

STAR TREK

DAWN OF A NEW

MILLENNIUM



SEAN O'KEEFE

Piper, Sarda, Scanner and Merete Return!

DAWN OF A NEW MILLENNIUM

by Sean O'Keefe 2011©

Dawn of a New Millennium

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*for Judi
who inspired me to reach for the skies*

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Prologue

S'tallek frowned at the viewscreen, knowing something was wrong, but unable to put his finger on it. His ship, the Imperial Romulan Warship *Falcon's Claw*, an older style Bird of Prey, had arrived at the rendezvous one standard before, and he was worried. The ship he was waiting for was usually on time, but one whole day had passed before it finally appeared.

The foreign ship loomed before him and for the first time he found deep down he was frightened. He knew that this feeling was not worthy of a Romulan, but only fools and dead men were never afraid. His eyes followed the squarish lines of the craft before him and knew that its power matched its bulk.

S'tallek's ship was still one of the best in the Imperial Fleet, but in this case, he was over-matched. He was fully aware that the ship before him carried a shield shredder and that if they wanted, they could destroy his ship in moments. If it was not for the stolen Federation munitions that this vessel had brought to trade, S'tallek would have found a stray Federation ship and captured it for the glory and political favour it would bring him back on the homeworlds. But S'tallek knew that these supplies were needed badly by the new Empress for defence as well as intelligence.

“Commander!”

S'tallek was shaken from his thoughts and brought back to reality by the communications officer at attention beside him. He didn't bother to look and indicated with a casual toss of his hand that his subordinate continue.

“They have signalled that they are ready to begin the transfer, sir.” The officer remained at full attention, and the Commander would have it no other way.

S'tallek was not surprised that they were unwilling to identify themselves. Knowledge was a dangerous thing. Besides, it was obvious who they were, anyway. At this stage in their relationship, introductions were totally unnecessary.

The Commander looked towards his science officer. “Status of their weapons and shields?” he barked.

“Lowered and powered down, sir,” came the instant reply.

S'tallek frowned. He was still suspicious. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end. It was bothering him that they were a whole day late, but many things can happen in space to delay even the wariest of travellers. Even in space, there was such a thing as “traffic”.

The Commander looked towards his shields officer and ordered him to lower their screens.

It was the last order he ever gave as a gas bomb materialised before him on the bridge, spewing its toxic gas in all directions. S'tallek had no time to react before he succumbed to the fumes and as the blackness took him, he realised that he was right after all.

Captain's Log, U.S.S. Ingram, Stardate 8400.3

Lieutenant Commander Benvenuto commanding,

The first flight of the new Ingram-class vessel has proven her to be bella. She is an impressive ship based on the Excelsior-class, but with even more firepower and even triple shielding! Mamma Mia, I cannot wait to take this ship to warp!

Lieutenant Commander Giovanni Benvenuto had the best job in the entire universe – so he thought. He got to dream up cool starship designs, build them, then go and fly them. Most of the time, they worked well and often went on to become history makers. Types like the *Saladin*-class, or the *Constitution*-class had made their mark on the galaxy, and he had taken part in their glory by being one of their designers.

However, they all faded into the background compared with the ship he had the joy of commanding today. With deck plates still smelling of freshly-minted duranium, the paint glistening and the panels shining, the *U.S.S. Ingram* – the first of class after which all that followed would be known by – was taking her maiden voyage. Fresh off the assembly line at Utopia Planitia Shipyards on Mars, the *Ingram* had the distinction of being the largest starship yet to come off their drawing boards.

Modelled after the *Excelsior*-class, it sported triple shielding, a hangar deck running most of the length of the engineering hull, more firepower and, when finished, she would have the latest version of the Federation's top secret new cloaking device.

However, complete was still a fair way off. Aside from the basics, like life support, artificial gravity, the head, and the engines, there wasn't much to this flying behemoth yet. Most of the living spaces had yet to be furnished, and areas like Sickbay and Astrometrics were only echo chambers. And that was exactly the way Giovanni liked it.

To him, it was like taking a tin can with a colossal motor out for a spin. He had done his family tree and discovered his liking for fast vehicles went all the way back to the twentieth century where some of his ancestors had raced antique ground cars at ridiculous speeds. Whilst most would have considered them nuts, Giovanni considered them pioneers.

They had just passed the asteroid belt, and all was going well. As was typical of such test flights, the ship had only ten people on board: himself in command, a pilot, a navigator, and the rest were down in Engineering running the engines and a multitude of tests.

Right now, he couldn't think of anything more he would rather be doing than testing the upper limits of this ship's modified warp drive. Although the transwarp

technology had proven to be a bust, the geniuses at Utopia Planitia had managed to morph the design with a standard warp drive engine to produce something that could sustain Warp Nine for extended periods of time.

Giovanni was wondering how long for. Whilst these things could be modelled on a computer, there was no substitute for the real world.

The door slid open and their Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Draltashack, an overgrown leonine being from Cait, stepped out and straight over to Giovanni. The two of them went way back.

“How are things down in the *prigione sotterranea*,” Giovanni asked offhandedly. Whilst he loved designing starships, spending all his time in the Engineering decks was not his idea of fun.

Fortunately for Draltashack, his Universal Translator rendered *dungeon* for him in his own language. He gave his friend a polite laugh. “The new engine is beautiful, Giovanni,” he said with pride. He had been part of the team that had developed it. “I think it will do even better than the simulations.” He ran his paw along the railing that encircled the rear of the Bridge, relishing the texture of the polished wood which reminded him so much of his homeworld with its pristine forests. For a moment, in his mind’s eye, he left the confines of the hull and saw the might of this vessel from outside. A jewel in the dark – one with sharp teeth. “Once this ship is finished, she could conquer the universe.”

Giovanni had tunnel vision, his mind on one thing alone – speed. “Magnifico!” He kissed his fingers as if tasting a tender morsel. “Once we’ve passed Jupiter, we’ll see how fast this ship really is.” His enthusiasm was infectious. The junior officers manning the helm and nav’ stations nodded their agreement.

Draltashack simply arched his whiskers forward in mild amusement. They had no idea what was going to happen when this ship entered warp. He forced himself to relax. Sometimes it was better that way.

His keen eyes spotted the banded gas giant, Jupiter, on the view screen long before the others. He estimated Giovanni would order warp drive in sixty seconds. “I need to get back to Engineering, my friend,” he said with a touch of sadness. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

Giovanni thought it an odd thing to say, and simply took it to mean once they had entered warp. He simply gave the Lieutenant a smile and a nod, then turned back to view the star scape.

Fifty-five seconds later, the *Ingram* cleared Jupiter’s orbit. With relish, Giovanni said: “*Andiamo.*” *Let’s go.*

As soon as the helm officer engaged the controls for warp drive, their Commander realised something was wrong. The warning light for the ship’s inertial dampeners flashed its signal, telling them – all too late – that the systems that would move them *with* the ship without them feeling the forces of acceleration had failed. The failsafes *should* have kicked in and protected them, but they did

not.

However, the possibility of systems failure due to design flaw or sabotage had no time to register in Giovanni's mind before the ship entered warp, killing the unprotected crew members on board.

Chapter One

Earth Spacedock revolved in space, in high orbit about the birthplace of the United Federation of Planets: Earth. Its hundreds of lights and towers glittered in the night, and its mushroom shape contained an orbital hangar for many a visiting starship. Its two thousand plus decks were home to many different functions, not the least of which was a mass of defensive weaponry. It was also home to a number of civilian organisations, as well as a large Starfleet contingent. Much of Starfleet's starship R&D was done here, as well as the general every day running of Starfleet itself. Such was this flying mushroom's complexity and bulk, that Earth was not always the primary destination for visitors. Many of them never went further than the base before returning home.

It was also that place where many a career was launched, both for crews and starships alike. Vessels like the brand-new *U.S.S. Enterprise*.

This *Enterprise*, registry *NCC-1701-A*, slid gracefully back through the doors and her pilot, Hikaru Sulu, guided her over to her dock. Which was no mean feat considering the disaster this simple shakedown cruise had been. Scotty was going to have his hands full whilst their new *Enterprise* was here, for however long that was going to be.

They had just returned from a quick trip to Vulcan, her first run since her launch only a week before. Her commander, the newly *demoted* Captain James T. Kirk, smiled to himself, just glad to be back in the centre seat. Then he frowned to himself. Sure enough, this new vessel carried the name *Enterprise*, but she certainly wasn't the original. Starfleet had rushed her commission, the paint on her new call letters still drying when they boarded her. Since then, they had found system after system that deserved a warranty check.

Now they had returned to Starbase One, their Chief Engineer could settle down and have some fun making her work properly.

Jim grinned to himself. If there was *someone* on this ship that would enjoy this at all, it was Scotty. He would no doubt have a ball making this ship into something that exceeded Starfleet's specs for the design.

The sound of the magnalocks activating reverberated throughout the ship as they locked on. Now held immobile, the crew could power down the engines and run the ship off the starbase's internal plant.

The sound of the turbolift doors opening brought Jim's attention, and he looked back to see Scotty who, even though his was in his sixties, practically ran out onto the Bridge. "Och, aye, Captain, you've got to see this!" he said with barely contained enthusiasm. The portly Scotsman stepped up next to the helm and tapped the board. "Sulu, put this section on the screen," he said, eagerly.

Nearing middle age himself, Hikaru never-the-less had kept himself fit with

his martial arts and fencing. His handsome, Asian face broke out in a smile. “What could be so exciting about being in Spacedock?” he asked. Regardless, he called up the required image.

All eyes turned to view the Federation’s latest starship design. It was a variation on the *Excelsior*, that much could be seen.

Scotty stepped right up to the screen and started pointing out the massive ship’s new fittings. With the ship essentially powered down, the rest of the bridge crew joined him. “Look at that!” he said, pointing to the top of the engineering hull. “That shuttle craft bay is huge!” His spoke as a child perusing the latest toy.

Sulu indicated the warp nacelles, which were equally massive. “How fast can that thing go?” he asked thoughtfully. “Warp nine?”

The navigator and weapons specialist, Commander Pavel Chekov, their ambassador of all things Russian, indicated the underside of the circular primary hull. “It’s got five sets of phaser pods as well!” he said, his Russian accent still thick after years in Starfleet service.

Their Vulcan science officer, Captain Spock, brought his attention to the warp nacelle struts. There was something peculiar about them. “Mister Chekov, I believe you missed the most impressive adaptation.” His finger tapped the screen and Pavel could see what he meant.

“Megaphasers!” Chekov exclaimed in surprise.

Scotty looked down on his fellow. “Aye, lad,” he said in his thick, Scottish brogue. “Run directly from the warp core. I would’na want to get in their way!”

Standing slightly to the rear, Jim Kirk just gave a small grin. This design had been brought about under his command. He was well aware of the type’s specifications. He had drawn the list up – personally.

He spoke up so his friends could hear him. “It’s called the *Ingram*,” he said sagely. “That vessel should be the first-of-class. She would have finished her shake-down by now and be ready for service.”

The fact their enigmatic captain knew so much about the new vessel came as no surprise to his crew. Captain Kirk always seemed to know a little bit more about everything.

Doctor McCoy, their tall, thin, southern gentleman, looked over at his younger friend with a slightly suspicious eye. “Jim, they’re not resurrecting the *Dreadnought* class again, are they?”

The captain rolled his eyes. “Hardly, Bones.” He leaned back against the helm as he remembered what his friend was referring to. A previous adventure some years before had them trying to stop an attempt by some to subvert the Federation and turn it into an empire, using the *Dreadnought*-class as muscle. It had taken some luck, talent, and the skills of a young woman just out of the Academy to put an end to it all. Jim’s eyes focussed as he returned to the present and took in his crew members as a group. “The type was proposed to be a kind of

trouble-shooter. The *Ingram* would go into an area in conflict, sort it out, then hold it until reinforcements arrive.”

The Doctor snorted. “What kind of nut job would want to captain a vessel with a giant target printed on it?” he asked derisively.

James Kirk gave a cherubic smile as he noticed another starship beginning docking manoeuvres. “Actually, Starfleet already has someone in mind.”

“Captain’s Log, U.S.S. Exeter, stardate 8451.4

We are returning from our five-year tour of duty discovering new worlds and patrolling along the Klingon Neutral Zone. Our crew is tired, and my ship is in dire need of a refit. As the Exeter will be in Spacedock for roughly a year I fully expect to be transferred to a new command for the duration, although to where is up to the powers-that-be.”

Piper gazed around the bridge of the aging *Exeter*, glad that she was at last going to be getting some shore leave, even though it was going to be on Earth. Having been born on Proxima Beta with its purple star, she could never get used to Earth’s little yellow sun. Still, any ground would do to rest her tired mind and body. Speaking of which, Piper shifted in her seat. Her cheeks were getting sore.

The captain tossed out her long, honey-blonde hair. She was naturally a brunette, but she had used her prerogative to change that styling years before. These days she pulled it into a simple ponytail and slipped her customary silver loop with a bar through it to keep it all in order. It wasn’t strictly regulation, but then she was anything but a stickler for the rules.

Tired of sitting around, Piper stood up and stretched out her nearly six-foot-tall frame. She had managed to keep herself fit with her mastery of an Andorian martial-art, and her slender body had done its share of fighting over the years. All the same, she noticed that, as she slid further into the forties, her body was trying to slow her down ever more.

She reviewed her most recent mission in the quiet of her thoughts. The *Exeter*’s three-month tour along the Neutral Zone had been generally uninteresting and dull, and even though Piper was proud of her first command she was looking forward to a decent break.

Spacedock loomed on the viewscreen, the only place where total re-fits were being done to the old *Constitution*-class starships, of which the *Exeter* was the last on the list of ships to be upgraded. Although she was old, the *Exeter* gleamed like a jewel in the dark as she closed the distance.

Piper turned to her communications officer, a black-furred Caitian called Krashtallah. The people of his world were leonine in form, proud and fierce, but finely tempered and with a great appreciation for art and spirituality. Unfortunately

for him, due to human tendencies his name had been shortened to the undignified name "Crash". The graceful felinoid knew the connotations were undeserved but didn't let it bother him. He thought their names were funny, too. He caught Piper's gaze as she said: "Open hailing frequencies, please."

"Aye, Captain," he replied with his friendly baritone. She gave him a quick grin then turned back towards the viewscreen.

"Earth Spacedock, this is the *U.S.S. Exeter*, Captain Piper commanding, requesting clearance for docking manoeuvres." She lounged back in the command chair, brushed her hair out of her face and waited. After thirty seconds of silence, Piper began to worry. "Starbase docking control, do you copy?"

Just before Piper decided to try again, a slightly flustered voice replied: "Sorry for the delay, *Exeter*. You are cleared for docking manoeuvres."

Piper glanced at her helmsman. "Disengage helm."

A muttered "Aye" answered her as the bridge lights changed to docking blue.

Believing they were now in safe hands, the captain relaxed again. "Starbase control, take us in."

Piper relaxed into her chair and watched the view as the *Exeter* neared the Spacedock doors. She surprised the crew when she suddenly sat bolt upright and cried: "Re-engage helm! All stop!"

The crew raced to complete her orders and bring the ship to a halt. On the viewscreen the Spacedock doors were still closed, and they were sitting too close to them for comfort.

Furious for the near miss, Piper yelled into her chair mike, "Spacedock control, what the hell is going on?"

A new voice was heard, embarrassed and apologetic. "Sorry about that *Exeter*, the docking tech seems to have had one too many."

Piper glanced toward her Deltan first officer, who only looked back at her with a bemused shrug. "What's going on over there?" she asked in wonder.

Once more the disembodied voice came from a speaker overhead. "*U.S.S. Exeter*, sorry about that. If you will disengage helm, we will bring you in." In front of their eyes the Spacedock doors began to part.

Piper looked about her at the doubting faces of her crew. "Negative, Spacedock control. We'll bring ourselves in."

The helmsman grinned. After three months of drudgery patrolling an all too quiet Neutral Zone, they were finally getting something fun to do.

Piper gazed at her expectant crew, waiting for her order. "Manoeuvring jets, Mister."

"Manoeuvring jets, aye."

Slowly, the *Exeter* crawled toward the great doors, matching her movement with the satellite's rotation. Piper felt better that her crew was doing the work. She knew they would not allow her ship to get the tiniest scratch.

“Proceed to bay twelve,” advised the Starbase control officer.

Piper watched as the *Exeter* aligned with the base doors. “Ahead 100 kph.”

Exeter glided into the yawning cavity within and towards bay twelve. When they were within five hundred meters Piper hailed all stop. “Aft manoeuvring jets. Bring us around.” The great starship gently swung on her vertical axis and halted parallel to the bay wall, perfectly aligned.

Piper addressed the intercom. “Extend docking latches.”

On the bay wall the docking magnets and tubes reached outwards to the waiting ship.

Glancing at her helmsman, the *Exeter*’s captain said, “We’re in your hands now, Mister.”

The helmsman grinned and lightly brushed a control. The great ship drifted toward the docks and gently bumped against them. “Lock up,” he ordered Starbase control, and they were still.

Captain Piper looked around at her crew and said, “Thank you, and well done.”

They each in turn looked at her and smiled or nodded their appreciation. It had been a long three months and it had been tiring just finding new things for her crew to do.

Regardless, Piper reflected, it was worth it, there was nothing like being in command of your own ship, even if the tour was generally uneventful.

Piper got up from her seat and approached the turbolift. She turned and looked fondly at her crew. “I’ll see you all at the party,” she said with a grin touched by sadness. She had no idea what ship she, or they, were going to be assigned to next.

With smiles and waves, her Bridge crew laughed and turned to complete their tasks before retiring to their quarters.

Within minutes, Piper found herself in her private quarters, folding her extra uniforms and packing them in her personal suitcase. She took great pains to put away her favourite picture frames and her medal case carefully but made sure she left enough things out for her one, remaining night on board. There was going to be a party later that evening in the Starbase ballroom as a farewell for her crew before they moved on to their new digs, and Piper always took the effort to show for such soirées. She made a point of valuing the people she served with and rewarding a job well done. Her attitude towards her subordinates inspired great loyalty from those who served under her both now and in the past.

She put down her last uniform jacket and looked up through her small, forward-facing portal. The view wasn’t wonderful, but it was enough for her to see two starships across the bay. The *Enterprise* she was familiar with. The other, larger ship was new.

Her vision was excellent, and Piper could make out the call letters on the

Enterprise and realised the stories she had heard regarding Jim's recent adventures were true. The *Exeter* had been on the other side of Federation territory, and so had no chance to intervene in the Cetacean Probe's attack on Earth.

She smirked to herself, finding it no surprise that Jim had been in the middle of it all. She noted that, even though he had technically broken the Temporal Prime Directive, the means had justified the ends. The Earth was still here. They even had Humpbacked Whales again.

After all that, they rewarded Jim with a new command. It was fitting.

He'd had to sacrifice the original *Enterprise* at Genesis – no starship Captain worth their salt wasn't privy to the events. Jim's son had been murdered as well, which had brought a tear to her eye when she had heard it. After Sa'avik had been rescued, with the resurrected Spock, and the Klingon incursion had been dealt with, Jim Kirk deserved *some* gratitude.

She had to admit it to herself, it still ground on her that the Admiralty had denied Jim the *right* to return to Genesis. She shook her head in wonder. The vagaries of politics were something she had no time for. Piper was a woman of action. The right thing needed to be done, regardless of *politics*, and so she would always champion that course of action. So, no matter how hard her superiors might try, there was no way they were going to promote her above the rank of Captain. It might have suited her old tutor, but not her. Her place was on the bridge of a starship, and that was where she was going to stay.

On impulse, Piper took out her communicator and flipped it open. "Piper to *Enterprise*," she called.

To her surprise, the answer was immediate – and familiar. "*Enterprise* here, Commander Piper," came the cheeky reply. Commander Nyota Uhura was having some fun with her old shipmate. "What can we do for you, Captain?" she added, a little more formally.

Piper grinned, the memories flooding back. "I'm extending you all an invitation to our breakup party this evening at oh-seven hundred in the dock ballroom. Just a small affair. Pretty informal. Please let the Admiral know." It was a chance for them to catch up, that was all, she thought.

Uhura's reply was cryptic. "I'll let the *Captain* know, Captain Piper," she said dutifully, then a little less formally. "And thanks for thinking of us. I'll see you then."

The *Exeter*'s captain flipped shut her communicator with a frown on her face. Something was up, that was certain. She shrugged. Whatever it was, she would find out at the party.

Once again, Rachel considered herself lucky she hadn't forgotten her torch. The walk down the mountain in the dark was treacherous, to say the least. In the six months since she had moved here and established her home, she had yet to wear

a decent path through the trees. In the dark, it was even harder to find the right trail.

She cursed the fact the days here seemed to pass by so quickly. It was beautiful, yes, but no sooner had you gotten into the chores of the day it was almost past.

It was the reason she was stumbling around in the dark. She was out of butter and milk. She mused to herself how many millennia people had to go out at night to the store to stock up for breakfast. She could have stayed home, she knew. There was still plenty of bread and oats. She could have made them porridge for breakfast, or dry toast with some jam, perhaps. But if Rachel was anything, she had to admit she was spoiled by her upbringing on Earth where everything was literally “on tap” and convenient.

So, there was no way she was going to put up with just jam on toast for breakfast. She made a mental note as she realised, she was out of coffee as well.

“Arrrgh!” she shouted in frustration. It just got better and better. A home without coffee was barely worth considering. “At least I remembered *before* I got to the store,” she said to herself in consolation.

She stopped for a moment and played the torch around the trees, looking for something familiar. She was at the foot of the valley, now, that she knew. The slope gave that away. Her log cabin home was on the other side of the ridge, the furthest from town. Whilst Rachel guarded her privacy, most preferred to live collectively.

It was funny how, no matter where you went in the universe, nearly every inhabited world had its own kind of pine tree. The scent of them filled her nostrils and reminded her, once again, why she was here. While she was physically fit and relatively young with thirty only two months away, her body had betrayed her by developing allergic reactions to practically everything modern man took for granted. Plastics, cleaning products, *shampoo*. That ground on her. Every young woman wanted to be able to wash her hair properly.

Her body had developed a malady that had been known for centuries as “Twentieth Century Syndrome”. Even in the Twenty-Third Century, there was no cure. So, she had decided to take the only reasonable course available to her: relocation.

The new colony on Breakwater was a blessing in disguise. It gave her the opportunity to raise her young daughter, Jennifer, in a pristine environment – one relatively free of predators – whilst giving her the atmosphere her body could tolerate.

Her home was made from the trees around her. Furnished in wood. The windows were made of old-fashioned glass. The fabrics adorning her home were all natural – either wool or cotton. It was beautiful, and free from hydrocarbons.

Finally! She found the trail and began stomping through the trees once more. Within minutes she found herself on the edge of town, a peculiar place that was a

mixture of colonial architecture and ultra-modern prefab buildings that had been shipped here with them when the Breakwater settlement had been established only two years previously.

The streets were still earthen, and as there was no traffic after dark, she chose to walk down the middle, keeping in the illumination thrown by the solar-powered streetlights. It wasn't that she feared the dark, it was simply an attempt to avoid the prefab buildings and the reactions they could cause her.

The air was still, the night clear, and their little moon was shining, blotting out some of the view of the stars. It was enough to reflect off the water in the bay down the end of the street where the local fishermen tied up their boats.

A few moments later, Rachel came to the shop she was still looking for. Every town had a general store, and she was glad this one was still open. As she gazed up at it, she noticed she found it was quickly getting easier and easier to see. Suddenly, everything was as light as day. She turned her gaze upward and screamed as what her mind's eye thought was a comet filled the night sky and quickly obliterated the small, quiet town, leaving nothing but a raging fireball and a mushroom cloud roiling into the air.

The party had been going for half an hour before Piper made her entrance. No matter how fond she was of her crew, and likewise, she knew there was always a certain wariness in the air whenever a ranking officer was present at a function. It was as if the children knew to be on their best behaviour lest their parents catch them talking about forbidden things.

Although the ballroom was large, Piper estimated only a quarter of the *Exeter*'s crew had shown. Even though she had granted shore leave to her crew for the night, she knew that many would be just glad to be home and would have already beamed down to Earth to visit their families. She didn't begrudge them their desire to be with loved ones as she sometimes found herself thinking of her family members back on Proxima.

She noted that, of the approximately hundred people present, not all of them were from the *Exeter*. In fact, some of them were definitely from the *Enterprise*. Including the senior staff.

Piper sauntered over to the bar and ordered a tall glass of pineapple juice for herself. She turned and grinned at her one-time teacher. "Hello, Jim," she said with a grin, took a sip of her drink, then almost choked on it when she noticed the captains' bars on his shoulder. "What the...." she spluttered.

Her former captain and mentor, James T. Kirk, noticed her gaze and looked at his shoulder. He smoothed out the captain's bars with an almost pleased grin. "These have always suited me better, I think," he said. Kirk put out his hand. "Good to see you again, Piper. It's been a while."

Piper nodded. "It has, sir. I meant to thank you for recommending me as first

officer of the *Hood*,” she said.

Jim frowned, suddenly feeling ancient. “I think we’re both too old to refer to each other by titles, Piper. Our time on the *Enterprise* was a while ago, and I’m no longer an Admiral.”

Piper smiled as she let go of her girlish tension. Jim was right, it *had* been a long time since they had served together on the *Enterprise*, with him as Captain and her as the lowly Lieutenant. Besides, she knew him well enough to consider him a friend much more than a simple compatriot. “You’re right, Jim. Sorry.” She took another sip of her juice then said as casually as she could: “I see you’ve had a few changes with your ship.” Her tone changed as she realised a consolation was necessary. “I’m sorry to hear about David. I wish I’d had the chance to know him.”

As he had so many times recently, Jim got a faraway look in his eye as he remembered the young man who was his son. The pain was mixed with the knowledge that he had never really gotten to know him in the short time since the Genesis Incident. He sighed. Now, he never would. He nodded, silently, and said a rough and simple: “Thank you.”

Piper knew her friend wasn’t feeling just grief for his lost son, but a burning anger against the Klingons for taking him from him. It was a feeling she shared. As the Klingons had come to respect Kirk for his run-ins with them, so, too, Piper had developed some notoriety with them for similar reasons. Now, they had given her a real reason to be angry with them. They had hurt a friend.

In deference to his feelings, she decided to change the subject. “I’m kind of glad you accepted the demotion,” she said airily. “It was a waste of your talents. You won’t ever find me accepting promotion.”

She saw Kirk’s lip twitch in that manner that told her he knew more than he was letting on. “I’m not sure the Admiralty would survive you,” he said with a wry look before taking another sip of his Andorian Sunrise.

The comment hadn’t meant to insult, so Piper didn’t take it as such. “I’m sure Admiral Smillie wouldn’t be happy about it, that’s for sure,” she said, leaning back on the bar with a grin from ear to ear.

Jim knew what she meant. Piper had seconded to Bill Smillie on the *U.S.S. Hood*. In conversations outside of his command, he had expressed his annoyance with his First Officer – not because she was in any way incompetent, but because she was usually the one who was *right*. Jim gave a thoughtful nod. Smillie’s rise to the Admiralty was more likely on the coattails of his First Officer’s successes. “I saw the *Exeter* when you brought her in,” he said, not willing to dwell on the past. “It’s almost a shame she’s going to be refit. She’s the last of her kind.”

“A lot of things are,” Piper said cryptically. “I just wish the Detailer would get back to me with my next posting. It had better be a starship. I’ve got no interest in running a starbase.”

Once again, Piper saw that small curl of his lip out of the corner of her eye.

“Okay, Jim,” she said, turning to face him. “What is it?”

For a moment, indecision warred within him. He didn’t like leaving Piper in the dark. She deserved better than that, but it wasn’t yet time. A couple of days ago he could have simply pulled rank and put her off with that. Now, he was looking into the green eyes of an equal. “I can’t say, Piper,” he said regretfully. As her eyes blazed angrily, Jim patted her arm. “What I *can* tell you is that, if I’m right, you have nothing to worry about. From here on out, it just gets more and more interesting.”

Piper snorted. “I seem to remember an ancient Chinese curse that went like that.”

Now Jim’s smile was genuine. “Much is expected from those who are entrusted with much. Adventure and risk; the two go hand in hand, I’m afraid.”

His companion laughed. “And we wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Chapter Two

Piper stepped out of the sonic shower and shook out her hair, which was a little long, but still regulation. She threw a simple caftan over her shoulders and reclined in her desk chair, staring at the ceiling. Slowly, one by one, she relaxed the muscles in her body the way her old, Vulcan friend Sarda had shown her. She was just on the verge of sleep when the thought of him roused her.

She raised a slender finger and dropped it on the intercom button. "Piper to bridge."

"Yes ma'am?" came the quick and professional reply.

"Crash, could you get me Commander Sarda at Starfleet labs in old Silicon Valley for me? And pipe it down here, please."

"Yes, ma'am." Piper smiled to herself. A little politeness went a long way.

On her last night as master of this vessel, Piper leaned back in the chair again and waited. Moments later her desk screen lit up, but it was not Sarda who answered.

"Professor Carmichael here," said the wizened old man brusquely. He peered into the screen curiously. "Who are you and what do you want?"

Piper introduced herself. "Would you know where I could reach Commander Sarda?"

Curly, the annoyed scientist said: "No idea." He scowled myopically at Piper, who was doing her best to be charming. "Sarda was transferred out of here by Starfleet a week ago."

Piper was surprised and let it show. "He didn't say where he was going?"

If it was possible for Carmichael to scowl harder, then he succeeded. The valleys of wrinkles deepened into canyons. "How could he tell me where he was going if he didn't know himself? Starfleet seems to love playing God," he grumbled.

Before he could say any more, Piper cut him off with a curt: "Thank you, Professor, you have been most helpful." She severed the link with a savage jab and then summoned her communications officer again. Her patience was running out. "Lieutenant, get me the Detailer."

"Yes, ma'am!" came the startled reply.

Whilst Piper waited for the Starfleet Chief of Personnel, she looked at her mail. She scrolled down the short list, past a letter from her mother, another from a company marketing the Klingon recordings of "Battle Cruiser Vengeance", and stopped at a letter from Dr. Merete AndrusTaurus. She "opened" it and began to read when Admiral Kline's assistant appeared on her screen.

The young brash ensign smiled a greeting and then asked the obvious question. "How can I help you?"

“I wish to know where Commander Sarda has been assigned,” replied Piper, all business.

The young man turned to the screen beside him and coded in the query. Piper raised an eyebrow when she noticed the frown creasing the ensign’s forehead. “Commander Sarda has had his assignment suspended until new orders are received.”

“From whom?” Piper grated.

“By order of Fleet Admiral Smillie, ma’am.”

Piper sat back in her chair and steepled her fingers in thought, a habit she had unconsciously picked up from Sarda, who had himself received from Captain Spock years before. She returned her gaze to the ensign and asked another question. “Where am I being transferred to?” she asked trying to catch him off guard.

The ensign paled a bit then pretended to access the computer, but Piper was already suspicious. “Are my orders also under suspension?” she snapped.

The ensign turned a lighter shade before nodding yes.

Piper’s voice turned to honey. “Could I speak to Admiral Kline, then?” she asked, but she already knew the answer.

“I’m afraid the Admiral is busy, Captain,” the ensign replied, hoping that would be the end of the conversation. “Perhaps if you called back tomorrow afternoon?”

“Perhaps,” Piper answered acidly. She cut off her end then sank back in her chair again to think. The blood pounded in her temples, and she massaged them in the Vulcan manner to relieve the tension. She thought of her suspended assignment and was reminded of her conversation with Jim. His unwanted promotion off the *Enterprise* had begun the same way, with him becoming a ground-based paper-pusher, and there was no way she was going to let that happen to her.

No, she decided in her thoughts, if he offers me a promotion, I’ll tell him what he can do with it. I won’t let them take away my ship.

However, Piper realised that for now there was nothing she could do but wait. She decided to distract herself with her mail and turned back to Merete’s letter.

As usual it was contained the letterhead: Chief Medical Officer, *U.S.S. Excalibur*. Piper smiled as she read of Merete’s recent exploits but frowned when she came to the real reason behind the message. Piper’s eyes widened as she saw that Merete was being transferred to an unknown Earth-based assignment and that she would not know what it was until she got there.

Piper checked the date it was sent – one week ago. She knew the *Excalibur* was assigned to manoeuvres near the Sol system so Merete was probably already there.

Suspicion ran through every nerve in Piper’s slim body. Acting on a hunch,

she asked the computer to supply her with the whereabouts of Lieutenant Commander Judd "Scanner" Sandage. She had kept track of the *Constellation*'s chief engineer as they went way back, and now, somehow, her old friends were turning up on Earth. Piper was not surprised when the computer informed her that Scanner was presently spending an extended shore leave on Earth.

Piper toggled the viewer off and flopped back in her chair, staring at the ceiling. This was getting weirder and weirder. These people, including herself, were the crew of the *S.S. Banana Republic*, who had rescued the Federation from losing the transwarp technology some years before. What they were all doing back on Earth at this time made her wonder what Starfleet was up to.

She gave a wry grin. Then again, she could just be getting paranoid with the years. She looked down and realised she was tightly gripping the arms of the chair. She forced herself to let go and relax. Right now, there was nothing she could do about any of it. She knew the answers would come tomorrow after the transfer of command ceremony. Once again, she began the relaxation technique and let go of her anxiety.

Piper materialised in the grounds outside the Starfleet H.Q. Building. She had packed the few things she carried around and had left them on the Starbase orbiting above, as proof to Starfleet that she had no intention of being left planet-bound.

In her hand she clutched an unopened envelope that had been passed to her upon completion of the transfer ceremony. No sooner had the commander of Earth Starbase assumed responsibility of the *Exeter* than he pressed the envelope into her hands. In a fit of pique, Piper decided not to satisfy their curiosity and simply slipped it into her jacket pocket to open later. Now she was planetside, she decided to find somewhere comfortable to read it.

She looked up into the afternoon sky and grimaced at the tiny ball of light that was this planet's star. Still, this was where her people had come from, and if they could stand it, so could she. Piper looked about her and found a shady spot under a tree and relished the feel of grass under her. She leaned against the bark and took a deep breath of air that hadn't been through air purifiers a few thousand times.

Piper gazed out over San Francisco Bay at the light reflected off what looked like the silhouette of a Klingon *Bird of Prey* under the Golden Gate Bridge being raised from the waters. She frowned and thought her eyes were playing tricks on her. Ignoring it, she turned and, putting her head against the bark, closed her eyes. She raised her hand and gently rubbed her temple to ease the ache left by last night's party.

Piper awoke with a start and looked at her old-fashioned gold wristwatch. With a sigh she realised that she had only been asleep for ten minutes.

She stretched her arms and legs luxuriously, enjoying the heat from the Sun. She chided herself on her lack of caution. With her fair colouring, she could have burned her skin badly had she slept longer.

Finally alone, Piper took the envelope from her jacket pocket and opened it with an air of trepidation. She felt as if her entire career hung in the balance, and that this simple note could spell the end of her illustrious career.

She had already considered the possibilities. Piper was not the sort who could be turned into a desk jockey. She just could not do it. If they wanted to promote her to a ground-based assignment, she would resign her commission and buy herself a freighter. It wouldn't be a starship, but it would give her the chance to continue seeing the universe.

Annoyed at herself for her fears, Piper ripped open the envelope and caught the letter as it fell to the ground. It was hand-written, which was odd, and it was concise. It simply read under a Starfleet insignia:

Captain Piper,

Report to my office A.S.A.P.

Fleet Admiral Smillie.

Piper frowned. Surely there was more to it than that, she thought. She leaned back against the tree and scowled. If there was one thing she remembered about her former Captain, he liked a bit of drama. She curled her lip in mild disgust. "Some things never change," she muttered to herself.

Not wanting to wait one moment longer, Piper pushed herself off the ground, brushed her pants then walked briskly across the courtyard, adjusting her uniform as she went. The great glass doors, emblazoned with the seal of Starfleet, opened at her approach.

She was stopped inside by a burly security guard who requested her identification and quickly scanned her for concealed weapons. The officer was made uncomfortable by the glare Piper gave him at being stopped at all. "Lieutenant, does the badge on my shoulder mean nothing to you?"

The young man remained unruffled by her threatening tone and completed his scan. "Yes, Captain Piper. Admiral Smillie is expecting you, but his standing orders are that all incoming personnel be searched."

"Why?" asked Piper, even though she had already guessed the answer.

"After the recent trouble, the Admiral decided not to take any chances." Satisfied that Piper was who she said she was, he handed her back her I.D.. "Thank you," they said in unison before she marched straight over to the turbolifts.

"I'd hate to be here at eight in the morning," she grumbled as the turbolift doors closed. She turned her attention to the lift controls. "Fleet Admiral Smillie's office, please."

She couldn't get over the feeling of impending doom as she watched the floors pass by on the panel overhead. Recognising the emotion, she squashed it as

being unworthy of a Captain in Starfleet. Instead, she got angry, and kept it boiling just beneath the surface. How dare they suspend her next commission, she silently told herself. She *deserved* another ship, and she would settle for nothing less.

When the turbolift finally came to a stop she stormed out and up to Admiral Smillie's office. She barely noticed the Admiral's aide glance up, smile, and wave her through. Piper only stopped when she was a foot from Smillie's desk and snapped to attention.

The object of her annoyance looked up and shook his head. He had quickly noted she had a full head of steam; however, he was in no mood to put up with it. "At ease, Captain Piper." When she had relaxed, Smillie waved her to a seat, which she reluctantly accepted.

Piper noticed that her old captain's eyes had strayed to another chair. She followed his gaze past the Old English furniture to where Jim Kirk was lounging in a high-backed Victorian chair. He wore the smile of a cat who had just caught the canary. Piper knew that something was definitely going on here, but that she would have to wait for the answer.

When Piper returned her attention to Smillie he began in his usual, business-like fashion. "Captain Piper, you are obviously aware that our relations with the Romulans are a bit stretched at the moment."

Out of the corner of her eye, Piper noticed Jim grimace. Yes, she was aware of the political situation with the Romulans, and Jim's part in it – especially regarding a certain sword and the woman who had taken it. As she reflected, Bill was continuing.

"With the borders closed, and the Romulan Ambassador saying nothing, there isn't much we can garner regarding their status. Even our assets on the inside haven't been able to give us any reliable intel. To make matters worse, the Klingons are, shall we say, very upset at us at the moment."

As Jim snorted, Piper covered her mouth to conceal her smile. Her old commander had a gift for understatement. The Klingon Ambassador was famous for recently announcing "there will be no peace as long as Kirk lives."

Piper glanced at her friend. "Jim, the universe seems to be revolving around *you!*" she jibed.

"Don't say that to Bones," Kirk parried. "He just might agree with you."

Their attention was drawn back to their superior officer who was glowering at them both. He decided to simply continue the briefing instead of engaging them. "In this climate of instability, a new breed of starship has been commissioned." He tapped an unseen control on his desk and a three-dimensional image of a familiar design appeared in the air before him.

Piper leaned forward in her chair and sucked in a breath. She was beginning to understand what this was all about.

"This is the *U.S.S. Ingram*, the first of her kind. She's a development of the

Space Control class of vessels that began with the *Excelsior*.”

Piper could see the similarities. The huge saucer, long, twin warp nacelles connected to an equally massive engineering hull via short, L-shaped pylons were clearly straight from the *Excelsior*-class. What was different was the enormous hangar deck mounted to the top of the engineering hull. It looked big enough to hold an entire squadron of fighters.

She tilted her head to the side. “Is this some kind of twenty-third century aircraft carrier?” she asked absently.

Smillie nodded. “She will carry a squadron of twelve fighters and a plethora of shuttlecraft.”

Jim spoke up at that point. He indicated the nacelle pylons. “When I was head of R&D, I ordered this class be developed as I could see that the Klingons and Romulan ships were getting almost *too* good.” He fingered the corners of the pylons. “The *Ingram* has megaphaser emplacements on both pylons, able to fire forward and aft. They’re powered directly from the warp engines and pack a hell of a punch. Their only drawback is that they’re limited to a twenty-degree arc.”

Piper nodded. They could only be used to fire at vessels immediately in front of, or behind, the ship. “Better that than nothing,” she said.

The Admiral pointed to the section connecting the two hulls. “The pylon was truncated to make it easier for shuttles to enter, and exit, the bay. Also, we found the design strengthened the overall structural integrity of the vessel, especially at high warp speeds.” He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts, and Kirk continued for him.

“As you know, the *Enterprise*, as Federation Flagship, has built up quite a reputation in both Empires. As the newer starships coming off the line are easily dwarfing her, it was decided that the flag should go to a new ship – one with a seasoned commander in charge to steer her course.”

Kirk was gratified to see Piper swell with pride at what she knew was coming. Jim knew in his heart that his old student wouldn’t let them down and that she was the right choice for the job.

Smillie continued. “You, Captain Piper, have distinguished yourself on a number of occasions. Your style of command has demonstrated loyalty from your crews and your record is exemplary.” Smillie looked into Piper’s grinning eyes and smiled as well. “So, we at Starfleet Command have decided to give the commission of the new *U.S.S. Ingram*, NCC-2001, which you saw in Spacedock, to you to command. She is undergoing the last of her preparations for service which you will oversee as her captain.” Both Smillie and Kirk stood and stepped forward. “Congratulations, Captain Piper,” and each confirmed it with a warm handshake.

Piper beamed. “Thank you, sirs.”

The Admiral got back to business. Smillie started with, “I know you are eager

to see your new command, but we have a few more things to discuss.”

“Yes, sir,” said Piper, who was happy enough to listen to a three-hour lecture on personal hygiene.

Kirk took over. “Your crew is already aboard, of course you are free to make any changes you deem necessary. However, there are a few more things you need to know. For one, the vessel in Spacedock *isn’t* the *Ingram*.”

Piper did a double take. “Huh?”

The Admiral sighed and waved them back to their seats. As he took his own, he said, in a lowered voice: “It’s embarrassing to admit, but the original *Ingram* was lost during warp trials. Both the original vessel and the one in Spacedock were being built in parallel so, for security reasons, we decided to keep the loss secret and substitute the second. It appeared she fell prey to a malfunction and the crew was killed. A few pieces of plating were found at her last reported location, but since then, nothing has been found.”

The *Ingram*’s new captain raised a curious brow. It was theoretically possible that the ship had been vapourised in a warp-imbalance wormhole, but the likelihood was remote. “You suspect foul play,” she stated.

Smillie threw out an uncertain wave. “We don’t know what to believe, but we’d like you to check it out – clandestinely, of course.”

Piper nodded. If the original *Ingram* was out there, then the best vessel to take her on would be her namesake. She frowned to herself. Thinking about two *Ingrams* was giving her a headache. “Admiral, I would like to exercise Captain’s privilege and change her name.”

That comment caught both her old captains by surprise. “To what?” Jim asked.

Piper simply smiled to herself as she told them.

With that small detail taken care of, Jim gave her a huge grin. “We’ve saved the best for last. Piper, you’re going to love this....”

Piper strode to the observation port and gazed at her new command. Its size reminded her of the Dreadnought *Star Empire* with which she had foiled the plans of Fleet Admiral Rittenhouse some years before whilst she was still a Lieutenant. The sharp, but graceful lines of this ship put that vessel to shame. The design reminded Piper of an arrow in a taut bow, ready to fly. The saucer was almost twice as big as her old ship, the warp nacelles the same. The secondary hull was huge as was its deflector dish. Everything about this ship said I’m big, bad and ready. Piper could not help but be impressed by the power this ship entailed.

Captain Piper noticed that the Starfleet engineer corps were putting the finishing touches to her insignia, and reading it gave her a rush. *NCC-2001 U.S.S. Millennium*, Starfleet’s newest ship, and she was Piper’s to command.

Piper raised her communicator to her lips. Her voice almost cracked as she gave the order. "Piper to *Millennium*, beam me up."

Piper grinned like a schoolgirl as she felt the transporter take hold of her but became all business as she reappeared in the state-of-the-art transporter room. She looked about her and breathed in the newness of the ship, knowing that the smell of new plastics, plasteel and duranium would soon pass. She felt almost giddy, as if she had just bought a new car and was now going to drive it for the first time.

The captain almost forgot herself as she stood there, but turned quickly to the transporter chief, a young man whose roots traced back to old India. "Permission to come aboard?"

The Chief smiled broadly. "Always, Captain."

This got a quick grin in reply before she turned to the door and went in search of the nearest turbolift.

The twin doors opened onto the bridge and Piper stepped through, studying her surroundings. Various people of all races, creeds and species were going about their business, checking and double-checking the ship's systems. At the sound of the turbolift doors opening many heads were raised in curiosity. Someone cried: "Captain on the bridge!", and suddenly everyone was at attention.

Piper looked down at the only one that hadn't risen and who was occupying her chair. She noticed the shock of brassy hair and pointed ears and smiled as the chair turned to reveal its occupant.

Sarda had hardly aged a day in the five years since they had parted. His face was still lean, his Vulcan physique still strong and supple, and his countenance severe. Yet Piper swore she saw a friendly glint in his eyes as he rose to meet her.

"Greetings, Captain," came the formal hello. "I see you have lived long and prospered."

Piper smiled warmly. "It's good to see you, too, Sarda." She stepped forward and honoured her first officer with the Vulcan salute, which he politely returned.

Her First Officer stepped aside and offered Piper the centre seat. As she sat Piper noticed the stares from her crew, some of whom she knew and some not, she realised they were wondering what sort of captain she would make. So, she decided to make a show of it. She relaxed into the very comfortable chair and put on her most confident look. Reaching down to her armrest, she punched the intraship communication button. With the entire ship's attention gained at the whistle, she began. "Attention crew of the new *U.S.S. Millennium*, this is your captain, Piper, speaking." She stopped for a moment to let the relevance of her statement sink in. "For those who are having to get used to the name change, I apologise, but you will one day learn the reasons, I'm sure."

She changed tack and put some passion into her voice. It wasn't difficult;

her heart was beating hard at the moment. "You have all proven yourselves with your previous commanders, so well that you have been chosen to serve on one of Starfleet's finest vessels. You should be proud." She paused to judge her crew's reactions then continued. "I would have you know that I intend to serve Starfleet, this ship and my crew to the best of my ability, which is no less than I expect from all of you." Her tone softened a little. "For those who wish to speak to me on any matter, my door is always open." It hardened a little once more. "I will conduct a ship-wide inspection in one hour and I expect to ship out by twelve hundred hours tomorrow. Thank you." With a flick of her wrist Piper severed communications.

Rising, Piper addressed the bridge crew. "That includes you, people."

The captain strode to the turbolift amongst a flurry of "Yes, ma'ams", and noticed the metallic clack her shoes made against the floor. She stopped and gazed past her feet to the bare metal floor of the bridge decking. "That's got to go."

Piper looked over at her communications officer, who turned out to be Lieutenant Krashtallah from the *Exeter*. "Lieutenant, call the starbase engineers. Tell them I want carpet on this floor by oh-eight hundred tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get on it right away!" he purred. He was glad, the bare metal floor played havoc with his paws.

Piper turned and shook her head as she stepped onto the turbolift. If they went to all this trouble to build this magnificent ship, the least they could do was put decent flooring on the bridge, she mused.

The lift stopped at deck six and Piper stepped out and walked down the corridor to her new quarters. She had asked the ship's computer its location in the lift as she would have had no idea otherwise. Knowing her unfamiliarity with her ship's design, she decided to spend some time this evening studying the Engineering schematics.

She soon came to her door, already labelled with her name and entered, almost tripping over her luggage which someone had thoughtfully left for her. She was surprised by the space within, more than she'd had on the *Exeter*. On Proxima she was used to space, unlike Terra where over fifteen billion people lived. Proxima's towns were separated by vast jungles and were again spread out over wide areas. Due to the planet's climate, the dwellings were very open for good ventilation and so the population could feel a little closer to nature.

Piper had spent many nights in her three walled "room", just listening to the sounds of night. Many and exotic were the bird life on her homeworld, with introduced varieties imported from Earth – including Australian Bell Birds. Their high-pitched chirps sounded like sonar reverberating off the trees. The sounds delighted the young Piper and gave her a great love and respect for nature. She had no need to worry as there were very few carnivorous animals on Proxima, but her people's respect for all life brought them to build their houses on stilts to let the ground dwellers to go their own way. To prevent birds and insects from entering,

a sonic screen was installed along the open wall.

The new Captain of the *Millennium* bent down and began to unpack. She placed a hologram of herself, Sarda, Merete and Scanner next to the ruin of the *Banana Republic* on a shelf next to her media player and only then noticed a memory chip with a note attached had been left there. She pulled off the note and read:

Piper,
I thought you might like this.
Merete.

Curious, Piper placed the tape in the player and activated it. Instantly, she was surrounded by the jungles of home, a small creek running the length of the room, the lush, green fronds of ferns hung over her head, vines dangled everywhere. The player even reproduced the sounds of home, of pseudo-crickets and the cackles of Kookaburras someone had thoughtfully introduced to reduce the insect population. She looked over and saw her bed had become a moss-covered rock.

The captain laughed to herself. She had forgotten all about this program which Merete had shown her so many years before, the imagery being the result of Sarda's work in holography.

Piper quickly finished unpacking, putting her uniforms in drawers that looked like a rotting log. She then stretched out on her bed and wished it really was a rock from home. She decided to herself that she would have to see if she could organise just that.

She glanced at her chronometer and saw she still had forty-five minutes to kill. Curious about her new ship, she ordered the computer to display the general ship's layout on the screen beside her bed, one that appeared as a large leaf with information on its surface.

Chief Medical Officer Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus had her hands full. She considered herself fortunate that she was busy preparing sickbay for its voyage and not putting people back together. Her last captain had been a little gung-ho and so sickbay had seen more than its fair share of casualties. A fact that had brought her into open conflict with Captain Martin so many times that when her transfer orders had come, he was glad to see her go – and she was glad to see the back of him.

This time would be different. Merete and Piper knew each other well. Merete liked Piper's command style, and she knew they would work well together. Piper did not like taking unnecessary risks.

Merete thought back to the first time they had met, when they had been roommates aboard the original *Enterprise*. She and Piper had made friends easily

and had soon found that friendship put to the test as they found themselves embroiled in the Rittenhouse scandal. Merete had come to trust Piper's judgement then and had never doubted her since. Merete's chest tightened a little when she remembered she had betrayed Piper aboard the *Star Empire*, but when she had been wounded Piper had done her best to help her. Merete smiled; she chose her friends well.

Merete put down the med scanner she held and tied her pearly, platinum blonde hair behind her head to stop those annoying locks falling in her slanted, blue eyes, the only obvious indication that she was not human. Like the majority of people from Altair IV, Merete was slender, but not skinny. Her people, known locally as the Palkeo Est, were quite strong given their stature, and no pushovers, as the Klingons, who had tried to conquer the planet centuries before, had discovered, in an embarrassingly failed attempt. She appeared human in most ways, right down to five digits on each hand and foot.

Tired, Merete flexed her slightly-longer-than-human fingers, then looked around her and watched her staff go about their tasks, quickly but efficiently. Sickbay would be ready for Piper's inspection.

The ship's newly commissioned Chief Engineer, Lieutenant Commander Judd Sandage was also busy. He ran a hand through his messy, brown hair, that was showing the first signs of grey at the temples. He was not conscious of the streak of grease he left through it and wouldn't have cared if he was. He was the sort of man who did what was needed to get the job done, and to hang with the niceties.

He patted down his coveralls, his uniform was hanging in his office, and wondered once again where his favourite spanner was. He was forever putting it down and forgetting where he had left it.

A fellow crewmember appeared at his elbow and his spanner was presented to him in a cheeky manner. "You left it next to the port warp conduit again," Ensign Jennifer Rapid said. The five-foot tall, buxom redhead smiled through her freckles and dazzled him with her grin. She thought her new boss was cute and wondered if he was available. She liked the fact he was down-to-earth, even though she found his southern accent a little hard to understand. She even liked his looks, even though he was about as average looking as a human being could get. Brown hair, brown eyes, not tall, not short, not thin, not fat, he was about as middle-of-the-road as possible.

As Judd took the proffered instrument, Jenny mused that in the short time he had been her boss, he had left his tools around all over Engineering and she sometimes found herself wondering if he was her superior officer or her father, who had been just as forgetful as he.

"Thanks for that," Judd said. "Piper hates it when I leave mah tools around."

Jenny raised her brows in mild surprise. She knew of no other Captain who would tolerate being referred to by their first name. "I've heard Captain Piper is anything but a martinet," she said amiably.

The Boss gave a knowing smile at that. "She has her moments," he said absently. "But we'd better get our asses into gear, or we'll discover just how ticked off she can get."

Jenny shrugged. "The *Millennium*'s read to fly," she said with her usual chirpy tone.

Judd rolled his eyes. "Ah know that. It's just that her builders didn't put their toys away." Testing equipment was still strewn everywhere from after the ship's warp trials. His people were working as hard as they could to clean up the mess before the captain's inspection, especially as every captain he had known always started in Engineering.

Scanner reflected as he knew Piper expected a lot from him. She had ridden him when they were together on the *Banana Republic* when she had lost helm control to the computer. She had forced him to virtually dismantle the whole ship until they found how to override the computer. He remembered what she had told him, that he could tell her anything, just not what she could *not* do.

With a new sense of purpose, he turned and bellowed with his southern American drawl, "Come on y'all, the captain will be 'ere in half an hour. And I warn ya not get her cross!"

With only a quarter hour to go before inspection, Piper rose and prepared to meet her crew. She looked for her mirror to check her appearance and couldn't find it. With a sigh, she turned off the hologram which vanished in an instant. Her quarters seemed plain now, but at least she could see her mirror. Piper was caught with her brush in her hair when the communicator chirped. She reached out and pressed the button and continued brushing. "Piper here," she said.

"Captain," sounded Crash's voice. "I have a message from Captain Kirk for you."

At the mention of her old teacher, Piper put down her brush thoughtfully. If Kirk was calling her now, it must be important. A Captain's first day aboard their new ship was sacred, and Jim knew better than to interrupt the settling in period. Besides, if Kirk had anything relatively unimportant to say, he could have said it at the briefing. "Patch it through."

"Piper," Kirk sounded jovial. "How's your new command?"

Piper still thought his timing peculiar. "She's a beautiful ship, Jim. You should see her."

"Don't worry, I will."

Ah-hah! she thought. "Really?"

"Bones, Scotty and I'll come aboard in ten minutes to look her over." Kirk

seemed casual.

“It’s a little short notice,” Piper pried.

“No time like the present.” Kirk remained disarmingly informal.

Hmmm. If Kirk had an ulterior motive, he certainly wasn’t letting on.

“Fine,” Piper returned chipper for cheer. “I’ll see you soon, Jim. Piper out.” She

thumped the comm button to sever the link, then reactivated the panel.

“Commander Sarda, report to Transporter Room One in eight minutes.” Piper sat

for a moment and wrung her hands together. Something about this was just not right.

Chapter Three

The Commander sighed as she looked out the window at the Romulan Praetorium grounds. The gardens were immaculately groomed, with a number of statues placed at various positions commemorating heroes of the Empire. She noticed an empty podium where one should have been for a cousin of hers who had chosen a different path. Thinking of her reminded her of the empty chair in the Praetorium with the sword sitting on it, the S'harien that S'Task had brought with him from Vulcan when their forebears left following their "Great Awakening". A sword that was so beautiful it took one's breath away. The Empress had returned it as a show of good faith in her people as she sought their people's return to a more "honourable" path, but that was a long road and they had barely begun to traverse it.

The podium waited for the day when the Empress' likeness would adorn it. However, knowing the Empress, there was no way she would allow that to happen until she was well and truly buried. The Commander knew her cousin well. In their opinion, the only true heroes were dead heroes. Living ones were usually conceited and therefore unworthy of such accolades.

Her excellent hearing picked up the hurried footfalls of the Sub-Lieutenant long before her eyesight deduced his existence. Inwardly, she sighed once more. The problem with the young these days is that they want everything *right now*, without the effort of gaining it oneself through honest labour, she mused. Such impatience bred a lack of respect for the merits of hard-won victories, and the deserved authority and responsibility that came with proving one-self. No, the young from politically aligned families seemed to think that the Empire *owed* them something just because they were born to the right people. She sniffed with disdain. It was a notion that did nothing but breed a lust for quick power and the desire to commit dishonourable acts to achieve those ends. It was a culture that needed to be dealt with before the Empire spiralled into despotism.

She kept her eyes focussed on the grasses outside and the lovely golden flowers that had been transplanted from the northern polar regions. Their natural beauty helped settle her mind. She decided to simply wait until the Sub-Lieutenant announced himself.

It did not take long. The Commander noted, out of the corner of her eye, that the poor, young man paid not the least bit of attention to the beauty just outside the window. He simply stood there, not wanting to bother her.

Once again, she sighed. "What is it?" she asked with her soft, feminine voice that was so used to carrying a note of command that it simply rolled off her tongue.

The Sub-Lieutenant studied the tips of his boots. "Commander, the *Falcon's Claw* is two days past her due time and we're unable to raise them on

subspace.”

More reluctance. Giving due respect to one’s superiors was one thing, but his behaviour was now bordering on cowardice. She turned and caught the younger man’s eye, showing him the steel in her own, yet her tone was casual. “The news is the news. There is no more shame in reporting it than there would be in telling me the weather.”

This seemed to cheer him. “Yes, Commander.”

Now she frowned as she considered the new information. It was unlike S’tallek to be late. He was practically obsessive-compulsive when it came to his punctuality. “There has been no trace?” she asked, lost in thought.

The answer was quick. “None, Commander.”

“There are two possibilities, then. The *Falcon’s Claw* is either destroyed or rogue.”

The Sub-Lieutenant was surprised at her candour, yet he felt it necessary to defend the man he once served under. “Sub-Commander S’tallek is....”

His defence of their lost Captain was cut short. “Loyal to a fault,” the Commander finished. She allowed herself the luxury of a grimace as if she had just eaten something particularly unsavoury. “No, the *Falcon’s Claw* was either destroyed or captured. Either way, we must know the truth.” Known as one to take the initiative, she made a quick decision. “Have his last known flight path completely scanned and bring me the findings. And *hurry*.”

Piper and Sarda stood side by side in the transporter room waiting for her guests to come aboard for the final inspection. Piper had to admit she was a little nervous having her old Captain aboard, but she reminded herself they were still old friends. She turned to her Transporter Chief, Lieutenant Kupta and ordered: “Energise.”

Three columns of blue light appeared on the platform before them, which filled out and gradually took form as people in Starfleet uniform. When materialisation was complete, they stepped forward.

Doctor McCoy shook himself in revulsion, it was common knowledge that he hated transporters. He was always afraid of a malfunction that could “scatter his atoms”, as he put it.

Captain James Kirk stood before Piper and was forced to look slightly up at her. “Permission to come aboard?”

Piper grinned. “Granted, sir. Welcome aboard.” Piper turned to Sarda. “I believe you know my first officer, Sarda.”

McCoy grimaced. “He should, he’s the one who shanghaied him into this.”

Piper and Sarda each raised a curious eyebrow, which gave McCoy cause to moan. “Great, now we’ve got two of them.”

Piper laughed and shook hands with Kirk, McCoy and Captain Scott in turn. “If you will come this way, gentlemen, we can get started in my ready room.”

When everybody had taken a seat Piper wandered over to her office replicator and offered: “Anyone for coffee?” She was not the type to order a subordinate to do a menial task when she was quite capable of doing it herself.

Whilst most declined the offer, McCoy ordered a Mint Julep and Scotty asked: “Would ye have any single malt scotch, lassie?”

McCoy made a disgusted sound at that. “Rotgut,” he muttered.

“Sarda?” asked Piper.

“Altair water, thank you.”

Piper turned to the replicator and ordered, adding a Proxima Knockout – a fruit juice mocktail from her homeworld – for herself.

As she did so, Doctor McCoy’s eyes narrowed for a moment as he considered something he had noticed earlier. He leaned over and whispered to Jim: “Were Piper’s eyes always green?”

Jim was not one to miss a detail like that and he gave a slight smirk. He responded in kind: “No, they weren’t.”

McCoy’s brows shot up. “I never would have thought of her as one to be worried about her looks,” he said.

Kirk shook his head. “I don’t think anything Piper does is for the sheer hell of it, Bones. Or just for the sake of fashion. No, she did it for the very reason that you noticed. If someone is staring at the colour of her eyes, they won’t see the phaser in her hand.”

The Doctor gave Piper a sly look. “Clever,” he said with admiration.

“I would never underestimate her, Bones,” Kirk whispered with a tight smile of appreciation. “I’ve always been glad she’s on *our* side.”

The two men quietened down as Piper handed out the beverages and took her seat behind her desk. Before anyone said a word, she raised her voice for the computer and said, “Mister Sandage and Doctor AndrusTaurus to my ready room, please.”

Kirk cast a curious glance at Piper who answered, “I want them to hear what you came to say.”

Scott chuckled and McCoy tried in vain to hide a grin. Kirk merely nodded and smiled.

“That’s fifty credits you owe me, Jim,” smirked McCoy.

Kirk shot McCoy a look then sat back to wait for Piper’s crew. He didn’t have long to wait until the door chimed and Scanner and Merete stepped into the room. Piper smiled a hello to them and indicated the last two empty seats.

Scanner looked around him and joked, “I hope we’re not gatecrashin’.”

Piper shook her head and grinned. She realised she hadn’t seen either of them since she had come on board. Merete seemed to have a timeless beauty; she

hadn't aged a day. In contrast Scanner still looked untidy even though he wasn't. Everything about the man said average but his outward appearance belied his inner genius, his ability to get the job done before you even asked for it, and he always finished the job with the charming smile that never seemed to leave his face. "Not at all, Judd, Merete. The captain has something to tell us," she said, indicating Kirk.

Taking this as his cue, Kirk got up and approached the wall screen. "Computer, picture and schematic of Epsilon Crucis III, planet Breakwater."

A blue green planet not unlike Earth appeared on the screen alongside a diagram of the Epsilon Crucis system. A standard orange K2 star centred the system, surrounded by numerous small planets and gas giants. Kirk indicated the third of these and began. "Two days ago, the colony on Breakwater was attacked by a cloaked ship. It fired several plasma bolts into the settlement. There were no survivors."

Scanner and Merete looked shocked, Sarda frowned, and Piper leaned forward and steepled her fingers in concentration, memorising every detail if she was to get the bastards who did this.

When Kirk believed that the information had sunk in, he continued. "A lone satellite in orbit managed to take a picture of the ship, which had to decloak when it fired. The photograph was discovered by the scout ship *U.S.S. Pegasus* which investigated the sudden loss of communications with the colony. They then forwarded it to Starfleet Command. We only received it two hours ago. In an effort to maintain secrecy, only a few hard copies have been made."

James Kirk opened the small case he was carrying and took out a copy of the photo, which he placed on Piper's desk. The picture was slightly blurred, but the ship was unmistakable.

"A Romulan Warbird," Piper stated through clenched teeth. She looked at her people to gauge their reactions and opinions. Sarda gazed at the image with the mild revulsion that was typical of his people. Vulcans abhorred violence of any kind, they preferred instead to find peaceful solutions to problems and only resorted to punitive measures as an absolute last resort.

Scanner was the fortunate one. Although his people had a violent history, Terran nationals had at last made peace and come to work together rather than fight over the little they had left. He understood death on a massive scale, the racial memory of the deaths in Terra's three World Wars still fresh. The devastation brought to some places in the "Garden World" was a constant reminder to those born there. Judd hated war and all it brought, but he, like his people, could make war well if pushed far enough.

Of them all, Merete seemed the most affected. Her people, due to their passive natures, had come under attack in the same manner all too many times. She had personally been the victim of a pirate raid and the memory remained buried just below the surface. Piper knew this and looked at Merete supportingly.

Kirk saw how Piper worked and approved. The job of a Starfleet Captain was too much for one person, he had often used the insights of the crew to aid in a decision. He smiled to himself, confident in his choice, and nodded. "Your first mission as Captain of this vessel is to discover what is going on and put an end to it before it gets out of control." Kirk glanced out of the window in thought. "As you well know, diplomatic ties with the Romulan Empire are strained at the moment...."

"That's one hell of an understatement," added McCoy.

Kirk continued without missing a beat. "...and this incident could become the catalyst for another Romulan war. And considering the *Millennium*'s particular equipment, you will be in the best position to deal with it."

Piper nodded her agreement. "I see, and I take it that this operation is to come under the heading of "need to know" only?"

Kirk grimaced. He hated being the one to deliver the orders, having been at the receiving end of such too many times himself.

Piper saw the answer in his eyes and understood. "Thank you, Jim, for the briefing." She rose and indicated the exit. "For appearance's sake we'd better proceed with the inspection."

The *Enterprise*'s Captain and his friends quickly drank the last of their drinks and stood. They divided up into groups; Captain Scott and Scanner went to see Engineering, whilst talking shop about anything and everything new in starship design; McCoy and Merete went to see sickbay, with McCoy muttering that everything would probably be different again; and Kirk, Piper and Sarda inspected the bridge, rec. decks and weaponry.

Piper stood to one side of the phaser control room door and ushered the Jim through. He stepped inside and stopped just short of tripping over a large multi-coloured rock near the control panel. He looked down and grinned. The voder on its 'back' showed a Lieutenant's rank insignia and he addressed it as such. "Excuse me, Lieutenant...."

"Earhaht," the Horta replied, with the sound of moving rock typical of its species.

To his surprise, the voice was distinctly female, but then with Hortas there was no obvious way to tell.

"Hello, Lieutenant Earhaht, I'm Captain Kirk. I've met your brother, Lieutenant Naraht. He serves on my ship."

Earhaht rumbled at the name, a sound translated as laughter. "Yes, sir. My mother and he speak of you often. By the way, my mother never did get the chance to thank you for the Terran slate you sent her, she said it was delicious."

Kirk looked fondly at the Horta. Earhaht's mother and he were good friends,

the misunderstanding at Janus long forgotten. Earhaht's mother was still running the mining station on the asteroid of their discovery, and doing very well for herself, the company being one of the most productive in the Federation.

Piper stepped forward and smiled at her crewmember. She remembered glancing through Earhaht's file earlier and was gratified to know she had on board one of the most eager and hardiest beings in the known galaxy. She was also grateful, Horta's had the unique ability to nibble a rock and tell you exactly what it contained, down to several decimal places. "Lieutenant, I'm glad to have you aboard." Piper then turned to continue the inspection.

The Horta rumbled behind her. "Captain, may I speak to you later?"

Piper stopped and looked back at the living rock. "Talk to my yeoman. She'll make a time." She grinned an encouragement. "If I ever will get any. A captain's work is never done!"

Earhaht moved in a way that looked like resignation. "Aye, sir," she said, subdued.

Piper frowned, curious. She had never heard of a depressed Horta before. Shaking her head in disbelief, she continued the inspection.

When each group had finished their tasks, they reconvened in the transporter room.

"I take it that everything was in order?" Piper said, a mock serious look on her face.

James T. Kirk smiled as he and his friends mounted the transporter pads. It was good to see his old student still had a sense of humour. "Good luck, Piper. Take care out there."

McCoy tried to look chipper. "She's a new ship, but she's got a great name." He looked directly at Piper. "You take care of her, and she'll always bring you home." McCoy smiled for real this time. "I like that line," he said to Jim, "I think I'll make a tradition of it."

Scott laughed. "If you live that long."

"Oh, I'll be around for a long time yet, you'll see." With Scott rebuked, McCoy returned his attention to Piper. "Are you sure you don't have a spare shuttle?"

Piper shook her head. "Sorry, sir. I can't spare the *Tyrannosaurus Rex* or the *Banana Republic*."

Kirk laughed out loud this time. "Piper, you'll never cease to amaze me."

Piper stood at attention. "Until we meet again, sirs."

"Live long and prosper, gentlemen," said Sarda, giving the Vulcan salute.

Kirk raised a questioning eyebrow at Piper. She smiled yes.

James T. Kirk left the *Millennium* with a single word. "Energise."

The whine of the transporter beam rose, then the three men were enveloped in shimmering blue and red light and were gone.

Piper returned to business. "Sarda, I want to bring departure forward to oh-eight-thirty tomorrow. See to it, please, we haven't any time to waste."

Sarda nodded. "We could leave immediately if you wish. The ship is ready."

Piper shook her head. "No, it's late, besides, I want to see carpet on that bridge before we leave."

Sarda raised a curious eyebrow at another human eccentricity but said no more. Noting Sarda's reaction Piper explained. "Remember where I was born, my friend."

Sarda nodded his understanding then turned and left to complete his task. Piper watched him go; her heart glad that she was working with the capable Vulcan again. She had always felt close to him even though he would never admit it, and when Starfleet had split them up the pain she had felt was very real. Her feelings weren't romantic, but to her, Sarda was more than a friend, and more than family. A small smile spread on her face as she realised her Starfleet family was together again: herself, Sarda, Merete and Scanner. These were people she knew without thought would always be there for her, no matter what. It was the best kind of crew, loyal to the end.

Feeling elated, she turned and walked to her quarters to get some well-earned rest.

Piper was asleep when her door chimed. She glanced at her chronometer and saw that she had only been asleep for half an hour. She sat up and grabbed her light caftan and threw it over her head. Due to the hot and humid climate, people from Proxima Beta did not like sleeping clothed. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Merete," came the quiet reply.

"Lights," she ordered the computer then she beckoned: "Come in."

Piper was momentarily dazzled by the light then saw her friend from Altair IV enter and look around her. "It's a bit bigger than our old quarters on the original *Enterprise*," she remarked.

"And warmer, thank God. I had Environmental raise the temperature and humidity in here, so now it's just like home." Piper rose and stepped over to her friend and gave her an enthusiastic hug, which Merete returned heartily. "It's good to see you again."

"My sentiments exactly," said Merete, letting go. She dragged a chair up next to Piper's bed and sat. "This is all making me dizzy."

"I know the feeling." Piper sat on her bed and drew her legs underneath her. "One moment I'm the Captain of the old *Exeter* and the next I'm commanding the newest ship in the fleet, which just happens to be the biggest and baddest starship

the Federation's ever launched." She let out a huge sigh. "It's a lot to live up to."

Merete smiled agreement. "Starfleet thinks you can pull it off."

Piper looked into Merete's slanted eyes. "Do you?"

Merete returned the gaze. "Yes," she said, solemnly. "You made captain at about the same age as Captain Kirk, and he was the youngest Starfleet captain in history." Piper nodded at the truth of it and grinned.

"And now they've dropped this hot potato in our laps for us to solve." Piper shook her head at it all. Her gaze returned to her friend. "Merete....do you think you'll be all right when we get to Breakwater?"

Merete knew what Piper was referring to. "I'm over my family's deaths, now." Her mind filled with images of the *Perceptive*'s bridge littered with the corpses of the ship's crew and passengers, who happened to be her parents, killed by an Orion attack. She looked down at her clenching hands. "I don't let it affect my professionalism, but I can't forget it. Besides, I've seen a lot of action as the CMO of the *Excalibur* and it's toughened me up a lot." She put on her bravest face.

Piper knew her friend better than that. Whilst Merete was one of the best medics in the fleet, her damaged youth had left an indelible impression on her. She reached out and took her friend's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "You're a good woman, a tough doctor and I would trust my life in your hands any day. I want you to know that I understand how hard it is for you sometimes. I won't let history repeat itself."

Frustrated that her past was affecting her so, Merete combated it with a brave smile that did not quite reach her eyes. "I'm sorry for getting maudlin, Piper."

Piper gave Merete her most winning smile. "That's okay, what are friends for?"

Merete gave her a sheepish smile then got up and turned to the door, feeling a little guilty. "I should let you sleep, tomorrow's going to be a big day."

The *Millennium*'s captain stood and watched Merete leave. "I'm here if you need me," she said as her Chief Surgeon stepped through the door.

"Good night, Piper."

"Good night, Merete."

When the doors were closed Piper continued to stare after her friend and had to consider just how much she could trust Merete's past not getting in the way.

Chapter Four

“Where are they?” The helmsman of the *Falcon’s Claw* nervously chewed the nails of one hand whilst he tapped out commands on the panel before him with the other. On the viewscreen, he could see nothing but the slightly illuminated frame of the Orion raider the *Claw* had encountered three days before. The sight gave him comfort as he knew it was his people on board it. After all, he was an Orion as well.

He squirmed once more in the hard chair that had been designed for Romulan soldiers. The surface was designed to keep the occupier from becoming too comfortable and getting lax. He wondered momentarily about whether the officer who used to man this station had any family. He dismissed the thought. It mattered little to him as that officer, along with the remainder of this ship’s former crew were now dead.

His captain had been quite creative. They had put their carcasses into the Romulan ship’s two shuttlecraft and tractored them into the nearby sun. No evidence.

His reverie was disturbed by a hand that slapped down on the back of his chair. His captain barked in his ear: “This ship is not the only one with a cloaking device, fool!” He then stomped over to the science station and ran *another* scan. “They don’t register in this ship’s scanners, but that doesn’t mean they’re not out there,” he growled.

Tall and burly, the Orion “Captain”, Trell, rubbed his black moustache with the side of his finger, then barked an order to his comms officer to open hailing frequencies. He hadn’t made a career of killing off his superior officers to rise in rank without learning to never underestimate his adversaries. “I know you’re out there,” he said in a decidedly neutral voice. “Show yourselves so we can get this over with.”

The reply was instantaneous. “The House of Duras doesn’t take orders from Orion scum, Trell,” the voice snarled. “You were paid to capture that Romulan ship and destroy a Federation target,” it continued, disdain dripping from every word. “You failed.”

Trell was incredulous. “What do you call this ship? A Tribble?” He scowled at the viewscreen as if he was glaring at his employer, even though it still only displayed the Raider. Suddenly, the image distorted, the stars shimmered, and a Klingon Bird of Prey decloaked, its armed forward torpedo launcher seeming mere inches from the screen. It was like staring into the maw of the beast.

The voice returned. “Cadets could have stolen that ship,” it said. “You were paid to destroy a Federation target and the best you could do was take on a defenceless colony of *farmers*. Cowards!”

Trell was just about fed up with the insults. He decided he could be just as arrogant as this Klingon. With arms crossed, he fired back: "If you have a problem with the target then you have no-one but yourselves to blame. You should have been more specific. If you don't like it, send a complaint to the management." Quietly he added to his own people: "Raise shields and prepare to fire weapons."

Duras' representative was not about to stand for his employee's attitude. "P'takh! There is no honour in attacking the defenceless. A Starfleet vessel or outpost would have been glorious and attracted a lot more attention."

Trell felt the need to defend himself. "We made sure we were seen."

"Irrelevant!" The voice was silent for a moment, causing Trell to wonder what was coming next. Then: "As the humans say, if you want a job done right, do it yourself."

Trell's attention was drawn by two more shimmering fields as another two Klingon vessels decloaked and fired a volley at the Raider's exposed rear flank. The explosions ripped through the larger vessel, causing a cascading reaction through the vessel's overtaxed power systems. They continued firing and blew the Raider apart.

"Cloak us!" Trell cried in fear, knowing he was now hopelessly overmatched.

A metallic clang was heard throughout the vessel as another ship latched on and docked. They were being boarded. Whilst the image of Klingons swarming through the *Claw*, waving their curved and razor sharp Bat'leths at anything that moved, gave Trell reason to be afraid, he took out his blaster and growled in determination: "You won't take this ship without a fight."

The voice responded one more time, sounding like the Grim Reaper himself. "Then it will be the first honourable thing you have done in your miserable life. Have a glorious death."

As the sounds of Orion screams filtered down the corridors as the Klingons went wild in bloodlust, Trell and his officers braced themselves for the battle to come. They knew they were all about to die, but they faced their fate bravely. Save for one who, not willing to be gutted alive by the business end of a Bat'lenth, turned his weapon on himself and vapourised himself with a quick blast.

The helmsman watched him go and wondered whether it was the wiser choice. He realised with a sense of irony that theirs was going to be the second crew of the *Falcon's Claw* to die in one week. Perhaps this was justice, he thought. No, more like just bad luck.

"All hands prepare for departure." Piper released the intercom button and turned to Krashtallah. "Inform Spacedock control of our intended departure and request clearance."

Krashtallash nodded and coded in her request. He gave her an affirmative nod.

“Request granted, *Millennium*,” issued from Piper’s speaker, “and good luck.”

“Detach moorings.” Piper watched the view screen with a sense of excitement as the ship moved slightly to one side. It was time to travel out among the stars again. “Manoeuvring jets, bring us about.”

The *Millennium* swung around in the docking bay and sat for a moment alongside the *Enterprise*, which was still under repair. Piper gazed at her and sent a silent thank you to the ship and her crew. Sarda followed her gaze and almost smiled at the memories. Piper saw the look and winked at her comrade. Time to make some of our own legends, she thought.

Piper turned her attention back to her helmsman, a young Australian Lieutenant called Jason Nunn. “Take us out, Mister Nunn, one hundred KPH.”

The crew watched, enraptured, as the docking bays passed by and the massive Spacedock doors parted. The *Millennium* glided through and into the diamond on black of space.

“Mister Nunn, full impulse power.” Piper turned to her navigator. “Mister Valastro, plot us a course to the Breakwater colony at Epsilon Crucis III. Mister Nunn, take us to warp seven once we have cleared the system.”

Both officers replied with “Yes, ma’ams” and got to business.

Jason leaned toward the navigator and whispered, “So much for the usual orientation cruise. I should’ve known we’d be thrown in the deep end.”

Lieutenant Carman Valastro shook his Grecian head at Jason, then turned to Piper and reported. “E.T.A. to Breakwater in two point four days, Captain.”

“Good.” Piper leaned back in her chair and got comfortable. “Mister Sarda.”

Sarda turned from his scanners at the summons and made his way down to the centre seat. “Yes, Captain?”

Piper looked up at her science officer and lowered her voice. “Sarda, this is a new ship and crew. I want you to schedule simulated battle situations to test the crew’s response time. Make them unpredictable and at irregular intervals.” She glanced behind her at the elongated section of the Bridge where her communications station was on the old *Exeter*. Lined with displays and control panels relaying not only the fighter’s condition, but the pilots as well, it was the nerve centre for the ship’s shuttles. “Have our squadrons practice their scramble techniques as well. Also, get your second to continue them for the next two shifts. I want this crew to be ready for anything.”

Sarda nodded. “Logical. I will see to it.” He turned, stopped, then walked back. “Is the Captain to be included in these exercises?”

Piper smiled. “Of course, no exceptions. Besides, I could do with the exercise.”

“Yes.” Sarda’s eyes grinned, then he turned away to carry out his orders. Piper had a sudden idea. She leaned forward in her chair and addressed her navigator. “Mister Valastro, tell me about yourself.”

Dinner in the officer’s mess for alpha shift was quiet. In fact, Valastro and Nunn were the only people in the room.

They sat together in an attempt to get to know one another. Each spoke of their homelands, Nunn being a slight, red-haired Australian with a ready smile and quick wit, and Valastro being a handsome, solidly built Alpha Centauran with soulful eyes that had already seen too much. It was well known that Alpha Centauri’s population, who had a racial similarity to Earth’s Greeks, was strongly suspected to have been planted there by the Preservers, a race who some believed seeded mankind throughout the galaxy in an attempt at preservation, hence the name. After spending some time with Jason, Carman had soon learned to be wary as Nunn boasted that when he was in the Academy, he had earned the wrath of the Dean for his numerous practical jokes.

“I remember when I reprogrammed the replicator in the swimming pool change rooms on the day of the Starfleet championships. I made it supply swimsuits for the opposite sex,” said Nunn with a grin.

Valastro was astounded. “Did anyone find out it was you?”

“No, but I laughed myself silly when the blokes came out of the change room wearing togs so tight, they made their eyes water.” Jason almost laughed aloud at the memory. Carman tried to remain straight-faced but couldn’t contain a chuckle.

Jason sighed and looked at the ceiling. “I tell you one person who could do with a good joke.”

Valastro looked over his fork at Jason. “Who?”

“Our beloved Captain.” Nunn leaned forward conspiratorially. “She may have the body of a goddess, but after fifteen false red alerts, she’s done a good job of getting up my nose.”

Carman came to Piper’s defence. “This is a brand-new ship and crew. She’s got to get our efficiency rating as high as possible. You never know when you’ll run into Orions or Romulans.”

“Yeah, well I’m tired of it.” Even as he spoke, a yellow alert sounded. “There you go again. They’re driving everyone up the wall.”

Valastro sat back. He had about five extra years on the impulsive male in front of him, and he could see that the younger man was headed for trouble.

Jason shook his head in annoyed wonder. “What kind of name is Piper, anyway?” He was finding it difficult not to resort to sarcasm.

“Captain Piper is Proxima Betan,” he said, remembering their earlier

conversation. "It's a new colony that has so few people that until a couple of years ago no-one needed a second name."

Nunn narrowed his eyes. "No wonder she's so tall."

Valastro smiled. "Exactly. She needed the stronger physique for the higher gravity."

"So, she could probably break me in half if she wanted to." Jason snorted, only half kidding. The captain was bigger than he was, and no doubt more highly trained in self-defence.

Carman laughed. "No, but I wouldn't tangle with her. Her tongue would cut you to pieces before you could raise a hand."

"Advice logged and understood." Nunn flashed him a cheesy grin and finished his plate.

Piper sat in her ready room and stared out the viewport. Something was bothering her about this mission, she was certain there was something she had overlooked. She reached a slender hand into her desk drawer, took out the 2-D photograph of the Romulan Warbird and placed it in front of her. She traced the outline of the ship in thought, knowing the problem was right in front of her.

In frustration, Piper called up Breakwater's information on her desk computer. She gazed at the planet, turning serenely before her and played a hunch.

Breakwater was only recently set up as a colony, its own industry was still limited. The population was small, and the planet was not rich in natural ores or dilithium. While the planet was rich in timber, which the locals had used to good effect in their town, the people had to import most of their material requirements and had only just bought their first satellite.

Piper sat bolt upright in her chair. That was it!

She raised her voice for the intercom. "Mister Sarda, report to my ready room, please."

Within moments, Sarda appeared and entered. He noticed his old friend was looking pretty pleased with herself. She motioned him to a chair, which he took.

Piper looked up into his eyes. "Sarda, something has been bothering me since I first saw this photo," she said, pointing to the object of her interest. "Breakwater had only one satellite, an old-style weather and communications relay satellite. It managed to take this picture of the Warbird because it decloaked *right in front of it*." She paused to let her news sink in. "Now this ship went to a lot of trouble to remain unidentified by dropping its cloak only while it fired." Her tone took on a note of incredulity. "Yet they missed something as obvious as Breakwater's one and only satellite which they *must* have known carried camera equipment, a satellite that contained the planet's only subspace radio relay." She

leaned toward Sarda to emphasise her point. “I think it was deliberate. They wanted to be seen.”

Sarda reflected for a moment on what Piper had said. He had dealt with the Romulans from time to time and he had come to the conclusion that they did nothing without a solid reason. They were clever and often devious, but they were not stupid. After a moment’s consideration he nodded his head in agreement. “Logical.” He looked his Captain in the eye. “We should report this to Starfleet Command immediately.”

Piper shook her head in disagreement. “They already know.” When Sarda raised a curious eyebrow, she explained. “I saw it in Jim’s eyes. I think he came to the same conclusion.”

Her First Officer’s eyebrows shot up. “Why would they not inform you of this?”

The captain sighed. “I suppose they’re still testing me.” She ran a hand over her brand-new mahogany desk. “Not only is this ship new, but I think Starfleet is testing me to see if I’m up to the task.” She rolled her eyes and grinned. She decided on not letting the situation annoy her. “I know Jim has every confidence in me, but I’m not sure about Bill Smillie. He knows I’m good at my job, I just don’t think he believes I’m equal to Captaining the Federation Flagship.”

Her friend caught her gaze. “I have no such doubts. You will thrive in this position; of that I am certain.”

The confidence he radiated warmed Piper’s soul. With Sarda by her side, she felt practically invincible. “Thanks. I just wish the Admiral shared your sentiment.”

The Vulcan’s stoic countenance did not change. “I uttered no sentiment, Captain. It is simply a fact.”

“Then may your facts always be sure,” Piper said with a heartfelt smile.

Famous for his sudden changes in subject, Sarda nodded in thought. “Do you think the Romulans want a war?”

Piper was not surprised by the question. She shrugged her shoulders. “Who knows? The Romulans are a warrior people who believe in expansion through conquest.” At this Piper frowned. “But they do have a code of honour, and it hardly seems honourable to attack defenceless colonies.”

Sarda interjected. “Recent intelligence reports are unclear whether the new Empress has been successful in instilling a fresh sense of honour in the Praetorate. In recent times, it was dominated by corruption in the highest positions with graft and familial favouritism running rampant. History dictates that it can take generations for attitudes to change in a society as a whole. The Empress’ reforms may not outlive her.”

Piper smirked. If the Romulan code of honour had been flushed in favour of expediency, they didn’t have far to go before they were in a state of complete

anarchy. Even so, it did not add up. “But surely, if they were only trying to gain territory, they must know they are going the wrong way about it.” She waved her hand dismissively. “Never mind the fact that Breakwater is a long way from the Romulan frontier. If you’re going to expand, you conquer the closest systems first and fortify your position.” Piper shook her head in thought. “You don’t strike soft, and strategically worthless, targets deep within enemy territory. No, the only thing such an attack would succeed in doing is cause outrage.”

Sarda steepled his fingers in thought, and Piper didn’t miss the action. “I see Spock has rubbed off on you too.”

The Vulcan looked up and realised what he was doing. He tried to ignore the comment and continued. “Perhaps there are factions within the Rihannsu who want a war, regardless of the great cost. Their actions could leave the Empress little choice.” Sarda was visibly repelled by the thought of such a war. “The casualties would be great.”

Piper pointed at Sarda. “And there’s a good chance they would lose.”

“I agree. With the new Starfleet monitoring posts watching the Klingon Neutral Zone instead of starships, we would have more than adequate resources to win such a war.”

The captain jabbed the desk with a fingernail to emphasise her point. “So why provoke a war when you know you won’t win?”

Sarda made his best Vulcan impression of being annoyed without showing it. “Who understands the emotions of the Romulan people?” He glanced meaningfully at Piper. “Or humans for that matter.”

“Of course, Vulcans were spared the illogic of emotions,” joked Piper, with a smile.

Sarda looked at her with the solemnity of a rock. “Of course.”

Piper stood, walked over to the window and stared out at the stars streaking by. Without turning, she voiced her doubts. “Starfleet will have to treat this raid as being a possible prelude to war. No doubt Admiral Smillie has already ordered reinforcements to the Romulan Neutral Zone.”

“The Rihannsu will respond.”

“That’s what worries me.” She turned back to Sarda. “We may not find out what’s really going on for a while, and we’ve still got two days before we get to Breakwater.”

Chapter Five

“Good morning, XO.”

“Good morning, Captain.”

Each and every day for the last two months had begun the same way for the crew of the *U.S.S. Firebrand*, N.C.C. 695. A *Saladin*-class Destroyer, the ship consisted of a circular primary hull attached to a single warp nacelle via a pylon extending from the bottom of the saucer at the rear. Although the *Firebrand* appeared a lightweight, the smaller Starfleet vessel could still pack a punch.

Her present mission had the ship and her crew of two hundred relegated to the dubious honour of border patrol. That it was along the now quiet Romulan Neutral Zone made it even more tedious.

The starship’s captain was an earth-born human whose ancestry could be traced back to France in the old national system. Captain Suzette Duquesne was in her mid-thirties and had only just recently attained that rank. She was of average height, brunette to match her eyes, and had a sweet, friendly smile that belied her keen intellect. Her mind was a natural computer which was able to complete complex analyses often before the ship’s could.

As they stood in the turbolift headed for the Bridge, she looked up at her First Officer, a handsome, Deltan male named Juliar. His hair was the typical pure white for his people, and likewise his eyes were a deep blue.

The captain gave him one of her trademark grins. In the mere two months they had served together aboard the *Firebrand* they had forged a solid bond. “What do you think the weather’s going to be like today?” she asked. It was a little running joke between them they shared each morning.

“Cloudy, with a chance of rain,” Lieutenant Commander Juliar answered cheerfully.

Suzette’s eyebrows shot up. “As long as it’s not raining meteors. I’ve had enough of them to last a lifetime,” she said ruefully.

The turbolift came to a stop and its doors parted, allowing the pair to assume their duties. They were gratified to see that Alpha shift had already assumed their roles.

Suzette took her place at the Conn and logged herself in. Once her chores were done, she considered the small Chess board attached to her chair’s armrest. She had considered her next move all night and had decided aggression was her best strategy. Before announcing her move, she glanced at the view screen.

The magnified image of the Romulan Warbird *Eagle’s Wing* was mirroring their course on the opposite side of the Neutral Zone, putting them a mere ten kilometres away. Both ships were staying a respectful distance from the Zone and had been keeping tabs on the other for the last fifty-nine days.

Five solar days into the tedium, Suzette had suggested to her opposite

number on the Warbird that he engage her in a game of chess. They had to do something to alleviate the boredom, she had said in her proposal.

For three days she received no reply. Then, finally, they received a simple message. Yes. P to K4.

The instructions were obvious to any seasoned Chess player as the standard opening gambit. The game was on. Since then, each Captain had won a game apiece. However, in this game Suzette was already under threat.

She glanced at her Communications Officer. "Send B to KR4. That should get him thinking," she said as darkly as one who reminded people of Snow White could.

Her XO spoke up and reported: "Coming up on Asteroid RNZ 13754."

Captain Duquesne turned her eyes to the screen as the huge rock designated 13754 began edging onto the screen. If it continued to pass between them the *Eagle's Wing* would be out of sight for a few moments. Not to worry, Suzette thought. Their course had brought them by it five times already. The sixth should be no different.

A moment later, the Warbird vanished from sight. In the past, the *Eagle's Wing* would quickly increase velocity and be waiting for them on the other side.

Out of the corner of her eye, Suzette noticed her Science Officer's head pop up from his scanners in alarm. "Captain, I'm picking up weapons fire on the other side of the asteroid. A lot of it."

Before Suzette could enquire further the Comm's officer announced: "Captain, we're receiving a distress call from the *Eagle's Wing*."

Always the type to go where Angels fear to tread, Captain Duquesne ordered: "Battlestations!"

Throughout the pocket starship, her well trained crew raced to make sure the ship was ready for anything.

Suzette got to her feet. She always felt more in control of a situation when she faced it standing. "Helm: intercept course. Full impulse power. Arm all weapons and raise shields."

The small, but highly manoeuvrable *Firebrand* quickly surged forward and circumnavigated the rock. What they found caused Suzette's jaw to drop.

The remnants of the *Eagle's Wing* sparked and crackled as the residual energy from the ship's shattered hull leaked out into space.

On either side of the hulk sat formidable Klingon D-7 Heavy Cruisers, their weapons pods glowing and pointed in her direction.

Realising instantly they were hopelessly overmatched the captain ordered: "Helm, get us out of here."

At that moment, both enemy vessels fired simultaneously, launching a volley of photon torpedoes that a small part of Suzette's brain registered as overkill. Another part wondered why they were Starfleet blue instead of Klingon red. The

most part realised they would not get out of the way in time.

“Checkmate,” she said in resignation just before the torpedoes detonated.

The Klingon Cruisers cloaked five minutes later and headed home once they were certain that both ships were well and truly dead.

“Mister President, I must protest at the recent build-up of Starfleet vessels along the Neutral Zone. Their presence could be misconstrued as a prelude to invasion.” The Romulan Ambassador S’tamok circled the Federation President’s ornate office like the bird of prey he was at heart. He was deadly serious in his accusation, knowing full well that if he was right the Federation may take the offensive against their old aggressor. Visibly agitated, he halted before the President and leaned over the mahogany desk, levelling an accusing finger at him. “I must insist that these extra starships be removed so that order can be restored.”

The President, a solidly built, middle aged, human with more of his white hair on his chin than on his head, looked into S’tamok’s green eyes and knew the younger man was worried, but he had his own concerns. The unprovoked attack on Breakwater was a reality and whatever the Romulans were planning, he had to be ready for it.

He raised his blue eyes and levelled a steely gaze at the Ambassador, his voice almost mocking. “Surely you must be aware of the attack on the defenceless colony on Epsilon Crucis III. I believe it to be ample reason for the added security precautions we have taken.”

S’tamok appeared confused for a split second then masked it with semi-feigned anger. “I have no idea what you are talking about. We Rihannsu would see no honour in such an attack. Why do you accuse us of such a crime?”

The Federation President saw S’tamok’s confusion but decided not to become convinced it was authentic when it could have been an intentional slip. Admittedly, the new Romulan Ambassador was young for such a posting, and full of pride for himself and his people. He was not intimidated by the Federation President and his insistent use of the Romulan name for themselves, the Rihannsu, was tantamount to open contempt, but he had also displayed unusual cunning in previous debates. No, he would not be fooled by this youth.

The President reached into the desk drawer beside him and retrieved one of only three hard copy photographs of the Romulan warship hovering over Breakwater. He slapped it down on his desk triumphantly before the impetuous Vulcanoid. “Here is the proof,” he said with heat. “This was taken by Breakwater’s satellite when your ship opened fire on it. The markings are unmistakable.”

Across the desk, S’tamok stared at it in open surprise. “This image *must* be a forgery,” he blurred. “The Rihannsu would never launch such an attack.”

The President wondered if S’tamok was more annoyed that it had happened,

or that the attack was launched without his knowledge. Politics was such a dangerous game of chess.

S'tamok seemed to calm down, which the President knew was the Ambassador at his most dangerous. "I can assure you, Mister President, that any attack upon this colony was not authorised by my government. And as far as we are concerned, this 'photograph' is a forgery to justify an invasion of the Rihannsu Empire." The Ambassador turned and headed for the door. Before he left, he turned once more. "You can be sure that we will respond to this threat." Thrusting the door open, the Romulan Ambassador stormed out of the building. He had a date with a communicator.

The President sat back in his leather chair and worried. This whole affair could easily get out of control. His only hopes lay with the *Millennium* verifying whether it really was a Romulan ship that had attacked Breakwater, otherwise he could be making a very big mistake.

Frustrated, he decided upon action. He sat up and savagely punched his intercom button. "Commander Nolan, get me Fleet Admiral Smillie."

Sarda lay on his meditation stone and contemplated his future. He had been continuing the work he had begun on the image projector at Old Silicon Valley when he had been unexpectedly transferred to the *Millennium*. He had always known that his destiny lay with Piper, but the sudden changes had taken him by surprise and left him feeling as if caught in a whirlwind.

Feeling. He squashed the impulse to react emotionally. He still found himself battling his emotions. He had long since forgiven the person responsible for his being ostracised by his own people. His talents with weaponry had made him an outsider among his own.

Vulcans believed that violence was never the answer, a thing to be avoided at all costs. So, when he and Piper were at the academy together, and she had naively made it known to his superiors of his "gift", the Vulcan Science Directorate had rejected him and cancelled his membership of that esteemed body. Much had happened since then and now he no longer blamed Piper for her ignorance and indeed their understanding of each other had seen each of them grow in unexpected directions.

Indeed, Piper was not as rash and emotional as she once was, but he sensed that had in no way changed the "intuition" that he had come to admire in her. She was going to make a fine captain and he was honoured to serve with her.

He, on the other hand, had learned much from the humans who had at first confused him so. He had found strength in the emotions that his clan tried so hard to reject. That was not to say that he let emotions run rampant through him as Scanner did. Sarda was an individual, unique, and so had decided that his rights in

a universe of infinite diversity allowed him to deviate from the path that the Lyr Zor expected him to follow. A path that led to the ultimate in self-denial: Kolinahr.

It was the total divorce of mind and responses from emotion. His kin, the Lyr Zor, demanded that all its members attain this state, even to the point of mental aberration if necessary. His time among the humans had taught him that emotion could be a useful tool, as well as something to enjoy, and, at times, endure. Sarda decided that his right to self-determination allowed him to reject his peer's notions and follow his own path.

Yet his decision meant that he could never again see his homeland, never see the valley of his birth. The Lyr Zor had rejected him – he could never go home. His parents no longer acknowledged him, a thought he admitted pained him. His sister, T'Zar, being part of the enlightened generation of Lyr Zor, would still talk to him, but was under threat of excommunication if she was caught. She would meet with him, but not in public, and Sarda would not force her to, she would be sacrificing too much.

Sarda thought fondly of his sister, her long, brassy hair which mirrored his own. Her deep blue eyes, unusual in a Vulcan, which seemed to peer right into your soul. She was slight, yet feminine, and her small frame contained a strong personality. Logic was something she used as a tool to beat over the head of anyone who disagreed with her. She was still young, and was currently attending the Vulcan Science Academy studying, of all things, psychology.

Apart from his people and with little outside help other than Captain Spock, he had followed a course of self-education. In his studies he had finally attained Venlinahr, the state of most Vulcans; in control of their emotions, but still aware of them. He still did not fully understand his emotions and suspected that he never would. But his decision still left him his own frontier to one day conquer.

When the door chimed it did not surprise Sarda in the least. He knew who was waiting outside his door, patiently awaiting his summons. He had been expecting this visitor for the past day after they had shipped out. Without opening his eyes, he called "come".

The doors parted to admit Piper in full uniform. She stepped forward past the doorway and waited for Sarda to admit her further. Her body appreciated the warmth of his quarters. Her eyes drifted around the room at the various items Sarda had collected over the years. Mostly Vulcan in design except for the Silver Palm and clusters that hung from their ribbon on the wall. When Piper stared at it, her eyes full of memories, Sarda sat up to engage her and answer her unspoken question.

"I know it is illogical to hang them, but the medal has been a reminder to me of our experiences aboard *Star Empire*."

"I didn't know you were such a sentimentalist, Sarda." Piper grinned at her old friend and stepped forward toward that presence she could always feel when Sarda was near.

“I am not sentimental. I merely value the learning experience.”

Piper shook her hair and laughed. “And of course, all life is a learning experience.”

“Indeed.” Sarda paused and looked into his commander’s eyes, looking for the questions he knew she wanted to ask.

Piper saw this but waited. She did not wish to violate the Vulcan privacies.

Sarda nodded. “You wish to know how my Vulcan training has progressed,” he assumed.

The corners of Piper’s mouth twitched upward yes.

The Vulcan took in the human with a long look. “Captain – Piper – I no longer consider you an outsider. You may freely ask what you wish.”

Piper was startled, she felt included in a way she had never felt before. He was treating her as a fellow Vulcan, practically as family, and she felt privileged. “So, how have you gone with your studies?” she asked, conversationally.

“I recently achieved Venlinahr,” he stated.

Piper shook her head in understanding, in an effort to know Sarda better, she had read up on the Vulcan disciplines. “And...?” she asked, regarding the future.

Sarda rocked toward her. “.... And I have no intention of going any further.”

Piper frowned. She knew what he was giving up with his decision. He was already shunned by Vulcan, but now his family would reject him as well. “It’s a pity we can’t all live by the tenets of IDIC,” she said wistfully. She looked about for a second to see if there was anything to sit on and found the only piece of furniture in the room was Sarda’s meditation stone that he also used to sleep on. She decided against it.

Sarda nodded his agreement. “Kolinahr may be right for many of my fellow Vulcans, but I do not believe that because one is born to a certain clan, they must also abide by every rule for living they dictate. IDIC also allows room for the individual’s right of choice.”

It was a philosophy that was near to Piper’s heart. The notion that one was free to follow their own path regardless of the social stigmas it might attract was part of her core beliefs. “I’m not going to argue with that,” she said. Sincerely she added: “I’m glad you’ve made your own choice.” She sighed and leaned against the wall, gazing at the ceiling. A cheering smile spread over her face. “It’s their loss, anyway. And my gain. I know I wouldn’t want anyone else as my first officer.”

Sarda’s eyes flicked up at his captain. Her words were a tonic to his soul. “Thank you, Piper. I am looking forward to serving under you for the coming years.” Sarda was one of the few people who Piper allowed to use her name alone, and he was not at a loss to understand its meaning. Her trust in him was absolute.

Piper stepped forward and extended her hand. She knew she was breaching Vulcan etiquette, but she also knew Sarda would understand the gesture. He rose and accepted the handshake warmly, letting Piper’s feelings through, unguarded.

He felt her loyalty and friendship strongly, she felt the feeling of confidence in her she sensed in the back of her mind whenever he was around.

Piper sought the words then gave up and offered a simple "Welcome aboard, Mister Sarda."

Sarda's eyes brightened. "Thank you, Captain. Might I also say: Welcome aboard."

Piper stared out the window at the stars that seemed to streak by, even though she knew it was quite the reverse. The *Millennium* was cruising at warp seven even though her maximum cruising speed was one warp higher, but Piper had no intention of pushing this new ship. Although she had a first-rate chief engineer, she was not going to trust the starship until it had proven itself. After all, the design had been created to house the new transwarp mechanism, which had ultimately failed, much to Sarda's chagrin. He had helped create transwarp, but after Professor Mornay, the twisted genius who had come up with the basic theories, had been interred for her crimes, she had refused to rectify the problems that the design still carried.

Piper pushed off the wall and turned from the spectacle. This was fast becoming a habit, staring out, letting the void enter her mind and fill her soul. She found it soothing, especially after hearing the news. Her old friend, Suzette Duquesne, was dead.

The dispatch lay on her desk, fresh out of the printer. Crash knew from experience that she liked such things printed on paper, even if it was only replicated. Given the sensitivity of the information, Suzette's family had yet to be informed.

Piper's mind went back to the Academy where she had met Suzette. Piper had been in her final year when Suzette had come as a freshman. Yet the younger woman's phenomenal mind had become legendary quickly. As both of them had been set apart by their particular talents they found themselves in the lonely club of the gifted. They were admired for their gifts, but at the same time they found others jealous of their abilities.

She smiled ruefully at the memories. If poor old Suzette had one failing, it was in social interactions. She was a bit of a nerd.

Piper remembered the joke they used to share. Whenever they were in space, they were always talking about the weather – as if that mattered. The memory brought a smile yet saddened her. They would never share that joke again and the knowledge Piper had lost something dear brought a great feeling of loss.

She shook her head. What was more important was a cloud was now hovering over Suzette's impeccable record. The Romulans were accusing her of attacking one of their ships unprovoked. The woman Piper knew would never have done such a thing, but she was not the one who needed convincing.

This situation had now taken on a personal note for the captain. There was no way she was going to let this lie go. Her friend had been not only slain, but slandered, and if there was one thing she could still do for Suzette, it would be to clear her name.

She looked at her desk. The dispatch wasn't the only thing on it. She let out a soulful sigh. She had work to do. She moved toward her desk in the ready room that she had been lobbying for years for Starfleet to add to their starships. It was good for her to have somewhere near the bridge to be alone to work and reflect. She looked down at her mass of paperwork and decided it was time to meet her assistant.

"Yeoman Carver to the Captain's Ready Room," she called. She hoped this new assistant was at least half as good as her old Yeoman, Roger Mastrantonio, who had been promoted to Ensign at Piper's recommendation, and was now serving aboard the *U.S.S. Melbourne*.

A few moments later the door chimed, and Piper called for the Carver to enter. The doors slid aside to reveal a young, dark, woman who seemed to be constantly frowning at everything and everyone. She appeared to be stumbling under the weight of responsibility and quickly took a seat before she was offered one.

Piper thought to be watchful of this girl who seemed barely out of the Academy. She had been thrust into the position of Captain's assistant and Piper wondered whether she would be up to running one of the biggest ships Starfleet had ever created because after hundreds of years of change in society and custom, Captains of all ships were still bogged down with paperwork.

Starfleet Academy had many different streams to capitalise on the skills and talents of their applicants. Their courses ranged from Command to Supply Officers to midshipmen. Piper wondered where this young lady had fit in.

Carver thumped the padd that had seemed so weighty down on the desk, sat back and ran a hand through her loose, short hair. "Yeoman Carver, reporting for duty, Captain."

Piper scowled at her "assistant". Carver saw the look and straightened in her chair, suddenly conscious of a small crease in her uniform jacket. The captain stood and rounded the desk and stared at the crease, making Carver shrivel in embarrassment.

Her commander spoke and the sound was a whip crack. "Yeoman Carver, I did not give you permission to sit! Come to attention!" The girl shot out of her chair and stood rigid, staring straight ahead. "I will have you know that I expect nothing but the best from the crew members under my command. Uniforms must be pressed, hair," and Piper flicked Carver's errant strands, "must be tidy according to regulations."

Piper circled her prey, her tone one a thirty-year veteran Sergeant would

have been proud of. "When you get out of bed in the morning, I want you to prepare as if you are going on parade. Boots must be mirror finished; insignia should shine. Not a single fibre of lint should be seen." Piper stopped before the cowering youth and gazed into her soul. "When you address me, speak to me as if you are addressing God. I expect respect in every word and motion. Any less than this and I will bust you down to Refuse." Piper's finger jabbed at the air just before Carver's nose. "Do I make myself clear?"

The Yeoman gulped and just managed a nod.

Content, Piper stepped back and sat in her chair, gesturing to the one before her. With a hint of condescension, she said: "Now, Yeoman, you may sit."

Carver sat, trying to still her shaking hands. She looked up at her Captain then looked down again, terrified.

Piper dropped her hard-nosed captain routine and returned to the business at hand. "I want you to make appointments for all the officers on this ship to meet me here over the next week. Inform them that they will be informal talks and that I would be interested in any ideas or thoughts they have regarding the efficient running of this ship." She stopped for a moment, thinking. "Oh, and put Lieutenant Earhaht on the top of the list." Piper was intensely curious about the ship's Horta. "I want them to begin in half an hour. You have that long to prepare."

Piper stood, indicating that the interview was over. Yeoman Carver got shakily to her feet with a quiet, "Yes, Captain", and stepped toward the door.

"Oh, and Carver?" The girl stopped in mid pace.

"Yes, Captain?" she quailed.

"Add yourself to that list."

Carver's heart leapt in relief. The captain was giving her a chance to redeem herself. "Yes, Captain!" she replied with some cheer.

Piper nodded and Carver left. Then she turned back to the window and resumed her examination of the stars.

One of Piper's first duties as Captain was to decide which of the ship's two security Lieutenants would be the department head. Piper had asked Krashtallah along, although she had reserved the reason why. Naturally, Crash had asked, but Piper had only given him a "You'll see", leaving him wondering. Once they had arrived at the security office on deck two, the reason became obvious.

Seated beside on opposing sides of the desk were two anxious young officers, hearts pounding in anticipation. One was a thin, Andorian male, Brankovian, who had the distinct blue skin and antennae of his race, the other Crash recognised in an instant, and he began to growl quietly in the back of his throat. A quick glance from Piper silenced him.

Brankovian stood and welcomed the captain. The tall, sleek, pure white

felinoid turned a disdainful eye at her kin and growled back. She stopped when she saw Piper's eyes narrow. This was not the time, she told herself in the quiet of her thoughts.

Piper managed to put two and two together and asked the obvious. "Do you know each other?"

Both felinoids spoke at once. "Yes, Captain."

Piper's temper was beginning to rise at her junior officer's lack of etiquette and unwillingness to volunteer even this small piece of information. "Well...?"

Crash grimaced as only a cat could do. "Captain, may I introduce Amantallah, my sister."

The captain grinned, smiled, then laughed at the irony. "So, I see sibling rivalry hasn't died."

Both cats pupils narrowed slightly, their only indication that they were not amused. They spoke as one. "Captain, I would like to request a transfer." They stared at each other, obviously uncomfortable with one another's presence.

Piper's smile thinned and she rested her hands on her hips in a no-nonsense stance. "I take it this is a personal matter," she stated simply. Both nodded. Piper smiled again. "Request denied." As both Caits baulked, Piper raised her hands at each of them, silencing any further complaint. She decided to give them a lesson in perspective. She caught the eye of each of them in turn.

"You were both given posts on this ship because you were the best in your fields," she said. "I *want* the best serving with me on this ship, and I am not going to have this team divided by some silly disagreement between you. Whatever it is, sort it out. The foibles and mistakes of your youth are far behind you and it's time to grow up. Neither of you want a black mark on your records because you wanted off the Federation *Flagship* because you couldn't get along with your sibling. So, I expect you to bury whatever is dividing you. Life is too short." She caught their eye once again. "Is that clear?" she said, her tone broaching no disagreement.

Heads drooped, and apologies given, they got down to business. Piper took the seat behind the desk and began reviewing their files.

The queen sat there taunting him. She would have him soon. He stared at his opponent, trying to see her next move, but so far, her strategy, although highly illogical, had proven very successful. His minions were diminishing at an increasing rate.

He noticed an almost feral glint in her eyes. She seemed to enjoy whittling him down, watching him cringe as another pawn was lost. So, perhaps the time had come to return illogic for illogic, he thought. Sarda reached forward and threatened his opponent's knight with a pawn.

Too late! He missed seeing the bishop hidden on the second tier and the

last of Sarda's hopes for even stalemate were gone.

Amantallash reached out and annihilated the knight and threatened Sarda's king in the same move. Seeing no way out, Sarda bowed to the inevitable and tipped over his king, abdicating the game.

Amantallash showed her sharp teeth in pleasure. It was a sweet victory.

"You play well, Lieutenant," Sarda acknowledged.

The pure white Caitian with the startling blue eyes purred, satisfied. "Thank you, Mister Sarda," she said charitably.

Although Sarda was by no means a Grand Master at the game, he considered himself quite adept. Yet Lieutenant Amantallash had almost embarrassed him. "Might I enquire as to who taught you?" he asked curiously.

Suddenly, Amantallash stopped purring. With obvious discomfort she told him with a grimace. "My brother." It was as if she was ashamed of the fact.

Sarda's brow shot up. "Indeed. Would you be referring to Lieutenant Krashtallah?"

The Vulcan was mildly startled when the security officer started growling. "Yes, Commander," she said between bared teeth.

Sarda carried on as if oblivious to the Lieutenant's increasing hostility. He wanted to know the root of it, and he was not above needling her to find it. "I shall have to challenge him to a game sometime soon." He looked up into her youthful eyes. "Would you be able to arrange it?"

Their new Security Chief visibly shook with rage and then a curious thing happened. The last of Sarda's chess pieces fell over as one and clattered to the floor. Several people around the rec. room tut-tutted at the display of sore losing and then resumed what they were doing.

Without another word, Amantallash stood and ran out of the room, leaving Sarda puzzling over what had occurred, and why.

"They've upped the ante." Captain Steven Martin of the *U.S.S. Excalibur* stood before Fleet Admiral Smillie's desk. He had been on his way up to report in when he got news of the *Firebrand*'s destruction. He had been asked to carry the report up to the Admiral personally. He delivered it, then hovered to see if he could glean any information for himself.

Bill Smillie stood and took the envelope. It was an official notification of something he was already fully aware of and so he didn't bother opening the envelope. There was that reason, and that he did not feel like indulging Martin's curiosity.

The older summed up the younger. Steven Martin was of average height and build, but these masked a quick mind and a fearless resolve to get the job done, no matter what the cost. It was that part of his nature that most worried the Admiral.

The rate of casualties on the *Excalibur* was higher than any other starship. He already had on file a number of reports from the vessel's former CMO questioning his "gung-ho" approach to every situation – her words. He didn't seem to mind playing fast and loose with other people's lives. His attitude had left its mark on his own body. A neat scar ran through the eyelids of his left eye. In fact, the eye itself had been damaged and mostly repaired. The only obvious damage to the eye was a lack of colour in the iris. The eye appeared black.

Rumour had it that the Klingon who had inflicted the injury during an interrogation gone wrong had paid for the insult with his own knife being plunged through his own eye socket and deep into his brain.

Admiral Smillie gave his subordinate a nod of agreement. "They have. Captain Duquesne and her crew will be missed." He deliberately kept his tone neutral, trying to draw out what the *Excalibur*'s captain was thinking.

Martin shifted uncomfortably on his feet. "At least she got that Romulan ship, too," he said hotly.

The Admiral waved the captain to a seat. If they were going to engage in this conversation, at least they could do so comfortably. He would rather have been having this talk with Jim Kirk, but he and the *Enterprise* had been called away on an urgent mercy mission to rescue diplomatic hostages on Nimbus III. He glanced at Martin and thought to himself: Two heads are better than one. Then he revised it. More like one and a half. He did not like Martin's style. Shoot first and don't bother with the questions at all.

"I'm not sure the Romulans are telling the truth," he said, letting his trepidation show. "And I'm certainly not sure that Captain Duquesne would have breached the Neutral Zone without a damned good reason. The fire fight was on *their* side of the Zone."

That simple statement got Martin's attention. While he was personally unfamiliar with Suzanne Duquesne, he knew that no Starfleet officer would breach the Neutral Zone without either an express order from above or a clear and present danger. Given Martin's propensity for jumping to conclusions, he blurted: "So, the Romulans must be lying."

The Admiral resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Biting his tongue, he said: "Somebody is."

The captain shifted in his seat. "You know this could be a prelude to war," he said.

The eagerness for battle that was clear in his tone bothered Smillie no end. This man would have made a great Klingon. Maybe the rumours were true after all, he reflected. "I hope not," Smillie said through tightened lips. "Captain, I want you to keep the *Excalibur* in Spacedock for a couple of days. Give your people some shore leave. Get some repairs made. I may need your ship. Maybe sooner than I think, if this keeps escalating."

Martin shot to his feet, firing off a quick salute. "Yes, sir!" he said before doing a quick about turn and leaving.

Smillie noted that once more the younger Captain had forgotten himself and violated protocol. He nodded to himself. He would have to keep a closer eye on that one.

Scanner poured over the schematics of his new ship, wanting to know all the intimate details of his new lady. Her curves and graceful lines reminded him of a young girl he had met on Argelius all those years ago. He'd had barely enough time to introduce himself when he saw Piper dancing on the stage and knew did not want to miss such an opportunity.

He noticed the *Millennium* had ample stores, crew quarters and staterooms for the odd visiting VIP. What the ship lacked was a bar, and he was trying to find a small, unnoticed place on the ship to set up his Still.

The synthesisers on the ship could provide him with a good whiskey, one that was suitably reduced in alcohol to prevent the crew from getting too inebriated and mistaking a phaser control for a sensor array. Such situations had arisen in the past, with sometimes tragic results.

Scanner was reluctant to open the bottle of two-hundred-year-old Johnnie Walker in his cabin, he was saving that for the day when Sarda laughed, or for when the Romulans wanted peace, whichever came first. He mused that he would probably see Satan sipping a cool drink whilst making snowballs in Hell before then.

His finger traced the layout of the ship on the display on his office desk. Jefferies tubes were too narrow for his equipment. However, the ship's skin was three layers thick and there was access at many points, particularly around Engineering. Unfortunately, he could not guarantee that the boiler would stay warm, or that one of his staff would find it and start borrowing all of his product.

He had considered doctoring one of the food replicators in the officer's mess, but that could lead to trouble with the crew, and especially Piper, if she found out. Scanner shuddered at the thought. She could beat him to death with her tongue and do it with a smile.

There! His hand came to rest, tapping the screen. He smiled the grin of a thirsty man being handed a glass of crystal-clear water. Now all he had to do was keep it a secret.

Chapter Six

On Romulus, as everywhere else, there was a time to work and a time to play. The end of the Commander's day had come hours before, but she found that her work often found her.

As she strolled the bluestone halls of her modest sized home, she was grateful for the fact that she could afford at least one servant, a young lass who was barely past schooling age, but had shown an unusual aptitude when she had interviewed her for the job. Wanting this girl to have a better chance at life than that of a menial worker, the Commander had decided to not only employ her, but to continue her education.

Another galaxy-wide axiom is that knowledge is power, and there were fewer places in the universe where that was truer than the Rihannsu homeworld, Ch'Rihan. It was taking the Empress' best efforts to keep the Tal Shi'ar under heel. Which was no mean feat as the secretive Intelligence organisation, that everybody knew watched everyone and everything, had a penchant for assassinating those who disagreed with them and their clandestine methods. Not that it could usually be proven. Most of those the Tal Shi'ar disposed of simply vanished, as if into thin air.

She sometimes wondered what life would be like without their "secret police", who definitely seemed to always operate with their own agenda. It was often debated whether that it was always in the best interests of the Empire – quietly, of course. A bit more freedom, perhaps, but the Commander was not certain the Tal Shi'ar was so easily disposable. Without a firm leash, her people's passionate heart could quickly lead them into the anarchy of civil war.

Sadly, even given her affection for her servant, Aeren, the Commander was not by any means certain she wasn't a Tal Shi'ar plant sent to watch her. It was her experience their tendrils extended everywhere.

A chime could be heard echoing off the walls, and the Commander wondered if her husband was home. She looked up at the wall chronometer and realised, with a saddened heart, it could not be so. It had to be her communicator. Once again, business was intruding on her personal time. She put aside her desire to practice her rhitaxa – a kind of stringed instrument not entirely unlike a guitar – and marched towards her personal study.

She found Aeren had beaten her to it and answered the call. The Commander resisted the temptation to scowl at her and simply looked at her askance.

Aeren seemed not to notice that anything was amiss. The petite girl with the long, black hair and tight face simply looked up at her employer and said: "It is the Imperial Fleet calling, ma'am."

The Commander simply nodded and waited as Aeren stepped out of the

room, being careful to close the heavy, wooden door behind her. She then sat down behind her ornate, antique wooden desk and took the call.

A few moments later, the Commander toggled her communicator off. She was disturbed by the new information. One of their Warbirds, *Eagle's Wing*, had been destroyed, apparently by a mere *Saladin*-class vessel. She was quite familiar with the type, and she didn't believe it had the firepower to do what it's Captain was accused of doing.

Tapping her computer's control pad, she brought up the intelligence report on the late Captain Duquesne. Above average intelligence, for a human. A scientist at heart, the intel officer had summarised. Not a military threat.

And yet the *Eagle's Wing* was lost. The irony of that simple statement was not lost on her. There was the consolation that the *Firebrand* was also nothing more than floating wreckage, but the evidence didn't quite add up. Scans of the detritus revealed a mystery. It appeared the Federation ship had been the victim of its own weaponry. A premature torpedo detonation? she wondered. It wasn't unheard of.

Her communicator chimed. The Commander had a different ID for each caller stored, and this one not only made her smile with familiarity, but then frown with concern. For the Empress to call her personally at this time could only be bad news.

She accepted the call. The familiar face on the screen did not smile. "Commander," the Empress stated flatly. She was not happy.

The Commander decided to keep her tone neutral. "Empress," she said, with mild deference.

"Someone is trying to start a war." The Empress' tone was matter of fact.

The small, fit woman on the screen almost glared at her through the device. The Commander did not know exactly what she expected of her. "I would concur," she said simply.

The Empress was an intelligent woman, and quickly realised this approach was getting her nowhere. "I am sorry, cousin," she said, by way of apology. She visibly relaxed and sat back into her chair. "I have been out of a Warbird too long. I don't seem to have the same ear for trouble anymore. The walls of the Praetorium seem to be soundproof."

It was something the Commander was aware of, on a number of levels. The walls did tend to isolate rulers, but they had also stifled the cries of a dying monarch.

The Empress continued. "Have you any idea who is behind this? Is it any of our own?"

Now comfortable in her own leather-backed chair, the Commander considered the question. "I cannot say either way for certain, cousin. What I can tell you is that I have heard nothing from my people at all. I cannot speak for our friends." Her deprecating tone revealed she was referring to the Tal Shi'ar.

The Empress nodded and appeared to be thinking deeply. "One cannot

always fathom their thinking, that's for certain," she said, evenly. She tapped her chin with a finger. "What of Starfleet?"

"The fractious Federation has its share of dissidents who have tried to stir the pot before," the Commander said, referring to the well-known events surrounding the Rittenhouse scandal, among others.

The Empress shook her head. Her recent dealings with certain members of Starfleet had left her with a much greater appreciation for the Empire's adversary – enemy was too strong a word for them. She had come to understand, however, that expansion through conquest was not their way. The Federation acted like one big, happy family and wanted everyone else to join in the party. You don't do that at the point of a gun.

"While an important question, Empress, I don't believe it's our biggest concern," the Commander said, surprising her cousin.

"And that is?"

The Commander's lips thinned out. "The Federation may be relatively peaceful, but it is the peace of a sleeping dragon. Provoke it, and you'll get burned."

The Empress nodded her understanding.

"Someone is waking the dragon," the Commander stated, her concern showing. "If we can't stop it, the Federation may burn our Empire to a cinder."

The Empress' eyes flared. She loved the Empire dearly and would lay her life down for it without question. Her tone was even, her thoughts determined, as she stated: "Then we must make preparations to meet them, should the need arise. I will order the fleet mobilised. However, I have a special task for you."

Piper looked up as her door chime sounded. She checked her diary for her next appointment and smiled when she saw who it was. "Come in," she called then sat back, hands clasped behind her head as she tried to appear approachable.

The door slid aside and with the sound of granite rumbling Lieutenant Earhaht entered the room. Piper was startled at how quickly the Horta moved but tried to conceal it with an amiable grin. "Good afternoon, Lieutenant."

"Captain," came the quiet reply.

Piper frowned. She had the distinct impression that the Horta was at full attention, and she had ordered that these discussions be informal. "At ease, Lieutenant."

Earhaht seemed to shift slightly and assumed an appearance that was not quite formal. Piper decided to put aside her impressions, it was so hard to tell, and got on with it. "As you know, Ms. Earhaht, I have merely called you here in an attempt to get to know you better and vice versa. This isn't an inquisition, so feel free to speak your mind. I feel that a ship's crew functions best when you know who it is you're serving with."

“Yes, Captain.” When the Horta offered nothing more, Piper tried a gentle prodding, trying desperately to break the ice.

“For instance, I’m from Proxima Beta. I have two sisters and a brother, and my parents are still living at home. I’ve served on several ships, including the *Enterprise 1701*, and this is my second command.” Piper tried to keep her life story short. She knew she had a distinguished past but the last thing she wanted was to give the crew the impression she was in love with herself.

The Horta remained silent. Piper was beginning to get irritated. She sat forward her arms crossed. “Lieutenant....”

When the living rock gave no answer Piper tried a different tack. “I believe you had something on your mind when I bumped into you earlier...”

For a moment Earhaht shifted. She somehow appeared uncomfortable. “Permission to speak freely, Captain?”

Piper frowned, annoyed that the Lieutenant obviously had missed that was the intention all along. She realised Earhaht’s problem obviously went beyond mere banter. She stared at the Horta and was aware of the irony of not being able to look into the soul of this creature when she didn’t even have a face. Curious, she said, “Granted.”

Even through the Starfleet voder on Earhaht’s back, it was clear she was a tortured spirit. “Captain, I do not understand why I have been posted in phaser control when I requested geology and xenobiology. I am not happy where I cannot use my talents to best serve this ship.” All this was said in the most formal of language.

“Have you spoken with the Quartermaster about this?”

Earhaht shifted. She looked as if she would rather throw herself in an acid bath than continue. “I do not wish to damage him, Captain.”

Piper’s voice grew cold. She was beginning to see she had a problem with one of her officers. “Have you spoken with him?”

The voice that came from Earhaht’s voder grew weak. “Aye, Captain.”

The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees. “And?”

Earhaht seemed to come to a decision. She mustered her resolve and blurted the rest out. “Captain, he told me geology was no place for an oversized doorstop.... Sir.”

Piper’s fingers rapped the table. “I see...” If there was one thing that Piper would not suffer, it was a bigot, and her irritation showed.

Earhaht wailed as she continued. “He insulted me and put me where he said no-one would trip over me.”

Piper’s heart went out to her junior officer. She rounded the desk, got down on her haunches and laid a comforting hand on Earhaht’s flank. “I’ll see what I can do, Lieutenant. That will be all.”

Earhaht perked up a little. “Aye, Captain,” she said as she rumbled through

the door.

Piper stood and watched her go, finding it ironic that she had a soft rock on board.

Scanner looked left, then right, making sure the coast was clear, then walked down the corridor away from his quarters pushing an anti-grav trolley before him, which was covered by a blanket concealing what it carried. Scanner tried to look nonchalant as he strolled, but like everyone who tried not to look guilty he had the aura of the Devil himself.

He took a turbolift down to the Engineering section and soon came to the panel he had located, not far from the Quartermaster's office. He pressed the invisible quick-release button that engineers alone could only find and lowered the panel to the floor. What he found behind it left him stunned.

"Well, dang me," he muttered as he stared at the motley collection of pipes, jugs, heating coils and beakers. He studied the set-up for a moment, unaware of the presence at his shoulder.

"Running moonshine again, Scanner?" Piper almost laughed as her Chief Engineer nearly jumped out of his skin.

"No, Captain!" he yelped in fright, opting for instant denial, the surest giveaway.

Piper leaned forward and gave the apparatus a quick appraisal. "Not bad, but the coils are too tight."

Scanner looked at his Captain in shock then burst out laughing. He sobered when her amused look took a more serious turn.

"I know it's not yours, Scanner." Piper waved a hand at the still. "It lacks the connoisseurs touch." She turned and gazed at the anti-grav trolley. "I'm sure you could do much better."

Scanner saw Piper's attention was riveted to his trolley and sweated. They had had this conversation before, and Piper had let it be known in no uncertain terms that she did not approve of this sort of behaviour from her crew.

Piper smiled at her old friend and laid a conspiratorial hand on his shoulder. "I'll let it go this time, Scanner." Judd relaxed and smiled back. He noticed the warning in her eyes. *Don't do it again.*

Piper shook her head in exasperation. "There's got to be a way to put a stop to this. I can't afford to have my crew going behind my back." Her eyes held his for a moment. "They might get used to it."

Judd felt ashamed. He hated letting his friend down. He nodded to her and waved a hand at both stills. "Ah'll get rid of this lot, Piper," he drawled. "It won't happen again."

Piper smiled. Judd's word was as good as his bond. "Good." She winked

at him and looked around to make sure they were alone. “Save me some,” she said with a final glance down the hall towards the Quartermaster’s office. “I’m going to need it after I bust this bigot.”

“Aye, ma’am,” Scanner said, feeling at once glad for himself and sorry for the officer who was about to be ejected from the ship in a shuttle craft. He knew just how much his friend detested wolves in sheep’s clothing.

The Imperial Warbird *S’harien* dropped out of warp, its cloak lowered, for all to see. There were no enemies to fear on their side of the Federation/Romulan Neutral Zone. The *S’harien* was of the newer class of Warbird; larger than the older Romulan Birds of Prey, one of which fought the original *Enterprise*. They were not to be confused with the Klingon variety with their long necks and bulbous heads.

The Rihannsu had returned to building their own vessels since the disastrous technology treaty with the Klingons had given away their best cloaking advancements whilst gaining the Rihannsu nothing but outdated Klingon D-6 Cruisers. The Klingons had quickly made use of the new cloaking technology, whilst the Rihannsu found the older Klingon vessels were often incompatible with it, leaving the Rihannsu with a distinct disadvantage.

The newer ship was much larger than her predecessors, with a higher warp tolerance and greater shield capacity. It also incorporated the latest in cloaking technology which even their own people had yet to learn to crack.

Unlike its predecessors, which were largely dinner plates with warp nacelles attached to them, the *S’harien*’s design was reminiscent of the Klingon Bird of Prey in that it actually *looked* like a bird. The emerald-green vessel had sweeping wings, a large “belly” that housed the ship’s engineering, crew compartments and cargo capacity, and a long neck ending with a large, drooping “head” that housed the control centre, weapons and science equipment. In the event of a disaster, the forward section could detach – a “lifeboat” that contained its own impulse engine.

The Commander mused that the likelihood of its actually being used as such was minimal. Failure in the Imperial Fleet was practically a fate worse than death.

Once more, she ran a hand over the controls built into her command chair and mused that the idea came from Starfleet. All the same, she relished being able to bring up information without having to ask for it. There were times when it was best *not* to keep your crew informed.

“Commander!” The Communications officer stepped up and snapped to attention beside her.

“Yes?” she asked, lounging to one side to look up at him.

“We are receiving a hail from the *Praetor’s Hand*.” He touched his earpiece, listening.

The Commander wondered just how stupid this young male thought she

was. The *Praetor's Hand* was occupying the whole of the *S'harien's* viewscreen. *Who else would it have been?* she thought. She gave a sneer of disdain as she ordered: "Put them on."

The Sub-Lieutenant turned back to his station on the Control Room's oval wall. The Commander sat towards the back, giving her an excellent view of all her people, with the screen at the tapered end. The screen shimmered then the image of the older warbird was replaced with its captain, Sub-Commander Nanclus.

The Commander was familiar with this male from the richer suburbs of the Capital. He came from one of the more privileged families. Word had it that he had designs on being a diplomat. In the Commander's opinion, it was an appropriate use for this weasel of a man.

"Sub-Commander, report."

Knowing his place and playing it to the letter, Nanclus began: "We have found no trace of the *Falcon's Claw*, Commander. No wreckage – nothing."

The Commander was tempted to shrug. It was hardly a surprise, and certainly no failure on Nanclus' part. Still, they had to look. "Not even an enemy warp trail?"

The Sub-Commander looked pained. "I apologise, Commander. By the time we were on station, it was already too late to trace any. We tried but found nothing."

The final admission was either a cover-up to failure to do so, or a statement of fact. Given Nanclus' temperament, she was given to believe the former. All the same, she was aware the likelihood of finding warp particles after two days was practically zero. Solar winds had a remarkably long-distance effect, and they were excellent at scattering atoms in space.

She considered the report. They simply confirmed what she suspected. The *Falcon's Claw* had been captured. She practically discounted the possibility that it had gone rogue, unless S'tallek had been the victim of a mutiny.

It was a notion that had not come to her until now. She paused as she considered then pushed it aside. If there was one thing she was certain of, it was that all Rihannsu knew what became of crews that mutinied. Their atoms, too, would be scattered by the solar winds after they were beamed into space, their molecules dispersed. The thought gave every person serving in the Imperial Fleet cause to think twice about mutiny as a course of action.

Still, there were exceptions. But they had only happened when a ship's captain had become mentally unbalanced. The crews had then returned to the fleet and had their captains removed.

That was not the case here. The *Falcon's Claw* was still missing.

No, she had been captured by an as yet unknown enemy. One the Commander had to find before they were plunged into a war neither side wanted.

She engaged Nanclus once more. "Report to the Empress' fleet and ready

your ship for possible conflict."

She could see that Nanclus was curious what her ship was going to do next, but he kept his mouth shut. It wasn't his place to know, or to even ask. "Jolan Tru," he stated, then cut the transmission.

With Nanclus now out of her mind, the Commander turned to her helm officer. "Make course for Federation space. Cloak us when we are one light year from the border. Maximum warp."

What she was about to do next was itself an act of war, but sometimes you had to risk a war to avoid one.

The waves lapped upon the pebble beach, creating a calming effect to anyone watching and listening. With the backdrop of forest and greenery, one might mistake this planet for Eden if not for the blackened ruins of a colony barely beyond its birthing pains.

What had once been a thriving community was now nothing but a mass of melted metal and glass, which all seemed to flow into one sickening heap of rubble. A lone building amongst the trees was sole testament to what was.

The silence was broken by the whine of a transporter as five figures in uniform appeared on the pebbles. They looked about them at the desolation, then proceeded to scan the landscape.

Piper soon put down her tricorder in disgust. There was no-one, and nothing left. The Romulan raid was most efficient. She put the tricorder back in her belt and signalled for the group to spread out and explore.

Piper did not need scientific analysis to know that the destruction had been caused by a photon bolt. She had seen such damage before when a Romulan ship had surprised the *Hood* whilst they had been patrolling the Neutral Zone. The captain had beaten them off, but the battle had ended in a draw.

Piper had been below decks when the first shot had hit. It had blown a gaping hole in the secondary hull near engineering and Piper had rushed to see if there were any survivors. When she was close, she came to a closed bulkhead and Piper had looked through the adjoining window to scan for any still living. The sight of blackened metal and plasteel bothered her, but the ruined arm sticking out of the wreckage made her retch. It was a picture she would never forget and often found its way into her nightmares.

The captain forced herself from her reverie to check on Merete. She seemed to be handling herself well, considering the circumstances and was proceeding in a highly professional manner. The Doctor looked over at her and shook her head at Piper's inquiring gaze. Nothing, was her silent report.

Amantallash remained at Piper's side on all fours, eyes taking in everything and ears flicking this way and that, listening intently for any sound other than the

wind in the trees. She had never lost a commanding officer before and she was not about to start today. She stopped for a moment, sat back on her haunches, and scanned the area with her tricorder. She scowled at the readings. Nothing. She raised her head and sniffed the air. She was sure she had smelled something, but as the scanner had revealed nothing, she dismissed the feeling as paranoia.

Merete's nurse and first aid medic, Lieutenant Patricia Stone, was looking through the windows of the only remaining standing structure. It was not much more than a shed, located about one hundred metres into the forest. Stone had only noticed it from the light reflected off the glass. The six-foot tall, solidly built woman who had prematurely grey hair – she was only thirty-five – was about to look away when a slight movement caught her attention. Curious, she made her way to the door and turned the knob, opening it wide. She had no time to react as the phaser bolt lashed out and stunned her senseless.

Piper saw the light and yelled "Down!" as she quickly hid behind a broken wall. She glanced over at Merete who was concealed in the hulk of an old ground-car. The Doctor had replaced her tricorder with a phaser pointed at the doorway.

Amantallash stayed by Piper's side, ears laid back, crouching, ready to spring at any enemy who came their way. Merete's other assistant was nowhere to be seen.

"Phasers on heavy stun!" Piper yelled. If it was a lone Romulan inside, it would take more than stun alone to bring him down. She turned her full attention to the structure. "I am Captain Piper of the Federation Starship *U.S.S. Millennium*. We come in peace. We're looking for survivors of the attack. Do you understand?"

For a moment, nothing happened. Then a small girl about five years old showed her head in the window. "Mummy told me not to talk to strangers," she said in a small voice.

Amantallash growled and Piper shushed her to silence. She looked over at Merete and gestured for her to talk. "She speaks the truth, little girl," she said, using her soothing healer's voice. "We aren't here to hurt you; we just want to find people like yourself who need help." Merete tentatively stood and pointed to her medikit. "See, I'm a doctor." She smiled and held her hands out in a gesture of good faith. "I won't hurt you." She stepped slowly toward the building and kept her hands outstretched. Piper hissed for caution, but Merete ignored her and continued.

The girl's head appeared in the doorway, with a phaser pointed directly at Merete. At this close range, the Doctor could see she was human, a red head with a sprinkling of freckles on her cheeks. She looked a lot like a doll she had when she was a child. "Please don't come closer. I've got to wait for Mummy to come home before I can let in strangers."

Piper had her hands full trying to stop Amantallash from rushing to protect

Merete. The Caitian was incredibly strong. "Hold your ground, Mister!" she ordered, quietly.

Merete paused before the girl and her face fell. She did not yet understand. It was obvious there was nowhere else for someone to hide, and their scans from orbit had found no signs of life, and so Merete assumed her mother was dead. She let a tear fall in sympathy for the child, who did not miss it.

"Why are you crying?" she asked.

Merete stepped forward again until she was two metres from the child. "I'm crying for your mother."

The face of innocence looked up at her. "Why?"

Merete gestured behind her. "Because she died in the attack."

"No!" the girl cried, raising the phaser. "You're lying. Mummy *can't* be dead. She said she was just going shopping." Tears were welling in the girl's eyes. "She *said* she'd be right back."

Merete crouched down and stretched out her arms to the child. "I won't hurt you...." she repeated. "What is your name?"

"Jenny Garrett," she said between sobs. Seeming to trust Merete a little, the girl stepped forward into the sun so the landing party could see the dishevelled, half-starved little girl. Her clothes were torn and dirty and her face was covered with grime with tear stains evident on her cheeks. She gazed up at Merete with a look that hoped that she would be able to bring her mother back if she only asked nicely enough.

"Jenny," she repeated, soothingly. "That's a nice name." She indicated herself. "I'm Merete Andrus Taurus."

The Doctor gestured to the phaser. "Will you put that down, now? You can see I won't hurt you. I just want to take care of you. Your Mummy would have wanted me to."

Jenny seemed to see the truth in what she said. With the tears flowing, she dropped the phaser in the dirt and ran to Merete's arms and cried hard and long.

Amantallash walked over and gently picked up the phaser and attached it to her utility belt then as gently placed her paw on the child's head. She realised Jenny was nothing more than a scared little child.

Piper got up and walked over to Nurse Stone, who was just regaining consciousness. Merete's assistant, Doctor Harper, joined her from his cover and together they helped Nurse Stone to her feet.

The older, crusty, Jonathan Harper tut-tutted Stone. "You really should stop jumping in front of phaser bolts. They're really not very good for you."

Stone glared at Harper and tried to stamp the pins and needles out of her feet. Then she whirled on Jenny and stepped towards her, blood in her eyes. Merete stood then, holding Jenny to her side.

"Nurse Stone, stop right there!" Merete hardly ever raised her voice, but

when she did, people took notice. This was one of those times. "Calm yourself! That is no way for a member of Starfleet to behave. This girl will not harm you."

Her words seemed to penetrate for Stone stopped and turned away, seemingly ashamed.

Piper narrowed her eyes as a thought came to her. "Why didn't the scanners pick her up?" she asked the air.

Jenny seemed to perk up and ran inside. A moment later she returned with something that looked like a large piece of silk. "Mommy told me that if there was ever any trouble to put this over me."

The girl handed Piper the material which she inspected. It seemed like ordinary cloth to her. She looked up, questioning, at her fellows.

"Altairian Spider Silk," offered Merete, examining the material. "Impervious to ordinary scanning devices." She rubbed it on her cheek. "A little touch of home."

Piper acknowledged this turning to Jenny. "What have you been doing since the attack?" she asked.

The girl shrugged then pointed towards the far end of the valley. "Our house is on the other side of the ridge. Mummy was going out because we were running out of food. I've eaten what's left, so I came down here to see if I could find some more, and to see if I could find Mummy." She kicked a loose piece of rubble. "I didn't find anything."

Piper understood. With no power or water, the girl would have had to rough it, alone. "Have you seen anybody else?"

Jenny shook her head no. Piper made up her mind. She had all she needed. "It's time to leave," she said, wanting to move on.

Jenny struggled in Merete's arms. "No! I want to stay, just in case Mummy comes home."

Merete got down on her knees to face Jenny. She put all the love and compassion she could into her eyes and voice as she put her hands on the girl's shoulders. "Mummy's not coming home, you know that," she said gently.

Jenny's eyes glazed over and threatened to cry when some inner strength stopped her. She looked into Merete's eyes and said weakly, "I know." She looked about her, then at Piper. "Can I come with you?"

Piper smiled and ruffled the girl's brassy hair. "Of course, you can."

For the first time, Jenny smiled, spreading out her freckles. Letting go of Merete, she ran into the shed and quickly returned with a small hologram of her mother she had kept with her. Merete looked down at the image and said, "Your Mummy was beautiful."

Jenny clutched the picture tightly to her chest. "I'm ready," she said, bravely.

Piper removed her communicator from her belt and flipped open the grid.

“Piper to *Millennium*, six to beam up.”

Chapter Seven

The *U.S.S. Excelsior* dropped from warp and kicked in her sub-light engines. She sped past stars that were completely unaware of their importance in galactic politics, for this was the Federation side of the Romulan Neutral Zone.

The importance of the *Excelsior*'s presence was not lost on her captain. Alexander Styles, a tall man with an aristocratic bearing shifted in his seat. The new starship was being used as a deterrent to further hostilities, and hopefully no more than that.

Whilst he had every confidence in his crew, the *Excelsior*, registry *NX-2000* had already proven herself to have weaknesses after what Captain Scott had done by means of sabotage.

Her much-vaunted transwarp drive was also proving to be more trouble than it was worth. Yes, the ship was fast, but the energy requirements to push the vessel to greater velocities were exceeding the starship's ability to provide, never mind the ship kept running out of gas. There simply wasn't enough hydrogen in space to power the ship over long distances.

It was becoming clear to the Admiralty that the format was a failure, although Styles had not yet given up on it. He had a lot, personally, at stake in this project, and he was deathly afraid of its failure and how it would appear on his record. A career Starfleet officer, his eyes were on the prize of a place in the Admiralty, and nothing short of the ship falling into a singularity would stop him.

What really rankled him was the fact that the *Ingram*, scratch that, the *Millennium* had been fully commissioned before his ship. The newer vessel was based on his, not the other way around. It was unfair. He felt like Katarina having to endure the prospect of Bianca being married off first because she was unlovely.

"We're on station, Captain," said his First Officer, a human over-achiever like himself called Malcolm Turnbull. He made up for his lack of stature with a determination to push everyone else harder than he would push himself.

Styles nodded. "Understood," he said. He rubbed his moustache in thought then stood, slapping his swagger stick against his thigh. His ship was fully stocked with torpedoes and the phaser banks were charged. Their offensive capabilities didn't worry him. It was just that their shields were untested in battle. The ship had never been in a firefight, and an untried weapon was an uncertain one.

He had to concede that the *Millennium* was literally in the same predicament, but that ship had trinary shields. The *Excelsior* only had the standard compliment of one main, however powerful, shield.

Styles' attention was drawn to his Communication's Officer as she listened intently to her earpiece. She looked up and caught his gaze. "Captain, I've intercepted an encrypted message from a Romulan ship on the other side of the Zone. I've managed to decrypt enough of it to tell they're worried, and they've

also called for reinforcements.”

The captain grimaced. This was the inevitable result of Starfleet’s rushed order to send the *Excelsior* into this situation. Not good. “They will get their reinforcements,” he muttered under his breath.

His XO, standing at his side, overheard him. “So will we, sir,” the younger man said eagerly.

Styles looked down on the impetuous youth and wondered *what* he could be so enthusiastic about. He wanted to get an Admiral’s star *without* fighting battles. Fighting was a great way to put an end to a career by getting prematurely dead. “Let’s hope we can put an end to this without anyone getting shot at,” he said imperiously. Internally, he was afraid it would come to just that.

Captain’s Log, U.S.S. Millennium, stardate 8555.7.

After close examination of the surface and surrounding system we can find no evidence that what was recorded by the Breakwater satellite wasn’t anything other than what it showed, a Romulan Warbird attacking the surface. We are now enroute to the Romulan Neutral Zone as a show of force to dissuade any further attacks.

Captain’s Personal Log,

Two hours out from Breakwater and I still don’t like it. No Romulan commander would be stupid enough to go to that much trouble and blow it by not detecting that satellite. I certainly wouldn’t, and if there’s anyone in the universe that you should never underestimate, it’s a Romulan. They don’t say “beware Romulans bearing gifts” for nothing.

Something gnawed at Piper’s gut, she knew all wasn’t as it seemed, but her new orders were clear cut. Proceed to the Neutral Zone and keep an eye on the Romulans.

“Damn.” Piper thumped her desk in frustration. Sarda raised a curious eyebrow but remained silent.

Merete jumped at the sound and looked up at her friend.

Scanner looked over his glass at his captain. “Time to leave, I think.” He looked to Sarda and the doctor. “Y’all better not be around her when she’s got a head of steam.” He motioned to leave, but Piper waved him down.

“I’m not angry at you, Judd. I’m just sick of being thrown in the deep end and being expected to work it all out.”

Sarda glanced at Piper. “You suspect there is more to this attack than we know.”

Piper glared at her desktop. “You can bet on it.”

Sarda looked visibly confused. "Why would I wager on conjecture?"
Scanner grinned. "Same old Sarda."

Merete filled in the gap. "So, you're sure of it."

Piper flopped back. "No, I'm not. But I am sure something isn't right."

"We just have to wait for the other shoe to drop." Merete AndrusTaurus frowned when she noticed the worry lines around Piper's eyes. "When was the last time you got some sleep, Captain?"

Piper scowled at her Medical Chief, knowing she had been caught.

"I see." Merete got up. "Then I recommend that you get some shut-eye before we get to the Neutral Zone." Piper's scowl deepened and Merete levelled a finger at her superior. "Don't force me to make that an order."

Piper had to grin. "Don't worry, Doctor, I'll get some rest, just as soon as I check on the Bridge."

Merete shook her head in disgust. "Starship captains are all alike!"

This time Piper smiled warmly. "I choose to take that as a compliment."

Sarda turned his attention to the doctor. "Surely, you must realise with your experience under Piper's command that she does not often listen to what others consider logic."

Piper smirked at her First Officer. "Then I must remember to review the meaning of logic."

Any further comment was halted by the red alert klaxon. "Red alert, Captain Piper to the bridge. Red alert." Crash's voice was as agitated as it could sound.

The four officers leapt from their chairs and vaulted into the bridge, swiftly taking their places.

"Status?" Piper ordered.

Lieutenant Nunn reported. "Starbase four-eight is under attack. They sent out a distress call for any starships in the area to assist." He met Piper's eyes. "We're the only ship in the quadrant."

Piper nodded. "E.T.A. at warp nine?"

Valastro shook his head. "Ten point two minutes."

"Our present velocity?"

"Warp eight," supplied Nunn.

"Increase to warp nine point one."

Scanner leapt to the ship's defence; his southern drawl thickened with apprehension. "The engines haven't gone that fast before! There's no knowin' how she'll handle."

Piper spared Scanner a glance. "You're our Chief Engineer, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Then they'll hold up." Piper turned back to the helmsman. "Engage."

Commander Sandage grinned at the compliment then turned a worried gaze

back at his control board.

Like a watched pot, time seems to go slower when rushing to the aid of an ally under attack. Piper decided she needed more information. "Any further word from the Starbase?"

Crash spoke up from his station. "They report their shields are down. Their attacker is a Romulan Bird of Prey, presently cloaked."

"Damn."

The Commander was worried. The floor plating under her feet was vibrating badly. The *S'harien* was having a hard time keeping pace with the *Millennium* as she appeared to be attempting to break the known Warp Speed records. Her engineer had already reported that their warp core was being pushed too hard.

Yet time was of the essence. The *Falcon's Claw*, if it was the *Falcon's Claw*, was attacking a Federation outpost without provocation. She needed to know three things. First, that it was indeed, the *Falcon's Claw*. If it was, then secondly, she had to know who was giving the orders. Thirdly, how to get it to back off *without* it being destroyed. She wanted to bring it home, if possible.

The first was easy. The second, not so. The third was practically impossible as she knew the *Falcon's Claw* was no match for the *Millennium*. If the Bird of Prey found itself in the Federation Starship's sights, it would be returned to the Elements.

All the same, her first priority was to find out *who* was behind the attacks, and why. No matter who was involved, there had to be some kind of profit. At present, she had no idea what it could be.

The *S'harien* had arrived at Breakwater shortly after the Federation starship. She had decided to follow the *Millennium* from Breakwater once they finished their analysis. There was little point in beaming down to the planet. Just from monitoring the open communications from the Federation ship, she had learned that the damage was done by a Rihannsu Photon Bolt. It was proof plenty of their ship's collusion.

She would never admit it, but there were times when a ship's captain had to go with their intuition. Hers told her that the *Millennium* had been tasked with hunting down the intruder. If she had to go with simple logic, she would argue that the immense ship was overkill to investigate this little backwater planet.

And now, with her new ship's design stretched to the limit, she was getting more than she bargained for. She was learning just how fast this new Federation ship could go, and she was getting an insight into how its captain thought.

“E.T.A. five minutes,” indicated Valastro, letting his nerves show.

Piper ignored the vibration beneath her feet. “Mister Krashtallah, warn the attacker off and inform Commodore Quigley that we’re coming. Mister Sarda, do you have a scan on the enemy vessel?”

Sarda shook his head. “Nothing as yet. It appears to still be cloaked.”

Piper exchanged a glance with her first officer. “Romulans all right,” she muttered.

“So, it would seem. However, I must point out that the Klingons have cloaking technology as well.” Sarda liked to cover all the bases.

The captain shook her head. “Last I heard, the Romulans were flying some of the Klingon’s old ships, not the other way around.”

Sarda tilted his head to the side in a gesture that Piper read as: “Anything is possible.”

Piper started at Merete’s voice at her left. “I’ll go prepare sickbay,” she whispered.

Piper gave her a quick grin for luck.

“Captain?” Crash’s voice sounded unsettled. Piper turned her attention to him and forced a calm expression. Her tactic worked and Crash’s neck hair smoothed out. “Captain, Commodore Quigley reports that he was “caught with his pants down”.” Crash looked puzzled but continued. “He didn’t have time to raise shields before the first torpedo from the Romulan ship hit. Casualties are high. Life support is down, and their power is crippled.”

Piper scowled. “So, they can’t fight back.” It was a statement, not a question.

Sarda looked up from his instruments. “The starbase’s shields are down, power is at a minimum.” His eyes shot over to Piper. “They don’t have enough power for one torpedo.”

“Mister Valastro, E.T.A.?”

“Two point one minutes.”

“Are we within range for a visual?”

The Vulcan turned back to his panel. “Coming into visual range... now.”

All eyes turned to the screen. Starbase forty-eight was an older model but was still home to approximately one thousand people. The trading post had been badly damaged. Where one of the base’s projecting bulbs had been there was only ripped cast rhodium and arcing energy. Most of the lights and landing beacons were black and there seemed to be very little life left in the structure.

“Crash,” fired Piper. “Any response to our warning?”

“None, Captain.”

“E.T.A. thirty seconds,” said Mister Valastro.

Piper looked over at Nunn. “Go to impulse power, .47c.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Battlestations.”

The *Millennium* dropped out of warp in a corona of light a mere million kilometres from the Starbase, shields raised and ready for combat. They didn’t have long to wait.

“Bird of Prey has decloaked at two zero mark zero,” barked Sarda. “They are preparing to fire on the Starbase.”

On the viewscreen, the familiar disc shaped Romulan Bird of Prey shimmered into view against the starfield, seemingly at point blank range.

Piper stood. “Fire phasers!” she cried. “All banks!”

Amantallah’s paw dropped onto her console, activating the *Millennium*’s powerful weaponry. Five beams of plasma shot out of the starship’s weapons pods and rocketed toward the attacking Romulan ship. A lucky shot struck the torpedo it had fired and detonated it short of its target in a massive flare of light. One other struck a glancing blow to the enemy ship.

“Good shooting!” Piper praised.

Sarda turned to his commander. “Romulan ship is raising its cloak and retreating.”

“Photon torpedoes, dispersal pattern sierra. Fire!”

A brilliant blue globe was launched from the great ship’s dorsal toward their aggressor. Just short of where the Romulan ship had last been it divided into ten and headed in different directions, then detonated. For a fraction of a second, the annihilating antimatter lit up space like a small sun, then was gone.

Piper turned her eyes to Sarda and waited for his report. A moment later he straightened and gazed at his superior. “There is some wreckage, but not enough for a whole ship. I would suggest a glancing blow.” He glanced at his scanners then met Piper’s gaze. “It seems we damaged their warp drive, though not severely.”

“At least they’re not going anywhere in a hurry, Mister Sarda.” Piper turned triumphantly back to the viewscreen. “Mister Nunn, bring us to within one hundred kilometres of Starbase four-eight, with our weapons to bear on the Romulan’s last position.”

One hundred and eighty degrees about, and one hundred kilometres out, the Bird of Prey shimmered into view once more, lining up for another shot.

Seated once more, Piper fired off further orders. “Bring us about and place us within the firing line between the Romulan ship and the Starbase.”

It was a gamble. Few starships had survived a point-blank attack from a Photon Bolt, but those ships weren’t equipped with the *Millennium*’s triple shielding.

The captain spoke again. “All weapons. Fire at will.”

They were out of position, and the captain knew it. To top it off, the Starbase partially blocked their view of the perpetrator.

Then something amazing happened. A photon torpedo streaked out from

the Starbase and damaged the Romulan's ship's shields. Then another, and then a third. Energy arced over the overtaxed ship's shields as her crew fought to keep them up.

Beaten, her commander decided on discretion. The vessel pushed its impulse engines to the limit and dropped down and under the Starbase, then under the *Millennium*, before it disappeared into warp.

Lieutenant Amantallah fired off a few chance bursts from the ship's phasers, but her shots went wide.

The captain whirled on Sarda. "Track them!" she ordered.

The Vulcan simply raised an almost annoyed brow. "They have cloaked their vessel, Captain. Their final trajectory is unknown."

Piper slapped her chair arm in frustration. "Damn." She sighed. It was time to consider the glass was half full, not half empty. "Helm, bring us into a close defensive orbit of the station. We're her only protection right now."

"Aye." The helmsmen, Jason Nunn, fed the information into the computer and watched as the *Millennium* placed herself between the Starbase and the Romulan's last known position.

Piper raised her voice to the ceiling. "Transporter room, prepare to transport survivors aboard."

Pandemonium reigned aboard the *Falcon's Claw* as Klingon officers were running every which way trying to repair the damage and help the wounded – or help themselves reach Sto'Vo'Kor. Blood flowed freely. Consoles spat sparks and smoke was being cleared by fans. The smell of death was in the air, and a number of Klingons were already screaming for the dead.

The ship's new commander, K'miktos raised his bloodied face to the viewscreen and cursed at the Federation starship that had raced to protect the Starbase. "Damage report," he ordered. He looked down at the prone form bent over the ship's computer console. "I said, damage report!" When he got no response, he shoved the body on the floor and operated the machinery himself.

Warp drive was limited to a speed of only Warp Two, for good he noted when the scanner showed him the tip of the starboard nacelle had been sheared off. Once again, he cursed. With their warp drive damaged he was going to fall behind schedule. His father, Duras, would not be pleased. To hell with him, he thought, grimly. He could kill him if he wanted to, that is, if he survived anyway. He tried to look on the bright side. If the warp drive failed altogether, he could still continue on impulse power.

He tapped a control, translating the Romulan language on the fly now he had become proficient at it. Universal translators were only useful for spoken languages. He noted their plasma torpedo and phasers were still operational. Good,

he would need them to avenge the deaths of his comrades.

K'miktos looked over to the shield console where his nephew, Magh, was being aided by the medical officer. He smiled at him in pride. He had saved the ship by raising the cloaking shields as soon as he had seen the Federation vessel. A good warrior, he thought, even though he did seem to have some weaknesses. He wasn't certain it was a warrior acting on instinct, or a coward trying to run from the heat of battle. The thought made him curl his lip in distaste as he turned back to the viewscreen as he considered his next move.

Even though they had been driven off by the Starbase when it had surprised them with a volley of photon torpedoes, his first instinct was to continue the fight. The thought of having been beaten raised the acidity of his stomach and made him nauseous.

“Prepare to come about!” he ordered.

All eyes were suddenly focused on him. As if from nowhere his second, Trask, appeared and challenged the order.

“No! We have succeeded in our mission here,” he stated categorically. “The Starbase is as good as destroyed. We have given the Federation a bloody nose and they will take it out on the honourless Romulans.”

“We must avenge the deaths of our brothers!” K'miktos yelled, slapping his sides.

“We must complete our mission!” his second yelled back. Lowering his voice, he continued. “If we attack again, we will be destroyed. We will have *failed*.”

The Commander sneered. “Coward!” He reached out and took his first officer by the shoulders. Pushing him forward he propelled him into a nearby bulkhead. He leaned in close and let his fetid breath slip out between his uneven teeth. “We will be victorious! This ship has defeated many Federation vessels and will do so again.” He turned and looked over his shoulder at his helmsman. “Impulse power, ahead .05c.”

“Belay that order!” The *Falcon's Claw*'s latest commander turned back to his second and stared down the barrel of a disruptor he had somehow slipped out of his holster unnoticed. “If you choose to commit suicide that is your choice, but do it alone with your knife, not with *this ship*.” He gestured to the viewscreen which showed a still image of the Federation vessel that had fired on them. “Look at that vessel,” he hissed. When the Commander did not move his voice became even more dangerous. He hissed: “*Look at it.*”

K'miktos turned slowly and gazed long and hard at the screen. He memorised every detail of the vessel before him. Her shape, design, call letters and name. *Millennium*. He didn't know who commanded it, but whoever it was, he and his ship would pay.

“That ship could take us easily,” his second continued without a beat. “We have done what we were sent here to do, now we must continue with our mission,

or do I have to relieve you of command?"

K'miktos had no doubts about how he would be relieved. He probably wouldn't know about it until his dead grandfather would greet him with a mug of Bloodwine.

"So be it," he grumbled. He locked his gaze with Trask. They both knew where they stood. Neither could afford to take their eyes off the other until their mission was over, and they went their separate ways.

The Commander stepped away from his second and took his seat in the command chair again, cementing his authority among his surviving bridge crew. Brusquely, he ordered: "Plot a course to the Romulan Neutral Zone. Change our evasive action strategy to Duras Four." He slapped his shoulders, a feral gleam in his eye. "K'plah!"

Unseen by the crew of the *Millennium*, the *S'harien* had recloaked and set off in pursuit of the *Falcon's Claw*. In the brief time the ship had been visible, the confirmation had been made. There was no doubt. It was their missing Bird of Prey.

Unwilling to let the Starbase be destroyed and further complicate matters, the Commander had placed her vessel in the Starbase's shadow and decloaked. Out of sight of the *Millennium*, she had fired on the approaching *Falcon's Claw*, hoping the torpedoes would be attributed to the station fighting back.

Once she was sure the ship had been disabled, she had allowed it to escape. Now, she was in pursuit.

"Science," she ordered. "Are we still tracking them?"

The female at Science frowned. "Commander, there is little to track. The stray plasma coming from their damaged nacelle is becoming increasingly difficult to find. I would suggest they are repairing it as we speak."

The Commander was herself annoyed. Not at the Science technician. She was candid, and the Commander appreciated that. On a Warbird, good communication was vital. No, she was annoyed at the choice she faced. Either decloak now and face possible discovery behind Federation lines, and worsen their position further, or remain cloaked and wait for a better opportunity.

The question became moot. Since their pursuit, the Bird of Prey had been careful to follow evasive manoeuvres, to make *sure* they weren't followed. Now, the Science technician reported again with finality. "The trace is gone, Commander. I'm afraid we've lost them."

The Commander simply caught the fearful, young officer's eyes and nodded her acceptance of the facts. The woman visibly relaxed, and the Commander wondered what kind of people were training their officers these days. A Rihannsu Warbird's command crew had to work as a team, otherwise all was lost.

That could not be encouraged with the constant fear of reprisals from a superior. The humans had a term for that. It was: "don't shoot the messenger".

The Commander stood. "Maintain the cloak," she said. "Pilot, bring us on a course for the Neutral Zone. I believe that was their next stop." She stepped over to the Science technician's console and sat down next to her. She had an idea. "Show me their flight path," she said, touching the screen.

Not understanding, but still compliant, the young officer began coding in the instructions.

Piper marched into sick bay as the last of the survivors were being beamed aboard. Most had only superficial wounds but there were an unlucky few on the critical list who were being operated on by Merete and her assistants. Nurses tended to the many who waited in the hall as the area was crowded. Very few people had come through unscathed.

Piper used her height to see over the milling throng and saw that Commodore Quigley was one of the last to come aboard. She made her way towards him, but the going was tough until the Starbase survivors saw the captain's bars on Piper's shoulder, then they respectfully stepped aside.

She stopped a foot from Quigley and looked him up and down. "You've looked better," she said cheekily.

The grey haired and cherubic Quigley looked up, scowling. "I might have known you'd be late."

"Better late than never."

Quigley's scowl changed slowly to a smile. "It's good to see you," with the warmth of a family reunion.

Piper grinned. The feelings were reciprocated. "And you."

Quigley tried to raise his portly body from his seat but was gently pushed back down by a hovering nurse. He looked up to see the cold eyes of Nurse Stone and knew where he stood. "I must be getting old," he muttered.

Stone frowned. "Why is that, Commodore?"

"For a moment there you reminded me of my dearly departed wife, Stella."

Piper understood the reference and concealed a smile. After the word had gotten around at Starfleet about Kirk's second run in with Harry Mudd and his androids and how the erstwhile Captain had left Mudd on his world under the direction of five hundred nagging Stella Mudds suddenly everyone once had a wife named Stella, as the situation reminded everyone of a Stella Mudd they had once known.

Stone obviously did not get the joke and shook her head as she scanned the old Commodore for injuries. She tut-tutted at his obvious abrasions then straightened and snapped the tricorder shut. "No broken bones, no internal injuries,

just a few minor cuts and bruises," she reported.

"I could have told you that, missy." Quigley looked up at Piper. "Is there somewhere a little less public we can have a talk?"

The captain offered an arm, helped Quigley up, then escorted him from the room. Once in the corridor and away from the injured the Commodore became all business.

"The Romulans are getting bolder, Piper. It seems they really want a war." He shook his head in sorrow for a moment. "Nine hundred people under my command are gone all because we didn't get the shields up in time." He paused for a moment as they waited for a turbolift. Once they were inside and on the move, he turned to Piper looking angrier than she ever remembered seeing him. It seemed incongruous as she had seen this man play Santa Claus at Christmas parties on his station.

"The Romulans have to pay for this. *I will not* let all those people die in vain." He paced the tiny space, stopped, then pounded on the wall. "I won't."

"Commodore," Piper remained formal in an attempt to bring her superior's mood under control. "Is there anything I should know before I dispatch my report to Starfleet Command?"

The old man's grey eyes flashed. "You haven't warned them yet?" He was all fire for a man who has already slipped past the mandatory retirement age of eighty-five.

Piper met his gaze and held it. "I'm not convinced that the Romulan Empire was behind the attack on your base, or Breakwater."

"What's this about Breakwater?" he asked, confused. "Was there another attack?" The man was incredulous. "What evidence do you have?"

Just then the turbolift stopped and the doors opened onto the Bridge. They stepped out and walked around the command centre to the door to Piper's Ready Room. Before they entered Piper motioned to Sarda to join them. Once inside they took their seats and Piper continued coolly. She and Sarda in turn laid out their thoughts, but try as they might, the Commodore would not accept their theory.

"So, the Romulans made a few mistakes?" he whined, shrugging it off. "Even they've been known to have a bad day."

Sarda closed his eyes for a moment in concentration. When he opened them, he stared directly at Quigley. He began ticking off his reasons on his fingers as he made his points clear. "As you well know, Commodore, Romulans are an off-shoot of the Vulcan people. Even in our most savage times Vulcans would never work this way.

"The Romulans have no new weaponry that intelligence is aware of, so that rules out the possibility of them simply testing their strength against Federation forces, as they have done before."

The Commodore nodded. It was common knowledge that the Romulans

preferred to test their strength before going to war.

Piper picked up from there. "Commodore, your Starbase was only hit by standard plasma torpedoes. Their ship was an older model Bird of Prey with a standard cloaking device. Nothing new there." She looked to Sarda and felt the wave of telepathic support that he had given her many times before.

Quigley took advantage of the momentary silence. "So, they're trying to wear down our defences before their big push." Quigley looked at Piper and Sarda with a condescending eye. "It's an old tactic."

Sarda jumped in there. "An old tactic, Commodore, but not an honourable one. If anything, my Vulcan ancestors lived by a strict code of honour. If the Romulans are a true representation of my Vulcan heritage, then they must still be a people of honour."

Quigley looked at Sarda incredulously. "Son, have you ever met a Romulan ambassador? They're slicker than oil on ice. I wouldn't trust any of them as far as I could kick them."

The captain grimaced. It was hardly a conversation crusher. "Commodore, it's a universal constant that politicians and ambassadors are cut from the same cloth – which came direct from the Devil's seamstress."

Aggravated, Commodore Quigley stood and paced, hands clenched tightly behind his back. "If, if, if. This whole approach is loaded with possibilities and probablies. Our evidence clearly shows a Romulan warship attacking a Federation colony. You have my sworn evidence that Starbase Four-Eight was attacked by a Romulan *Bird of Prey*. The Romulans are massing their fleet on the other side of the Neutral Zone while these attacks go on, wearing us down." He stopped and looked accusingly at Piper. "While we sit around spinning yarns about what might be happening Starfleet is about to go to war."

Piper rose slowly and locked her green eyes with Quigley's grey. "Commodore, you have not asked why."

For a moment Quigley looked taken aback, but he pressed on anyway. "Why?" he asked, rolling his eyes. "The Romulans like war. To them it's as essential as breathing. What more do you need?"

Sarda gazed up at the Commodore. "Why fight a war you cannot win? Even if the Romulans like war, as you suppose, they would not be foolhardy enough to take on Starfleet. They are outmatched two to one. There is no glory in total defeat."

Piper sat once again and waved Quigley back to his seat, which he took reluctantly. She leaned back in her chair and forced herself to relax, then turned her attention back to her superior. "Who would benefit from a war between the Federation and the Romulan Empire?" Piper let the question hang in the air for a moment. She pressed her line of thought. "Certainly not the Federation because when it all comes down to it, we just don't like war, it's not our way. Not the

Romulans, they would lose their whole Empire in such a war. The Klingons are not interested in the Romulans, they stopped trading with them years ago, besides, they have enough on their plate as it is. The best that they could hope for out of such a conflict would be to grab some of the Romulan's lost territory.

"No, I think there's a fourth party out there who would benefit greatly from a war between us, and they are trying to push us into one."

Quigley frowned in thought. "Who could it be?"

Piper leaned forward over her desk. "When we know that, we'll have the final piece in the puzzle." She stood and walked over to the food dispenser and ordered a fruit juice for each. Once she had handed them out, she sat on the edge of her desk, sipped and put her drink down, lost in thought.

"We should be getting orders any time now to join the fleet at the Neutral Zone," she said, concern showing in her tone. "When we get there, I have a feeling we'll be the straw that will break the camel's back." She sighed. "For the moment, we're not going anywhere until the base is capable of being defended." She smiled as she remembered the short battle. "It was a good thing you managed to fire those torpedoes at the last minute, Commodore. You managed to scare him off."

Confused, the older man looked up at Piper in wonder. "I'm sorry?"

Piper's brow wrinkled in surprise. "You know, the three torpedoes you fired at the end of the fight. You scared the Bird of Prey off."

Quigley engaged Piper directly, certainty in every syllable. "Honey, I don't know *what* you're talking about. Their first shot destroyed our weapons controls. There was no way in hell we fired any torpedoes."

Sarda was not one for letting his feelings show, but this was an exception. He was annoyed only in part at the information the library computer was displaying. He was more annoyed that, in the heat of battle, he could have missed this. Perhaps his time working at Starfleet's Labs in Old Silicon Valley had taken the edge off his once-keen observational skills. He chided himself that he would have to do better. He was First Officer of the Federation Flagship and such a high station demanded more than this sloppy work.

"Captain," he stated calmly to draw Piper's attention.

She knew her friend well enough to know he was annoyed at himself. She knew he was being too hard on himself, and he needed time to get used to his new station. Their orientation cruise had been skipped and they had been literally thrown in the deep end with their new starship. "On screen," she said simply.

A wireframe schematic of the partially shattered starbase appeared on the main viewscreen. Sarda dispassionately narrated as the information scrolled on the screen as they watched the computer's automatic scans appeared in real time. "At this moment, the *Millennium* was positioned on the wrong side of the Starbase to

be able to effectively defend it from the attacker.”

Piper remembered her tactics at that point and considered that it may have been better to keep her ship circling the Starbase, in motion and ready to respond. She quickly realised the flaw in that line of thinking was that the enemy could simply have done the same and come in to attack the base from the ship’s aft. Either way, one ship would have had a hard time defending the base.

She also realised that Sarda was in no way reproving her for her choice of action. It would have worked out that way whatever she had chosen to do.

She turned back to her Science Officer and heard him as he announced the appearance of an uninvited guest. Like the Starbase, it appeared in wireframe form as the *Millennium* had only a basic scan of the vessel in the short time, they had engaged the enemy.

Whilst the silhouette was new to Piper and her crew, the design style was obvious. “Romulan,” Piper muttered.

Standing off to the side, the Commodore scowled. “This is getting weirder and weirder.” He leaned on the railing that encircled the centre of the Bridge. “What is a Romulan ship doing defending a *Starfleet* Starbase from one of their own?”

Piper got to her feet and walked up to the screen. The scan was still moving in real time, and in the seconds they had spoken the ship had quickly fired three photon torpedoes and recloaked. She nodded to herself. “No surprise the scanners didn’t pick up more than just this thing’s silhouette,” she said quietly.

The captain was surprised by a dark chuckle from behind her. She turned slowly and looked over at the Commodore who was grinning to himself as if he had some strange secret. “Would you care to share with us?”

Quigley stepped down and joined Piper in front of the viewscreen. He gazed at the now restored and frozen wireframe of the mystery vessel. “There is a way we can be sure,” he said, a peculiar smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

The captain’s silence was all the answer she was going to give him. Her impatience was fairly palpable.

Reaching out a hand, the Commodore traced the shape with a finger. “Did you know that my little trading post has all kinds of people living on it? Not everyone on Starbase Forty-Eight is *Starfleet* you know.”

About ten minutes later, the Captain and Commodore Quigley stood in the bowels of the base. It was peculiar standing there with magnetic boots on their feet and everything else floating around them. The air was becoming a little stale as Scanner and his people had yet to bring the base’s systems back online. The space was dimly lit with the lights still flickering from the lack of voltage.

The Commodore gave his guest a slim smile. “It’s the cleaning lady’s year

off."

Piper sniffed the air. Stale atmosphere wasn't the only thing she could smell. A nauseating thought came to her that all *kinds* of things could be floating around them at the moment. She considered whether it would be a good idea to go back to the *Millennium* to get kitted out in environment suits.

Ignoring Piper's obvious discomfort, Quigley stepped forward and began pushing things out of the way as he moved with purpose, his destination clear in his mind.

Mildly amused, Piper watched the boxes, tools and other flotsam ricochet off the walls and fittings, then took off in pursuit of her host. He seemed sure of himself, so she put all other considerations out of her mind and focussed on the task at hand.

"Kodak! Where are you?" Quigley called out as he looked into the rooms adjoining the hall they stood in. Most of the doors were closed and locked, and the Commodore for some reason was ignoring them. Curious, Piper stepped over to one of them and found out why. The atmosphere readings on the space beyond read zero. For some reason, they were open to vacuum.

Piper caught up with the Commodore and pushed aside a half-eaten burger so she could look him in the face. "What kind of name is Kodak?" she asked curiously.

Pausing, Quigley gave her one of his peculiar smiles. "You'll see." He turned and kept moving down the hall. "Kodak!"

Finally, there was a response. A slightly slurred voice replied in a decidedly annoyed tone: "What the hell do *you* want?"

Following the sound, the Starfleet officers quickly found an odd-looking humanoid clinging to a bar in one of the side rooms. It was clear to Piper that this was his dwelling, with the room oddly decorated with pictures from all over the galaxy. On the far wall was a large window that looked out on the vista of space.

Once her attention went beyond the floating detritus within the room, Piper focussed on its occupant and found herself drawn to his face. It was clear he had subjected himself to some technological modifications, with one eye replaced with an ultra-high-resolution camera. She wondered if he was the victim of an accident.

The being's natural eye scowled at them both. "I didn't give you permission to enter," he growled. He sounded threatening, but Piper surmised he was no threat, just annoyed that his privacy had been violated.

Quigley chuckled. "You're not exactly in a position to argue the point, Kodak," he said with only a hint of mirth. He indicated the bar that the cyborg was holding.

"Kodak" shrugged and pushed himself off the bar and floated over to grasp a table that was anchored to the floor. "I can manage," he said. Comically, he seated himself at the table on a chair that was also welded to the floor. He tucked

his knees under the table to stop himself from moving. Oddly, he indicated the other empty chairs, as if entertaining guests in zero gravity was an everyday occurrence.

Piper gave Quigley a sideways look which the Commodore simply shrugged at. Both took a seat and held themselves on them in like fashion.

Kodak tapped the table. "Like I said," he growled once more. "What do you want?"

With a glance at the portal, Quigley made some introductions. "Captain Piper, this is Samuel Rosen of Brooklyn, Earth. We call him Kodak because he modified himself to be able to take images at will."

The captain was startled. She had heard of people modifying themselves for a number of reasons, mostly cosmetic or to replace a lost limb. To replace a perfectly good eye with a prosthetic seemed bizarre.

Kodak was perceptive. "You don't approve," he said, not unkindly. He rubbed a hand over the shiny componentry that was now a permanent part of his face. "I'm a photographer," he said by way of explanation. "I love nature and the marvels of creation and, you might laugh, I've got a good eye." He indicated the prints on his walls. "I took these, and I've got thousands more stored on data chips spread throughout my body."

Annoyed at Piper's lack of acceptance, his one natural eye narrowed as he looked over his guest. "Not that you can judge, lady." His mechanical eye zoomed in on her face. "With this, I can tell your hair ain't naturally blonde but brunette. And your eyes aren't green from birth, either." As Piper's eyes widened in mild surprise, his tone became wistful as he turned his attention to the stars outside. The heat went out of him as he reminisced. "With my camera, I have the ability to acquire an image at the speed of thought." He gave a small, sad grin. His voice reflected it. "You'd be surprised how many amazing images are missed because the photographer is still fumbling with his camera." He sighed. "My plan was to sell my services as a roaming freelance photographer. I got stuck here when I ran out of money."

Now Piper knew why the Commodore had told her to bring some credits. "Did you happen to see something unusual during the fire fight?" she asked.

Kodak's eye grew crafty. "You mean: did I see a Romulan ship decloak outside my window and fire at the other ship?" He gave a light-hearted laugh. "Actually, I did." Without reservation, he tapped a concealed button on his cheek. "You can download it, if you like."

Piper realised he had just made himself visible on the local wireless network and took out a data padd. She quickly discovered he had named himself "Kodak" on the net and accessed the files stored there. Curiously, there were only five available. "I thought you said you had thousands of images filed away?" she asked in quiet challenge.

The photographer gave her a sly smile. “You will only get the photos *I* give you access to,” he said with pride.

The captain concluded he must also have conscious control over the data chips stored within him. It was a remarkable ability and she wondered what horrendous cost he’d had to pay to acquire it.

It took only seconds for the images to become available to her and she brought them up on her display. The elegant lines of the new warship were unmistakably Romulan, as was the Empire’s insignia on the wing. The dark, emerald green was a new touch as most of the Romulan ships she had encountered were grey with distinctive paintings of carnivorous birds adorning their bellies.

Quigley looked past her shoulder at the vessel. “Why paint it to look like a bird when you designed it to mirror one?” he said, quietly mocking.

Unlike the Commodore, Piper marvelled at the wonderful artistry and engineering prowess that went into the ship’s creation. It was not only graceful, but beautiful. After having examined all five images, which were largely similar with two of them featuring the vessel firing torpedoes, Piper was certain of the identity of their “guest”. However, the knowledge simply brought more questions than answers.

“These were beautifully taken,” the captain said graciously. She gave the photographer an admiring smile and held out her hand.

When Kodak put out his, Piper pressed a small fortune in Federation credits into his palm. Money was never a problem for her as her family was very well off.

As Kodak looked at the money in his hand a small tear formed in the corner of his eye. In the zero-gee environment it stayed put, and he had to wipe it away with the back of his hand. With a very tight voice he said: “Thanks.” Unable to say any more, he simply nodded his gratitude.

“You’re welcome,” the captain said. “If you ever take some pictures of Proxima Beta, send me some. Care of the *U.S.S. Millennium*. ”

As Kodak sat there numbly trying to make sense of the minor miracle he had just witnessed, he watched as the captain whipped out her communicator and called her ship. A few seconds later she, and the Commodore, vanished as they were beamed away.

Crash leapt and dug his claws into a branch of the oak tree standing in the recreation deck. He pulled himself up and brought his hind feet between his hands and balanced there for a moment before jumping up to the next branch. Concentration was needed as the branch was narrow, but with the grace and skill born of his people he walked to the trunk and wrapped his arms and legs around it and pulled himself up. He stood and walked out to the end of the limb that was his destination and rested there for a moment. His daily callisthenics were usually

something to be watched by the rest of the crew on the deck, but it was late, and the area was deserted, allowing him to exercise without interruption.

Balanced on the end of the branch he brought his fore and hind paws together beneath him and closed his eyes in meditation, as was the way of his people. He thought of his new friends, Jason and Carman, the younger still smarting after a practical joke he had been setting backfired and covered him with a Warunian web, one of the itchiest and hardest to remove substances in the galaxy. Crash's lips curled up at the memory as he laughed inwardly. Jason had spent half an hour in a sonic shower trying to remove the offending material. Carman had laughed and told Jason that it was his just desserts, for the trap had been set for him. Although they had only just met, Crash felt within him that he could trust these human males with his life if he came to it, and he decided to make sure he earned the same in return.

He thought of Captain Piper and how she appeared to be glowing with the new challenges set for her. She had not had a decent shore leave in years and yet when this new command had been given her, she had taken the opportunity without hesitation, as Crash had expected her to. Piper was someone who lived and breathed to explore space and seemed to see shore leave as a diversion that was required either on a mission or when only direly needed. Crash's head nodded unwillingly from a feeling of love and comradeship; it was good to be serving with her again.

Sarda appeared to be something of an enigma for a Vulcan. It seemed he actually indulged in the odd emotion every now and then, yet the rest of the time he was the consummate Vulcan, logical in every sense. Yet Sarda did not feel cold as many Vulcans did, there was a warmth there that so many of his kind lacked.

Crash was brought back to full awareness by the sound of the door hissing open on the far side of the deck, a good hundred metres away. As the room was littered with all kinds of exercise equipment, not to mention a small garden, it took a second for his eyes to focus, then he recognised Amantallash walking into the room, her eyes and ears darting about, as if she was looking for something. Somehow, Crash knew she was looking for *him*. Still, he remained quiet, motionless, thankful that his black fur was masking him in this darker corner of the room. He watched as his sister looked over at the tree, sank down to all fours and moved stealthily toward him as if hunting prey. He experienced a moment of pride as she sprang and landed neatly on the branch he had had trouble getting to. It was in that moment of feeling for his sister that he decided to try to make up with her. If they were to serve together things would be a lot better, if they were at least speaking to one another.

Amantallash leapt for the trunk and made her way up, past the branch Crash was perched on. She suddenly noticed him out of the corner of her eye and his scent confirmed it. *He* was here. She turned and began to make her way down

when Crash raised a paw. Instinct took over and she raised an arm to protect herself from the coming blow, but Crash's arm stopped, and his whiskers drooped forward in sorrow that he had been taken the wrong way. "Shrallah," he said.

Amantallash's ears jerked upright in surprise. He had not called her sister in their native tongue for years, let alone acknowledged their relationship as kin. In fact, he had not spoken to anyone in their clan for fifteen years.

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Yes, brother?" she replied in Standard.

Crash decided to ignore the insult and plunged on. "Shrallah, grall hin cluus rronn..." he began. His sister's hiss silenced him. She had recognised the ancient rite for the asking of forgiveness, but she wanted no part of it.

Crash arched his whiskers. "Why?" he asked.

Amantallash had to restrain herself and speak civilly. "Our family would have had prosperity if it wasn't for you."

Startled, he shook his head in wonder. This was not the young Cait he had left, along with his family, so many years ago. He remembered times when they not only played together, but that he had even taught her some skills. They were happier times in a childhood filled with pain. "I cannot believe you have bought into the Priest's lies. I thought you had seen beyond their prejudices when we were kits. They're nothing but ancient myths, perpetuated to keep the masses under their control."

His sister laughed bitterly, mocking him. "This is coming from someone about to perform the ancient Llivish ceremony?"

Crash growled in return. He loved his sister, but she knew how to push his buttons. "I ask forgiveness and all you seek is to anger me?"

Amantallash looked him straight in the eye and put all her personal misery into her voice. "You anger me with your very existence," she spat. With that said, she leapt to the ground and ran out the still open door. Crash watched her go, sorrow filling his heart. It was several hours later when he finally finished his meditation. When he left the room, he was determined to heal the rift between them. The Llash clan had to be whole again.

Standing in the once pristine Engineering section of Starbase Forty-Eight, Scanner put down the screwdriver he had been using and wiped the perspiration from his brow. He cast a glance over to where his assistants were putting the finishing touches to repairing the Starbase's life support systems and nodded to himself at seeing a job well done.

Judd turned back to the shield controls he was fixing and tossed aside a ruined circuit board and ordered another from the *Millennium*'s stores. A moment later the new component materialised before him, and he quickly installed it with a deft touch. He scanned the components once more with his tricorder and located one last damaged transtator. Prying it loose, he replaced it with another from his

work belt. Once completed, he took a moment to reassemble the control board and activated it with a flourish. Satisfied that everything was working as it should, he produced his communicator and opened it with a chirp.

“Scanner to *Millennium*.”

Krashtallah's soft purr responded. “*Millennium* here.”

“Crash, tell the captain that I'm about to test the shields.”

“Aye.” Silence, then Piper's voice. “Go ahead. Let's see if you can still remember one end of a screwdriver from the other.”

Judd chuckled. “Then y'all better stand back and watch the fireworks.” He lowered a finger onto the shield activation switch and watched the readout.

Sarda's voice responded over the communicator. “Shields at forty-two-point-three percent and steady.”

“That's the best I can do with only a portable generator,” defended Judd. He reached out and patted the console. “Still, it's better than nothing.” He looked over his shoulder at his technicians and saw that they had finished their work. They looked to him for confirmation, and he nodded his blessing. Several switches were thrown then suddenly the lighting returned to normal and gravity returned to one gee. “Thank God for that,” Judd muttered. Even with magnetic boots, zero gee played havoc with his insides.

Piper watched the viewscreen and was delighted to see the space station light up with power. She turned to Commodore Quigley and saw a smile flicker across his face. It was better than the haunted look he had been wearing since he had come back on board. His command was a mess, and he had a huge job ahead of him. “Commodore, I assume you want to take possession?”

Quigley actually smiled at that and turned to the communications officer. Piper nodded and Crash opened intraship communications. “Attention crew of Starbase Forty-Eight. Prepare to reboard the base and meet me in transporter room two in ten minutes.”

The Commodore looked to the captain and bowed his appreciation. “Thank you for your help, Piper.”

“And you, yours. Any time you need some help, give us a call, Commodore.” Piper shook his hand jovially.

As Quigley left, Piper hailed Scanner. “Lower shields, Scanner and prepare your team to come home.”

At that, Piper flashed Sarda a quick grin, which he returned with a raised brow. This ship was home now.

“Captain!” Piper turned at her felinoid friend's beckoning. “Incoming message from Fleet Admiral Smillie.”

“Here it comes,” muttered Lieutenant Valastro under his breath.

Piper straightened herself in the centre seat and tugged down on her uniform. Bill Smillie would not be met by sloppiness from *this* crew. “On screen,” she

ordered. She quickly realised this was a pre-recorded message, not live. At this distance, there would have been a notable time delay.

On the forward viewscreen the view of Starbase Forty-Eight was replaced by the image of Admiral Smillie looking more haggard than Piper had ever seen him. "William Smillie, Admiral to Piper, Captain, *U.S.S. Millennium*. You are ordered to proceed to the Romulan Neutral Zone to participate in the deterrent action we have instigated. The co-ordinates are attached. You are to report as soon as possible. The scout *U.S.S. Pegasus* has been dispatched to defend Starbase Four-Eight from any repeated attacks. That is all, Starfleet out."

Piper frowned, Sarda's eyes narrowed a fraction, Jason Nunn shook his head in disbelief, Carman Valastro sighed and Krashtallahash let out a low growl.

"Well, folks," Jason quipped, leaning back in his chair, interlacing his fingers behind his head. "We're off to war."

"Belay that, Lieutenant," Piper snapped. Her eyes narrowed in annoyance. The situation was fast spiralling out of control and there were too many questions that remained unanswered. "We're going to put a stop to this." She turned to Carman. "Mister Valastro, plot us a course along the last vector taken by the enemy vessel to the co-ordinates supplied. Make it semi-circular if you have to." Piper turned back to Nunn, who was still smarting from the rebuke. "E.T.A. at warp two?"

"Captain?"

"You heard me, Lieutenant."

Nunn consulted his board. "Roughly one point two days, Captain."

"Good." Piper regarded her communications officer. "Have the Starbase crew all beamed down, yet?"

Crash touched his earpiece. "Almost. One more minute, Captain."

"Inform Commodore Quigley that the *Pegasus* is on her way and wish him good luck."

Crash smiled. "Aye, sir."

Piper turned back to the viewscreen and waited. She hated this, every fibre of her being quivered with annoyance that she and her ship were being used as pawns in someone else's game of chess. That some unknown group was prodding the Federation into a war with the Romulans raised bile in her throat. A calm presence at her side helped her to control her raging emotions and she turned a grateful eye at Sarda.

Piper knew he was a telepath, but she also knew that Vulcans required actual physical contact to create a proper link. But there were times when she doubted that when Sarda would appear magically at her side whenever she needed him. Whether or not he could hear her, she said a silent 'thank you' to him.

Sarda made no acknowledgment that he had heard. "Captain, I believe you wish to try and track down *both* Romulan vessels before we arrive at the NZ."

Piper gazed up into Sarda's blue eyes for a moment and gave him a slight

smile. “The Admiral gave me the job of solving this *before* he ordered us to the NZ. I’m not about to give up on getting some answers.” She tapped her chair arm, then made a decision. “Wrap up all we’ve found so far, the scans, the photos, everything and send it in a report to the Admiral. Perhaps he’ll give us some more time.”

She was interrupted by Krashtallah’s report. “Transporter room reports transfer complete, Captain.”

Piper nodded. “Mister Nunn, engage.” Piper got up from the command chair and marched to her ready room door. “Crash, get me the *Excelsior*, code forty-seven. I’ll take it in my office.”

Pandemonium reigned aboard the Romulan vessel. Klingon officers were running every which way trying to repair the damage and help the wounded – or help themselves reach Sto’Vo’Kor. Purple blood flowed freely. Consoles spat sparks and smoke was being cleared by fans. The smell of death was in the air, and a number of Klingons were screaming for the dead.

The ship’s new commander, K’miktos raised his bloodied face to the viewscreen and cursed at the Federation starship that had raced to protect the starbase. “Damage report,” he ordered. He looked down at the prone form bent over the ship’s computer console. “I said, damage report!” When he got no response, he shoved the body on the floor and operated the machinery himself.

Warp drive was limited to a speed of only Warp Two, for good he noted when the scanner showed him the tip of the starboard nacelle had been sheared off. Once again, he cursed. With their warp drive damaged he was going to fall behind schedule. His father, Duras, would not be pleased. To hell him, he thought, grimly. He could kill him if he wanted to, that is, if he survived anyway. He tried to look on the bright side. If the warp drive failed altogether, he could still continue on impulse power.

He tapped a control, translating the Romulan language on the fly now he had become proficient in it. Universal translators were only useful for spoken language. He noted their plasma torpedo and phasers were still operational. Good, he would need them to avenge the deaths of his comrades.

K’miktos looked over to the shield console where his nephew, Magh, was being aided by the medical officer. He smiled at his sibling in pride. He had saved the ship by raising the cloaking shields as soon as he had seen the Federation vessel. A good warrior, he thought, even though he did seem to have some weaknesses. He wasn’t certain it was a warrior acting on instinct, or a coward trying to run from the heat of battle. The thought made him curl his lip in distaste as he turned back to the viewscreen as he considered his next move.

Even though they had been driven off by the Starbase when it had surprised them with a volley of photon torpedoes, his first instinct was to continue the fight.

The thought of having been beaten raised the acidity of his stomach and made him nauseous.

“Prepare to come about!” he ordered.

All eyes were suddenly focused on him. As if from nowhere his second, Trask, appeared and challenged the order.

“No! We have succeeded in our mission here,” he stated categorically. “The starbase is as good as destroyed. We have given the Federation a bloody nose and they will take it out on the honourless Romulans.”

“We must avenge the deaths of our brothers!” K’miktos yelled, slapping his sides.

“We must complete our mission!” his second yelled back. Lowering his voice, he continued. “If we attack again, we will be destroyed. We will have *failed* our mission.”

The Commander sneered. “Coward!” He reached out and took his first officer by the shoulders. Pushing him forward he propelled him into a nearby bulkhead. He leaned in close and let his fetid breath slip out between his uneven teeth. “We will be victorious! This ship has defeated many Federation vessels and will do so again.” He turned and looked over his shoulder at his helmsman. “Impulse power, ahead .05c.”

“Belay that order!” The *Falcon’s Claw*’s latest commander turned back to his second and stared down the barrel of a disruptor he had somehow slipped out of his holster unnoticed. “If you choose to commit suicide that is your choice, but do it alone with your knife, not with *this ship*.” He gestured to the viewscreen which showed a still image of the Federation vessel that had fired on them. “Look at that vessel,” he hissed. When the Commander did not move his voice became even more dangerous. “Look at it.”

K’miktos turned slowly and gazed long and hard at the screen. He memorised every detail of the vessel before him. Her shape, design, call letters and name. *Millennium*. He didn’t know who commanded it, but whoever it was, he and his ship would pay.

“That ship could take us easily,” his second continued without a beat. “We have done what we were sent here to do, now we must continue with our mission, or do I have to relieve you of command?”

K’miktos had no doubts about how he would be relieved. He probably wouldn’t know about it until his dead grandfather would greet him with a mug of Bloodwine.

“So be it,” he grumbled. He locked his gaze with that of his second. They both knew where they stood. Neither could afford to take their eyes off the other until their mission was over, and they went their separate ways.

The Commander stepped away from his second and took his seat in the command chair again, cementing his authority among his surviving bridge crew.

Brusquely, he ordered: "Plot a course to the Romulan Neutral Zone. Change our evasive action strategy to Duras Four." He slapped his shoulders, a feral gleam in his eye. "K'plah!"

Chapter Eight

“You want me to *what*?” Styles stared in disbelief at his personal viewscreen, his moustache bristling. Piper stared back at him with the same intensity.

“We just need to stall the fleet for a little while.” It was a long shot, she knew, but she needed this windbag on her side if they were going to put a stop to this war before it began.

Captain Styles’ eyes rolled in their sockets. His opinion of Piper wasn’t very high. They had had their run-ins before. “And how do you expect me to do that?” he said with an excess of sarcasm.

Piper gave him a mischievous grin. “Well, you are the captain of the *Excelsior*.”

Styles scowled at her. “Flattery will get you nowhere. Besides, shouldn’t you be asking your old *friend* Jim Kirk? Why are you bothering *me* with this?”

It was all Piper could do to not roll her eyes at the arrogance of the man. It was well known in the fleet that Jim was her mentor, and since that time they had backed each other up on occasion. Besides, she knew that the statement came from a heart full of jealousy, nothing else. Their careers had been illustrious, his had not. To top it off, Piper was fully cognisant of the insult Styles had taken from Kirk’s recent disabling of his ship. He was merely projecting his anger with Kirk onto her. All the same, she could not afford to get this man offside. Not now. She kept her voice firm and even. “I don’t intend flattery and you know it. Not to mention the fact that Jim is stuck on Earth while Scotty sorts out the *Enterprise-A*. I seem to remember hearing him mention something about the warranty,” she added as an after-thought. “So, we’ll have to save the Federation without him.”

The *Excelsior*’s captain crossed his arms and sighed. “Hmmph. Get to the point,” he said brusquely.

Piper was employing all her skills as a diplomat – which wasn’t her strong suit – to sway him. “You and I both know that if the Federation and the Romulans get into a shooting match a lot of good people are going to get killed. It could even start with the two of us.”

That got his attention. It was very hard for one to proceed up the ranks if one was dead. “I’m listening,” he said, showing some interest. “What do you have in mind?”

Piper looked down at her board and punched in a set of codes. Data began flowing into Styles’ panel too fast for the human eye to follow.

“What’s this?” he asked, curious.

“They’re the plans for the image projector the *Star Empire* once used on the *Enterprise*. It creates life-sized images that fools scanners into believing they’re solid.”

Styles’ eyes flicked up at Piper in surprise. “You’re not going to create an

armada, are you?"

Piper narrowed her eyes at her contemporary. "Not at all. I have something else in mind. An armada would defeat the purpose."

Captain Styles lounged back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. He tapped his thigh with his swagger stick as he thought. "Why are you telling me this?"

"You mean, why aren't I telling this to Admiral Smillie?"

Styles' eyes answered yes.

Piper acquiesced. "Let's say I know him *too* well." At Styles' curious brow she continued. "He'll follow any order he gets from the President to the letter."

Styles paused in reflection. "How can you be so sure?"

"Who do you think I served under as first officer of the *Hood*?" Her note of confidence rang clear.

For the first time, Styles broke into a grin. If this worked, it would help him make an indelible mark on his career. "I see."

"So," said Piper, getting down to business. "This is what I have in mind. It'll take both ships to do it."

All cleaned up and dressed in the latest fashion for young ladies – a purple jumpsuit with pink piping down the arms – Jenny found herself wandering about the huge ship in awe. She had never seen a ship this big or this complicated and soon it became apparent to her that she was well and truly lost. She wondered about Merete, whether she would worry about her, but she thought not. Doctor Merete was a nice lady, but she was still busy with patients who were too sick to go home. She was tempted to go back anyway, but the image of the cold Nurse Stone came to her mind and made her shudder.

She stopped and peered around the corner of the corridor. The captain had told her that there would be no-one onboard who would want to harm her, but after what she had seen on Breakwater, she was still a little frightened.

The memory of that night was still fresh in her mind. She had been lying on her bed, the night had been warm, and she had slept on top of the covers. She had been gazing at the stars as she waited for her mother to come home. Mum had checked on her before leaving the house. Jenny had faked being asleep and had watched as her mother stumbled into the forest on the way to the store. She had followed the light from the torch until it had disappeared, along with her mother, over the ridge between their home and town.

Then the bright light came, and the town was gone. With her mother.

The thought brought a wave of sadness that Jenny tried to dismiss and almost succeeded in doing. She shook her head to clear away the images then looked around the corner again to see if the coast was clear.

Certain now that nobody was going to jump out at her she continued. The

first door she came to looked like any other door on the ship, but her curiosity got the better of her and she stepped forward. The doors whooshed open, and Jenny stepped into a little room she recognised as a lift. She jumped as the door closed once again, trapping her inside. For a moment she froze in fear until a gentle, feminine voice came from overhead.

“Level please.”

Jenny thought for a moment. “Take me to where Captain Piper is,” she said, meekly.

“Captain Piper is on Level One.”

Jenny’s nerves were too frayed to have an argument with the computer. “Then take me there!” she yelled.

Piper, Sarda and Scanner sat clustered about the science station in heated conversation. A picture of the Romulan Warbird adorned one monitor whilst schematics were displayed on another.

“We don’t have time to build it,” Scanner whined.

Piper rebuked her chief engineer with a look. “Yes, we do. We’re going to drop to warp one, that’ll give you about twenty-four hours to build and install it.”

Sarda looked coolly at his superior. “May I respectfully remind the captain that we have been ordered at our best speed to the Neutral Zone.”

Piper gave her First Officer a rueful smile. “I know that Sarda, but if we’re going to stop this war, we’re going to have to bend the rules a little.”

A shocked eyebrow was raised, stopped, and then lowered. “I will admit I expected you would ‘bend’ the rules sooner or later,” he remarked solemnly. “I had just preferred it to be later.”

Scanner leaned his chin in his hands and gazed soulfully at Piper. “I’d just be happy knowing what we’re building it *for*.”

Piper put on her most enigmatic look and decided then it would be best to keep her crew informed. She lowered her voice and told them her plan.

When she finished Sarda leaned back in his chair and considered her idea. “Unexpected factors could jeopardise this mission,” was his only comment.

Scanner looked from one to the other as if they had lost their minds. “If you mean it’s *risky*, I’d agree with you, Points. It won’t work,” he objected.

Piper had expected Scanner’s scepticism. She was tempted to tell him to do it anyway but changed her mind. He was a good friend who had often given her a new insight into a problem. So, she decided to hear him out. “Why not?”

“We don’t have the power to do it,” Scanner attacked. “And if the projector fails, we’d probably just be making matters worse.”

Piper exuded confidence. “I know you’ll do a good job.”

Scanner smirked. “I know that tone.”

Sarda raised his brows. “What tone is that?”

“Her tone of “I know it’s risky but we’re going to do it anyway”. You should know her well enough by now, Points.” Scanner smiled in resignation and turned back to Piper. “Even if we finish it in time, we still can’t do it alone.”

Piper glanced at her science officer, who returned the gaze, knowingly. For a moment he almost smiled. “You have already informed Captain Styles of the *Excelsior*, I presume.”

Piper grinned. “You presume correctly. He’s agreed to help. Between the two of us we’ll pull this off.”

For a moment Sarda stared into Piper’s eyes. “You have already decided on this course of action.”

Piper nodded. “Captain’s prerogative.” She stared back into Sarda’s eyes and was almost overwhelmed by the feeling of confidence in her that he was projecting. Her smile widened in response. They would do well.

The captain glanced up at the ship’s chronometer. “Gentlemen,” she addressed them, rising. “Use as many people as you require, but the projector must be finished, on time or sooner. If we’re going to pull this off, we’re going to need it finished and operating at one hundred percent.” Piper turned and addressed the helmsman on duty. “Reduce speed to warp one until further notice.”

“Aye, sir.”

Scanner stood and faced his Captain. “Piper, when it comes time to mount the projector to the hull we’ll have to go sublight.”

Piper nodded. “Don’t worry, I have that under control too.”

Dismissed, Scanner and Sarda made their way to the turbolift. As the doors parted, they almost stepped on Jenny as she was getting off. Sarda halted her with an upraised hand. “Miss, you are not permitted on the Bridge.”

The sound of Sarda’s voice drew Piper’s attention. She looked up from the padd a yeoman had handed her and stepped over to Sarda’s side. She looked at her small visitor then sat down on her heels to look her in the eye, and waved Scanner and Sarda on to their duties.

“And to what do I owe this visit?” she asked in her most friendly tone.

Jenny put her hands on her hips. “Merete and everyone were busy. I got bored.”

Piper smiled in understanding. She knew that her chief surgeon would be busy for some time yet. She stretched out her arms and the child embraced her happily. Piper stood, carrying Jenny on her hip, and gave her small passenger a tour of the Bridge. She noticed a look of awe and expectation on Jenny’s face she recognised as one she, herself, had worn when she had seen the bridge of the old *Enterprise* for the first time. She knew her own kind and knew that this little girl might go on to a career in Starfleet one day.

Jenny was eager to learn as much as she could, demanding that Piper explain

the function of every control on every panel, even though most of the time she did not understand. Eventually, they got to the centre seat and Piper sat down, with Jenny perched in her lap. She quickly read the padd she had been given, signed it, and handed it back to the yeoman who had been waiting patiently.

Jenny looked up into Piper's eyes. "Are you really in charge of all of this?" she asked, indicating the ship around her.

Piper smiled and nodded. "Yep. It's a big job."

Jenny nodded back knowingly. "I bet you're really smart to know how all this works."

Piper raised her eyes to the ceiling and grinned to herself. It was clear the child did not know just how many systems the *Millennium* had. "I know enough to do the job," she admitted. "But a starship is so big and complex that it takes many people functioning as a team to make it all work."

She turned as she heard the turbolift doors open. Misters Valastro, Nunn and Krashtallah stepped onto the Bridge and replaced those at their stations. A moment later the doors opened again and Amantallah stepped onto the bridge, casting a diffident look at her sibling. It appeared that the new Security Chief would not ride on the same lift as her brother. Piper shook her head and wondered how she could get them to make up – if it was possible.

A yawn suddenly escaped her, and she looked up at the chronometer and only then realised that it was oh-seven-thirty. Morning. She had been up all night. With that knowledge sinking in she felt the weariness in her muscles and decided she needed some rest. However, duty still called.

Piper looked down at her small companion, knowing from the bags under Jenny's eyes that she had not had any sleep, either. She gathered Jenny into her arms and headed for the turbolift.

Piper was about to give out her parting orders when she noticed that Crash's head was inclined to the side as he listened to an incoming message. When his eyes slowly rose to meet hers, she knew who was calling. She put Jenny down and told her to wait for her by the turbolift.

The captain stepped back to the centre seat and relaxed into it, readying herself for the coming argument. She nodded to Crash and the haggard face of Fleet Admiral William Smillie appeared on the viewscreen. For a moment Piper felt a tinge of worry for her former captain but brushed it aside as the Admiral began his tirade.

"You're late, *Captain*." Smillie made the rank sound very temporary.

"Teething troubles, Admiral," Piper lied.

"Of what nature?" Acid dripped from every word.

Piper remained poker faced, not letting anything show to the man who knew her well. "We're having troubles with the warp drive. There may be an imbalance with the warp nacelles. We dropped back to warp two to allow our chief engineer

to make repairs, but since then we've had to drop to warp one to allow him to do the job right." Piper had to refrain herself from feeling contempt for the whole situation lest she let it show. "The delay will only be about fourteen hours."

Smillie peered at his former first officer with open suspicion. "What are you up to, Piper? Why are you taking so long?"

A part of Piper wanted to leap from her chair and give her superior a piece of her mind for his open suspicion, not to mention such a question could undermine her authority with her bridge crew who were watching. However, common sense prevailed. She spoke coolly, and evenly, keeping her cards close to her chest. "I am simply doing the job I was asked to do. We still have a rogue Romulan Bird of Prey out there, and there is evidence there may be more of them. I just need time to make sure that the *Millennium* will be ready for any engagement. I know the Romulans would take advantage of any weakness we showed."

Smillie quietly fumed at this impossible woman and found himself doubting the wisdom of assigning her to the *Millennium*. Still, Jim Kirk had recommended her as the best candidate for the job and, if there was anyone whose advice he respected, it was Kirk's. Through narrowed eyes he glared at his subordinate. "Your situation is understood, *Captain*. Your presence would be greatly appreciated as soon as possible. Admiral Smillie out." The Admiral's face vanished to be replaced by a crawling starfield.

Piper flopped back in her chair and let out a sigh of relief. She had bought the time they required, now all they had to do was finish the projector before they got there. The captain stood and turned to the turbolift where Jenny was waiting. She felt weary to her bones. "Mister Krashtallah, you have the Conn. Inform me if anything happens."

The sleek felinoid flowed gracefully to the centre seat and took his post. "Aye, *Captain*," he purred. As Piper and Jenny left, Nunn and Valastro turned in their seats and smiled as they heard a contented rumbling from behind. It was well known that Crash desired a command of his own one day.

Jason Nunn watched the Caitian raise a powerful arm, muscles rippling under his thick fur, extend one claw and gently touch the controls to log himself in. Whilst the huge feline reported Jason found himself wishing never to get into a fight with the communications specialist, or his sister – he knew who would come off worst. If he was ever going to play a practical joke on *this* being he hoped Crash would be in a good mood.

Krashtallah noticed the sudden interest, which he put down to their proximity, but he did not let it show. Although Crash was not much older than Nunn, he had already judged him as impulsive and given to outbursts of emotion. Crash's people matured earlier than humans and in ancient times his people needed to mature young just to survive. Since that time the Cait had tamed their environment and so their early maturity became something they took pride in when

they finally reached out to the stars.

They learned to walk within the first week and to fend for themselves within a year. The ability to reason came after only six months. Whilst physically it still took them five years to mature and become sexually of age, they restrained themselves and devoted their lifestyle to learning and the arts and only propagated in their latter years.

Crash had been just out of the academy when Piper became Captain of the *Exeter*, an Ensign and junior communications officer, but Piper had seen talent in the youth and under her had learned and even gone back to the academy to complete a year of command candidacy school. He had returned to the *Exeter* a Lieutenant, junior grade, and since then had advanced to full Lieutenant under Piper's watchful eye. Piper had Crash's total loyalty and had been delighted when he had been posted to the *Millennium* under her.

And so, Lieutenant Krashtallah relaxed in the Conn and lapped up the experience. The only sign he gave was the smile that curled the edge of his lips, and the quiet purring he wasn't even aware of.

On the Bridge of the *S'harien*, the Commander began to sweat, though she dare not show it by wiping her brow. Her Rihannsu pallor changed to a slightly deeper shade when she realised what the Captain of the *Falcon's Claw* had been doing. There was something to be said for examining the behaviour patterns of others. Most people simply cannot help reverting to old habits.

As she looked at the three-dimensional image of the rogue ship's course, a dotted green line tracing along it, it became clear to her what was going on.

She tapped a tooth with the tip of her fingernail, the sound attracting the attention of her assistant. "Commander?" she asked.

She shot her underling a look that simply said: "Don't ask."

She didn't.

The Commander got up from her seat slowly, using the time to consider her options. This revelation was stunning, and her first duty should be to inform the Empress. Fear touched her heart as she realised they were all being manipulated on a cosmic scale.

The problem lay in the fact that they were far from home and the message would take too long before it was received. The solution to their problem lay in action, but what that action was lay just beyond the reach of her imagination at this time. Until inspiration struck, she sat in her chair and simply ordered: "Continue on course."

Merete put down the last of her instruments and wiped the perspiration from

her brow, pushing back a lock of platinum blonde hair that refused to leave her alone. She glanced up at the lifesigns readout and breathed a sigh of relief. The last of the critically wounded would make it.

The Doctor turned to her assistant and flashed her a weary grin. "Have this patient moved to ICU with ten cc's of triquardrazine given hourly." Merete removed her gloves with a snap and watched as the poor man was taken away. She threw her operating clothes down the recycling chute and stepped into her office, sagging her aching bones into a chair.

She contemplated the scene outside her office. Through the Plexiglas window she watched her nurses tend to the injured, each showing good signs of recovery. They had only lost two of the people beamed over, but in Merete's mind it was two too many. With an annoyed grunt she activated her computer screen and began writing up death certificates for those lost.

Consumed as she was by her work, she failed to hear her office door open. She wasn't aware of Piper's presence until a glass of Romulan ale appeared beside her screen. The almost crystal blue quality of the drink lured her attention away and Piper was surprised when Merete suddenly grasped the glass and quickly downed its contents. She let go a deep sigh and looked up at her friend. "I needed that."

Piper raised a curious brow. She was deeply concerned for her. Too many of the recent events would remind Merete of her childhood nightmare, and it would take superhuman strength to not be swayed by it. She swallowed her glass with a toss of her head, refilled, and slowly turned the vessel between her long fingers. She stared into the blue liquid and pondered the situation. Finally, she decided to enter the conversation by a side door.

"How are our visitors faring?"

Merete's eyes slowly rose to meet her captain's. Sorrow filled their very depths, reflecting the despair in her soul. "Two dead, three still on the critical list. The rest will be fine in a few days."

A quote came to Piper's mind. "Suffer the fate of thy neighbour." Surely that was how death always affected Merete. Death horrified her so much that it had turned her into one of the best surgeons in Starfleet. Her reputation showed that she would go to any lengths to save a patient. It was no surprise that Merete and her former captain hadn't gotten along, he had one of the highest casualty rates in the fleet.

Piper avoided Captain Martin like the plague, just being around him could get you killed. She hated his old west cowboy style. It was a wonder to her that the man still had a commission.

Putting aside this line of thought, Piper gave the Doctor a winning smile to raise her spirits as she refilled her glass. "I know how much you hate filling out death certificates." An idea came to mind. "I know, you could always relegate that

task to Nurse Stone, I'm sure she'd love the job."

The picture gave Merete cause to laugh as the liquor began to take effect. She rocked back in her chair and let her hair down. "Oh, dear," she said, slightly embarrassed, a smile playing around the corners of her lips. "What scares me is that you could be right."

Piper narrowed her eyes. She had little tolerance for incompetent officers. "If that's the way you feel about her, why don't you get her transferred to another ship?"

Merete's grin faded a little. "She does her job very well, only the best get to join the crew of the Flagship. I admit, I find her hard to take, but I'm sure that under that granite exterior beats a heart of gold."

The captain couldn't miss that opening. "Yeah, cold and hard." Her sarcasm was biting.

Merete surprised herself by defending her nurse. "No. It takes a lot of love and patience to do her job. Compared to what she does, I have it easy. All I have to do is diagnose and treat a patient. Nurses have to be there every second of the day to help people perform the most basic functions, even hold their hand when they need it. Sometimes it takes a long time for someone to recover, and they're with them every step of the way." She glanced towards the doorway, certain that Stone was doing just what she said only metres away. She looked into her partially emptied glass and mused: "She may not show it, but I think she cares – a lot."

Piper nodded, compassion filling her voice as she shared her concerns with Merete. She leaned forward and covered Merete's hand with her own. "I care, too, about *you*. How are you holding up?"

Several emotions flickered across the Doctor's face. Anger, suspicion, pain, to be replaced by trusting resignation. "Not too good." She reached forward, refilled her glass and drank, this time sipping the contents. "I'm afraid I don't like picking up the pieces left by unthinking marauders."

"I don't blame you. I'm not into this much, either." Trust won out over Piper's doubts, and she decided to share her thoughts candidly. "I don't think the Romulans are behind this."

"Who then...." Merete's tilted eyes closed in concentration, then widened in horror as she considered her worst fears. "Not the Orions!"

Piper leaned forward and took her friend's hands in hers, lending as much support as she could. "Maybe, but it could be anybody. I just thought you should know."

The inner strength that the captain had seen in Merete's eyes many times before came back and stilled her quaking hands. She stood and smiled at her friend. "Thanks, Piper. You can count on me, no matter what happens."

Piper took this as her cue, stood, and picked up the bottle of Romulan ale on her way out. With her back turned she failed to see the solitary tear that ran

down Merete's cheek.

Chapter Nine

“Commander!”

The Romulan taskforce leader, Fleet Commander Reen t’Khenniell, a middle-aged woman who had worked hard to achieve her high station, casually glanced up at her aide, away from the starfield she beheld beyond the portal. Those peaceful stars would soon be the setting for one of the greatest battles in history. She knew her fleet was invincible, she had conditioned herself to believe nothing less, but still, she was nervous. She felt no shame at admitting it to herself. Fear was a constant companion of any warrior. The true test was whether you could master it.

Having done so long before, Reen forced calm as she wished to retain the air of having everything under control, which she knew to be far from the truth.

The only place where things were truly under control was here on the *Razor’s Edge*, Reen’s flagship crewed by Rihannha that were totally loyal to her. Their commitment to pleasing their commander was so complete they had modified the older-style Warbird to the point that it was the equal of anything in the Empire – short of the newly consigned *S’harien*.

Knowing this helped bolster her confidence, but knowing the whole truth was what drove people to paranoia. Right now, she was fighting off that particular demon as she considered the facts.

The Federation ships were building up at a steady rate on their side of the Neutral Zone and it seemed that it would only be a matter of time before they would invade. The thought bothered her. In all the dealings she’d had with the Federation and their Starfleet they had always shown an almost weak dislike of fighting. The captains she had met mostly preferred to talk and agree to compromise rather than cause loss of life.

So how could these weaklings suddenly turn on the Rihannsu Empire and try to bring them down? Insecurity? Surely not. Their Starfleet vessels were well armed and defended, with commanders of mettle above the average being. Their belief system allowed freedom of expression which gave them the opportunity to develop at an alarming rate new weapons and systems that the Rihannsu scientists hadn’t been coaxed into dreaming of yet.

Having almost forgotten her subordinate, she feigned arrogance. “Yes, ‘Timon?’”

The young, brash Sub-Commander looked at his leader with a mixture of awe and fear and was forced to follow as his commander paced before the massive window, her long robes flowing elegantly behind her. Her reputation was taller than she was physically, but her lack of height had never held her back. The Commander noticed the younger man’s age; he obviously had friends in the Senate.

S’Timon cleared his throat nervously. “The communications officer has

intercepted a dispatch from the enemy command to one of its ships, the *Millennium*."

The Commander's eyes lit up at this news. The Tal Shi'ar had informed the military of the Federation's newest battleship, as yet untested. It was coming here! Ah, to meet him in combat once before she retired. "And..."

"He is en-route to the Neutral Zone but is experiencing technical problems." The Sub-Commander sought the words in Federation Standard. "Teething troubles."

The Commander frowned at the unusual phrase. "Computer," she ordered, curiously. "Language check: meaning of Federation term 'teething troubles'."

The computer was silent for a moment before it divulged the answer. "Problems experienced when using new, experimental and untried equipment."

"Ah," t'Khenniell understood. She had read, and knew from experience, that the first of class often had bugs that needed to be sorted out. Good. Perhaps that could be used to her advantage.

"Are there any indications that the *Enterprise* has joined the Federation fleet?" She fairly salivated at the prospect of waging war against the famous human warrior who commanded him.

The Sub-Commander lowered his head a fraction. It was enough for Reen to read. The *Enterprise* was not coming to the party. Disappointing. "They are dealing with a disturbance on Nimbus III," he stated unnecessarily.

The Commander was no longer interested. "Number of Federation ships now at the zone?" she barked.

The Sub-commander paled a little. "Eighty-three are now 'patrolling' the Neutral Zone with three more coming into sensor range. The *Millennium* is still four hours from the zone."

"And our own?"

Her junior officer remained hesitant. "Fifty-seven."

S'Timon was startled by the smile that lit his leader's face. "Even better," she said. Starfleet still did not realise she was running a double bluff. Her enemy knew she would have a certain number of ships cloaked and that the size of her visible fleet would be a good indicator of the few hidden. So, she had decided to keep them all visible and not waste valuable fuel to make her fleet look bigger than it actually was. "Move the fleet toward the Zone near Galorndon Core. We will start our push there in five hours."

Sub-Commander S'Timon saluted, swivelled, and left. The Commander watched him go, wondering if he, if they were all, going to be alive in six hours. A pity if he died, she saw a lot of promise in the man. Still, war was the way of things, the one true way of proving who would win the battle and reign as those fittest to rule. The Commander knew that she would die in battle, and she hoped that if she was bested, it would be by the likes of James T. Kirk.

Engineering was a scene of organised chaos. Scanner's staff ran back and forth creating and installing parts for the image projector they were rushing to complete. The schematics for the device were displayed on a vast screen on the wall and Scanner spent most of his time tracing circuit paths with his finger and programming the replicator to produce what they needed. He kept casting worried glances at the readout that was starting to complain from the excess workload. Still, he continued placing a strain on the machine and his people. He had no intentions of letting Piper down.

Nearby, Sarda frowned at the computer console in Scanner's office. The programming that Piper required was complicated to say the least. He knew he had to make what she wanted realistic, otherwise they were all sunk. He took a moment from his work to check Scanner's progress. Most of the unit was already finished; a few more adjustments and only the optical unit would remain. However, it would have to be mounted on the hull. He estimated completion in roughly seventy-three minutes, leaving an hour for him to calibrate the equipment and tie it into the library computer. Considering their ETA to the Neutral Zone, it was not much time. Sarda turned back to the screen and picked up the pace. One never knew when the clock ran out as life had a peculiar way of shortening the time available.

Lieutenant Krashtallah stood and stretched each muscle wearily. This was his second stint in the centre seat after once again relieving the captain. Sarda was still busy with the computer which left himself as the most senior bridge officer. Crash's race was not used to be sedentary for so long, so he made himself useful, checking over his second officer's shoulder at the state of things at the Neutral Zone. His pupils dilated at the news just in and he sprinted to the science station to verify.

"Yellow alert, Captain Piper to the bridge." Crash bounded back to the Conn and made the appropriate log entry while he waited for the captain. He leaned back to address Amantallah who had just come back on shift an hour before. "Activate defence fields, do not raise the shields."

For a moment Amantallah hesitated. She seemed reluctant to follow her brother's orders. Crash did not miss it. He scowled, gave a low growl and turned slowly to face his sister, his fur bristling. His tone brooked no argument. "While I sit in this chair, I expect you to obey my orders, is that clear?"

Amantallah nodded, mildly embarrassed that her attitude had been broadcast to the rest of the bridge crew. "Aye, sir," she replied professionally as her paws moved across her panel, implementing the order given.

Crash looked back over his shoulder at his second. "Call Engineering and find out how much more time they need before we can go back to warp." He looked over to Carman Valastro at Navigation. "E.T.A. to the Neutral Zone?"

Before he could answer the turbolift doors opened and Piper, followed by

Sarda, burst onto the bridge. Crash stood up respectfully and updated his Captain of the current events, including the Romulan fleet's movements. "I have brought us to Yellow Alert in case there may be cloaked Romulan ships prowling the area, looking for unwary Starfleet vessels."

Piper nodded at the wisdom of the decision. They were now relatively close to the Neutral Zone, and they had to be careful. "Thank you, Mister Krashtallah." Piper looked to Valastro. "E.T.A.?"

"Two hours at our current speed, Captain," came the immediate response.

"Captain." Crash had taken his place at Communications. "Engineering reports they need ten more minutes before we can go to warp."

Piper nodded, shaking off the last effects of sleep. She had been in her quarters barely three hours and she still felt weary. "Sarda?"

The first officer looked up from his station at her call. "Yes, Captain."

"Could you display tactical on the main screen, please?"

"Aye." The massive starfield was replaced by a three-dimensional chart of the Neutral Zone and the starships from both sides that were moving along it. It showed clearly the red dots that marked the Romulan and the green dots for the Federation forces that were converging on the space near Galorndon Core, one of the closest planets to the Romulan NZ. The blue marker which showed the *Millennium*'s position was still moving toward the Neutral Zone, but on a vector that took them away from Galorndon Core.

"Mister Valastro, lay in a course for Galorndon Core. Mister Nunn, execute as soon as possible." Piper gave Crash an annoyed look. "Well?"

Crash smiled to himself. He knew Piper wasn't mad at him, but at Engineering. He made the call and knew Piper wouldn't be happy with "wait", so he got on their case.

"We're going as fast as we can down here," answered a junior ensign.

"Do you really want Captain Piper to come down there to hurry you up?" Crash teased.

An audible gulp was heard from the nervous ensign. "I'll be back in a minute."

Crash curled a lip in pleasure. He loved getting the crew to hop at his snarl. A moment later the ensign was back. "Commander Sandage is coming back inside now." A pause, then: "Ready when you are."

"Thank you," he purred, deeply. "Captain, warp speed at your command."

Piper grinned at him, with a twinkle in her eye. "Mister Nunn, warp one." As the mammoth vessel slipped into faster-than-light travel the captain stepped over to Sarda and looked past his shoulder at the picture of the strange Romulan Warbird once more. Her keen eyes caught something she had previously missed. Touching the screen, she zoomed in then turned the image slightly. Right next to the Romulan Star Empire insignia was a small painting of an elaborate sword. Her

mind turned back to the conversation she'd had with Doctor McCoy just days before regarding the S'harien sword's beauty.

At that point, Sarda stood and offered the captain his chair. "If you will excuse me, Captain, I have much to do on the projector software."

Piper noted the sense of urgency he held. Time was pressing in on them from all sides. "Go," she said with a small smile.

Without another word, Sarda turned and made for the turbolift. Within seconds, he was gone. She was sorry to see him go. She always was.

Piper turned back to the Science Station screen. "Computer," she commanded. The machinery blinked an acknowledgement that it was ready. "Show me an image of the S'harien sword that sits in the Romulan Senate's empty chair."

The captain's eyes widened in surprise at the craftsmanship that was barely revealed in the image before her. Like many pieces of art, one could not completely appreciate it from a photo, but she got an impression of just how breathtaking it was.

She compared one image with the other. It was clear. A very good likeness of it was painted on the Warbird's flank.

She glanced at the viewscreen and saw the streaming stars that indicated they were back at warp. She checked their position on the star chart on the panel before Lieutenant Valastro. She made a snap decision.

"Crash, open hailing frequencies," she said.

While the great cat's ears flicked up in surprise it was his only indication of his feelings. He touched a control. "Hailing frequencies open, Captain."

Piper tilted her head to the side. This had to be said just right. "If the one who holds the sword will sheath it, meet me at Genesis in one hour." She turned to Crash and made a slashing motion to stop the broadcast then turned to the Helm. "Gentlemen, take us to Genesis. Best speed."

The Romulan Commander wasn't the only one listening to Piper's invitation. Aboard the Romulan Bird of Prey, *Falcon's Claw*, K'miktos was fuming. He recognised the voice. It was Piper's; the human whore who had messed with his plans before.

The nuances of the message were not lost on him. He knew Romulan history almost as well as he knew his own people's. The reference to the S'harien was a clever double entendre. He had analysed his own recordings of the exchange at the Starbase. He had not been able to understand how the station, which should have been crippled, had managed to fire on them. The *Falcon's Claw*'s scanners had seen the Warbird and its insignia.

Furious, he turned and spat on the floor beside him. He reflected that he

should have kept some of the Orion pirates alive for moments like this. There was nothing so relaxing as a good torture session. He balled his hand into a fist and punched the air. "I will not have that Federation P'takh destroy our plans *again*." He strode over to the Communications panel and made a call. He had an appointment at the Neutral Zone he had to keep, but, fortunately, he wasn't alone.

It took only thirty minutes for the *Millennium* to reach what remained of Genesis. The planet, with its newly generated star nearby, had both come and gone almost as quickly as they had been created. Now all that remained of the system was rubble that had once been a planet, and a white dwarf which was soon going to collapse into a singularity.

Its position was known to all, as was its notoriety in the galaxy's history. Carol Marcus, her son David (who was also Jim Kirk's son), and their crew had managed to pull off nothing short of a miracle with the creation of this system from the Mutara Nebula. However, their theories had proven flawed, and their new world had self-destructed within weeks of Khan Noonien Singh's activation of the Genesis device.

The drama had been exacerbated by David's early death at the hands of Commander Krue, a Klingon on a personal mission to seize the secrets of Genesis at any cost. James Kirk's attempt to retrieve Spock had ended with the *Enterprise* destroyed, David dead, and Spock's protege, a young Vulcan/Romulan hybrid named Sa'avik having to deal with the grief of having lost a possible lover.

As Piper and she were close friends, Sa'avik had shared the story with her just before her assignment to Vulcan. The young Lieutenant was stoic, but undoubtedly grief stricken.

Now, all that remained of Genesis was a debris field that was orbiting a tiny star. Floating amongst the asteroids was a small, Federation shuttle containing the *Millennium*'s Captain and First Officer. At the shuttle's rear was a universal docking collar that would allow the passage of people from ships of practically any design.

Inside, Sarda tapped on a console, the only indication that he was in any way disturbed by this turn of events. The notion of being in a defenceless shuttle during a time of hostilities seemed a little foolish to him. He glanced down at his fingers and realised not only what he had been doing absently, but also the lack of faith he was showing in his Captain.

He felt her emotions momentarily when she put her hand over his. Piper turned from the portal and looked Sarda in the eye, showing him her own doubts. "I can't say that I blame you, old friend. This isn't my idea of fun, either. But if we want to get to the truth of what's going on, we've got to start trusting *someone*."

The Vulcan nodded silently, a bit more at peace, but still on guard. "Yes,

Captain. I am merely concerned that the Rihannsu have a history of duplicity.”

That evoked a tight smile and Piper rolled her eyes. “That goes without saying.” She turned her attention back to the massive asteroid field around them. She tried to put what she felt into words. “I suppose I’m betting on the fact that the ship’s name is the *S’harien*. Anyone with that knowledge and respect for their history might still be an honourable person. Their code of honour has weakened, but it hasn’t disappeared entirely.”

Sarda knew the captain was referring to the recent events in the Romulan Star Empire and that efforts were being made to restore it to some semblance of nobility. Stoically, he said: “I am just not certain that it would be something I would be willing to place a wager on.” His attempt at levity did not go unnoticed by his companion.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sarda saw the emerald-green shuttle slip out from behind a larger asteroid and head their way. The change in his demeanour was more than enough for Piper to realise they had company.

They both noted the shuttle was not moving quickly, and their scans showed it carried no armaments, only defensive shields.

Piper opened communications. “This is the *Banana Republic* calling the Rihannsu shuttle. Please state your intentions.”

A tense moment was shared as they were temporarily greeted with silence. Then, a female voice was heard from the overhead speaker. “Apologies, *Banana Republic*, this is Shuttle Three of the Rihannsu Warbird *S’harien*. These cursed asteroids are hard to navigate around. My intentions are to answer your invitation. My sword is definitely sheathed.”

The mirth in the final statement could be heard clearly, causing Piper to chuckle. “You’re welcome to dock with us so we can discuss the situation,” she said cheerfully. All the while, she kept her hand near the shuttle’s shield controls, just in case. Somewhere out there, the *S’harien* was cloaked while it waited for its envoy’s return. Their intentions were anything but clear.

All the same, she felt a certain comfort that her own cavalry was close by. A lot closer than the crew of the *S’harien* might imagine.

“I’m glad we had the chance to test the projector,” Scanner said as he lounged against the Bridge railing. On the screen, the *Banana Republic* could be seen in high resolution as the Romulan ship dodged the floating rubble as it attempted to dock with her.

Crash nodded his black, shortly maned head, his whiskers arching forward. “I’m just glad you got it finished just before we got here.” He stood inside the railing encircling the centre of the Bridge just behind the Centre Seat. For good reason.

Looking entirely uncomfortable, Lieutenant Amantallash sat, temporarily in command at Piper's order. She could still hear the captain's voice. "I'm leaving you in charge, Lieutenant, so you can gain some experience. *However*, it will be under the supervision of Lieutenant Krashtallah. If there is to be *any* sign of combat, I want him to assume command. Is that understood?"

Remembering the words, Manny was tempted to nod in acceptance of them once more. Instead, she asked: "Are there any signs of the *S'harien*?"

Carman looked down at his board. As there wasn't much need for navigation at the moment, he had given his eye to using the passive sensors to locate some sign of the Romulan ship. "None, yet, Lieutenant," he responded in business-like fashion.

Manny sighed. Nothing was happening. Command was supposed to be exciting, but the most she had done so far was fill out logs and sign reports. Her view of Command had always been like a thrill ride, with one adventure after another. She was beginning to understand that those times were the exceptions rather than the rule.

Krashtallah's whiskers twitched. His sister hadn't changed. She was still looking for action. Something she could do with her hands *now*. She had yet to learn the value of patience.

It was something he once had tried to teach her himself. They had always been at odds when they were young, only because their parents kept them that way – their father in particular. Their people had an ancient history, but it was one dotted with irrational superstitions, to say the very least. Chief among them was the notion that white kittens were to be prized, while black kittens were to be reviled. As the two of them, and their ordinary, tawny coloured brother, Gruntallah, were from the same litter, Crash was seen to have "cancelled out" their clan's good fortune with the birth of Amantallash.

So, she had become the prized kitten, and he the rejected one. Duty to one's children, and a mother's love, was all that kept him in the clan.

With these prejudices played out before them constantly, Crash had grown up shunned by society, and often envious of his sister's natural desirability. It was a situation that could have caused him to loathe her, but instead he went against the grain and tried to see her for what she truly was. He was often buoyed by the conflict he could see in her eyes when he was teased as a kit. He knew that, deep down, a part of her didn't want to be a part of it.

It was what he had appealed to when, one day, he suggested his sister play a human game with him – chess. It had taken some time to explain the rules, but after weeks of practice – with nobody watching (of course) – her skill levels began improving. Whilst Crash was a better tactician, his sister's kamikaze style of play had occasionally left him on the back foot.

As Crash focussed on the view screen once more, watching as the shuttles

came together, he wondered if she remembered those times and cherished them the way he did. His attention was drawn to the hackles on the back of Manny's neck as her fur began to rise. She was becoming irritated.

To attract her attention, he let out a quiet sigh. He knew she heard him as her right ear flicked back towards him. Good. "Sometimes, we have to wait for our opponents to make the first move, Shrallah. During that time, we can consider what they're thinking; try to get under their fur." His tone and manner were of a teacher encouraging a promising student. "What do you think is going on?"

His sister's eyes narrowed a little. She was having a hard time letting go of her anger towards him and just accept the fact he was her superior officer, end of story. "All I know is that the *S'harien* is out there somewhere, cloaked. I *don't* like the idea of an enemy shuttle docking with the captain's without an armed escort. That shuttle could be full of Romulan guards."

"True," Crash said conversationally. "But the Romulans have to know we have taken safeguards as well. It would be very risky to try something with the captain keeping a constant open channel. What would they have to gain from it?"

Manny growled and let out a slow hiss. Crash noticed the sound startled a few of their fellow bridge crew members, but oddly not Scanner, who was manning the Bridge Engineering panel. Before Crash could speak again, Scanner stepped forward and laid a friendly hand on his sister's shoulder.

The move caught Manny off guard and her head whipped around, her fangs bared. When she saw it was Lieutenant *Commander* Sandage, her visage softened, and she remembered her place. She looked into his human face and read there only compassion and camaraderie.

His soft, southern United States accent brought a smile to her face as he spoke. There was something about this human she really liked. "Ah'd listen to your brother, Lieutenant. He's only trying to teach you somethin' valuable."

All the same, Manny spoke with a touch of sarcasm. "Aside from the obvious?"

Instead of rebuking her, Scanner laughed. "Nothin' of the sort!" he said between chuckles. His grip on her shoulder tightened, warmly, and he looked her right in the eye. "One thing about *any* game is to not waste your time on useless thinkin'. Is your mind really on what you're doing here, or are you still too busy nursing a grudge?"

His words stung. They had hit their mark. Manny's fur shook in embarrassment as she realised, she was letting the crew down with her childish attitude. Now was not the time for such behaviour. If she had something to sort out with her brother, it would have to be when they were off duty.

Ashamed, Manny kept the Engineer's gaze and gave him a soulful, "My apologies, sir. It won't happen again."

Scanner gave her a warm smile, his eyes twinkling, and playfully scratched

her behind the ear. It was a friendly action, but also a surprisingly intimate one. He reluctantly pulled his hand away and said with confidence: "I'm sure it won't." He glanced over at Crash, indicating he should take over. "Ah've got to get back to Engineering and make sure our new equipment is holdin' up." With that said, he turned and disappeared into a turbolift.

Crash was almost sorry to see him go. The human was quite good at settling down his sometimes-flighty sister. He was surprised when he heard her give out a sigh that started at the soles of her feet.

"In answer to your question, Lieutenant," she said evenly. "There would be two valuable Starfleet officers very dead."

From the navigation station, Carman spoke up. His years of training and experience were showing. "A lot of effort for little return," he said in his Grecian accent, common for people from Alpha Centauri. "Besides, it would escalate the conflict to all-out war with an attack on a Starfleet vessel *inside* Federation space."

"Precisely," Crash said, sagely. He gave a small smile, grateful that he was in the company of wise counsel. "The captain knows what she's doing."

In the Centre Seat, Amantallash squirmed. The weight of responsibility was weighing on her as she said a little fearfully: "But what about the *unknown* factor. What if things don't go the way we expect them to?"

As one, Crash, Carman and Jason Nunn said: "That's what we're here for."

With a metallic clang, the two shuttles docked, the captain steadyng the craft with a deft hand, then setting the automatics to keep them from falling into one of the nearby asteroids. There were plenty of them about, slowly tumbling this way and that. Some were the size of golf balls. Others, the size of Manhattan Island. It was those she was most concerned about.

Piper gave her friend a tight grin that said: "Here we go!" as they stepped over to the hatch. The atmosphere indicator went green as the collar was pressurised. Without preamble, the captain toggled it open.

It slid aside to reveal a Romulan woman of about fifty earth years in appearance. She wasn't overly tall, or overly beautiful, with her long, black, straight hair that was typical of her people. Her nose belonged to a noble woman and her lips were full.

It was her eyes that engaged the Starfleet Officers. They were piercing and missed nothing. Within seconds, they had their measure.

"May I come aboard?" she asked formally.

Piper stepped to the side and ushered her inside. A quick glance behind her confirmed she was alone.

"It would be hardly trusting if I brought a contingent of guards, would it?" their guest said mildly, having seen Piper's look.

The captain gave her a brief smile. "No, I suppose it wouldn't." She offered the Romulan woman a chair. "We would have had to share the drinks."

The whimsy surprised the Commander a little and she gave a small smile. "True." To break the ice, she introduced herself. "I am Commander t'Avik of the Imperial Warbird *S'harien*."

The captain responded in kind, introducing both herself and Sarda, then asked the obvious: "What brings you here?"

Once again, the captain's use of humour eased the Commander's nerves. She wondered how much she could tell them. They were the enemy at worst, and their peoples had rarely seen eye to eye. And yet, she knew the Federation regarded honour highly, and with this in mind she decided to take the plunge. "I am trying to recover one of our Birds of Prey before it is used to start a very costly war." There, she thought, keep it simple.

Piper's eyes narrowed. "By violating Federation space," she said baldly. "You could have informed us and let us deal with it."

The Commander sighed. It was always difficult dealing with outworlders. They just didn't understand the Rihannsu way. "It was a matter of mnhei'sahe," she stated flatly. "If the *Falcon's Claw*'s captain had gone rogue it would have been our duty to deal with his.... error."

As the Captain rolled her eyes at the sheer arrogance of the Romulans and their rigid code, Sarda interjected. "I understand the need to deal with one's own people's mistakes, Commander," he said evenly. "It must have been a difficult decision to make."

She looked at the Vulcan, one of her people's distant cousins, and realised he knew her better than she thought. "It was not taken lightly," she said shortly.

Silence reigned for precious seconds as the tension in the air mounted. It was broken when Piper mentioned the elephant in the room. "And we're simply supposed to take your word for it that it's all not some convoluted plot."

Trust, the Commander realised. It always came down to that. Who can you trust? Their peoples had far too much bad blood to take each other at face value.

"May I suggest something?" Sarda offered, his gaze flicking from one woman to the other.

Piper tilted her head to the side, realising what he was about to offer. "It's too much of a security risk," she said flatly. "Besides, I know it's hard enough to mind meld with *one* person. How are you supposed to do it with *two*?"

As the Commander began her own objections, Sarda held up a serene hand to silence her. "It would only be the lightest of joinings. Just enough for us to know that we are being truthful with each other."

The women shared a look, each wondering if the other was going to back out. The notion of opening one's mind to another was something that triggered an almost primal response. In that brief exchange they found the strength to give it a

go as they remembered who they were. Women of duty and honour. They nodded in unison.

Taking Sarda's cue, they brought their chairs together in the centre of their small space and leaned towards each other. Without fear, the women allowed Sarda to place his hands on their cheeks and temples.

The psychic shock jolted all three of them as the mind meld went way beyond anything they expected. Each of them found themselves seeing places they had never seen before, memories that weren't theirs. The Commander saw the purplish sunset on Proxima from the Piper's family rooftop and heard Piper's mother's loving voice call her down for dinner. The captain found herself smelling a home cooked meal in a bluestone building and Sarda remembered what it was like to be in the Imperial Rihannsu Academy, sitting through a lecture in Quantum Mechanics. The images shifted and congealed, and it was all they could do to keep their separate identities from merging all together as they found themselves living each other's lives.

“What’s keeping them so long?” Manny said soulfully. Her tail was getting sore sitting in the big chair. She was looking forward to having the captain back where she belonged.

Crash’s tail whipped playfully. “It takes as long as it does.”

From the helm, Mister Nunn said in a bored tone: “How long is a piece of string?”

Manny missed the meaning, but Crash understood the human idiom. “As long as it has to be,” he said quietly. He tensed as he realised something had changed. His glanced at the view screen where the shuttles were continuing their celestial dance. He then looked down at his sister and noticed her hackles were standing on end. “What is it, Shrallah?” he asked her, feeling her tension.

She turned and looked up at him, her eyes full of fear. “I don’t know, Shrallah,” she said, a pained expression on her face. “I just know there’s something very wrong.”

“Lieutenant!” Carman stated suddenly, his eyes drawn to the scanners. “A Klingon Battle Cruiser is decloaking at two-five mark fifteen! Five thousand metres! They’re preparing to fire!”

Without a word, Amantallah surrended the Conn and Krashtallah took her place. She leaped over the console and took her place at Weapons.

“Battlestations!”

On the shuttle, the human, Vulcan and Romulan were still struggling to sort themselves out. Unable to understand what was happening, it was taking all their

concentration to find their individuality once more.

Because of this, they were entirely oblivious to the danger lurking outside and the urgent messages coming from *both* of their ships.

Two thousand metres behind the Romulan shuttle, the *S'harien* decloaked and fired on the Klingon Battle Cruiser. Unfortunately, it played right into their hands when a *second* Klingon Battle Cruiser decloaked behind the *S'harien* and opened fire as they struggled to raise their shields.

Seeing it all play out before them, Krashtallahash detached the part of his mind that was screaming *run!* and decided on a course of action. “Helm, intercept course with the first Klingon vessel. Fire at will. Scramble the fighters.”

As the order was given, a bright red globe streaked out of the forward torpedo tube of the Battle Cruiser and raced towards the shuttles. A part of Crash’s mind screamed, then he had to keep himself from jumping ecstatically when it impacted an asteroid and detonated short of its target.

Regaining his composure, he said: “Inform Starfleet of our situation.”

The answer did not surprise him. “The Klingons are jamming us, sir. Long range communications are down, but we can still punch through the noise locally.”

Crash grimaced. At least he could still talk to his people. “Then we’re going to have to do this on our own,” he said resolutely.

On the bridge of the first Klingon Battle Cruiser, *Bloodwine*, its captain, another son of Duras named K’ringtof, watched his viewscreen in amazement as a huge rock behind the shuttles began moving. Curiously, it was heading his way! The burly Captain could only say: “What the...” before he saw a barrage of photon torpedoes race towards him from *inside* the asteroid.

“Evasive manoeuvres!” he barked, knowing full well it was hard to do when you were surrounded by asteroids.

As the torpedoes detonated against their shields the asteroid disappeared, replaced by the biggest Federation Starship he had ever seen. Its name was clearly seen on its primary hull: *U.S.S. Millennium*.

Momentarily startled, K’ringtof bellowed: “Fire again on the shuttles, and bring all batteries to bear on the Federation ship!”

The *Millennium*’s Bridge was a hive of activity as officers raced to do their jobs. At the rear of the Bridge the fighters were being ordered to launch

immediately. The pilot's leader was a woman who knew trouble when she saw it and had her pilots sitting in their fighters ready to go. As they raced out both ends of the hangar deck in their light craft, they received Crash's order. Protect the shuttles at all costs.

"Helm, put us between the shuttles and the first Klingon ship. Shut down the projector." With a confident smile, he gave the order: "Weapons, give them a taste of our megaphasers."

Attached to the *Millennium*'s warp nacelle pylons were the latest weaponry in the Federation's arsenal: Megaphasers. Drawing their energy directly from the warp core, they were able to deliver a deadly blow. Each glowed brightly as raw energy was thrown at the Klingon Battle Cruiser time and time again. Backed by the *Millennium*'s regular phaser emplacements, and photon torpedoes, the Klingons found themselves being driven backwards as each blast erupted on their shields, which was just what Crash wanted.

The *S'harien* had taken damage to their warp nacelles in the initial volley, but they were still free to manoeuvre, their shields fully charged. Her first officer threw everything they had at the second Klingon ship as they flew with agility around the asteroids. However, the fight was too evenly matched, and the Klingons were yet to suffer a hit to their hull.

On the *Banana Republic*, Piper, t'Avik and Sarda pulled away from each other at the same instant. Although they were not touching, they could still sense one another's thoughts. It was bizarre.

Without having to speak, Piper asked: "What the hell was that?"

Sarda answered in kind. "I believe the two of you are much more mentally adept at mind melds than I imagined. It took me by surprise and overwhelmed me. Before I could stop it, my mind simply became a conduit for our thoughts and memories."

In such an open state, the Commander simply concurred. Communicating as they were, there was no dissemination. "I see the truth of it," she stated simply.

Piper's gaze was drawn to the flashes outside of weapons fire. "What the hell!" she said verbally as her eyes took in the vista before her.

From the speaker overhead, she finally heard: "*Millennium* to *Banana Republic*, please respond!"

She slapped her hand down on the comms console, activating her end. "Piper here."

The relief she heard was fairly palpable. "Captain, thank God. We have launched the fighters to escort you until the situation is secure."

This Piper saw as the fighters pulled in alongside and around them. They were shielding them from all sides, she noted. Beside her, Sarda and the Commander watched in amazement.

t'Avik's attention was drawn to her own vessel and she noticed it was under fire and doing badly. "I have to get back to my ship," she said silently. Nobody tried to get in her way. She turned and headed back to her shuttle.

K'ringtov was furious that the *Millennium* had gotten in the way, and they were not able to fire on the shuttles directly. He scowled at his second and growled: "Have the *Hellfire* fire on the shuttles. They must be destroyed before the truth gets out!"

The weapons officer on the *Hellfire* received the order and frowned at the P'takh Federation fighters encircling the shuttles. It was going to be a difficult shot. He smiled to himself. Why take one shot when you can fire six? he thought. There was a time for subtlety, and this wasn't one of them.

The *Millennium*'s fighter squadron was being led by Lieutenant Gabriella Batistelli, an earth woman from a long line of fighter pilots. She had seen a lot of action in her career, but today was something else. Not only was she being tasked to protect the captain in the shuttles, but her people had to fend off *two* Klingon Battle Cruisers *and* dodge a hail of asteroids. It was scene straight out of her worst nightmares.

With their mother ship covering them from the first Klingon ship, she kept her eyes on the second. If there was going to be some unfriendly fire, it would more than likely come from that direction. Her assumption was confirmed when the Klingon vessel's torpedo tubes glowed and fired a barrage straight at them!

"Lay down cover fire!" she ordered her people excitedly, her Italian accent thickening. "Make sure they don't get through!"

"Aye!"

All sixteen fighters began firing at the bright red globes racing towards their positions. Within seconds, they began detonating, lighting up space, as the phaser bolts found their marks.

The Commander had barely stepped into her shuttle when one of the

torpedoes slipped through, exploding behind them and vaporising the forward section of her shuttle. The small amount of air inside raced out as she desperately gripped the edge of the airlock door, feeling the air within the *Banana Republic* rush by her as it was blown out the door. In the second she had to choose, she focussed her thoughts on Piper and gave her a message to pass on, before she let go and allowed the door to close. Mercifully, death came swiftly in the icy cold of space.

Inside the *Banana Republic*, the Starfleet Officers struggled to breathe as the tiny vessel raced to replenish their air and bring the temperature back up to something tolerable. The moisture within had instantly frozen to most surfaces, including the forward windows, and caked their faces in ice.

And yet it was hardly felt as the pair experienced t'Avik's death in their hearts and minds. It was mercifully quick, but, as the dark closed in, they felt her slip away as if it was their very selves. Even though they had mostly separated their consciousnesses, they had still been connected by a bond that went way beyond intimate. In a very real way, they knew each other completely, and to lose t'Avik was worse than losing a lover. Shaken to their very souls, it was all Piper could do to find the will to get the *Banana Republic* moving again while Sarda ejected the remains of t'Avik's shuttle.

Shivering, but hardly feeling the deathly cold, Sarda could do nothing to comfort his Captain. He needed comforting himself.

As the *Millennium* took fire herself, Crash kept up a merciless barrage of fire against the *Bloodwine*. He knew he had to finish this fight quickly if he was to help the *S'harien*.

“Status of shields,” he requested.

With complete composure, Amantallash replied: “Shield one is down to twenty percent. Shields two and three at one hundred percent.”

From the helm, Jason Nunn muttered: “You’ve gotta love triple shielding.”

“Hmm,” Crash said by way of agreement. “Keep us moving forward, I want him to keep his attention focussed on us.”

“Aye.”

What K’ringtof was unaware of was that Krashtallash was driving his ship backwards into one of the system’s biggest asteroids. In fact, he wasn’t aware of it until his aft shields failed and he heard the sound of rending metal.

With the *Bloodwine*’s shields overloaded, it only took seconds for them to

go down. Then the *Millennium* pressed home the attack. Their weapons played over the Klingon vessel's hull, leaving scorch marks all over its Bridge and weapons pod. As it was designed with the usual bird's head design attached to the Engineering section via a long neck, it wasn't long before that very neck was exposed. Under Crash's orders, Amantallah used the *Millennium*'s megaphasers to slice through it and separate the head from the body. Then, with a few, choice shots, they disabled the ship's engines and remaining weapons.

With the first Klingon vessel taken care of, Krashtallah turned his attention to the *S'harien*'s plight. "Helm, bring us about on a course for the second Klingon vessel. Weapons, co-ordinate your fire with the *S'harien*. Work on the Klingon's weakest shields. Has the subspace jamming ceased?"

As the *Millennium* came about, it quickly became clear that the *S'harien* was in deep trouble. She was venting plasma from her warp drive, leaving what looked like a trail of stellar smoke behind her as she continued trying to dodge the Klingon's fire.

On some level, Crash knew that if they couldn't close the distance between them quickly, the fight would be over in moments. As he watched, another phaser bolt scored the *S'harien*'s hull.

"Status of the *S'harien*?" he ordered.

Their Science Officer had already scanned her. "Shields down. Warp drive damaged. Minimal weapons."

Crash snarled in anger. His eyes narrowed as he considered a desperate rescue plan. Between them was a densely packed field of asteroids, most of them not larger than a car. "Emergency power to the shields. Helm, push through these asteroids. Use the shields as a battering ram!"

Their pilot, Jason Nunn, was stunned by the order. Things outside were about to get very messy. "Aye, sir," he said, a little shaken.

As Piper considered her options, her desire to return to her ship warred against the fact that they seemed to be doing the job without them. She had briefly considered leading an attack on the Klingon vessel, but she knew it would be a suicide run. David was not only taking Goliath on but having to dodge a hail of arrows as well. In her mind, that was beyond stupid.

Her sensors showed her the *Millennium* was in fine shape, with her shields holding up well. She could not say the same for the *S'harien*. The part of her that was still t'Avik yearned to go to their assistance.

She shook her head to clear it. t'Avik's thoughts were a constant distraction, even though their originator was now dead. It was if part of the Commander's

consciousness had taken up residence in her mind.

Her eyes widened as she watched her Communications officer's latest tactic. The *Millennium* suddenly surged forwards under impulse power, knocking asteroids this way and that as her shields brushed them aside. It was a brazen move, that was certain, as her people tried to go to the Romulan's ship's aid.

"The *Millennium*'s triple shielding will only last for five minutes if the Lieutenant keeps using the vessel as a pool cue." Sarda's words sounded strange, and Piper realised that, like her, his thoughts weren't entirely his own. What she also found odd was the echo in her mind as she heard them. It was as if she was hearing the thought as her First Officer voiced it.

A thought came to her, and before she could act on it, Sarda had already opened a channel. It was as if he knew her thoughts. "Banana Republic to the *Millennium*. We are going to move to a safe distance until the situation is secure." The *Millennium*'s actions had started a chain reaction. Drawing on Sarda's analogy, the area had turned into a pool table after the balls had been broken. Asteroid after asteroid were being bounced around as the ship's forceful motion was sending them flying, then ricocheting off one another. The region had become a celestial pinball machine.

And yet, the *Millennium* pushed forward and through. Piper had to admire Krashtallah's chutzpah. There was no way he was going to let some rocks get in the way of his mission.

With regret, Piper did the smart thing and began navigating out of the asteroid field, knowing her faith in her Communications Officer was not misplaced.

On the *Hellfire*, her captain, a stout, but burly male with the odd name of K'Hannibal, cheered his success in typical Klingon fashion. He raised his fist in the air and cried "Victory!"

He wasn't far from the truth. The *S'harien* was nearly beaten, and, although it still defiantly fired upon its adversary with what little it had left, its time would run out when K'Hannibal had a clear shot.

There was little that could burst his bubble at this point. However, it almost made an audible "pop" when his tactical officer reported: "Captain, the *Bloodwine* has been destroyed. The *Millennium* is on an intercept course."

K'Hannibal frowned. The Federation starship would waste time navigating through the asteroid field on its way to him. They still had time to finish off the Romulan ship before engaging the Federation scum. He was just about to issue the order to fire when the Tactical Officer spoke again.

"Captain, the *Millennium* has triple shielding and will be on us in fifteen seconds. He is pushing through the asteroids and gaining speed." The officer sounded concerned.

As he should have been. Any ship that could best the *Bloodwine* would no doubt be able to do the same with them. All the same, the *Millennium* must have sustained damage in her battle with their brother ship, and her shields were being drained with each asteroid hit.

He glanced at the *S'harien* and realised the Warbird wasn't going anywhere. They could finish him off later. The thought made him taste bile, but victory went to the wise, not fools.

"Bring us about," he ordered. "All power to the forward shields. Open fire on the Federation ship."

The *Millennium* was being rocked by every shield impact, and most kept their place by hanging onto something anchored to the floor.

"Status of shields," Crash requested grimly.

The reply was immediate, and the tone carried concern. "Shield one is down. Shield two is at forty percent."

Which left their third shield in reserve. Crash tapped the chair arm. It would no doubt come to that.

An idea came to him. "What's the composition of these asteroids?"

The Science Officer took a moment to scan. "Mostly iron, nickel, and traces of sulphur and other earth minerals typical of planetary flotsam."

"Are there any that are unstable?"

The Science Officer, an older human with greying hair named Guido, looked at the Lieutenant with a sly grin. "I'll check," he said. "*Uno momento.*"

Krashtallash's attention was drawn back to the view screen as they were rocked by Klingon disrupter fire. "Shrallah," he said, addressing his sister, "let them have it."

"With pleasure," Amantallash purred, letting her hands glide over the panel. With each touch, a phaser pod released a bolt, or a torpedo arced towards the Klingons. Within seconds, their shields were flaring so badly that the Battle Cruiser was barely visible.

K'Hannibal found himself having to grip the railing on his own Bridge as the *Millennium*'s three weapons sources played havoc with his shields. His screen revealed a similar image as the Federation ship's shields flared. With nowhere to go in the asteroid field that wouldn't result in *more* shield damage as they would undoubtedly encounter the annoying rocks, he could do nothing more than advance on their nemesis and give them everything they had in their arsenal.

In the *Millennium*'s engineering section, Scanner was swearing. Their largely untried ship was starting to show where her stress points were. The large ship's schematic that lined one wall was highlighting components that were under strain or even near to overload.

"This is why you have shakedown cruises!" he yelled in anger. He slammed his fist on the wall in frustration. "You *don't* throw a starship in the deep end!"

As he spoke, a panel behind him sparked and arced electrically before its safety system kicked in and isolated the circuit.

"Jenny!" he yelled to his assistant. "Get on that!"

"Aye, sir!" she cried in response. With the warp core working at high capacity to supply them with the power to run the megaphasers, the noise was almost deafening. Most of his staff was wearing hearing protection and had to yell if they wanted to be heard.

Scanner scowled. "I hope this fight is over soon," he muttered to himself. "Or we won't have to worry about the *Klingons* finishing us off. We'll do that all by ourselves."

On the Bridge, Krashtallah finally got some good news. On his chair arm was a small display that reported their shield status. The secondary shield was down, and they were now down to their last line of defence. As he watched, the graph was shrinking visibly.

"Gotcha!"

Crash started. "Sorry?" he asked, confused.

Guido grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, Lieutenant." He tapped a control that highlighted an asteroid with a red outline. He pointed to it as he reported. "Our friend, here, is made up of magnesium and kalganite. An explosive combination, you might say."

Manny chimed in. "I don't see how that will help us as the asteroid is *in front* of them, not behind."

A feral smile crossed her brother's face. "Helm, back us away. Let them think we're retreating. Shrallah, as soon as that asteroid is behind them, hit it with a photon torpedo and detonate it."

"Aye!" both officers replied.

It took a few moments of edging backwards, but Jason managed to not only reverse the *Millennium*, but avoid hitting anything behind them. All the same, they were losing shield strength not only from the Klingon weapons fire, but also on bouncing asteroids that were coming in from all directions.

A minute later, they were in position. Without waiting for an order, Lieutenant Amantallah fired the requested torpedo, her hopes riding on her brother's risky plan. Her doubts were quashed when the asteroid exploded with the

brilliance of a small sun. The shock wave slammed into the *Hellfire*, buckling its hull and twisting its port warp nacelle. Energy arced throughout the vessel as plasma conduits ruptured and power found its way into places it wasn't meant to go. A number of Klingons were killed in the blast, even more were electrocuted by arcing energy as it made its way down the ship's corridor, destroying anything in its path.

On the *Hellfire*'s bridge, K'Hannibal, along with the rest of his crew, were tossed about like rag dolls. It took a moment for the deck's gravity plating to right itself, but even when it did, it felt like they were sitting on the side of a hill with a thirty-degree slope from right to left.

K'Hannibal survived, but he realised he wouldn't be using his left arm any time soon as it was broken in two places. He tried to look about him, but it was taking time for the fans to clear the smoke. "Damage report!" he demanded, expecting an immediate response.

There was nobody alive to answer. K'Hannibal dragged himself over to the computer console and called up the ship's diagnostic program. The report was devastating. *All* of their systems were offline, including life support. With this much damage, they would have only minutes to live.

However, life support was not the worst report. Their warp core was going critical. The realisation struck with only enough time for him to cry out to the dead before the containment field failed and his ship exploded with the force of fifty megatons of TNT.

The first shockwave also shook the *Millennium* badly, rattling the new ship's solid construction. When the *Hellfire* also exploded, the *Millennium* was close enough to be thrown backwards into several asteroids, bringing their shields down to a critically low level.

In the Engineering section, the crew had barely picked themselves up from the first blast when the second struck with even more violence. Crew members were thrown about, tools went flying, and a number of panels overloaded and exploded.

When it was over, Scanner let go of the master control panel, glad it was there. He knew what the second shockwave was a result of. He had felt that kind of blast before.

A quick glance around him confirmed that several of his people needed help. He slapped the ship's emergency intercom. "Engineering to Sickbay, we have injured down here."

Nurse Stone's gravelly voice replied, her annoyance obvious. "You're not

the only ones. The doctors are snowed here, so I suggest you try and bring your most seriously injured here yourselves. Stone out."

Chapter Ten

Captain Martin paced the bridge of the *Excalibur* like a caged animal. He ran a hand through his mop of thick, red hair in frustration. It was plain that the Romulans were preparing a thrust and Admiral Smillie refused to take any punitive action. Sure, the fleet was all here, with the exception of the much-vaunted *Millennium* and the *Enterprise*, but the Romulans were not leaving.

Time and time again during his seventeen years in Starfleet, the last six as captain of the *Excalibur*, Steven had to watch opportunities for the Federation to push back its aggressors, to create breathing room and space for it to expand. For freedom to come to worlds that knew only the hand of either Romulan or Klingon enslavers. Time and time again his superiors had tied his hands and kept him from glorious victories that would pave the way for a bigger and better Federation. There had even been times when he'd been ordered to tuck his tail and run from combat.

Steven threatened to wear a crease in the carpet as he paced, wild eyed and furious.

The *Excalibur* crew watched him as he fumed. They were handpicked men and women who would fight if their captain made the call. They too were itching for action. The enemy was within reach, only their sworn duty to Starfleet and Fleet Admiral Smillie kept them at their posts.

Captain Martin stopped and seemed to come to a decision, but before he could utter a word the turbolift doors opened and Admiral Smillie strode onto the bridge. He had shaved, showered and put on a new uniform and wore his most business-like look. Although Martin and he were the same height he did his best to use the higher decking around the perimeter of the room to look down on the captain, to be sure he knew his place. Steven Martin did not miss the gesture, or its meaning.

“Status, Captain?” Smillie asked in his most no-nonsense tone.

Martin had to repress the urge to be sarcastic. “The Romulan fleet is on course for Galorndon Core and will have completed its formation in approximately two hours. Our patrolling Starships are being shadowed by Romulan warships of similar size and armament.

“The Romulan fleet appears to be taking up a conical formation to try to pierce our defences and leave us unco-ordinated. I recommend we attack them now before they get the chance to complete it and use this strategy against us.”

“Anything else?” Smillie remained cool and in control. He was doing his best to project calm, hoping it would rub off on those around him. He needed these people to remember they were Starfleet – professionals whose job called for level heads.

“Three more Starships have arrived in the last half hour. *Kongo*, *Potemkin*

and *Phoenix*. The *Millennium* still hasn't shown and is not responding to hails." The Space Control ship's possible plight was played down. It was obvious that he did not give the *Ingram*-class ship much credence.

William Smillie's brows raised a fraction. It was true, he found Piper annoying at best, but she had always been a stickler for protocol. She *should* have checked in by now. Unfortunately, he didn't have the resources to send a ship to look for her.

The Admiral turned his attention the communications officer. "Keep trying to hail the *Millennium*, but first I want you to hail the *Excelsior*."

For a second, the Lieutenant's eyes flicked to the captain for confirmation, who gave an almost subliminal nod. Admiral Smillie saw this and privately worried. The crew obviously regarded loyalty to their captain above rank. He realised he may be forced to take punitive action if the situation degenerated.

The chime of connection being made shifted his attention to the main viewscreen. Captain Styles appeared, nodded and waited for the Admiral to speak. The Commander-in-Chief wasted no time. "Captain, we may soon be facing a thrust from the Romulan fleet. I believe you have already made your own scans and drawn your own conclusions from their actions. I want you to meet the thrust head on and do your best to disrupt their formation. I'll assign the *Saratoga* and the *Melbourne* to escort you. The rest of the fleet will do the rest."

He looked Captain Styles' image square in the eyes to drive home his next point. "Until they make a move you are to make no aggressive moves at all. Stand by on Yellow Alert. Understood?"

"Understood, Admiral," Styles acknowledged, with only a touch of reluctance showing in his voice.

"Good luck, Captain. Admiral Smillie out." The Fleet Commander turned back to a fuming Captain Martin. To Smillie's eyes, the man was practically apoplectic.

"You rejected my recommendations without even giving me the respect of telling me straight to my face." The captain's anger was barely under control, his voice tight and quivering.

Smillie gazed deep into his subordinate's eyes and saw open rebellion. He also knew that where Martin led, his crew would follow. Now was not the time for this. He needed Steven, in control of this ship, and under orders. He could not co-ordinate the fleet and Captain this vessel as well. The Admiral placed a fatherly hand on Martin's shoulder to try to placate him. "Steven, you know we can't take the initiative here. We're here to avert a war, not start one. That's not how we, of the Federation, work. Besides, we don't need a repeat of the Six Day War." He learned that little titbit of history from Piper.

The captain's eyes narrowed with anger bordering on hatred. He yanked the Admiral's hand from him and took a step back, distancing himself from the

Romulan lover. “You would give the Romulans, *our enemies*, the advantage,” he sneered.

The situation was quickly getting out of control. Smillie glanced out of the corners of his eyes and saw the crew getting ready to respond if needed. He let his hands drop and brush a button on a little box in his pocket. Now all he had to do was stall.

“Captain Martin,” he said, his tone one of an official reprimand. “When was the last time you read the Articles of Federation?”

“Don’t patronise me, Admiral,” Martin snapped, his arms crossed, defiant. “You know Starfleet requires all its members to memorise them.”

The Admiral let his voice slip to a dangerous level. “Then you know we cannot start a war without direct orders from the Federation President, and I assure you he has no intention of going to war if it can be helped. He wants peace as badly as the rest of us,” his gesture took in the bridge crew. “As badly as we all do.” He saw a few gazes shift downward in shame. It gave Bill some hope. At least some of them could be counted on to think before they acted.

Captain Martin sneered at his superior. He would not allow his crew’s loyalty to him to be compromised. “Peace is something to be *fought for*, Admiral. Warriors ensure the peace, not bureaucrats like you’ve become. The safety of the Federation is of paramount concern to us, and we are willing to die for it. If the rules need to be bent occasionally to protect our people, then they must.” He looked Smillie square in the eye. It was now or never. “Admiral, I must insist that you move the fleet forward and engage the enemy before they are ready.” He flexed his fingers and reached for the phaser on his belt.

Fleet Admiral Smillie was faster. The small palm phaser he kept up his sleeve dropped down and into his hand. He jerked it up and fired before Captain Martin could raise his. The look of surprise froze on his face as he dropped to the floor, thoroughly stunned. The Admiral made a show of quickly resetting his phaser to “kill”, then waved it at the bridge crew.

“Believe me, I will use this,” he said, his tone deadly serious. Those who had made to go for their phasers stopped, and believed.

The Admiral breathed a sigh of relief when the lift doors opened and his personal guard and assistants, led by Commander Kyle, charged onto the bridge bearing phasers. Kyle stopped, took in the situation, and broke into a grin. “I should have known,” he said with more than a touch of irony, his English accent showing.

Smillie returned the grin then started picking out the members of the crew who had not looked away before and who had remained defiant, along with Captain Martin. He herded them all into the corner next to the viewscreen then sent them to the brig, escorted by his security men. Once they were gone Smillie stepped to the communications board, now unmanned, and hailed the rest of the ship.

“Attention crew of the *Excalibur*, this is Fleet Admiral William Smillie, Commander-in-Chief, Starfleet. I have placed Captain Steven Martin under arrest, charged with mutiny and disobeying a superior officer. Several members of the bridge crew have also been arrested for mutiny. Those who have proven loyal to Starfleet and the chain of command remain. Let it be known that Starfleet will tolerate no more disobedience from this crew. We are in a potential war situation, and I need everyone carrying on their duties as would any other crew in the fleet. *Any* further insubordination will result in not only a dishonourable discharge, but a lengthy stay in a penal colony.” He let that notion sink in for a moment. “That is all,” he said with all the finality of a funeral. With a deft motion he cut off the speakers, then met the gazes of the remaining bridge crew. “You will understand that I cannot trust any of you implicitly until you have proven that you are worthy of that trust. I am therefore promoting Commander Kyle to the battlefield commission of Captain.”

John Kyle’s blue eyes lit up, but his demeanour remained serious. The declaration was the sudden culmination of a lifelong dream.

Smillie locked eyes with Kyle. He was losing a good assistant, but he needed a man he could trust in command. “Captain Kyle, the *Excalibur* is yours. Take care of her.”

“Yes, sir.” The new captain took the centre seat and began issuing orders. He quickly established a new chain of command, promoting a few to fill now vacant positions. Smillie watched with satisfaction as the crew banded together under their new commander, but still gestured quietly to his security guards to remain and keep an eye on things.

Before he returned to the business of organising the fleet, he stepped forward and placed a hand on Kyle’s shoulder. His old friend looked up at him askance. “See if you can find out what happened to the *Millennium*.”

Confident that Kyle would pull the ship together, he turned and left. The new captain had a lot to organise, and he would just get under foot.

Sub-Commander S’task, second-in-command of the *S’harien*, watched what remained of his fire-damaged view screen in amazement. This new Federation starship had not only bested *two* Klingon Battle Cruisers, but they had performed an act he thought he would never see in his already long lifetime. They had come to the defence of a Rihannsu vessel – their enemy. He did not understand it, but he wasn’t going to let such an honourable act go without reciprocating.

“Sub-Commander S’task of the *S’harien* calling the *U.S.S. Millennium*. Are you in need of assistance?” The offer was genuine and heartfelt.

He was starting to worry when, after a moment, there was no reply. Then, finally, his screen winked into life. The veteran Romulan officer reacted in surprise

when he found himself talking with a sentient feline with decidedly black fur. He looked a lot like an oversized version of a pet he had once had on Ch'Rihan as a child.

“The offer is appreciated,” Krashtallah said amiably, “although unnecessary. I was just about to call and say the same to you. What is your status?”

S’task baulked at the notion of telling a Federation officer that his ship was practically defenceless. For a moment, he stood there, silent and unsure.

His stress was relieved when his new ally answered the question himself. “Don’t worry, Sub-Commander. I won’t ask you to reveal any of the Empire’s secrets. We’ve already scanned you and I know your warp drive is badly damaged. I know your shields still work, but your weapons are offline, but repairable. My suggestion is that you get to work on fixing your cloaking device. Your presence in Federation space is not going to go without some interest.” Even though he was of a completely different genome, S’task could not help but see his sly smile.

“Understood, Captain....”

The Federation officer’s reaction startled him. He roared with laughter. “Lieutenant Krashtallah,” he replied by way of introduction. “My Captain is with your Commander. She left me in charge.”

S’task blinked in surprise. A mere *lieutenant* was responsible for today’s actions? He really must stop underestimating his enemies.

“Sub-Commander, we’re about to get under way and pick up our Captain. Can I suggest you form up behind us and let us lead the way out of this mess?” On the screen, Krashtallah made a rude gesture regarding the floating debris about them.

At that, the *S’harien*’s new leader gave a slight smile of gratitude. It would be good to get away from this cosmic graveyard. “We will follow you out, Lieutenant. *S’harien* out.” When the screen went dark, he turned and spoke to his communications officer, uncertainty in his voice. “Find the Commander. I need to speak to her immediately.”

“When can we get under way?”

Scanner scowled at the speaker grid as if it had suddenly betrayed him and was speaking Klingon. “What universe are you in?” he said, not bothering to hide his anger. “We’re literally picking up the pieces down here. Main power is offline, but we should have that back shortly. I’m sure warp drive is fine, as are the impulse engines.”

Crash’s voice sounded almost chipper. “Excellent!”

“HOWEVER,” Scanner interrupted. “Our sensors need work, the projector’s damaged and our long-range communications are down – permanently. Our subspace transceiver’s fried. It looks like something my father used to serve

up on a bar-be-que. We've got short-range comms only."

"So, we can't contact the fleet or Command." The reality of the situation was a little more daunting than Crash had hoped. He rattled off a string of Caitian epithets that only he, and his sister, could understand, then said: "Thanks for the heads-up, Commander. Please inform me when we are free to navigate."

At that moment, the containment rings around the warp core began glowing again as matter and anti-matter were being guided into collision within it once more. Scanner grinned to himself. It was great timing. "You can do so right now, Lieutenant," he said, feeling a bit more jovial. "Just tell Mister Nunn to take it easy. He shouldn't believe everything the sensors tell him at the moment."

It had taken a little while, but Piper, with Sarda's help, finally managed to find what she was looking for. Usually, the Captain wasn't the type for being overly sentimental. This was an exception.

Using her exceptional flying skills, Piper steered the shuttle so that their airlock, with its outer door still open, lined up with and caught Commander t'Avik's frozen body. Once she was confident, she was completely enclosed, Piper closed the outer door and repressurized the airlock. A brief, loud hiss was heard, confirming that the job was done. Upon equalisation, the inner door opened.

The cold fairly radiated from t'Avik's body, and it was all they could do to not start shivering once more. The Commander had frozen with her hands still outstretched, her head turned up, as if somehow, she could still reach the shuttle. It was fortunate that t'Avik was only five feet tall, or she would have never fit in the airlock stretched out as she was.

Piper fished a thermal blanket out of an overhead compartment and gently wrapped t'Avik's sad form. It was all she could do to internalise her feelings and not start crying, as the connection she had felt with the Rihannsu warrior was still very fresh in her mind. For a short time, the three of them had literally been of *one* mind. It was as if a very real part of her was gone.

Once Piper was finished gingerly wrapping t'Avik's body – she dared not touch her she was so cold – they gently laid her on the floor.

"Now, we take her back to her crew," Piper said without actually speaking. She was unaware the link between her and Sarda was still active.

The Vulcan's concern was easily felt. "They may react badly when they find their Commander is dead." Even through the link, his stoicism was solid.

Piper nodded absently. "All the same, we owe it to her. Search your memories from t'Avik. You know that S'trask is a practical man. It will hit him hard, but he will do what is right."

Her First Officer acquiesced as Piper opened a channel to the *S'harien*.

Five minutes later, they were in the *S'harien*'s shuttle bay. Like the outer hull, the interior was an emerald green, only a much lighter shade. It was spacious and held three other sleek shuttles – sisters to the one used by t'Avik. The *Banana Republic* was as out of place as a snowball on Vulcan.

S'trask and his officers, forming a solemn honour guard, met the captain at the hatch and retrieved his former commander with the utmost respect.

Once the formality was done, S'trask turned a suspicious eye on his guests and said: "What are your intentions now the Commander is dead?"

Piper sighed, ushered S'trask inside the *Banana Republic*, and sat down in one the shuttle's chairs. She offered one of the others to the Sub-Commander and waited while he internally debated the wisdom of accepting it. He was nothing if not a careful man, she thought.

After a moment's hesitation, he sat. Sarda took the chair beside him. All three of them were fully conscious of the three Romulan guards standing at the entrance, their weapons drawn, just in case.

The captain looked the Sub-Commander in the eye and said in all seriousness: "I don't want your ship. I only want peace, even if it is strained at times, to be kept between our peoples. It was what Commander t'Avik wanted, and I know you want to honour her memory."

S'trask nodded in agreement, even though he was a little startled at the voicing of her name. The Commander had been so revered amongst his fellows that her name was not mentioned in public. "So, what do you expect from us?"

Piper sucked in a breath, her eyes widening a little. She knew her plan might be a little hard to sell. "Well, it's like this...."

Fifteen minutes later, the Captain and Sarda were back aboard the *Millennium*, along with the fighters. They stood in a turbolift, on their way to the Bridge, knowing that Mister Nunn was presently wending his way out of the asteroid field and into the clear so the ship could go to warp. Less than a kilometre behind them, the *S'harien* followed.

When the lift doors opened, Piper stepped out, Sarda at her side.

"Captain on the Bridge!"

All stood respectfully as Piper made her way down to the Conn. Krashtallah stepped aside and waited as he expected her to take it. She surprised him when she shook her head, no. She stopped, facing the Caitian, who was only slightly taller than she, but even though she had to look up at him, he still felt like he was the smaller one.

"Lieutenant Krashtallah," Piper said, sounding very annoyed. "I seem to remember leaving this ship in your sister's hands, under your supervision, of course.

The next thing I know, it's in the middle of a shooting match, and being used as a battering ram." She looked over at Amantallash at the Weapons console, then back to Crash. "Who do I have to thank for that?"

The silence on the Bridge was cut only by the sound of the computer's operating beeps and whistles. Without hesitation, Crash stepped forward. "I was in command, Captain."

Before he could say another word, his sister came to his defence. "Captain...."

Piper cut her off with a look. Then she turned her gaze back to Crash and broke into a huge grin. "Lieutenant, *inspired* tactics. You did *brilliantly*. Congratulations on your first command. Not everyone gets to chalk up two Klingon Battle Cruisers the first time out." She clapped him on the shoulder warmly, even though she was beginning to find it harder to focus on him. To her eyes, he was starting to look like a giant loofah. "I plan on writing you up for...., for...." The room started spinning, and before Piper lost consciousness, she heard Crash yell: "Medical emergency!"

"What's the matter with them, Merete?" Scanner asked, sounding more than a little panicked. The two of them stood between a couple of the miniature hospital's diagnostic beds. Piper was on one, still unconscious, Sarda, the other and in a similar state.

The Doctor shook her head in wonder. "I don't know, Scanner," she said, perplexed. She looked up their brain scans and shrugged, resigned. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say the pair of them are asleep and in a heightened R.E.M. state. It's like they're both having *very* vivid dreams."

"Sorry?" Crash asked from the far side of Piper's bed.

Merete indicated their faces with a pointed finger. "Just look at their eyes. They're definitely seeing *something*. I just have no idea *why*."

Crash shuddered. The notion of going through the rest of this mission without his Captain's wisdom was daunting. "Can't we just wake them up?"

The doctor wasn't really listening. As she stared at the scanners, each one reporting its patient's lifesigns, and brain wave forms, she noticed something odd. She waved absently at Crash in answer to his half-heard question. "No," she mumbled. "I don't dare to. The psychic shock might kill them."

That statement gave Scanner a start. "Huh?"

Merete pointed up at each of the screens in turn. "See the beta wave forms here," she jabbed at Piper's screen, "and here," she jabbed again at Sarda's. "They're the same. It's as if they're having the *same dream*."

"WHAT?" Scanner and Crash yelled in unison.

The doctor sucked in a startled breath, recoiling slightly from the

information displayed. She placed her hand over her mouth, shocked. The situation was finally clear to her. "I bet I know what happened to them," she said, knowing the answer, but almost unwilling to voice it, as if it would make it certain when all there was at the moment was doubt.

Their Chief Engineer was running out of patience. He stepped over and took his friend by the shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. "What is it, sweetheart?" he asked, not urgently.

It was difficult for her to meet his gaze as she assimilated the situation. Her mind was going in many directions simultaneously. After a moment, and a gentle shake from Scanner, she looked him in the eye and said: "They're joined." She stepped backwards out of his grip and walked around to the other side of Sarda's bed. She took out a med scanner and ran it over the top of Sarda's head. It confirmed her suspicions. "I think Sarda started a mind-meld between Piper and the Commander so they could form some trust. However, what Sarda did *not* know was that Piper's Psi factor is a lot higher than *his* is." She stepped back and sighed. "If the same was true for the Commander, and I suspect it was, the two of them would have completely overwhelmed his defences and their minds would literally have temporarily merged." She continued as her fellows simply nodded their understanding. "It could be that the Commander was still linked to them when she died. The mental trauma that would have resulted has brought them to this," she gestured to the two beds. "They're in a coma. It's possible that they have unintentionally formed a marriage bond."

Both officers did a double take. "But... but they're *not* married," Scanner stammered.

Merete rested a fist on her hip, totally serious. "Whatever their intentions were, it just might be the case now." She looked down on the two unconscious forms and grimaced. "We'll just have to wait and see."

Still in shock, Crash and Scanner stepped into the corridor. Crash looked down at the Engineer, a man he was still just beginning to get to know and said: "I guess the ship is yours until they regain consciousness," he said.

It was a day of surprises for Scanner. "What?" he blurted.

Crash shook his head, a little surprised at his fellow officer. "You are the highest-ranking officer behind Captain Piper and Commander Sarda," he said in all seriousness.

Dread of the Centre Seat was an old associate of Scanner's. He had absolutely no intention of ever commanding anything outside Engineering. The idea was beyond scary, it was terrifying. His frightened visage gave way to a slight smile as he realised, he had an out. He tapped Crash on the chest and said: "The last I knew, the captain left the *Millennium* under your sister's command, under

your supervision. I'm not sure she relinquished that order when she came back on board." He gave a small chuckle. "You're still in the hot seat, pal."

Unlike Scanner, Krashtallah had no fear of Command. Instead, he relished the opportunity. He showed some teeth in delight. "That is true, Commander. The captain did not relinquish command when she returned to the Bridge." The look in his eyes was as if all his Christmases had come at once. He turned and started running down the corridor towards a turbolift. He stopped, momentarily and looked back over his shoulder. "Thank you, Commander. Please make sure we're back up to full strength before we get to the Neutral Zone. We may need it."

Within moments, Amantallah was back in the Conn, hating every moment of it. Still orders were orders. She watched the screen as S'trask filled them in on the captain's plan, telling them everything she had told him.

"Wow," Jason said, quietly. He was only just now beginning to see the whole picture, as they all were.

At Amantallah's side, Crash said: "Thank you, Sub-Commander. We have about ninety standard minutes flight time to the Neutral Zone. Please have your necessary repairs done before that time. You're going to need them."

"Yes, Lieutenant Krashtallah." He glanced off to the side as someone reported to him. "We are ready when you are."

Crash laid a hand on his sister's shoulder, his message to her that it was now her show. She straightened up and began giving orders, sounding a little more confident with each word. "Take the *S'harien* in tow and bring her inside our warp field, then go to warp. Get us to the Neutral Zone as fast as you can."

Chapter Eleven

Piper stood on the edge of a desert, the hot Vulcan sun high in the sky. The vista of sand dunes and reddish mesas at once seemed familiar, yet strange. There was something odd about the world, but she didn't know what it was.

She looked down and saw the blood of the freshly killed Sehlat at her feet. It had attacked suddenly, but she was ready. Her parents had warned her it might happen. She leaned over and wiped the still warm substance off her palms onto her shorts.

She ignored the animal as her tutors had instructed her. It was deceased and there was nothing she could do for it. Eating meat was totally out of the question for a Vulcan, so she put the animal out of her mind.

And yet the situation bothered her. This wasn't the way she was brought up to think of animals. Her parents had taught her to respect them and live in harmony with them whenever possible. They were only to kill if threatened, and that wasn't likely on Proxima Beta as the only carnivores were the size of possums.

She looked down again and wondered what a Sehlat was doing on Proxima. But this *wasn't* Proxima, it was Vulcan, her homeworld.

"No," a voice said from nowhere. It carried a touch of jealous anger. "Vulcan is *my* home, not yours."

Piper spun about on her heel, her fear rising at the displaced voice. In the middle of the desert, it was illogical for a voice to come from nowhere. She patted down her pockets, looking for some form of communication device, but she knew she wasn't carrying one as they were forbidden during the trials.

"Who are you?" she cried, defiant but still a little fearful.

A figure appeared before her from out of nowhere. It was as familiar as family, and as strange as a ghost. It was a Vulcan male, with oddly brassy hair. He was of average height and build, but he had the most piercing blue eyes she could ever recall seeing. "Who are we?" he asked.

Piper started to circle the friend/foe, uncertain of his intentions. "What do you mean?"

The stranger/friend didn't move. He just followed her with his eyes. "I mean, what is your name?"

Piper stopped, thinking introductions were logical. It was a wise place to begin communications. "I'm...." She stopped. She had no idea who she was. "I'm..." she stuttered. She frowned in concentration, yet no matter how hard she struggled, she could not recall her name.

Sarda smiled, delighted that he wasn't the only one who was confused about their circumstances. "I haven't got the foggiest idea who I am, either." At that, he smirked. "I'm not sure I've ever seen fog either, for that matter."

In the blink of an eye, the scene changed, and the pair were standing in one of Proxima's dense forests, a thick mist hanging in the air. The smell of peat filled their nostrils as well as moss that was clinging to the trees. The forest was old and its atmosphere sweet – rich with oxygen. The air was still, unlike a moment before when a light breeze had been blowing.

And yet, somehow, the change of scenery was taken in stride by the sparring pair.

“Ah, that’s how I remember it,” Sarda said. He took a deep breath through his nostrils, enjoying the scent. “Lovely.”

Piper scowled. “It is merely condensed water due to the local atmospheric conditions,” she stated in a flat monotone. “You are emotionalising unnecessarily. A Vulcan should know better.”

At that, Sarda raised his brows in surprise. “That’s a funny thing to hear from a human,” he said, slightly amused by her rationalising.

Piper stopped pacing and folded her arms, glaring at this odd Vulcan. “I see nothing funny about our situation. We are in the middle of my adulthood trials and your interruption could invalidate the entire experience.”

Sarda sighed. He took a step forward and tried to put his hands on Piper’s shoulders. She took a step backward to avoid him, fearing the possible mental contact. Having failed to touch her, Sarda stopped and let his hands fall by his sides. “If you are undergoing the trials, why are we standing on the surface of Proxima Beta, which must be *your* homeworld, not mine?”

Piper started. She had failed to notice the change. She looked about her, touching a log and a tree trunk to check if they were real. They certainly felt like they were. Annoyed that he knew something about her she had forgotten, she scowled at him once more. “How are you doing this? Is this some kind of hologram?”

Sarda sat down on a log. “I’m not doing anything. We are simply experiencing places in our memory somehow.” He brushed the sodden bark with the back of his hand, taking delight in the texture. “This is marvellous. I had no idea Proxima was so beautiful.”

Piper sat down opposite him. “I see no point in discussing this topic.” She looked about her and noticed the beauty of the tall redwood trees for the first time. “I will admit they are aesthetically pleasing.”

The Vulcan looked at her thoughtfully. “I still have no idea who I am. Do you?”

“Of course, I do,” Piper said defiantly. “I’m.... Dammit. It’s on the tip of my tongue, but I just can’t think of it.”

Sarda slapped his thighs, looking for answers in his own mind, and coming up with nothing. “Let me think. We were firstly on Vulcan, which should be *my* homeworld. Then we found ourselves on Proxima, which would be a fair bet to be

yours.”

Piper tipped her head to the side. “You’re right. It would appear we are reliving our own memories. I wonder if any of them are shared.”

Once again, everything changed. They found themselves in a modern room, filled with furniture typical of shared sleeping quarters. It felt familiar, but at the same time odd. Sarda was sitting on a desk chair; Piper was lounging on the top of a double bunk bed.

“Now, what?” she said in frustration.

Sarda got up and began exploring the room. He picked up a padd and found it contained a thesis on warp travel written by Zefram Cochrane, its human inventor. He turned it over. There was no identity label on it. Nothing to explain where they were.

Piper watched as he rummaged through the content of the desk’s drawers. At first, he was respectful and neat, but then he realised that none of this was real anyway, so he started upending their contents on the desk and sorting through them that way. After a few moments of fruitless searching, he gave up with a sigh. “That was a waste of time,” he said ruefully.

Suddenly, the door opened and a young woman from Altair IV stepped through the door. As one, they watched her come inside, look at the mess, then turn and scowl at the pair of them. “Have you been fighting again?” she said, rebuking them as if they were errant children. “I warned you both you’re going to get kicked out of the Academy if you keep this up.” She shook her head in annoyance, picked up the padd, then turned and moved towards the door, her platinum blonde hair flying behind her. She turned back just before she stepped out. “Just make sure you clean up this mess before the Commandant sees it.”

Before they could utter a word, she stepped through the door and disappeared down the corridor.

As one, both Piper and Sarda moved to follow her, but once they were in the hallway, they found themselves alone again.

“What is going on?” Piper said, confused and a little afraid. She whirled on Sarda. “You were standing. Why didn’t you stop Merete before she could get away? Maybe she could have sorted out this mess.” The importance of her statement sank in. She had recognised someone. “How the hell can we remember her, but we still haven’t got any idea who I am?”

Sarda decided to ignore the second question and simply answer the first. “I, too, was surprised by her entry,” Sarda said regretfully. “Looking back, perhaps Doctor AndrusTaurus could have assisted us, but I fear she was simply another memory.”

Piper looked into her companion’s eyes. “Whose?” she implored. She was absolutely bewildered.

Touched by her pain, Sarda stepped forward to hold her. Instead of touching

her, his hands passed through her shoulders. However, the feeling was electric. In that moment, their communication went beyond anything verbal, and yet the images that passed through their minds were even more chaotic than before. Stunned by the power of the contact, both recoiled and broke it.

“What the hell was that?” Sarda said, stunned.

Piper closed her eyes and shook her head to clear it. When she opened them, she found herself in a different set of quarters, but this time they felt familiar. It was if, at one time, she had called this place home.

The difference was, this time she was alone. She looked about her for her companion but could not see him anywhere. “What is going on!” she cried in frustration, mixed with more than a touch of fear. “And why is it so hot in here?”

There was no reply.

On the Bridge of the *Millennium*, Amantallash felt that odd feeling again. It was if there was something wrong, but she could not put a name to it.

She had always known she was a sensitive. It was part of the reason she had left her homeworld of Cait. Being around her own kind heightened her senses, and the constant barrage of impressions she received off her fellow Cait was maddening.

For instance, she always knew when someone was lying to her. It was a handy gift to have in certain situations, but the fact remained that if someone believed the lie, they were telling her, she tended to believe it as well and take what they were saying as fact. It had gotten her into trouble more than once.

Tired of the constant scrutiny from others and feeling their avarice towards her for her fur colour, she finally left Cait and decided to follow in her errant brother’s footsteps. She joined Starfleet. Her thinking was simple. If it was good enough for him, it was good enough for her.

Recently, her “sensitivity”, as she called it, seemed to be getting stronger. She had been aware of the Klingon threat only hours before, now she was feeling something else. As if someone important was in trouble.

Knowing the only way she was going to get out of the Conn was to take a “break”, Manny told her brother she needed to visit the head. He let her go willingly, as if he yearned to sit in the Big Chair. He was welcome to it, she thought. She knew it wasn’t right for her.

Standing in the turbolift, she was suddenly unsure where she should go. Her “feelings” were rarely detailed, and she found it maddening.

“What is your destination?” the computer enquired.

Without thinking, she blurted: “Sickbay.”

It took Piper some time, but after wandering the empty halls of what she could only guess was a starship – the stars out the windows kind of gave that away – she found Sarda sitting in the Centre Seat on the Bridge. She had no idea what ship she was on, but the old-fashioned buttons and screen design told her it had to be at least twenty years old.

How she knew this, she had no idea. She was fast getting tired of having access to all kinds of memories and being uncertain of them all. Were they hers, or someone else's? Why were they of Vulcan, Proxima Beta, and even ch'Rihan!? How she was remembering Romulus was totally beyond her, never mind the fact that she had no way of even knowing how she *knew* it was ch'Rihan!

When she stepped onto the Bridge, Sarda smiled once more. He found the sensation very pleasing, even though he somehow knew he shouldn't. Most illogical.

He was glad she was here, although he didn't know why. The whole situation was most puzzling. The longer he was here, the more questions he had and the fewer answers he was finding.

As for her identity, he was beginning to suspect she was simply a part of his own persona. Perhaps one of his ancestors had mated with a human and he was the result. If she was simply a part of his own mind, there was no reason he could not completely engage this persona. Perhaps he might learn some interesting insights into his own mind.

While all this was rolling around in Sarda's head, Piper was finding it harder and harder to focus on rational thought. Her thoughts were becoming more carnal by the second, as if some inner drive was taking over and she had no control at all. When she found her companion, she was glad for more than just having some company again. She wanted a lot more than just talk. She wanted to mate.

On some level, Sarda seemed aware of this. He casually turned, looked Piper up and down and stated: "You are going through the Pon Farr." His eyes narrowed as he took in her flushed face, beading with sweat. Since they had parted, Piper had changed into a practically see-through dress. However, that was not the first thing in his mind. "How is a human capable of going through the Pon Farr?" he asked himself, puzzled. This evidence, more than any other, was convincing him that she was nothing more than a repressed part of his own psyche.

Reason was the farthest thing from Piper's mind. All she saw was a candidate for wild, passionate lovemaking. "Who cares?" she asked demurely. She stepped down into the space next to the helm, stalking her prey.

Concerned for her, and confused as to the reason why, Sarda stood and backed away from her, whilst wondering why, all of a sudden, the temperature had spiked in the room. "It is impossible for humans to go through the Pon Farr," he repeated.

Piper shrugged. "So?" Her eyes moved up and down his body, then

lingered at his beltline.

Sarda continued playing for time. "This must be a part of one of *my* memories," he insisted. "Perhaps of my own Pon Farr." His back hit the railing behind the captain's chair. He had nowhere else to go.

Knowing this, Piper moved.

The Romulan fleet was close to finishing its formation. It was a classic style, a funnel shape with their biggest, and most well-armed, Warbird at its peak, the tip of which was pointed directly at the *Excelsior*.

Captain Styles was well aware of this fact as he stared at the viewscreen. He could feel the dampness in his palms that matched the fear he felt. His was an untried Starship. Indeed, the closest thing this vessel had ever seen to action had resulted in embarrassment for her and her crew as they had been tasked with the pursuit of the original *Enterprise* when Kirk had stolen her. Their Chief Engineer, the recently attached Captain Montgomery Scott, had betrayed them and sabotaged the warp drive computer so the *Enterprise* could make a clean getaway.

The mere thought of the man made his blood boil. If you took someone on board to become a part of your crew, they were expected to give that ship and crew their loyalty. A Starship crew became family, and Scott had used that sentiment against them.

As the Romulan fleet was slowly finishing its formation, Styles was *almost* glad the new *Enterprise* wasn't here. Just having the people who had made him a laughingstock nearby would be a distraction. Almost, in that having the famous James T. Kirk and the *Enterprise* would be a definite deterrent for the Romulans. At worst, having him, and his famous luck, around tended to increase one's chances of survival.

Not that that was going to happen. As far as he knew, N.C.C.1701-A was in drydock. End of story.

A good consolation prize would have been to have the *Millennium* here. Her captain's commander had carved a brilliant career of her own, and the ship was known to be far beyond his own for firepower. If the *Millennium* showed up there would be a good chance the *Excelsior* would no longer have to take point.

He tapped his swagger stick against his thigh nervously, unaware he was doing so. Piper had assured him she had a plan. He had worked his Engineering team, led by the able Lt. Commander Chris Plumber, hard to install the projector equipment the *Millennium*'s captain had given him the schematics for. Now all she had to do was show up so they could put her plan into action.

The problem was, with each passing minute, that seemed to become less and less likely. It was now only a matter of moments before the Romulans would attack.

“Dammit, Piper, where the hell are you?” he muttered to himself.

Merete looked up as she heard the doors open. She had been very busy these last few days, and the last thing she needed was another client. She relaxed when she saw Amantallash step into the room, looking around her with a face that reminded the doctor of how young people looked when they asked her for contraceptives the first time.

“Can I help you?” she asked in the tone all doctors use: part compassion, part authoritarian.

Manny’s whiskers twitched as she scanned the room. Her eyes alighted on the Captain and Sarda, and she began moving towards them, still looking uncertain.

“*I don’t think she heard me,*” Merete thought to herself. Was the Security Chief deranged? She put down her medical scanner and stepped forward. “Are you alright?” she asked a little louder.

Big, blue, feline eyes focussed on Merete’s humanoid grey. “I’m fine,” she said, more than a little distracted. “How are the Captain and Commander Sarda?”

Merete relaxed a little but kept an eye on the Caitian out of the corner of her eye. “No change. I’ve got them on IV fluids to keep them hydrated. Other than that, we’re playing a waiting game.”

As if she was a marionette, Manny walked around Piper’s table and stood at its head. She looked from one to the other of her commanders and then, without asking permission, she placed her paws on each of their heads.

Surprised, it took a moment for Merete to react. By the time she was in motion, it was far too late.

Amantallash opened her eyes. She didn’t remember closing them, but for some reason she couldn’t see. “Lights,” she said, as if expecting a computer to turn them on for her. What she saw next both stunned and thoroughly confused her. Her Captain and her First Officer were *busy*. Yet she knew there was something fundamentally wrong with both of them. Their behaviour was not only out of character, so were their *personalities*. Not to mention the captain had taken on a slightly greenish hue, and were those pointed ears she had? She blinked. It was as she was looking at some twisted version of them that were a mixture of each other, and someone else again. It was disorienting, to say the very least.

“What is going on here?” she said incredulously.

At the sound of the new voice, both individuals who *looked* like her commanders paused to look at her, as if amazed to see her at all. Piper’s mouth opened, but she was lost for words.

Amantallash spoke again. “Captain Piper, Commander Sarda, *what are you*

doing?"

The change was practically instantaneous as the reality of who they were struck home at the core of their very beings. Both Piper and Sarda had been asking themselves for some time who they were, and the simple utterance of their names brought home to them the truths not only of themselves, but of what was going on. There is an old saying: What's in a name? A person's name is an embodiment of who they are. That's why human beings generally are very particular about the way people speak about them. One's name is more than their reputation; it was who they are.

With their own names reverberating in their heads, Piper and Sarda were able to look inside and realise who they were. Within seconds, the two of them had changed from carnal caricatures of themselves to looking and thinking like their true selves. A little embarrassed, Piper and Sarda stood before Amantallah in dress uniforms and wearing expressions that were truly their own.

Even the scenery changed. Manny now found herself in dim lighting, with no notion of a horizon in the distance. Even the ground seemed as if it was not quite fixed and a little soft.

With all the changes came relief not only for Piper and Sarda, but for Amantallah. She had been truly distressed by their appearance and manner, and now to see them as they really were gave her reason to relax. That was, until she realised the three of them were not the only ones present.

Manny looked past the captain's shoulder to see a slightly ethereal being standing behind her. She reached to her belt, and only realised then that she was not armed. This was the world of the mind. "Who are you?" she said in challenge. She stepped forward to guard her Captain from this possible threat.

At the sound of Manny's "voice", both Piper and Sarda turned and took in their surprise guest. While they could see right through her, it was clear to both of them it was t'Avik.

"How is this possible?" Piper asked, mostly to herself. She hadn't meant to voice the words, but here, in this place of the mind, her every thought was open.

t'Avik held her hands up before her and seemed to be mildly amused that she could see right through them. "I suppose I'm not really here," she said in mild wonder.

Sarda looked at her critically. "I do not believe you are simply a figment of our imaginations."

Their guest simply shrugged. "I'm not. I guess I'm just the fading echo of who I once was." Her gaze became introspective. "I must apologise for what I've put the two of you through." As she spoke the feelings were passed on. They were authentic. "I guess I wanted to have one last look at life before I passed into memory."

Piper nodded in understanding. "So, it was *you* dragging us through our

memories.”

t’Avik smiled. “Yes, I guess it was. I wanted to know what kind of people you were, and your minds were kind enough to take me to places I had only ever dreamed of.” She let out a soulful sigh. “That’s what it was, I guess; a dream.”

“I gather you were not in complete control as our environment changed with *our* thoughts, not yours.” Sarda crossed his arms, mildly pleased with himself for making the connection.

The Romulan Commander stepped forward. Even now, she seemed a little less substantial than a moment before. “I just came along for the ride, to use a term of your vernacular,” she said. With a voice full of regret, she said: “I am sorry for your delirium. It must have been very confusing for you, not knowing who you were. I was being selfish, I suppose. As long as I continued to experience your memories, you were giving me life.”

t’Avik glanced past Piper at Amantallah. “I’d keep an eye on that one,” she said almost conspiratorially. “She’s very talented.” As she faded even more, she looked Piper in the eye. “Thank you for giving me a chance to see my daughter again. Your memories of her are strong. Don’t forget what I shared with you before I died,” she added forcefully. “It might just save you.” The words faded into echo as t’Avik vanished from their sight.

As the Romulan Commander disappeared, any trace of the presence of her personality went with her. All Piper and Sarda were left with were a few scant memories of her that she had left them with. Seeing her go was a fresh reminder of the agony they had felt upon her death, and for a moment they shared their grief. It was broken when they realised their thoughts were open to Amantallah as well.

Piper pulled herself up before her subordinate. “I’m sorry, Lieutenant. I forgot you were with us for a moment.”

Manny rolled her eyes and gave them a feeble smile. “I can feel everything you do right now, Captain. I feel the pain of losing the Commander as you do, and I want to give you my condolences. She was a remarkable woman.” Without considering the consequences, at the speed of thought she found herself giving the captain her people’s version of a hug. She nuzzled her neck.

Fortunately, Piper knew better than to be repulsed. She accepted the offering with a weak smile. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

The gentle reminder brought Manny back to the place where she had originally stood, just far enough away from her superiors to give them their personal space.

Sarda steeped his fingers as he pondered their situation. “I must now break our union Captain, Lieutenant. This must be done right, or we might end in psychosis.” Before he began, he turned and gave Manny a brief smile, something he would never do in the real world. “Thank you for what you have done, Lieutenant. I don’t know how or why you did what you did, but I am grateful.

Perhaps we should explore your talents later. I may be able to help you develop them and shut out any unwanted contact."

It was the last point that really appealed to Manny. The relief she felt washed over all three of them and Sarda simply took that as a positive.

Sarda took a deep breath and concentrated. "Let us begin."

In the time it took for Merete to take a step towards Amantallash, the Lieutenant had not only closed her eyes, but suddenly they snapped open again. Her eyes focussed on Merete, and she spoke. But the voice she heard was not that of the Lieutenant, it was Captain Piper's. "Don't touch her, Merete," she said with the air of command that came so naturally to her. "She's helping us sort this mess out." With those words said, Amantallash's eyes closed once more.

The Doctor pulled up short. She had no idea really what was going on, but she trusted Piper knew what she was doing.

All the same, she needed to let the Bridge know what was happening. She stepped over to a wall communicator and tapped the button. "Doctor AndrusTaurus to the Bridge."

Rather than hearing Crash's second speak in his place, the ever-capable Caitian answered personally. His voice betrayed his worry. "Doctor, has there been a change in their condition?"

Merete gritted her teeth. What she was about to do was akin to tattling. "Did you send Lieutenant Amantallash down here?"

There was a brief pause before he answered with an even more concerned: "No."

The Doctor took a deep breath and blurted out: "Well, she's down here and I believe she's mind melded with the Captain and Sarda."

An even longer pause was followed by a softly spoken: "I'll be right there."

By the time Krash tallash reached Sickbay it was all over. He had taken advantage of his people's skills running on all fours, but it was not necessary. Captain Piper was sitting up on her bed, her legs swung over the side. She was rubbing her eyes as if she had just woken up from a long and restful sleep.

Commander Sarda was sitting on his, his legs crossed and in deep mediation.

Amantallash seemed a little nonplussed, but none the worse for wear. She was sitting between them preening herself and looking quite pleased with herself.

The Doctor was busying herself running a medscanner over them to make certain they were all right.

Crash came to a screeching halt just inside the doorway. His claws actually scuffed the carpeting as he dug them in to help stop himself. Flabbergasted, he

looked from one to the other in amazement. Finally, he stopped at his sister and gave her a mock scowl. "I thought you had stepped out for the Head," he said tongue in cheek.

Manny said nothing. She simply started purring, which for her was quite loud.

Piper snorted. "We'll chalk this up as "sometimes the ends justify the means"," she said. Feeling refreshed, she pushed herself off the bed and stood, feeling stronger than she had for a while. She came to attention before Crash and said: "Lieutenant, report."

Crash gave his Captain a brief summary of their adventures during the previous hour, which wasn't more than she already knew. Their timing wasn't bad as they were only minutes away from their first stop.

Piper nodded, content. Things were going more or less according to plan. All the same, there was still a lot that could go wrong. The thought reminded her of a superstition Lieutenant Nunn had told her about regarding a person called Murphy and his pessimistic law. Even though she didn't like the notion, it often wasn't far from reality. She gestured to the others. "Let's go, people. It's time to save the galaxy."

Commander Reen t'Khenniell knew that she would have to give the order to attack soon. For the sake of appearances, she had tried to provoke the Federation into a pre-emptive strike. Her ships were nearly in a classic line-punching formation that was typically used only for pushing through enemy lines. It was meant to be provocative, but the Federation Admiral wasn't buying it. She guessed they had their own historical examples of such tactics and they had learned those lessons the hard way.

For the sake of posterity, no matter which way this battle went, it was always good P.R. to be able to claim the moral high ground and insist the other side started shooting first.

She checked the wall chronometer. Now, it was down to minutes. If Starfleet didn't attack, she would be forced to, even though she feared she would be on the losing side. The numbers simply did not stack up in their favour.

There was a part of her that wished it would turn out differently and war would be averted. At heart, Reen was a peaceable person – except when provoked. Then her claws came out and pity the poor person who got in her way. However, she was nearing the end of her career, and the notion of going out in a glorious blaze enticed her. Never mind the fact it would be poetic justice to destroy the Starfleet who had, time and again in the Rihannsu's recent history, interfered in the affairs of their nation. Interference that had helped the new Empress, a woman she had little time for, ascend to her now lofty position.

She was interrupted in her musings by the sound of her personal communicator summoning her. It was a small, sapphire-blue device that looked more like a Twentieth Century compact than an ultra-modern subspace telephone. She kept it with her at all times, and its signature was only known by a handful of people. One of which was the Empress herself.

The thought of her gave Reen a chill. She feared the Empress, as any good soldier should. But her fear went beyond mere respect. Reen had opposed the Empress' rise to the Praetorship and had even conspired to keep it from happening.

If there was one thing about the Empress she had to admire, it was her pragmatism. Reen was an excellent tactician, and many in the Imperial Fleet would have followed her if she had tried to overthrow the government herself. Like today, she didn't like the odds.

As she answered the call, she considered that she had more in common with the Empress than she realised. She would rather be a living military leader than a dead, short-lived ruler.

“Fleet Commander t’Khenniell,” she said, announcing herself.

The Empress had a way of making her blood run cold. “Fleet Commander,” she said. “I am impressed with your tactics. However, if I can tell you’re running a double bluff, I think Starfleet can as well.”

The rebuke was bald, but it was a consideration that had not escaped her. “If you have no cards to play, you have to pretend that you do.”

The silence on the other end was deafening. “Your point is taken.”

The obvious finally sank in. “Where are you?”

The Empress was unusually coy. “Close by.”

It took a measure of self-control to not let the fury she felt show. If there was something she hated more than staring down the barrel of an enemy’s disruptor barrel pointed at her face, it was having someone looking over her shoulder. “Nice of you to stop by. We could always use another ship.”

“The last thing I want to do is tell you how to run your business, Reen,” the Empress said churlishly.

In her mind, she was screaming *Liar!* but Reen was far too astute to ever voice that opinion. “I am certain of that, Empress.” This conversation had to come to an end before Reen *did* say something she would regret. “If there is nothing more, I must attend my duties.”

“Just one more thing.” Reen braced herself for a reproof. She was surprised. “Is the *Enterprise* here?”

Reen blinked. Why on ch’Rihan would she care? Kirk and his ship would have been just one more of many. “No, he is not here,” she said, using the Romulan masculine for ships as was their tradition.

The next statement at least had some sense. “And what of the reports of the Federation’s newest weapon: the *Millennium*?”

This conversation was getting weirder and weirder. “No sign of him, either Empress.”

There was a slight pause, giving the Fleet Commander even greater reason to doubt what her people’s leader had in her mind. “If the *Millennium* shows, you will find him commanded by a female named Piper.” Her tone became even more cryptic. “Watch her. If there is one person out there that can turn the humans around, it will be her.” With that final statement, the line went dead and Reen found herself so puzzled it was hurting her forehead.

Rather than try to sort it out now, she filed it away for her sub-conscious to chew on and went back to organising her final thrust, which was now only minutes away.

Chapter Twelve

When the *Millennium* arrived to join the fleet, nobody noticed. The ship's new cloaking device was working perfectly, and Piper felt like she could practically reach out and touch the *Excelsior*; they were so close. In turn, she also knew that if the *Excelsior*'s crew looked out one of their starboard portals all they would see was the endless vista of space.

Once in position, the *Millennium* sent out two microburst transmissions, tight beamed at specific vessels. One of them to the *Excalibur*, the other to the *Excelsior*. The highly compressed data streams took only a fraction of a second to send, and so Piper was fairly confident their transmission went unnoticed by the Romulans.

On the Bridge, Piper had a quiet word for her people. In the dim purple lighting signifying the ship was traveling under cloak, she kept it brief. "Attention crew of the *U.S.S. Millennium*. In the short time since this magnificent ship was commissioned, she has performed brilliantly. But she could never have done so without the help of every single member of her crew."

She paused to take a breath then continued. "Now, I am going to ask more of you than I have so far as this situation is likely to get very messy. Remember your training, remember your courage. And remember that I am proud of every single one of you."

With that said, she turned to Sarda. With complete confidence in him she said: "Keep a watch out for our Klingon friends." She remembered what t'Avik had shared with them during the final stages of the meld as they were trying to separate their consciousnesses. "If t'Avik was right about him, he will pick a fight with the biggest starship he can find. Which means he will probably come after us. If he doesn't, we need to be ready to react at a second's notice."

In response, he simply nodded his understanding. However, their extended time linked mentally seemed to have left a residual effect. Piper felt the acknowledgment of his skills had lifted his spirits a little and it gave her comfort. Her faith in him was not misguided. His talents were legendary.

On the *Excelsior*, Captain Styles' Communications Officer spoke up. "Captain, we have received a message from the *Millennium*."

Styles visibly relaxed, feeling like a drowning man who had been thrown a life preserver. "What is it?" he said quickly, urgently.

The Comms Officer frowned. "It's simply a time, Captain." He checked the chronometer above the view screen. "In thirty seconds."

For the first time in days, Styles smiled. He looked over at his Science Officer. "Activate plan Wellington at that time precisely."

On the Bridge of the *Millennium*, Piper gave the order. “Prepare for Operation Wellington.”

Piper’s plan was named after Proxima Beta’s moon. She smiled at the memory. Wellington was not your typical moon, more like a large asteroid that was probably captured some millennia before. It didn’t even really look like a moon; Wellington was misshapen to the point of just plain looking weird – and its orbit was something else.

Its high-speed orbit gave it an orbital period of half an hour, and became the reason for the colony’s resentment, for when the colony ship had entered standard orbit to scan for a suitable landing spot, Wellington came roaring around from the dark side and nearly impacted the ship. If not for a quick-thinking helmsman Piper’s great-grandparents would not have lived to see their colony flourish.

After that event, Wellington was marked an orbital hazard and any ships visiting were warned to watch out, and even though Wellington never actually hit anybody it became a source of personal anger down through the generations. The colonist’s children and their children’s children were taught to hate their little moon.

It got to the point that Proximans no longer referred to Wellington by its name, or even as just “the moon”. Wellington simply became known as *It*. And although *It* wasn’t massive enough to create a change in tide or weather, the sight of the ungainly asteroid ripping across the sky became something to be tolerated, not enjoyed.

After a mishap concerning a freighter that was thrown into the atmosphere trying to dodge the speedy rock, a motion was put forward in government to have Wellington destroyed, smashed so its remains could burn up on re-entry. The motion was rejected on the grounds that the task was too dangerous, and if a large shard made it to the ground, it could demolish a city, or worse, set fire to the jungle.

Another motion was made to have Wellington towed out of orbit using a tug and tractor beam. The motion was eventually rejected as *It* was too massive – both in size and composition – and traveling too fast to just pull out of orbit. Safety was also considered as an overtaxed tug could slow down, but not hold the asteroid, and thus have it plunge into the planet. Proxima was too sacred to the people to consider such a thing, and so Wellington remained, unaware as to how close it had come to destruction.

Piper was considered a strange child as she liked to lie on a mossy branch high in a tree in the dead of night and watch the rock fly over from west to east. In her studies, Piper had noted that *It* was unlike Terra’s moon in shape, orbit and look. It was composed of a variety of metal ores that gave off different coloured reflections as it passed over. To Piper it shone like a jewel, and she envied it because it was “up there”, and she was not. But she knew that one day she would reach the stars and remember their little rock with the funny name.

Although not officially recorded, rumour had it that Wellington had been named by an Englishman who thought the asteroid looked a lot like a boot.

Things were different on the *Excalibur*. In his temporary Fleet Command Centre, set up in one of the ship's large cargo bays, Admiral Smillie was handed a hard copy of the message Piper had sent him, and he read through it quickly. The further he got through the report, the more he was amazed, and angry. With the discovery of the truth came the pain that they had all been played for fools.

Duras. It was a name that brought with it memories of a lot of bad blood. Ever since his grandfather, who he had been named for, had been foolish enough to get in the way of the original starship *Enterprise*, the *NX-01*, under the command of the trailblazing Captain Jonathan Archer, the Duras clan had apparently been waging their own little war with the Federation. Smillie knew that Klingons were very serious about blood debts, but this family took things too far.

He read down further, finding himself amazed at the new Starship's adventures considering she had only been a ship of the line for a few days.

When he got towards the closing paragraphs, he found himself angry, yet hopeful. Angry that the mere *Captain* Piper had taken it upon herself to put a plan of her own in motion without consultation. Hopeful, because it had some merit. However, it was incredibly risky.

William Smillie found himself faced with a choice. Whether to support Piper's mad scheme or give the order for her to cease and commit them all to a war with the Romulan Empire. In his mind, it was a no-brainer, but that didn't stop him from worrying all the same.

The final line of Piper's message stated that if she did not receive an answer to the message within thirty seconds of its being sent, she would take that as permission to go ahead. He checked his wrist chronometer. It was already way past that.

He scowled to himself once more. He knew Piper would know it would have taken him longer than a minute just to receive it and read it. Impossible woman. Her plan was already in motion, and there was nothing he could do to stop her – even if he wanted to.

He turned to one of his lieutenants manning his communications hub. His tone would have snap frozen a Mammoth. "Let me know the instant Captain Piper contacts us. I want to speak to her personally."

As the last Romulan ship came into formation, the Fleet Commander gave the order. Under impulse power, they began their push into the Neutral Zone.

On the Bridge of the *Excalibur*, Captain John Kyle noted the movement of the Romulan ships and gave the order he had been given. They were to hold the line, no matter what happened. They were not going to let the Romulans through.

“Keep scanning for energy anomalies,” he said thoughtfully. “There’s no telling how many of the enemy are out there cloaked.” He determined that they were going to win the day, one way or the other. “Battlestations.”

On the bridge of the *Falcon’s Claw*, K’miktos gloated. He had stationed the ship a mere fifty kellicams – a hundred kilometres – from the NZ and was watching with pure delight. Their plan had worked flawlessly. The two fleets were about to engage in combat, a war that would weaken both sides and leave them unable to fight off the might of the Klingon Fleet.

“K’plah!” he cried, slapping his chest with his fists.

“Commander K’miktos!” It was his Communications Officer, come to bother him with unimportant news, no doubt.

Annoyed, K’miktos turned his bulk to glower at his minion. Of all the times for an interruption! “What is *so* important you had to drag me away from this spectacle!” He gestured at the viewscreen angrily, sounding like a petulant child being dragged away from their favourite television program.

To his credit, the younger officer looked him in the eye, unfazed. “Commander, there has been no word from the *Bloodwine* or the *Hellfire*. They should have checked in an hour ago.”

The news made the Commander’s blood boil. K’ringtof was his brother, an excellent warrior who would have made contact just so he could boast of his victory, as he had when they were children. If he had not called, it was only because he was dead, or worse – he had failed. If he *had* failed, he might as well have been dead. Their father, Duras, would not take it well.

In fact, the last warrior to fail him had found himself staring down at his D’k Tahg buried in his heart. It had been an excellent example for the rest of his warriors. Failures were rare as the price was lethal.

The choices available to him were few. Retreat and try to make contact with his brother, and, if necessary, help him with his attack on the *Millennium*. He could stay and watch the fireworks and wait for his brother here. He could decloak in the midst of the Federation fleet and speed up the fighting.

That option would probably get him, and his crew killed, but oh! The glory!

He paused for a moment of indecision then made his choice. He decided to err on the side of caution. “Hold station. We will act only if necessary.”

His second wasn’t happy. He would have rather died in a blaze of glory. However, he understood the wisdom of the choice. He stiffened as he saw

something amazing happen on his viewscreen. “What the....”

The flooring under the Fleet Commander shifted dramatically as the ship’s helmsman suddenly flung the *Razor’s Edge* to the side. Reen was thrown to the deck, along with most of the ship’s crew, and it took a moment for the Commander to recover.

“Vahrrau Thieura?!” she demanded as she patted herself down, looking for injuries.

An aide standing nearby was smart enough not to interfere. She simply stated: “The pilot had to adjust our course to avoid a collision.” In her mind she added: “Otherwise we would all know what *was* in Hell.”

Reen stepped past her six-foot by nine-foot tactical screen to look out her portal. What she saw caused her jaw to drop. “What the....”

Like his Romulan counterpart, Admiral Smillie looked out his portal in abject amazement. He had no idea how she had pulled it off, but all he knew was that he was grateful. How it was going to make a difference, he did not know. He was fully aware that it may simply delay the Romulans. It was time for someone to act, that was sure. He could only hope it was the right one who would.

Captain Styles tapped his swagger stick against his thigh and worried. He knew what everyone was gaping at in both fleets. He also knew it was a giant illusion, created by the projectors fitted to both the *Excelsior* and the *Millennium*. A concerned glance at his chair display showed him the massive drain on his ship’s energy reserves it was creating. The warp drive was running at 105% just to keep it all together, and yet he noted that the illusion was slowly stealing energy from other of his ship’s systems. Most notably of these was their shields, which had already dropped to 90%.

“Come on, Piper,” he muttered. “Get this over with.”

“Decloak the ship,” Captain Piper ordered. “There’s no point in running it here.”

On the viewscreen, the crew of the *U.S.S. Millennium* saw the same thing everyone else was seeing, but they had the advantage of knowing it was there because they had made the illusion happen. Separating the Romulan and Federation fleets was a large asteroid field, made up of rocks of varying sizes and textures. To save time, each was modelled on known asteroids scattered throughout

the Federation – including Proxima’s Wellington – as each had been completely documented and were on Memory Alpha’s database.

From their vantage point, they could see the *Excelsior* only five hundred metres away to port, and a mere ten kilometres ahead, the Romulan fleet scattering as they changed course to miss the apparently solid rocks.

Piper could not help but smile as the Warbirds and Birds of Prey scrambled to not only miss the asteroids, but each other. She knew it would take a few minutes to regroup. Now was the time to act.

“Open hailing frequencies,” she ordered. “I want to speak to the Empress.”

“Commander K’miktos!” the *Falcon’s Claw*’s Comms Officer called. “The *Millennium* has opened hailing frequencies! They’re calling the Empress!”

The tiny viewscreen on the captain’s chair took the brunt of the Commander’s fury as it shattered into millions of tiny pieces under his fist. “I don’t care where the *Millennium* is, set course for it now!” He stood, knowing his time had come. “Take us into the heart of the Federation fleet. It’s time for battle!”

As the Romulan ship began moving, he stepped over to his weapons officer. “As soon as the ship decloaks, I want you to fire everything this vessel has. And make sure you save the photon bolt for the *Millennium*.”

As the young warrior went about his task, K’miktos grinned to himself, relishing the glory that would be his in the coming battle. His family would sing songs about this day.

“Where did they come from?” Reen t’Khenniell was not to know that about a hundred other people were asking the same question – and getting the same answer.

“I don’t know, Commander,” replied her science officer. He frowned in annoyance, as if his scanners had intentionally betrayed him. “They do register as solid.”

“Commander!” her Communications officer announced. “We’re receiving a hail from one of the Federation Starships.” At that point the young, female officer blushed bright green. “Apologies, Commander. She is asking to speak to the Empress.”

Reen pulled herself up into her most regal pose. She was not used to people going over her head. In the fleet, she was the top of the food chain, and she was not about to let the insult go unchallenged. She looked down her nose at the Comms officer and stated categorically: “The Empress does not speak to lowly Starfleet Captains. Tell whoever it is that I will speak for the Empire here.”

Her statement was part hubris, part a desire not to reveal the fact that the

Empress was present. If the day was not to be won, she still had a duty to protect her Praetor.

“Who is calling?” she asked quickly, before the officer could relay her demand.

She was pre-empted by the officer touching the copy of the Starfleet earpiece lodged in her ear canal. “Sorry, Commander. The Empress is replying personally.”

Feeling as if she had been slapped in the face, Reen recoiled. This was *her* command, *her* fleet, *her* war. She stepped forward, about to announce her intention to reply anyway, when common sense intervened.

The Empress had every right to speak for the Empire. If they truly *were* going to war, then the decision was hers alone.

Reen pressed her lips into a hard line and bit her tongue. This would have to wait for another day.

Now, *this* didn’t happen every day, Piper thought to herself. However, when she looked back over the previous 24 hours, it had been anything but a normal day.

Glaring at her from the viewscreen, as if she stood just the other side of it, was the Empress of the Romulan Star Empire. She had aged a little from the photo that Jim had shown her, and Piper was still a good foot taller than her. But there was no doubting that the Empress was a powerhouse of personality, intellect and fervour.

Her hair was pulled back tightly into a ponytail, much tighter than Piper’s, and it was the usual black of a Romulan. She was middle-aged, at least a hundred, but for all her years and trials, she was still a striking woman.

Her voice and tone brooked no foolishness. However, she was familiar with the Federation people’s ways. “Greetings, Captain Piper. What can I do for you today?” Her cordiality was meant to put Piper at ease.

It did the opposite. Piper knew she had to walk very carefully. There was no way this lady could be taken for a fool. She stood up from the Centre Seat and bowed slightly. “Empress, I have some good news, and some bad news. I’m afraid, it’s mostly bad.”

The furrows on the Empress’ brow creased slightly, the only indication that she was at all bothered. “Please enlighten me, Captain Piper.”

The repetition of her name reminded Piper that the Tal Shi’ar was very well connected. They were no doubt aware of her posting to the *Millennium* before she was. They would even have a fairly large dossier on her career. Hell, she thought, probably even knew her bra size. She glanced over at Sarda, who was watching his scanners intently. Looking for any change that might indicate a cloaked ship. Still nothing.

“Our two peoples have been played, Empress. And I have the proof.”

Upon hearing that line, K'miktos threw caution to the wind. “Decloak and open fire!”

In the heart of the Federation fleet, which now numbered one hundred Starships plus, a lone Romulan Bird of Prey decloaked and began firing madly, scoring hits on a number of Starships – including the *Excalibur*. It unleashed a barrage of photon torpedoes, phaser bolts, and one photon bolt, aimed at the biggest starship present. The one K'miktos was certain was the *Millennium*. It was fairly close to a large asteroid, but he was confident it would pass it and hit the Starship. If it didn't the destruction of the asteroid so close to the vessel would no doubt do some damage to it anyway.

Around them, the Federation Starships scrambled, trying to get a bead on the interloper as it wove around them madly, trying to get closer to the front ships so it could finish them off – if that was possible.

Sarda jerked up from his scanners. “Captain! A Romulan Bird of Prey has decloaked aft and is firing. It has fired one photon bolt that is headed in our direction.”

The captain had only seconds to act. At present, they were concealed, hidden within one of their asteroid creations, just like they were at Genesis. However, to divert more power to the projector, Piper had ordered they run with their shields down. If the photon bolt were to hit them, it would pass right through the image and most likely destroy most of her lovely new ship.

“Empress, I'll have to get back to you.” She turned to her people. “Drop our cover. Raise shields! Bring us about! Battlestations!”

For all their ship's ducking and weaving whilst firing at anything that moved, K'miktos had kept an eye on the progress of their photon bolt. They had loosed it at a distance, but he was certain it would run true.

However, now he was confused. One of the asteroids disappeared, as if it had never existed, and it was replaced with another huge starship, like the one he had fired on. And judging by the track of the bolt, it would hit it, not the one he had aimed at.

It was all taking too long, that Captain Styles was sure of. The *Millennium*

was about to take the full force of the bolt. He was certain as soon as he saw it had been fired. He also knew that the *Millennium* had no defences, and they were unlikely to get them up in time.

“Fire a torpedo into that bolt and try to detonate it!” Even as he gave the order, he knew it could not be carried out in time. He made the choice to act.

“Move us astern, full impulse power! Emergency power to the shields!”

His plan was to take the force of the bolt on themselves. He just prayed they had enough power left to take it.

Piper blinked as she saw the *Excelsior* suddenly reverse. On the tactical display, she could see that Styles’ actions would result in their salvation. She just worried that it might damage their sister ship.

The sudden movement also resulted in the movement of a large number of their projected asteroids, which seemed to be following them. Styles’ heroic actions might save them, but it would also reveal their ruse. They had just run out of time.

“Shut down the projector!” she ordered. “Arm the megaphasers and bring us about. We need to take that Bird of Prey alive.”

As she gave the order, they witnessed the Photon Bolt’s detonation.

The bolt impacted the weakened *Excelsior*’s shields above the massive ship’s impulse engine housing. It quickly encompassed the area over the sublight engines all the way to the bridge dome. It took only a moment for the shields to be totally drained in that area before the remaining force detonated, buckling in a huge area of the aft saucer section, destroying the ship’s impulse drive, the projector, and laying waste to the top of the hull – all the way to the bridge – which was left nothing more than a smoking crater.

The *Excelsior*’s lights flickered for a moment as the ship’s brain centre received a mortal wound.

On board, the Engineering officers quickly began picking up the pieces. Lt. Cmdr. Plumber, once he had picked himself up off the floor, organised his people into repair parties and set them to work. He then turned his attention to the communicator. For some reason, there was no answer from the Bridge.

As he rubbed his badly bruised forearm, he directed his voice to the ceiling. “Computer, give me a damage report for the upper saucer section,” he asked, wincing in pain. In the back of his mind, a little voice was telling him that things were worse than he thought. He shook his head. It couldn’t be that bad, he thought.

He was wrong. The first thing he checked was the damage to Level One. It was complete and irrevocable. There was no possibility of survivors. In fact, there was no-one left on board who out-ranked him.

With a start, Plumber realised that he was now in command. His grief for his lost crewmates was put aside as he acted for what was now *his* crew.

His pain suddenly forgotten; he called his people together quickly. "Heads up, people." It was taking some effort, but he managed to keep his voice from disappearing as his throat tightened in remorse. "The Captain and First Officer are gone, as is everyone on the Bridge." He looked over at the chronometer. "As of Thirteen Forty-Seven hours, I assume command of the *Excelsior*."

He looked about him and could not have been prouder as he saw the resolute faces of his people showing him their confidence. "Our lady's damaged, but I know she can still fly. First up, we need some shields, then we'll see if we can get back in the fight. Let's go people!"

He didn't tell them he was certain the impulse drive was history. They could go to warp – maybe, but there was little chance they could dodge a rock thrown at them by a kid.

Which meant that, if this went to battle, the only real choice they had was to run. It was either that or be a sitting duck.

The *Falcon's Claw* continued twisting and turning, firing this way and that, taunting the enemy ships with their Commander's clever tactics that had so far kept them alive.

However, it was no strategy of theirs that had prolonged their existence, it was simply that the Federation fleet had been made aware, by Admiral Smillie, that they could corral the rogue ship, but not destroy it. Disable it, if possible, but make sure its crew survived.

So, K'miktos wondered why his challenges, in the form of phasers and torpedoes, had been allowed to bounce off the Federation ship's shields without much in the way of retaliation.

He had his answer when, suddenly, his ship was seized by a *very* powerful tractor beam. As he fought its hold, he found the *Claw* had turned about to face the biggest starship he had ever seen. Its weapons ports were glowing, and he had every reason to believe they were about to be blown out of the sky. In that moment, K'miktos discovered a whole new emotion: fear.

Not that he was going to beaten by it. In a last, defiant gesture, he ordered another photon bolt be launched before gesturing, in the crudest Klingon fashion available, at the viewscreen.

With the sudden disappearance of the asteroid field, it took only seconds for Commander t'Khenniell to realise it was a ruse. A clever one, to be sure, but a ruse all the same. It was *insulting*.

Once both the *Millennium* and the *Excelsior*'s projectors had been shut down, the asteroid field had quickly dissipated.

Infuriated at the Federation's attempt to throw them off, Reen lost all good sense. Her fleet had been disrupted by a *light show!* It really was nothing more than that.

To top it off, her scanners were picking up one of her own ships, behind enemy lines taking fire. The path ahead was clear. Whatever Captain Piper had been wanting to say was no longer important.

She spun on her assistant and ordered: "Get the fleet to regroup immediately and push ahead with the original plan. I want these Federation (expletive deleted) to remember the Rihannsu are not to be fooled with!"

On the Empire's flagship, the Empress herself watched the mayhem with something akin to disbelief. She had heard the order given by the Commander to go ahead with the push.

Yet a voice within her told her this was *wrong*. Her recent dealings with the Federation's finest had shown her they were an honourable people, sometimes even more so than her own. She also noted that, whilst the Bird of Prey that was behind enemy lines was taking fire, for all its flying skills, there was no possibility that it could have lasted this long on its own. It was being spared; of that she was certain.

Not to mention Starfleet was being far more forgiving than she would have been in their position. She could see the damage to the *Excelsior*, and if it was her people, she would have been out for blood.

However, the leader in her knew that, in times of war, sacrifices had to be made. She knew the Federation understood sacrifice. Although the war being played out before her was for peace, not for continued bloodshed, there were times when you licked your wounds and did not strike back.

Politics kept her from calling off the push. She needed her people to follow her willingly, with good reason. For her to back down now would seem like cowardice and weaken her position to the point where her hold would be untenable.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, the Empress simply dug her nails into the arm of her command chair and prayed silently. "Piper, whatever you have in mind, do it *quickly!*"

From the *Millennium*'s science station, Sarda announced: "Captain, the Romulans are regrouping." Without a beat, he continued. "The Bird of Prey is arming weapons."

With the *Falcon's Claw* occupying the centre of the view screen, Piper gave the order: "Fire *one* photon torpedo."

Behind her, Amantallash dropped her paw onto the fire control button, having once more anticipated her Captain's request.

The screen glowed red as the relatively slow-moving Photon Bolt launched by the Romulan ship was loosed. Before it got very far, it was met by a streak of blue as the *Millennium*'s torpedo detonated it. With only a kilometre separating the two ships, both were rocked by its destruction.

On the *Falcon's Claw*, the forward portion of the ship's saucer-shaped hull was instantly vapourised as the concussion easily knocked out their shields. The damaged section spat sparks of energy as rooms and corridors were now exposed to the vacuum of space whilst losing their air in a quick jet that actually propelled the ship backwards momentarily. Quickly frozen bodies spun away from it in bizarre cartwheels was the screaming atmosphere ejected them into the dark.

In a study in contrasts, the *Millennium*'s triple shielding easily took the blast, with the ship being tossed rearward only a hundred meters. All the while, the great ship did not lose its grip on the Romulan ship with its tractor beam.

Piper knew the *Falcon's Claw* was doomed even before Sarda reported his findings. She hit her chair control and bellowed: "All transporter rooms, beam over any survivors *now!*" She turned to Amantallash. "Get your best people down there quickly. We're about to be visited by some very pissed off Klingons."

The Lieutenant's eyes went wide. "Aye, Captain." She didn't know how the captain knew, but her word was good enough for her. She rushed to carry out the order.

With that said, the captain added coldly: "If you find their Captain, bring him to me. I don't care what condition he's in."

A feral grin spread over Amantallash's face. "Aye, Captain. With your permission?" She indicated she wished to take command of the situation herself.

Piper nodded and turned back as the Security Chief handed off her station.

If there is one thing a Cait knows how to do very well, it's run. On all fours, Amantallash bolted down the corridors, headed for Transporter Room One, all the while communicating on her headset with the rest of her detail.

"What did you say?" she heard her second, Lieutenant Brankovian, say incredulously.

Amantallash didn't miss a beat and said calmly: "The Captain said *Klingons*, and I believe her." She sniffed the air. "She's not wrong, either."

A howl of anger mixed with anguish echoed down the hallway and made Manny pick up speed. Whoever it was, they were not in the mood to go visiting unexpectedly.

As she neared the door, she slowed, raised herself on her hind feet and pulled out her weapon. The sound of phaser fire, mixed with Klingon disruptor fire, filled

the air.

Reaching into a small pocket on her sleeve, she took out a tiny dentist's mirror and used it to look inside the room around the doorjamb she was leaning against.

She narrowed her eyes, quickly assessing the situation then slipped a flashbang stun grenade from her jacket pocket, threw it around the corner then closed her eyes and covered her sensitive ears.

One second later, a brilliant light shone out the doorway and a deafening clap was heard that slapped the walls around her. As some more of her people joined her, Manny confidently stepped into the Transporter Room and viewed the scene.

Two Starfleet technicians were lying on the floor behind the console, merely stunned senseless. They would wake up with a hell of a headache, but it was better than dead.

On the transporter pad, four Klingons lay in differing states of consciousness. One was out to the world, possibly dead, Manny thought.

Another two had the glassy-eyed look that spoke of shock. The last was trying to focus and regain his senses. Manny simply bounded over and knocked the disruptor out of his hand, while removing his knife from its sheath. She was well aware that the average Klingon warrior carried a number of concealed weapons, so she gave him a quick scan with her tricorder as she quickly retrieved another seven knives.

"What are you doing?" he growled, flailing about, trying to stop her.

Manny's tone carried more than a little acid. "Believe it or not, trying to make sure you *don't* get yourself killed."

The Klingon's eyes flared pure hatred. "How dare you take prisoners!" he snarled. "I am Commander K'miktos, and I demand you release me!" He made a weak attempt to push her off him. He was not getting far as his right arm was broken and his left burned.

The Lieutenant curled back her lips in disdain as she waved over two of her people. They each took an arm. "You know, until this moment, I didn't think Klingons had a sense of humour." She leaned into his face. "Now behave yourself, or I might just grant your wish and beam you into space." She glanced at one of her fellows. "I wonder how long Klingons can hold their breath."

Her comment gave K'miktos pause. He had heard the Federations were peaceful types, but this overgrown white cat sounded like she would *actually do it*. He looked her in the eyes and spoke with certainty. "You denied me a glorious entry into Sto'Vo'Kor. I will not forget it."

The reference to the Klingon afterlife drew Manny's attention. Her people believed in a loving God who created the universe, and she was aware there were many differences between her people's belief systems and the Klingons. However, there was one similarity. The afterlife was supposed to be a place one *looked forward* to getting to. This Klingon was blaming her for his being denied that

destiny. She mentally raised the threat level this being posed. “Let’s get him to the Bridge,” she told her people as together, they hoisted him to his feet.

Chapter Thirteen

Sub-Commander S'trask sat in the Command chair of the *S'harien*, wishing there was something he could do to make his partially crippled ship fly faster.

Before Commander t'Avik's death, he had been content with working under his esteemed leader. In fact, when the chance had come along to either command his own vessel or serve under t'Avik, the question to him had been a no-brainer. The chance to learn under her was not one to be missed. Her career had been stellar, to say the very least. It was like apprenticing to a legend.

Now she was gone. He had not only a huge pair of shoes to fill, the fact would always remain that their living legend had died on his watch. It would take a miracle to resurrect his career in the Fleet after this debacle.

He felt a peculiar atmosphere about him. It was if he could still feel her presence on the Bridge. He had to shrug off the feeling that he was sitting in her chair against her will, as a child rudely sits in his father's chair without asking.

He had been silent for a time, simply letting his people do their jobs. There had been a substantial amount of damage done to their ship, and whilst he was an adequate engineer, he knew he would simply get in his subordinates' way.

Warp drive was still down, and there was no real reason to believe that was going to change any time soon. His lip jerked upwards as he mused that at least the cloaking device still worked.

On the view screen he could see the *Falcon's Claw* as it made its mad dash through the Federation fleet. He knew that it was not being crewed by their people, but by Klingons. He also knew he had to get the Commander's evidence to the Empress before it was too late.

He was keenly aware that he could do nothing to interfere whilst they were still on the wrong side of the Federation Neutral Zone. If he made their presence known, it would only exacerbate an already tense situation.

He looked over at his Science Officer. It was time to break the silence. "Time to the fleet?" he asked, doing his best to sound like a leader.

Without looking up, the reply came quickly and professionally. "Five minutes, Sub-Commander."

"Do we have that long?"

S'trask didn't realise he had voiced the private question until the Science Officer, a seasoned veteran, stood and caught his gaze. "We're in the hands of the gods, Sub-Commander," he offered.

The comment gave S'trask reason to smile ruefully. "Let's hope they're in a good mood, then," he said affably. To the Helm Officer he said: "Keep us out of detection range. When we're cleared the Zone, make for the heart of the fleet. The Empress will be there."

In the *Excalibur's* Command Centre, the Admiral was beginning to sweat. The Romulan fleet was still advancing, and now the *Falcon's Claw* had been partially destroyed by the *Millennium*.

“Scan the Romulan ship,” he ordered brusquely.

“Which one?” came the naïve reply.

Smillie scowled. “The one with the big hole in it!” he snapped, pointing to an image of the stricken vessel. “Scan for life signs.”

The order was carried out quickly, and a little fearfully. The previous comment’s stupidity would not be forgotten.

The errant officer frowned at his screen. “There’s ten, no five, no, there are no survivors. Huh?” He turned and looked at the Admiral with a dumbfounded look on his face. “I don’t understand it, sir. They were there a minute ago.”

His superior sighed. There was one in every batch. “It seems clear the *Millennium* beamed off the survivors. What I want to know is: *what species were they?*”

The Admiral’s every word dripped acid, causing the Lieutenant to recoil. He quickly turned his attention back to the screen and called up the scan’s details. He blinked at the result. “Computer, confirm the species aboard the hostile vessel,” he ordered, amazed.

Without hesitation, the mechanised voice replied: “Klingon.”

The Admiral’s eyes went wide. Piper had been right all along. “Open hailing frequencies!” he ordered breathlessly. Perhaps there was time to stop this madness after all.

“Captain, we need reinforcements!”

Piper spun her chair to face Crash. “Get as many security officers down there as you can!” she said, then she turned back to the view screen. “Turn us about!” she commanded. “Bring us back on station! We need to protect the *Excelsior*.” She glanced back at Crash. “Lieutenant, I want you down there as well. Give your sister all the help she needs.”

Manny called her people to a halt with an upraised fist as she, too, got the message. In their midst, K’miktos stumbled to a halt, his hands in binders, arm in a splint, helpless. To all intents and purposes, the defeated foe.

The Security Chief spoke into her headset. “Brankovian, report!”

After a brief pause, her second answered with his quiet, Andorian hiss. “The Klingons were ready for us. We’ve lost two of ours, and four of the Klingons are dead. There’s one left, but he’s giving us a lot of trouble.” There was the sound of

phaser fire, then: “We’re on deck five. Guest quarters.”

Amantallah’s eyes narrowed in annoyance. This was not going as planned. “We’ll be right there.”

A voice behind her said coldly: “Yes, we will.”

She turned to check on her captive to see a gas emanating from the soles of his shoes. She tried in vain not to take a breath, but it was already too late. She slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Standing over them, grinning mercilessly, K’miktos laughed. “They always forget to check for poison gas,” he said, remembering what his father had taught him when he had been given the boots.

He reached down and took the key to his binders from the Security Chief’s vest where he had watched her stow it, then retrieved his weapons before picking up Manny’s unconscious form and slinging her over his shoulder. He divested her of her communicator and pushed it into his own ear. Having a hostage was always useful, he thought as he made his way towards deck five.

There was a lot of noise outside the door. The sound of phaser fire was startling, although not altogether unfamiliar to young Jenny. She had seen vids of the adventures of the early space explorers like Jonathan Archer, a man who seemed to attract directed energy like a magnet. Those stories fired her imagination and fuelled her soul. She saw herself one day travelling amongst the stars as a member of Starfleet – as long as the Twentieth Century Syndrome that had haunted her mother didn’t strike her down as well, she mused.

A thought came to her that she really should lock the door. She took a step towards it to do so.

Suddenly, her door opened and one of the biggest people she had ever seen ducked inside. As he turned, his wild, scraggly hair waved behind him, blocking her view of his face.

Not that she needed to see it to know she did not like this man. His “clothing” was some kind of battle armour which almost completely covered him. It creaked like new leather as he moved and was mostly black. Even his gloves had some kind of “horn” on each finger. The whole effect was menacing.

And the *smell*. Jenny’s nose wrinkled as she took in his odour which suggested he had not bathed in weeks – at the very least.

The intruder fired off a shot through the open door, causing a crewman to duck behind a corner to avoid being hit. The door slid shut, cutting off his escape, but also buying him some time. He stepped forward and locked the door before taking stock of his surroundings.

“You’re a Klingon!” Jenny said with a gasp as she back-pedalled, terrified.

Her uninvited guest sneered and said, his voice rumbling ominously: “And

you're my exit ticket."

Brankovian looked up from his tricorder, his antennae turning as he saw his reinforcements arrive, led by Lieutenant Krashtallah. He gave a start. "Where's the Chief?" he asked. "She should be here by now."

The question pulled Crash up short. Touching his headset, he put out a call. "Krashtallah to Amantallah. What's your position?"

There was no reply.

The implications were clear. Their prisoner had no doubt escaped. And the Security Chief had been taken out.

Without thinking, Crash let out a blood-chilling roar so loud it practically deafened his people. He quickly turned to Brankovian. "You keep chasing down this Klingon scum," he said furiously. "I'll get after the other one." Without another word, he took off back the way he came, quickly outstripping the pace of those who followed.

On all fours, his weapons jostling on his belt, Krashtallah ran for all he was worth. If his sister was alive, he had to rescue her. If dead, then blood would be spilled. There was no other directive in his mind as he tore through the corridors towards Transporter Room One.

First, he had to find where the prisoner had escaped from. Then he had to track him down.

Behind him, Brankovian called the Bridge and informed the captain before hunting down his own Klingon.

"What?!" Piper was incredulous. "Get some people after him! I need those Klingons *alive!*" This day was just getting better and better.

She turned her attention back towards the scene outside. Things hadn't improved much. The Romulan ships were still closing, however the *Millennium* had almost arrived at her intended position – that of guarding her sister ship, the *Excelsior*. Swinging her vast bulk around, the *Millennium* brought the topside of her primary hull to within fifty metres of the *Excelsior*'s, covering the damaged sections. The two ships looked like mirror images of one another.

"Make sure our shields cover the holes in theirs," Piper ordered. Then she turned to Crash's second at Communications. "Hail the Empress again."

After a moment, the Officer held up his hands in annoyance. "She's not responding, Captain."

Piper sighed. This whole scenario was going pear-shaped. "Keep trying." She looked at the screen once more, then made a decision. "Commander Sarda, take the Conn."

As the Vulcan assumed the station, Piper stated: "Do not fire unless first fired upon."

Sarda nodded. "Understood," he said in his deadpan fashion, then he did something unexpected. "Be careful," he said to her, although Piper would remember later that his lips hadn't moved.

He was being followed, of that K'miktos was certain. By whom, or what, that he didn't know. But whatever it was, it was good.

His original intention had been to go where he could cause the most damage – Engineering. He had made a beeline for that department, but it was taking more time than he had imagined. This ship was huge, and its corridors were longer than he'd hoped.

Listening to his borrowed headset, he heard the Starfleet officers were chasing his compatriot, but as yet he had no idea who he was. No matter, he was a Klingon and together, they had every chance to destroy this ship and send the Federation P'takhs to Klingon hell, earning them both an honoured place in Sto'Vo'Kor. It would be messy, but worth it.

Whenever he met resistance, he simply held his disruptor at his captive's head, and he had been allowed to pass. Curiously, they hadn't moved to follow.

That was his first clue that someone was shadowing him. Someone who had the other's faith. For the first time, K'miktos found himself wondering whether he was going to pull this off. As he moved from deck to deck and from one hallway to another, he became more uneasy. He was rarely encountering anyone at all, and if he did, they quickly disappeared behind a locked door.

More importantly, he kept coming to bulkheads that were reinforced with shields. He imagined that Starfleet employed them for security purposes at first, but the further he went, the more he became convinced he was being subtly herded somewhere.

The odd thing was, even though he was in space, K'miktos had an excellent sense of direction. He knew the earthers kept their warp engines in their secondary hulls, and he *was* still going that way.

Suddenly unnerved, he stopped in his tracks and yelled at the top of his voice: "COME OUT!"

Nobody did. Even the female Security Officer over his shoulder was silent. Not that she would have, anyway, he thought cheerfully. The gas that took her would not wear off for hours.

The moment bolstered his conviction that he *could* make a difference here, and so he continued down the hall.

Not far away, Captain Piper was now leading Brankovian's party as they hunted the other intruder. They had quickly discovered he had taken Jenny, and the knowledge emboldened them. No matter what culture you came from, children were off limits. The Klingon had violated this simple rule, and, just as simply, he would pay.

Piper listened keenly. In one ear was an earpiece linked to the channel she was using to relay false information to the Klingon who had gotten away from Lieutenant Amantallah. The other was tuned to an encrypted channel that was being used by Lieutenant Krashtallah and the Bridge.

The captain had decided long ago that the best course of action was to herd the Klingons into an open space so they could get a clean shot at them without having to worry about hitting her people. Piper was secretly furious they had taken prisoners, but she was not allowing the feeling to cloud her judgement. She was saving that for a more appropriate time.

Now they were getting very close to that place. Piper tapped her secure commlink. "Piper to Crash, what's your progress?" she asked quietly.

Krashtallah ducked his head back around the corner where he had been observing his quarry. For some time now, he had been pacing the Klingon, who he thought might be their commander. He was a very shrewd one, that was certain.

Very quietly, he responded: "I think he's beginning to realise something's wrong, Captain."

Before waiting for a response, he looked again to see the Klingon disappear around the far corner. Silently, he slid around the bend and dashed down the hall, stopping just short of the end. Once more, he took a quick look. The Klingon was still walking purposefully.

He stopped then, adjusted his load, for the umpteenth time, then continued. Unlike the Captain, Crash was letting his anger at this coward fuel him. It was bad enough taking a hostage, but for it to be his beloved sister, that was just too much.

So intent was he on his thoughts, that he missed the captain's last statement. "Sorry, Captain. Could you please repeat that?"

He could hear her sigh over the commlink. "They should arrive at about the same time. Be ready."

"Aye, Captain," he said before touching off. He checked his prey, and noted they were still going the right way. As he turned back, he noticed a GNDN panel on the wall and got an idea.

On the Bridge, Sarda divided his attention between what was happening below decks and what was going on outside. It was proving quite taxing, he mused

to himself.

He spoke up so the Comms Officer could hear. “Has there been any reply from the Empress?” he asked calmly.

“None, sir,” he replied.

Sarda allowed himself the luxury of a frown. The Romulans were getting too close, and time was running out. He made a decision. “Begin broadcasting what we’re receiving from the captain’s camera, as well as from the security cameras from the Rec. deck. Make it a live feed. Audio as well.”

“Aye.”

He had to get the Empress’ attention so she could put an end to this war before it began. At least if he broadcast the facts, she had little excuse and could not cry innocent.

On three different starships, Commanders of two different fleets saw the video feed and paused to consider its meaning. For the moment, the Rihannsu fleet stopped – just short of the Neutral Zone.

As soon as K’miktos stepped into the Rec deck he realised the trap. No sooner had he walked inside the doors behind him closed with a slap. Instantly, a force shield snapped into place, and he quickly discovered his disruptor, even set on maximum, didn’t make a dent in it.

He cursed his stupidity for allowing this to happen then found a moment to hope when a door on the far side of the deck opened and one of his warriors, Wotar, if he remembered rightly, stepped through, pushing a human female child before him.

“Cut it out!” she said defiantly then quietened again when she saw K’miktos.

“Hold the door!” he called – too late. Like the one he had entered by, Wotar’s snapped shut and a shield came on.

When Wotan took out his pistol, K’miktos shook his head. “Do not waste your energy on it. It will not penetrate.”

Wotan pushed Jenny out into the middle of the deck where he could get a clear view of every entrance.

Not having anything better to do, K’miktos joined him then decided against such a vulnerable spot. “We need some cover,” he stated, roughly. His shoulder ached from carrying Amantallash for so long. He decided it was time for his underling to do some real work. “Here, carry this one. She is their Security Chief,” he said. “They will not shoot at you while you are carrying her.”

Wotan looked at him dubiously but complied all the same. He let his Commander slide the Cait onto his shoulders where he wore her like an oversized

stole. He shrugged to adjust the weight. He then turned back to his Commander, who was now holding the human before him as a shield.

Even the minor functionary found fault with *that*. It was bad enough he had been forced to travel with the child down here. He had hoped the humans would not dare shoot at him with her nearby. It was quite another thing to cower behind one. “Commander, we should not be hiding behind children,” he hissed disapprovingly.

For that comment, he was backhanded – savagely. “Who are you to question me?” K’miktos bellowed. He then sneered. “You’re just as bad as those useless Orions!” He turned as if the matter was settled. “Now, be on your guard. The Earthers are watching us. That, I am sure of.”

Seeking some shelter, the duo headed for the Oak.

All the while, Jenny had been listening, and getting bolder by the minute. She had been shot at, growled at and pushed around, and she was getting very tired of being afraid. “What is all this about?” she snapped suddenly, stamping her foot, refusing to go any further.

K’miktos had no patience for her prattle. “Be silent, child, or you will join the people of Breakwater in death,” he said cruelly, not realising where she came from. He prodded her with his disruptor, but she refused to move.

The mention of her home galvanised Jenny. Memories of her mother flooded her mind. Times when the of the two of them made a new home for themselves and taking delight in it – even given her mother’s illness. Memories of playing with the other children of the colony in the sea that they were so buoyant in they couldn’t have drowned if they tried. Furious, she glared up at K’miktos’ six feet from her four without any fear. “Did you kill them?” she said, angry and shocked.

The Klingon gave her a shove that sent her reeling. “What is it to you?” he growled. Tired of the charade, he stretched his hands to the heavens and proudly bellowed: “The Orions may have stolen the P’takh Romulan ship, but they only fired at *our* order.”

Jenny sat on the floor, the grass under her, only metres away from the Oak. Bruised, she was still defiant. “Were you too gutless to pull the trigger yourselves?” she sneered as only a child could.

It was too much for K’miktos. To be challenged by a human was bad enough, but a female *child*? It was too much to bear. The anger burned through him like a fire, igniting his eyes. He stalked towards her, his hand reaching for the firing control on his disruptor. “The ORIONS are cowards! We told them to destroy a Federation starship – something that could at least defend itself – not some whimpering little human colony! We had to kill them to remove the stain their actions brought to the honour of the house of Duras and do the job *ourselves*.” Baring his teeth, he drew a bead on Jenny’s chest. “Now, join them.”

On the Bridge of the Empress' flagship, the Rihannsu leader sat, and marvelled. For a handful of Klingons to almost bring the remaining two Alpha Quadrant powers to war was amazing. She would have to have a word with the leader of the Tal Shi'ar and recommend they improve their intelligence gathering techniques.

She was, however, impressed by the actions of the *Millennium*'s captain, who was willing to risk it all to keep the peace. Beaming out the video of the Klingons had been a stroke of genius. Piper was more resourceful than she had guessed. She would have to keep an eye on her in the future.

Her comms officer interrupted her chain of thought. "Empress, Commander t'Khenniell is calling."

The Empress had been expecting the call. "Put her on screen," she said coolly.

The image of the Commander did not fail to hide the anger in her eyes. Curious, the Empress thought. She was usually quite impassive.

"Empress, I implore you not to take this broadcast seriously. I believe it to be a last, sad, attempt to keep us from war." There was something in her voice that caught the Empress' attention. Defiance.

She had to be certain. "I believe it to be genuine," she said quietly. She stared at her Fleet Commander and waited for her to speak.

Reen's eyes widened a little. Yes, the Empress thought. It is defiance. "And if it *isn't*? We will have let the Federation get away with the murder of the *Falcon's Claw*'s crew."

The Empress sighed and forced a relaxed posture. "Is all out war required to avenge the deaths of the crew of *one* Bird of Prey?"

The Commander's pupils dilated a little. "Is the life of a Rihannha worth so little that they not be avenged?" she countered.

At that point, the two women were interrupted by an overriding call from another Warbird. "Empress, Commander, if I may?" The voice was masculine – and familiar. The Empress would have recognised S'trask's voice anywhere.

This day was getting more and more interesting. The Empress looked up at the ceiling in wonder, but also sadness. S'trask was the second in command of the *S'harien*, and for him to call could only mean that t'Avik was dead or incapacitated.

"Put them on screen," she ordered calmly. "Side by side."

As S'trask appeared he gave the women a polite bow. "Empress, Commander t'Khenniell. I have important information from the Commander." Even in death, S'trask would not utter her name.

The Empress allowed herself a small sigh. "Why is the Commander not giving this report herself?" she asked, already knowing the answer from the Sub-Commander's body language.

Stoically, S'trask reported: "I regret to inform you that the Commander has

passed.” He paused for a brief second, the pain intruding into his eyes. “She was killed when we were engaged by two Klingon Battle Cruisers sent to destroy us and keep us from getting vital intelligence to our leaders.”

Even Reen sucked in a breath. For such a great warrior to be killed in battle was an honour for her, but a loss for the Empire. Even so, she questioned S’task’s intentions. “What could possibly be so important that it would alter these events?” she said, trying to mask her anger.

She wasn’t very good at it. Even S’task could see that, the Empress noted.

The younger male continued professionally. “From their tactics, the Commander concluded that the *Falcon’s Claw* that fired on the Federation Starbase was in the hands of Klingons – from the house of Duras to be precise.”

Reen blinked. “How could she be so certain?”

The Empress narrowed her eyes at that comment. There was no doubting her cousin’s intelligence and integrity. If she thought something was so, it was.

S’task answered, betraying a touch of annoyance with his ever-so-slightly disrespectful tone. “We followed them for a while unobserved. Their evasive tactics were textbook Klingon.”

The Fleet Commander doggedly continued, not giving the Empress a chance to speak. “How are we to know they were not in collusion with the humans? This could be a plot to overthrow the Rihannsu together.”

At that the Empress allowed a slight chuckle. Both of her subordinates stared at her from the screen. “It is mnhei’sahe. They are poles apart, and there is no way they would work together. The Klingons, especially Duras, are without honour. Never mind the fact that the earthers would *never* sacrifice a colony of their own. They are “one big happy family”, as they would put it. *It is mnhei’sahe.*”

She took a breath and added: “Aside from the fact that you, Reen, missed something the Sub-Commander said earlier. He said *us* when he reported the Klingon’s attack. He wasn’t just talking about the *S’harien*.” She turned slightly and looked S’task’s image in the eye. “You were meeting the *Millennium*, weren’t you?”

The Sub-Commander paled a little but nodded obediently. “The Commander responded to a call from his Captain, a human female called Piper. They shared information, but during their time together we came under fire from the Klingons and the Commander was killed.” S’task then went on to give a detailed report of the firefight, unabashedly adding that the *Millennium* had come to their aid and finished off their attackers before towing them to safety and returning the Commander’s body. He finished with: “Their Captain asked that we return and report what we knew to you.”

For a moment, he seemed reluctant to say something and the Empress did not miss it. “What else did she say?” she asked sternly. Now was not the time for trepidation.

S'trask drew himself up straight and looked her fully in the eye. "Empress, Captain Piper told me that you might be suspicious. She told me to pass on a message to you, given by the Commander just before she died. She said: I never forgot what you did for me on Hellguard."

The Empress felt like she had been sucker-punched. Her cousin was many things, but she never thought her to be such a sentimentalist. It had been a long time ago, and she thought it a minor thing she had done for her, but it was clear t'Avik had never forgotten it.

At that moment, she remembered her cousin, as dear to her as a sister, and felt the grief tear at her heart. Duras would pay, of that she was certain as the old Rihannsu code kicked in. As the emotions warred within her, she remained visually impassive, betraying nothing. She simply nodded, accepting the report.

She knew it was all true as t'Avik would never have shared the knowledge with anyone else unless absolutely necessary. As far as she knew, only the two of them were aware of the events she had referred to. There was no way a Starfleet Captain could possibly have known unless she had been told by t'Avik herself.

The Empress took a deep breath and flexed her fingers. She didn't realise until that moment that she had been gripping the chair arms tightly. "Call it off," she said quietly.

Open rebellion found a home on Reen t'Khenniell's face. "No," she said simply, angrily. "Not again! I will not watch the Rihannsu back down in the face of the Federation again!" She turned to her second who was off camera. "Move the fleet forward."

The Empress vaulted to her feet and glared at t'Khenniell. "You will not live out this day, traitor!"

With an evil glint in her eye, the Fleet Commander grinned back at her. "I could say the same for you, *Empress*," she spat. "While we've been talking, I've been triangulating your signal. Even cloaked, I know exactly where you are." She turned once more to her assistant. "Target the Empress's ship and fire."

So intent was the Empress on facing down Reen, she failed to notice S'trask was already acting. He, too, knew where the Empress's ship was – right in the heart of their fleet. And, true to his training, he had taken up station in a position to best protect his leader.

"Drop the cloak," S'trask ordered. "Arm weapons and raise shields." His confidence rose as he knew his engineers had been hard at work restoring the *S'harien*'s systems. The Rihannsu's latest Warbird was once more ready for action.

The emerald green, vulture shaped vessel, newly decloaked and visible, swung about in space, its weapons coming to bear on the Fleet Commander's Warbird which was bearing down on the Empress' position. As S'trask watched,

the Commander's vessel fired a volley of photon torpedoes.

Behind the *S'harien*, the Empress' ship also decloaked, but S'trask knew that they would not get their shields up in time. He knew he did not have to give the order as his pilot moved their vessel straight up and into the path of the torpedoes.

However, their fate was markedly different to that of the ill-fated *Excelsior*. The torpedoes exploded against their forward shields, reducing them only by ten percent.

The *S'harien*'s reply was swift and executed with extreme prejudice. "Fire everything we've got," S'trask ordered pitilessly.

The *S'harien*'s wingtips glowed as its disruptors opened up, unleashing bolt after bolt of green fire at the Commander's ship. These were followed momentarily by a volley of photon torpedoes that played over their adversary's shields, causing them to flash into ultra-violet.

Reen t'Khenniell was not going out easily. "Evasive action!" she ordered. "Fire a photon bolt at the *S'harien*, then go after the Empress's ship."

The reply from the bridge was quick and decisive. The commander of the *Razor's Edge* broke her resolve with a few choice words. "We don't have the energy for a photon bolt. It would take too long to charge the weapon, and we need all we've got to sustain our shields. The *S'harien* is keeping up a constant bombardment, so I can't spare the energy."

The Fleet Commander was not without options. She knew she could not fight this battle alone, so she called in reinforcements. She began rattling off ship names. They were captained by people who were loyal to her. "Order them to fire on the Empress and the *S'harien*."

The floor bucked as another volley of photon torpedoes exploded against their shields. Her aides began reporting that, one by one, the commanders of those ships refused to engage.

When the last one answered in the negative, Reen knew she was beaten. With no-one to assist her, and two Warbirds to her one, there was no chance of victory. However, waiting for her shields to fail was suicide, and she wanted to make sure she would be around to fight another day.

"Retreat!" she ordered through a tight throat.

The Empress watched as the *Razor's Edge* continued fighting, doggedly firing volleys at both her and the *S'harien*. She had to give it to Reen. She was like the proverbial dog with a bone. If she believed she was in the right, she would fight to the death.

She caught herself. No, unless it was pointless. Then she would run.

She had also watched S'trask's tactics. They reminded her of t'Avik. However, he was a lot less subtle than her late cousin. Whilst he kept his ship moving, he was literally throwing everything in his arsenal at her. He was hoping for a quick victory. She knew from experience that such things were rarely possible.

It was time to put this to a decisive end. "Signal the fleet to fire on the *Razor's Edge*," she said with a tinge of regret.

On the screen, their quarry spun on its axis, turning every which way. She wondered what they were doing until realisation stuck. "Fire now!" she cried.

Torpedoes from fifteen different Warbirds flew towards the *Razor's Edge*, but in vain. The Fleet Commander's ship finally found a vector they could escape by, and the Warbird disappeared as it went into high warp.

"Follow her!" the Empress ordered, knowing it was already too late. By now, the *Razor's Edge* had deployed its cloaking device. Reen t'Khenniell was long gone.

Chapter Fourteen

There were few things in the universe more cowardly than to strike down a helpless child. Wotan watched as his commander aimed his weapon at the human girl, yet even though he was repulsed at the extraordinary lack of courage shooting her would require, he did nothing, not realising his was the greater measure of cowardice.

His focus on K'miktos was his undoing. Both Klingons glanced upwards as the Oak's branches parted and two beings jumped out, one towards each of them. They moved with a speed that seemed unnatural.

Wotan noted that one of them actually growled! It was a huge, black cat that attacked like lightning. The last thing Wotan ever saw was the light glinting off its razor-sharp teeth as it flew towards him, its claws outstretched. Distantly, for a split second, he felt the tearing of his flesh as the being sunk its fighting nails into him. This halted when the signals from his body were severed – along with his spinal cord – as the furious creature drove its fangs into his exposed neck, partially severing his head.

Krashtallah tasted bitter Klingon blood as he quickly dropped the being who had been using his Shrallah as a shield. There were times he loved being a Cait, having been endowed with formidable defensive – and offensive – weapons.

At this moment, he only knew hate for the beings who had so mistreated his sister, and the quick dispatching of Wotan was the first step towards rectifying the insult. Once he was certain that the Klingon was taken care of – and the blood pooling across the floor confirmed that – he checked his sister's vital signs. With a sigh that came from the depths of his soul, he let go of the fear of having to mourn her as he felt her pulse as strong and steady.

His job done, he turned to see if the captain needed any help.

Piper was glad to finally be able to deal with this troublesome Klingon. She had pursued him down here so she could get some answers out of him, but fortunately Jenny had taken care of that problem by goading him into a confession. Her link with Sarda told her the security cameras had recorded everything and had broadcast it to the fleet. The Klingon captain's usefulness was now officially at an end.

Having jumped down from the Oak's branches along with Lieutenant Krashtallah, who had insisted on rescuing his sister, she was focussing on disarming K'miktos before he shot Jenny. This had the double benefit of helping her filter out the sound of flesh being rended behind her. Armed with her Andorian version of a Kendo shinai fighting stick – a Vin'tah – she brought the end of it up in an arc that not only spoiled K'miktos' aim but sent his disruptor flying.

K'miktos' wrist guard took most of the shock and kept it from shattering. All the same, he shook his hand painfully and almost reached to rub his right wrist with

his left hand when he realised his left arm was still broken and tucked into his chest armour. Furious, he turned on the captain and advanced on her, not the least bit intimidated by her Vin'tah and the fact it was pointed at his face.

Piper smirked, welcoming the challenge. "Are you sure today is a good day to die?" she asked him, letting him hear her confidence. She slipped her left hand down to the hilt of the handle and touched a hidden button. As if my magic, the curved sides of the Vin'tah retracted into the hilt to reveal a three-foot-long shining steel blade, its business end now directed at his sternum.

The blade gave him reason to pause. The Klingon stepped back and considered his next move. As he did so, Piper spoke without shifting her gaze. "Jenny, get out!"

In her periphery, the girl got off the grass and ran to the now open side door where a Security Officer was waiting for her. He pushed her behind him where Doctor AndrusTaurus was waiting to check her over. With that done, he turned his attention back to the captain. She had left orders not to enter unless absolutely necessary. Just keep the Klingon from escaping.

There were many things he liked about his Captain. Her sense of humour and compassion were among them. However, her propensity for taking on dangerous assignments was not among them.

He turned his gaze back to watch, noting that Lieutenant Krashtallah was cradling his sister, whilst keeping a keen eye on the captain's activities.

Piper kept her footing sure and ready to move at a moment's notice. K'miktos was keeping just out of range of her blade. Somehow, she had known that he would not come quietly, so she tried reason.

"My people have this room surrounded," she said, chiding herself for sounding like a Saturday night television series policeman. "You can surrender peacefully and spend the rest of your life at a Federation Penal Settlement or go to your people's version of hell. Which one is it?"

Her answer came as a clear challenge. He slipped his right hand down and took the end of his belt, slipped it out from around him, then hit a button that made it go straight and rigid. A handle dropped out of the buckle, and Piper found herself marvelling that Klingons seemed to have weapons stashed everywhere.

K'miktos swung his now solid belt over his shoulder as he stepped forward to pummel the Federation Captain. He had long practised with this weapon, as he had with all his weapons, and he felt confident that he could take out this meddlesome female.

Piper swung her blade up and parried, expecting to slice straight through what appeared to be leather. She did not. The carbon steel of her blade reverberated as it deflected the now remolecularised ceramic of K'miktos' weapon.

Her surprise nearly cost her dearly as K'miktos kept coming, swinging again, this time from his left as he kept moving towards her. Piper ducked suddenly,

K'miktos' club brushing through her hair as it barely missed her scalp, then she used her momentum to roll out of the way and back onto her feet.

K'miktos's impetus carried him past Piper and it took him a second to straighten up as he could not balance himself properly without the use of his left arm. He staggered for a moment as he came around, finding himself staring into the feral eyes of a great cat who had no love for him.

"You had better wish the captain finishes you off," he said, chilling the Klingon. Crash glanced off at the prone form of Wotan. "Or I will."

There were few things that frightened a Klingon, and the sight of his underling lying dead with his throat ripped out was one of them. K'miktos took a backwards step before turning once more to face Piper. This time, he noticed she was ready for him and K'miktos realised these would probably be the last few moments of his life.

He had no idea that those of the Federation could have such mettle. He, and his clan, had underestimated their resolve, a fault that had proven fatal this time. All the same, he knew his people would learn from this exercise, and his failures.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something that gave him hope that he could snatch some victory from the jaws of total defeat. He needed to form a plan, and fast.

Before he could come up with one, the captain stepped forward and started swinging. It was all the experienced warrior could do to parry each blow. He noticed that every time Piper's "sword" connected with his makeshift club, a chip flew out of it as the sharp blade slowly dissected it.

Knowing he had little time, he allowed himself to be slowly pushed back as Piper swung left and right, wearing him down. Step by step, he moved in a circle the brought him closer and closer to his quarry.

Behind the Captain, Crash narrowed his eyes suspiciously. The Klingon was up to something, but he didn't know what. He looked around and his eyes alighted on the Klingon's target.

Piper was also watching K'miktos. For someone who was losing as badly as he was, she saw something in his eye that made her wonder. Defiance. He faced total defeat, and yet he was still holding out hope for *something*.

Suddenly, K'miktos dropped at the same time the Crash yelled: "Look out, Captain!" The Klingon brought his body down in a painful roll on the grass that landed him on top of his disruptor.

As he grabbed for it, the captain took the only action she could to stop him. He was out of arm's reach, so she swung her Vin'tah in an arc and released it, its point headed straight for K'miktos' chest. Even with his armour, the incredibly sharp point of the Andorian weapon sliced straight through his breastplate, his chest, his heart, then out his back, effectively pinning him to the ground.

With the last reserves of his strength, K'miktos feebly raised his disruptor,

but instead of trying to hit the captain, he aimed for the Rec Deck's windows which were a much better target.

Time slowed down as Piper watched K'miktos act out his final revenge, knowing that there was nothing she could do to stop the explosive decompression they were about to endure. She was shocked to find herself lifted from the ground by a barrelling Cait who already had his sister slung over his shoulders.

Crash had guessed K'miktos' plan and was already in motion when he went down. Not willing to leave her behind, he grabbed Manny's prone form then sprinted towards the captain with one plan in mind: get to the tree. If he could get his claws into its bark, they had a chance.

As he closed in on his target, K'miktos fired with his dying breath. The disruptor beam cut a hole nearly three feet wide through the transparent aluminium window, causing the pressurised air in their space to rush out into the zero pressure outside.

As the doors closed around them, cutting off any hope of escape, the wind tore at their bodies. However, Crash was not going to let it beat him. There was a lot of air in the spacious Rec. Deck, and it was taking a minute to evacuate. With his claws extended, Manny over his shoulders and Piper clinging to his chest, Crash took the final steps towards the Oak and wrapped his arms around it, sinking his claws deep into the wood. He hoped he could hold on until the automatic force shield snapped on to cover the hole and the room could re-pressurise.

As Piper watched over his shoulder, she hoped the very same thing. Peculiarly, she felt no fear, only fascination as she saw firstly Wotan's body get sucked out into space, then K'miktos's body slipped free of the soil as her Vin'tah lost its hold on the floor. His body shot feet first through the hole, then jammed as the Andorian sword caught as it was marginally longer than the gap was wide.

His body acted as a partial plug momentarily, slowing down their loss of atmosphere until, seconds later, the shield finally snapped on. The energy wall sliced straight through K'miktos's torso, cutting him in two just below the sternum. His "bust" dropped to the floor, still pierced through by Piper's Vin'tah. Fortunately, his organs had frozen solid and stayed *inside* what remained of him.

In a burst of sound, the vents lining the wall opened, gushing life-giving air that brought a fine mist into the room as the temperature had dropped well below freezing. The grass was covered in frost and Piper found herself shivering, knowing she had to let go of Crash whose body was warming her own, but not really wanting to for that very reason.

The decision was taken away from her as Crash released his hold of the tree, freeing his Captain. He looked down at her and for a moment they shared a look. They were warriors who had prevailed, and they took a moment to share in their victory. Piper simply nodded her thanks for effectively saving her life.

Crash returned it with a slight smile. "All in a day's work on the Starship

Millennium,” he said with cheer. “Now, Captain, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to take Amantallah to Sickbay.”

Piper stepped back and allowed him to pass, and she watched him cheerfully shoulder his responsibility then step gingerly across the partially frozen floor with his bare Caitian feet. She covered her mouth to hide the smile she wore at how ridiculous it seemed then turned to finish her business on the Rec. deck.

She walked over to what remained of K’miktos, leaned over, took her Vin’tah by the handle, then slid it out of his corpse that gave it up with a slight sucking sound. She cleaned its blade on K’miktos’ sleeve then hit the button that extended the cover that once more turned it into a metal baton. Before she stood, she had a parting word for his corpse as she remembered how he had practically plugged the hole he had created. “I suppose you weren’t a complete waste of space after all,” she said in an off-hand manner.

Turning her back on the Klingon, she brought her attention to the nearest security camera. “Admiral, I think that concludes this little war, don’t you?” she said devoid of mirth.

In the command centre of the *U.S.S. Excalibur*, Fleet Admiral William Smillie looked up from the monitor he had been glued to for several minutes and allowed himself the luxury of a small smile. Thanks to K’miktos’ big mouth, Duras’s plan was now common knowledge.

He had to give the older Klingon credit. It was a good plan. However, now the truth was out, there had to be repercussions. They were not going to let this insult pass.

However, that would have to wait for another time. Smillie turned and addressed his aides. “Have the fleet stand down.”

“Er, Admiral.”

The worried words brought him to attention and drew him across the room. He looked down at the scanner then spoke again: “Belay that order, but our people are not to fire unless they are fired upon!” He watched in amazement as the Romulans were shooting at each other! “What is going on over there?” he asked in wonder.

By the time Piper reached the Bridge, the fighting amongst the Romulans was over. On the turbolift up to Deck One, she had sensed Sarda’s surprise, but also his concern, over them. She knew she had missed something with his subtle change in mood when one of the Romulan ships had warped out, leaving the *S’harien* guarding what must have been the Empress’ Warbird.

These details she had missed and discovered when Sarda gave his report. “It

would appear the Empress managed to put down a mutiny," he concluded.

Piper nodded. There seemed to be no end of weirdness this day. "But why did they mutiny?"

Inwardly, Sarda shrugged, and whilst nobody else saw it, Piper felt it. "There can be many explanations, Captain, but I believe that speculation at this juncture would be fruitless."

His comment drew a smile from Lieutenant Valastro, who enjoyed Sarda's linguistic gymnastics. "Still no movement from the Romulan fleet, Captain," he reported.

"Incoming transmission!" the comms officer reported. Piper noted Crash's second was still manning the station as he was undoubtedly still in Sickbay with Manny. No sooner had she finished the thought than the turbolift doors opened and Krashtallah stepped out and took over his station.

"On screen," Piper said after a quick grin to the Cait.

Looking none the worse for wear, the Romulan Empress appeared as serene as she had before. Nobody would have guessed from her countenance that she had just come very close to losing her Empire. "My apologies, Captain," she said calmly, betraying nothing of her feelings. "We were rudely interrupted."

Piper wondered for a moment whether she would be offered a cup of tea, the Empress was being so congenial. "Such is life in service to our people," Piper stated with equal equanimity.

The Empress's mouth raised a little in one corner in mirth. "Indeed. I am appreciative of your broadcasting the images of K'miktos's confession. We have all been the victims of an elaborate deception."

The Captain was only slightly surprised that the Empress was aware of the Klingon's identity. He had never spoken his name for the cameras, nor had DNA tests been yet performed to uncover whether what he had said in the transporter room was true. Yet the Empress was once again revealing how well informed the Tal Shi'ar was. Yep, she thought to herself, she really would know my bra size. "Perhaps both parties can work towards making certain it doesn't happen again," Piper offered. As an after-thought, she added: "My condolences on the loss of your two crews."

This time the Empress allowed herself a full smile. "Thank you for your generosity. I offer mine regarding the loss of your friend Suzette and the crew of the *Firebrand*. I know the two of you were good friends." At the sight of Piper's tightened face, she said: "I am not trying to show off, Captain. She was a good woman. You choose your friends well."

The anger Piper had felt upon the Empress' use of Suzette's name did not completely abate. The Empress was quite capable of subterfuge, but Piper was also aware from Doctor's McCoy's recounts of their dealings that she was also a very honourable woman. She decided to take her at face value – this time. "Thank you,

Empress.”

As she turned to go, the Romulan leader said quickly: “Tell Jim I said Jolan Tru.” The *Millennium*’s screen changed back to the starfield, and she and the crew watched momentarily as the Romulan fleet turned and, one by one, they headed home.

The captain’s respite was short. A call came from the *Excalibur* a moment later, and Piper decided to take it in her Ready Room. Before she took it, she got herself a fresh glass of pineapple juice from the replicator then took her seat at her desk. She took the call on her desk screen. No surprise, Admiral Smillie gazed at her from behind his own desk. She noted he was holding a cup of Brazilian coffee – black, no sugar. For once, she found him hard to read as he was wearing his best poker face.

Piper decided to break the ice. “What can I do for you, Admiral?” She took a sip from her glass and did her best to look amiable.

“Still drinking jungle juice, Piper?” he replied before taking a sip of his brew. He sighed, letting his mask slip. “I’ve got to be honest with you. On the one hand, you managed to avert a war, for which we can all be grateful. But on the other hand, you showed a flagrant disregard for my leadership of this fleet. I don’t know whether to pin a medal on your chest or have you court martialled.”

Piper smirked. “There are few things that smell as sweet as success, Admiral. Let’s call it a draw.”

The Admiral chuckled at that. “Fair enough. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a fleet to send home.” He reached forward to cut the link, but Piper held up a hand.

“Admiral, I have two requests to make first,” she said. “First, I want the *Millennium* tasked with the duty of escorting the *Excelsior* home. I don’t know if Captain Styles survived the attack, but I owe it to him to make sure his ship gets back safely.”

The far off look in the Admiral’s eyes was all Piper needed to know that Styles was dead. It was regrettable. For all the man’s bluster, he was a good officer. “Granted,” Smillie said charitably. “What’s the second?”

With the *Millennium* now officially headed home, escorting the badly wounded *Excelsior* at warp four, the crew was finally finding time to relax.

Jason Nunn and Carman Valastro decided they would visit the still comatose Lieutenant Amantallah in Sickbay. They found, to their delight, that their timing was impeccable. The erstwhile Security Chief was just coming around.

Standing beside her bed, Doctor Andrus Taurus took in the duo with a raised

brow. “Aren’t the two of you on duty?” she asked with only a slight rebuke in her tone.

Carman gave the Doctor a shrug. In as friendly a manner as he could, given that he was exhausted, he said: “The Captain sent us to check on the Lieutenant, personally.”

Merete wondered to herself whether the captain had an ulterior motive. She noticed Carman was carrying a datapadd, but there was nothing else about him that seemed even remotely unusual. She closed both sets of her eyelids for a moment to think but discarded the notion. She was getting paranoid in her old age, she decided. She opened them again and gave the young men a welcoming smile. “As you can see, the Lieutenant is starting to come out of it. The poison gas she was exposed to was potent, but I don’t believe it was designed to kill. Of the people affected, it hit her worst because of her physiology. The others have already returned to duty.”

Jason stepped forward and tapped Manny on the shoulder. “Wake up sleepy head,” he said cheekily.

The Caitian’s eyes opened a fraction, turned slightly and took in her guests. She closed them again as she found the world was too bright and far too loud. She tried to sit up and discovered her sense of balance had gone on holiday and forgotten to leave a note. She slumped back onto the bed, her head coming to rest in the middle of the pillow. “What happened?” she croaked. “I feel like the sky fell on my head.”

The Doctor laid a hand on Manny’s head. “Are you thirsty?” she asked.

Manny tried to nod and failed. But the slight movement was enough for Merete to get the message. “I’ll get you some water,” she said, turning to go.

“Make sure it’s in a bowl,” came an unexpected voice from the doorway.

Merete took in her old friend with a smirk, hand on hip. “I think I know enough about the Cait to know that a glass would be wasted, Scanner.”

The ever rumpled, but never-the-less cheerful Engineer flashed her a grin. “I wouldn’t doubt it, Doc.” He let her go and turned to Amantallah. Stepping past the younger officers, he sat on his heels and looked her in the eye. “You’ve been in the wars, haven’t you?” he asked gently. Not knowing exactly why he was doing it, he reached up and gently stroked the hair between her ears.

The action brought an immediate reaction. Manny started purring. Her eyes opened a crack, and she took in the human before her. He looked like most of the other humans to her, but what she found endearing about this being was that he genuinely seemed to *care*. He didn’t do something for show. “Thank you,” she said quietly, closing her eyes once more. “I needed that.”

Scanner moved to retrieve his hand and stopped when Manny’s eyes opened again. “Please don’t stop,” she implored. “It’s better than aspirin.”

Scanner nodded and complied, gently stroking her head.

Jason spoke softly. “Headache?” he asked.

Without moving, Manny responded: “I feel like a photon torpedo went off inside my head.”

Rejoining the group, Merete passed the bowl of water to Judd. He took it and held it under Manny’s nose. She sniffed, grateful for the offering, but she wondered what the odd smell was. She asked.

“I dissolved some painkillers in it for you,” the Doctor said. “Now, drink it, it’s good for you.”

“You sound like my mother,” Manny said groggily. She lifted her head a little and started lapping at the water Judd held for her.

“She sounds like everybody’s mother when she talks like that,” Judd said, not unkindly. He looked up to see her give him a knowing look before she left them to tend to her other patients.

Feeling a little stronger as Merete’s fast-acting drugs took effect, Manny finished her drink and tried to sit up once more. As sitting on her tail was not an option, she brought herself up to a typically feline position with her legs folded before her and her hands/paws supporting her. She swayed for a moment, and Scanner held one shoulder whilst Carman supported the other.

“Thank you,” Manny said gratefully. She looked about her and took in her surroundings again. “What happened?” she asked again.

Both junior officers deferred to Judd. Aside from simply protocol, they had no idea how she would take the truth.

Scanner took her cheek and turned her face to look her in the eye. For a moment, Manny worried that someone had died. Perhaps even her brother. “Don’t fret, Lieutenant. The Klingon you were escorting had more tricks up his sleeve than any of us imagined. He knocked you out with some kind of nerve toxin he had in his boot.”

Manny groaned painfully, putting her paw to her head. “I failed,” she bemoaned. “My first week as Security Chief, and I failed.”

Still holding the other side of her head, Scanner gave her a tiny shake to get her attention. He spoke with the authority that his superior rank afforded him. “I’m only going to say this once, Lieutenant, so I expect you to listen.” Manny’s feline eyes focussed on his gentle human ones. “None of us are holding you responsible for what that Klingon bastard did. I don’t think even Piper would have anticipated that form of attack – especially from a Klingon.” He thought for a second. “It’s not, well, the *Klingon* thing to do.”

At that, Carman nodded his agreement. “The Commander has a point, Manny,” he said. “It’s not their way.” He shot Judd a look. “What kind of Klingon does the kind of things *he* did?” he said, concerned. “To use their vernacular, he was *without honour*.”

“What things?” Manny asked, getting caught up in the discussion.

As if in answer, Carman passed her the datapadd he was carrying. “The captain thought you’d like to be brought up to date. Everything you need to know is here, including video recordings of K’miktos’s misdeeds.” He gave her a quick grin. “Don’t skip to the end. You’ll spoil it.”

Jason gave a dark chuckle. “Too right. The Captain and Crash kicked butt.”

At the mention of her brother’s name, Manny became more alert. “What do you mean?”

Scanner laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, and she turned back to look him in the eye. She liked spending time with this human with his gentle ways, even when the practical joker in him came out and he was playing a prank or driving Sarda crazy with his overt humanity.

“Lieutenant, it’s best you find that out for yourself,” he said firmly. “Just watch the video and read the reports. You’ve got plenty of time as the war was over before it began. We’re on our way home as we speak.”

Manny was so startled she jerked backwards in surprise. “How long have I been out for?” she asked incredulously, before taking her head between both her paws to keep it from exploding. When the pain subsided, she found Scanner waiting patiently for her. “Only six hours,” he said with a smirk.

Jason laughed. “A lot can happen in six hours, that’s for sure.” He gave Manny a pat on the arm. “Get well soon,” he said, before he and Carman left to return to the bridge.

Manny muttered “thanks” as they left then turned back to Scanner. “You, too, Commander.” She was oddly moved. “You’ve been very kind.”

Scanner just raised his brows, amused. “We aim to please,” he said. He gave her one more rub between the ears before leaving, leading Manny to purr once more in pleasure. He left her with a jaunty wave, and she watched him go, sorry to see him do so.

Now free of distraction, but finding herself still too weak to stand, Manny turned her attention to the padd and started to read. Finding the written reports dull, she began watching the security footage and found herself in open wonder at what she was watching.

And feeling a conviction she had never felt before.

It took her a while, but Piper finally found Jenny. Since she had ordered the child out of the Rec. deck for her own safety, she had not even seen a hair of her head. Now, she found Jenny sitting on the grass, staring up at the window that had only hours before been cut through by a Klingon disruptor, but that Judd’s people had already replaced.

There were tears in the girl’s eyes, and the captain wondered for a moment whether she should interrupt her. Knowing that she would rather have company

than not, Piper folded her legs and sat down gently on the grass beside Jenny, resting her hands on her knees.

She sat silently for a number of minutes before the lass broke the silence. “How could he?” she said in quiet rage. “He killed my mother and everybody on Breakwater and to him it was nothing.”

At that, Piper had no answer. “I’ve been out in space for twenty years,” she said introspectively. “In all that time, I’ve met an amazing amount of people I can relate to and who think like we do, and just as big a group that don’t. Some of them are so alien we can’t even find some common ground....” her voice trailed off for a moment. “Others just seem to like being evil.”

Jenny looked at the captain in mild surprise. “My teachers always said there are no evil people, just people who think differently to us because they come from a different culture.”

Piper shifted on the grass and watched a star go by outside. She reminded herself it was she who was going by *it*. It was all just a matter of perspective. “K’miktos thought he was doing something good for his people,” she said.

As Jenny scowled, thinking Piper was somehow going to defend him, the captain continued. “However, I saw the look on the other Klingon’s face. Even he thought his captain was doing the wrong thing when he pointed his gun at you.” She turned and looked Jenny in the eye. “I have to disagree with your teachers. There are plenty of evil people out in the galaxy – some of them even right at home.” She touched her insignia on her left breast. “It’s our job to keep them at bay whilst making new friends.”

The child nodded, then turned back to gaze out the window once more. “I’d like to join Starfleet when I’m older.” She leaned back on her palms and got comfortable whilst shedding the odd tear. “I’d like to protect others from monsters like K’miktos.”

Piper gave a pleasant sigh whilst keeping her eyes on the window. “You’d be welcome. You handled yourself very well today. I’m sure your mum would be proud.”

At the mention of her mother, Jenny let loose a flood of tears. Piper drew her in close and let the girl soak her uniform jacket. Since they had left Breakwater, she had dammed up her feelings, but now they flowed like a flood. She gave her time to weep whilst she gently stroked Jenny’s hair. After a little while, she spoke softly. “I contacted your Aunt Sandra. She’s an Ambassador on Delta. She wants to look after you.”

Jenny pulled back a little and sniffed. “I can’t stay here?” she implored.

Flattered, Piper gave her a disarming smile. “I’m sorry, but, as you’ve seen, a Starship isn’t a very safe place to raise children. Your Aunt is on Earth at the moment, and we’re going to meet her there. She’s going to take you back to Delta to live. You’ll love it there; it’s very beautiful.”

The child nodded absently. “Aunty Sandra’s always been good to me.” A thought came to her in the random way they do with children. “I’m not sure I want to stay in Starfleet as long as you have,” she said with certainty.

Piper just looked at her askance. “Why?”

Her guest just looked up at her and spoke in total honesty. “You don’t have any kids. I know I want to, to make sure I do so I can name her after my mum. Maybe she’d like to join Starfleet when she grows up.” She continued in her flight of whimsy. “Who knows? Maybe she’d make Captain like you. Captain Rachel Garrett, she’d be. Captain of her own Starship. Saving people like me. Who couldn’t fight back.”

The captain drew her to her chest as, once again, Jenny began crying. She tried to be strong for her, and yet, Piper was cut to the heart. She realised that time was running out for her if she was ever going to have children of her own, but she also knew herself too well that she was already married to her career.

As Jenny’s scent filled her nostrils, she felt a pang of loss for the path not taken – the path that would have included love and children, what most people craved. Even Starship Captains.

However, she had determined long ago that she would never regret her choices. So, even though this moment touched her, she was adamant not to let herself doubt if she had taken the right path. That was the way that leads to depression, and she would have no part of it.

Later that evening, Piper relaxed in her cabin, having rested, showered, and thrown one of her purple, silk caftans over her head that she liked to recline in. She took some time, sitting before her mirror, to brush out her honey-blonde hair (she coloured it because she liked it that way) to keep it supple and manageable. Afterward, she took a moment to stretch, knowing she was simply procrastinating. She had a job to do before she retired, and she was anything but certain how it would go.

She allowed one more diversion, stepping into her personal bathroom to brush her teeth, before sitting down at her modest-sized desk and toggling on the communicator. She sighed, for once uncertain she was doing the right thing. She put herself in the place of the one she was going to call and decided that, if the roles were reversed, she would still want to know what it was she was going to say.

It was all she needed. “Computer,” she said calmly. “Open a channel to Lieutenant Sa’avik on Vulcan.” She had checked the star charts earlier. They were in range for a real-time conversation over subspace.

It was afternoon on Vulcan in the city of ShiKhar where Sa’avik was staying with Ambassador Sarek’s wife, the Lady Amanda. Due to the heat of the afternoon day, and the time of year, most Vulcans chose to stay indoors to avoid their killer

sun. Even though Sa'avik was only *half* Vulcan, the other half was Romulan, which made her really no different from a local; they shared their blood and heritage.

The younger Sa'avik answered the call within seconds, and while she did not smile in greeting, Piper knew she was feeling it. Sa'avik was pretty by any standard, with a mass of curly, dark hair, sharp nose and piercing eyes atop a slender body.

The two of them had been friends for some time, even before the tragedy involving David Marcus and the debacle at Genesis. When Spock had sponsored Sa'avik for the Academy, Piper had seconded the recommendation after she had been impressed by the woman's resourcefulness when they had met during an earlier adventure.

"Greetings, Captain Piper," she said stoically. Sa'avik had decided to follow the Vulcan way, even though she had no idea who her father was. She did it to honour Spock, who had rescued and raised her.

"Hi, Sa'avik. How's the weather?"

Piper's attempt at humour caused the tiny crow's feet in Sa'avik's eyes to crease a little. It was as close as she would come to laughing. "I believe you would think it to be as "hot as hell", Captain," she said. "Might I ask as to the purpose of your call? It has been some time since we have spoken, and I have come to recognise that you are not much of a social caller."

Caught out, the captain pursed her lips. Sa'avik was very astute. "I have some news for you, Sa'avik, and I'm not sure you'll really want to know."

Concern showed on Sa'avik's face as her training slipped. "Spock has not been killed, has he?" she asked. Losing him twice in as many months would be too much.

Piper shook her head, wanting to put her at ease. "No, nothing like that. It's just that our most recent mission involved me meeting a rather impressive Romulan Commander I mind-melded with." She paused for a moment, then took the plunge. "She shared something with me, privately, that she wanted me to pass on. For a time, we had access to one another's memories, and even though the meld is over, I can still remember a lot of them, as if they were my very own."

Sa'avik raised an eyebrow. She had no idea where this conversation was going. "And...."

As much as she could, Piper looked her in the eye. "Her family name was t'Avik. In their culture, a child does not acquire a name until a certain ritual naming ceremony. Until then, they simply get the prefix Sa', which simply means "child of" followed by their mother's family name."

Sa'avik's eyes started widening as the import of the information became clear to her.

The captain continued. "Years ago, she was used as part of an experiment – against her will – to create Vulcan/Romulan hybrids. She had been "volunteered" by some of her superiors." She shook her head in disgust. "Her eggs were

harvested and fertilized in vitro. Only one successful child was brought forward, but the scientists never gave her a real name. They just left her with a prefix: Sa'avik, before they abandoned the project and left the children they had created to rot."

The memories of growing up on the hellhole appropriately called Hellguard came flooding back. "Why didn't she come for me?" Sa'avik asked through a tightened throat.

Piper allowed the sorrow both she, and t'Avik, felt to show. "She only learned that you existed too late. She was never informed of your birth as you were produced from a surrogate."

Her Vulcan stoicism crumbled. It was becoming too much for Sa'avik. "I don't understand. *How could she not know?*"

Piper rubbed her temples as she fought to see the memories clearly. As they were not her own, it was hard to focus on them. She took a breath, then revealed: "A couple of days after her eggs were harvested, she was "rescued" from the experiment by her cousin, who is now the Empress of Romulus."

If Sa'avik's eyes could widen any further, they did. "Are you saying that my cousin is the *Empress of the Romulan Empire?*"

The captain nodded. "She doesn't know, and frankly, I'm not sure she should." She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't see that it really matters, to be honest. I'm certain the Empress will never admit the relationship, and all it might do for you is shed some doubt, from some quarters, on your allegiance to the Federation, which I know is rock solid anyway." She remembered how the Empress seemed to know everything about her and her ship and wondered at its veracity. There was every reason to believe that she *did* know about Sa'avik. Where that left the Lieutenant, she didn't know.

Sa'avik took a moment to compose herself. The impact of this revelation was just too much. She struggled to find the equanimity that her fellow Vulcans had attained once more, then gave up. It was an appropriate time to be Romulan.

Piper noticed a shadow move behind Sa'avik that resolved itself into the form of Spock's mother, Amanda. The years had piled on her, but she remained a beauty in form and spirit. "What is it?" she asked Sa'avik with her usual serene manner. She could be in the middle of a hurricane and still enjoy the sunshine.

Distressed, Sa'avik could only shake her head. She didn't know *what* to do with the information. Amanda moved up behind her and embraced her in the loving manner mothers do, giving Sa'avik the comfort a Romulan child needed.

Amanda looked into the screen and recognised Piper. "What is it?" she asked, this time showing her concern. She, too, had been touched by the recent events.

Piper had to wonder what Amanda felt having lost her son then gotten him back again. She quickly recapped what she had told Sa'avik.

A profound sadness filled Amanda's eyes as she held Sa'avik tightly. "I'm

so sorry, child." She looked at Piper. "t'Avik is dead, isn't she?"

Perceptive as ever, Piper thought. It was no wonder Sarek so admired her. She nodded. "She was killed in a Klingon attack. She fought to survive, but I was there. She had no chance." She looked at Sa'avik and put all the compassion she could into two simple words. "I'm sorry."

Now Sa'avik was sobbing, soaking Amanda's dress. The elder soothed the younger and stroked her hair. Amanda looked into Piper's eyes and gave her a slight smile, unseen by Sa'avik. "I thank you for passing this on, Piper," she said generously. "It is important for all of us to know our origins and family. I know this must have been hard for you."

There was more love and acceptance in those eyes than Piper had seen in anyone else's for a long time, and the captain was moved. Spock was lucky to have a mother like her.

For a moment, Sa'avik made a mighty effort to collect herself and turn to bid Piper farewell. "Live long and prosper, Captain Piper," she said tightly. "And thank you."

Piper held up her right hand in the Vulcan salute, fingers parted in the middle. "Peace and long life to you both," she said, then she broke the connection before going to bed. Sleep took some time to come as t'Avik's memories kept erupting into her conscious mind as insubstantial as a dream.

Upon arrival in the Sol system, the *Millennium* and the *Excelsior* both dropped out of warp together, with the former slowing down the latter with their combined tractor beams. Whilst the *Excelsior*'s warp engines were still functional, her impulse engines were beyond repair. The two ships flew in formation, having adjusted their courses to coast most of the way to Earth. Once past Mars' orbit, the *Millennium* used her tractor beam to latch on to the *Excelsior* and tow her the rest of the way to the orbital Starbase. This close to Earth, or any inhabited system for that matter, they would take no chances of an accidental collision.

Once the two starships were within range, Piper signalled them. "Starbase, take good care of the *Excelsior* for us. Give them our best."

"Will do, *Millennium*. We're putting her in bay thirteen, you will have bay fourteen."

Side by side, Piper thought with a smile. It was fitting.

What was frustrating was that the *Millennium* would need a few days in Spacedock herself. The repairs to the long-range communications were still needed, among other minor adjustments that Scanner had insisted could only be done whilst there. Oh, well. Perhaps a couple of days of shore leave would do her new crew some good.

It would give her a chance to talk to Sarda. She glanced in his direction,

suddenly feeling uncomfortable. Their shared experience had left her wondering what was next for them. After all that they had been through together, it was weird feeling this way about him.

She knew he was as aware of her feelings as she was of his. However, he was carrying on as if nothing had happened, perhaps in deference to her position. There was no way the Vulcan would ever undermine her position as ship's captain by speaking of it openly before others.

Without looking her way, she heard his voice in her head. *“We will speak of it soon, Piper. Do not fear. You could never lose my friendship.”*

Inwardly, she relaxed and let it go. She chided herself for worrying about nothing.

Epilogue

With only four days in dock, the Starfleet Corps of Engineers did a marvellous job of repairing the *Millennium*'s critical systems and several dented hull plates. However, there was one thing the Corps had pulled off that Piper considered a miracle.

Whilst on their way home, she had come to the realisation that her crew – including herself – needed somewhere to go to relax and unwind after a trial. It was nice having the Rec Deck with its Oak Tree, but they needed somewhere to socialise as well as let their hair down. So, she had taken it upon herself to have the Forward Observation Deck, which was located in the ship's bow, redesigned.

Now, with only an hour before the ship was to disembark for her next adventure – that of guarding the Romulan Neutral Zone – Piper decided to christen their latest addition to the ship.

Having gathered her senior staff together, they stood outside the door, wondering what it was that had brought them here. Each asked the others what was going on, but even Sarda had no idea.

After a tense few minutes, the “wooden” doors to the Observation deck slid aside and their Captain stepped through. She wore a huge grin. “I’m glad you could all join me,” she said cheerfully. She moved to the side and ushered everyone through. “Be my guest.”

The senior staff, including Sarda, Merete, Scanner, Krashtallah, Amantallah, Jason Nunn and Carman Valastro, stepped inside and looked about them in awe.

Scanner was the first to speak. “I’ve got to hand it to those boys on the Starbase. They really know their stuff!” He ran his hand along the mahogany bar with its brass fittings and genuine beer taps. Some of the brands he recognised, others he did not. “It looks like you stole a bar from Old New York!” he said with gusto. “Ah’m gonna feel right at home here!”

They were surprised by an unexpected guest who popped her head up from behind the bar where she had been polishing glasses. She drew a breath from some as she was a natural beauty, with opaline skin, slender form and long, black hair. Her blue eyes were practically sapphire in colour, and her rare smile dazzled when applied. Her overall appearance was human, but something about her demeanour suggested otherwise.

“Hello, everybody,” she said as if she had known them all her life. “My name’s Gillian and I’ll be your bartender.”

Scanner looked at her as if she had been discovered stealing the crown jewels. “You can’t be serious,” he said incredulously. “There are no bartenders in Starfleet.”

Piper stepped forward and elaborated. “That’s true,” she said. “Gillian isn’t

in Starfleet. She is our guest, and on my personal payroll.” She turned and gave their new crewmate a grin. “I met her on Argelius a couple of years back, and I told her then if I could ever return the favour, I would.”

The Doctor stepped forward and took her place at the bar. She tipped her head to the side curiously. “What favour is that?”

Gillian gave her a shy smile. “That is a story for another time,” she said airily. She looked at the two Cait crewmembers and said: “I take it you two want Catnips.”

Before they could even nod, Gillian dropped below the countertop and produced two tall glasses of the fruit cocktail affectionately dubbed “Catnip” as it was a Caitian favourite. She even included long straws for them to suck on.

Gillian then looked at Scanner. “You’ll have bourbon,” she said. She disappeared once more and gave him a small glass of the amber fluid. Scanner took it gratefully. It had been a while since he had enjoyed some. He took a sip and smacked his lips together in delight. “That hit the spot!” he said with a huge grin.

Gillian looked over at Sarda. “Altair water for you, I guess,” she said. Seconds later, another glass appeared, and Sarda took the offering surprised that she would know his favourite drink.

Piper was offered a pineapple juice, Jason a small glass of bitter ale from Australia, Carman some Centauran Ouzo and Merete Romulan ale.

Amantallah enjoyed her drink but looked suspiciously at their unexpected host. “Are you a reader?” she asked, concerned she may be entertaining a possible security risk.

Gillian shook her head, no. “You’re much better at that than I ever will be,” she said politely.

That made Manny’s whiskers arch forward in surprise. She had tried to keep her “talent” secret.

As they stood there, sipping their drinks, Piper took the opportunity to do a small piece of business. “Now I have you all here, Commander Sarda and I have a small presentation to make.”

Sarda stepped forward to join his Captain at her side. Piper’s gaze turned to her Communications Officer. “Mister Krashtallah, if you would please join us.”

Surprised, Crash stepped forward, wondering what the captain had in mind. He stood before her and looked her in the eye, knowing that she would do him no harm. He was merely curious. “Yes, Captain?” he asked.

Piper looked up at him and put her hand on his shoulder. “I have been impressed with the leadership qualities you exhibited during the recent crisis, not to mention your tactics. The actions you took helped avert a war. There was no way I was going to overlook your contributions.” She turned and received a small box that Sarda presented her. She opened the lid and took out the medallion it contained. It resembled a cross shaped star.

At this point, the captain looked off to the side and beckoned over one of their compatriots.

To Crash's surprise, his sister stepped over and took the medal from the case. She looked at him with a fondness he had never known. "Shrallal," she said in their native tongue, "the captain has given me the honour of presenting this to you in recognition of your acts of heroism, not only in the fight against the Klingons, but also in rescuing little Jenny – and me." She stopped for a moment, leaned forward, and licked his cheek fondly before lovingly hanging the medal around his neck.

"I was wrong about you, my brother," she said as she stepped back. Those listening knew she was speaking from the heart. "You have shown me more grace and love than I have deserved." She wrung her paws together in grief for her previous behaviour. "When we were kits, you taught me chess, among other things. They were all done in love when you didn't have to, in a family that did little to earn it."

As she spoke, Krashtallah's heart beat so hard it was drowning out his sister's voice. He had longed to hear these words for over twenty years. In his family, and society, he had always been treated as an outsider purely because of his colour. For Amantallah to do and say this was a huge step for her, and a great leap forward in reconciling their relationship. He put all the love he had for her into a single look and gave it to her. He leaned forward and gave her a lick on the cheek to show his appreciation. "Thank you, Shrallah," he said.

His sister took his paws in hers and gave him a sheepish look. "You've always been my hero, Krashtallah. Even when I've been too proud to show it." She squeezed his paws with feeling. "Thank you, Shrallal. From now on, I'm going to try harder to show my appreciation for you."

With the moment over, Crash's crewmates moved to step forward to congratulate him, but stopped when they saw Piper's raised palm. "We're not done, folks," she said with quiet firmness.

As one, they all turned and watched their Captain. She continued, all business. "Since we came aboard, there has been one position open on this ship that I haven't yet had filled – that of Third-in-Command. Since the role must be filled by someone of at least the rank of Lieutenant Commander, my choices have been limited."

At this point, Scanner got an alarmed look on his face. He knew that, aside from Doctor AndrusTaurus, who was never going to be asked to fill that role, he was the only remaining candidate. The medical staff were not in the chain of command.

The captain laughed. "Don't worry, Scanner, I wasn't going to stick you with the job," she said between guffaws. The look on her old friend's face had been priceless, and she took a moment to control her laughter whilst she held her sides. After a few moments, she stood tall with a cheerful smile. "No, Judd, the job is

going to the *Millennium*'s newest Lieutenant Commander." She stepped over and unclipped Crash's Lieutenant's bars from the shoulder strap of his chest length uniform jacket, then attached his new insignia in its place.

Crash looked down at Piper in shock, his whiskers turned back, his ears forward, wondering if he had heard her right. What he did know for certain was that his new insignia confirmed the captain's words. He now held the much-desired rank of Lieutenant Commander.

The captain took a step back and shook her Comm's Officer's paw. "You've earned it, Crash," she said with absolute certainty. "Report to my Ready Room an hour after we ship out and I'll explain to you your new responsibilities."

Dumbfounded, the Cait could only nod, stunned, speechless.

With the formalities concluded, his fellows stepped forward to congratulate him with slaps on the back and handshakes.

As they talked amongst themselves, Piper drew Sarda aside and the pair of them sat down on opposing sides in one of the new bar's booths. The First Officer looked his Captain in the eye, and he knew it was time for them to deal with their situation.

"What has happened here, Sarda?" Piper asked quietly, her tone intent and serious.

Through their *link*, as Piper put it, she felt his concern and indecision. She reached out to him through it, emotionally, to set him at ease, letting him feel her compassion.

It settled him. He took a breath and decided he needed some back story. "As you know, Piper, Vulcans typically marry for life," he said stoically. "During the marriage ceremony, the participants engage in a mind meld that is free of mental barriers and inhibitions. For that moment in time, they become thoroughly enmeshed in each other and become, as your people would call it, psychically connected." He intertwined his fingers demonstratively. "Afterwards, they are always aware of one another's feelings, and sometimes even their thoughts, at close range."

Piper's eyes began widening as he spoke.

Sarda saw he was being understood and continued. "Piper, what we experienced went far beyond a marriage bond. For those hours, we literally became a part of each other. To my knowledge, no bond of that strength has ever been broken. In fact," he said, his tone becoming even more serious, "my research has confirmed that it may indeed be *dangerous* to try and break it."

The captain drew in a breath. On some level, she had suspected the truth, but to have it confirmed shocked her to the core. She felt like questioning whether it was in fact true, but she knew for certain that Sarda was on the level. Their link confirmed his honesty.

Before she could continue, Sarda said with more than a touch of sadness, a

rare glimpse of his emotional side, “I’m sorry, Piper. I had never intended for this to occur. While I value our friendship, I know we had never considered one another for a mate. And just because this has happened, I would still encourage you to find a partner that would fulfil your desires and complete your life.” He touched her hands, which were folded in front of her on the table, gently. “I want to assure you; I will attempt to find a solution.”

At that, the captain sighed. Sarda was on the mark. She, too, valued his friendship – actually he was more of a brother to her – but she had no romantic inclinations towards him.

She considered her feelings at that point, and while she had always thought of herself to be a confirmed bachelorette, she had come to find his constant presence in her mind comforting. It was like constantly having background noise in her thoughts that, if she focussed on it, she could hear clearly. She decided to take stock and look at the bright side. “You know, having you in my mind isn’t as bad as all that.” She gave him a slight smile. “I’ve actually noticed it has increased our efficiency.”

Whilst Sarda’s expression did not change, Piper felt his smile. “Indeed,” he said. “Fascinating.”

At that, Piper laughed and slapped her old friend on the shoulder playfully.

Then a thought came to her. There was something her friend should know. She picked up her drink and made a play of taking a long sip, but as she did so she focussed her thoughts on Sarda. This conversation she needed complete privacy for. “I need to tell you something about our ship,” she said to him through her thoughts. His eyes caught hers and she knew she had his complete attention.

She spent the next minute explaining – at the speed of thought – what had happened to the original *U.S.S. Ingram* and the reasons why the *Millennium* had been given its name.

The Vulcan raised a curious brow. “The Admiral suspects foul play?” Sarda replied silently.

Piper nodded. Now came the fun part. “Just before we came down here, I received a report from the scout *Copernicus*. They’ve done thorough scans of the vector last taken by the *Ingram*. There’s no sign of subspace disruption from a warp-imbalance wormhole, and they’ve found the site where the ship dropped out of warp, just short of a nebula. It entered it on impulse, but they lost the trail in the ion flux within the nebula.”

Inwardly, Sarda gave a soulful sigh, something he would only show and share with Piper. “It has *indeed* been stolen,” he said through their link.

The captain nodded absently.

At the bar, Merete watched the two of them out of the corner of her eye. Scanner noticed the attention and glanced their way. The corner of the Doctor’s mouth turned up in mild mirth. “We’re going to see a lot of that from now on,” she

said quietly, her lips concealed by her glass.

“What’s that?” Scanner replied in kind.

Merete rolled her eyes. “The pair of them having a conversation without actually saying anything out loud.” She found it amusing, and it showed.

Scanner smiled. “It’s a good thing I’m not paranoid,” he said with a chuckle.

Their conversation over, Piper sat back and considered. The path ahead was clear, as was the size of the task. One of the biggest and most powerful starships ever created had been stolen and was now in the hands of who-knows-who. It could take some time to find her but find the *Ingram* they would.

Sarda caught her eye without moving. She found it both amazing and now perfectly natural that he could attract her attention without doing anything physical. She just knew he wanted it.

“At least we have one edge with this ship,” he said, deadpan, his lips still, the voice purely in Piper’s head.

“What’s that?” she responded in kind.

“We can disappear whenever we want to.”

The joke came out of the blue and caught Piper by surprise. She knew instinctively that Sarda would never make such an effort for others to see, and the nature of their link was such that there were no secrets between them. There couldn’t be. She had always known that Sarda harboured a sense of humour, and to be able to share it with him and not have him embarrassed by an outward display of emotion was something she cherished.

The knowledge was bittersweet. At the same time, she realised that she would also have to be mindful not to push too much of her humanity on the Vulcan as well. It wouldn’t be fair to him.

All the same, Piper laughed out loud, her full mouth wide, her teeth shining. She gave her friend a knowing wink.

Her outburst brought the attention of the others, and now sobered, she decided to use the opportunity to make a move. She stood and gestured towards the door. “People, we’ve got a date with the Neutral Zone. Our new *Millennium* has had a great dawn, now it’s time to get on with the day.”

As they left the ship’s new bar, Piper and her old friend, Gillian, shared a warm smile of old friends.