

*Excerpted from Devastation Class by Glen Zipper and Elaine Mongeon
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IF I DIDN'T KNOW ANY BETTER, I would've thought it was a practical joke. Out of twenty-five students enrolled in Debate Theory, Professor Sigvaatsan chose me to argue the Kastazi position. I guess I could've passed to another student, but why bother? Most people had already made up their minds about me, so I figured I might as well go ahead and win the argument.

"There is no justification for the actions of the Kastazi," Cadet Nixon went on. The swollen vein in the middle of her forehead told me I was getting to her. Quivering fingers soon followed, and then a sudden, sharp narrowing of her otherwise soft oval eyes. "What they brought with them wasn't just wanton despotism. It was pure evil."

Like most students, I was no fan of the cadets and all their militaristic ceremony, but it was hard to dislike Nixon. She was definitely more accessible than your typical cadet. Not stuck-up at all, she had no issue breaking ranks with her rank-and-file chums to commiserate with those of us on the lower decks—an exceedingly rare thing for a cadet to do.

For all the captain's talk of students and cadets having an equal opportunity to learn out among the stars, the reality was far from it. As a student, it almost felt like you were a stowaway—expected to stay hidden on your assigned decks, go to classes, be in bed by curfew, and thank the Alliance for the honor to stare out the *California's* portholes for months on end.

Cadets, on the other hand, had a function. Beyond the academic curriculum they shared with us, they got to learn all of the ship's critical operations, participate in bridge drills, and enjoy access to facilities we weren't allowed within five hundred meters of. They had aspirations for military service that most of us did not, so some additional opportunities made sense, of course. What galled me, though, was how the cadets spun these opportunities as hardships that entitled them to *even more privileges* than they already had. Later curfews. Additional meal options. Extra Iso-Rec credits.

There were seventy-seven of us and only seven of them, so their walking around the ship like they owned it understandably rubbed a lot of students the wrong way. It wouldn't have been so bad if they at least had some awareness of it. But they didn't. Except maybe for Nixon.

Unlike the rest of the cadets, at least she made a real effort to treat us as peers. Sometimes she'd even felt comfortable enough to ask me for help with her Comp Sci assignments. I would've expected her to ask Cadet Bixby instead, but my guess was she didn't want him to know she struggled from time to time. Cadets had it so drilled into their brains that they always had to be the best at everything. It was actually kind of sad.

"That's the problem with your argument. Its entire premise is predicated upon the idea that evil exists," I answered. "It doesn't. Evil is a matter of perspective—in your case informed by an emotional rationalization of something painful your mind can't intellectually process. Do you really believe the Kastazi's primary motivation was to cause us torment? That they received some kind of spiritual nourishment from all the blood we spilled fighting them?"

Nixon slowly exhaled, doing her best to maintain her composure. It was only an academic exercise, but anything related to the Kastazi was bound to get emotional. "No one is saying that human suffering was the Kastazi's goal. From their perspective they may have believed their actions to be practically motivated. Even logical. It's the means they took to pursue their goals that made the Kastazi evil."

I suppressed a smile as she left herself further exposed. "So let's start there then. Are you agreeing that the underlying premise of the Kastazi Imperative was logically sound?"

“I said it might be logical from their perspective,” Nixon replied.

“Fine, but as my entire argument is predicated upon the idea that evil is a matter of perspective, that’s something I’d like to explore. Tell me about their perspective.”

“Everyone knows about their perspective.”

“I want to hear it from you. In your own words. I want to make sure you’re not conflating their perspective with your own.”

Nixon stood silent. The vein in the center of her forehead throbbed.

Professor Sigvaatsan gently motioned to her with an open hand. “Cadet Nixon?”

“Their perspective was that they were superior to us,” she answered. “And they believed this superiority gave them a natural right to control an inferior race. Humankind. Their so-called Kastazi Imperative.”

“And that’s all?” I prodded. “Are you suggesting that this perspective alone is what motivated their occupation of Earth?”

“Yes.”

“What about the destruction of their home world? If there was an alternative—an unpopulated, habitable world similar to Earth for the Kastazi to settle—do you think they still would have come just to cause us suffering?”

“I’m not going to argue against a hypothetical.”

“Fine. Dispense with the hypothetical then. Let us presume there was no alternative. That Earth was their only hope of survival. Should they have not come? Are you suggesting they should have allowed their entire race to perish?”

“They could have come. They didn’t have to conquer.”

A soft bell sounded, signaling the transition to open interrogatories. Nearly everyone activated their consoles, wanting to join the debate.

“Before we continue, I want to remind everyone of the purpose of this exercise,” Professor Sigvaatsan cautioned us. “Not all of our enemies have descended upon us from the stars. Earth’s history is littered with examples when we failed to promptly recognize a clear and present danger to our values, liberties, and way of life. What we must remember is that such threats rarely show us their true faces right away. Most often they arrive as simple ideas that appeal to our greatest fears and insecurities, requiring us to relinquish more and more of our freedoms in exchange for the promise of a better, safer, or more prosperous future. By the time we recognize the truth of the bargain we’ve struck, our present has become far worse than the future we were hoping to avoid. Mr. Chen’s argument was intended to help us see these threats more clearly—and to better understand our capacity to rationalize almost anything if it appeals to our baser fears.”