether it’s a natural phenomenon or artificially created.”

“And if it’s artificially created, then by whom and why?” Eliza mused, “Could we be talking barbarians or someone or something else?”

“T’Vrel? Your thoughts?” Zsa-Zsa prompted. “Can you use those particles to backtrack when that wormhole might have opened?”

“Affirmative, Captain.” The Vulcan science officer responded as she immediately began working on the problem. Moments later, she made her report, “I was able to extrapolate an approximate time frame from the rate of decay of the verteron particles in combination with the rate of dispersal and concentration of dark energy.”

“*Jo.*” Zsa-Zsa nodded, “What’s your conclusion?”

“Approximately one month.” T’Vrel announced.

“About the same time the colony went dark.” Eliza murmured. “Interesting coincidence.”

“A little too coincidental for my liking.” Zsa-Zsa replied, her brow furrowed as she addressed her tactical/communications officer. “Are you picking up any communications or energy readings from the colony or outpost, Sito?”

“Minimal power and no comm traffic detected, Ma’am.” The blonde Bajoran woman reported.

“*Cheirar e esturro.*” Ensign Django muttered in Portuguese.

“If that means ‘I smell a rat’...” Ensign Barnes murmured in rare agreement with the dusky-skinned Brazilian woman to his left, “I do too.”

“*Igen.*” Zsa-Zsa, overhearing her junior officers’ conversation, agreed. “Put us in standard orbit over Cyrus IV, Mr. Barnes.” she commanded, “I think we should take a closer look.”

“Aye, Captain.” The Irish helmsman acknowledged as he smoothly piloted the recon-destroyer into position. “Standard orbit.”

“Any unusual environmental conditions?” Eliza asked, “Radiation? Microbial life?”

“There are traces of verteron particles on the planet surface near both the colony and the outpost.” T’Vrel reported, “No dangerous concentrations of radiation, but I am picking up some interesting biological readings. And...something else.”

“Can you be a little more clear than...something else?” Eliza prompted with a sarcastic humph.

“Not without closer analysis.” T’Vrel responded.

"Then that's what we're going to do." Zsa-Zsa declared, "Eliza, *dragam*? Pick a landing party if you would please. Kick a few rocks and see if you can find something out."

"Aye, Captain." Eliza promptly acknowledged, "T'Vrel...you're with me." Tapping her comm, the olive-skinned first officer commanded, "Mr. Mtolo? Mr. Pearson? Dr. Knoll? Report to transporter one for landing party. Standard equipment loadouts."

After the three officers acknowledged her orders, Eliza turned to her lover and gave her a sly wink. "Landing party ready to go, Captain."

"*Jo*." Zsa-Zsa winked back, "Find me something interesting, *dragam*."

"I'll see what I can turn up."

Cyrus IV

Immediately on rematerializing in the middle of a park in the center of the colony, T'Vrel, taking out her tricorder, scanned the area. "No signs of life, Commander. "

"Shit." Eliza swore in a low voice, "Nothing at all?"

"No, Commander." T'Vrel shook her head. "Even the livestock and crops are gone."

"No signs of weapons fire." Lieutenant Mtolo, the Zulu security chief, announced.

"Anything to indicate transporter use?" Eliza queried.

"No, Ma'am." Liam, after taking a reading from his tricorder, responded. "No signs of shuttle activity either."

"So...you're telling me that the colonists, along with their livestock and crops, disappeared into thin air?"

"Apparently so, Ma'am." Liam replied, a nervous grin appearing and then disappearing just as rapidly.

"T'Vrel?" Eliza called out to her science officer, "Are you picking up on anything at all?"

"Affirmative." The slender Vulcan responded, "My tricorder is picking up faint traces of verteron and chroniton particles."

"Any presence of dark energy or dark matter?" Eliza asked as she surveyed the surrounding area with her eyes.

"Very faint traces of both." The Vulcan science officer reported.

"What about those weird biological readings you saw from orbit?" Eliza questioned, "Anything there?"

"Hmmm..." T'Vrel vocalized as she tuned her tricorder to another setting.

"Hmmm...what?" Eliza remarked.

"I am picking up very faint mycelial residue." T'Vrel answered, "Very low concentrations."

"Do you think they might have anything to do with the colonists vanishing?" The first officer asked.

"Unknown at present." The Vulcan science officer responded, "There is insufficient evidence with which to formulate a hypothesis."

"All right." Eliza decided, "Let's see if we can get some evidence." Taking a quick appraisal of her surroundings, the dark-haired first officer pointed at a nearby building. "Over there. That looks like it might be an administrative office. They might have something in their logs. Let's go."

As the landing party walked down the quiet street, Lieutenant Mtolo pointed to a wrecked skimmer. "Commander." Pointing to the skimmer, the security chief remarked, "Take a look at that skimmer and how it crashed into the wall."

Approaching the downed vehicle, Eliza attempted to download its traffic log. "That's odd." She remarked, "The log's not there."

"There should be a recording." Liam noted, "All vehicles have a monitoring system that records speed and driver habits as well as the usual vehicle maintenance and so on. Tampering with it sets off an alarm."

"No sign of the alarm being triggered." Eliza commented, "Nor any signs of it being erased. It's as if nothing was recorded at all." Motioning for the Dr. Knoll to join her, the first officer inquired, "Are you picking up any biological or DNA traces doctor?"

Running a scan with his medical transporter, Dr. Knoll replied, "I am picking up faint human DNA traces along with a very faint trace of mycelial spores."

"I'm also picking up chroniton and verteron particles along with traces of dark energy." T'Vrel reported.

"All right." Eliza took a breath and exhaled, "Whatever or whoever took the colonists did so without resistance and possibly without the colonists even knowing it was happening."

"A reasonable conjecture." T'Vrel agreed.

"We don't have enough to go on. We need more information." Eliza determined, "Let's continue on to the admin building. We'll check that out first and then we'll see what's going on at the outpost."

ISS Belladonna

"Commander Flore on the comm for you, Ma'am." Lieutenant Sito announced.

"Thank you, dahling." Zsa-Zsa responded as she tapped the comm button on her chair, "Have you got something good for me, *dragam*?"

"I've got something." Eliza replied, "But I don't think it's good."

"All right." The Hungarian captain prompted, "Give it to me."

After delivering a quick and concise report of what her landing team had discovered so far, Eliza advised, "We're on our way to what we think might be a town hall. We're going to take a look at what they've got there. If we're lucky, we'll find some log entries or even recorded evidence. Then we're going to see what we turn up at the outpost."

"*Jo*." Zsa-Zsa acknowledged, musing, "I'm not sure I like this repeating coincidence of verteron and chroniton particles, dark energy, and spores."

"I don't either." Eliza agreed, "I'll keep you updated on what we find. Landing party out."

"Hmmm..." Zsa-Zsa hummed, "Salome, dahling? Widen the range of our scans to include mycelial spores along with verteron and chroniton particles and dark matter and energy. See if you can give me a rough pattern of concentration for all of those within this system. If my guess is right, we might just have a trail to follow."

"Aye, Captain." The caramel skinned science/intelligence officer responded, "Scanning now."

"Report to me once your scans are completed."

Ground Party

"No sign of a struggle or emergency." Nealo noted as the landing party entered the building. "See? Someone's coffee cup is still sitting on the desk."

"No signs of disturbances at all." Eliza commented as she motioned for T'Vrel and Liam to join her at an inert computer console. "Liam? Can you get that working again?"

"I'll need to have a portable generator beamed down." The English engineer replied.

"Do so." Eliza ordered.

Tapping his comm, Pearson relayed his instructions to his assistant. A few minutes later, a portable generator materialized next to the computer console. "Give me a moment, luv, and I'll get it hooked up and going." After a few more minutes of tinkering, the dark-haired techie flipped a switch. Smirking as the computer beeped, lights flickering on and off and then stabilizing, Liam announced, "You're in business luv."

"T'Vrel?" Eliza prompted, "Can you dig anything up?"

"I will try." The Vulcan science officer responded. "Computer. Play the last three log entries."

"No log entries have been recorded on this computer."

"Have they been erased?" Eliza inquired.

"No log entries have been recorded on this computer."

"What do you have recorded?" Eliza asked, "Duty rosters? Crop yields? Personnel files?"

"No information has been recorded on this computer."

"Shit." The olive-skinned first officer swore. Speaking to her science officer, Eliza asked, "Can you recover any information at all from that computer?"

"Negative." T'Vrel replied. Her eyebrow raised, she murmured, "Interesting. The computer shows no sign of any activity at all."

"That's impossible." Eliza huffed, "It's an old computer and it's obviously a work station. There should be something on it. If nothing else, evidence of reformatting."

"There isn't." T'Vrel responded.

"Could an EMP or something like that have caused it?" Eliza asked.

“Possibly.” T’Vrel conjectured as she activated her tricorder. “Interesting. There is a slightly higher concentration of verteron and chroniton particles here. A high enough quantity of those particles could conceivably result in the erasure of any data in the computer.”

“And we’re back to verteron and chroniton particles.” Eliza sighed, “Are you picking up any evidence of mycelial spores or anything similar?”

“Affirmative, Commander.” The Vulcan science officer confirmed, “Trace samples.”

“Dark energy?”

“Negative.” T’Vrel shook her head.

“So we have three of the four elements we’ve been chasing after here.” Eliza pondered, “Why no dark energy though?”

“One possibility could be that it had already dissipated.” T’Vrel conjectured, “The traces of dark energy we have detected elsewhere are far lower than the verteron and chroniton particles. It would be logical to assume that it would decompose completely first.”

“For now we’re going to have to go with that.” Eliza declared before issuing her team new orders, “Fan out everyone. I want this building searched from top to bottom. We’re looking for any physical evidence you can find—hardcopy files and documents, data disks and recordings, holo-images, and so on. Set your tricorders to scan for verteron and chroniton particles, mycelial spores, and dark energy. Report back here when you’re done.”

Watching as her team went about their tasks, Eliza opened a desk drawer. “Let’s see if you’ve got anything.”

ISS Belladonna

“How are you coming with those scans, dahling?” Zsa-Zsa asked the tawny-skinned woman currently at the science station.

“All done, Ma’am.” Salome responded, I’ll project the results on the viewscreen.”

“*Koszonom*. Thank you.” Zsa-Zsa replied. Cupping her chin with her hand, she leaned forward in her chair, carefully studying the results of her science officer’s survey. A sly grin appearing on her face, the Hungarian captain exclaimed, “Just what I expected. Good work, Salome dahling. Now let’s see if Eliza can find the next part of the puzzle.”

“Ma’am?” Lieutenant Barnes queried curiously

“If this is what I think it is...” Zsa-Zsa explained, “Then whoever did this would leave a clue on the ground. What we have here is a general direction towards something, but it’s not complete. I’m betting that we’ll find that at the colony, the outpost, or the ruins. If you’re starting a pool, put me down for fifty solidi on the ruins.”

“And if we do find a solid trail, Ma’am?” Ensign Django asked.

“We follow it.” Zsa-Zsa answered, shrugging her shoulders nonchalantly.

“Works for me.” Sito chuckled.

“I’m glad you approve, dahling.” The Hungarian laughed, “Now be a dear and put on some music please after you raise Eliza for me.”

“Anything special?” The Bajoran tactical officer responded.

“Hmmm...I think I’m in the mood for swing. How about a little Artie Shaw.” Taking a sip of her tea, Zsa-Zsa sat back in her chair. “And now we wait and see what my *szerezo* turns up.”

Landing Party

“We haven’t turned up anything at the colony *amante* other than a few printed documents on stuff like expected crop yields and some market projections. Other than that, some doodles and sketches—nothing of...wait one!” Eliza exclaimed as her eyes fell upon a particularly disturbing image.

“*What is it, dragam?*”

Gazing at a hastily drawn sketch showing a bright light on an otherwise dark sky in the direction of the ruins, Eliza murmured, “I think we might have discovered how to find the second part to our puzzle. Captain...” she enthusiastically requested as she motioned her team to gather around her. “I need an immediate transport to the outpost.”

“*Is that where you think our solution lies?*”

“No, *amante*.” Eliza responded, “But I do think there might be some information there that could help us uncover that next part.”

“*Lieutenant Sito. Transport the landing party to the outpost.*”

“*Aye, captain.*”

Materializing just outside the outpost entrance, Eliza instructed in a light tone, “T’Vrel. Give me a scan of the area. I’m betting you’ll pick up

our trio of particles again.”

Moments later, the Vulcan science officer reported her results. “You were correct in your hunch Commander. Trace particles of verteron and chroniton radiation accompanied by dark energy along with traces of mycelial spores.”

“All right.” The dark-haired first officer commanded, “Let’s see what we find inside. Liam...call down another portable generator for the computer inside. I have a feeling that we’re going to get the same results we got at the colony, but let’s go ahead and make the attempt anyway. T’Vrel? You’re with me and Liam. Dr. Knoll?”

“Infirmary.” The Arkarian doctor finished.

“Right.” Eliza nodded, “Nealo?”

“Search the area.” The Zulu security chief affirmed.

“Let’s get to work.” Eliza directed as she and her team entered the outpost.

Minutes later, Liam announced, “Computer’s up.”

“T’Vrel?” Eliza quipped, “You’re on.”

After several moments of fruitless inquiry, the Vulcan science officer declared, “Similar results to what we found at the colony along with a slight increase in verteron and chroniton particles with traces of mycelial spores, but no dark energy.”

“As I figured.” Eliza remarked before calling out to the *Belladonna*’s CMO. “Doctor Knoll?”

“Interesting.” The Arkarian physician responded, “You might want to see this, Commander. T’Vrel—you too.”

“Whatcha got for us, Doctor?” Eliza asked as she and T’Vrel entered the infirmary.

“Over here.” Dr. Knoll motioned to a desk. Holding up a piece of paper in his hand, he explained, “I found this on the desk. Just as was the case in the colony infirmary, there was nothing on the computers or scanners. No biobed readings. But when I began to search the CMO’s desk, I found this.” Handing the paper to Eliza, he continued, “See those figures?”

“The numbers written down?” Eliza answered, nodding her head, “Yes. What are they?”

“Before whatever happened to him happened...” the Arkarian doctor exclaimed excitedly, “he recorded his vitals. But he had to use analog and mechanical recording devices.” The doctor pointed to a mercury thermometer, old style blood pressure checker, stethoscope, and O2 and heart sensor.

“Interesting.” T’Vrel observed.

“Very.” Dr. Knoll agreed. “The first number is his body temperature. Second his heart rate. Third O2 saturation level. Final reading blood pressure. He also recorded the time of each check. See how each set of readings declines at a steady rate.”

“It would seem that he is being brought into a state of suspended animation.” T’Vrel commented, cross checking the readings with her tricorder. “Curious.”

“So...” Eliza snarked, “Don’t leave us hanging.”

“When the rate of decline of this individual’s vitals is cross referenced with the concentrations of radiation, it can be extrapolated that he—and presumably the others—were removed via a form of teleportation.”

“Can’t be transporters.” Liam shook his head, “Even after taking into account the delay between our arrival and whatever happened here and the erasure of any digital or optic records, there should still be some evidence of transporter use—decayed buffer patterns if nothing else. Everything’s clean, luv.”

“Then we’re looking at another method of teleportation.” Eliza declared as her security chief approached carrying several papers in his hands.

“Hey Boss! You’re gonna want to see these.”

“Let’s see what you’ve got, Nealo.” Eliza replied as she took the papers and examined them. “Hmmm...there’s something about these glyphs.”

“Do you think they might be a message or pattern, Commander?” Nealo inquired as the rest of the team gathered around.

“Could be.” Eliza replied as she walked towards a conference table. “Let’s take a look, shall we?” Setting the glyph drawings on a conference table, she looked carefully, putting the glyphs together in different shapes and patterns until a sly smile appeared on her face. “I’ve got it.” She proclaimed as she placed the final piece of the puzzle in place.

“What are we looking at?” Liam queried as he gazed on the completed puzzle.

“If I’m right...” Eliza mused, “This is the key to the second part of the puzzle. Time to take a trip to the ruins.” Tapping her comm badge she requested. “Landing party to *Belladonna* request immediate transport to the ruins. I might have the answer to our riddle.”

Materializing near the ruins with her team, Eliza shook her head as she gazed at nearly completely eroded columns and pillars. “These are old.” The West Indian first officer gasped. “These ruins must predate the first known humanoid fossils on Terra.”

“Even older.” T’Vrel declared as she took out her tricorder. “The last report from the outpost places them at over two billion years old.”

“Two billion years?” Nealo exclaimed in amazement. “That would make the builders of these ruins...”

“One of the oldest if not the oldest sapient species in the universe.” The Vulcan science officer finished.

“Where did they go?” Liam pondered as he gazed at the stubs that used to be majestic pillars once. “The builders I mean. Shouldn’t the archaeologists here have found at least a few fossils?”

“In a manner of speaking these are the fossils.” T’Vrel lectured, “Given the two billion year time frame, the probability of finding fossil remains of the creators of these ruins would be miniscule at best.”

“In other words the odds of finding a bunch of old bones is somewhere between slim and none.” Eliza quipped, “So any ideas on what these ruins were supposed to be?”

Scanning with her tricorder, the Vulcan science officer raised an eyebrow.

“When you do that thing with your eyebrow, that means you’ve found something interesting T’Vrel. What is it?” Eliza asked.

“The concentration of verteron, chroniton and dark energy particles along with mycelial spores shows a marked increase here.” The Vulcan woman responded.

“How much of an increase?”

“An appreciable increase, but still in very small quantities.” T’Vrel replied, “This would be expected given the length of time since we’ve lost contact with the colony.”

“Let’s take a closer look.” Eliza decided as she led her team to the ruins. Approaching a pillar that had long since tumbled to the ground and had been worn smooth by time, she looked down to see what looked like a faded glyph at the base. A smile appearing on her face, she quipped, “Well look at what we have here.”

“It matches one of the glyphs in the drawing.” Dr. Knoll commented, “But we don’t know it’s purpose.”

“In other words don’t do anything stupid.” Liam joked.

Closely examining the glyph etched on the rock Eliza noticed something vaguely familiar. A sly smile appearing on her face, she announced, “It’s a visual math puzzle. Hmm...that should be the sequence.” Shuffling through the other drawings in her hand, the smile returned to her face as she picked out one of the drawings. “That’s it. We’ve got the first part of the key. Now we search for that particular glyph.”

“I think I found it!” Nealo called out, waving his commanding officer and the rest of the landing party to him. “It looks just like it.”

“Let’s take a look.” Eliza replied as she carefully examined the glyph. “Yep. Another visual puzzle.” Repeating the process she quickly ascertained the third glyph...then the fourth...and then the final marking. “Well I’ll be an aristo’s whore.” Eliza swore, earning a chuckle from both Nealo and Liam. “I think I’ve solved it.”

“Mind telling those of us who aren’t wizards at solving puzzles what it is?” Nealo bantered adding a respectful “Ma’am.”

“It’s a combination of puzzle types.” Eliza explained, “First you solve the triangle puzzle. Once you’ve solved that, you’re presented with a math puzzle involving figuring out sequences. Get that right you go to the final brain teaser—a doodle. Put it all together and you get a series of coordinates. When combined with the results of Salome’s orbital scan, that should point us to our next destination.” Tapping her comm badge, Eliza called out, “I solved it baby! Beam us up!”

ISS Belladonna

“So...what have you got for me, *dragam*?” Zsa-Zsa asked as her lover exited the turbolift on to the bridge.

Smiling broadly, Eliza replied, “Our next stop once T’Vrel feeds these coordinates in with Salome’s scans.”

“All right.” Zsa-Zsa nodded, “Let’s see what we’ve got. Display the results of the orbital scan.” Moments later, the starry image on the viewscreen was replaced by the map that Salome had made based on the results of her earlier scan. “Enter in the coordinates, T’Vrel.” Moments later a smile appeared on the captain’s face as a star lit up brighter than the others.

“The Eleuthra System.” Eliza gasped, “The same system the admiral told us about.”

“*Igen, dragam.*” Zsa-Zsa agreed, “Come with me to my ready room. I think we need to speak to *apa* now.”

“Champagne, love?” Eliza asked as she walked to the replicator, ordering a champagne for her lover and a margarita for herself.

“*Igen*, thank you, *szereto.*” Zsa-Zsa replied as her companion joined her on the couch and handed her a champagne flute filled with the sparkling wine.

“How’s the champagne?” Eliza asked as she took a sip of her margarita.

“Not bad for replicated.” The strawberry-blonde hedonist responded, “How’s the margarita?”

“About the same. Where booze is concerned replicated just isn’t quite as good as the original.”

Nodding her head in agreement, Zsa-Zsa sighed, “I’m going to have to speak to Liam about procuring some champagne and tequila for us at our next shore call.” Setting her glass down, she called out, “Computer. Contact Admiral Bateson on subspace. Scramble and encrypt using our private code.” Moments later the image of an elderly man with a short well maintained grey beard and a bald pate with grey hair around his temples wearing an admiral’s uniform appeared on the screen. “Hello, *apa*.” Zsa-Zsa smiled fondly on the man, referring to him using the Hungarian word for father.

“Zsa-Zsa. Eliza. I take it you two have news for me?”

“*Igen*.” Zsa-Zsa responded in the affirmative. “We just finished our survey of Cyrus IV. I’m transmitting the results to you now.”

As his eyes fell on the images of the ruins and their glyphs, the old admiral heaved a sigh. “*Apa?*” Zsa-Zsa asked with a worried tone as she saw the grave look on her adoptive father’s face.

“Is everything all right *mia padre?*” Eliza exclaimed, a look of concern on her face as well. “Is something wrong?”

“Something is very wrong.” Morgan thoughtfully responded. “Those ruins and glyphs—they were just like the ones that the *Lexington* in my universe encountered years ago.”

“What happened?” Zsa-Zsa inquired as both hers and her companion’s attention were now focused solely on their old mentor.

“The *Lexington* was answering a distress call from a science research vessel that disappeared into a nebula and we ran into a Klingon D-7.”

“And assumed that the Klingons had destroyed it.” Eliza surmised.

“Right.” Morgan nodded, “The Klingons had lost a ship of their own and were even more trigger happy than usual. The moment Commodore Wesley ordered red alert, he, Aliz, Jennifer, and a couple of other people were teleported off the ship along with the captain of the Klingon vessel and some of his crew. They found themselves on an alien world and were unable to recognize any of the stars or constellations.”

“Different galaxy?” Zsa-Zsa conjectured.

“That’s one possibility.” The admiral responded, “Or it could have been a different universe or even dimension. Bob, Aliz, Jennifer and the others had to go through a series of tests and mazes...some of which defy our conception of physics and even reality.”

“They were lab rats.” Eliza concluded with a frown on her face.

“Exactly.” Morgan affirmed. “They had to go through a Darwinian survival of the fittest series of tests where only Bob, Aliz, and Jennifer survived. The Klingons went through something similar—also with only three survivors including their captain. While that was going on, the XOs for both ships had hammered out a reluctant truce and agreed to a joint expedition to a mysterious structure that they had found in the middle of the nebula. Transporters weren’t functional so they had to go by shuttlecraft. Once there, the people they sent ran into the same thing Bob and the others did with similar results. Talana and one or two others were the sole survivors.”

“Did whoever was running those tests explain why they were doing them?” Zsa-Zsa asked.

“No.” Morgan shook his head, “Once they had completed the last test which involved solving a puzzle that used the same set of glyphs as what you dug up, Eliza, they were returned to their ships. Bob and the Klingon captain, both realizing that neither one was responsible for what happened to the *Voltaire* or the Klingon ship, agreed to extend their truce, giving enough time for both ships to be well clear of each other before the truce expired.”

“Damn.” Zsa-Zsa gasped. Then, looking into her adoptive father’s eyes, she queried in a soft voice, “There’s more isn’t there?”

“Yes.” The admiral nodded, looking, in many ways for the first time, old. “I was on the *Lexington* when we investigated the Eleuthra IV in my universe.”

“That’s where we’re headed next.” The Hungarian captain noted with concern, “What did you find?”

“Ruins.” Bateson responded, “Much like those you found on Cyrus IV. The Commodore sent down a team led by Talana to investigate and we found those same glyphs again.”

“Shit.” Eliza murmured. “Were they just as old as the ones we found?”

“At least.” Morgan affirmed, “Maybe older. Talana discovered that the glyphs, when arranged in a certain way, opened a portal to other worlds—even other dimensions. At the same time that portal opened, another opened in space. Bob sent a probe through the anomaly. As soon as it entered, both portals closed, but not before something came out of the portal Talana opened.”

“What was it?” Zsa-Zsa asked.

“Something that looked like it might have once been a living being.” The admiral answered, “But whatever sentience it might have had or soul it might have possessed had long gone. It was a killing machine. Talana lost two good people trying to kill that monster. After it was killed, it was brought back to the ship under a level ten confinement field and an autopsy was performed.

“What were the results of the autopsy, *apa?*” Zsa-Zsa inquired with a worried frown.

“That it was extra-universal in origin, but not just from one universe.” Morgan declared. “Not only were cybernetic implants present, but so also a great deal of genetic and biological augmentation and manipulation—on a level far in advance of what we’re capable of.”

“So you think we might find another one of those portals on our Eleuthra IV?” Zsa-Zsa concluded.

“Exactly.” The admiral responded, “And...if I am right...whoever has been using those portals has been doing it for a long time and we might be one of their next targets.”

“So what do you want us to do?” Zsa-Zsa asked, “Make it to where the portal can’t be used?”

“No.” Morgan shook his head, his expression one of grave sadness, “Whoever is doing this appears to be able to open portals at will. The permanent structures that those ruins most likely represent appear to be more along the lines of nexus points or stations. They make intergalactic and interuniversal quicker and more convenient and most likely permit more stable networks, but that’s about it. If we were to close that portal, they’d just use or open another one somewhere else. “What I’m going to have to ask you to do is something much more painful and is purely voluntary on your part.”

“You want us to go through a portal and see what’s there.” Zsa-Zsa concluded.

“Yes.” Morgan nodded, “And I am so sorry that I have to ask you to do this. I’ve lost two women I loved and wanted to spend the rest of my life with and now I must ask the two women who have become the daughters I’ve never had to risk themselves and those with them on a possible one way voyage. I’ll understand completely if you choose not to do this. As I said, this is strictly voluntary and I wouldn’t blame you one bit if you said no. If you choose not to do this, Zsa-Zsa, don’t worry, you’ll still retain command of the *Belladonna* and will be assigned other missions. Eliza—same goes for you.”

“Do you think the situation is that serious?” Zsa-Zsa asked as she grasped her lover’s hand in hers.

“Yes, my dears, I do.” Morgan replied earnestly, “This is not a request I’m making lightly and I have wracked my brain for years trying to find an alternative, but I don’t think there is one. If we don’t find out who’s doing this, why they’re doing it, and put a stop to it, then not just our universe and reality, but any number of others, might be in danger—including the one I came from. I wish I could go with you, but I have to stay with the Emperor and Alexei. We’re at a very important crossroads now. We’ve got to keep the reforms going while at the same time do our damnest to reach out to our enemies like the Klingons and Romulans.”

“That’s not going to be easy.” Eliza commented with a wry grin.

“You’re right about that, my dear.” Morgan answered back with a sardonic smirk of his own. “We’re going to have our hands full not just with the Romulans and Klingons but also the Peerage, the major merchant houses, and others who don’t want to see us succeed. We have to continue with what we’ve started if we’re going to have any hope of preparing this small corner of our universe for the coming storm. Your job will be to find us allies as you work to unravel this mystery from your end. Oh. One other thing. If an old friend of mine got the message I sent him long...long ago—a message similar to the one I’m giving you now—and if he acted on it which—knowing him—he did, then you’ll have at least one ally to help you. I’ll tell you more later. So, I need to know your decision, and I’m sorry, but I need to know it now.”

Zsa-Zsa and Eliza both gazed into each other’s eyes for what seemed several minutes silently holding each other’s hands until, almost simultaneously, they both nodded their heads. Turning back to their adoptive father, they answered in unison, “We’re in.”

Choking up, Morgan wiped the tears from his eyes. “I am so proud of you and I love you both.” Regaining control over his emotions, the old admiral said in a warm voice, “I’ll meet you at Eleuthra IV and we’ll make final plans. I’ll see you then.”

“We’ll see you at Eleuthra IV, *apa*.” Zsa-Zsa smiled back.

“Eleuthra IV, *padre*.”

“Eleuthra IV.” Morgan responded. “Until later. Signing off.”

Poking through the Ruins

Chapter Summary

This chapter ends the first story covering the voyages of the *Belladonna* and its quirky crew and sets up the next story which will be a crossover with the *Bellerophon*. I hope you've enjoyed reading this story as much as I have writing it.

Eleuthra System

"We're about to enter the Eleuthra system, Captain." Ensign Barnes announced as the K0 star grew larger in the viewscreen. "Estimated time of arrival in system—two hours."

"Maintain current speed, dahling." Zsa-Zsa ordered, "Eliza, *dragam*. Join me in my ready room."

Entering the captain's luxuriously furnished office, Eliza asked as she made her way to the replicator, "Your usual, baby?"

"*Igen*." Zsa-Zsa replied, "And get something for yourself."

Returning with champagne for her lover and a margarita for herself, Eliza asked, "Time to contact the admiral?"

Nodding her head, the captain affirmed as she activated her monitor. "*Apa*. We have reached the Eleuthra System."

"Hold position for now." Admiral Bateson instructed, "I'll be at your location in approximately half an hour. After I beam aboard your ship, we'll go over everything."

"*Igen*." Zsa-Zsa acknowledged. "We'll see you in half an hour."

A half-hour later

"Welcome aboard, Admiral." Zsa-Zsa formally announced before making her way to her adoptive father and embracing him. "Eliza's in the ready room, *apa*."

"Lead the way." Morgan smiled as he gestured to the door.

Flashing a wide grin as she recognized the admiral walking through the ready room door, Eliza rushed up and hugged him, "Hello, *padre*."

Smiling beatifically at his two surrogate daughters, Morgan gestured for them to be seated. "I take it you've read all the log entries and everything else I gave you?"

"*Igen*." Zsa-Zsa nodded, "A lot of it was frankly speaking amazing. Do you think that perhaps all that activity might have opened a door?"

"I don't think what happened with Liz so much opened the door as widened it." Morgan responded thoughtfully. "Remember, I first encountered those ruins while I was still an ensign on the *Merlin* and about a year or so later while I was on the *Ajax*. What happened with Liz, and later with me and Boris, didn't take place until I...the younger version of me, that is, was on the *Lexington*." Taking a deep breath and exhaling as Eliza handed the admiral a shot glass with a finger of bourbon, "Time travel's a mess. Past...present...future...all becoming a..."

"Wibbly wobbly mess." Zsa-Zsa chuckled. "*Ertem*. Go on please."

"So, I don't think what happened to us kicked the door open so much as opened wider a door that was already ajar. No." Morgan shook his head, "Someone or something opened that door a long time ago...billions of years probably. So now we're left with questions. Who? What? and Why? That's what I need the two of you to find out. But...like I said earlier, you might not be alone. I'm pretty sure that Boris will also be following the trail from his end—at least I'm hoping he will. So..." he asked, "What's your plan of attack?"

"Plan?" Zsa-Zsa laughed, "What plan, dahling? We're going to do what we always do..."

"Fly by the seat of our pants." Eliza finished with a laugh.

Responding with a rich belly laugh, Morgan joked, "That's what I thought you'd say." Getting serious again, he declared, "That's why I wanted the two of you to lead this and why I picked the crew for you I did. No one on this ship is afraid to color outside the lines and that's what we need right now." His good humor returning, the admiral prompted, "Have the two of you had dinner yet?" Again speaking with a grave voice, he lamented, "It might very well be a long time before we have this opportunity again. I'm hoping we can spend some more time together before you have to go and take care of business. Besides...I've got some more tall tales to tell you—if you want to hear 'em, that is."

"*Igen*." Zsa-Zsa smiled warmly at her adoptive father, "We would love to hear a few more of your stories."

"Please." Eliza grinned, adding her entreaties, "We'd especially like to hear more stories about your friends."

"All right!" Morgan laughed as he placed an arm around the shoulders of each of his surrogate daughters, "Let's grab us some grub and I'll tell you the story about the time when I was still a captain in the Border Service on the old *Bozeman* and me, Joseph, and Boris got into trouble at

Sloopy's. It involved a troupe of Orion strippers and their Ferengi manager..."

A few hours later

"I guess it's time for me to get back to my ship." Morgan sighed as he and his adoptive daughters entered the transporter room. Taking an object out of his pocket, he handed it to Zsa-Zsa.

"A holo-disk?" The Hungarian captain exclaimed with a curious expression on her face.

His lips turning up in a sad smile, Bateson nodded his head, "If you run into Boris, would you give this to him please. It's just a little something I recorded for him."

"Of course, *apa*." Zsa-Zsa promised, "We'll make sure he gets it."

"Thank you." Morgan grinned as he brushed away a tear. "Now. Why don't you two give your old man a last hug."

"We'll miss you *apa*." Zsa-Zsa sobbed as she and Eliza both embraced their surrogate father.

"We promise we'll find out what's going on and whatever it is, we'll stop it." Eliza swore, brushing away her own tears.

"I know you will." Morgan smiled back. Taking his place on the transporter pad, he then ordered, "Energize."

"Well that's it then." Eliza commented to her lover in a low whisper as their trusted mentor dematerialized, "We're on our own now."

"*Igen*." Zsa-Zsa smiled, "But we'll do what we always do."

"Kick ass." Eliza chuckled.

Immediately on exiting the turbolift on to the bridge, Zsa-Zsa commanded, "Helm. Take us to Eleuthra IV. Maximum impulse."

"Maximum impulse aye." Ian, the ruggedly handsome Irish helmsman acknowledged.

"Course laid in." Ensign Django announced.

A short time later, as Eleuthra IV grew larger in their viewscreens, Eliza snorted, "Remind me to cross this place off our must see list."

"Too late, *dragam*." Zsa-Zsa chuckled, "We're already here and it looks like we're the only guests." Swiveling in her chair, the Hungarian captain called out to her science officer, "What does it look like down there, T'Vrel?"

"Arid world. Only small bodies of water mostly frozen. Thin oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere." The Vulcan science officer reported back.

"Temperature averaging zero degrees Celsius. Radiation within limits so long as extended exposure is avoided. Environmental suits should not be necessary provided exposure to the elements is limited. However, cold weather gear will be necessary as well as breathing assistance and I would advise prophylactic anti-radiation medicine be administered before beaming down to the surface as well as setting up a portable shelter."

"Any signs of verteron or chroniton particles or dark energy?" Zsa-Zsa inquired.

"Faint traces of all of them, Captain." T'Vrel responded.

Zsa-Zsa nodded as she turned her head to her first officer, "Pick a landing party and see if there's anything hiding there, *dragam*."

"Aye, Captain." Eliza promptly acknowledged, tapping her comm. "Nealo...Salome...Liam...Dr. Knoll...report to the transporter room for landing party duty. You can pick up your supplies and cold weather gear there. Doctor? Bring anti-radiation medication with you."

"Good hunting, *dragam*." Zsa-Zsa winked as her lover rose from her seat. "Bring me something nice."

"I'll see if I can find us a souvenir or two, baby." The olive-skinned executive officer replied with a coy wink of her own.

"Music, Captain?" Lieutenant Sito asked as the turbolift door closed behind the first officer.

"*Igen*. Put on something jazzy, dahling."

"Any preferences?" Sito asked with a grin.

"Surprise me." Zsa-Zsa replied as a soft jazz tune filled the air. "Ah!" The Hungarian captain sighed, "Good choice."

Eleuthra IV—the ruins

"Damn!" Liam cursed, wrapping his arms around himself as he struggled to stay warm, "Even with all this gear I'm fucking freezing!"

"I hate the cold." The Caribbean born first officer shivered, "Get that goddamn shelter set up asap while I set up the detection and defense grid!"

"On it!" Nealo exclaimed as he and Dr. Knoll quickly set up the portable shelter.

Taking out her tricorder, Salome announced, "I'm going to make a preliminary sweep of the ruins."

"Go ahead!" Eliza affirmed, "Don't let anything eat you!"

"Liam?" Salome waved at the English engineer, "Give me a hand?"

"Sure, ducks." Liam replied, referring to the tawny-skinned science officer by her pet name.

As her engineer/casual sex partner approached, Salome pointed, "Check out the pillars clockwise and I'll take them counter-clockwise."

"What am I supposed to be looking for?"

"Glyphs for starters." Salome instructed. "If you see any, make a visual record with your tricorder. Also keep an eye out for the usual. You know...flashing lights, talking bombs, big alien carnivorous creatures. That sort of thing."

"Aye, Aye, Ma'am." Liam responded with a playful salute, "Oh...ducks...if I do run into any carnivorous monsters you'll know immediately. You'll hear me screaming."

Chuckling, Salome joked back, "Find me something and who knows what or who you might find in your bed tonight."

"Well..." Liam laughed, "I better get to work then. See you on the other side. Sooner if I run into a carnivorous monster or worse—an alien killer robot."

Scanning the first pillar with her tricorder, Salome vocalized to herself in a low voice, "Hmmm...verteron and chroniton particles...but no traces of dark matter or energy or spores." Glancing down, she at once noticed a glyph similar to one of those found in the ruins on Cyrus IV. Kneeling down, she took a closer look. Then, spotting what appeared to be a small, shallow depression at the base next to the sigil, she placed her finger in it. As she did so, the sigil lit up with a dull blue light. "Well...well...what have we here. After taking out her tricorder and taking more readings, she cupped her hands and called out to her companion, "Liam! Check near the base of the pillar. Are you seeing a glyph?"

"Sure am, ducks." Liam shouted back, "Verteron and chroniton particles too."

"What about dark energy or matter? Spores?" Salome queried.

"Nope." Liam yelled back, "Gonna check out the next pillar."

"Before you do that..." Salome hollered, "Check near the glyph. Do you see a small indentation?"

"Yeah!" The English engineer answered, "What is it?"

"Don't know." Salome responded, further instructing. "Place your finger in the indentation. Does the glyph light up with a blue color?"

Doing as he was told, Liam at once noticed the glyph glowing only instead of blue, it emitted a dull yellow glow. Relaying his findings to his companion, Pearson asked, "Do you know what it means?"

"No idea." Salome answered back, "Let's continue our sweep and check each of the pillars. If they're the same, then repeat the experiment and record the color each glyph emits. If I'm guessing right, this could be a clue to solving at least part of our mystery."

"Right!" Liam responded, "Meet you at the twelve o'clock pillar!"

Camp

"We're good to go." Nealo declared as he and Dr. Knoll finished setting up the tent.

"About time!" Eliza exclaimed, involuntarily shivering from the cold. "I've set up a detection grid that will alert us to any sudden infusion of verteron or chroniton particles."

"Get in the tent before you get frostbite or worse!" The doctor ordered, waving at the olive-skinned executive officer in a come here gesture.

"Right." Eliza readily agreed, "Have some hot chocolate ready for me when I get there."

"Heating it up now, Ma'am." The Zulu security officer responded with a laugh. "Hurry up before it gets cold."

Entering the heated tent, Eliza gratefully accepted a cup of steaming hot chocolate from the Arkarian CMO. Taking a sip, she smiled, "Thanks. I needed that."

"I better make some more for Salome and Liam when they get back." The doctor laughed as Eliza's combadge chirped

"Flores. Tell me you found something, Salome."

"We found something." Salome responded, "And I've got a feeling you're going to love it. We're on our way back to camp."

"We'll have some hot chocolate waiting for you when you get here." Eliza laughed.

"Can't wait." Salome answered with a chuckle, "Jenkins out." A short time later, the tawny-skinned science/intelligence officer with her

engineer companion entered the tent, shivering, she smiled gratefully as she accepted the proffered cup of hot chocolate. Taking a sip, she heaved a sigh, “You have no idea how good that tastes.”

“Take a few minutes to thaw out and then we can get started.” Eliza prompted before taking another drink.

“Thanks, Mum.” Liam grinned as he took the other cup of chocolate. “Mmmm...that hits the spot.”

“So what did you find out?” Eliza asked as she motioned for the others to join her at a makeshift conference table set in the middle of the large insulated tent.

“We think you’ll find this interesting, Ma’am.” Salome stated as she played the results of her and Liam’s tricorder scans along with the video evidence they recovered.

“Hmmm...looks like another puzzle.” Eliza commented, tapping her chin with her index finger.

“Any ideas how to solve it, Ma’am?” Nealo asked, joining the discussion.

“I’ll have to see it for myself.” The olive-skinned puzzle aficionada replied, “But from what I’m seeing here, I’d say that it’s a mixture of different puzzle types: visual, mathematical, and possibly logic.”

“Any further expeditions will have to wait until planet dawn.” Dr. Knoll declared. “The sun’s setting now. It won’t be long until the temperature drops too low for us to wander about outside—even in our cold weather gear. I prescribe dinner and a good night’s sleep.”

“Good idea.” Eliza agreed, barely repressing a yawn as she cracked a mischievous grin, “And since it was your idea, Doctor, you get to cook dinner.”

Laughing, the Arkarian physician joked back, tossing a ration bar to his impish superior, “I’m afraid ration bars will have to do for now.”

“You owe us a dinner when we get back.” Liam jibed before taking a bite from his bar, his expression turning into a grimace, “Fuck! This tastes like shite.”

“I had to live off these things during the Cardassian border wars.” Nealo scowled, “I was on Setlac III when the Cardies attacked. We took off into the woods and played cat and mouse with the spoonheads with nothing to eat but ration bars for over a month. When the *Eisenhower* arrived with the relief fleet, first thing we did once we got out of sickbay was pig out on steak, potatoes, and all the wine and beer we could get our hands on.”

“What about you, ducks?” Liam grinned, giving his part-time lover a coy wink, “Any stories about bad ration bars or sneaking through woods?”

“As a matter of fact...” Salome responded with a mischievous smirk, “I do have a story.” After taking a bite from her bar and washing it down with a swig of hot chocolate, the tawny-skinned intelligence officer leaned back, “I was part of a covert ops team sent to sabotage a Klingon shipyard. While we succeeded in our mission and blew up our primary target: a modified *Negh-Var*, we didn’t reach our rendezvous point in time.”

“You missed your ride.” Nealo nodded sympathetically, “Been there...done that. So...how did you get away?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Salome answered, “We stole a shuttle and managed to warp out of the system, but not before they tagged our engines. So, after our engineering guru and I jury-rigged the engines, we were able to limp along at warp two. Took us two weeks to get back with nothing to eat but Klingon rations and no sonic shower or bath. By the time they rescued us, we all smelled like Liam after a long weekend on Argellius.”

“Hey!” An English accented voice cried out in protest.

“Ugh.” Eliza exclaimed with a look of disgust on her face, “Klingon rations taste like shit.”

Salome joked back, “Live shit that tries to bite you. Let me tell you, I was so happy when we were finally rescued that I threw the biggest, most decadent orgy ever to celebrate.”

“And you didn’t invite us!” Eliza quipped, “How rude!”

“Sorry, darling.” Salome bantered back, “It was a spur of the moment thing.”

“That’s all right.” Eliza laughed, “I’ll forgive you this once, but the next time you throw a party...”

“You all are invited.” Salome promised as she stretched out and yawned. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I think I’m ready to turn in.”

“Good idea.” Eliza agreed as she slipped into her sleeping bag, “Tomorrow’s going to be a long day. Time for us to get some rest. See you in the morning.”

The Next Morning

“Be sure to bring plenty of hot coffee and chocolate thermoses and ration bars!” Eliza advised as her team prepared to venture out once again into the cold. “We’re probably going to be at those ruins for a while.”

Hefting his backpack, Liam joked as he opened the tent, “Then let’s get started. The sooner we’re done, the sooner I’m back in our ship’s pub.”

Reaching the ruins after a short hike, Eliza pointed to them, “All right, Salome...Liam. Show me what you found.”

“This way, Commander.” Salome responded, leading the expedition to the first pillar. Approaching it, she pointed to the base. “There. That’s where I found the glyph and the button that triggered the blue light.”

Kneeling down, Eliza repeated her intelligence officer’s actions from the other day, also noting a blue light seemingly pointing to the center of the ruins. “Let’s see what our light leads to.” Eliza commented, gesturing in the direction the light was travelling. “I’m betting that’s where we’ll find our next clue.”

“What about the other glyphs?” Nealo asked, “Do you think they figure into it too?”

“Oh, definitely.” Eliza responded, “Odds are that we’ll have to activate them all to solve the puzzle if it’s what I think it’s going to be.”

.”So?” Salome interjected, “What are we waiting for?”

“Took the words right out of my mouth.” Eliza quipped with a crooked grin on her face. “Everyone pick a pillar with a glyph and activate it. Then we’ll see what we’ve got and take it from there.”

As Nealo activated the last pillar its red light joining the other colors: blue, yellow, green, orange, and violet, a console made of stone rose in the center of the ruin where the colors converged. “Careful, Boss.” The Zulu security chief cautioned as Eliza slowly made her way to the table.

The curious first officer commanded as she neared the console, “Be ready in case something ugly happens.”

“Always ready, Mum.” Liam declared as he set up shield and medical regenerators.

Examining the glyphs seemingly carved into the stone, Eliza vocalized as she tapped her fingers on the table edge, “Hmmm...” Motioning for her people to join her, she called out, “It’s safe. You can join me, but don’t touch anything yet.”

“What are we dealing with, Commander?” Salome asked as she and the rest of the team joined their leader at the table, gathering around it.

“I was right.” Eliza affirmed, “It’s a combination of puzzle types. It looks like we have a sequential puzzle combined with a visual one involving colors and shapes. I think we have to match the glyph with its pillar and color—but it has to be done in a certain order.”

“We’ll be here forever.” Nealo moaned, “Do you know how many combinations there are?”

“No.” Eliza quipped, “But I can always call up T’Vrel. I’m sure she’ll be happy to tell you.”

“No, thank you, Ma’am. We’ll be here all day..” Nealo smirked, “But, Ma’am, my point still stands. How are you going to solve this puzzle before we freeze to death.”

Looking up at the position of the dull orange sun in the sky, the first officer’s lips turned up in a sly grin. “I was right last night. There’s a logic puzzle hidden in there too.” She further explained, “We’re going to let the sun help us. “See how it’s light is focused on that pillar over there?” she gestured to a nearby column. I’m betting that’s our first one.” Walking over to the pillar, Eliza at once spotted the symbol at the base of the structure glowing a dull yellow. Returning to the console, she pressed first the glyph and then passed her hand over a faint narrow light. Moments later, she was rewarded for her efforts as the pillar began to hum.

“That’s one.” Salome noted as she took out her tricorder. “This should tell us where the sun will shine next.” Moments later, she exclaimed, pointing at a column. “Got it! That one and red light.”

“Right!” Eliza grinned as she repeated what she had done earlier with similar results. Her smile growing wider, she called out, “Next!” Once the last pillar was activated, the console began to glow as beams of light struck each column, the gaps in between the columns now covered by a wall of fog.

“What the hell?” Nealo exclaimed as he instinctively drew his phaser.

“Salome? Liam? Dr. Knoll?” Eliza called out in a sharp, commanding voice as her gaze shifted from the console to the pillars and back again. “Report!”

“No life signs.” Salome quickly responded, scanning the area with her tricorder. “But I am picking up high resonances of verteron and chroniton particles along with dark energy.”

“I can’t figure what or where the power for this is coming from, Commander!” Liam declared, “I’m playing it safe and rigging up an anti-radiation shield—just in case.”

“Doctor?” Eliza prompted, turning her attention to the Arkarian physician. “Exposure risk?”

Taking a hypo, Dr. Knoll administered injections to himself and the rest of the landing party. “A combination of hyronolin and chlorohexidine. “That will protect us for a short while, but I’d strongly suggest we get done what we’ve come here to do quickly.”

“Right.” Eliza nodded, “I want readings on those pillars and that fog that’s in between them. What are we dealing with?”

Slowly the fog walls in between the pillars cleared to reveal images—each one different from the others. “Are these some sort of logs or

archives?" Nealo inquired as he gazed on one display—that of what appeared to be a desperate battle between a *Constitution*-class starship bearing the name *USS Valley Forge*, and several Klingon D-7 battlecruisers.

"I don't think so." Salome replied, gesturing to the image that she was recording—this one of a woman wearing what appeared to be crimson and white armor hiding behind a rock as a man was placed on a platform by a pair of what seemed to be robots or some other form of artificial life. The landing party watched transfixed as a large spike impaled the screaming man, skewering him.

"Damn." Liam groaned, "That's a rotten way to go."

"Record everything." Eliza commanded in a crisp tone as her tricorder recorded images of what seemed to be a building or structure of some sort made of opaque crystals that shifted pattern and shape randomly.

"Some of this stuff...that thing looks like it's staring right at me." Nealo asked as he pointed to the display he was recording of a creature with tentacles on what looked like its chin appeared to be gazing back. Reacting quickly, the security chief backpedaled just in time as two of the tentacles reached out to grab him. Firing his phaser, the Zulu officer gasped in relief as the phaser beam contacted the image and the monster disappeared. The image now black and featureless, Nealo caught his breath, "I don't know what these things are, Boss, but they're not archives or recordings. That...whatever it was...was real!"

"Just like the admiral said." Eliza murmured as she tapped her combadge. "Captain?"

"Yes, *dahling*." Zsa-Zsa answered. "Did you find something?"

"You might say that." Eliza responded, "*Padre* was right. The ruins are portals. We had an incident involving one of the gateways." She then gave a report on her security chief's encounter with the tentacled monster. "We're also picking up increased amounts of verteron and chroniton particles as well as dark energy."

"Have you gotten everything you can, *dragam*?" Zsa-Zsa asked.

"I think so." Eliza answered back, "Wait one. Dr. Knoll wants to tell me something." After a brief conversation with the CMO, Eliza again tapped her comm. "The doctor just told me that the radiation is about to reach unsafe levels."

"*Ertem*." Zsa-Zsa quickly acknowledged, "We're pulling you out." Eliza then heard her captain calling out to the destroyer's tactical officer, "Sito. Beam our people back now."

"All right, crew." Eliza commanded, "We're beaming out." A few minutes later, immediately upon rematerializing in the transporter room, the landing party barely kept their footing as the ship shook. A moment later, as the alarm klaxon sounded out, the first officer commanded, "Move!" Exiting the turbolift on to the bridge a short time later, Eliza, accompanied by Liam, the chief engineer, heard T'Vrel call out her usual calm voice now carrying a slight edge.

"Increased buildup of chroniton and verteron particles accompanied by dark energy."

"Shields firming up." Lieutenant Sito announced. "Weapons charged and ready."

"All stations ready for action, Captain." Ensign Salal reported.

Taking the first officer's chair next to her lover, Eliza whispered as what appeared to be a wormhole opened up, "It's just like what *padre* told us about."

"*Igen*." Zsa-Zsa whispered back before issuing her next order, "Contact Admiral Bateson."

"Aye, Captain." Lieutenant Sito acknowledged. A moment later, the elderly admiral's image appeared on the viewscreen.

"Zsa-Zsa." Morgan commented with a worried look on his face. "We just picked up a sudden spike in verteron and chroniton energy."

"*Igen*." The Hungarian captain promptly confirmed just as her science officer called out.

"Radiation increasing!"

"Buck us up, Ian. Slow and steady."

"Yes, Ma'am." Ian responded in his usual Irish brogue.

"Massive energy spike." T'Vrel reported in her usual flat tone, "Verteron and chroniton particles accompanied by a massive surge of dark energy."

"Look!" Ensign Django exclaimed as the image on the viewscreen changed to show what appeared to be a "Wormhole!"

"Floor it, Ian!" Zsa-Zsa ordered.

"I've got my pedal to the metal, Boss!" Ian responded as the *Belladonna* was drawn ever closer to the anomaly.

"More juice, Liam!"

"I'm giving you everything I've got and then some, Mum." The English engineer declared, "Any more and we'll rip this ship apart."

"*Baszd!* Contact Admiral Bateson!" Zsa-Zsa ordered as the *Belladonna*, her engines straining and the ship shaking, was pulled ever closer to the gaping black maw.

“Zsa-Zsa! What’s going on? Our readings are spiking off the scale.”

“You were right, *apa*.” The young Hungarian captain said, a sad smile on her face as she brushed away a tear. “We’re being pulled into whatever that is and can’t break free. I’m sorry.”

“No.” Morgan responded in a somber tone. *“It is I who should apologize. I should never have...”*

“You did the right thing.” Zsa-Zsa declared as the wormhole grew larger on the viewscreen, now blotting out all the stars. “I promise. Wherever...whenever...we end up...we’ll find help and we’ll come back.”

“I know.” The admiral answered with a smile, *“While you’re doing that, the Emperor, Alexei, and I will do the best we can to hold the line here. Zsa-Zsa...Eliza...I love you both. May St. Christopher watch over you and guide you safely back home.”*

Watching as the *Belladonna* and his adoptive daughters and their crew passed into the wormhole, Morgan lowered his head and said a quiet prayer. Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the admiral turned to the *Richelieu’s* captain. “Take us back home, Gabe. We’re got a lot of work to do.”

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