

# Enterprise: The Ship Of Death



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Cover by Edelweiss O'Keefe

Modern beaming technology is a marvellous thing, Lieutenant Michael Ross Branson thought to himself as he reformed on the transporter pad. He looked about him at the ultramodern space and sighed. Quietly, he muttered to himself: "Here I am. It's finally happened. I'm on the most cursed ship in Starfleet."

"Permission to come aboard," he said, keeping true to Starfleet tradition. He even offered the female Andorian shen behind the console a smile.

She smiled back. "Permission granted. Welcome aboard, Lieutenant. Welcome to the *Enterprise*."

Branson grimaced. This was the last place he wanted to be.

It hadn't always been that way. He had been brought up in a family that practically worshipped Starfleet. His mother had been a midshipman on the *Intrepid*, his father an ensign on the *Republic*. Each had served one tour before meeting, marrying, and settling down on Alpha Centauri Prime. Michael was their firstborn, but not their last. No sooner had he been born his parents began reading old captain's logs to him from notable ship commanders. People like Captains Jonathan Archer, Christopher Pike and James Kirk of the *Enterprise*.

He loved hearing them and of their adventures, including some of the most outrageous stories that often-defied imagination, like the *Enterprise* being grabbed in space by a gigantic green hand. If those commanders hadn't been above suspicion, he would have thought some of what he heard was on the same level as tales of the Easter Bunny.

However, he noted one thing about the *Enterprise* logs that wasn't exactly mirrored in others. People on that fated ship had a bad habit of dying. In his teens, he did some reading and found that the death rate on ships with that name was higher than any other – especially the *Enterprise-C* that was lost with all hands. Such tales brought to mind the look on his parent's faces when they recalled the loss of their own friends during their time in the service, eyes that looked back in time regretting the absence of those special, unique people. In time, he would find himself at the family dinner table, listening to his parent's latest story and hoping it wasn't about the *Enterprise*. At some point there would be mention of someone killed in the line of duty.

Upon his graduation from College, his parents held a very special dinner for him. His favourite meal was served by his mother who was beaming with pride – after all, he had finished with the highest scores in his year. As far as she was concerned, the sky was the limit for her boy.

His father looked around the table, taking a moment to catch the eye of each of his progeny, before focussing on his eldest. "Michael," he said, his chest swelling. "Congratulations! You're the first in our family for generations to finish top of the class!"

Michael was overjoyed with the praise. Any son would be. All young men want to hear their father's words of approval. Then his father said something that made his stomach clench.

"I got word today of your acceptance into Starfleet Academy! With any luck, with your grades, you'll go far. Perhaps even serve on the *Enterprise*!"

His parents had begun following the tales of Captain Picard of the *Enterprise-D* and of their encounters with the Romulans, and how they even had a Klingon aboard serving as chief of security. He'd also noted that Picard didn't seem to like putting people in the line of fire. Aside from the tragic loss of their first security chief, Tasha Yar, they'd had a pretty good run. All the same, Michael was convinced that any ship with the name *Enterprise* may as well have a target printed on its hull. It was just a matter of time before the *Enterprise-D* came to grief.

Hiding his feeling of dread, Michael smiled up at his father and said: "Sure, Dad."

It was in his first year as a cadet that word came that the *Enterprise* had encountered a new species from the Delta Quadrant that filled anyone reviewing the encounter with dread. The Borg seemed not only formidable, but unstoppable. Once more, the curse of the *Enterprise* had stuck. The ship had lost a number of crewmembers in the encounter, but Michael was certain the carnage had only just begun.

All the same, Michael continued in his studies, and he worked hard. He had a family tradition to not only live up to, but parents he wanted to make proud. They had invested so

much in him, in the goal of seeing him serve not only in Starfleet, but perhaps on one of the ships of the line. He comforted himself with the thought that the *Enterprise* was one of hundreds of ships in Starfleet, and the odds of being posted to that vessel made winning the lottery look like a better bet.

During his Academy years he studied, he occasionally partied, he even fell in love. When he graduated, he finished with honours and, having completed the officer's candidacy course, was granted the rank of Lieutenant JG on the new *USS Saratoga*. New, because a replacement ship had to be commissioned after the rout at Wolf 359. Sure, the *Enterprise* had eventually stopped the Borg when they reached Earth, he knew that because he had looked up into the afternoon sky and seen the tiny, dark cube in orbit, had even seen it explode. All the same, in Michael's mind, these were the repercussions of an encounter that might not have happened to any other ship that wasn't named *Enterprise*.

Life on the new Galaxy-class starship *Saratoga* was fairly ordinary and the captain seemed to have a blessed ability of keeping them out of the line of fire. That was until the Dominion War. Overnight, the families that had travelled with them were sent home to keep them out of the fight. Starfleet had learned a hard lesson at Wolf 359 and had reminded their people to keep civilians out of the midst of possible carnage.

Captain Shran, an Andorian who could trace his lineage back to another Shran who had befriended Jonathan Archer nearly two hundred years before, was a formidable warrior, a trait his people seemed to share. He would stand on the bridge of their beefed-up warship as she flew into battle, unmovable, unflappable. He would bark out orders and his people had such

trust in him that they followed without question. The *Saratoga* was there when Captain Sisko led the *Defiant* and their armada against the Dominion forces in their attempt to retake Deep Space Nine. The ship had taken a beating during the battle as Shran led them into the heart of the Dominion lines.

Michael had helmed the ship during the fight. He'd lost count of the times he had managed to dodge incoming fire while lining them up for a shot at another ship. He'd lost count of how many ships they had managed to destroy or disable. Eventually, both sides backed off when the *Defiant* broke through the enemy defences and made its run on DS9. While the Dominion forces had outnumbered the Starfleet forces initially, with the addition of the Klingon capital ships they became more than a match for the enemy and the Dominion forces were routed. Rather than continue the fight, Shran had convinced his fellow Captains to remain and rescue as many of their brothers from the burning starships that they could. There were "sailors in the water", and they couldn't be left to their fates. Not only that, a number of Cardassians were taken prisoner and Starfleet vessels that could be salvaged were towed home. They quickly realised that the Jem Hadar ships would not be recovered for their technology. Any attempt to do so failed as the remaining crews detonated them before they could be taken. The Klingons took advantage of the situation and simply finished them off.

The *Saratoga* was luckier than most. Sure, holes had been punched in her hull and she had completely depleted her stock of weaponry, but they returned heroes, with their hallways teeming with rescued Starfleet crewmen who were just grateful to be alive.

Michael had received a boost in rank to full Lieutenant for his role in the fight, and he was happy to serve out the rest of the war under their enigmatic captain who strode into every battle, phasers in hand. He'd lost an antenna once in battle, yet he just stood there and kept going as if it was simply a flesh wound. Shran was an amazing chan and Branson learned much from him as they served out the war.

Michael's prowess at the helm had been noted by his Captain and he had been rewarded for his gifts with the Senior Helmsman's post. Delighted to be part of the *Saratoga*'s senior staff, Michael felt he'd not only found a great team to work with, but he felt part of the family.

After the war, the call came for the *Saratoga* to come home for refit. She had become a bit of a patchwork quilt of repairs, but it didn't bother the crew one whit. To them, these were battle scars won in war and that wiping them out would somehow diminish the great vessel. All the same, their turn had come, and the *Saratoga* had to go home. It was going to be a full refit, with a three-month layover. There was no way the crew could stay together.

Shran had put in a glowing report for all of his officers, so when the time came for Starfleet to cut new orders for the ship's officers, they found that their future career assignments were rosy. All except for one. Michael had been given the position of helmsman on the *USS Enterprise-E*. When he read the document, Michael felt ice water in his veins. Was this his reward for years of faithful service to the Federation? To be posted to their death ship?

Trying to back out of the posting would have been career suicide, and Michael fought an internal battle to simply

retire then and there. He'd done his part for King and Country. He didn't have to go.

Yet the thought of the disappointment on his parent's faces was more than he could bear. He could not return home and tell them to their faces that he had refused such an illustrious posting. It would kill them with shame. So, with great reluctance, he accepted the posting and reported for duty.

His first few months aboard had been relatively uneventful. His new fellow crewmembers were friendly and welcoming and told him of their adventures thus far. He hadn't been there for the second battle for Sector 001 with the Borg or their fight with the Son'a, but that didn't stop them from filling his head with every little detail. All the same, he could not help but examine the ship's records for the number of crew who had been assimilated by the Borg. The number was frightening.

Yet he could not help but be amazed at these people's resilience. Yes, there was great risk serving on the *Enterprise*, but the adventure – the ride – was unforgettable, and the results of their efforts often not only shaped worlds, but the whole Federation. It took him a while, but he was beginning to understand the prestige of serving on this ship.

One thing that struck him as odd was a conversation he'd had with Worf on one occasion in Ten Forward. The Klingon had understood that they were alone in their service to the Federation at the battle for DS9. Nobody else aboard had been there. As they shared their experiences, with Worf taking delight at coming to the rescue, they noticed a small gathering forming about their table. Some even began asking questions.

"What was it like looking at all those Cardassian and Jem Hadar ships on the screen? Were you afraid?"

To Michael's surprise, he found himself answering: "Not really. We had a job to do and the Captain was solid. We were going to retake DS9 and prevent the Dominion from sending through reinforcements. There was no "or die trying". That was our job, and we were going to do it. Come hell or high water. When the order came to move forward the sky lit up like fireworks. Ships were exploding left and right, but the Captain kept us true and let me fly her. Jillian Taylor at Navigation made sure we stayed out of the other's way and Commander Shrev at Tactical took advantage of every opportunity I gave him."

Worf's eyes lit up with delight. "Glorious! I wish we could have been with you at the first push. To face such an overwhelming force and march into battle is the mark of a true warrior." He snapped his fist against his chest in salute. "K'phah!"

It was high praise from the ship's security chief and Michael recognised it as such. "It was good to fight with you that day, Worf. It was an incredible battle!" With that, he put his fears to rest and realised that, as Worf liked to say, there were some days when it was a good day to die.

Word came that the First Officer, Commander Riker, was being offered command of the *Titan*. He and Troi had taken it as a sign that they should finally solemnise their relationship and so the *Enterprise* returned to Earth for the wedding. While Michael had been invited, he politely declined and taken the opportunity to visit with his parents who had

travelled to Starbase One to meet him. After all, it wasn't often that the *Enterprise* was in their part of the galaxy.

Michael hadn't had to go far to meet them. The ship was inside in dock and his parents met him on the spacious restaurant deck. Even though all three of them had been there before, it had taken them ten minutes of discussion, after a solid hug from each, to finally settle on Chinese. They made their way over to the open venue and they were shown to a table. To their delight, there was no replicated food here. Every meal was hand-made by chefs who took great pride in their work.

As they waited for their meal to be served, Michael's mother caught his eye and asked: "What's it like to serve on the *Enterprise*?"

He took a moment to consider the question and answered: "So far, pretty uneventful. It's nowhere near as dangerous as it was during the war on the *Saratoga*. I'd thought Captain Shran shied away from danger at first, but when the battle came, he strode in as if nothing could touch him. Since I transferred to the *Enterprise* not much has happened."

He noted his father's almost shocked look. "I used to wish for quiet days. Don't moz it, son."

Michael gave a confident chuckle. "You don't know Captain Picard, Dad. He doesn't go looking for trouble like some Captains do."

"It's not Picard I'm worried about, Son. The ship is still called *Enterprise*. Trouble seems to find *it*."

As their food arrived, Michael gave his father a knowing grin. He had come further and seen more action than both his

parents put together. He was sure he could weather any storm that came his way. "It's all right, Dad. At least the ship's not called *Voyager*."

The comment brought a laugh from both his parents, and Michael was not surprised to find them regaling him with stories taken from Janeway's logs.

Things began getting interesting after the *Enterprise* left spacedock headed for Betazed for the *second* of Riker and Troi's weddings. Michael had been smiling to himself at the senior officer's banter regarding the tradition of nude nuptials.

Then the call came to investigate a positronic indication on a desolate world. The Captain, Data and Worf had returned unscathed, but not without facing stiff resistance. In the days following, Michael had seen the simpler version of Data, B4, a number of times and each time it unsettled him. Such a naive tool could be used by anyone.

Then the call came from Admiral Janeway – of all people – to go to Romulus! When the Captain had come out and told him to set course for that far-flung planet, he wasn't certain he'd heard the order properly. All the same, he programmed in the course and the *Enterprise* flung herself into the void.

Things were tense from the moment they made orbit. The Romulans had kept them sitting there for hours and Michael took note that even some of the senior officers were becoming nervous. All the same, like Shran, Picard was keeping his people calm in the middle of the storm.

All that went out the window then the *Scimitar* decloaked in front of their ship. The sheer size of the vessel dwarfed theirs, never mind it looked like some kind of demented spider. Then came the scan of its weaponry. Captain Picard was right, it was a predator.

Michael was well aware the Romulans liked to project strength. He'd had a number of opportunities to observe them during the War and they were all about putting their opponent on the back foot by sheer intimidation. Right then and there, Michael Branson was intimidated. He was sorely tempted to back their vessel away from this flying monster.

He kept his cool, however, and waited for his orders. Hold station.

Things began to look up after the Captain's initial contact with the new Praetor, Shinzon. However, once his identity was confirmed as a clone of Picard, everything started going sideways. Tensions went through the roof when Troi was attacked psionically and Picard was kidnapped.

Michael did his bit in the search for the cloaked *Scimitar*, but, without active measures their search was fruitless. To their surprise, after an hour a small fighter craft appeared out of nowhere, heading for the *Enterprise*. Riker gave the order, and it was beamed aboard before the Romulan ship could recapture the Captain.

Then Michael received the order he'd been waiting to hear since they crossed the Neutral Zone. "Get us out of here!" With the course and speed already programmed into the board, Michael touched the panel and the *Enterprise* spun around and left the system at high warp. Even pushing the engines past Warp Nine, Michael did not feel at ease. They had no idea of

the *Scimitar*'s capabilities and top speed, and for all they knew the ship was nipping at their heels.

It hit the fan when the ship entered the Bassen Rift. The battering the ship took quickly incapacitated their warp drive and Michael found is options extremely limited. Using his considerable skills, he kept the ship in the fight until the unexpected happened and Picard was hailed.

Michael sat at the helm and sweated. To say the situation was tense was an understatement. When Picard sauntered out of his office, he could almost swear the man had an air of defeat about him. What had happened in there?

He was brought back to the moment by Riker's comment: "When I thought this couldn't get any worse."

The war-hardened helmsman looked up at the viewscreen and realised the one thing that had been bothering him since they had entered Romulan space had come to fruition. They hadn't seen a single warbird since they crossed the Zone, and now they were nose-to-nose with *two* of them! Michael gritted his teeth. No matter what happened here, the *Enterprise* wasn't going down without a fight! He tensed up at the controls, expecting the call to come for tactical manoeuvres.

It didn't. Instead, a Romulan Commander appeared onscreen and, contrary to all belief, was offering them assistance!

"Let's get to work!"

Michael flew the ship like a man possessed. He pushed it past the design specs on many occasions, and he did his best to keep the ship's weapons pointed at the *Scimitar*. He cringed when he felt the wing of the destroyed warbird bounce off their

shields. Sure enough, it did massive damage to their forward shields, and he had to bring the ship about to keep the enemy from taking advantage of the weakness. As the shields firmed up, the crew watched with dismay as the *Scimitar* disabled the *Valdaur* and left them alone once more to fight their invisible foe.

With fire raining down on them once more, Troi produced her psionic miracle. With the Romulans distracted, she managed to locate the *Scimitar* and fire a volley of Quantum Torpedoes into the vessel.

Michael wanted to “whoop” with joy when he saw the ship’s cloaking device fail.

“Fire at will!” Picard called, and Michael took delight at giving Worf every opportunity he could to lay into the Reman killing machine. Pushing the ship to her limits at impulse, the *Enterprise* surged past the ship, pummelling her with her array of phaser banks and torpedo launchers. Michael’s heart swelled in his chest as he saw the damage his people were doing to the enemy vessel. They could do it!

He looked up and saw the Romulan vessel swing round for a forward strafing run and he knew they were in trouble. The disruptor fire pounded their already weakened forward shields and one shot got through.

Michael was thrown backwards by the force of the explosion and he put up his hands to protect his face. Then the air pressure in the room tried to drag everything out with it as it rushed into the void. He was pulled out of his chair and for an instant he clung with everything he had to the console, yet his fingers slipped on the surface and he was thrown spinning, crying out, through the smashed forward bulkhead into space.

His lungs were instantly robbed of their life-giving air and the cold hit him like dropping into an intensely cold frozen lake. He could feel the moisture on his flesh icing over and, as the cold robbed him of his ability to process, his last thought was not of becoming the latest victim of the cursed *Enterprise* name, but pride in fighting a good fight with people who made a difference, who fought in defence of the defenceless.

A week later, back at Starfleet Command an ensign stepped up to an exterior memorial wall and sighed. It was time to add more names to the wall marked *Enterprise*. He looked to his left and noted the large number of names that began under NX-01 which included Commander Charles Tucker III. His eyes caught a few others as he turned. Elizabeth Dehner under 1701, James Kirk under 1701-B, Rachel Garrett under 1701-C, Yar under 1701-D, and now a bunch of other names under 1701-E. He set up the etching machine and allowed it to self-calibrate. He had already programmed into it the names to be added so it could begin as soon as it was ready.

Light shone out from the front of the device and golden names appeared in the light-coloured marble. The first was: Lieutenant Commander Data, then came: Lieutenant Commander Michael Ross Branson, followed by many more. Sadly, the ship had lost a number of members when she had been used as a battering ram against the *Scimitar*. The ensign following his orders had no idea of this, even though he grieved in his own way for the lost.

He wasn't alone. Standing behind him, watching him do the work, were three men. Michael's father had come to honour his fallen son, but he was surprised to find two other

people here who he instantly recognised: Captains Picard and Shran.

Picard seemed to see the familial similarities between father and son, and he stepped forward to shake his hand. "Mister Branson I presume?"

The man was torn between his grief and his sense of idol worship. "Sir," he said, taking the offered hand.

Shran did the same. "I was his captain on the *Saratoga*," he said by way of introduction.

"Ah." Branson senior didn't know what to say and his eyes slowly returned to the shining letters on the memorial. It was all that was left of his eldest son. He had been told the exploding Romulan ship had vapourised his remains. The captains left him to his silence, until he uttered: "They got it wrong. My son was only a Lieutenant."

Picard gave a small, sad smile. "I had put him in for promotion a week before we left for Romulus and it hadn't come through until the day after he passed. I made sure they added it to the memorial. He more than deserved it."

Branson's chest swelled in pride. His son had died a Commander on the *Enterprise* in a battle that he could tell his descendants about for years to come. There was no way Michael was going to be forgotten in his household! "Thank you, Captains. You've made an old man proud."

Both officers nodded silently, then Shran added: "It was my honour to serve with him, sir. You raised a fine man."

Picard agreed. "He will be missed on the *Enterprise*."

Both men turned and left Branson alone in his grief. On the inside, he was torn, and he knew of his son's reservations about serving on any ship named *Enterprise*, but he well knew

that to have your name on this wall wasn't a curse. It was being immortalised with great people who had helped not only shape the Federation, but to serve and keep safe her citizens. The future of their growing civilisation was founded on the actions of the people whose names adorned this wall.

Branson would miss his son. He would grieve for his son. But he couldn't be prouder.