FRACTURED

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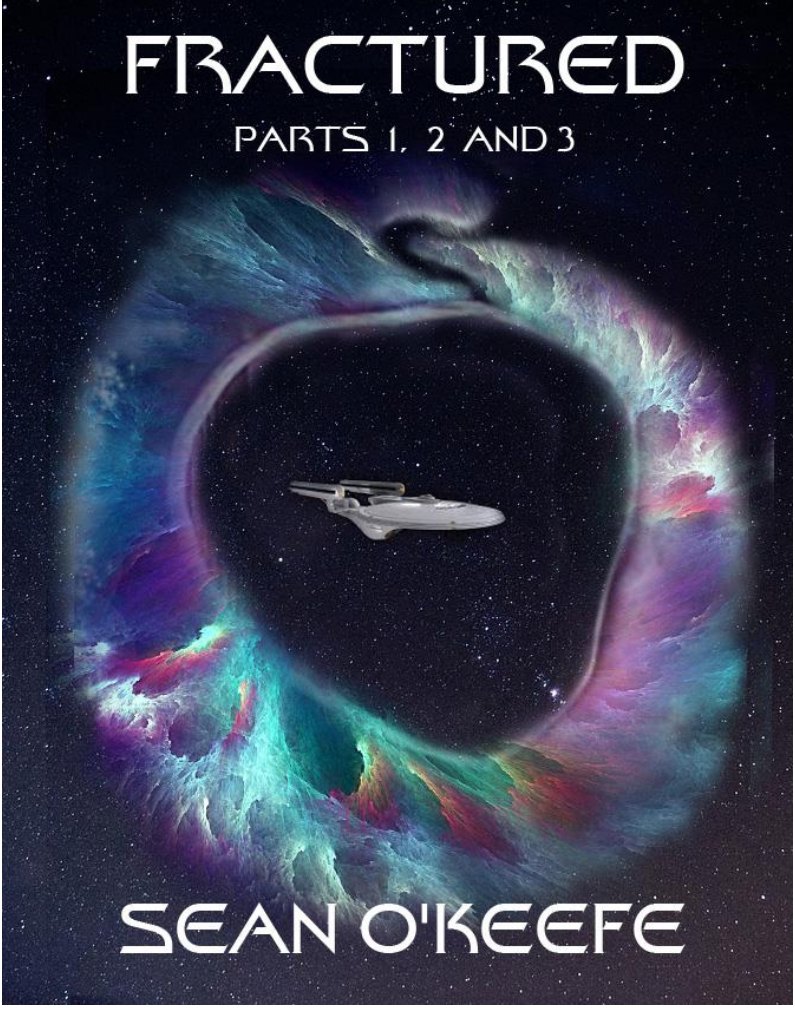

SEAN O'KEEFE

FRACTURED

by Sean O'Keefe

Fractured Book 1: What Must Be
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Dedications:

What Must Be:
for Edelweiss,
the most patient, loving woman I know

Shock Wave:
for Loren,
one of the most creative people I know

Ouroboros:
For my Dad,
Who has always been there for me

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Book 1: What Must Be

Chapter One

Tall, honey-blonde and green-eyed, Captain Piper walked down the corridor, her thoughts on the task ahead. Her ship, the *U.S.S. Millennium,* was in orbit of a planet known only as the "Time Planet" as it had no official designation – that she knew of. They had been sent here in the hope of discovering the cause behind a series of space/time anomalies that seemed to have their focus here, they had discovered. Having only just arrived after a long journey, Piper was headed to her quarters for a nap before beaming down.

All the same, her mind relentlessly forged on, considering the situation. As a driven person, she was often walking around the *Millennium* on autopilot whilst her brain was ticking over. Enough of her brain was functioning to engage a passer-by with a friendly nod or "good morning", leaving the other person convinced the Captain had met them on some level. In honest moments, she would admit she had no idea who she had passed on her way there. That included her closest friends, who had come to realise there were times when their fearless leader was simply on another planet in her thoughts.

Something shifted. It was enough to get her attention and it gave Piper reason to pause. A change had occurred and, even though she couldn't instantly put her finger on it, she knew that something was odd. She had long come to trust her instincts, and right now they were on high alert.

She looked around her at the walls. They were the wrong colour. The *Millennium's* colour scheme was in subtle brown tones. The panel she was looking at was blue. As she cast her gaze about her, she found all of them were the same hue.

There was also not enough space. She suddenly had the distinct impression she was not on her own ship. It was Starfleet for certain, but not hers. Worried that something sinister was afoot, she touched a computer console and was surprised when it spoke.

"Good morning, Captain. How can I assist you?" The mechanical voice was friendly, but unfamiliar. For one thing, it was masculine. Starfleet had long ago adopted feminine voices for their A.I.s.

"What is the name of this ship?" she asked as she wondered how she was going to get back to her own.

"*U.S.S. Ingram*," it replied.

The answer was more than unsettling, it was impossible. She had personally destroyed the *Ingram* only months before. What there was that was left of it certainly wasn't functional. It was floating wreckage fit only for scavenging.

As she pondered this revelation, Piper found herself involuntarily stepping aside as a crewman passed her by. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed there were some obvious differences between their uniforms. The fabric the male wore was different in texture, and the style reminded her of what she had worn as a lowly Lieutenant during her

stint on the original *Enterprise* when she had served under Jim Kirk. Not the new, red on white jacket with black slacks she had been wearing for the last couple of years. So, it was no surprise (even though she inwardly cursed) that the crewman stopped, slowly turned then gaped at her.

"Captain," he stammered. "What happened to your face?"

Piper could not help but run her hand over her brow, nose, cheeks then mouth and chin. She relaxed when she realised she was all right, but worried a little when she saw the crewman still staring at her as if something was wrong. If the way she looked like here was different in some way, she had to wonder what that difference was. To avoid a scene, she decided to think fast and come up with a good lie. "I had some surgery at our last layover to make some improvements," she said. It sounded good to her.

Not so to the crewman who shook his head in disbelief. "Nobody's that good."

Before Piper could decide whether she should be insulted or not, the young man slapped at the Starfleet pin on his chest, which surprisingly chirped. The Captain soon realised it was a miniaturised communicator.

"Crewman Sandage to the Bridge," he said, eyeing Piper. "Intruder alert."

This was not going to go well, Piper decided to herself. Wherever this *Ingram* was, they would take a dim view of imposters. She began backing away from the crewman with the familiar name. "If you don't mind,

Crewman, I'm not going to hang around and wait for your friends."

"Hold it!"

Piper ignored the order, turned and ran. She took two steps before something even more amazing happened.

She suddenly found herself back in the hallway on the *Millennium*. However, as she made the almost instantaneous transition, she felt as if she had *passed through* someone else.

Safe once more, Piper saw to her surprise that she was looking down the barrels of a number of phasers held by some decidedly anxious crewmen.

"Captain!" said the lead Security officer. "Where did you come from?" He looked past her shoulder as if looking for something. "And where did the imposter go?"

Curious, Piper turned and looked about her, but there was nobody present who should not have been. She stopped and considered what had just happened. One thing was certain, it was beyond her understanding. She took a second to fire off a request for Sarda's presence in her thoughts before asking the officer who it was they had been chasing. There were many times when her telepathic link with her Vulcan First Officer came in handy and now was definitely one of them. She turned her attention to the crewman. Queries regarding her sudden appearance were left for later when, perhaps, *she* understood them. "Who were you chasing?"

The security guards suddenly looked uncomfortable. Their Chief simply stated: “You.”

That bought the Chief a double take from his commander. “Huh?” she said incredulously.

The female guard next to him picked up as the Chief was lost for words. “Well, not exactly you, Captain. She was wearing some weird retro-style uniform and she had some stuff on her face.” Without preamble, she stepped to a computer panel on the wall and commanded it to replay the last five minutes captured from the hall cameras.

As Piper watched, she saw someone who did look a lot like her walk down the corridor, obviously curious regarding her surroundings. She wore a uniform identical to that she had witnessed on the *Ingram*. The other Captain stopped her wandering when she met a crewman in a scene that mirrored the one she had just partaken in.

When the intruder turned, Piper took in a sudden breath when she realised what Crewman Sandage had meant. He was right. Nobody was *that* good. She paused the playback and zoomed in.

At that moment, Sarda arrived and simply looked at the monitor whilst trying not to show the amazement he felt. The face seemingly looking out of the screen resembled Piper, except that half of her counterpart’s face had been replaced by a shining metal prosthetic that ran from her right jaw to her temple, including her right eye and socket. It was as if someone had fixed her face in a hurry and never gotten

around to finishing the job. She looked in amazement at the false eye that glared at the crewman with a bright green lens.

It reminded her of a man she had met a year before at Starbase Forty-Eight. He'd had half of his face replaced so he could take photographs at will. However, Piper could not imagine in her wildest dreams why she would voluntarily have the procedure done on herself.

Piper shivered. It was like looking at a nightmare captured on film.

"She's not you." Sarda's voice rang clearly in her mind.

The simple statement settled Piper's nerves. The whole situation was bizarre. *"I can see that,"* she replied silently. *"It's just weird seeing another version of me."* She narrowed her eyes as a thought came to her. *"How do you know that?"*

Before Sarda answered, he dismissed the security officers and waited while they resumed their duty stations in other parts of the ship. Then he took out his tricorder and scanned the area around them for a full minute before stating: "There are no signs of anomalies, Captain."

Piper frowned. "Something happened that took me …. somewhere else." She shook her head in wonder. "I don't get it."

Sarda considered the problem for a moment. "If you will permit me?"

The Captain nodded. She knew what he was asking. They would need some privacy. "Lead on," she said.

Three minutes later, Piper and Sarda were sitting side-by-side in her ready room. There was no preamble as they prepared for the meld, nor was there any trepidation. They were familiar enough with one another's thoughts and feelings that there was no fear, only complete trust.

After a moment's meditation, Sarda placed his fingers on Piper's jaw, cheek and temple and allowed their minds to mesh together as one.

Piper led him on a tour of her short trip on the *Ingram* and Sarda saw Crewman Sandage through his friend's eyes. It was clear to him what had happened to her, but the how was beyond him. He felt the sensation she had felt when she had stepped back into the *Millennium* – as if passing through another person's soul.

Together, they examined the memory. The other person they felt was familiar, yet strange. They quickly came to the conclusion it was the other Piper as they passed one another through the "rift".

Sarda broke contact and they sat back, deep in thought. Due to their proximity, they were able to continue sharing their thoughts without having them meshed together.

Piper offered: *"The only thing I can think of is that it was an alternate universe."*

"Or another timeline."

The Captain chuckled. "How on earth do you tell them apart?"

Sarda's eyebrows shot up as he stated: "Different universes have varying quantum signatures. Alternate timelines share the same quantum state, but varying fates."

"It's like trying to unscramble spaghetti!" Piper's frustration was beginning to show as she threw up her hands in the air in disgust. "How do we scan an alternate state without being in it?"

A smile played around the edges of Sarda's mouth as a notion came to him. His eyes met hers as he said: "Air. Whilst you were in the other reality, you breathed in their atmosphere. If it *is* an alternate universe, you will be still carrying some molecules from there. If we scan you and look for different quantum states in your cells, we will solve that puzzle quickly. However, we must hurry."

Together, they rose from Piper's couch and headed straight out the door and down to Sickbay.

"You want me to *what*?" Dr. Merete AndrusTaurus of Altair Four blinked her almond-shaped eyes if she had been asked to reach into her medscanners and pull out a carrot.

Not willing to wait a moment longer than they had to, Piper walked straight over to the diminutive Doctor's examination table and lay down on it, her head cradled in the small, rubber cushion at the top. "There's not a moment to waste, Merete," she said, letting her friend know how serious it was by the stern tone of her voice.

The Doctor got the message and, with Sarda's help, quickly programmed her scanners to check her for

anomalies. A moment later, the scanner arm over the bed began moving up and down her body, casting its soft illumination as it went.

"So, you think Piper was sucked into another universe?" Merete queried as they waited. She crossed her arms over her chest, concerned, and realised she would soon have to feed her baby twins. She was getting top heavy once more. Palkeo Est women produced copious amounts of milk whilst lactating. They needed to keep up with their children's voracious appetites.

The Vulcan was not one to commit himself to a theory without solid evidence. "Perhaps," he said, hedging his bets. "What she saw was real, and I felt her absence."

She wasn't certain she was just imagining it, but Merete got the distinct feeling that Piper's absence had somehow affected him on a personal level. She shelved the notion for another time, knowing that Piper and Sarda's link went well beyond a typical Vulcan marriage bond. Anything could happen, even to a pair who were determined to be nothing more than friends.

"What did you see?"

Knowing Piper couldn't move while the scanner did its work, Sarda simply said: "People like us, but not quite. The uniforms were an older style, and the ship had the wrong name."

The scanner finished its job with a chirp and Piper sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "The weird thing was meeting Crewman Sandage. I can't help

but wonder if he's a relative of Judd's. They certainly looked alike."

Sarda agreed with her with a simple nod. His recollection of the man was clear from Piper's excellent memory. The familial similarity was obvious. He cast his gaze over the readout and grunted. "There are no quantum anomalies in any of your cells. The air you breathed was from our universe."

"That's weird. As you put it, the only other possibility is that I stepped into another time stream." She screwed up her face in amazement. "I thought that was impossible. Never mind that I always thought the notion of multiple universes was a cheat, but the idea that we can have two time streams – two eventualities – for the same universe occurring simultaneously is unbelievable. I'm well aware of the old theories that every single possibility is played out in alternate versions of reality at the same time. It was disproved when mankind finally accepted the notion that infinity is nothing more than an abstract notion. It does not occur in nature."

In the quiet of their thoughts, Sarda revealed: *"It is unsettling."*

Without judgement, Piper chided: *"I don't think it's a bad thing to share that with Merete. You know you can trust her implicitly."*

Their interchange happened at the speed of thought, yet Merete picked up they were having another of their silent conversations. "What is it?" she asked.

Sarda took in a breath to calm himself and shared his feeling with the Doctor. Always the forgiving type, Merete rubbed his biceps and smiled. "I've known you too long to believe you don't have feelings, Sarda," she said. "Why is this bothering you?"

The Captain knew the answer to that question. "Because it's a paradox," she answered. "Two possibilities cannot play themselves out simultaneously without some kind of damage." She shot a look of dread at the Vulcan. "They can lead to accelerated entropy. The end of the universe, if you want to sound alarmist."

Not knowing whether to be worried or not, the Doctor chipped in: "I didn't think that was going to be on the calendar for the odd billion years yet."

Piper's teeth came together in a worried clench. "Time is a lot more fragile than we know," she said quietly. She lowered her voice so only her friends could hear her. "Starfleet has set up a branch called Temporal Investigations to watch over it. Ever since the *Enterprise* proved it was possible to alter the natural flow of time, there have been several attempts to change the course of history. So far, each one has been thwarted."

Merete baulked at the notion. "So, what you saw was some kind of cheat? Changing the course of history without actually doing so?" Fearing for the future for her babies, she closed her eyes and held her head in her hands. "It's almost too much to take in."

Sarda joined Piper at her side and sat down on the bed next to her. The whole subject was at the same time unsettling, yet fascinating. He also took some enjoyment watching how Piper's mind worked.

"The trouble with time travel is that cause is supposed to precede effect, not the other way around." She lightly nibbled the tip of her thumbnail as she considered the puzzle. "This could be the worst kind of grandfather paradox," she said.

Merete pulled over her office chair and sat down in front of them. "What is the "Grandfather Paradox"?" she asked. Her concern over the whole thing was beginning to show as Piper noticed her hands were shaking a little.

Piper donned her teacher's cap. "The Grandfather Paradox speculates that, if someone was able to travel back in time and prevent their own grandfather from having the child who would then create the time traveller himself, you would have effect without a cause because the time traveller would never have existed. Paradox."

Their friend from Altair Four's eyes went wide as she tried to grasp the concept. "So, why is it bad if that happens? Wouldn't the new timeline just continue?"

Sarda interjected at this point. "For a time, it would. However, the paradox would cause an increase in entropy in that timeline. It would "burn itself out" in short order."

Merete threw her hands up in disgust. "How does that affect us if we're in the original timeline?"

Piper scratched her head at that one. "If we're in the original timeline that created the alternate line, then we should have ceased to exist some time ago." She frowned. "That's why paradoxes are so destructive and why time travel should be kept to an absolute minimum. The ripple effect is just too damaging." She turned her attention to Sarda. "How is it that this is possible at all? Both timelines cannot exist simultaneously."

Two brows went up together as the Science Officer admitted: "It is puzzling. It is even more curious that you have made the transition between them. Either entropy is increasing rapidly, causing fractures in space/time, or there is something about you, personally, that is making it possible."

Piper sighed. "All of this speculation is getting us nowhere, really. The best we can do is make a report and forward it to Starfleet. Perhaps it's even linked to the space/time anomalies that brought us here." She hopped off the bed and stepped towards the door. "The odds are this was an isolated event."

Once more, something shifted. Again, she felt the presence *pass through* her, ever so briefly, and she found herself standing in a variation of her ship's Sickbay. Albeit more brightly lit and with a decidedly more futuristic look.

"Not again!" she groaned.

Around her, the crew of the *Ingram* took time to react. Surprised, it took them a moment to realise their Captain's uniform had changed.

Knowing it would be best to try and put on a friendly face, Piper turned and smiled. "Hi! Would you believe I mean you no harm?"

The crew of this vessel were almost completely unfamiliar to her – save one. Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus looked no different to her counterpart in Piper's save the obvious fact this woman was not a nursing mother.

"Security!" The man wearing the Commander's stripes on his sleeves watched Piper warily. He was older than she, human, grey haired and he wore a bristling moustache that made him look quite distinguished to her. He was tall and trim and had the bearing of a man from an old military line. His accent gave him away as English. "Watch her, but do not harm her. She is simply our Captain's counterpart from the other timeline." Putting her to the test, his eyes narrowed a little as he said: "I gather you have already realised this?"

Piper nodded. "No varying quantum signatures. We just finished scanning me."

The Commander took a deep breath. He was clearly concerned but seemed to have no idea how to proceed.

The Captain decided to break the ice. "You know who I am. I know Doctor AndrusTaurus. Who are the rest of you?"

Their reactions to her announcement varied from disappointment to surprise to relief. Most of them were understandable to Piper. All the same, she could not help but wonder why Sarda wasn't here.

The thought of him brought to her realisation that, for however long this went on for, she could no longer feel his presence or sense his thoughts. She was so used to having him in her mind she found it almost disconcerting to be alone.

The Commander brought himself up to parade ground attention and said: "I am Commander Warwick Lee." He indicated the science officer to his left, an Andorian shen who wore a broad grin – uncharacteristically friendly for one of her species. "This is Lieutenant Aaness. She will take a brief scan of you."

Piper nodded her acceptance and Aaness took her cue, stepped past the diagnostic bed and ran a med scanner over her. Piper took note she lingered over her face for a moment, as if they found the fact she wasn't injured odd.

While Aaness worked, Piper asked: "Have you figured out what's going on yet?"

Almost embarrassed, Aaness said: "Sorry, Captain. We haven't gathered enough information to make even an educated guess."

To Piper's ears, Aaness' voice sounded so beautiful it was like rose petals falling to the floor. She couldn't help but mention with a friendly smirk: "You have a lovely voice, Lieutenant. I bet you're a good singer in the shower."

Aaness' skin turned a slightly darker blue. It was clear she wasn't used to receiving compliments. "Thank you, Captain Silayna."

At that, Piper's brows rose as she realised the import of that single word. Her counterpart from this universe had married her old flame from the Academy, Brian Silayna. Circumstances had torn them apart in her native timeline soon after they had become lovers. His silence regarding his involvement with the theft of the *Star Empire* so many years ago, and his lack of trust in her, had driven a wedge between them. Perhaps the Rittenhouse Affair hadn't happened here. If that was the case, she couldn't help but wonder what else was different in this version of reality.

She gave Aaness a gentle smile and said: "My name's Piper. I'm not married."

Her words caused a ripple of surprise in the room. She could tell that Commander Lee was about to ask her another question, but she got in first. She turned her attention to the Doctor and asked: "Merete, where's Sarda and Scanner?"

The Palkeo Est woman seemed a little confused. "I don't know a Sarda. As for Scanner, if you're referring to Judd Sandage, I haven't seen him for years. He left Starfleet after his first tour."

"Aboard the *Enterprise*?" Piper added.

Merete shook her head. "No, the *Hood.* I've never served on the *Enterprise*. She was commissioned after I joined Starfleet."

Piper bit her lip in wonder. Things in this timeline were weirder than she realised. The *Enterprise* was over ten

years old before she had even gone to the Academy. Stranger and stranger.

The Commander's patience had been stretched far enough. "Captain... Piper. Do you know how to get *our* Captain back to us?"

Piper tapped her teeth together and gave him a brief smile. "I haven't got the slightest idea. The only thing I can guess at is that both of us seem to be occupying the same space when we make the transition." The thought drew her to another question. "Where are we?"

"In Sickbay," Aaness said quickly.

"No," Piper said, wishing the room had windows. "Where is the *Ingram*?"

Lee seemed a little reluctant to share information with their guest. Merete came to her rescue. "We're in geostationary orbit over the Guardian."

"Doctor!" Lee shouted. "That is classified!"

Piper nodded. "As we are. It's beginning to make sense. We were tasked with dropping off some supplies to the Security contingent guarding it." It was a half-truth. They had indeed been requested to resupply as well as their primary mission.

Lee demonstrated surprise at her candour. All the same, he remained mute on the subject.

"Commander," Piper said with a winning smile. "We're not going to get very far if we're going to be suspicious of one another. I don't think your Starfleet and

mine are all that different. Our job is to protect the Federation from malevolent forces."

The First Officer crossed his arms, defiant. "It remains to be seen that your reality isn't trying to interfere with mine."

"What for?" Piper countered. "The only person who seems to be able to make the transition is myself and Captain Silayna. I'm certain neither of us wishes to be in the other's timeline and it's not like I'm going to steal the Crown Jewels while I'm here. I have only two questions I want answered are: One: Why are we making these transitions? Two: How is it that two different versions of the *same universe* can exist at the same time? Surely one should have cancelled the other out upon its formation."

The notion that one's entire existence could be simply erased did not sit well with the people around her. Aaness asked: "Is it true that we might not exist in your timeline?" Her agitation was clear in her quaking voice.

Piper suddenly realised that such knowledge was dangerous. She had possibly already revealed too much with her admission she didn't know anyone present aside from Merete.

Considering her friend, she wondered why, as the two women existed in both timelines, they weren't making the transition. The odds of them occupying the same space were much greater than it was for her as this was Merete's domain. They worked in the same space. Strange.

Commander Lee picked up on her previous line of thinking. "I think it would be better if we refrained from discussing such matters, Captain Piper." He glanced at Aaness. "We don't need to know what we cannot change."

Piper nodded her agreement as she pondered another problem. "Commander, where are Captain Silayna's quarters on this vessel?"

Once more, the Commander seemed reluctant to share information. Merete slapped his shoulder, annoyed. "Warwick, she's trying to help." She turned her gaze back to Piper. "Deck Six, section three."

Piper smiled. The differences between their vessels apart, at least their quarters were in the same place.

"Why do you want to know?" Commander Lee asked.

Piper drew a deep breath. "I don't understand what's going on, but I suggest we pool our resources. Your Captain and I can share information if we can agree on a place where we can make a transition safely with an expectation of returning." She glanced at the ship's chronometer on the wall and compared it with her antique wristwatch. They were in sync. "I think the doorway to my personal washroom would be appropriate – on the hour." She fixed the Commander with a stare. "For this to work, you're going to have to keep the ship *right here*. If either of them moves, you could be stuck with the wrong Captain." She gave him a cheeky grin.

She noted that her friendly attitude seemed incongruous to this crew. Was her counterpart that different? She wondered what she would be like if she'd been badly injured and needed such drastic surgery. She couldn't help but ask: "What happened to Captain Silayna's face?"

That was a subject that put these people on edge.

Merete spoke up. "Phaser accident," she offered.

Aaness added: "We don't usually talk about it."

"Why?"

Commander Lee's baritone answered a little more quietly, obviously more than a little embarrassed: "Because the Captain doesn't mention it."

To Piper he seemed keen to protect Silayna's privacy. Fair enough.

Before she had a chance to ask another question, she found herself back in the company of friends in the *Millennium's* Sickbay. "How did that happen?" she asked.

Her Merete smiled. "You'll laugh, Piper, but your other started spinning around the room with her arms out wide hoping to find you."

Piper chuckled. "I never was a graceful dancer," she admitted.

"Neither was she," Merete said, still grinning. "But it was effective."

Piper looked to Sarda. He had to admit, it was nice having him back in her head. "Did you learn anything?"

Sarda almost frowned. "Only that your counterpart, Captain Silayna, has no idea what is transpiring, either. She did, however, confirm her ship is in the same orbit as ours."

"So, we're literally occupying the same space and time," Piper observed. She turned and suddenly left the room, headed for the Bridge at a brisk pace. Sarda and Merete ran to keep up with her.

"Why are you running?" Merete called.

"Would you believe I'm trying to get out of my way?" Piper returned.

As she ran, she realised it might get maddening trying to second-guess Silayna. They were bound to bump into each other from time to time and cross over unintentionally. She was even uncertain as to whether she should occupy the Centre Seat. Not good.

She slowed down and waited for her friends who caught up with her at the turbolift doors.

"Don't spend all your time second-guessing Captain Silayna," Sarda offered out loud.

Merete added: "Yes. If you bump into each other, we're pretty sure we'll get you back anyway."

Piper grinned. "I just hope they'll take me up on my suggestion." She explained the idea she had left with Commander Lee.

"A commendable plan, Captain," he said. He added with a touch of mirth. "If they don't, all you'll have to do is sit in the Conn. It will be simply a matter of time before the two of you meet."

Piper rolled her eyes. "That's going to make it hard to run this ship, isn't it? It's probably only a matter of time before you wind up with her in the chair instead of me." The turbolift doors opened and they stepped inside. "Bridge," Piper ordered.

"That could be a dangerous security risk, Piper," Sarda said. "We don't know if she can be trusted."

Piper's first reaction was to defend her counterpart. She was poised to answer when she realised that Sarda was right. She had yet to meet her face-to-face and she truly had no idea what she was like. All she had was hearsay. Before she could say anything, the door whooshed open and they stepped out.

Lieutenant Valastro glanced up at Piper as she exited and stood, expecting her to take over but she waved him down. He nodded his understanding and kept station as the trio made their way into Piper's Ready Room.

Once inside, they took their usual places: Piper, behind her desk, feet propped on the corner; Sarda, sitting bolt upright on the chair directly opposite and Merete relaxed into the corner of the couch.

"All right, then, what's your take on her?" Piper asked.

Merete started. "She's like you, that's for sure, although I'd have to say she's tougher. She's the sort of person you'd think had endured a hard life, so trying to have a laugh with her was almost pointless. She was polite when I tried a little joke, but she didn't even chuckle."

Piper rolled her eyes. "I have a hardass double. Who'd have thought it?" She threw her hands up in amazement. "Then again, if I'd had half my face shot off, I wouldn't be too happy about it either." Once more, she ran a hand over the right side of her face, feeling almost self-conscious. *It's not me,* she reminded herself, *it's the* other *me.*

"This must be confusing for you," Sarda stated.

The Captain shrugged it off. "I suppose the old saying: "If you travel far enough, you'll eventually meet yourself" isn't that far from the truth." She shook herself. "All the same, we've got a problem. Why is this happening? Does it have anything to do with the Guardian?"

"Uncertain." Once more, Sarda was unwilling to engage in conjecture.

It was a habit that Piper often found maddening. She narrowed her green eyes at him and said not unkindly: "You know, you can have the occasional guess, Sarda! I won't hold it against you."

Although he didn't show it, Piper felt Sarda's embarrassment. It was a character flaw found not only in Sarda, but in practically his entire race. Their rigid code of logic forbade guesses or generalisations.

Regardless of his feelings, Piper was not about to apologise. There was a time for facts and there was a time for conjecture. Vulcans needed an imagination as much as the next species. It was the only way to put yourself not only in the place of another, but in their mind as well.

In the moment of uncomfortable silence, Merete interjected: “Why don’t we just ask it?”

Piper and Sarda shared a look. The idea hadn’t occurred to either of them.

Chapter Two

Cold, dusty, ancient. The undesignated, and highly classified world that was home to the Guardian of Forever reminded everyone who visited it of an ancient graveyard. One could not help but walk amongst its ruins with a sense of respect, awe, and more than a touch of fear. It was if something was lurking here, waiting to pounce on the unwary.

Sitting among the fallen walls and columns was a large, two-metre-tall, distorted doughnut-shaped object that had the appearance of rock but was anything but. A curtain of something akin to mist kept one from seeing through it. It was as old as time itself, a left over from an ancient civilisation – one was meant to believe.

However, doubts about its origins were being raised due to its annoying predisposition towards obfuscation. It would answer questions with statements that would make a politician proud.

Piper mused that, even when it *was* talking, it usually said nothing of value. Lighting up as it spoke, whilst showing images of the past, it was clear that it was proud of its ability to send people to other places in time and space. It no doubt fulfilled its designated role to its creators, but she had to wonder that, for a race with such obvious mastery over time and space, their disappearance was disturbing.

Jim Kirk had shown that one man could change the course of history by saving one critical person. The price of

this lesson had been high as he had fallen in love with one such individual, Edith Keeler. She was a linchpin in history around which the fate of World War Two could have turned out very differently with Germany as the ultimate victor.

To put things right, he'd had to stop Doctor McCoy from saving her as a truck bore down on her in a busy street.

Jim never forgot her. She was the one woman in his life he would never get over. Piper remembered Jim's fitting tribute to her as she leaned across the railing of Jim's yacht as they sailed and read its name: Edith Keeler.

"With great power comes great responsibility." Starship captains knew this. The fate of worlds was often in their hands. Unfortunately, it had sometimes gone to their heads – with tragic results.

Piper gazed at the Guardian and mused to herself that any race capable of creating such a device would live from that point on the razor's edge. All it would take was the wrong choice. An inappropriate action taken at the worst point in time, and they would erase themselves from history. As she circumnavigated a boulder, she wondered if that was indeed their fate.

At least Starfleet had learned something from their mistakes. It was absolutely forbidden to enter the portal and allow the Guardian to send you to goodness knew where. The Temporal Prime Directive was now in force and being guarded, in this place, by a small contingent of some of Starfleet's finest fighters and a ten-gigawatt force field.

As Piper approached it, she got the impression that the Guardian was observing her. It had no eyes or any other sensory apparatus, nothing that moved to give away its intentions. Yet, she still had the feeling it was watching her somehow.

On either side of the portal, the security officers kept a wary eye on their visitor. While they respected Piper's rank, they trusted no-one.

She stopped a respectful two metres from the object, Sarda by her side. She felt his trepidation. Even he was awed by the immense power the Guardian embodied.

Curiously, the Guardian spoke first. Its voice boomed and carried the note of enormous capacity, as if everything it said carried great import. Piper wondered if Genghis Khan had spoken that way. "Time is coming full circle."

The comment brought Piper up short. She considered the words for a moment and silently shared her thoughts with Sarda on the subject. Both of them came up blank.

"Guardian," Piper said, speaking up a little even though there was no other sound save the never-ending wind. "Are you responsible for my recent steps into an alternate timeline?"

For a moment, the Guardian was silent. Piper was beginning to wonder whether she would need to rephrase the question when it spoke again. "Time is fractured. It can only be healed with much sacrifice."

The word chilled Piper's soul. She was well aware just how high a price that could be. She pressed on. "How is time fractured?" she asked.

Again, the Guardian considered its reply. "All is not as it should be. Not in your time, or the other."

This was not going well. If things in both timelines were wrong, what was the real timeline like? Who was she? *What* was she? Was she even in it?

"How is this so?" she asked, feeling a little naïve.

This time the Guardian was ready. "A paradox is occurring."

"What paradox?" she blurted.

Instead of answering, the Guardian said: "Space/time has been torn. It must be repaired or all with be lost."

"What paradox?" Piper repeated.

"There is one who can help you," the Guardian said. The mist in its centre cleared and Piper found herself looking at a mirror of the landscape behind her. Standing in the middle of it was Captain Silayna.

Both were shocked to see the other. They were two eventualities that were never meant to meet. A "what if?" nobody should ever encounter.

Without thinking, they approached one another, drawn to each other like magnets. Piper came within six feet when the security guards decided it was close enough and raised their weapons.

"That's close enough!" Their tone brooked no argument.

Piper nodded, as did her counterpart. It seemed they had faced the same issue.

"Can you hear me?" Piper asked – at the same time her mirror asked.

The peculiarity of the situation was offset by the humour. "Jinx," Piper said with a smile. She noted Silayna simply quirked up the good corner of her mouth.

Piper opened. "It's nice to meet me," she said. In her mind she heard Sarda groan.

Silayna's gaze shifted from Piper, who she had been scrutinising as one would a Michelangelo, to Sarda. "Vulcan," she said, matter-of-factly. "You don't see many of their kind these days." Her words were meant for Piper.

Sarda's right brow jumped up in wonder. "Why is that?" he asked, his need to know clear.

Silayna crossed her arms and looked at him with her mismatched eyes. "Since the destruction of Vulcan, there haven't been many of your kind around."

Piper wished she had a notepad. One of their timeline's divergences was already clear. She needed to compare more of their histories to find what changed them.

"We have a problem," Piper said. "The Guardian has told me that nothing is the way it should be."

Silayna sighed. "Cracked like an old teacup," she said with little mirth. "The Guardian told me it's the result

of a paradox." She nailed Piper with a glare. "We need to compare our histories to find where they diverge."

There had been many times when Piper was glad she was a student of history. Knowing the chief events throughout human history had helped her avoid repeating some of its mistakes.

Silayna took out a large tablet and tapped its screen. "Are you ready?" she asked.

Her tone reminded Piper of a no-nonsense schoolteacher. While she enjoyed teaching, her style was more participatory.

At her side, Sarda took out his padd and signalled his preparedness.

Piper took the lead. "I suggest we start further back and move forward." Silayna nodded her agreement. "All right. How about Zefram Cochrane? April 5, 2063 mean anything to you?"

Silayna tilted her head to the side, her good eye narrowed in annoyance. "Do you think we can do this without the childish attempts at humour?"

The comment came as a slap in the face. The woman on the other side of the looking glass may have looked like her, but Piper was fast coming to the conclusion they were nothing alike in the things that mattered. "I'm not sure Mum would let you talk to people like that," she said caustically.

Now it was Silayna's turn to recoil. She scowled at Piper, clearly angry. "I haven't spoken to Mum in years. Not since..."

Piper missed seeing her counterpart start to reach for her face. At the moment, all she saw was red. The alternate version was showing a side of herself that bothered her. “Are you afraid she’ll put you in your place?” she growled, her fists going to her hips. “Mum would never put up with your crappy attitude.”

“Piper!” The word rang in her mind, loud and clear, projected there by Sarda, who had had enough of their bickering. *“This is not the time.”*

However, the damage was done. Silayna glared at Piper and snapped: “I’m sure Mum would have no problem with your pretty face my dear, but she does with mine!” As she shook in fury a lock of her shoulder-length brunette hair shook loose, falling across her artificial eye. She tossed her head to return it to its place.

“Captains!” Sarda said, raising his voice uncharacteristically. “Do I need to remind you of the importance of what we are doing here?”

Both Pipers sucked it up. They glared at each other, putting their dispute off to another time. *Almost* apologetically, they said: “Sorry.”

Silayna continued through gritted teeth. “First contact with the Vulcans was on that date.”

Piper nodded. “How about the NX project?” she offered.

Silayna was beginning to cool and said a little more amiably: “The original *Enterprise* was launched in 2151, captained by Jonathan Archer.”

So far, so good. Time for smaller steps. "When was the Federation Charter first signed?"

"2161."

That was right, too. "Who signed it?" Piper asked.

They went on for some time until Piper said: "When was the *Enterprise NCC-1701* launched?"

"I'm not sure. 2258, I think." She cupped her chin in her left hand, her index finger on her cheek as she thought. "That's right. She was launched prematurely when Vulcan was attacked."

Both Piper and Sarda reacted to this information. It lined up with neither of their memories.

Sarda spoke first. "Vulcan was attacked?"

Silayna nodded. "I gather it didn't happen in your timeline. A ship from the future, a Romulan ship, destroyed Vulcan by creating a singularity inside it."

Aghast, both *Millennium* officers felt each other's shock. Such a violation was almost beyond understanding.

"Hang on," Piper said, realising it wasn't the only non sequitur. "I'm pretty sure the *Enterprise* was launched years before that in 2245."

Silayna's good brow lifted. "That's news to me," she said, surprised. "The late Admiral Pike was her first commander, with James Kirk taking over her shortly after when he was captured."

Weirder and weirder, Piper thought. "Why was the *Enterprise's* launch delayed?"

"It wasn't." Silayna's annoyance with her double was resurfacing. She was starting to get tetchy again. "I just told you that."

Piper took a deep breath to settle her nerves. "You don't get it," she said after a moment. "There's over a decade of difference between our launchings. Any idea why?"

Silayna sighed and tried to let go of her negative feelings. Being helpful was the only way forward, she told herself. "I'm sorry, no. She is a *Constitution*-class ship, and they'd only built the *Constitution* herself just before the *Enterprise*."

Again, it didn't line up. "How many of them were built altogether?"

"Four." For the first time, Silayna smiled. "Starfleet's made up of a lot of diverse ship designs. We've got ships for all kinds of missions."

The last time Piper looked, there had originally been twelve of the *Enterprise's* sister ships. Silayna's fleet sounded a lot more varied than hers. "Okay. Let's go back a little." She thought to herself for a moment, then asked: "Where was Jim born?"

"Who?" Silayna had no idea which Jim she was referring to.

To Piper, there really was only one. "Jim Kirk. Surely he told you a little about himself over time."

Quizzically, Silayna squinted as she tried to reconcile what she was being asked. "I've never served with

him." As an editorial, she added: "I wouldn't want to, either. Cowboy!"

The disdain she felt was clear and had Piper wondering what kind of a career Silayna had led. If she had never served with Jim, then she probably never captained the *Banana Republic* or the *Star Empire* for that matter. It was also obvious that she had no love for Jim.

"Can you find out?" Piper asked. She wasn't sure why it was so important to ask, but she did so anyway.

Silayna shrugged and tapped in a request on her datapadd. "Whatever." She read for a moment, then said: "He was born on a shuttlecraft. Apparently, his mother went into premature labour when their ship, the *U.S.S. Kelvin*, came under attack – by the same ship that destroyed Vulcan." The co-incidence was not missed.

"Now, isn't that interesting?" Jim had told Piper he had been born on the *Kelvin*. His mother had left the ship shortly after to raise him and Sam on the family farm in Iowa. She thought space was too dangerous to raise children. Piper tucked her head to the side as she considered. "Where did this mystery Romulan ship come from?" she asked.

Silayna sucked in a breath between her teeth, her eyes widened as she cast her mind back. She was being hard on herself for not remembering. "Stuff it," she said after a moment of futility. She tapped in the request and got her answer in seconds. "The logs stated a "lightning storm in

space" appeared and the *Narada* – the Romulan ship – emerged from it."

A thought came to Sarda and Piper silently encouraged him to explore it. "*If you don't practice your imagination, my friend, you'll lose it,"* she thought fondly. "*That brilliant mind of yours came up with amazing new designs. Don't let it go to waste."*

Sarda simply nodded, leading Silayna to wonder what level of synchronicity these two held. The best teams could practically read one another's minds. She had no idea they actually could.

"I was about to speculate," the word hung there for a moment, reminding Piper of her previous barb, "that the storm was in fact the emerging end of a temporary wormhole from the distant future."

Piper's eyes went wide. "When I suggest you use your imagination you really go all out!" she said with a grin. "All the same, you could be right. Captain Silayna did say the Romulans were from the future. If they came from *our* future and changed the past, it would have created her timeline leaving us all with a nasty paradox."

A communicator chirped. Neither Captain was sure it was their own so both took theirs off the back of their belts. It turned out they were both being called. The messages were very similar.

"Captain, we are under attack from an unknown ship. Our shields are up, but they are proving hard to target. We think it might be..." The connection went dead.

Both Pipers tapped their communicators and tried to regain contact with their ships. Sarda tried with his own – to no avail. Piper turned her gaze to the skies and tried to see some tell-tale sign of a battle but saw nothing. If the *Millennium* had been destroyed, it would have lit up like a small sun. She took comfort from that.

She took a moment to glance at her opposite number and saw her doing the same thing – before turning and looking at her. It seemed they shared one thing in common: the fear all captains have of losing their ship.

Simultaneously on both sides of the mirror, a transporter beam appeared. The security guards on each side stared at it in amazement as it should not have been able to penetrate the security shield. Caught off guard, each one fell to an expert phaser shot that knocked them out cold – leaving only the Pipers, Sarda and themselves.

"This madness has to end here!"

For a moment, Piper wasn't certain who had spoken, and on which side. It took her only a moment to decide that it was her interloper. Another question plagued her. Why hadn't they been shot as well?

As there was no cover, both Piper and Sarda kept perfectly still, doing their best to appear unthreatening. Both of them were unarmed – a condition of their visitation. Each of them looked over their unexpected guest and shared their observations. It was a skill they were honing that helped them sum up an enemy much faster than on their own.

The visitor was male, human – or at least humanoid – and appeared to be in his mid-thirties. He was of medium height, wore a peculiar ribbed, black, form-fitting outfit, and carried his phaser with an ease come of much practice. Oddly, for the moment, he didn't seem that interested in Piper or Sarda. He made straight for the Guardian.

As she turned to watch him, Piper noticed that a similar thing was happening in the other timeline. However, instead of a male, this protagonist was female. She was only about five feet tall, but her physique spoke of great athleticism. She carried herself as one born to confidence. She had long, raven hair, graceful features and cold, blue eyes that could cut a man down. She spoke with a voice full of arrogance. "Who said anything about madness?" she taunted. "It's simple. You and yours must die so we can live."

The male spoke, imploring. "We both cannot survive. Since the event, entropy has increased. It's only a matter of time before space/time rips itself apart."

The woman put a hand to her hip. "What does what happens over there have to do with me?" It was clear she held little regard for their timeline's existence.

The young man pulled himself up and spoke from a life of experience. "If our timeline ceases then yours will be doomed to crumble because of paradox. Both timelines will be destroyed. Nothing of our universe will remain!"

On both sides, Piper looked at her mirror in horror. What they were talking about could literally mean the end

of everything. They gave each other a tiny nod. If an opportunity arose, they would act, no matter the cost.

"Do you have any idea who these people are?" Piper asked Sarda.

"I cannot even guess," he replied. "*I am, however, concerned that any being with the power to subdue the* Millennium *must be taken seriously. Tread very carefully."*

"Excuse me," Piper said politely. "Do you mind if I ask a question?"

Both interlopers reacted as if they had completely forgotten she was there. Each turned and stared at her as if she was an impudent child speaking out of place. The female spoke first. "What do *you* want, alternate Piper?" Her voice was laced with disdain. "Don't you think you've done enough?"

Behind her, the other Piper shifted, trying to find a position to strike.

"Who are you?" she asked sweetly. Her tone took on some steel. "And what have you done with *my ship?"*

Now she was a little closer to the Guardian, Piper could see the woman was wearing an outfit like the male on her side. The only difference being that hers was burgundy coloured.

The male spoke with a modicum of respect. "My people watch over the continuum to keep our timeline from being interfered with," he said, as if that explained everything.

The female spoke caustically. "You mean flowing in the direction *you* think it should be. How arrogant!"

Once more discounted, the male turned back to his adversary. Before he could say a word Piper spoke again. This time her voice was deadly. "What did you do to my ship?"

The male sighed. It was a sound that came from the depths of a weary soul. Without turning he said: "Captain Piper, your ship is fine. I've simply placed it in a stasis field temporarily."

The comment brought a raised brow to Sarda. He understood such an act would require an enormous amount of energy that was harnessed by a technology that was far beyond them. He shared the observation with Piper.

"Whatever the two of you are planning, put it out of your minds," the man continued. "I am well aware that you're telepathically connected."

Neither of them could cover their shock, which was reflected in Piper's other, who had managed to edge closer to her quarry. Silayna looked at Piper with a gaze that spoke of surprise and envy.

In a lightning smooth move, the alternate time agent whipped out her phaser and pointed it at Silayna's nose without looking. "And whatever you've got going in your bionic brain, forget it. I know what you're capable of as well."

The comment hurt Silayna, but she managed to keep it from everyone except her alternate. The more time she

was around her, the more Piper was becoming tuned into her thinking. Wisely, she stopped moving.

The female spoke again to her adversary. "Just let it happen, Kelvin. There's nothing you can do. Your time is over."

"Not yet, it isn't," Kelvin said, determined. "I can still keep you from ever existing, Keily."

Keily gave him a grin that spoke of absolute mastery. "Nothing you do in the past can stop me without rubbing yourself out. Grandfather all over again."

It was an obviously empty threat, but it was clear that was the best that Kelvin could offer at the moment. Piper stepped back from the situation and marvelled at the ludicrousness of the situation. It seemed that both her and Silayna's ships had been put in stasis by these unknown beings who just dropped in from out of nowhere, who also claimed to be the "good guys" of time, whatever that meant. Piper knew from experience that absolute power could easily corrupt absolutely. Mastery of time travel could lead to disaster.

Which led her back to the state of the Guardian's world. Perhaps they had done the same thing, and, in their hubris, they had suffered the ultimate fate: Extinction. Was that what awaited the universe now things had been set in motion?

Keily had a final comment for him. "Besides, even if you did manage to rub us out, who would you trust to save the universe? Piper?"

Her sarcasm had its desired effect. Both women winced.

Kelvin was not finished. "I'm sure they would do a better job than *you,"* he snapped.

"Piper." The voice was ancient and yet it seemed only she heard it. "What you see before you is an example of why I exist." Piper suddenly realised she was hearing the Guardian's voice in her mind. Peculiarly, she noted Sarda did *not* hear it.

She glanced at her other and noticed she had a quizzical look on her face, as if she had just encountered something odd.

"I am speaking to your alternate as well. Once a race attains mastery of time travel, they do irrevocable damage to time. As it is, your people may have already unravelled space/time itself. If you want your universe to continue, you must act. In a moment, I will open the portal to the past. Pass through it five seconds later. You will have an opportunity to start putting things right. You must work together to make it happen. You will know what to do when the time comes."

Piper glanced at Silayna to see what she thought of the whole thing. It was clear she was undecided as Piper was. However, it was clear to her that something was definitely wrong. That was why they were here to investigate. Space/time was breaking down, they knew. The question was: could they trust the Guardian?

The time for decision came when the mirror finish disappeared, and images started appearing in the mist. Acting on instinct, she barked an order to Sarda to distract Kelvin.

His trust in Piper absolute, Sarda stepped to the side and did his best to tackle Kelvin, who was still stunned by the sudden change in the Guardian. Kelvin tried to bring his phaser to bear, but the much stronger Vulcan gripped his arm in an iron grip and refused to let go. A shot went high over their heads.

However, Piper wasn't paying attention. She was counting down the seconds and quickly began moving. On the count of five she leapt into the unknown.

Chapter Three

Piper found herself in the dark on a dusty, wooden floor wondering where she was. Never mind that someone else was there. Someone who didn't seem to be happy either. They disentangled themselves and sat up.

"Where in Proxima's thick jungles am I?"

The voice was hers, but she didn't remember saying it. She looked at her companion and took in a startled breath.

"This shouldn't be possible." This time, both spoke together in perfect harmony. Again, they spoke: "What are you doing here?"

Piper was sitting only two feet away from herself. At least, it was a person who used to look a lot like her. Not quite believing what she was seeing, she put out a hand, just as Piper Silayna was doing. Palm to palm, they confirmed they were both very real.

They both retracted their hands, in wonder and feeling very confused. "How is this possible?" they both said.

For the first time, both shared a laugh. The impossibility of the situation gave them a momentary release from the stresses they had already endured that day. It was a good feeling.

Once they settled, they looked into each other's eyes, waiting to see who would speak next. Silayna went first.

"Any idea where the Guardian sent us?" she asked.

Piper looked around their little, dark, non-descript room with its generic door and knob and tiny incandescent bulb. "Well, judging by the décor, I'd say it sent us back to the mid-twentieth century Earth."

Her opposite agreed with a nod. "Well, at least we've got electricity. Imagine if it had sent us back to the Middle Ages! Cold nights and bad food don't to a lot for me."

Piper smiled her agreement. "Never mind we'd have a lot of trouble passing you off. We'd probably be burned at the stake within a matter of hours."

Silayna rolled her eyes. "I have no intention of being a sadistic town's entertainment today!"

Piper made herself comfortable by sitting on the floor cross-legged. She encouraged her counterpart to do the same. She did so, but awkwardly.

"Did your injury hurt you elsewhere?" Piper ran an eye over Silayna's form and couldn't see anything out of place.

"No, I'm just not much for sitting this way. Give me a good chair any day." She rubbed her knees and pushed them down a little to stretch her legs. "I see you've had a lot of practice."

While Piper would have loved to banter on the subject, their personal exploration of each other would have to wait. "I'll tell you about it later," she said. "Right now, we need to figure out what we're going to do next."

Silayna approved. "It's nice to see you *can* get down to business," she said a little tartly. "What do you have in mind?"

Piper let the comment slide, but she knew it would be a subject for another time as well. "While our uniforms aren't necessarily a problem, I suggest you wait here for a minute while I scout around. There's no guarantee your prosthetic won't be a problem once we step out of this room."

Silayna gritted her teeth in annoyance, but she had to concede the point. Before Piper could continue, she said: "There is one thing we need to agree on as well."

"What's that?" Piper asked curiously.

"What we're going to call each other. We can't *both* go by Piper, can we? It's going to get confusing, fast."

"Hmmm. I see your point. I'm not sure we'd want to be known as "Piper One and Two" all the time. Never mind it would sound stupid. So, how are we going to introduce ourselves to others?" she said, deep in thought.

Silayna, all business, said: "We can pass ourselves off as identical twins, at least. How about Thelma and Louise?"

Piper remembered watching that movie in her youth. It occurred to her that her mirror had probably done the same thing. "Didn't they wind up dying by driving off a cliff? No thanks. How about Susanna and Suzette?"

"Where did you get those from?" Silayna asked, genuinely interested.

"Suzette was a friend of mine, another starship captain. Susanna is a Federation Ambassador who is attached to my ship. She's married to my Second Officer."

"You miss them," Silayna observed.

Piper sighed. "I do. Suzette was killed a year ago in a Klingon attack. Susanna is on a sabbatical with Krashtallash, her husband, on Cait."

Silayna shook her head sadly. "Cait was a beautiful world. We lost it some years ago when a rogue asteroid destroyed the star. It went nova. We still don't know how."

Piper felt both sadness and irony. It was her crew's actions which saved the planet. She gathered her opposite number never had that chance.

Silayna spoke up. "I've dot dibs on Suzette."

Piper chuckled. "Okay. From now on, you call me Susanna. Hopefully, nobody looking back from the future will pick up on the names. What's our last name?"

The newly dubbed Suzette said: "Ingram."

Piper/Susanna tilted her head to the side as she considered it. "Nah. A search might turn it up too easily. Best to go with something generic. We can more easily get lost in the crowd. How about Smith?"

"Suzette" grimaced. "Not very imaginative," she said unhappily. "But if you want to get lost in a forest it's best you look like a tree." She had a thought. "I'd suggest Lee. It was one of the most popular names of the day and less likely to draw suspicion from others."

"Susanna" blew out through pursed lips. She had a point. "I remember from the old video files that Smith was often used by people looking for an alias." She slapped her knees cheerfully. "That's it, then. Susanna and Suzette Lee. With a grin, she leaned forward and shook Piper Silayna's hand. "Hi, I'm Susanna Lee. I'm pleased to meet you."

Her "sister" smirked and shook her hand back. She realised it would be good for them to get used to their temporary monikers. "I'm Suzette Lee and the feeling is mutual."

Susanna let go and pushed herself off the floor then stepped over to the door. Suzette found herself wishing she was as agile as her "sister". She couldn't help but wonder whether she was trained in some kind of martial art. Susanna/Piper gave her a quick grin. "Wish me luck," she said with as much cheer as she could muster.

"Just don't make me have to come and rescue you." Piper wasn't certain whether she was trying to be funny or just rude. She put it aside and gently turned the doorknob. It moved smoothly and the door opened without a creak. Piper put her head outside and had a quick look around.

They were in a tiny utility shed on the fringes of a large compound that seemed to be surrounded by forest. The day was warm, and the sun was shining brightly.

Piper ducked back into the room and divested herself of her uniform jacket. "I'm not going to need this today that's for sure."

As Piper stepped back out into the sunlight once more her companion simply wished her: “Good luck”.

Piper simply gave her a quick grin then disappeared outside. Left alone, Piper Silayna found herself wishing for her companion’s quick return.

Piper tried to make herself seem as nonchalant as possible. Everybody she saw seemed intent on whatever it was they were doing at the time. While there was a sense of urgency nobody seemed particularly interested in making new friends, which suited her. Whatever these people were doing security did not seem to be an issue.

She noted that the people were dressed in clothes that had seen a lot of use, as if they didn’t have much of an opportunity to buy new ones. The style was reminiscent of the mid twenty-first century, while the architecture reminded her of a hundred years before. While it was all odd, there was something vaguely familiar about it.

Piper meandered among the buildings, finding most of them quite utilitarian. Except for the large one in the centre that doubled as a general store and a bar.

Stepping out of the sunshine, Piper found herself surrounded by shelves stocked with items that ranged from toilet paper to caviar. As she wandered around the room, she found a few items that she could use. However, she quickly realised she had nothing of value to trade for them.

“What is it honey?”

Piper started and found herself looking down at a sweet old lady who could have been no more than five feet tall. For a moment she was lost for words.

"I've seen that look many times," said the woman. She had grey hair, a face that had seen a lot of sunshine and a light cotton dress with a floral print. She looked at Piper myopically through thick glasses. She summed her visitor up in a second. "It tells me you need something, but you've got no money. Am I right?"

Piper nodded truthfully. "I need a few things for me and my sister. We're new in town and all our money was stolen on our way here."

The comment drew a look of surprise mixed with suspicion. "Nobody comes to Bozeman because they want to, Sweetie. You're either coming here or hopelessly lost."

Piper didn't quite manage to cover her surprise at the unexpected news. "What's the date?" she asked in shock.

"Why, it's April Fool's Day, dear!" the shop keeper said with a mischievous grin. She looked her up and down and smiled, her mind clearly ticking over. "Maybe we can come to an arrangement."

Just when the newly dubbed Suzette was beginning to give up hope the door opened and Susanna slipped inside. "What happened to you?" she asked, a little testily.

Piper just flashed her a grin. "I found that a good pair of boots are in high demand in this town. Speaking of which we're in Bozeman, Montana four days before First Contact."

Suzette's good eye went wide in amazement. "Why on Earth would the Guardian send us *here*?" she asked in wonder.

Susanna shrugged. "No idea, but it did say we'd know why when we saw it."

Suzette's mixed eyes focussed on Susanna's booty. She was carrying an armful of clothes, not to mention her outfit had changed. Instead of her uniform she now wore second-hand clothes from someone a size bigger.

"Here, put these on," Susanna said with a quick grin. "They're your size. I should know."

Suzette slipped off her uniform top and looked at the three shirts Susanna had been carrying. She held up one that had an arrow pointing upward and the words "My Face Is Up Here" printed below it. She frowned. "I don't want people focussing on my face, that's for sure," she said with a touch of sadness. She picked a black one with a star field motif and pulled it over her head. She looked down at her slacks and shoes. "At least I get to keep these," she said with a little cheer.

"Ah, no." Susanna/Piper grimaced. "I promised the shop keeper your outfit was well in exchange for this lot. Sorry."

Suzette took off her boots, grumbling under her breath. She dropped her slacks and pulled on an old pair of jeans. "At least I get to keep my bra," she said, annoyed. She shot Susanna a look. "Or did you give *that* away, too?"

Susanna cheekily cupped her breasts with her hands and gave them a light lift, demonstrating they were being supported. “Don’t worry. Mine don’t defy gravity any more than yours do.”

Suzette sighed, her gaze looking backward. “But not as much as they did when we were twenty.”

Time was taking a similar toll on both of them. “I miss when B1 and B2 were perkier, too.” Piper smirked and watched as her namesake put on the cheap tennis shoes she had bought her. They were the same as the ones she was sporting. She wiggled her toes. Inexpensive, but still comfortable.

Piper Silayna stood upright and tossed her hair backwards. Piper noted that she kept it shoulder length, unlike hers, which was half-way down her back and held in its usual ponytail with a silver ring with a bar through it. It was these simple details that made her wonder how deep their differences truly ran.

“How do I look?” she asked. She seemed genuinely interested in hearing her answer.

Piper laughed. “It’s funny to hear you say that. I think you look great. I never knew how good I looked in a good pair of jeans.” She stepped forward and gently guided her new friend under the bulb. “Now, I want to see how this stuff does on your face.” She opened a jar of foundation and dipped her finger in the flesh-toned substance. She reached upwards and almost touched Silayna’s right cheek when she flinched. “What’s the matter?”

A number of expressions warred for supremacy on her face until she settled on angry. She snatched the jar out of Piper's hand. "I don't like people touching my face."

Piper snatched it back. "Hey!" Piper held the jar behind her and passed it back and forward as Silayna reached past her, moving left and right, trying with both hands to retrieve it. "Stop it!"

When Silayna refused to do so, Piper stepped out of range. "What is the matter with you!?"

Her namesake recoiled. "What do you mean by that?"

Piper angrily stepped forward and well into her personal space. Nose to nose, she stared into her eyes and said in all seriousness: "If there's one person on this planet who cares more about you and what you think than me – a person to all intents and purposes *is* you – I'd gladly like to meet them. Until you do so, I want you to get over yourself!"

Silayna stared right back, but the tear forming in the corner of her eye gave her away. "You are *not* me. I stopped being you when that Orion shot me on Gamma Crucis Three and left me a freak!"

Piper recoiled slightly and cast her mind back. The place was familiar to her. "I remember being there about fifteen years ago. We came under fire from Orion Pirates. I remember their Captain had me dead to rights, but Sarda pulled me out of the way." Her look became wistful. "If he hadn't, the shot would have got me right in the face...."

"What missed you got me," Silayna growled. She became introspective. "It's a pity your friend Sarda wasn't there for me."

A sadness gripped Piper's heart as she realised where he must have been in her universe. "I bet he was on Vulcan when the Romulan ship from the future destroyed it." She sighed, a sound from the depths of her soul. "The death toll in your timeline seems to be climbing by the minute."

Silayna rolled her eyes. "No more than any other timeline, I'm sure."

Piper stepped forward once more, took some foundation and reached for her mirror's face once more. Not interested in debate, she said: "Now, hold still."

Not to be out-cooled, Silayna did as she was told. "Just don't make me look like a ghost," she grumbled.

Piper grimaced. "No chance of that." She began smoothing the foundation over Silayna's face with a small sponge, making sure to keep the colour even. She had compared it with her own skin and had gotten the shade right. Fortunately, the foundation adhered to the metal without smearing. It took her two minutes to make her look a whole lot less robotic.

"Keep that stuff away from my eye."

"I'm planning on it." She touched up the colour. "Just hold still." A minute later, Piper stepped back and admired her handiwork. "Good. We can nearly pass you off for me," she said with a touch of pride. She looked through the rest of their stuff and produced a pair of

reflective sunglasses with a flourish. "And now for the piece de resistance. Put these on."

Silayna slipped them on and looked Piper in the eye. "Well?" she asked testily.

Piper sighed. Her companion's attitude was starting to get on her nerves. "You pass for human, but if you don't lighten up, I'm sure some people will begin to wonder."

Silayna gave her a look that was not quite a grin and almost a grimace. "I'll try."

Piper gave her tight smile in reply. "Good. Until you do so, I suggest I do most of the talking." Even though she couldn't see it behind the glasses, Piper knew she was glaring at her. She grabbed her arm. "Come on." Reluctantly, Silayna relented, grabbed their clothes, then found herself grateful that she was wearing the sunglasses in the strong sunlight. She looked to her right and grinned to herself when she saw Piper was shading her eyes with her hand. "Where's the store you got this stuff from?" she asked.

Piper led them unerringly through the small village through well-worn dirt paths lined with grass and, within minutes, she introduced "Suzette" to the shop keeper, Mrs Hilldale. She reluctantly handed over her boots and uniform with something akin to a smile.

Susanna elbowed her. "We're really grateful for your generosity," she said, doing her best to be amiable. She put her hands in her pockets and she touched her Captain's insignia and suddenly realised she had one more thing she

could use to barter. Ever so slowly, she took it from her pocket and showed it to Mrs Hilldale. "What would you give me for this?"

The older woman took it from her hand and looked it over. She weighed it in her hand, feeling certain it was really gold. She held it up to the light and even tried biting it to be sure. All the same, she had to hedge her bets. "I'll give you a hundred dollars for it."

Suzette took Susanna's arm and gripped it. "Are you sure you want to sell Mum's pendant? It was our Great-grandmother's!"

Piper/Susanna looked at her "sister" in mild surprise, realising the scam and going along with it. She felt no remorse as the insignia really was made of gold. "Where else are we going to get some money?" she gently pleaded.

"Susanna! We can't!"

Mrs Hilldale sympathised. "Don't fight, girls." She made a counteroffer. "I'll give you three hundred dollars – and I'll hold it for you for a week. If you can give me the money back, I'll return it to you. Okay?"

Both Pipers smiled sweetly at her. "Thank you," they said in unison.

The proprietor looked at the two of them in wonder and paid them in cash. She had one more kindness to offer. "If you're looking for work, Zefram is looking for people to help him finish his rocket."

The "girls" looked at one another in awe. The idea of working for the great Zefram Cochrane was a dream come

true. Piper looked at their benefactor with a sweet smile. "Thank you for the suggestion. We'll think about it."

Mrs Hilldale wondered to herself just how badly they wanted their pendant back and shrugged. The younger generations always made her wonder.

Once outside, both Pipers made their way around the building and soon found the launch complex. They moved over to the huge, lightly rusted launch doors and sat on the aging concrete surround. Making sure they were unlikely to be overheard, they debated the notion of working for Cochrane.

"I'm not sure it's a good idea," Silayna said, sounding more than a little dubious.

Piper mulled it over for a moment. All kinds of ideas were swirling in her head, fighting for dominance. One thing was clear, however. The possibility of her working on the *Phoenix* project was a dream come true. Her more positive nature pointed out: "Perhaps the Guardian sent us here to help him with his ship somehow."

Silayna was anything but convinced. "What on Earth would he need our help for? Didn't the *Phoenix* fly just perfectly without us?"

Piper sighed. "It did, obviously. So, what does the Guardian want us to do?" The situation seemed unfathomable to her, and one look at her double told her she felt the same way.

"No idea." The usually stoic woman slowly looked around her at the mixture of antique Air Force installation

and pine forest, while she took in the fresh smells. It had been a long time since she had been outdoors. "This is all still a little surreal to me."

Piper felt the rough concrete under her palms as she gently stroked them. "I know what you mean. It's like one of Dad's surprise picnics when I was a kid. He'd take us off to goodness knew where at no notice."

Her alternate nodded, a faint smile on her lips. "They were always fun, though. We'd call them the…"

"Jack-in-the-box trips," they said together.

Piper Silayna actually smiled at Piper this time. For a moment, they had found something that truly connected them. A shared, cherished memory. They both wondered if they had done the same things.

The sun was beginning to settle behind the trees, and the temperature was starting to drop. Not wearing a jacket, Suzette was the first to notice and she rubbed her forearms to warm herself. "We're going to need somewhere to stay for the night. Did you see a hotel in your wanderings earlier?"

Piper cast her mind back. "I don't recall seeing one, but then I wasn't looking for a hotel at the time." She pursed her lips in frustration. "This place is big enough for us to get lost in. It might be a good idea to simply ask for directions at the bar over there." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder.

Silayna gave her a rueful smile. "Considering the crap you and I have had to put up with today, a visit to the

bar would probably do us both some good." She stood and gave Piper her hand. "Come on, let's let our hair down for a while."

Taking the offered hand, Piper allowed herself to be hauled to her feet. While she didn't drink alcohol in general, she wasn't averse to a bit of wine occasionally with a meal. Also, she had to admit she was right. The trials of the day so far had been wearing. "Sounds like a plan," she said with a smile.

The bar had an open doorway in the centre and glass walls going off in both directions from it. Inside, there were a number of tables in reasonably good condition, with the bar running along the wall opposite the door. It wasn't a very big place, but there was still a large number of people crowded into it.

As they entered, Silayna's attention was drawn by the ancient Wurlitzer Jukebox to the left of the door. It was currently pumping out a song she was unfamiliar with.

Piper noticed her confusion and informed her: "It's ABBA singing Waterloo, if I'm not mistaken."

"ABBA? What kind of name is that?"

A forty-odd male near the door said conspiratorially: "Don't let Lily hear you say that. She's a diehard fan."

"I heard that!" A short, dark-skinned lady Piper estimated as being around forty appeared out of the crowd and gave them a welcoming smile. "Never trash ABBA, Europe or Billy Ray Cyrus when I'm around."

Silayna returned the gesture as best she could. She had no idea who Lily was talking about, but she decided to be gracious. "We'll make a point of that."

Piper reached out and offered Lily her hand, who shook it warmly, then did the same with Silayna.

"I'm Lily Sloane. What brings you to Bozeman?" The woman's eyes were friendly, but both Pipers realised the woman was shrewd and was quietly sizing them both up.

Piper took the lead. "I'm Susanna Lee, and this is my twin sister, Suzette. We're passing through and were wondering if anyone here could point us in the direction of a hotel."

The question brought a chuckle from those standing by. Lily covered her smile with a hand while her eyes betrayed her mirth. "There's a hotel in town, all right," she said with a chuckle.

Suzette bared her teeth, expecting the worst. "And..."

Lily smiled openly and let her guests know what she thought of the home away from home. "It's fine as long as you don't mind sharing your bed with cockroaches."

Having grown up on a lush planet should have hardened the women against bugs. However, for all their toughness, bugs were not their favourite. "We'll pass," they said in unison with tight smiles.

One of the women standing nearby interjected. "Lily, aren't you looking for some boarders?"

Caught out, Lily scowled at her but still admitted: "Thank you for reminding me, Mel. Yes," she said with a

touch of sarcasm. "I am." She turned back to the Lee sisters, finding she had to look up at them somewhat. They were taller than she, and quite good looking. She mused that the women varied their hairstyles to help others distinguish them more easily. However, it was clearly unnecessary as Suzette was sporting some obvious scars. Perhaps even eye damage considering she was hiding her eyes behind reflective glasses.

The women were also different in temperament, Lily reasoned. Susanna was the more friendly of the two, that was clear. Suzette seemed to have less time for others. As well, she got the distinct impression that they both hid considerable intelligences.

One thing she didn't get from either of them was any sense of malice. They appeared genuine in their desire to simply find somewhere to crash.

"Can you pay your way?" she asked abruptly.

Susanna spoke for them. "We have some money and we're willing to find some work to help pay our way."

Lily got the vibe from Suzette she wasn't quite so willing. Whatever her problem was, it was none of her business. However, Mel was right. She could use some help paying the bills. "All right. Follow me."

She led the way back outside and into the fading light. A chill was coming over the shanty town, even though it was late in the Spring. Lily noted the trees had begun swaying in the building breeze. "There's going to be a storm

tonight," she said with confidence. "We'd best get inside before it hits."

Suzette looked up at the sky and saw the storm clouds building in the distance. It reminded her of home, and she felt a pang of loss. It had been many years since she had stood on its soft soil, soaking up the rich atmosphere while listening to the sound of the chirping birds. She glanced at Susanna and noted she seemed to be reminiscing, but content. For a moment in time, she envied her.

Both Pipers picked up the pace as Lily broke into a light jog. Fortunately, they didn't have far to go, and they found themselves outside a modest sized home. It was clearly a left-over from the officer's quarters for the old missile installation that the *Phoenix* was housed in. Lily unlocked the door and ushered them inside.

While the exterior was dated late twentieth century décor, Lily had furnished the home with furniture from her own century. Even though it was clear none of it was even remotely new, Lily had taken care to maintain her home and her lifestyle. There was even an old Flat Screen Television set on one wall, connected to a still operating Blu ray player.

Her tastes were southern, with more than a little New Orleans. The lounge was brightly coloured and there was even a banjo hanging on one wall.

Before the "Lees" got any further with their perusal, Lily became all business. "I'm happy to have you two here, however, I have a few rules I need to make clear. Board is fifty dollars a day – each. That includes your food, water

and use of the kitchen, shower, etcetera. Thanks to the ECON, I've only got cold running water, but it's better than nothin'. Okay?"

The Pipers gave each other a look. Inflation had done its dirty job and left them with a lot less money than they realised. They were going to *have* to find some work. They turned back to Lily in a fashion that she found a little unsettling. Their mannerisms were sometimes uncannily identical.

"We accept," Suzette said.

Susanna fished in her pocket and took out two hundred dollars to pay for their first two nights and handed it over. Lily took it and stowed it in her breast pocket.

Happier now that she had been paid and the Lees weren't simply leading her on, Lily showed them around her small home. Standing off to one side on a small sideboard sat a katana sword, sitting in a purpose-built cradle, proudly on display. Susanna looked at it enviously and bent down to examine it. The ivory handle seemed genuine, but she wasn't certain about the blade as it was hidden within an ornate emerald-coloured sheath.

"May I?" she asked Lily politely.

A flicker of distrust passed over Lily's face, replaced by realisation. She gave her a simple nod. "Go ahead."

Suzette watched as Susanna picked up the sword by the hilt, feeling the weight of it. She slipped it out of its sheath. She gave it a quick spin in the air before bringing it up close to her face. "The weight's a little off and it could

use sharpening," she said amiably. "But it could be a formidable weapon. Would you mind if I could use it to practice in the mornings? In exchange, I'll see what I can do about giving it a proper edge."

The weapon was clearly a favourite of Lily's, but she relented after a moment's consideration. Susanna appeared to know what she was doing, and it would be good to have it taken proper care of for a change. For all its good looks, she wouldn't know what to do with it other than swing and hope she didn't miss. "I'll introduce you to someone who might be able to give you what you need."

Their host continued on with the brief tour. One thing the women quickly realised was there were only two bedrooms. When they brought it up, Lily simply shrugged.

"You're not going to find anything better in Bozeman – not to mention the rest of what remains of the United States." She took a second look at the Lees, once again suspicious. "You should know that."

Both women did their best to allay her fears, even if it was a little over enthusiastically. "We're not complaining!" Suzette said quickly.

"The room's lovely!"

"Delightful!"

"I'm sure the bed's great!"

At that, both women checked the bed. It was Queen-sized. They were going to have to share. They looked at one other and realised they were going to have to get to know each other.

Lily was sharp. She looked at the two of them and asked: "What is it? You look like you've never shared a room together before! I thought identical twins shared everything!"

Suzette wondered to herself if they had even shared the same men.

Susanna said: "We have! We've even had the same crush on boys when we were little."

In her mind, Suzette ticked that box.

Lily's eyes went wide in amazement. "I'm glad I wasn't around you two when you were checkin' out the same man! The fur must have been flyin'!"

At that, both women simply gave her an amiable grin. There was only so far they were going to go with their fabrications.

Seeing the two of them giving her the same smile was almost creepy. She decided to take this as her leave. She said: "I've got to check in with Zee before I call it a day. Feel free to whip something up from the refrigerator while I'm gone." Lily gave them both a quick nod then turned and left.

"Zee?" Piper asked, perplexed.

"Zefram Cochrane, I think," Silayna said helpfully. "History often wondered whether the two of them were an item. Neither of them ever said anything."

It was clear that Silayna knew more about their personal life than she did. "What else can you tell me?"

"Not much. What I've learned from the archives – and I've read a lot of them from this time – was this was a pretty traumatic time for both of them. For some reason, what should have been their greatest achievement was also remembered as a time of great loss." She moved over to the comfy looking red couch and sat down. Piper took the other end. "I've seen video from interviews they both did and each time they were asked about the first flight of the *Phoenix* they got this weird look in their eyes, as if they knew something they weren't talking about, but that made them sad for some reason."

Piper shrugged. "I suppose we're going to find out shortly. We're going to have a ringside seat for history. I know Sarda would have loved to be here."

Silayna thought back to the red-headed Vulcan she had briefly met on the *Millennium*. He seemed to be a good man, as Vulcans went. She had always found them to be an overly reserved bunch – that was on the rare occasion that she actually met one. They were practically an endangered species. "Why is that?" she asked.

As Piper thought of him she found herself missing him even more. She was so used to having him in her mind it was peculiar to not feel his presence. Oddly, having her double around was making it easier, even if she was a total pain at times. "Sarda once told me that he's the great grandson of Sotal, the commander of the *T'Plana-Hoff*. It's not something he broadcasts, even though I know he's quite proud of his heritage."

"If we're still here in a couple of days you can take a photo for him for Sarda." Silayna got up and made her way into the kitchen. It took her a moment to work out how to fill the kettle with water before she put it on the stove to boil. "Would you like some coffee?" she asked.

Piper followed her a moment later and found the cups. She took down a mug for Silayna and a glass for herself. "No thanks," she said. "I stopped drinking that stuff when I was at the Academy. I found it kept me up at night." She opened the fridge door and looked for some fruit juice. She came up empty. She looked at the faucet and wondered if it was a good idea.

Silayna took off her glasses and saw where she was looking. "I wouldn't. You don't know where that's coming from." She shook the coffee jar for effect. Its contents gave a slight rustle. "Perhaps now's a good time to resume old habits."

Not seeing a whole lot of choice, Piper simply nodded her assent.

"How do you know so much about Sarda?"

Piper's eyes went wide for a moment. She didn't know just how much she could trust this other version of herself, but she was finding it hard not to. Never mind the Guardian seemed to think they needed each other for whatever it had sent her here for. "Have you ever heard of the Vulcan Mind Meld?" she asked by way of introduction.

"Telepathic contact through touch, if I remember. I've never seen it done."

Piper chuckled. "In some ways, you seem to have lived a fairly sheltered life," she said with a bemused grin. She went on to explain the accident a year before that had left them permanently linked to each other. While it was unwelcome at first, they had turned it to their advantage on a number of occasions.

"Are you telling me that Sarda can hear what you're thinking?" Silayna involuntarily shivered. "I'm not sure I'd like that. I don't like the thought of someone snooping around in my head."

Piper shook her head. "No, it's not like that. He usually only hears what I tell him. And I'm not worried about him in the least. He has my complete trust and I know it's reciprocated." She looked Silayna in the eye. "There is no room for deception in our relationship. It's completely open and completely honest."

"Wow." Silayna went silent for a moment as she poured and finished making the coffees. She handed Piper hers and together they returned to the lounge. "I'm not sure I've ever been that honest with Brian."

The reference to her husband piqued Piper's interest. While their timelines had obviously diverged greatly, she couldn't help but wonder what became of her old flame in the other universe. "How is he?" she asked.

A great sadness came over Piper Silayna as she stared into her coffee. Softly, she ruminated: "I don't know. I haven't spoken to him in over six months." When she

noticed Piper was about to ask her for more, she simply said without any heat: “I’d rather not talk about it.”

Piper wasn’t about to jeopardise the rapport she was building with her, so she didn’t push. For a while, she just sat back and considered all that was going on in silence. There were so many things that simply didn’t add up.

After a little while, she noticed her cup was empty. She had forgotten to see if she still liked coffee, she was so lost in thought. She collected Silayna’s from her as she went past and she was surprised when she caught her hand and brought her up short.

“You know, I haven’t been this open with someone for years,” she said quietly.

Piper squeezed her fingers and gave her a little smile. “If you can’t trust yourself, where does that leave you?” She gave her a gentle tug. “Come on. Give me a hand to cook something for dinner.”

Reluctantly, Silayna followed her. “What do you mean, *cook*? Coffee’s about the best I can do.”

“Great,” said Piper drolly. “That was something I was hoping we *didn’t* have in common.”

Chapter Four

Time is relative. It's a notion that we've been told since youth. "Time flies when you're having fun" and such.

The passage of time varies not only from our point of view or perception, but how time is viewed – even manipulated. Time can be slowed down if you go fast enough – a notion that has been twisting minds for generations.

During the hours that the two Pipers had spent in April the 1st, 2063, time moved on elsewhere. Back in the twenty-third century, amongst ancient ruins surrounding the enigmatic Guardian of Forever, two men wrestled for control of a phaser. The stronger of them, Sarda, should have had the upper hand and dealt with the human from the future. However, Kelvin got off a lucky shot with his phaser and stunned his attacker. Sarda slumped to the floor, unconscious. Kelvin knew he would remain that way for hours.

He turned back to the Guardian and immediately realised it was far too late to do anything to stop Piper. She was long gone.

Irate and not caring who knew it he barked: "Guardian! Where did she go?"

The usually helpful Guardian was strangely silent.

Peculiar, Kelvin thought. Usually you couldn't shut the device up. He asked again. "Where did Piper go?"

Once again nothing. Kelvin wished he could threaten the Guardian and shoot it, but studies done by his people in the distant future had proven the device was practically impervious. If they destroyed the planet it would still be drifting in the debris, untouched.

Frustrated, Kelvin took out his communicator and dialled up his people in the thirty-first century. Largely protected by the damage to the universe by their advanced technologies, the runaway entropy wreaking havoc on space/time was at last beginning to take its toll on them. It had been some time since they had been able to use their starships in normal space, however time travel was still available to them.

"Daniels calling," he said.

"What do you need?" The masculine voice was friendly, but all business.

"I need you to run a trace on the Continuum. Captain Piper has gone retro and I need her found." He was already aware that history may have been irrevocably altered by her leaving. Oddly enough, there appeared to be no alteration. Perhaps he would be able to get to her before she left any lasting damage. However, he knew better. Whatever Piper *was* going to do since she had left she had already done from his point of view. It was all in the past.

He knew that, no matter when she was, or where for that matter, as soon as he found her he would enter that time and place and deal with her. The annoying thing was that he could not create a paradox by arriving at her location and

dealing with her *before* the photo or other evidence they found was documented. He needed it to find her, and removing her before it was created would destroy his method of finding her as well. It was just another rule of time he had to observe.

This time, his people would disappoint him. "We don't have the energy or enough functioning equipment to find her. The entropic distortions have become too pervasive. We're using all our remaining reserves just holding what remains of the universe together."

"Arrrgh!" Daniels growled. This day was getting better and better. "How the hell am I supposed to find her, then? Who knows what damage she's already done!"

"If it's any consolation, son, there doesn't seem to be any lasting alteration in the continuum. It seems as though she has simply become a natural part of history." The tinny voice did its best to cheer him.

The notion left Daniels with a quandary. There was a possibility that Piper *needed* to go back in time to correct some aberration to history. The fact things hadn't changed for him gave the argument great weight.

He also remembered that, once a person completed their task/journey into the past the Guardian would immediately transport them home. He made a decision. He said: "Daniels out," before snapping shut his communicator. He then waited for a few minutes to see if Piper returned.

She did not. Becoming even more frustrated, Daniels snapped: "Guardian, show me Earth's past." As the

images began flashing by in the misty centre of the stone geolith, Daniels began recording. He wasn't certain she was there, but it was as good a place as any to start.

As he was doing so, he wondered if Keily was doing the same thing he was. Experience told him yes.

Time is relative. It goes by quickly when you're enjoying yourself. It drags when you're not.

Right now, in Lily's kitchen, time was a snail. The Pipers had taken stock of their resources and found some eggs. "What could be easier than scrambled eggs?" they thought.

"I'm glad Lily doesn't have a smoke alarm!" Silayna growled as she scrubbed the frying pan.

Piper stood in the front door, using an old magazine to fan smoke into the evening air. Fortunately, it was beginning to clear. She could almost see Silayna. "We'd have the whole neighbourhood here by now, I'm sure!"

Silayna reached forward and slid the kitchen window open. The breeze helped blow the smoke out. "Why didn't Mum teach us how to cook?" she wondered to herself.

"Everyone was focussing on making sure we didn't fail the Academy entrance exams. We learned all about Denebian slime devils and Andorian wedding rites and Vulcan chess. It was a minor oversight. I guess Mum always thought there'd be a replicator around for us to use."

Silayna glanced over at Piper. "Promise me if either of us ever have children we'll make sure they can at least make an omelette."

For the sake of the joke, Piper smiled and nodded.

The truth be told, time was running out for both of them. Soon, nature would render that possibility moot and menopause would take its due.

Before they could continue, Lily appeared at the door seemingly unimpressed. "What the hell is going on here?" she said, clearly upset.

Piper was apologetic. "We're sorry. We tried to cook some eggs and, well, we didn't quite get the recipe right."

Lily looked at her incredulously. "How on Earth could you screw that up?" she said, partly angry, more amazed.

At Lily's appearance, Silayna had turned and replaced her sunglasses on her nose. She felt fortunate that she could correct for the light with her artificial eye. "It was my fault," she said. "I thought I remembered how Mum used to cook them and I messed it up."

Lily turned her amazement on "Suzette". "I'm amazed the pair of you have lasted this long if you can't cook. What have you done for food?"

Piper's mind raced. "During the war, we were fortunate enough to be in a well-stocked bunker," she said, trying her best to sound convincing. "Our Mother still did

all the cooking. We never did get a chance to learn how to do it."

Lily's brown eyes engaged Piper's emerald green – which Lily knew instinctively were artificial, even though she had no idea how it was done. There was something peculiar about these two, she thought. She had no idea what it was, but she was certain she was going to find out.

All things being equal, she still believed they meant her no harm, even though it was clear they were spoilt.

"Let me guess," Lily said, donning her Sherlock Holmes cap. "You were in New York when the war broke out. Park Avenue brats?"

Neither Piper was certain of their facts regarding her suggestion. It could go either way. Suzette erred on caution. "We lived in New York," she said amiably. "However, we were in Boston when the war broke out." Silayna mentioned this because she remembered the city had survived the nuclear holocaust. "We were taking some more courses in Engineering at Harvard."

Her comment caught Lily's attention. "The two of you are engineers?"

Piper just smiled and nodded. The courses she had taken in the Academy would get her by here she hoped. She wondered if Silayna had taken the same classes.

Now the smoke had completely cleared, Lily strode into the kitchen and waved Suzette away. "Don't worry about it, honey. I'll fix something up." Lily looked at the

two of them and felt it must have been Kismet. “I may have some work for you after all.”

Later that evening, with the wood fireplace illuminating the room with its soft, flickering light whilst keeping them from the night chill, Lily treated her guests to some southern hospitality. She cooked minestrone with some locally baked bread and chased it down with some bourbon.

The tastes were new to the time travellers, but very welcome. Lily was an excellent cook. Coupled with the fact neither of them had eaten for hours, the flavour tantalised their taste buds. Both of them complimented the Chef.

“Thank you,” Lily said. “It’s nice to be able to entertain and be complemented on my cooking. Zee says I’m not a bad cook, but then he’s usually half-drunk by the time we’ve finished the meal.”

It was clear to the Lees that Lily was saddened by her friend’s drinking. Her tone spoke of a deep fondness that hinted at something deeper.

“Are you in love with Cochrane?” Silayna asked bluntly.

Lily recoiled as if slapped. “What kind of question is that?”

Susanna tried to cover her sister’s tactlessness. “She’s just curious,” she said gently. “It’s clear you’re very fond of him.”

Lily was clearly uncomfortable talking about private matters. "We're close as two people can be when they're working on a project of this size."

"What project is that?" Suzette asked, feigning ignorance.

Lily considered telling them, but she held off. "I'll let Zee tell you tomorrow when I introduce you two to him."

"Okay." The Pipers were willing to wait. The missile held no surprises for them that they knew of.

With the meal concluded, the Lees washed up and put away the dishes. They watched as Lily almost aimlessly walked over to the monitor and turned on the screen. She selected a movie from her shelf and asked the women if they were interested in watching it.

The name meant nothing to them and so they simply nodded. When they finished cleaning, Suzette finished off in the kitchen while Susanna put some more wood on the fire.

"You know," Lily said absently. "It's nice having you here. This house has been empty for too long."

The Lees shared a look, both wondering what she meant by the comment. Suzette said: "We're happy to be here. It's the nicest place we've stayed in for a long time." The lie was transparent, but still well received.

The chores done, the women sat down next to each other on the couch facing the screen. They were still a little uncomfortable being inside their personal space, but they

realised they would have to get over it if they were to share the same bed that night.

As the movie started, Lily asked: “How come neither of you ever got married?”

Suzette stiffened a little, even though Susanna was comfortable with the question. The latter spoke for them. “We were married to our careers, I guess. I know I just never got around to finding the right man and settling down.”

Lily noticed she was speaking only for herself. She turned to Suzette. “How about you?”

Suzette focussed off into the distance, her mind elsewhere. “I loved a wonderful man once, but I let him get away.”

Lily surprised Suzette by giving her fingers a friendly squeeze. “Don’t let that happen, honey,” she said. “If he’s worth it, go after him. Don’t live your life pining for someone who doesn’t even know you’re there for him that way. Life is too short.”

While Suzette was comforted by the advice, Susanna found herself wondering at the window she had just seen into both women’s lives. It was clear to her that Lily was in love with Zefram Cochrane.

As the credits finished and the movie began, the women fell silent and let themselves be carried away by the narrative. Neither Piper could remember a time when they just sat and watch a movie. By the twenty-third century, they were no longer a popular form of entertainment.

Two hours, and a few tears, later, the women decided to call it a night. The Lees used the bathroom to brush their teeth – Susanna had made a point of buying some brushes – before retiring to their room. They wished Lily a good night, then closed the door.

The first thing Suzette did was remove her glasses. "Okay," she said. "Which side do you want?"

Susanna shrugged and pointed to the left side. It made little difference to her. She felt embarrassed to ask something else. "What do you usually wear to bed?" She flushed a little as she said it.

Suzette, who had taken a seat at the bureau and was wiping the foundation off her face, chuckled a little. "My birthday suit. I've been that way since I was little. Never could take the hot nights at home."

Susanna blushed. "Me, too. I usually keep a kaftan by the bed in case I have late night visitors."

Suzette tilted her head to the side. "I've got a standing order with my crew. Don't wake me for anything short of an invasion."

"There are times when I wished I could do that, but life on the *Millennium* is a little like having a large family. Sometimes my friends come to me with their problems at night. I like to keep an open-door policy. It means I sometimes lose a little sleep, but I find it helps my people deal with their issues a little better knowing that I care."

Suzette frowned. "I tend to not fraternize with the crew. I don't want the line between Captain and crew becoming blurred."

Deciding to take the plunge, Susanna divested herself of her shoes, shirt, jeans and bra. She realised that Suzette should be the last person she should be embarrassed to be undressed in front of. Besides, she wanted her to know she could not only trust her but be comfortable in her presence. She stepped over to Suzette and picked up the T-shirt with the arrow from their clothing pile and pulled it over her head. "Come on, sis, it's time for bed."

Suzette looked up at Susanna, her face once more reflecting the light on the right side. She was fast becoming attached to this other version of herself, and grateful of her acceptance. She nodded and changed herself into the remaining T-shirt. She reasoned the clothing wasn't so much their unfamiliarity with one another, it was simply cold, and the bed only had a few blankets on it.

As they slid between the sheets and fluffed up their pillows, Susanna said: "Don't isolate yourself from your people, Suzette. They can be the source of your greatest strength. I know that I wouldn't want to run my ship on my own. I've got a great team and I'm proud of them."

For a moment, Suzette simply lay in the bed and shivered a little. The night was colder than she realised. She considered how lonely she had been feeling of late, pinning it on her husband's absence, but she was beginning to see it went a lot further than that.

"Are you as cold as I am?" Susanna asked.

Suzette mumbled yes, then was pleasantly surprised when Susanna gently spooned her from behind. Together, they quickly warmed one another.

"I hope you don't snore," Susanna said quietly.

Suzette simply replied: "Brian never complained." She closed her eyes and sleep caught up with them quickly.

Piper Silayna woke with a start, the unfamiliar surroundings throwing her for a moment. Then the previous day came flooding back and she settled back into the pillow once more.

A glance at the window showed the sun had just come up. Good, it was still early. A look in the other direction told her she was alone. Surprised, she frowned, wondering what on Earth her counterpart could possibly be doing at this early hour.

Right then and there, she didn't overly care. Piper was a big girl and quite capable of taking care of herself. It was cold outside and still warm under the blankets.

All the same, she started getting itchy feet. Both Pipers were women of action and lying around here wasn't going to achieve much.

She decided on taking a morning run before breakfast. She, almost reluctantly, slid out from under the covers and dressed herself in her jeans and runners, but kept the T-shirt she had slept in. She realised they would need to do some washing soon. Throwing her clothes in the uniform

recycler wasn't an option here. She just hoped the washing facilities would make things easier than when she tried to cook a meal. They didn't have that many clothes to ruin.

Suzette applied her makeup, put on her sunglasses, then let herself out quietly and rejoiced in the crisp, morning air. A mist hung between some of the trees in the hollows, and the golden rays of sunlight played through the trees. The ground was moist with dew making the grass slippery. She realised she would have to tread carefully.

She decided to jog down to the bar and back as she remembered the way. She started out and got about twenty metres when she heard something that caught her attention.

Nearby she heard the sound of the odd grunt and many footfalls, as if someone was working out. She recognised the voice. She jogged past a couple of pines and found Susanna in the middle of a small grassy area moving with the grace and agility of a samurai warrior.

Suzette paused for a moment, not wanting to disturb her, but not wanting to miss the opportunity to watch what was obviously a master at work. She leaned against a tall pine and watched silently.

Susanna worked through her version of a kata, katana flying in her hands, the blade practically zinging through the air as she sliced through unseen opponents. Kick, chop, punch, parry. She blended the motions together into a personal practice that resembled a lethal ballet. As she worked though her morning calisthenics, she remained oblivious to the fact her "sister" was watching.

However, Suzette began to notice that she was not the only person observing the spectacle. A number of others had gathered around the edges of the clearing to watch Susanna's display. She took a certain level of pride in the looks of amazement on the small crowd. Even though she didn't know even the rudiments of her alternate's martial art, she knew she had it within herself to be just as good as she was. It reminded her that, even though she was getting older, she was capable of more than she knew.

At some point, Susanna became aware of Suzette's presence. She quickly brought her kata to an end, slid the katana through her belt then gave her sister a smile. "Good morning!"

Suzette smiled back. She couldn't help but be affected by her "sister's" good cheer. She noted to herself that she *was* beginning to think of Piper as another sister.

Their relationship reminded her of their sister, Priscilla, who was a year younger than she. She had never left Proxima and had become a schoolteacher, mother and loving wife. Even given their differences, when they got together it was just like old times, as if she had never left. She found she was beginning to form that kind of a rapport with Susanna.

She also found it a lot less confusing to think of her as Susanna – rather than "alternate Piper". The difference in their adopted names was helping her to recognise they were unique individuals rather than just different possibilities.

"Good morning!" she called back. "You make that look so easy." She marvelled that, even though Susanna had been working out for some time, she wasn't soaked in sweat. She was fitter than she thought.

An odd mixture of confident and humble, Susanna simply gave her a slight tilt of the head to the side. "It took a lot of practice to get this far. I'm at Grand Master level, but there are still higher levels that what I've attained." She waved her over. "Come, give it a try."

Suzette stepped forward and pointed at the katana. "You're not going to get me waving that thing around, are you?"

Susanna shook her head, no. "I didn't get to touch a weapon for the first year." She walked over to a nearby tree and leaned the sword against the trunk, then returned and stood before Suzette. "First, let's do some warm-ups."

Suzette's eyebrows shot up. "I've already warmed up a bit."

Susanna stepped right up to her and looked her in the eye – as well as she could given all she could see was a reflection of herself in her glasses. "If you want to learn," she said in all seriousness, "you have to trust me and not question when I ask you to do something. Okay?"

Suzette bit her lip and reminded herself that Susanna deserved to be respected for this field of expertise. She humbled herself and gave her a simple nod. "Sorry."

Susanna said: “All right then.” She stepped back. “Now, I’m going do some warm-up exercises and I want you to do your best to copy me. Let’s begin.”

For the next hour Susanna led her sister through a tortuous regime that tested her physical limits. She was a little surprised that Suzette stubbornly kept going, even though it was clear her body was screaming at her to stop. The reason was clear: anything she could do she should be able to do as well.

She led her through a simple kata, and made her do it, over and over. After the fifth time through she noticed Suzette was starting to remember to do it from memory.

When Susanna realised she might be ruining her sister for the rest of the day, she stopped and led them through some stretching exercises to cool down. As Suzette leaned forward, propping herself up with her hands on her knees, breathing heavily, Susanna retrieved the katana. She slipped it once more through her belt, then took Suzette by the hand and slowly led her back towards Lily’s home. Their onlookers had mostly moved on by this point, however some remained – at a respectful distance.

One wide-eyed young lad, clearly the son of poor parents, approached, looked up at her and eagerly asked: “Could you teach me that?”

The women shared a look. It was enough they were crossing their timelines; it was another thing to introduce an Andorian martial art to a world that hadn’t even heard of Andor yet.

"Sorry," Susanna said. "I can't." At the boy's crestfallen expression, she added: "But I don't mind you watching." She patted him on the head as they walked by and headed back to their temporary home. "Was Lily up when you left?" she asked.

Still a little pooped, Suzette wheezed out: "No."

Susanna nodded and gave Suzette her arm to help her. She seemed about to beg off for a moment, then accepted the offer. She noted the faces of some of the people she recognised were watching during her practice. There was a level of respect for her and the blade that hung at her side. It gave her a sense of relief to know that word would get around that the two of them were quite capable of taking care of themselves.

She reminded herself to spend some time sharpening the blade. Right now, it wasn't much better than an oversized butter knife.

When they arrived, they found Lily was up, dressed and making porridge for breakfast. She was warming it over her small, wood-fired stove that they had managed to ruin some perfectly good eggs on the day before.

"I hear you've been entertaining the neighbours this morning," she remarked whimsically.

Susanna placed the katana back on its ornamental stand. "Just exercising," she said.

Lily gave her the lightest of chuckles. "If that's "just exercising", then I don't know what I've been doing all these years." She pointed towards the shower. "It's cold, but you

pair need one. At least the upside is that you won't spend too long in it. The fresh water I use comes from the tank out back and the rain from my roof."

The Lees looked upward and realised the roof wasn't *that* big. Her supply would be fairly limited. "Gotcha," Susanna said. She turned to Suzette. "Do you want to go first?"

Suzette nodded. "Thanks, yes." With a glance at Lily, she disappeared into the bathroom. A minute later there came a squeal through the door as she stepped under the water. "I miss hot showers!" she yelled through the door.

Lily and Susanna glanced at one another. They had to agree she was right. There was no substitute for a nice, hot shower.

An hour later, the three women, reasonably well presented, arrived at the entrance to the underground bunker where the *Phoenix* was housed. Without any preamble, Lily reached down and pulled up the hatch then ushered the Lees inside. They walked down two floors of winding stairs until they reached the metal door to an old nuclear missile silo operations room. A tall, burly male stood guard at the door and opened it for Lily as soon as he saw her. He cast a suspicious look at the Lees, but a nod from Lily was all he needed.

Once inside, Lily raised her voice and said: "Good morning, people."

A chorus of “good mornings” replied and a number of new faces popped up from their stations monitoring the *Phoenix’s* systems.

“I’d like to introduce the Lee twins,” she said. “This is Susanna and Suzette. They’re engineers who will be helping us out on the project.”

“Not until I say so, Lily,” came a new voice from the far side of the room. A tall, slim, aging man who wore worn denim clothes and, peculiarly, a reversed baseball cap stepped forward.

The man needed no introduction to the Lee sisters. They had seen a number of his pictures in the archives from the time. Zefram Cochrane was considered one of the chief architects of their modern society due to his breakthroughs in warp field physics.

“How do we know they know one end of a screwdriver from the other?” he asked cynically. He stepped over and sized up both women. Tall as the Pipers were, they had to look up six inches to see his eyes.

Suzette was the less star struck of the two and she scowled at the man. “You forgot to shave this morning, Zee,” she said, clearly annoyed. “You really need to remember you’re setting an example for your workers.”

Cochrane looked at her and growled. “Is your future so bright you can’t take your sunglasses off inside?” he asked. Before she could react, he scooped them off her face.

Suzette was surprised, but she just kept glaring at Cochrane.

Instead of reacting, he scrutinised her artificial eye and said: “That explains it. Nice work.” He turned to Susanna. “Is it yours?”

It was an opportunity not to be missed. She knew this could be the key to getting inside. “Yes. When my sister was injured, I designed an eye that would give her back her depth perception.”

Cochrane called her on her bluff. “What resolution?”

“Twenty million megapixels.”

“What do you use for a power source?”

“Bio-electricity, so it never runs flat.”

Cochrane was impressed. He continued his interrogation, asking questions ranging from the optical interface to lubrication. Susanna let her imagination supply most of the answers, drawing on her experience studying physics during her time at the Academy and recalling some of Scanner’s more outlandish ideas.

When he finished, he looked her in the eye and asked her straight. “Do you know anything about quantum mechanics?”

It was a subject Piper had nearly failed whilst she was studying, but she had managed to scrape through. All the same, she found she could answer honestly: “Yes.”

Realising Susanna had been doing all the talking, he turned his attention back to Suzette. “What about you? Do you know anything about relativity?”

Suzette gave him a cheesy grin. "If you managed to get to .99c I might wind up older than you."

Susanna blushed and elbowed her sister in the ribs. Suzette pretended to ignore her and stared Cochrane down.

Instead of getting angry, Cochrane laughed. It started as a chuckle and quickly developed into a belly laugh. After a moment, he collected himself and said: "You'll do." He turned and headed towards a blast door. "Follow me! I'll show you our flight of fancy."

The Lees obeyed and they soon found themselves walking through the metal and concrete corridors of an old Air Force installation. Pipes and wires lined the walls, and everything was painted in the same aging, dull grey.

They soon came to another blast door and Cochrane strained to push it open it was so heavy. Even though it swung freely, it was clearly difficult to open. Once through, Cochrane showed them his labour of love with a flourish.

"The *Phoenix*," he said proudly. "She's a converted intercontinental ballistic missile that is going to carry a converted second stage into space where, if all goes well, it will carry me and Lily where no man has gone before. Hopefully to Mars and back within an hour."

He expected them to be in awe of the notion. What he perceived in them was something like it – but not quite. It was as if they expected to see it there but were still amazed to be here. It was weird.

Susanna and Suzette split off and circled the tubular hull, examining its many riveted steel plates and access

ports. They met on the far side, and both turned to look up towards the cockpit. He noticed them gesturing at something in a negative fashion. Curious, he sauntered over to eavesdrop.

When they went silent as he neared he asked straight out: "What is it?"

The women shot each other a look and Cochrane found himself wondering how much these two could communicate without actually saying anything.

Susanna spoke for the two of them. "Where's the navigational deflector?" she asked.

The question stymied Cochrane. "The *what*?" he asked incredulously.

Instead of answering directly, Suzette posed a simple scenario. "You want to fly this thing to the speed of light and beyond, right? At those relative speeds, what would happen if you hit a rock the size of a grain of sand?"

The usually cocky Zefram Cochrane was dumbfounded. The thought hadn't occurred to him. Their logic was sound, however. "It would punch a hole clean through the ship."

"And anything else in the way," Susanna added.

The image rattled the usually unflappable scientist. "I can't believe I didn't think of it."

Susanna and Suzette held hands and smiled at him. "That's what we're here for. We can have one installed within a day."

In the project office, located off the control room, the Lees, Cochrane, Lily and three others from their staff poured over the schematics of the *Phoenix*. The Lees had already designed a simple deflector array for the ship – a feat that amazed Cochrane. It was as if they already knew how to make one.

Now all they had to do was fashion it and install the device.

Walter Simmons, a young man who had only just graduated from university when the bombs started dropping, nodded his handsome, dark-haired head and said through full lips: "I think we can find what we need to build the "deflector" in the base stores. It shouldn't take long to put together once we've got the parts." He then drew long and hard on his extremely expensive cigarette and blew the smoke towards the ceiling. Nobody minded. It had become apparent to the Lees very quickly why that was so. The man was brilliant.

Lily added her two cents. "I'm just not sure how we're going to power this thing. It'll take a whole lot of energy to push aside rocks from the path of the ship while it's flying at them like a rocket."

Nobody pointed out to her that the *Phoenix was* essentially a rocket.

Susanna traced her fingers down an energy conduit that fed the warp core. It amazed her that the small device – tiny by modern standards – used a small chunk of dilithium

Cochrane had scrounged from a meteorite to channel the energies required to power the ship.

"If we draw off some of the energy here," she tapped her finger on the page, "you'll have all the power you need and still have more than enough to power the warp nacelles."

Suzette chipped in: "It's not like you're planning on going to Alpha Centauri in this thing. A short hop should be all you need to prove your theories."

Lily looked at the sisters gratefully. "I've got to say I'm really happy the two of you have gotten on board with this thing. There are some..." she glanced across the table at Simmons through narrowed eyes, "who are only doing this for the money."

Susanna eyed the young man once more. For all his reported genius, it was clear he did not believe the *Phoenix* would fly. Before she could speak her sister asked for her.

"You don't agree with Professor Cochrane's theories?" she challenged. "This is the only feasible way mankind will ever get off this planet and explore the galaxy. Relativity makes exploring the nearest stars problematic at sublight speeds."

Simmons tapped out his cigarette and looked Suzette in the eye. He couldn't quite hold her gaze now he knew one of them was artificial. "Get past the light barrier by changing the nature of space itself? I'll believe it when I see it." His voice fairly dripped cynicism.

The Lees shared another of their famous knowing looks and smile. Standing across the table from them,

Cochrane could not help but feel the two of them knew things that the others did not.

Suzette decided to have a little fun with the mouthy kid. "What will you give me if Zee pulls it off?" she challenged.

The younger man could not help but be pulled in by the dare. "Hmm." Inspiration struck. He put up one finger as he said: "I know! I'll give up smoking."

As Susanna snorted, Suzette countered: "Fine." She spoke like she was on a certain thing. "I'll give you a week's pay."

Lily could not help but notice the absolute confidence the women carried. They *knew* they were going to win the bet.

Susanna said: "At least you'll live longer when you lose," she said derisively. She never had liked the smell of burning tobacco.

Simmons stamped out his cigarette butt and lit another. "No chance," he said arrogantly. "I'm going to be enjoying these when the two of you are dead and buried."

"Side bets aside," Cochrane interjected. "I think the Lee's idea for powering the deflector system is our best bet. Susanna, Suzette," he paused for a moment, a look of annoyance on his face. "In future, I'm going to call you the Suzies collectively." As both women rolled their eyes, he continued. "I want you to work with Simmons and the rest of his crew and have the deflector installed by tomorrow night. I don't want to delay the launch past April 5th. Okay?"

The Lees were well aware of the importance of keeping the launch date. First Contact could not be missed. They both nodded. “We won’t let you down,” they said together.

Chapter Five

Now safely aboard the Starship Taurus, Captain Kelvin Daniels scowled at his computer monitor. The ship was tiny, by twenty-third century standards, being only about twenty meters long, roughly triangular in shape, with a large, forward-facing viewport that allowed its single occupant to see what was really going on outside. For all its diminutive size, it hid savage teeth – the technologies it wielded were formidable. At the moment, it held the *Millennium* in a stasis field while doing the same with Sarda who was lying behind him in a locker reminiscent of a mortuary with its locked door and pull-out tray.

He felt no remorse for his rough treatment of the Vulcan. While he had great respect for him and his accomplishments for the Federation, Kelvin's need to save the universe from the effects of the paradoxes that Sarda had unwittingly become a part of left no doubt which was the more important in his mind.

"Come on!" he muttered over and over. The tension was making bile rise in the back of his throat. Yet all he could do was wait. It was going to take time for even his computer to look for relevant references to Piper in history. He knew she had gone back in time, but to where he had no idea. The best he could do was scan the images the Guardian had given him and reference his own data banks. Hopefully, something in there would give him a clue to her current whereabouts.

The computer would sometimes come up with something it thought was relevant, but so far everything it had offered had proven useless.

All Daniels could do was wait and eat his tuna sandwich.

Exhausted for their day's work, the Pipers lay back in their bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to get to sleep. Neither could do so, they were so worked up.

Piper rolled over, turned on her bed-side lamp with a click then turned to face Silayna. There was no hiding the fact she was still awake. Her eye was glowing dimly in the dark. It turned to focus on her.

"What's up?" Silayna asked, curious. "You having trouble sleeping, too?"

Piper shrugged. "I'm about as tired as I've ever been given the work we've done on the deflector today, but I just can't get over the fact that we're taking an active part in one of the great turning points in history. The first flight of the *Phoenix*, and we're part of the team making it fly!" Even through her fatigue, Piper's enthusiasm shone.

While she shared her sister's feelings, Silayna was not quite as effervescent in her behaviour. "It *is* very cool," she admitted. All the same, her mind drifted to the one she was missing the most. "I just wish Brian was here to share it with."

"Ah." Piper took a breath while she tried to put herself in her sister's shoes. She tried to remember what it

was like for her when she lost her Brian after the Rittenhouse scandal, but she had to admit the pain of that loss had been dulled not only by time, but by the fact that so much had happened to her shortly after it that their breaking up got swamped in a tide of memories.

After a moment, she had to admit to herself she really didn't understand how she felt. All she could offer was: "I'm sorry."

During the last couple of days, Silayna had been enjoying having Piper around because they truly resonated in so many areas. They often knew exactly what the other was thinking. In this area, she knew she was alone. Piper had never known what it was like to be part of a *marriage* – the bonding of two people who chose to spend the rest of their lives together. They were no longer individuals; they became part of each other.

It was a feeling of completeness she missed deeply. Brian had become the other half of her, and she often felt less of a person in his absence.

"It's okay," she said. "I know you don't really understand, but you're trying, and I respect that."

Piper gave her a brief smile of encouragement. "If it helps at all, the bond I share with Sarda may not have been something I asked for, but I've gotten used to. He's my right hand on the ship, and, with our psychic link, we can move together as a team without even talking about it." Her tone softened. "And, right now, I'm missing the fact that, every now and then, he silently gives me a word of encouragement

or a piece of advice. I've come to rely on it more than I realised," she admitted. "It's great to be able to have a totally honest relationship with someone – even though he's not my partner."

Silayna looked at her in mild wonder. She couldn't imagine what it was like to share her thoughts with another. To have that going on all the time made her uncomfortable, but she saw in her alternate the capacity to derive strength from the association. She found herself a little wistful. "I wish I could have that with Brian. At least I could share what I really feel with him. There are times when words just don't cut it."

Piper sighed. "I know what you mean." A thought came to her, but she dismissed it.

Silayna was more preceptive than she realised. "What were you thinking?"

Once more, Piper sighed. "I was thinking it might be possible to give you an idea of what it's like. Sarda's taught me a few techniques. I might be able to let you hear what I'm thinking – if you're interested."

Fear warred with curiosity. However, neither Piper was the kind to let fear rob them of a new experience. Silayna nodded. "Give it a try."

Piper sat and crossed her legs, indicating to her sister to do the same. She took a moment to relax and clear her thoughts then reached out with both hands and placed her fingers on Silayna's chin, cheeks and temples. "Just relax,"

she said. "Don't tense up. Just let yourself be calm and open."

Relaxed was not a natural state for Silayna. All the same, she tried. "How will I know if it's working?" she asked.

Piper laughed internally. "It already is," she said – without voicing it. "Do you remember actually speaking?"

Silayna's eyes went wide in surprise. She didn't. "That's amazing." This time she had used her lips. To Piper, it was like hearing an echo as she heard the sound *and* the thought.

The exercise done; Piper decided to break contact. However, Silayna grabbed her hands and held them to her face. "Please, don't," she said, plaintively.

Piper didn't need to see her face to know she genuinely wanted to maintain contact. The feelings she was experiencing weren't necessarily hers. However, she did enjoy the elation of making contact with a mind so similar to her own. "It's intoxicating, isn't it?"

Instead of answering in words, Silayna showed her how she felt. She took Piper through a gamut of images that defined the loneliness she had been feeling. The rejection from her family. The distance she felt from her peers and her crew. The growing disassociation from her husband. Piper saw the look in Brian's eyes as the light of love in them slowly went out.

The loneliness and isolation took its toll as Piper Silayna withdrew more and more. She realised that she was

as much to blame as Brian for their separation. That she had been projecting her feelings on him and pushed him away. Her feelings became those of despair as she began to wonder if their relationship could be restored at all. Would her marriage simply become another statistic?

Silayna took her back to happier times when the face in the mirror was just like Piper's. Piper recalled romantic meals in San Francisco at a lovely Italian restaurant that overlooked the Golden Gate Bridge at sunset. She recalled the moment that Brian proposed. She felt the elation of being so loved and desired and feeling it returned to her lover.

She felt the angst and long-buried guilt over discovering she was pregnant a week before graduation. It was unintended. They had been using precautions.

However, Piper didn't want it to interfere with her career. She terminated the pregnancy and never told Brian.

They realised that it was then that the rot set in. It was the secret that slowly destroyed the foundation of their relationship. She saw it in his eyes. Brian knew she was keeping something from him but, as she would never discuss it, he began to lose trust in her. He also took it as a slap in the face – that there was something in the universe his *wife* (she heard the words, in Brian's broken-hearted voice) couldn't share with him.

Over the years, they had tried to keep their marriage together with trips to the sun and sandy beaches of Risa. Even a camping trip to Yosemite. They had their moments

of love and passion. Piper felt the heat of their lovemaking, felt the heat of his body against hers. It was so like the times she had shared with her own Brian at the Academy.

For a moment, she shared her own memories of Brian and she held nothing back. The highs and the lows – especially his betrayal of her that had ended their relationship. They both felt the pain of it.

She shared her experiences serving under Captain Kirk on the original *Enterprise*. Her excitement and fear as she piloted the *Star Empire* to victory. Her promotion to First Officer of the *Hood*, and finally her ascension to Captain of the *Exeter* before moving on to the *Millennium.* She showed Silayna her crew – her extended family – and how fond she was of them all. She even shared her feelings of sadness that they were separated with Krashtallash, his sister, wife and Scanner serving on Cait. She even gave Silayna a glimpse of that lush world.

At the mention of Cait, Silayna showed her an image of that destroyed world that she had seen from the archives. That linked her to the memory of Vulcan, which was now nothing more than a small black hole circling its star that it was already drawing matter away from. It had already drawn the frozen wasteland of Delta Vega into itself.

Piper showed her what Vulcan looked like the last time they had visited. She let her sister feel the dry heat of the valleys, showed her the ochre cliffs and mesas, let her hear the cries of the Vulcan eagles as they sought their prey. She showed her an image of Spock's mother, the Lady

Amanda, let her see her sparkling eyes, even given her advanced age. She was a woman of great character and compassion who had helped Spock recover after his death and resurrection.

After seeing all that once was and was no more, Silayna felt a great sense of loss. In her timeline, they were nothing more than a footnote in history. Not only was the wisdom and knowledge of the Vulcans lost, so was the beauty of Cait with its wonderfully spiritual feline people.

Finally, she shared with Piper her worry that, once this was all over, she would simply cease to exist. That all she knew, all she had loved, all she had done, would be lost. It was a despair that threatened to consume her. Piper shared something with her she hadn't considered.

Ever since the cracks had appeared in the universe – as they should not have done – her timeline had been altered as well. As Piper's timeline was closer to the true one, it would still resemble it, but Piper feared as well that the person she was right now, with the experiences she had shared with Silayna and how they had affected *each other*, would also be lost. They would *both* be gone, with a Piper living on that knew nothing of their adventures together.

To both of them, it seemed grossly unfair.

For a time, they simply held each other, sobbing on one another's shoulders as the feelings they shared were amplified within one another. Yet, they took solace from the fact that, here and now, they were not alone. Eventually,

they went to sleep, holding each other, giving one another solace as they slumbered.

The next morning, the Pipers sat silently at the breakfast table enjoying their oatmeal. In the future, neither of them would have ever considered eating the steaming, milk and sugar flavoured substance. However, they had to admit it was growing on them.

Lily watched the two of them quietly. It was clear that something had happened between them the night before, but she had no idea what it might be. Her frustration was exacerbated by the fact butting into other's personal lives was not something she would normally do. In her paranoid culture, which she was well and truly a part of, people kept mostly to themselves. Trust was hard earned and seldom given away freely.

A part of her envied the relationship the women had. She had been long aware of the closeness twins often demonstrated – especially identical twins. There were some who believed they knew each other's thoughts, even felt each other's pain at a distance. That kind of rapport was something that was missing in her life, she knew. She yearned for it. Her thoughts drew her to Zefram Cochrane who, for all his bravado and big talk, was the one man she couldn't get out of her head. Yet, she was pretty sure he never thought of her that way.

She quietly sighed. And probably never would, she thought dismally. She looked up to note that Susanna and

Suzette both finished their bowls at the same time, got up together, and stepped over to the sink in the same fashion. Without a word, one washed while the other dried and put them away.

"Ladies," she said in order to get their attention. Both women looked at her with faces that were alike in some ways and totally different in others. She turned her attention to Suzette, who was staring back at her with her natural and mechanical eye. "A piece of advice," she said honestly. "Zee, myself and the rest of the *Phoenix* team might be OK with your electronic eye, but I'm sure you've met some people who are a little too curious about it. They might even try to take it off you, if you're not careful. These are hard times, and something like that could bring a fair price on the black market. At least for now, I suggest you keep your sunglasses on while you're outside."

Once again, the sisters shared a look, as if everything was sorted out between them. Together, they nodded their silent agreement. "That's good advice," Suzette said stoically. She grimaced. "I was getting used to not having to wear them."

"Give it time," Lily said in a mild attempt to comfort her. She took a sip of her coffee. "The people around here will eventually get used to it."

Susanna gripped her sister on the shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Don't worry, you're still beautiful to me," she said with a mixture of cheer and sincerity.

Suzette just looked at her with a pained expression. It was clear to all she wished she wasn't scarred. "You're biased," she said from a melancholic heart. "You have to love me the way I am. It could have just as easily have happened to you."

"True," Susanna said, giving Lily reason to wonder how that could be so, "but if I can't love you the way you are, how can I have any respect for myself?" Without asking, Susanna gave her sister a hug. For a moment, Suzette seemed ready to resist, but instead she relented and accept the gift. After a minute, the women broke contact and Susanna took her sister by the chin, raising her eyes to meet her own. "Now, are you up for another lesson?" she asked airily.

Suzette gave her a broad smile, her teeth sparkling. It was something Lily had not seen her do before. "Any time, sis," she said, momentary joy breaking the ice. She stepped into the bathroom for a few moments to apply her make-up, then donned her sunglasses. Already dressed in their exercise gear, the two of them disappeared out the front door with a friendly wave to Lily.

As she watched them go, Lily got the feeling the women were truly enjoying themselves. As if it was something they weren't quite used to.

Outside, the Lee sisters broke into a light jog as they made their way to their new favourite place to work out. Each took in the morning air, rejoicing in the clarity of it. Starship air was technically clean and breathable, but few

could forget that it went through carbon scrubbers, and everyone else's lungs, many times before each breath. The air in Montana was like a glass of pure, fresh water: a little chilled but totally refreshing.

The sun was now well and truly over the horizon and had begun its daily routine of drying the moisture from the green grasses – a job it never quite completed. The tall pines and cedars saw to that by throwing long shadows that covered most of the soil and the homes that collected beneath them.

The steady, squishing beat of their sneakers on the damp soil soon brought them to the clearing where Piper led Silayna through their warm-up exercises again. She noted with a certain amount of pride that her sister had remembered most of what she learned the day before.

Today, she worked her a bit harder, taking her for a five-mile run around the town, followed by a time of cooling down. Then she ran her through the kata again.

To their amusement, a few more of the locals had braved the morning chill to watch them. Fortunately, it hadn't rained the night before, so the ground was relatively dry. Even Piper found it harder to exercise on wet, slippery grass.

As Silayna followed Piper through their moves, she said quietly: "You know, I had a weird dream last night. We were both riding in the *Phoenix* with Cochrane, but we'd had to fight a pile of Klingons to get on board. I distinctly remember you fighting them with the katana, but, somehow,

I was doing the same. Then, when all was going well, and we were about to enter warp, we disappeared and found ourselves back at the Guardian on opposite sides again."

Piper finished the kata then looked her sister in the eye. "We must have been still connected somehow when we went to sleep. I think we had the same dream." She didn't mention how alone she felt when she found herself back in the future, separated from Silayna. She had grown quite fond of her alternate over the last couple of days, and a part of her wished this time wouldn't end. While she missed her future family, she found the resonance she had with Silayna refreshing and alluring in its own way.

For all her attempt at hiding her feelings, Silayna saw through her. She gave her an almost embarrassed smile and admitted: "I don't necessarily want to go home, either" she said affectionately. She pulled herself upright and grimaced. "However, we're going back whether we like it or not. We should be prepared for it."

Piper nodded her sad, silent agreement. She slid the katana out of its sheath and began one of her more arduous katas. As the short, bone handled sword sliced through the air, she thought about how bizarre this mission was. Never mind that she wasn't even here on Starfleet orders but on the whim of a device that nobody seemed to be able to tame, let alone understand. While she guessed they were here to ensure the success of the flight of the *Phoenix*, she could not be certain that was the Guardian's primary reason for their presence.

As the sword cleaved an unseen Klingon, Piper wondered how the task before them was helping save the universe. When she and Silayna left the twenty-third century, space/time was cracking up in all directions. She couldn't speak for Silayna, but she knew Starfleet had tasked her with finding the cause. She could not help but be frustrated that her time was being wasted in the past when she should be finding a solution to the problems in *her* present.

Silayna watched the woman she had come to think of as her twin as she went through her exercise regimen. She had come to recognise certain behaviour patterns in Susanna, and one was clear right now. She was angry at something, and she was taking it out on her phantom foes. In her mind's eye, she could not help but see bodies pile up around her. She was worried for her, but also amazed. Her breath was taken away by the grace and agility that was on demonstration this morning. What she had seen the day before had been restrained.

Susanna swung, jabbed, whirled and kicked. Her hands flew in punches and chops. She blocked incoming blows, then despatched her attacker with her blade. The longer she went, the faster she got as she got even angrier at their predicament.

From the side of the clearing, Suzette had gotten her breath back and was relaxed. Even though, she found herself feeling angry, although she had no idea why. Usually, it took a lot for her to become really *angry*. While

she didn't suffer fools gladly, she would put them in their place with a few cutting remarks then move on. What she was feeling was seriously *angry*.

It came to her in a flash. What she was experiencing was not of her. It was Susanna's feelings. The realisation was stunning. The two of them were somehow resonating off one another. "Susanna!" she called.

Momentarily startled, Susanna/Piper quickly brought her kata to an end with her katana held high in an attack stance before she brought it together with both hands, the sword pointing to the sky in front of her. Finished, she slid the ceremonial sword into the scabbard and watched as her sister came over. "What is it?" she asked, doing her best not to project her feelings at her, but not quite managing to keep them out of her voice.

"What are you so angry about?" Suzette asked. She stepped up close and whispered as if revealing one of the secrets of the Universe: "I could *feel* your anger from over there." She pointed back to where she had been standing.

The revelation brought Susanna up short. Their experience the night before might have lingering effects. "What am I feeling now?" she asked.

"Curiosity." Suzette said it with complete certainty. "Mind you, I don't have to be empathic or a genius to know that. I'm curious too."

Susanna gave her a grin. "I'll credit you that," she said with a bit more cheer. "I wonder how long this will last?"

Suzette shrugged. "Who knows?" she said airily. "I just find it really interesting."

Susanna turned and looked at her sideways. "I think you like it, too," she said gently.

Her first impulse was to come back with an acerbic comment, but Suzette paused for a moment and examined the question honestly. "You might be right," she said with an embarrassed smile. She quickly changed the subject. "Let's go home and have a shower. We've got a lot of work to do today."

The daily chores are something that can never be done away with. Not in the twenty-first century, not in the twenty-third. No sooner had the women returned to their temporary abode did they realise they not only needed a shower, their clothes needed a wash as well. Both women were silently wishing Lily had a washing machine. Alas, it was not meant to be. Lily pointed them towards the laundry sink and the soap.

What should have taken about ten minutes took half an hour as they hand scrubbed every article of clothing they were not wearing. After two days, they had nothing left. It wasn't that they didn't know how to wash their clothes, it was the mere fact they were very much perfectionists when it came to their personal hygiene.

Susanna cast a worried glance at the clock, but she noticed that Lily was not only still present, but that she did not seem the least bit concerned. "Are we going to be late

for work?" she asked, worried that the two of them might be docked some of their pay.

Lily shook her head in mild amusement as she nursed her morning cup of coffee. "Two things," she said. "One, I'm the boss. Two, having the two of you on the project is a Godsend. The last thing I want to do is alienate you. If you need a bit more time in the morning to get some stuff done, that's fine by me. I know the two of you will put in a hundred percent when we get there," she said dismissively. "Your heart is in the job. That's enough for me."

Susanna gave her a grateful nod and helped her sister carry their clothes out to the makeshift clothesline out the back where they took a few minutes to hang them out. As they finished up, Lily joined them and said: "Don't worry about your stuff. Marjorie," she pointed to the home behind hers, "will look after them for us."

The Lee sisters looked where she was pointing, silently wondering what kind of a society would consider stealing clothes a day-to-day matter. They shared a look, knowing each was grateful that, in only a matter of years, things on Earth would begin to change after the arrival of the Vulcans. An event that would take place in only two days.

With that thought fresh in their minds, the Lee sisters quickly finished and joined Lily as she walked down to the *Phoenix.*

In the old base's well tooled, yet still underground, workshop Susanna spent some time going over the designs

of the deflector the two of them had put together the day before. They had gone to great pains to assemble something that was simple, yet functional. Their knowledge of many sciences went way beyond the day, so they made a point of keeping it basic. All the same, the design was reasonably intricate compared to the knowledge of the mid-twenty-first century and they had to adapt their knowledge to what was available in this time. It was taking more time than they realised.

While Susanna kept pouring over their schematics, looking for errors, Suzette was putting her electronic eye to good use. With her steady hands and a ready supply of useful materials, she had already begun assembling the unit with the grudging help of Walter Simmons, who had to admit the strangers were good.

"How did you come to this design?" he asked as he tapped another of his seemingly endless supply of cigarettes.

Suzette scowled at the offensive object. The smoke was messing with her mechanical eye. "Do you mind doing that someplace else?" she asked, making it clear it wasn't a request. "I've only got one good eye, and I'd like to keep it."

Walter noted that her sister didn't even look up at the comment. She knew she could take care of herself, obviously. He looked back at the cyborg woman and decided he wasn't going to back down. He picked up the cigarette and drew on it once more before blowing the smoke in Suzette's face.

"I wouldn't do that again, if I were you," Susanna said without looking up. "My sister could kill you with a single blow that you never saw coming. And if she doesn't, *I will*." While Susanna had no intention of carrying out her threat, she made sure Walter believed it.

Suzette could see he did. Word had gotten around about her sister's prowess with a blade and the fact the two of them worked out together. It had obviously reached his ears as well as he, reluctantly, stubbed out his cigarette.

"Sorry," he said, not quite sounding sincere, nor was he.

It was enough for the sisters. They went back to their work. Suzette finished soldering an IC to the board she was planning on using for the deflector's control. She held it up to the light and used her electronic eye to look for imperfections. There weren't any. She looked over at the wall clock and began to worry. It was late in the afternoon on April 3rd, and they only had one more day to complete the deflector and have it installed.

While Cochrane, Lily and the rest of the crew went over the rest of the *Phoenix's* systems, the small team raced to complete one of its most vital systems.

Simmons took the board from her and placed it in the casing borrowed from an old computer. As he worked on wiring it all together, Suzette turned her attention to adapting a small satellite dish to function as their emitter. "Suzy," she said to her sister. "I need your help with this."

Without question, she quit looking for faults in their design and came to her aid. As she held the dish, that was only a foot across, their fingertips brushed as they held it. In that moment's contact, they once more felt each other's emotions and had a flash of seeing what each other thought. Startled, Susanna nearly dropped the dish.

"The effects must have been more lasting than I thought," she said, cryptically.

Suzette gave her a tight grin. "No kidding. We'll have to watch that," she said. She gave her sister a look that said: No offense.

Susanna gave her a quick smile that said: None taken.

Walter didn't have the slightest clue what they were talking about and didn't care. He only hoped they wouldn't make good on their threat.

It was well into the evening before the three of them began installing the equipment in the *Phoenix*. The women lay down a floor panel that folded out of the side of the shaft to give them access to the cockpit's nose cone. Beneath them was a one-hundred-foot drop to the cement flooring below which was punctuated by the odd removable floor panel and stabiliser arm. The air was cold, but dry and there was a distinct echo. Even a whisper carried all the way down.

With a compressed-air operated ratchet in hand they unbolted the nose cone and removed it. Fortunately for

them, Lily's design for the cockpit had nothing behind it but a sealed firewall.

Walter took measurements of the framework behind it and left to make a bracket to suit the deflector dish while the women went to work drilling out a hole to pass their cabling through.

A short time later, Cochrane stepped into the silo below them with a flat, cardboard box in his hand. "Who wants pizza?" he called to them doing his best impression of Santa Claus.

For a moment, the sisters looked at him in bewilderment. Then the smell of fresh pepperoni pizza drifted up the shaft and into their nostrils. Suzette's stomach growled – loudly.

"I'll take that as a "yes"," Cochrane said smoothly. He waited as the two women, who lay prone on the deck they were working on, gripped the edge tightly, then flipped over the edge and dropped onto their feet in front of him. "What do you two do for an encore?" he asked flippantly, quietly impressed.

Susanna looked at him slyly. She wasn't certain his motives were entirely pure as she could smell the alcohol on him. "Wouldn't you like to know?" she answered, her tone making it clear he was never going to find out.

Zefram gave them a cheeky, and slightly lecherous, grin then flipped open the box and offered them a slice. Both of them were unfamiliar with the food before them but were

hungry enough to eat a vegemite sandwich. Each took a slice and delightfully took a bite.

The taste assaulted their hungry tongues and delighted their senses. "Why don't we have these where we come from?" Susanna asked her sister.

As Suzette shrugged, Zefram helpfully offered: "Not many pizza stores survived the war," he said regretfully.

The Lee sisters looked at him and couldn't help but chuckle. "Yes, I'm sure it's that," Suzette said as she ate.

Cochrane looked up at the *Phoenix*, feeling like he was missing something, but not really caring what it was. "It looks like you're nearly finished. Why don't you call it a night and come back to the bar with me? You can finish the installation tomorrow and test it after."

Susanna was about to take a bite, stopped and looked back at the ship. The idea of not finishing the job at hand was foreign to her. A glance at her sister told her she was thinking the same thing. She shook her head. "No, we're going to finish what we started." Suzette nodded her agreement.

It was clear to them both that Cochrane was upset about their answer. He snapped the box shut, miffed. "If you're going to be like that, fine! I just thought I could show the two of you a good time."

While Susanna was unsure what he meant, Suzette understood completely. She pulled herself up to her full height and snapped: "We don't go that way, Cochrane. Now, if you want some female company, try someone who *wants*

to be with you! For some bizarre reason Lily likes you. Why don't you go and bother her?"

Knowing he had just stepped way over the line, their benefactor pursed his lips and turned to leave. "If you change your mind, I'll be in the bar." He was trying to sound pleasant, but he came over as a lecherous snake. He quickly disappeared through a side door.

Both women shook their head in wonder.

"How the history books got him wrong," Suzette muttered.

The saying "how the mighty have fallen" passed through Susanna's mind, but she corrected herself. "The history books tell of a Zefram Cochrane that doesn't exist yet," she said, almost pitying him. She gave her sister a meaningful look. "I think the Vulcan's arrival will change more than just the world," she said then got back to work.

The pizza had done its job and now they had to do theirs.

Chapter Six

April 4th, 2063 started off like the ones before it for the Lee sisters. Their time in Bozeman, Montana had gotten them used to the daily routine of life for the post-apocalyptic town. They shivered through their morning showers after their exercise routines. They were quickly becoming addicted to coffee and grateful for the supply of it, considering most of the world's coffee producers were still only now getting back into production.

International commerce was still in its reborn infancy, and it did not help that most of the former United States' ports had been destroyed in the first volley of fire. While industry was slowly rebuilding in the local states, with trucks coming and going once again, the goods they moved were expensive and fuel was hard to come by. As it was, the world was still in dire straits both financially and politically. With the Eastern Coalition still rattling its sabres from time to time, it wasn't about to get better any time soon.

For all the negativity in the world at the time, there was a sense of hope in Bozeman. The locals were all aware of Cochrane's folly – that somehow he was going to turn an unused nuclear missile into a spaceship. If it was successful or not was not really important. What did matter was that something was actually happening in a world that seemed to have ground to a halt. For those who remembered, there was no more progress, no entertainment, no sense of purpose.

Except in Bozeman. The locals were all benefiting from the ship's construction in some way as the people working on the "ship" had come from all around to contribute to the task. Somehow, they knew they were a part of something special. Whether it made it into space or blew up on its way out of the doors, at least something new was happening in their lives.

As the time ticked down to the launch, a sense of expectation was coming over the town. People in the streets stopped and talked among themselves in wonder at the sight they were going to enjoy the next day. The last time any of them had seen a missile fly, it had rained down destruction.

This time the launch would be reminiscent of Man's first steps on the moon. Nobody had been in space since the International Space Station had been destroyed by the E-Con by a pre-emptive strike.

As the Lees walked down to the launcher, they noted the buzz of conversation growing. The two of them had become famous among the townsfolk not only for their fighting prowess, but for the simple fact that they were known to be helping out on the *Phoenix* project.

So, they often caught fleeting glances from people and the odd pointed finger. While there was some enjoyment taken from the experience, both women were keenly aware they not only wanted to minimise their impact on the timeline, but also avoid photographs. Fortunately for them, film hadn't been made for many years and digital photography required either batteries – which were also

unavailable – or reliable equipment, which was equally as rare.

The downside for the two of them was the fact they stood out like a sore thumb. Even though Piper's hair had been honey blonde for years, it was through the usual dyes and treatments. Her brunette roots were now starting to show, making the two appear even more like the identical twins they were pretending to be.

Sadly, Susanna was also aware there was much speculation from the town's folk as to the extent of her sister's injuries, and she hated the fact that she was the subject of local gossip. It could be more destructive than a photon torpedo. She did her best to keep Suzette distracted by remarking about the beautiful blue sky and the clarity of the air.

A point that Suzette appreciated and was acutely aware of. If she was never the kind to spend a whole lot of time sightseeing, neither would the other version of herself walking next to her. Both women were expert at reading the behaviour and body language of others, and there was no-one she could read better than herself. Reading Susanna was a simple matter, even when she was trying to cover her true feelings. *Especially*, when she was trying to be deceptive.

She appreciated the gesture. It had been a long time since she had worked with someone who genuinely cared about her. Her crew on the *Ingram* were good, but she had to admit she had done too good a job of maintaining a professional distance. So, even Doctor AndrusTaurus, who

had served with her most of her career and who she considered a friend, had become distant. It was a thought that pained her deeply.

Her time in the twenty-first century was becoming like a holiday for her. She knew she was here for a reason, that there was a mission to perform however, the time away from her life in this time, with this other Piper, was becoming an eye-opener for her. She was beginning to see life through her "sister's" eyes and realising how barren her own life had become in comparison.

They had talked little about their lives at home in the future. They had been so busy just dealing with their chores and task in Bozeman they had simply never gotten around to it. Even though she felt there wasn't a whole lot she could tell Susanna about her life aboard the *Ingram*, aside from the day-to-day running of her ship, she was still curious about her sister's life. It seemed a whole lot more fun and fulfilling.

She gave her sister a cheerful smile and determined that they would talk about it. She really wanted to know what it would have been like to be her alternate and she couldn't wait to pick her brains. Their "mind meld" had taught her much about Susanna's griefs, but little about what her life in the alternate timeline was really like. What was her Merete like? Had any of them married? All questions for another time.

It wasn't long before they arrived at the hatch that was the entrance to the control centre. It was already open,

in anticipation of theirs and other's arrivals, however their ever-present guardian – whose name turned out to be Ryan – was still guarding the door. Before they proceeded the pair of them stopped for a moment, eyeing it uncertainly.

"How do you think we should handle this?" Susanna asked, referring to the previous evening's run-in with Cochrane.

Behind her sunglasses, Suzette's eye narrowed in annoyance. She was still angry with Zee for his unwelcome advances. "If he comes on to me again, I'll break his nose," she muttered.

Susanna laughed. "That'd be a good one. Every time someone comments on pictures of the man and his crooked nose, I'll be able to say: I did that! And I'll take pride in it." She wore a big, cheesy grin as she said it.

Suzette took one look at her sister's face and cracked up. She laughed hard and long, enjoying the feeling and the pain that came when her sides started hurting.

Her sister just stood there and enjoyed the shared joke. She was taking great pleasure in the thought of breaking the arrogant man's nose – until he stepped out of the shadows on the stairs below them.

"What's so damned funny?" he asked angrily. He seemed a mixture of tired and hung over.

Instead of worrying about being caught out, both women looked at him and laughed all the more. Suzette even pointed at him but was laughing too hard to get a word out.

Not understanding, and not liking being laughed at either, he waved them off disgustedly and disappeared in the direction of the control room.

When they finally settled down, the Lees locked arms and headed down into the darkness, headed for the *Phoenix*. It was time to test their equipment.

In the shaft, both sisters climbed into the cockpit through the open hatchway, taking care to walk only on the panels marked "Step Here". They took a moment to sit in the launch couches and stared up through the cockpit windows at the closed hatch above.

"I wish it was me going up there tomorrow," Suzette said wistfully. Her glasses hung from her t-shirt's neckline. Today she had decided to have a little fun and wear the shirt with the arrow.

Susanna answered without turning. "You and me both," she said. "It would be amazing." Keeping her eyes forward, she said: "I remember sitting in my bedroom staring up at the stars, watching a re-enactment of the *Phoenix's* flight and imagining that it was me flying her."

Next to her, Suzette glanced to her left at the hatch to see if anyone was watching, then climbed into the pilot's chair up front. She took hold of the yoke and sat back and pressed herself into the chair as if she was being pressed back by g-forces. "Let's make history!" she cried as she pretended to fly the ship.

"Watch out for the asteroid!" Susanna said from behind her, getting into the act. The two of them threw

themselves in opposite directions as they dodged the imaginary rock that was on different sides of the ship.

"Engage!" Suzette said as if she was Cochrane. She remembered hearing that in the video she had seen as a child.

"That sounds cool," said a familiar voice from the hatch. "I might say that tomorrow."

Both women turned their mortified faces to see Zefram Cochrane looking up at them with an amused look on his face. His visage changed as he offered: "I just came by to apologise." He broke eye contact and looked down at his feet. "I have this vague memory that I said something totally inappropriate to you both last night."

From their chairs both Pipers looked at Cochrane in wonder. This was a lot more like the man they had seen in the history books.

"The truth be told," Cochrane continued humbly, "Lily sent me over here to apologise. She heard about what I did and read me the riot act. After what the two of you have done for us, what I did to you was unforgivable."

The thought occurred to both women simultaneously: Who told her?

Suzette grimaced, feeling more than a little humiliated herself. "I suppose we're even, then." She glanced at the yoke, her face reddening. "I'm sorry I played astronaut with your toy."

Cochrane shrugged. "If it wasn't for you two ladies, I probably would have had my *Phoenix* become ashes seconds after I activated the Warp Drive. I think we're

even." He turned his attention to the cockpit's latest addition: the deflector control. Which, he noted, was nothing more than a small, plastic box with a red button on it. Marked next to it was a label in bold, white letters: Navigational Deflector. Hit this button to live.

He bowed his head to the Lee sisters. "How will I know this is working?" he asked.

Suzette's mechanical eye noisily focussed closer in on Cochrane's face. It was her way of looking incredulous.

Susanna picked up on her sister's annoyance. "We're going to run some diagnostics on the system, but we're confident it will work as promised." She held up an old tablet computer and cable. "All we have to do is plug in and run some software we wrote."

To his credit, Cochrane took them at their word. "Then I'll leave you to it." He turned away then stopped and gave them a genuine smile from the heart. "If you're interested, I would like to buy you both a drink later to show you my gratitude." He put up his hands and rolled back his sleeves to demonstrate he had no hidden motives. "My intentions are honest, ladies."

Once more, he watched as the sisters shared a look and thoughts without talking. As one, they turned back to him and said: "You're on."

The day passed quickly for the Lee twins. Whilst they were confident of their design and construction of the deflector system, they still didn't quite trust the aging

Phoenix herself. The two of them spent hours going over every system that was remotely connected to the deflector. By the time they were finished, dusk had fallen, and a number of the workers had already left for the day.

As they passed through the Control Room, they found Walter Simmons working on a computer console, doing some analysis work of his own. With him were three others who would be running the launch from the ground the next day.

"Walter," Susanna said, batting away some of the cloud of smoke that always seemed to hang over his head. "Why don't you come and have a drink with us at the bar. I'm sure the *Phoenix* will make us proud tomorrow. You'll see."

Simmons tapped his cigarette and shook his head. "No, I've got some work to do on the warp field generators." He gave her a look that was a mixture of irritated and envious. "I'm not a wunderkind like the two of you. Some things are actually harder for others than they are for you." He chuckled darkly. It was a sound full of sadness and regret. Susanna wondered what awful things the man had seen to make him so miserable.

"At least you gave Zee an earful for being such a jackass. It was fun to watch. Thanks for that." Dismissively, he turned and began clicking away with his mouse.

Susanna watched him for a moment, certain she would never truly understand the man, then turned and found Suzette was already waiting by the door where she

was trying to keep her mechanical eye clear of the nicotine floating in the air. "Let's go," she said, sounding tired. "I could use a drink."

It was late in the evening on a clear night. An early chill had fallen, prompting everyone to don their warmest attire. Zefram Cochrane had drunk up a storm and had insisted on winding up the ancient Wurlitzer to pump out his favourite songs of the sixties. Sometimes the records got stuck as the 45 singles had seen better days. Occasionally, he would walk over to the machine and give it a thump for good measure. They'd miss a chorus but at least the song would finish.

From her end of the bar Lily got more and more worried as she watched her ship's pilot drink himself into virtual incoherence. Sitting next to her, Susanna and Suzette watched him in amazement. It was well known that Cochrane had made the flight with a hangover. Watching him now, they knew it was going to be a doozy.

"Why does he do that to himself?" Susanna asked, truly amazed.

Suzette shook her head. "I'm surprised he's lived *this* long," she said righteously. "His liver should have the consistency of neutronium by now." She picked up her gin and tonic, gave it a swirl, then downed the remainder.

"Careful with that stuff, sis," Susanna said with a gentle warning. "You know you're a two-pot screamer." She took a sip of her own gin glass as if giving her a lesson on how to drink.

Lily hadn't paid any real attention to what they were doing. She just watched Cochrane with more than familial concern on her face while she played with her beer glass. "He hates flying," she said, as if that explained everything. "When we were kids, I remember him going up in a Ferris Wheel with me. He threw up after screaming for three minutes for the attendant to let him off." She gave them a meaningful look. "He *hates* flying."

"Then I guess I'm glad you're the one going up there with him tomorrow and not us," Suzette said with a slight slur.

Lily sat back in her chair and put her feet forward. She couldn't quite reach the bench, but she did knock something with her foot. "Oh, I almost forgot," she said. She leaned over and picked up the offending object and returned with the katana in her hands. "I had one of the boys sharpen this for me today." She handed it to Susanna proudly. "My gift to you both." She gave them each a peck on the cheek as they were sitting on either side of her. "You came along at just the right time. It was Kismet."

Susanna held the sheath with delight and pulled the blade out just enough to see the blade was now razor sharp. "I don't know what to say," she said gratefully. "This is beautiful." She beamed with delight at her. She was so moved she gave Lily a hug. Over her shoulder, she said: "I'll share it with you, sis," she said with a wink.

Over her glasses, she saw her sister's eyebrow shoot up. "Hey, I was just happy for us to get paid," she said offhandedly, but her small grin gave her away.

Susanna let Lily go and laughed when she saw Cochrane's latest gag. "Look," she said pointing past them.

They all watched as Cochrane got up and started dancing to Roy Orbison.

Suzette giggled and said: "He looks like a rusty robot trying to swim!"

The sight was the last straw for Lily. "It's time I sent him home," she said, determined. She dismissed the Lees with a: "I'll see you two tomorrow morning."

Susanna downed the last of her drink and gave her a nod. "We'll see you later," she said then took her sister's hand and led her out into the night. "I'm going to sleep soooo well tonight," she said, her fatigue showing in her tired pace.

Behind them, they heard the others say goodnight to the bartender as he was closing up shop.

Suzette fell behind Susanna and gave her shoulders a gentle rub which she responded to with a deep sigh. "I'll tell you what," Suzette said. "When we get home, I'll give you a massage if you give me one."

Her sister gave her a grin and said: "You're on!"

In the dark forest, noises carried well. Both women stopped when they heard Lily say: "What's that?" They turned and looked back past the bar where she and Cochrane

were now looking up at the night sky. The Lees followed their gaze and saw something large moving in the night.

"That's too big to be a satellite," Suzette said, adrenaline sobering her up.

Her sister nodded. "It's got to be a starship," she said, alarmed. "This is all wrong."

Suddenly, green bolts of energy began raining down on the site all around them. The first hit near the bunker and the bar, damaging them both. The Lees dived for cover behind the largest fallen tree they could find, Susanna keeping a tight grip on the katana.

They quickly realised the bolts were coming in groups of four and very regularly. Susanna looked up at the stars once more. It was clear the bolts were coming from the starship.

"What the hell is going on?" she hissed. They dived for cover once more as a bolt came down close by, demolishing a house and leaving it a smoking crater.

"This certainly wasn't in the history books," Suzette said through gritted teeth as dirt rained down from them from a nearby explosion.

Suzette turned her attention to the sky and saw something her sister had missed. She used her electronic eye to full effect and zoomed in. She saw the vague outline of a Federation starship closing in on the intruder.

"What the hell?" she said in wonder.

"What is it?" Susanna asked.

Rather than describe it, she took her sister's hand once more and showed her what she could see. Both women watched in amazement as the starship fired on what was clearly some kind of mechanized flying ball. The four globes of destruction slammed into the ball, breaking it apart from the inside out.

Just before it detonated, they heard a familiar sound. It reminded them both of a transporter but was different enough to leave them wondering for a moment.

They looked to the source and saw something that was beyond their experience. There were two bipedal beings who had once clearly been humanoid but were now covered with mechanised components that were mostly black. Each had a kind of electronic eye and had one arm replaced with something that looked decidedly unfriendly.

Now the fire from the sky had ceased, both women, still holding hands and working as a unit, stood and approached the interlopers. "Who are you?" they demanded, their voices coming out in perfect harmony.

The newcomers ignored them and advanced in the direction of the bunker. There was purpose in their footsteps and death in their eyes.

Still linked, the Piper's mentality was more than doubled. They quickly put together that these beings were from the now destroyed vessel and that their intention had been the destruction of the *Phoenix* and the death of Cochrane. That was something they could not allow.

"Halt!" they demanded.

The cyborgs kept advancing. Knowing they would now have to defend themselves, the women let go of one another, but still maintained a mild link.

As Susanna reached for her katana, the cyborgs stuck and rudely pushed them out of the way. As they did so, Suzette fell and lost her glasses.

Both women rolled and came back up in fighting stances, but their attackers stopped when they saw Suzette's face. The sight of her false eye glaring back at them with its green glow seemed to confuse them.

Without a word they changed direction and came at Suzette. Still linked to her sister she knew exactly what to do. She reached out to either side of her and picked up two solid sticks and began striking at the nearest of the two as it was reaching out to her, aiming for her neck. She increased the force of each hit and frequency as it closed in. Her efforts were buying her time, but it wasn't much.

However, it *was* enough time for Susanna to recover and quickly circle them. Her katana came up in a blur and the cyborg's arm dropped to the ground, neatly severed. Curiously, there was little blood.

Amazingly, the attack didn't slow either of them. They just kept coming.

Knowing there was now very little time as Suzette was backing up against a house, Susanna did the only thing that would ensure success. Spinning in a fashion that would make a ballet dancer proud, Susanna swung her sword once, twice, felling both as their heads hit the ground with a wet

thud. Neither emitted a sound as their bodies stumbled for a moment then dropped to their knees as if there was some final impulse pushing them on. Finally, they toppled over and stopped moving.

Suzette stepped forward; her sticks held high, ready to defend herself if they tried again. Nothing happened.

"I hope there was just the two of them," she said, shaking, still breathing heavily.

Susanna kicked the severed hand lying on the ground, noting the tubules that were still extended from the middle fingers. "They don't look friendly."

Seeing through her sister's eyes, Suzette concurred.

Nearby, there was the sound of gunfire. Without discussion, they ran through the forest in the direction of the sound. Suzette went first, using the zero-lux setting on her eye to see in the dark. They quickly came to a clearing that was lit by firelight from a nearby burning house. Next to it lay the prone form of another of the cybernetic beings, its chest ripped open by a shotgun blast.

A second being was closing in on their assailant, a huge man who was desperately trying to reload his weapon.

Working together, the sisters raced up behind the alien. Suzette threw her sticks – aimed directly for the back of its head. They connected neatly, causing the alien to stop and consider the new attack.

It began to slowly turn and look for the threat but did not move quickly enough. Once more, the katana sliced through the air – and the alien's neck – severing its head.

Amazingly, the alien did not fall. Grotesquely, it stopped, picked up its head and began to restore it to its shoulders.

Not to be outdone, Susanna stepped forward and plunged the blade through the monster's chest and out the other side.

The thrust severed the alien's energy packs, killing it instantly, but also sending a shock back along the blade, through the metal guard and into Susanna. The energy tightened every muscle in her body in excruciating pain, throwing her backwards into the grass and blissfully out cold.

Suzette raced over to her sister, whose pain she had momentarily experienced, and checked her pulse. She already knew she was still alive – she was certain she would have felt her die if she had. All the same, she placed her fingertips to her wrist. Her heart's tempo was strong, but slow. She shook her head and tearfully pushed the hair out of Susanna's face. "Thank God," she whispered heavily before clumsily hoisting her sister over her shoulder and carrying her home.

As she passed the fallen alien, she stopped for a moment and retrieved their katana. She slid the sword from the corpse – carefully. She made certain her hand remained on the bone handle and went nowhere near the metal. To her surprise, the body disappeared as it came, in a weird, greenish transporter-like beam. She wasn't certain it had been retrieved or self-destructed. She scowled at the space

it had vacated. As long as they didn't come back, she was happy. She had enough to worry about.

She adjusted Susanna's weight and began to walk along the street, which was still dimly lit by the moonlight. Her path took her behind the bar whose side wall had been blown out by a blast. The lights were mostly out, but there was enough light from the fires that were burning for her to make her way and for her to see the destruction.

There was clear damage to the missile installation as well. There was no sign of Cochrane or Lily, and she began to worry if history had been irrevocably altered by this event. She hoped they were still alive, but right then she had her own worries. Susanna's weight was wearing her down and she was beginning to tire.

She turned to go and heard something else to increase her night's tension. The quiet whine of a transporter beam.

In the darkness, she turned towards the sound, her electronic eye adjusting for the light. She held up the katana, ready to defend them from more of the invaders. Instead of cyborgs, she saw people like herself, dressed as she was in clothes of their time. Their leader was a balding man who carried himself as one born to lead. Suzette knew she was looking at a Starship Captain like herself.

Next to him was one who looked like a human, but his gold skin stood him apart. Aside from him, there was a woman with flaming red hair who had the bearing of a healer – no doubt the ship's doctor.

Their appearance added to the day's mystery, but she took solace in the fact that some of her own people had come to their rescue.

Taking stock of the situation, Suzette decided her first responsibility was Susanna. She shifted her once more on her shoulder and headed home.

Chapter Seven

When Susanna woke in the morning, she found the world was too bright, the sounds were too loud and every muscle in her body ached. She tried to raise her head, but her neck ached. She felt like she had been dropped from a great height then fired out a torpedo tube – without a space suit.

"Good morning, Sunshine," Suzette said from the other side of the bed where she was reading a magazine. "I'm glad to see you're finally awake."

Susanna gripped her head with her hands and noticed even her arms were aching. She opened and closed her right hand as she felt something odd. She focussed on it and saw a small burn on the webbing between her thumb and forefinger. "How'd I get that?" she asked, confused. "Why am I in bed when we should be working on the *Phoenix?"* She made as if to get up, but Suzette pushed her back down.

"You have no idea what happened last night, do you?" she asked, concerned.

Searching her memories, Susanna quickly came up blank. "I vaguely remember being in the bar and sharing a drink." She looked at her sister in a mild daze. "That's it."

Suzette sighed. She considered it ironic that she was getting used to sharing her thoughts with Susanna. Never mind that the situation was practically surreal. Two versions of the same person should not be able to share the same reality. The peculiar thing was that, even given their

differences, she was beginning to like sharing her consciousness with her. It was a wonderful way of knowing and being known. She knew her "sister" accepted her completely – no reservations.

She reached out and took Susanna's hand and opened her mind. Her sister knew the routine well enough to do likewise and she was soon seeing the night through her Suzette's eyes – even her own when their experiences had been shared. She saw not only herself fight and get zapped, but she also saw herself fall heavily and hit the ground with enough force to knock her out.

She was grateful to feel her sister's concern for her and to witness her actions to bring her home. She also saw the surprise arrival of the Federation away team.

"Who are they?" Susanna asked.

"No idea." Suzette replied. "*I was hoping you might recognise them."*

"The guy with the gold skin is a complete mystery to me. I've never seen his species before."

"Me neither."

"We're not going to learn much about what's going on while we're here."

"Agreed. We should get back to the Phoenix and see what's happening. I want to know how Lily is. She didn't come home last night." Susanna felt her fear and concern for Lily clearly.

She also knew that, in this mode of communication, there could be no lying to her to make her feel better. "*I hope she's OK, too.*"

They let go of each other, yet each allowed an empathic link to remain as they went about their morning ablutions. Suzette helped Susanna get up and into the shower as her body still felt like it had been put through the wringer. As Susanna bathed, Suzette went looking for some painkillers. She didn't find any in the kitchen, but, ironically, found some in the bathroom mirror cabinet.

When Susanna finished, she stepped out of the bath, still shivering from the cold and pain she was still feeling. Suzette quickly wrapped her in a towel and handed her a glass with two paracetamol tablets. "Take these, they'll make you feel better."

As Susanna complied, her sister began her shower and soon they were finishing drying their hair and dressing for the day. Neither felt any embarrassment with the other being undressed. They had shared their bed, their fears, their food and even their minds. Seeing each other naked was like looking in a mirror, nothing more.

Feeling better, but still stiff, Susanna allowed herself to be helped into the kitchen where they had a simple breakfast. They scoffed down their food and coffee. Given a choice, they would have skipped the nourishment and taken the caffeine. At this stage they were already hooked.

The sisters headed out the door with Susanna making a point of taking the katana. She was disappointed the

sheath was missing, but she was fortunate to spot it off the path near the bar as they walked. She gently replaced the blade and slung the sheath's strap over her shoulder. Even though her body still ached she felt ready for anything.

Although only a matter of hours had passed, the locals had done an amazing job of cleaning up after the attack. Scorch marks still abounded, with structures damaged and small craters in the ground, yet the damage to the buildings was already being taken care of. There was even a crew of people working to repair the damage to the launcher. At the doorway there was no sign of Ryan.

They stepped down into the Control Room to find it a shambles. Several of the panels had been blown out, wiring was burned everywhere, and blood stained the walls and floor in several places. Susanna stepped over to the damaged chair she had last seen Walter in the night before. The desk was spattered with blood and the drying pool underneath it was a sad testament of the engineer's fate.

"You owe me a week's pay," she said under her breath, lamenting the annoying man's loss. She felt her sentiment resonating from her twin.

A tall man who was unfamiliar to them stepped forward with a friendly, yet suspicious eye. He was solidly built with a dark beard to match his well-manicured hair. He had a twinkle in his eye as if he expected something humorous to happen any moment, yet the air of command was clear. This man was also from the Starship, Susanna guessed.

"Can I help you?"

As usual, Susanna took the lead and did her best to sound assertive. "I might ask the same of you. We work with Zefram Cochrane on the *Phoenix*, and we know everybody on the team." She stepped forward and tapped him on the chest issuing a clear challenge. "I don't know who *you* are. Explain yourself."

While it was clear the man was not used to being pushed around, he found himself unwilling to deny her an answer. He quickly realised there was something about this female he found familiar. "Fair enough," he said congenially. "My name is Will and my friends and I are helping bring the *Phoenix's* flight back on track for this afternoon."

Susanna narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. While she was fairly certain he'd had no part in the actual attack the previous night, she did not know that their actions hadn't pre-empted it. "What's in it for you?" she asked, trying to push his buttons.

He clapped his hands together and gave her a friendly grin. "Just trying to make sure things work out the way they should."

They were words that rang a resounding gong for both Pipers. That was exactly what they were here to achieve. Susanna felt her sister's apprehension.

Will looked at both women and tried to size them up. The similarities between the two was remarkable aside from

the obvious repair work to his inquisitor's sister's face. Yet, there was something about them that was decidedly familiar.

Suzette broke his concentration with a simple introduction. "We're the Lee sisters. I'm Suzette and this is Susanna. We're working on the navigational deflector."

The names rang a bell for Will Riker. He remembered them from his study of this time. The temporal Prime Directive was still in force, so he was reluctant to tell them any more than he had to. "I've heard of you," he said simply.

The words had a profound effect on both women. While they had tried hard to minimise their effect on the past, it was clear they had left a notable impression on history. Both women were fully aware that "Will" was from the future, as they were, but what was not clear was *why*. While they believed that their job had been completed with the building of the deflector, neither knew nor understood why they were still here. The women shared a look that was a mixture of pride in their achievements and fear that they may have done more harm than good. What might have changed when they returned to the future?

Something about the women still bothered Will. He didn't remember ever seeing a photograph of them, they were said to be a bit reclusive. However, they reminded him of someone *else*. Just who it was remained a mystery to him.

Susanna took control of the situation and stated: "If that's all, Will, my sister and I have to check on our work. I

think we'd hate for Zee to have a hole punched through him when he enters warp."

Will stepped back gallantly and ushered them down the hall that he had been guarding behind him. "After you, ladies," he said with a cheeky grin.

While Susanna accepted the offering, Suzette simply eyed him with suspicion. She was not ready to trust this man yet.

Once they'd taken a few steps down the hall, both women reached out and took the other's hand so they could talk in private.

"I take it you don't recognise him either," said Susanna.

"Nope. A complete mystery. I'm not sure about his motives, though." Suzette fired an image of a wolf undressing at her double.

Susanna nodded. "*A wolf remains a wolf even though it has not eaten your sheep,"* she quoted. "*I'm not sure what we should do at this point - other than make sure the* Phoenix *is ready to fly."* She could not help a feeling of apprehension. "*I still haven't seen Lily anywhere, either."* Her fear that she had been killed in the attack roared through their link.

Instead of trying to placate her sister, Suzette simply shared the feeling. It would be a cruel fate for their friend if she had been killed in the attack.

When they reached the end of the hall and pushed back the blast door, they were dismayed to see a number of

scorch marks on the wall, but otherwise there seemed to be little actual damage to the ship. There were obvious marks where someone had recently done some repair work, but otherwise there seemed to be little left to do. All the same, they set about making certain their deflector system would work.

They looked down at some people who were also unfamiliar to them working on the booster section below. It was clear they were working feverishly to complete the work, as if they, too, knew the importance of this missile's flight.

Taking their lead, they women got to work.

On the surface, Will Riker of the Starship *Enterprise-E* was taking a quick break. He needed something to drink, and his first thought was to try the bar, but it was still too early in the day – it was not yet open.

So, he turned his attention to walking to the shop. He had been prepared enough to bring some local currency with him, so buying a soft drink should pose no problem.

As he walked, he drank in the clear air and lush forest that reminded him of his native Alaska. While he loved serving on a starship it was always welcome to stretch his feet on real soil and there was no place better than on his home world where even the gravity was just right.

"I see you're getting all nostalgic," came a friendly, feminine voice to his left.

He gave her a huge grin. While the two of them were not officially a couple, Deanna Troi would always be the

most special woman in his life. The one who would always truly hold his heart's title deed. "I'm just on my way to get some refreshment. Care to join me?" he asked charmingly with a twinkle in his eye.

The exotic Betazoid took his arm and said: "I'd love to." While her affection for Will was clear, there was something that was clearly bothering her.

Riker guessed it in one. "Still got a hangover?" he asked gently. "I'm sure we'll find some aspirin in the store."

In her peculiar accent that lay somewhere between Greek and British, Deanna said: "That's one of the best ideas I've heard all day." She rubbed her temple. Partially for effect, and partially to dull the throbbing in her brain.

It took them a few moments to walk to the store. Along the way Will filled her in on his encounter with the Lee sisters. "They're just like the books said they were," he said. "They know what they want and how to get it out of people. It's a pity no pictures were ever taken of them." He snapped his fingers. "Of course, how can I let a chance like this pass? Remind me – some time I have to take a photo of them – for history's sake."

Deanna was always on the lookout to defend people. "Perhaps nobody ever took a photo of them was because they didn't like being photographed?" she offered. "You should ask them."

"Nah," he said defiantly. "All the more reason not to miss this chance." He snapped his fingers as a connection was made in his mind. "*Now* I remember who they remind

me of. Captain Piper from the *U.S.S. Millennium*!" he said excitedly. He frowned to himself and stopped to consider the thought. "Actually, Susanna looks just like her," he said, perplexed. "Right down to the dyed honey hair and emerald-green eyes."

Deanna brought him back to reality. "It *can't* be her," she said. "Didn't you say she had an identical twin sister who was injured? Never mind she would be two hundred years out of time."

Will Riker took a moment to consider Suzette. "I see your point," he said. "But that's what makes this whole thing even spookier. Aside from the facial injury, Suzette looks just like Piper did when she graduated from the Academy."

Troi gave him a light chuckle and dragged on his arm. "Enough of these fantasies about old Starfleet women!" she said, feigning jealousy. "I need painkillers!"

He let her win and lead them into the shop, but the more he thought about it, the more fascinated he became regarding the Lee sisters. Was it possible?

As he headed over to the fridge to find some beverages, Deanna saved herself some time and asked the proprietor for help with some aspirin.

"I don't have a whole lot left of them," she said in her grandmotherly tone. "Cochrane has pretty much cleaned me out!"

After her encounter the previous night with him, and his insistence that she drink shot after shot of tequila,

Deanna understood. She looked into the lady's eyes with her warm brown ones and gave her a knowing smile. "I know what you mean."

Something shiny behind the shopkeeper caught Deanna's attention. "Where did you get that from?" she asked, pointing at an odd piece of jewellery hanging behind the counter.

"You can't buy that just yet," the old lady said. "I'm holding that as surety for the Lee sisters. Lovely girls, aren't they?"

"May I see it?" Troi asked politely.

The shop keeper gave her a second look, then decided that Deanna was good people and allowed her to hold the piece. In her hand, Troi knew exactly what it was.

"Will!" she said in a tone she knew he would respond immediately to: a little urgent, a little worried.

He appeared at her elbow a moment later with the drinks in his hands. "What is it?" he asked, concerned.

Deanna held up Piper's captain's bars for Riker to see. "I think you might be right," she said in all seriousness.

Once the Lee sisters were certain that the deflector was working properly, they climbed further down the echoing shaft to see if they could be any help to the people working below. They found them working on the secondary throttle assembly where it had been damaged by the mystery attack.

"How's it going?" Susanna asked, crouching down beside them. She peered into the open panel to see the components of the throttle had been slightly damaged by their attackers. The burn marks were still clearly visible.

A man in his mid-forties with thinning, brown hair gave her a wide, ingratiating smile. "Hi!" he said a little too cheerfully. "I'm Reg Barclay." He put out his hand and vigorously shook theirs whilst looking at them like a deer caught in headlights. It was as if he was in the presence of rock stars and just couldn't wait for them to say something to him.

Suzette kept it simple. "We're the Lee sisters," she said. "I'm Suzette..."

"And I'm Susanna," she finished personally.

Barclay seemed delighted to meet them. "It's a joy to meet you ladies," he said like an excited puppy. "Your contributions to space travel have been extraordinary!"

There was something about what he said that told the women he was speaking in hindsight, not foresight. To compound the statement, the young male next to him said: "Careful, Reg!"

Suzette seized the opportunity to pump him for information. "What ship do you serve on?"

Before his friend could stop him, Reg blurted out: "The Enter..."

"...prise," came a voice behind them, finishing the statement. The Lees spun to see Will and a beautiful

Betazoid woman standing with him. "But you already know that, don't you *Captain Piper."*

"I think you have us confused...." Susanna stopped when Will presented her with her Captain's bars. After a moment's contemplation, she simply said: "Oh."

Next to them, Reg looked thoroughly confused. "I thought they're the Lee sisters who invented the Nav Deflector."

The Betazed woman tilted her head to the side as she read them – inside and out. Her empathic ability helped her to feel what others felt, but the Piper's latent Psi talent gave her access to their surface thoughts. "I think they're *both*, Will," she said, baffled.

Riker did a double take as he turned to her. "What?" Susanna/Piper stood and addressed him while Suzette turned her attention back to the throttle assembly. There was something about it that was bothering her.

"You have me at a loss, Will," she said.

Riker drew himself up to attention and made a formal introduction. "I'm Commander Will Riker, this is Counsellor Deanna Troi, and these people are part of the crew of the *U.S.S. Enterprise."*

Piper tipped her head to the side with as she considered the man. "Obviously not Jim's *Enterprise*, so you're from our future as well." She tapped her teeth with a fingernail. "The paradoxes just keep piling up."

"Paradoxes?" Deanna asked, curious.

Piper gave her a smile tinged by pain. "It would take a lot of explaining. The simplest explanation I can give you is that we're here because the Guardian of Forever," Riker flinched at the name, "sent us here." She lay her hand on her "sister's" head. "This is Piper Silayna of the *U.S.S. Ingram.* Essentially, she's me from a different timeline. We're the same person from two eventualities and we're both here to stop a certain paradox from destroying the space/time continuum."

Riker was cluey, that Piper could see. It didn't take him long to find a flaw in her reasoning. "How can that be when we're from *your* future and it hasn't happened there."

Suzette stood up and addressed him for the first time. "That's because, Commander, you're not from *my* future, or my sister's. My guess is that you're from the original timeline that was disrupted when a ship from your future entered our past and changed everything for all of us."

Deanna looked like her head was spinning. "How can that be?"

Susanna gave her a polite smile. "Therein lies the paradoxes. Even if I tell you the name of the ship and when it will fall back into the past, there's no guarantee you will succeed in returning to the future due to the paradoxes that are at work here."

Behind them, Reg Barclay made an interesting observation. "If you're not the Lee sisters, where are the *real* Susanna and Suzette Lee?"

At that, both Pipers laughed in a beautiful harmony. Together, they said: "We *are* the real Lee sisters." Susanna continued. "The names came out of our imaginations."

At that, even Riker baulked. "That can't be true," he said incredulously. "That would mean..."

Suzette beat him to it. "...that we're part of a predestination paradox, yes. We were always meant to be here to create the Navigational Deflector for the *Phoenix*."

Deanna looked at them both incredulously. "How can that be?"

Susanna shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly. "Hey, I nearly flunked Temporal Mechanics at the Academy. Don't ask me."

Riker could see Piper's legendary nonchalance hadn't abandoned her, even though he noted Suzette – Piper Silayna – wasn't quite as cheerful as her other self. Perhaps a result of her injury, he wondered. All the same, their presence presented him with a quandary. "What am I supposed to do with the two of you?" he said, unsure of where to go next.

Susanna/Piper looked him in the eye. The tough veneer of Command came down and Riker got to see another side of the legendary captain. She was cheerful when she wanted to be, and hard as nails at other times. This was one of them. "I don't see that you have any authority to, *Commander*," she said. She recalled her sister's memory of the night before. The bald man was the *Enterprise's* captain, that she was certain of. Obviously, something had called

him away and he had left his first officer in charge down here. "Never mind the fact that I, we, outrank you, I need you to know that our presence here is essential to help restore the time/space continuum. If you interfere, there may not be a future for you to return to."

Uncertain, Riker glanced at Troi, who could only offer: "She believes every word she's telling you, Will. I believe her."

Suzette turned and stood, catching the two of them with her unbalanced glare. "As the Guardian sent us back, we will only be remaining until we've finished our task. Once that is achieved, we'll automatically return to the future." Riker was about to interject, but she held up a hand to silence him. "One thing we must stipulate, Commander. Under no circumstances are you to take any images of either of us – period."

"Why?"

Susanne gave him a glib answer. "Because I said so will have to do, Commander."

Riker drew himself up to his full height, not liking that answer one bit. He found himself staring into the unflinching eyes of not one, but *two* Captains Piper. He had temporarily forgotten her reputation for being a force of nature.

"There are agencies working against us, Commander," Suzette said without blinking.

"Who cannot be allowed to know we're here," Susanna continued.

"If they come looking for us, we could wind up with even more paradoxes and the result could be even more catastrophic," Suzette completed.

Riker looked from one to the other, uncertain where he stood. While Piper outranked him, he wasn't certain that a person from another timeline had any authority over him. The whole notion was beginning to make his head hurt. Singling out Susanna, he said: "Given that the two of you have a place in all our established timelines, I have to admit you make a strong case. There are no photographs of either of you in the future, and I'll make a point of not taking any either."

Both women stepped back and gave him a grateful nod. "We appreciate that Commander," they said in unison.

Out of the corner of her eye, Troi noticed Reg Barclay seemed even more starstruck than usual. He seemed ready to burst. "Reg," she said quietly, but firmly. "We will *all* have to keep this out of our reports and to ourselves." At his crestfallen visage she added: "We cannot tell anyone – *ever*."

For a moment, Reg seemed lost. Troi was concerned what he had been asked to do was too much for him. Her concern was allayed when Susanna Lee dropped down on her heels and turned her attention back to the throttle assembly.

"Well, Mister Barclay," she said amiably. She put her hand on his shoulder and steered him back to the task. "Let's spend some time together while we get this throttle

assembly working properly. We'll be happy to field any questions you have regarding our ships in the future."

The notion that he had the attention of one of Starfleet's finest for the duration tickled the engineer and gave him something to look forward to.

Still standing, Suzette shook both Will and Deanna's hands. "If you'll excuse me, Commander, Counsellor, I'm going below to check over the rest of the *Phoenix*."

"Not necessary, Captain," Riker said, trying to be helpful. "My people have already been over the rest of the ship. She's nearly ready to fly."

Suzette tapped her temple next to her artificial eye. "Don't underestimate the technology, Commander," she said. "I can see a whole lot more than you can with this. You'd be surprised how handy it's been at times."

The *Enterprise-E's* crew members could relate as they had lost track of how many times their Chief Engineer's artificial eyesight had come in handy. Riker simply nodded, not giving anything away. "I understand, Captain." He ushered her towards the ladder. "Be my guest."

Without further ado, Suzette headed downwards, but not until after she had touched her sister on the shoulder briefly. As she disappeared from sight, Riker stepped back through the blast door, headed for the stairs upward. He had to prepare for the *Phoenix's* flight.

Behind him, Troi considered the two Pipers. There was something about them that rang a bell in her mind. When Suzette had touched Susanna, she had felt something

she didn't expect. When she realised what it was, she picked up her pace to catch Riker.

"Will?"

Several steps ahead of her on the stairs, he paused. "Yes, Deanna?"

"How well do you know Captain Piper?" She caught up with him. He noticed she was wearing her curious face.

Riker thought back. He loved reading about the exploits of the Starfleet captains of yesteryear. Captain Piper's career had been a notable one as her ship was one of the few fighter carriers ever employed – and this one with a cloaking device. She had used the ship's technology to great effect and had often been sent into the most dangerous situations. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Was she telepathic?"

Of all the things she was going to ask, that was one of the last he expected. "I seem to recall she was telepathically linked to her First Officer, a Vulcan named Sarda."

Troi nodded her understanding. "That would explain it," she said. "For her to link with a Vulcan, she must be psi sensitive." She looked back towards the rocket. "No surprise that she's capable to share her thoughts with another version of herself freely."

"Sorry?" Will was bewildered. "What gave you that idea?"

Deanna smiled. It was typical of those who were not telepathic to pick up on the signs. "What did you think that

touch on the shoulder was all about a minute ago?" she asked, gently mocking him. "She was sharing something with Susanna before she went below. I almost heard it."

Will shrugged. "Nothing we need to worry about," he said as he resumed climbing. "They are on our side."

Troi glanced back towards the *Phoenix*. She hoped he was right.

Chapter Eight

After several days of fruitless searching, Captain Daniels was getting more than a little frustrated. The universe was coming apart around him and he still hadn't a clue as to Piper's whereabouts in time.

He had to remind himself that time *was* on his side. With Piper in the past, all he had to do was find a clue and he could be there a moment after the clue was created.

The waiting was what was killing him. He had the full resources of his ship working on the problem and yet he had still to find *anything* from the past.

Meddling with time was a dangerous thing and he worried about the possible changes Piper could be wreaking on history, yet he was beginning to realise there were no distinct ripples from her departure.

In his panic to try and find the *Millennium's* captain, he had failed to check on the time continuum using the technology at his disposal. A change should be quickly noticeable.

Daniels stepped into a small room that operated much like a holodeck, however it was linked to a miracle of modern ingenuity that could look for distortions in time and display them. Any moment in history was available to him prior to the ship's launch.

The trouble with Piper reminded him of his previous adventures with Jonathan Archer and the crew of the NX-01 *Enterprise*. The changes brought by the Suliban and their

cohorts had made his life miserable for a time – including his being shot by Silik in the twenty-first century. Silik's actions had seemed irreparable for a time – until the whole misery had been unravelled by Archer's activities in his future and the Earth's altered past. Once the pivotal point in history had been repaired, all went back to the way it should have been.

Now he was looking for that point. He only wished he could go back a couple of days and stop Piper from going through the Guardian at all, but he could not change events that would change his *own* past. He had enough paradoxes to worry about it.

As history swirled around him in a three-dimensional display of time eddies and currents, he could glimpse moments in the histories of many worlds and had to consider that Piper could literally be anywhere in the universe – at any time. However, he had a plan.

"Computer," he said calmly. He had to settle his nerves to keep his mind clear and focussed. "Report on any changes in the continuum since Captain Piper of the *U.S.S. Millennium* went back in time."

It took only a moment to report: "There are none."

Daniels' eyes went wide in amazement. That wasn't possible. "Recheck."

The A.I. computer's tone changed to one of derision. "I'm not going to waste my time on such a fruitless exercise." As Daniels rolled his eyes, the computer said:

“And don’t go rolling your eyes at me. Since Piper departed there have been no changes.”

“How can that be?” he said in frustration.

The feminine and sultry voice said: “The reason should be obvious.”

Daniels scowled. He remembered his classes in Basic Temporal Mechanics and knew the computer was right. If someone went back in time and nothing changed it was because it was due to a predestination paradox. That person’s actions were a necessary part of history. “So, what should I do? Ignore it?”

“No, I’m not suggesting that at all. Just because Piper’s activities are an established part of history it doesn’t mean that your activities to dissuade her from whatever she’s doing won’t be as well.”

There were times when Daniels wondered if the person who programmed his ship’s computer had a vendetta against him. Even though the voice was sexy, he often felt like he was back in school worrying if he was going to have to do one of those mental exercises a hundred times over again if he got the answer wrong.

“Alright, Computer.”

“Sally,” it corrected, sounding a little miffed.

This time the human took a deep breath. He was no longer worried about Piper. He was now consumed in his annoyance with the A.I. that insisted that it be treated as a person – complete with name. As it ran his ship – and pretty

much everything else on board – he had to play ball. There was nothing worse than a petulant computer.

"Okay, Sally," he said, doing his level best to be patient. "As we have not been able to find any photographic or textual trace of Piper prior to her natural lifespan, how do you suggest we precede?" There, suck on that one, he thought.

"You have not considered all the possibilities," Sally said, using her instructive tone again.

Surprised, Daniels asked: "What have I missed?"

"There is a remote possibility that someone from beyond this stardate had encountered her in the past and recorded it."

The notion was so far out that it was something that had not come to him. Incredulously he said: "Are you suggesting that *another* time agent may have come across her? That there would be a report of it in our database?"

"Not necessarily. Time agents are not the only people who have travelled back in time."

There it was. Once again, out there, but not beyond the realm of possibility. "All right, Sally," he said, for once pleased with the computer. "Start running a check."

With the work finished on the throttle assembly, Susanna led the rest of the Engineering team topside to watch as the hatch slid aside. On her way up, she had noticed the time was drawing near for the ship's launching and she hurried to reach the surface to watch the event.

It wasn't every day that she got to witness a pivotal moment in history. If everything went right, not only would Cochrane break the light barrier, but it would only be a matter of hours before humanity had its first encounter with Vulcans. From this day forward, things would start improving for the people of Earth. Poverty would soon pass, and a new golden age would begin for the world.

In another hundred years people from Earth would even colonise a little planet called Proxima Beta – her homeworld. It was now only a matter of time.

Standing on the edge of the launch tube, she looked down and saw the sunlight glint off the titanium shell of the *Phoenix's* nose cone that held her navigational deflector. She mused to herself the odd chain of events that brought her here and wondered again if this all meant to be. Without her and Suzette's contributions, there was a good chance the warp ship would never have come back.

She glanced behind her. It was funny how things were working out. If she *and* Riker's *Enterprise* hadn't come into this time, there wouldn't have been much of Bozeman left for the Vulcans to visit. Cochrane had failed to take into account the backwash from the missile's launch. The buildings surrounding the silo and the watching locals would have been vaporised if the *Enterprise* crew hadn't erected some portable shield generators to protect them as the nearby structures were too close to the shaft for safety.

She wondered to herself if there was some cosmic force at work, bringing about order from chaos. Never mind

the impossible notions that civilisations were forming everywhere, bringing about peaceful, or at least regulated, societies that moved forward. All of this was formed from a universe whose one guiding principle was that everything eventually fell apart. It was as if the nature of intelligent beings rebelled against the entropy that would one day claim them.

However, stubbornness wasn't enough. She knew that. There seemed to be a greater consciousness bringing about positive changes that were beyond the abilities of mere men.

She considered this thought for a moment and decided to share it with her sister. Thinking of her, she looked down the side of the shaft, past the rocket, and saw something that startled her. Someone was firing a phaser!

"I could use some help down here!" Suzette's voice was clear in her mind carrying with it a clear note of worry.

Susanna turned and bolted for the entrance. She took the steps two at a time, passed a startled Ryan and dashed down the corridor, pausing in the control room only long enough to snatch up her katana.

Deanna watched her go as she began her countdown. "Be careful!" she yelled. "We've only got one minute to go!"

One of Deanna's people closed the door behind Piper and dogged it closed. Troi worried for the captain, but she was also aware just how vitally important it was for the *Phoenix* to launch on time. She discounted her fears for her

as she remembered just how capable she was. Piper was no fool.

Curiously, another, youngish, man entered the control room behind her and made for the door as if to follow Piper. Deanna looked at him, realising this man was out of place. She was far too busy with her preparations to scan him. "Can I help you?"

Daniels looked at Troi with barely concealed amazement. Of all places for Piper to turn up. "No, Commander," he said, addressing her by her rank. "How much longer to lift off?"

Deanna was too preoccupied to spend time interrogating the stranger. She simply replied, "Forty-five seconds."

The young man stamped his foot in annoyance and made his way back topside. Deanna let him go. She had more important things to worry about.

Suzette had been minding her own business, trying to avoid choking on the vapours from the rocket fuel. While the base of the shaft was ventilated, she found herself feeling a little light-headed from the lack of oxygen.

Her visual inspection had gone well, and she was just about to move back to the ladder when she heard a familiar sound behind her. Knowing the *Enterprise* was in orbit was one thing, however the timing of the sound was peculiar. What on earth would someone be doing beaming down here moments from launch?

Instinctively, she ducked into an alcove and looked back towards the source of the sound. What she saw took her breath away. The time agent, Keily Daniels, was standing on the opposite side of the platform, looking around her, phaser drawn, clearly on the hunt. A vent hatch opened near her, and she shot it in reflex.

"Come out, Captain Silayna!" she growled. "Your time here is done!"

Suzette fired off a quick thought at her sister and prayed she would get here in time. In the darkened alcove, she looked around her quickly for a weapon, something, that she could use but came up empty. Everything was fixed to the walls. There was nothing loose.

When she came back up to look for Daniels, she found herself staring down the muzzle of a miniature phaser.

"You're a hard woman to find, Silayna," Keily said menacingly. "It took me some time to find the right woman sporting an artificial eye."

Suzette grimaced. She had wondered what had given her away. All the same, the notion occurred to her that Daniels seemed to be hunting only *her*.

"Come out of there," Keily said in a decidedly unfriendly fashion. She wisely stepped back as the much taller captain stepped out of the shadows. She kept her phaser aimed squarely at her heart. She reached behind her with her free hand and took out a set of mechanical binders that seemed more in keeping with this century than the thirty-first. "Put these on," she ordered.

Suzette wondered to herself what she had in mind. The woman could simply have beamed the two of them out immediately. The look in the woman's eyes was wild, almost mad. Antique binders suggested a more sinister purpose.

"Forty seconds," the voice reverberated down the shaft.

In Suzette's mind she heard her sister say: *"Stall as long as you can. I'm coming."*

She fired back an image of Keily holding the binders and phaser. *"Gotcha,"* she heard back.

Suzette slowly took the handcuffs and looked at Keily askance.

"Clamp it to one of your wrists," she ordered.

Suzette obeyed, fumbling a little with the cuffs, doing her best to buy time.

"Thirty seconds."

The cuff clicked closed. Keily snatched the other one and snapped it shut around a safety railing. In shock, Suzette realised the time agent was going to let her be incinerated by the rocket exhaust. She looked up at the base of the vehicle, for once terrified that she was going to be roasted alive. As she did so, she noticed something she had missed before. Concern overcame fear as she realised what it was. The main ignition cable that provided the spark to start the rocket motors was damaged. There was no way for the engine to ignite the rocket fuel that would be soon

pouring out of the nozzles. The *Phoenix's* mission was doomed if they failed to act in time.

She pointed upwards, hoping to get the agent's attention to the dire situation they were all in. If the motors failed to ignite not only would the *Phoenix* not fly, but there was a good chance the accumulating fuel would be ignited by something else and explode, taking out not only the ship, but a good portion of the town as well. "Agent Daniels," she said, imploring. "The *Phoenix* is damaged. Help me fix it before it's too late."

"Twenty seconds."

Keily Daniels simply scowled at her. "I don't believe you, and even if I did, there's no time left to fix it."

Suzette was amazed at her lack of concern. The success of this mission was tantamount to *all* the possible futures. For her to display such a lack demonstrated the woman had tipped over the edge into madness.

Behind Daniels Susanna landed, cat-like, on the grating the three of them were standing on. Try as she might, there was still a slight noise as she touched down. Knowing she was discovered; her hand went straight over her shoulder and pulled the katana from its sheath.

Daniels whirled at the sound and tried to bring her phaser to bear, but she made the mistake of getting in the path of the whirling katana. Her right hand dropped to the floor, still bearing the phaser.

Appalled, Daniels fell to her knees, cupping the newly amputated limb with her left hand whilst she tried to

staunch the flow of blood. She looked in horror at her hand, laying on the floor, as the fingers twitched.

"Ten seconds."

There was no time to escape. However, to women like Piper, their lives were far from the greatest concern if parting with it would bring the mission success. The *Phoenix* had to fly – nothing else mattered.

Suzette fired an idea at her sister, and she responded in kind. At the speed of thought, they formulated a plan.

Susanna dropped to her knees and retrieved the phaser.

She also took the time agent's communicator from her belt to keep her from calling her ship.

"You can't use it, either" Keily said, feeling a final victory as she glowered at the Pipers. "It's coded only for me."

Susanna took her sister's hand. In that moment, in their minds, they were in complete agreement. The mission was more important than their lives. It always had been. History had to be preserved. They also took some solace that, if they had to die, at least it would be together and quick.

Susanna raised the phaser as she heard the release of fuel overhead. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the ignition lead arcing as it failed to bring the required spark to the rocket. Knowing the only way to light the engine was to sacrifice themselves, she raised the phaser and fired it into the cascading fuel, igniting it.

Daniels could do nothing but scream as the hot gasses engulfed her, searing her flesh with a massive blast that pushed her flat to the floor and momentarily reduced her to ashes.

As Deanna watched the *Phoenix* fly into the blue on the monitor it occurred to her to check on her ground staff. She called for her people to check in as she wandered topside. There was little her people could do for Cochrane now. It was all in their hands.

One by one her staff checked in and she smiled as she realised they were all accounted for. That was when the penny dropped.

She turned to Reg Barclay, who was standing nearby and asked: "Have you seen either of the Lee sisters?"

The man gave her one of those looks that had him trying to decide whether to be cool or excited. It annoyed some but Deanna found it to be one of Reg's more endearing characteristics. "You mean Captain...." he shook himself. "No, I haven't seen either Susanna or Suzette Lee since before the launch."

She hoped Piper had gotten out in time. She asked a few more of her fellow officers and got nothing. She then ordered a thorough search – including the shaft, which she decided to do herself.

With the ventilators running, it took only a short time for the air to clear. Deanna was careful not to touch any

metallic surfaces as many of them were still warm. At least the fold-down decking had cooled quickly.

She put down her mental shielding and called out to Piper and her duplicate but got nothing in response. Aside from herself and the other *Enterprise* crewmen she could see, there was no sign of anyone.

As she reached the bottom of the shaft, she came upon something peculiar. There was a misshapen form on the decking and, at first, she wondered if it was Piper. However, it quickly became clear to her the size was wrong. Whoever this poor being had been the height was wrong. The corpse was almost a foot shorter than the captain. The face was too charred to identify, the skin grizzled and disgusting. There was even a smell of charred meat in the air that almost made the Counsellor retch.

A glint of light on metal drew her attention to the nearby railing and she found, to her astonishment, a pair of antique handcuffs dangling from the railing. They were still shut, as if they had once held someone, but were now empty. It was a discovery that left her with nothing more than another unanswered question. Where were the Captains Piper? She feared for their safety, but a little voice inside her suggested that perhaps their time in the 21st Century was done. It gave her some solace, but all the same, she left a standing order that, if they should be seen, that she be notified immediately.

Later that evening, the Vulcan explorer ship *T'Plana-Hoff* landed in the open space near the launcher. As

it should be, Lily rejoined Cochrane and, together, they welcomed the visitors from another world. They would always keep to themselves the discovery that the Vulcans were not, in fact, the first aliens they ever met.

And Cochrane would never know how close he had come to being at the wrong end of an exploding rocket.

Book 2: Shock Wave

Chapter One

As forest worlds went, there were few as beautiful as Cait. Its inhabitants, named for their planet, had such a deep reverence for nature that they built their homes either underground, or in the slow-growing trees that practically covered the land masses of their world. There were few deserts, and their oceans only took up fifty-seven percent of the globe.

Their trees were sturdy, and sometimes supported large homes, similarly made out of wood – mostly replicated or imported.

Rivers flowed through most of the population centres, including the Capital, where the few open spaces remained. One of them was famous for an oration given there by the people's greatest hero, a being simply known as the "Teacher", as his name was so revered that it was very seldom spoken, even in private circles. He had guided their culture from one based on confrontation and aggression to one based on mutual respect, love and hospitality.

In the middle of this grassy space was a small mound that was venerated for the simple fact that he had once stood there.

It was a place that brought one Manny Sandage to consider her world. She was a being who most gave deference to – just because of her colouring. The people of Cait were feline – leonine in form – and they came in three

basic colours: Tawny, White and Black. The vast majority were tawny, whilst Manny, as her friends called her as her real Caitian name, Amantasandage, which was quite a mouthful, was white. Her people had long judged one another on their colouring and, as she belonged to the favoured Whites, hers had been a life of privilege.

It was a lifestyle that had *almost* spoiled her. It was only in the realisation that colour had no bearing to a being's worth that she woke up to herself, and the terrible way she had treated her black brother, Krashtallash. Her eyes had been opened when she had witnessed not only her brother's tactical excellence, but also his willingness to put his life on the line to rescue *her*, even after she had treated him shamefully.

All of this came back to her thoughts as she gazed at the mound. She had recently been immersing herself in the lore of their Teacher, and it had opened her eyes to just how prejudiced she had been. One of his principle notions was respect and love for *all* beings, regardless of race, colour or species.

It was one she had not only embraced but had helped her open her heart to a *human*, rather than one of her own kind. Her husband, a fellow Starfleet officer, was an engineer temporarily assigned to this world's starship – the *U.S.S. Jolly Roger*, which was attached to the *U.S.S. Millennium*, Starfleet's flagship. Manny, herself, was a security specialist.

All of this was far from her mind as she gazed at the mound. She had to admire how a natural feature so simple, could still instil such a sense of reverence.

Her attention was diverted by a cracking sound from nearby. She got up from her relaxed position (she had been curled up on the grass) and turned her gaze to the tree she knew her children were playing in. Although adopted, Drallah and Lila were as dear to her as her own offspring. Both black, they had taken them as their own after a recent crisis on their world had left them without parents who were *willing* to raise them. The choice had only seemed natural to Manny and her husband, Scanner.

Manny focussed her gaze and found it hard to find her children through the foliage. She turned her ears, but she could not find them. Just before she decided to run over and check on them, she chose instead to practice her sixth sense and look for them in her mind. It took only a moment to locate them, high in the branches.

That got her to her feet. Fearfully, Manny ran over to the base of the tree before bounding up through its branches, quickly scaling it. She had seen one of them fall in her mind. She knew it was only a possible future, but there was no way she was going to sit by and give it a chance to become reality.

As she neared the top, she heard her children teasing each other. "Mother loves me more than *you*!" she heard Drallah say.

Unfortunately, little Lila was too young and still too insecure not to believe the possibility. "She does not!" the young female retaliated against her slightly older brother.

Just below them now, Manny decided to squash this argument. "I love you both equally," she said in that strict, authoritarian manner that only mothers possess.

Startled, Lila turned to look at her and missed gripping the branch she had aimed for with her right paw. The young claws of her left paw slipped on the bark, and she lost her hold altogether, tumbling off the branch she had been sitting on – and straight into her mother's outstretched arm.

"Got you!" Manny said as she pulled Lila to her chest. Unfazed, her daughter clawed herself up and over onto her back.

"Thanks, Mamma," Lila said, lovingly, purring loudly. She rubbed her cheek against the back of Manny's head in gratitude.

Whilst she was tempted to carry Lila down to the ground, Manny realised she needed her daughter to learn the finer arts of tree climbing. Reaching around, she picked her up by the scruff of her neck and lowered her down onto the branch below, one decidedly thicker than the one she had slipped from.

Without preamble, Lila started making her way down. Satisfied that she was okay, Manny turned to check on her son.

As she did so, her perception shifted dramatically. Instead of Drallah, branches and leaves, she suddenly saw only the ruined landscape of a destroyed world. It was if God Himself had reached down and reduced the land to nothing more than scorched earth and erupting volcanoes as far as the eye could see.

The scene seemed so realistic that the scent of sulphur burned her sensitive nasal passages. The heat dried her eyes and forced her to blink.

Shocked at the level of devastation, Manny recoiled. As she did so, the vision disappeared, and she found herself staring into the concerned eyes of her son.

"What's the matter, Mum?" he asked, worried.

Not wanting to scare her son with the peculiar vision, she dodged the question. "Nothing, Drallah," she said, trying to sound unconcerned and failing dismally.

Her adopted son was far too perceptive to believe her, but he respected her too much to pry. He leaned forward and rubbed the bottom of her chin with his head. As he did so, he found something peculiar. "What is that smell?" he asked, perplexed.

Manny's eyes widened in amazement, and she sucked in a gentle breath through her nose. She could still smell sulphur.

Lieutenant Commander Judd "Scanner" Sandage beamed back into the living room of his mother-in-law's

home. There was no way he was going to try climbing the tree this home was perched in. He didn't have the nails, or the patience for it. In the early days he used to gain entry by using anti-grav boots. These days he had gotten a little lazy and simply programmed the *Jolly Roger* to beam him home at the end of his shift.

As Cait was nestled in a quiet corner of the Federation near the outer edge of the Milky Way's spiral arm, there wasn't a whole lot for the pocket starship to do. It regularly made milk runs to Cait's moon where starship repairs were often conducted in a vast cavern that had been hollowed out to house the *Millennium's* former sister-ship, the *Ingram*. As the foremost engineer in the system, Judd's expertise was often called upon.

Today, Judd was simply tired because a problem that kept coming up had him baffled and he didn't know what to do about it.

Glad that he was home, he forced himself to relax and leave work behind him. Whatever it was, it could wait for tomorrow, he told himself.

He looked about him and found, to his surprise, that he was alone. Pashtallash, his wife's mother, was usually pottering around, playing the doting grandmother role to the nth degree. She often amazed him with her imagination and resourcefulness. She seemed to have no end of energy reserves.

He wished he could tap into them at that moment. In his mid-forties, Judd was beginning to feel the aging process taking its toll on his body. He worked out regularly, keeping himself fit not only for the health benefits, but simply for the fact that Starfleet required him to do so.

If there was one thing that was guaranteed to keep him fit, it was keeping up with his children. Drallah and Lila were like feline wildfires. While it had taken some time for them to get used to their new Dad being an off-worlder, a few short words from their grandmother sorted them out.

Unlike his wife, who was of Cait, Judd was a southern gentleman from the former United States on Earth. His brown hair was beginning to show signs of grey at the temples, and he was noticing a few more wrinkles these days. It was either that, or they needed a new mirror.

Judd sighed. It was a rare moment of peace in the busy days of running a family. It was about to get a whole lot noisier when his brother-in-law, Crash, became a father in a matter of days.

Taking advantage of the unexpected blessing, Judd headed down the hall and straight into the shower.

With the water spraying in his ears, he missed hearing the rest of the family arriving.

The first in the door were Manny, the kits and Pashtallash, who had met up with them after she had done some shopping for the family. There was a reason that Cait family homes were relatively free of adornments. They

would never have survived the children. No sooner had the kits gotten in the door they began wrestling in the middle of the family cushions.

Manny let them go, knowing that their play was normal for their age. In fact, she patently ignored them as she helped her mother put away the groceries. "I hear Scanner's home," she said, the sound of running water catching her ears.

Pash flicked her ears towards the hall and caught the sound herself. "I know he loves his showers," she said. "He told me he finds them very relaxing."

Her daughter made a disgusted face. Being able to swim was important for any sentient, yet that didn't make it something that had to be enjoyed. "It's one of the things I've just learned to be patient with. I've found husbands and wives don't always have to agree on everything."

Pash snorted. "That's the understatement of the millennia."

Manny sighed. There were moments when she almost forgot that her parents had only recently divorced. Her father, Slash, had moved out and had severed all connection with not only Pash, but also his three children. "Sorry," she said quietly, suddenly feeling insensitive.

Her mother lightly cuffed her over the back of the head. "Don't do that," she said, only slightly annoyed. "Your father made his choices." She gave her a small smile

and added in a whisper: “And I haven’t been this happy for a long time.”

Any further comment was cut short as the sound of a flitter landing was heard through the still open door. Lila bounded over to the door and shot outside. “Aunty Susanna’s home!” she cried joyfully. Everyone knew Lila loved her aunt.

Her behaviour was nothing new to the family. Lila did this every day. They were certain she would continue doing so, even after she went back to school next week.

Drallah was playing it cool, curled up on his favourite cushion, watching the door. He was waiting for his adopted sister to return so he could pounce on her the moment she showed through the door.

Usually, Lila was first back inside as she was small and quick. Not so, this time as a taller, tawny, adult Cait stepped inside wearing a bejewelled necklace and light purple gown. At the sight of her, everyone inside dropped to one knee.

Cait’s Queen Castashack, a young female Cait who was as down-to-earth as the next person, accepted the respectful offering then waved them up. “I appreciate it,” she said with her gentle voice and nature, “but after all we’ve been through together, I’ve come to think of you as family.”

Pashtallash, who was the slowest to rise, was reluctant to agree. “You honour us with your presence, my

Queen." The ancient Cait custom towards taking care of guests kicked in. "Can I offer you something?"

"Faith!" The surprised voice came from the hallway, where Judd was dressed in his favourite, worn tracksuit. Unlike the rest of the family, Judd stepped forward and shook the Queen's paw. "It's been a while."

The Queen smiled, glad to hear her favourite moniker for herself. It had been given her by one of Judd's fellow *Millennium* crew mates in response to her overly long name. The helmsman had noted her love for the Cait's spiritual leader, known only as the "Teacher", who had died two millennia before. So, in response to her devotion, he dubbed her "Faith". It had caught on, and the majority of the planet now referred to her by it.

Glad that someone was finally treating her like a normal person, Faith's whiskers arched forward, and her pupils widened in delight. "Scanner!" she replied in kind. "It hasn't been that long since you stopped that assassination attempt.[1] I hope I haven't made things too uncomfortable for you adopting you into the royal family. Oh, and thanks for all you've been doing for Cait in getting our starbase established. It's really helped."

Judd ignored the annoyed looks he got from Pashtallash and pushed on. He knew she was very old-school when it came to royalty, that somehow, they were a

[1] You can find this in Sean O'Keefe's short story: All Things Being Equal, I'd Rather be in Vegas.

cut above the rest. He knew the truth, that Faith *was* cut out of different cloth, but that it was the same stuff as everyone who lived in service to others. "You're welcome," he said, shrugging it off. "I've never been so busy, and most of the people I deal with are more interested in my brains than my connection to you." He gave her a smile and a friendly wink.

At that point, Lila returned, clutching her aunt, Susanna Llash, Federation Ambassador-at-large, who was now also heavily pregnant with quads. No sooner had Lila entered she let go and jumped on Drallah and began rolling around on the floor together once more, playfully grappling and clawing.

With a delighted smile, Queen Faith added: "Yes, I can see that."

Manny met Susanna at the door and quietly hissed: "Why didn't you tell me the Queen was coming to our home tonight?"

Susanna merely gave her a sheepish grin. "Faith insisted on surprising you."

The security specialist looked out through the door. "I'm sure the Queen's bodyguard is also surprised she's disappeared again."

At that, Faith interjected: "No, they won't be. I duck out all the time. I hate being stuck in the palace."

Manny tipped her head to the side in a gesture that said: "I can understand that, but please call them anyway."

The Queen acquiesced and waved her off with a bashful grin. "All right, I'll call them, I'll call them." She stepped over to the corner and produced her private communicator to check in.

A moment later, two of the palace guards materialised outside their home and made their presence known. After a quick check inside, they left the Queen in the Llash clan's company. The family was famous for their actions in the recent civil war, and they knew without a doubt that the Queen was in good company.

Pashtallash roped Manny and Scanner into helping prepare the evening meal while they insisted Susanna rest. This late in her pregnancy, she was tiring quickly, and it was beginning to show on the Persian. Like Manny, Crash had married outside his species, but this time he had taken a felinoid bride. They had their similarities in some areas, but where the Cait resembled sentient lions, the people of the Ambassador's world took after overgrown Persian cats. Susanna was herself around five feet tall with long, mottled fur that reminded humans of a tortoise-shell moggie.

The only reason it took time to prepare the meal was the fact that Scanner refused to eat his meat raw. "Ah just don't like eating meat that hasn't finished mooing," he once told Manny.

She had countered with: "That's all right for you, just don't expect me to eat meat that's been cremated."

Most of the time Judd simply ate replicated catfish, cottage fries and vegetables. It was all weird to the Cait palate, but at least it didn't offend their senses.

As she watched from her prone position, Susanna found herself getting drowsy. She knew she was getting near full term, but her body wasn't telling her it was time yet. "Thanks for giving me a chance to rest," she told her family. "I seem to be getting tired more and more easily these days."

"It's the least we can do," Pashtallash said mildly. "Besides, I know what it's like. I slowed down to a crawl in my last days before birth, and I was only carrying three kits! My son has given you four!"

Susanna's eyes narrowed to slits. "Remind me to thank him for that when he arrives," she said not unkindly.

A shadow appeared at the front door. "Thank me for what?" came her husband's baritone. Six foot tall and black as night, Krashtallash entered the room to be greeted with nuzzling, waves, and Lila and Drallah jumping on his back.

Susanna watched her husband play with his niece and nephew with a smile playing around her lips. He was so good with children, she thought. He was going to make a great father. "My dear, your mother was reminding me how blessed we are to be having quads!" she said with mock seriousness.

"It's a good thing we'll have her here to help when they arrive," Crash replied with a chuckle. At that moment,

he remembered they had company. He had seen the guards outside and realised the Queen was dropping by for one of her famous absences from the palace. She seemed to enjoy breaking with tradition. He looked over at Faith and gave her a bow. "My Queen, you honour us with your presence."

The monarch stepped over and batted Crash's sooty shoulder with her tan paw. "I've told you before, Krashtallash, the honour will always be mine. I wouldn't have a crown at all if it wasn't for you bringing freedom once more for all Cait."

Crash was tempted to sigh but was too polite to do so. He had great respect for their world's newly appointed monarch. Although she was still young, she had also suffered much to bring peace, including the loss of her mentor.

On the other hand, she spoke the truth. He had played a pivotal role in their world's recent uprising, but it was not something he liked to dwell upon, and he certainly did his best to shun the limelight. He just wanted to get back to the business of being a Starfleet Officer, which included commanding the *Jolly Roger* and overseeing "Starbase Cait".

Instead, Crash simply nodded and moved on. He stepped over to his wife, dropped down onto the same cushion she was on, spooned her and began licking the back of her head.

Susanna immediately began purring. "When you do that, my dear, I'm always happy to have you home," she said blissfully. She closed her eyes and lapped up the attention.

Pash gave her son a mock scowl. "There's a time and place for that kind of thing," she said with only the tiniest reproof. "Now, get yourselves up off the floor and come and eat."

Only a mother could push around the people assembled in the room. The Starfleet Officers, the Ambassador, the Queen and the children obeyed and seated themselves at the table. As Crash was now officially the head of the household, he gave the blessing, and the family began tearing into their meals – which mainly consisted of replicated raw meat of various kinds. In deference to Scanner, who took longer to put away his meal, the rest of the family, the Queen included, waited for him to finish.

As families do over the dinner table, subjects of all kinds were discussed. In respect for her position in society Faith started things off.

"The great clock in the palace ballroom has been taken down to be repaired," she said. "The technicians told me it's the first bit of bother it's given them in the last four hundred years. In all that time it's given perfect time."

Scanner's eyes widened at that. The engineer was curious. He put down his fork and asked: "Did they say what it uses for a timer?"

Faith frowned. The inner working of technology was not her strong suit. "Caesium?" she said, doing her best to remember.

Judd shrugged off her awful pronunciation of the word and scowled. "That's weird," he said, the tension he felt heard in his tone.

Science wasn't anyone's forte at the table – including Crash. He was command and communications, not engineering. What he knew of time was what he needed to know to avoid dilations that would interfere with transmissions.

The expectant mother worried the most. She had the most to lose. "What's the matter?"

Scanner held her gaze. "Technically, what Faith has just told us is not possible. A caesium clock, properly maintained, should last a millennium and not lose a second in *fifty million years*."

Crash's pupils narrowed in concern as a thought came to him. "Judd, your second on the *Roger* told me he was having problems with the warp engines. He said they were having some unusual phase variances."

The children could keep their silence no longer. Lila asked in her little girl voice: "Faze whats?"

Her father simply smiled at her to put her at ease. "It just means the warp engines are a little out of tune, sweetheart. Nothing to worry about."

Drallah was more perceptive. "Then why *are* you worried?" he asked with all the innocence of youth.

Scanner gave his wife a look which she immediately understood. This was not a conversation for the children. "Come on kits," she said. "It's time for bed. Say goodnight to everyone."

Children the galaxy wide hate hearing those words. They moaned and quietly complained yet complied. They gave everyone a nuzzle, including the Queen who lapped up the attention, then followed Manny down the hall. With a last worried look, she closed the door.

Judd turned back to Crash in all seriousness. "I've been having trouble all day with ships suffering problems with their engines. Nearly all of them are experiencing phase variances."

The hackles on the back of Crash's neck raised. "What could cause that?" he asked slowly, fearing not only for the world, but especially for his family.

Scanner knew enough about physics to know there could only be one cause. "A singularity could be passing through the system."

"A what?" the Queen asked, worried, but confused.

He put it in layman's terms. "It could be a miniature black hole."

The words hung in the air like a death sentence. Every child of the Federation was taught the dangers of space flight – especially those involving singularities and

how they could devour not only entire star systems, but in some places whole galaxies.

"What can we do?" Susanna asked. Her fear for her unborn children had her fur standing on end.

Scanner patted her hand. "There's not a whole lot we *can* do," he said. "If it is a singularity and it's close, it's already too late. We could be caught in its grip already." He grinned sheepishly. "I know that's not much comfort." He turned to Crash. "But if it's a large one, there may still be time. We need to get the *Jolly Roger* in the air and see if we can find it, track its course and, if necessary, begin the evacuation of Cait."

Krashtallash sat in the Conn of the *U.S.S Jolly Roger* and marvelled that the pocket starship was his to command. It had only been a year ago that he was still a lowly Lieutenant in charge of Communications on the *U.S.S. Exeter*. Now, he was a Lieutenant Commander, third in command of the fleet's flagship, the *U.S.S. Millennium* and commander of the pocket starship tasked to it, the *J.R.*. All the same, a lot had happened in the previous year, and he had found that sometimes life simply put you in the right place at the right time. He smiled to himself as he watched the system's fifth planet, a gas giant, pass by slowly on the screen. He loved being out in space.

"Have you found anything yet?" he asked Judd, who was manning their scanners.

His answer came as a puzzled shake of the head. “There doesn’t seem to be anything out there at all,” he said, mystified. He sat back and tapped the console with a finger. “This stuff isn’t the most sensitive in the universe, but it should still be able to pick up a singularity at this close range.” He rubbed the bristle on his chin, considering the situation. “It’s bizarre.”

Amantasandage swivelled to look at him from the navigator’s station. “Isn’t it a good thing we can’t find anything?” she said, with a touch of playful sarcasm.

Scanner caught his wife’s eye and said: “Yes, and no. A singularity would have been a nice, obvious cause for the problems we have. We’ve got problems with space/time throughout the sector, and I can’t find the cause.” He pointed to the screen where he had displayed his findings. The three of them approached it and stared in amazement. “I’ve found pockets of space and subspace damage all over the place.” The screen displayed their solar system, and beyond, which should have showed clear space dotted with pink, largely spherical spots of various sizes. They seemed to remain stationary compared with the planets, however some of them appeared to be in their orbital path.

“What are these?” Crash asked, beginning to sound worried.

Scanner smirked to himself. “I may not have found the *cause*, but I have found the *effect*. The pink areas are places where space/time has distorted, and time is flowing

slower than usual. The differences are usually only in the manner of .02 of a percent, but it's enough for not only clocks to be thrown out of synch, but for a starship that passes through one to collapse its warp field. And if they try to go to warp again within one, they'll drop out again when they pass back into normal space." He grimaced, realising the full effect of the problem.

Krashtallash picked up on the thread. "It's a massive hazard to shipping," he said, astounded. He stepped back to the command chair and sat down heavily. "Do you have any idea how far this goes?"

"I need some coffee," Scanner stated, letting his frustration show. He walked over to the small food replicator on the wall and dialled up a hot cup of brew. It quickly materialised and Scanner took a moment to savour the aroma before taking a sip as his family watched him and waited. He gently placed the cup on the desk next to him and took a seat as he collected his thoughts. He began slowly. "Whatever this is, it goes beyond this system. We need to track it to find the locus, and maybe then we'll find the cause." He gave them both a worried look. "Whatever it is, it's going to be big."

Crash's fur bristled as he thought about their situation. "We've got to inform Starfleet. Let's put together what we've found and transmit it ASAP."

"I'm not sure that's going to help," Scanner said quietly. "If subspace is as distorted as I think it is between

here and Earth, our message may have a snowball's chance in hell of getting through." He gave his brother-in-law a quick grin. "But we've got to try!"

Their commander nodded his understanding. "We may have to do this one on our own." He turned to their pilot and said: "Take us back to Cait. We've got to get this ship ready for a journey."

Chapter Two

Starbase Cait was a hive of activity. Only recently opened to the Galactic public, it was quickly becoming *the* place to have your ship repaired in their sector. As such, the vast, open space in Cait's only moon that once housed the *Millennium's* sister-ship, the *Ingram*, was full of starliners, freighters and small pleasure craft.

The captain of the *Interstella* noted this as their ship passed it by. He waited patiently until they were given clearance to land on the Caitian homeworld. He had hoped to dock in the new facilities, especially given the problems they had experienced with their warp engines in this sector. Phase variances had made their journey tedious in the extreme as they had all too often dropped out of warp suddenly when their warp field collapsed. Their chief engineer had no idea what was causing it, which didn't surprise the captain all that much. The Starfleet drop-out was competent – and that was being generous.

As he watched the view of the green world of Cait rotating beneath him, he sipped his tea and considered how far behind schedule these delays had put them. Theirs was a pleasure cruise that was supposed to take in the most beautiful of the Federation's worlds. Andoria had been first, Cait second and they were supposed to take in the Eye of Orion next, but he was beginning to have doubts about that if they were to return to Earth on time.

He took consolation that the real Starfleet Officer who was travelling with them had proven helpful with their little problems. It was a pity they were going to have to leave her here.

If there was one thing about this world she was beginning to really like, it was the fact that transporters were *everywhere*. Public transporters were easily found in convenient places, a public transportation alternative to personal ground cars or flitters.

Lieutenant Caitlin Ryan trundled her luggage behind her in a small, wheeled suitcase. A spinal injury two years before had left her incapable of carrying anything over five kilos, but that had not stopped her from continuing her exemplary career in Starfleet. "Ghost", as she was known among her peers, was the organisation's best and most highly decorated fighter pilot. Her skills had brought her to a place in Starfleet enjoyed by few. Her lowly rank of Lieutenant was the result of her being busted for striking a superior officer. The reason she was still in Starfleet was that even Admirals respected and deferred to her judgement. She was a living legend in her field.

On first impression, the diminutive dark-haired, slender young woman with the distinctive Irish lilt was friendly and out-going, not the type to suffer fools gladly. She had a rapier wit and a keen mind. There were few who

doubted that she would one day captain a ship of her own – if she refrained from punching out her fellows long enough.

In the fresh morning air, she stopped for a moment, looking around her at the many trees with their wooden homes built among their branches, and wondered once more how these people found anything. On Earth, houses with numbers on them lined streets that were identifiable. On Cait, the only way to find a home was through scent – which didn't help her – or GPS location. She looked down at her datapadd and checked her location once more. The home she was looking for was thirty metres to her left. She looked over at it and marvelled at how the owner of it had decorated it with many colourful touches, mostly floral murals.

It wasn't unusual however, as most of the homes were similarly decorated.

Certain of her destination, Caitlin began walking once more and soon came to the base of the tree. Her next problem was an obvious one. The entrance to the home was right above her head – an open space with a platform next to a door. It seemed the only way inside was to climb up the tree.

In her cheerful, southern Irish accent, Caitlin mused to herself: "I am not a monkey, you know!" After a quick look to see if there were any doorbells attached to the tree, she decided to set aside her pride and raise her voice. "Is there anybody home up there?"

After a moment, the door opened and a tawny local looked out and down at her. As her Starfleet uniform was clearly recognised, the older female broke into a welcoming grin. "Can I help you?" she asked.

Caitlin gave her a winning smile. "I'm looking for Commander Krashtallash. I was told I could find him here."

Pashtallash beamed back at her. "You've found the right place. Please wait there a moment."

Before Caitlin could ask for help getting upstairs, her host disappeared inside. A minute later, Susanna appeared in the doorway, looked down and gave her a bemused grin. "Can I help you?" she said, surprised to find a Starfleet Officer at their door. "What brings you here?"

A shadow passed over Caitlin's face. "Business. I'm here on urgent orders from Starfleet. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

A hundred kilometres away, but only a moment by public transporter, the *U.S.S. Jolly Roger* landed at her usual berth near the Capital, her retro-thrusters kicking up dust as she touched down on her extended landing struts. The retro-fitted starliner with lines that reminded one of a huge, space-going whale, was one of Starfleet's latest acquisitions. Captured during the recent Caitian civil war, Captain Piper had pressed it into service for the protection of Cait. She was operated by a mixture of locals left over from the war and a detachment of Starfleet officers and crew.

As soon as the *J.R.* had settled, the engines powered down and the cargo bay doors opened up. Krashtallash was wasting no time taking on provisions for their journey.

Under the nose, the *J.R.'s* docking hatch opened, and the landing plank extended, allowing her officers to disembark. As they did so they found they had an unexpected surprise waiting for them. They were met by Susanna and Lieutenant Ryan, who had been waiting for them in the departure lounge.

Krashtallash greeted his wife with his usual display of affection – a rub under her chin with the top of his head, which she returned. Scanner and Manny said "hello" to Ghost the old-fashioned way: with a friendly handshake. "What brings you all the way out to the rim?" Scanner asked.

Manny chipped in: "Yes. The last time I saw you, you were still in bed recovering after our little fun with that bounty hunter on Mars."

Ghost gave her a cheerful smile as she recalled their little adventure, then she remembered why she was here. Her sense of urgency great, she darted her eyes about her then she drew the group off to the side for a little privacy. "I'm here on special assignment from Starfleet," she said, finally able to let her worry show. "The *Millennium* has vanished, and they want you to find her."

Scanner gave a start, the notion not quite getting through to him. "*What?"* he blurted out incredulously. It

took him only a second to go from disbelieving to angry before adding: "They're trying to catch that fish with the wrong bait! What can our little starship do to find Piper when the rest of *Starfleet* should be out looking for them?"

Ghost gave him a thin-lipped smile, letting her own annoyance at the whole situation show. The *Millennium* crew was her family too. "I know, Commander. All I can guess is that they've got bigger problems at the moment."

As Scanner ranted: "What could be bigger than the flagship being missing?" Manny remembered her vision of a destroyed world, perhaps this one. The gut feeling she had been carrying for some time surfaced once more. "There's something wrong with *everything*," she said, suddenly feeling nauseous. A momentary wave of weakness came over her and she dropped to all fours, doing her best not to retch.

Worried, Scanner squatted next to her and ran his fingers through her head fur, comforting. "Are you getting another one of those "feelings" of yours?" He had seen the way his wife had been behaving recently. He knew she had been unsettled by something that was very real to her.

Manny's whiskers bristled and her tail swept the floor as she recalled her vision from the morning. She related it in detail. She finished with: "I still remember the *smell*."

Ever the sceptic, Ghost asked: "Are you sure it wasn't just your imagination, love?"

Annoyed, Manny let a little of her impressive teeth show. "No, it wasn't just in my head. After I came out of it Drallah said he could smell something strange."

Ghost still wasn't buying it, but Scanner knew his bride too well to doubt her gift. He had long learned to trust that she had what his folks called "the Second Sight". He also trusted his son. He stroked her back gently to help her calm herself. "I believe you, Honey. We'll find out what it means, I'm sure. I wouldn't be surprised if all of this was somehow linked."

Caitlin turned her back and rolled her eyes. She was anything but a believer in such things, even given their history together. She, still respected Manny too much to say it to her face.

She was startled at a low growl from behind her. "I can feel your scepticism from here," Manny said angrily. "Don't ever roll your eyes around someone like me, Caitlin Ryan. I'll always know."

All her life, Caitlin had been a warrior: fighting the good fight and never backing down. This was an exception. She had not only hurt the feelings of a good friend, she realised she had insulted her. Swallowing her pride, she offered: "I'm sorry, Amantasandage. You didn't deserve that."

As any husband would, Scanner wanted to go to his wife's defence, but he was also fully aware that she could take care of herself. It was all the better, too, that the two

women sort things out between them. As Manny simply nodded her acceptance, he said: "You'd better get your kit together, Lieutenant. You'll be coming with us."

Caitlin glanced at the *J.R.*, which was the size of an average passenger liner, curious. "Is it big enough for *my* luggage?"

Knowing what she meant, Scanner gave a short laugh and said: "Don't worry, Ghost. We won't be leaving your tinker toy behind."

Crash spoke up. "Actually, both it and you could be of great help to us. I need you to fly the *Roger* around the time distortion fields if we're going to find the cause of them *and* find the *Millennium*."

Finally, she hit something she wasn't prepared for. Caitlin's eyes went wide and she sputtered: "The *whats*?"

He had faced angry Klingons, Romulans, humans and even his own kind. Yet nothing he had experienced had prepared Crash to face his angry wife. Her eyes blazing, she said: "What do you mean: *You can't come!?*"

Out of the corner of his eye, Crash noticed his mother slip out of their common room at home. "Coward," he thought to himself. He fell back to legalities. "Starfleet regulations forbid our taking our children along. Not to mention a pregnant female," he said. It sounded weak, even in his own ears.

Susanna clutched her belly, clearly distraught. "There is no way I'm having these children without you here!" Susanna screeched hysterically. She gesticulated wildly as she challenged: "I don't want to be left behind to have *our children* while you go off in your little starship! Who knows when you might come back?"

The implied "if ever" hung in the air. Crash knew she wasn't doubting him, it was fate she was suspicious of. He sighed, took his wife by her paws, and lowered her to the floor. "I know it's a big ask, my beloved," he said gently. "It's going to be dangerous, and I don't want to risk yours *and* our children's lives. Besides, you won't be alone. Pashtallash will be here with you." *Once she returns from wherever it is she's escaped to,* he added in his thoughts. He loved his mother, but these days she had an annoying predisposition towards avoiding conflict – of any kind.

Susanna softened along with her husband, but not her resolve. She ran a paw through his short, black mane and purred a little. "My love, you know I have great affection for your mother, but she's not you," she said, tapping his nose. "She's not Manny. She's not Scanner. You and the crew of the *Millennium* are my family now, and I'll be damned if I'm left holding the kits while you're out there looking for Piper."

Her request left him in a quandary. His desire to protect his family warred against his personal need to have his wife nearby. He also knew that, in the scheme of things,

technically Susanna outranked him. As a roving Ambassador for the Federation, she could order him to take her with them. However, in the end, he knew she would still defer to his judgement and not put him in that position. It was never a good idea to emasculate your husband – especially this early in their relationship. That usually came later.

A thought came to him, and he wondered for a moment whether it could be true. If Manny's vision had been brought on not by her sixth sense, but an actual crack in time, then she may have witnessed their world's destruction. It was not a pleasant thought. A notion came to him, and he acted on impulse. "You can come with us, my love, but I'm going to need Pashtallash and the kits to come along as well."

Susanna's eyes narrowed a little as she wondered at the thought behind his decision. She decided then that she really didn't care about the why, as long as she got what she wanted. "All right, my love. I'll pack what we need and let your mother know we need to leave immediately." She moved to do so, then turned back and gave her husband a loving lick. "Thank you, my husband," she said gratefully.

In response, he gave her a haunted look. "Thank me when we get through with our tails intact."

Two hours later, the *Jolly Roger* departed as Faith watched from her palace on a nearby hill. She couldn't help

but feel a tinge of fear as her friends were leaving to find the *Millennium* – she had been fully briefed. The captain and crew of that massive ship had risked all to save her world in their recent revolution, and now they were out there, lost.

All the same, her fears for them were not as great as her concern for the Llash clan who was leaving to find them. They had become an extension of her family, confidants and guides as they had been rebuilding their society to once more become the friendly world it had once been.

As she saw their ship rise, she said a quiet prayer for their safety, then watched in amazement as a small fighter craft took off, met the *J.R.* about a kilometre up and swung into its open cargo bay. She had no idea what it was, but whatever it was, she added it to her prayer list.

On the Bridge the doors whooshed open and Ghost strode out. She took a look around her at the compact command centre, staffed by a mixture of Starfleet and Caitian volunteers – leftovers from Cait's former military. In the centre seat sat Krashtallash, looking like he was born to lead. Beside him was his sister, his wife and Scanner. At the sound of her arrival, they turned as one and welcomed her aboard.

"What do you think of the *Jolly Roger?"* Scanner asked, genuinely curious.

Ghost gave him a cheeky smile. "She seems space worthy enough," she said. "No two guesses who gave this ship her name."

The comment elicited a quiet chuckle from her companions. Captain Piper was notorious for giving ships odd names. The *Millennium* carried a "runabout" class shuttle that was so big that its tight fit had led her to dub it the *Cork.*

Caitlin stepped over to the pilot's chair. The Lieutenant manning the console, a young, impressionable human fresh out of the academy named Christopher Manning, took one look at Ghost and fairly leapt out of the way. The fighter pilot's reputation had preceded her. She gave the fellow a brief smile then got down to business. As she sat, she felt a pinch in her spine, reminding her she still had to be careful.

Behind her, Scanner picked up on her discomfort and joined her. "I'll replace the chair for you. These back-killers were made to suit felines, not our fragile selves."

Gratefully, Caitlin gave him a quick, thankful grin. "I see the console was made for the Cait, too." She brushed her fingers over the touch panel. "What can this thing do?"

The engineer chuckled. "The *J.R.* will surprise you." He took a moment to run her through the ship's specifications, giving Ghost cause to whistle.

"You've been tinkering with this ship, haven't you?" she said in mock accusation.

Scanner pretended innocence. "Moi?"

Ghost rolled her eyes and glanced over at Crash. "Captain, with your permission, I'll take a minute to personalise the controls."

Crash gave her a nod and logged their departure. "When you're ready, Lieutenant."

Behind him, Susanna dropped her head so only her husband could hear her. "I'm off to watch the kits, my love. At least I can do something useful while I'm lying around getting fatter." She gave him a lick behind the ear before bounding over to the doors which barely had a chance to open far enough for her to slip through.

Crash watched her go with a mixture of delight and awe. It had only been a matter of months since they had met, married, and started a family. In that tiny passage of time they had endured much – including an attempt on Susanna's life – and their shared adventures had cemented their relationship. All the same, he sometimes had to remind himself that her presence in his life was a very real thing, and not some passing fantasy. He had been alone for so long he had become used to the notion that he would meet his maker in the same fashion.

Now his life felt more complete than ever. He had become content to follow and advance his career, but now having a family of his own was taking him in a direction that was both wonderful and foreign to him. Having a starship full of people he was responsible for was one thing – having

a wife and coming children was something else altogether. There really was no comparison as he knew that he could live without his career – but not his family. The mere thought of it opened a bottomless pit in his soul – one he had visited once before when he had watched his wife go to what he believed was certain death. Only her amazing agility had saved her.

With a flourish Ghost finished reorganising the controls. "At your command, Captain," she said eagerly. She always loved taking a new toy for a spin.

"Aunty Susanna, where are we going?" Lila asked as she was putting away her simple belongings in her parent's room.

It was moments like these when Susanna wished she was a bit of an oracle like her sister-in-law. While Manny seemed to have more than a touch of sixth sense, Susanna found herself sometimes jealous, at other times spooked. It was a hard thing for her to understand. All the same, when children asked tough questions, it still would have been great for her to either see into the future or be able to think quick and come up with a comfortable lie when necessary. The best she could do was: "We're going to find Captain Piper. Starfleet doesn't know where they are."

Drallah was a bit older and wiser beyond his years due to his experiences as a slave mining dilithium on an asteroid. He was still only two and a half, but in his people's timelines

he was already half grown. Susanna's half-truth was as clear as plexiglass. "Captain Piper's not the sort to get lost anywhere," he said confidently.

This family had gone through too much already for her to think of these kits as naïve, Susanna realised. As she looked at their expectant faces, she decided to give them the whole truth. "The *Millennium* is missing, and Starfleet has asked us to find her."

Since their adventures only months before, Drallah had spent a lot of time studying things off world – including Starfleet. He was aware of just how big an organisation it was. "I don't get it," he said, confused. "We're on the outer edge of the spiral arm of the galaxy, lightyears from anywhere. Surely there are other starships out there that could find them quicker than we can."

Susanna sat down, glad to take the weight off her paws. She was finding it harder and harder to walk around on her hind legs now her four babies were getting closer to their arrival date. She put out her arms and the kits bounded over and snuggled into her fur. It was moments like these that she was glad she had taken a sabbatical to raise her children. She delighted in being an aunt and expectant mother. "I don't begin to understand all that's going on, my darling kits, but I *can* tell you that there's no-one that can find them like your parents and Uncle Krashtallash." She gave them a squeeze. "Especially your Mum. She could find a single hair in an ocean of fuzz."

Lila purred against Susanna's chest. "That's Mum, all right. I can't get away with anything, even when she's nowhere near us; she always knows."

From anyone else, it would have sounded like a complaint. To Susanna's ears it was the contentment of a child who knew without a doubt she was loved. "Yes, your Mum's really amazing," she said. Inwardly, she was grateful that her own mother didn't have Manny's senses. There were some things she wanted to keep secret. Mothers don't have to know *everything*.

Drallah pulled away a little and looked into Susanna's eyes. "After all that Captain Piper's done for us, we owe it to her to help her." The young male's determination was inspiring. "I don't care how long it'll take." He took her paw in his own. "Can you help us with our studies while we're gone?" he asked.

It was an appeal from the heart to just the right person. Susanna's first love was teaching. She had even taken some classes on the subject before university in preparation for a career in that field. Her dream had been squashed as there had been an over-abundance of teachers on Persia. "I'd love to, my dear," she said. She pulled them closer. "Both of you."

Krashtallash had decided to look away from the starfield on the view screen after ten seconds of watching their new pilot fly. Caitlin had decided to put the ship

through its paces and was flying manually, taking the ship out past their asteroid field whilst dodging not only the rocks, but also the "pink fuzzies" as the time dilation fields had come to be called. Thanks to the ship's inertial dampeners he felt nothing of their crazy flight, but he still had to avert his eyes to avoid becoming nauseous.

After three hours of this, Caitlin finally announced: "We're clear of the system."

Crash stepped forward and ordered up a scan of the space ahead. "Show me the plot to Argelius," he added. He glanced at Ghost. "That was their last port of call before they vanished, wasn't it?"

Caitlin nodded. "They were doing a milk run dropping some supplies before they were called away." She glanced at the sealed orders she had been given. It was an envelope they had been told not to open until they reached Argelius's orbit. Bound by duty, it remained sealed, sitting on the edge of her console.

Scanner stepped over and joined Crash and together they looked at the winding path ahead. He gave Crash a wry grin. "And that's only out one light-year. We're going to have to rely on the computer to keep replotting our path to keep us free of the fuzzies." He gave their pilot a wink. "I don't think even Ghost wants to keep us on manual for the days ahead."

Caitlin gave him a smirk. "You've got that right," she said drolly. "My back wouldn't stand it."

"What's the best warp factor we can hope for through this mess?" their Captain asked as he gestured at the screen rudely.

Ghost gritted her teeth. She didn't like this any more than her commander would. "Warp five," she said. "And there's no guarantee that we still won't bump into one or two of these things along the way to slow us down."

That was not good news to Crash. This was going to be a long cruise. He gave a low growl then said: "Whatever it takes, we do. We're not in it for us, we're in it for the Captain."

It took two days for Susanna's biological clock to go off. As was typical for her species, she wanted to be alone with only her husband by her side – and he was under strict instructions to sit by and do nothing unless she asked for it.

"Are you sure you don't want a bowl of water?" he asked her at one point after she had been panting for an hour.

The comment earned him a glare and a gritted: "If you must."

Crash got up from the floor in their quarters and walked over to the replicator, wondering if all husbands felt like fifth legs when their wives went into labour. He didn't feel very useful – in fact, he felt worse than useless. Only his wife's request to watch over her lest anything untoward happen gave him a reason to believe he *could* be useful.

As he returned, Susanna got up and did a quick circuit of the room on all fours before gladly drinking the bowl of water in one quick slurp. Once done, she returned to the carpet – and the large blanket to protect the flooring – and began to push.

Crash watched in amazement as the muscles in her torso began to ripple. Her eyes reflected the effort she was putting in as she strained with all her might time and again. Her fur became matted with sweat from the exertion.

After ten minutes of nothing happening, Crash was beginning to worry. His wife had been whimpering from the strain, and just when he was about to call for his mother's help Susanna pushed out their first-born with one mighty shove. The kit hit the blanket with a wet splat after sliding off its mother's fur.

Not knowing if he should do something, Susanna came to his rescue as she said: "Take care of it, Crash. I've got another one coming."

Almost gingerly, her husband leaned over and picked up the tiny bundle of fur. It had already begun moving, fingers extending, tiny claws just visible. Crash quickly cleaned their child up with one of the towels they had ready and marvelled to himself. He was a father!

Knowing the kits were coming was one thing, but until he held the child in his hands, until he heard their first mewing, it had yet to become concrete to him. This tiny

person was *his* responsibility – his and his wife's. The weight of it fell upon him like a brick from heaven.

"Are you going to tell me the sex or not?" Susanna growled between contractions.

A little embarrassed, Crash held the kit up to see. He put it down and held it to his chest lovingly. The kit instinctively tucked into his warmth. He still wasn't certain about the colour, it was very wet, but one thing he did know. "We have a son," he said, letting the joy he felt show.

Before she had a chance to respond, Susanna pushed again. This time, Crash was ready to catch it. Being careful not to jostle their first-born, he scooped up their second child and cleaned it as well. Eager to know, Crash declared: "We have a daughter."

To his surprise, Susanna gave a deep sigh and declared: "I'm taking a break." To his amazement, she got up and made her way over to the replicator and ordered up another bowl of water which she quickly downed. She then rejoined her husband and curled up on the floor. "I think these little kits need some milk," she said joyfully. "Besides, it's either that or I start dripping it everywhere I go," she added with a touch of sarcasm. She gently placed the pair on her belly and watched as the kits quickly found her teats and began to feed.

Crash's eyes became saucers. "I don't know what else to say but: Wow!" he said, letting his admiration show. His wife had just performed a miracle by bringing forth two little

miracles, and yet she had the ability to stop her labour and resume it at will when she was ready. He leaned forward and gave her a loving lick on the cheek. "You are an amazing female, my beloved," he said, adoringly.

Susanna licked him back, then grimaced. "Thank you for that, my dear, but you can tell me that when I've finished the job." Her body trembled with a contraction. "I've held this off as long as I can, I'm afraid," she said painfully. Whilst the first two kits fed, Susanna got to work bringing the last two into the world.

This time, Crash simply sat back and stroked her head as she pushed. He wasn't sure, but this time around seemed a little easier for her. Within moments, they had two more children, born within minutes of one another. Once again, the first was a boy, the other a girl. Again, Crash took the burden of cleaning them up and placing them on their mother's belly. Like their siblings, they began feeding within minutes, although the last one took a little longer than the rest.

They lay together for a short time, huddled together not for heat, but the warmth of a family's love. As they dried off their colours became apparent. Their mixed heritage showed.

Crash nudged each one in turn as he and Susanna named them and began to get to know them. The first male was white, except for black socks on each leg that came up to his ankles. They had long agreed on what to name their

children, so Crash held him up as if offering him to God. "Welcome, Leontallash," he said with all the dignity of a long-held ritual.

The second child, a female, was tortoise-shelled in colour like her mother. She, too, was held high and named: "Kintallash."

The third raised Crash's brows in wonder. He always knew that their children would be a mix of both their worlds.

"He's a peculiar colour," Susanna said in amazement. "Even for people of my world."

Crash tilted his head to the side. "He's not exactly tawny, either. I'm not sure what you'd call him." His lips formed a smirk. "I'm sure Scanner would know."

Susanna had to agree. On Judd's homeworld, he was a bit of a cat-lover and his people had names for all kinds of feline colour schemes.

Once more Crash held him aloft. "Welcome Huntallash," he said cheerfully.

Last, but not least, Crash turned to the smallest of the four, an all-black kit like Crash had been so many years before. For a moment, he felt a pang of sorrow for her. Although things were changing on Cait, there would be many who would reject her because of her colouring. All the same, he took comfort from the knowledge that his friends would never do that to her. He reached down and stroked the tiny child's back lovingly. "I know you're going to find this world tough at times, little one. But don't worry,

I'll always be here to remind you that a black Cait can achieve the impossible, just like the Teacher did." He paused for a minute and changed his mind regarding what to call her. They had agreed on names for all their children, but he knew just what to give this ray of sunshine.

He gently lifted her aloft and said: "Welcome, Hopetallash."

Susanna was a little surprised at first that he had done so, but the choice pleased her. Hope was an appropriate name for a child born into a new world that was trying to overcome the prejudices of the past. "Well, at least you didn't call her Last-to-arrive-tallash," Susanna quipped. She gave her husband a tired, but completely content, smile and lay down to let her children feed.

As Crash bathed in the glory of being a new father while watching his new family bond, his wife could not help but pop the bubble for him. "My dear, don't you think you should tell the rest of your family the news?" she said. She was so tired it came out in a dreary mumble.

For a moment, Crash wasn't certain she had even said anything. He was so enamoured of his little brood that he almost forgot his wife. Just before Susanna felt the need to repeat herself, he realised not only that she had spoken, but what she had said. He felt silly for forgetting, but all the same, he had to tear himself away. "Will you be alright?" he asked, trying to find some excuse to remain.

Susanna was too tired to be polite. “Get out before I throw something at you,” she said in a low growl.

The ship’s captain hadn’t been married for such a short time that he didn’t recognise his cue to leave. There were times to assert himself and his authority as husband. This was not one of them. “I’ll be back soon,” he said, giving her a loving lick on the cheek. As Susanna simply groaned in response, the new father lightly stroked each of his children on the back. Partly to say, “I’ll be back”, and partly to confirm they were, in fact, real. With great reluctance, he opened the door and stepped out into the corridor where his sister and mother had been waiting.

Crash thought that they had obviously been there for some time as they had dragged a cushion into the hall and were curled up on it, chatting. It was only then that he checked the ship’s chronometer. They had been locked away for over four hours.

Not wishing to wait a moment longer than necessary, both immediately sat up and began plying him with questions.

“Is Susanna OK?”

“Are the kits OK?”

“What sex are they?”

“What colour are they?”

Clearly unable to answer all the questions at once, Crash simply put up his paws and waited a moment. His family got the hint and shut up.

With great delight he informed them: “Susanna’s fine, just tired. The kits are fine and are feeding. Two of each and they’re a real mixture.”

Manny got in next with a quick-fire “What did you name them?”

He spoke and they approved. Both realised the honour they had bestowed on Kintallash by naming her after her uncle’s lost love from the civil war.

Pashtallash then stepped forward and took her son’s shoulder in her paw. “Krashtallash, it’s time for you to resume your duties as this ship’s captain,” she said, using the full force of her motherly prerogative. “The crew needs you. Leave Susanna and the kits to us.”

Crash shook his head. “Mother, she said she wants to be left alone,” he said.

Pash chuckled. “Son, there are some things you will never understand about females,” she said sagely. “One of them is that there are times when husbands are best off doing something else while the women are taking care of each other.”

True to form, Crash did not understand, but then he would not doubt his mother’s wisdom either. She had been there before with him and his siblings. He reminded himself that she, of them all, would know what she was doing. “I won’t pretend to understand,” he said graciously. He glanced at Manny. “I’ll see you at the end of my shift,” he said, giving her an order without it sounding like one. With

their short staff, the command duties had been divided between himself, Manny, Ghost and Scanner who was looking after the Bridge whilst he was with Susanna.

His sister gave him a simple smile and said: "Yes, Captain," before giving him a surprise hug and loving lick. "Congratulations, Shrallal," she said, overjoyed for him and feeling his emotions through their touch.

Crash left them and began walking down the corridors. At every turn he met crew members who gave him some kind of acknowledgement that they were aware the *J.R.* had four new passengers. By the time he got to the Bridge Crash was practically walking on air.

As he entered Scanner stood and gave him a hearty handshake. "Welcome, brother Dad," he said jovially. "How does it feel to have the weight of the world on your shoulders?"

Scanner's attempt at humour went partially over Crash's head. "Firstly, I didn't know there was a fraternity among fathers," he said, slightly confused. "Secondly, I already have the weight of finding the Federation flagship. What could get heavier than that?"

His brother-in-law's eyes went a little wide as he realised Crash had so much to learn about being a father. Truth be told, he was in the same boat. However, Judd had at least already begun to paddle.

"Have we gotten back in contact with Starfleet, yet?" Crash asked.

Judd glanced in the direction of their communications board. "Nothing from any Starbases or HQ. However, we've made intermittent contact with Memory Alpha, so we've been able to upload some emails in microbursts. We've had a few replies and requests for further information." Judd shrugged. The man seemed to deflate before Crash's eyes. "All I can tell you from what we've got so far is that the whole galaxy is starting to look like Humpty Dumpty."

This time Crash did nothing more than twitch his whiskers in annoyance. He had told Judd many times that many of his favourite home spun stories were completely wasted on him.

Judd quickly picked up on his brother's mood, putting up his hands and shaking them in surrender. "Okay, okay. What ah am sayin' is that the whole fabric of space-time throughout the galaxy is cracked. *That's* why we've been given the task of finding Piper. Starfleet is stretched too thin at the moment as they've got every available resource tasked to finding the cause and puttin' a stop to it before this gets worse than is already has."

Crash's eyes widened in shock as the enormity of their problem sank in. He sucked in a breath and asked: "Are you saying that this is *progressing?"*

Scanner sighed, letting the cracks in his good mood show. It wasn't often that something truly bothered him. His southern accent thickened the more he spoke. "Yup,"

he said, letting the finality that he felt show in his eyes. "Starfleet projects that, if we can't get this fixed, all spaceflight will cease in two months." At this point he grimaced and scratched the back of his head nervously. "That'll be the least of our problems, though."

The new father was finding his levity quickly being deflated. He had just welcomed his children into a universe that was disintegrating before his eyes. "What else?"

The engineer waved his commander to the Conn and let him sit down. Neither of them had noticed the silence that pervaded the deck. Everybody was listening with every fibre of their being. Once seated, Crash bade him to continue as Scanner took the vacant navigator's chair to face him.

"The time distortions have already disturbed the orbits of some worlds. Not much so far, but there is a real fear that planets are soon going to be knocked around like billiard balls." As Judd spoke the reality of their situation was beginning to sink in. His eyes widened in shock as the image played itself out in his mind. Planets began spinning off on their own, some becoming wanderers and dying, frozen. Others falling into the sun and burning up long before they hit its surface. Either way, not only billions would die, but perhaps reality as they knew it would end.

Krashtallash sat in awe as the information sank in. It was almost too big to wrap his thoughts around. The

universe was dying. "Do they know was caused it?" he asked, his voice tight and rough.

At that, Judd shrugged. "Starfleet didn't say. Frankly, I don't think they have the faintest idea. There is one thing I *do* know, though," he said with a faint trace of hope.

"What's that?"

"The *Millennium* was the ship tasked with finding the source of the anomalies before she disappeared." He slapped his hands on his knees and suddenly stood. "Ah have to go and tell all this to Manny," he said sadly. "I'm pretty sure she already knows how I feel. Now I have to tell her *why."*

Crash watched him go and found he did not envy Judd. It would be a terrible truth to tell his wife. The thought of his newborn kits came to him, and he suddenly felt very angry. How could this happen to him and his family! He wanted to lash out and vent his feelings, but the chair he sat on reminded him of his obligations. He had a crew to lead.

He also had a family to save. He was not going to go down without a fight. His gaze turned to Ghost who was eyeing him expectantly. She had listened to the whole conversation without a word. She could see the anger in him. She also knew he was not a male to take this lying down.

"Is there any way we can make this thing go faster?" he asked.

She gave him a slight grin. "I'm glad you asked."

Chapter Three

Two weeks later, the *Jolly Roger* entered the orbit of Argelius. It was the second planet in the system and reminded one a little of Earth with its clouded blue/green surface. As ports-of-call went, the world was a paradise. Its beaches were beautifully sanded, its seas azure blue and its mountain ranges a mixture of sheer rock face and gentle slopes topped by snow dusted peaks.

The people of Argelius were known for their hospitality, but also for their lack of ambition. Their docile manner led them to use off-worlders to run their administration branches of their government. Their lackadaisical manner had led their world to a generally run-down state. If a doorknob came off, a local would say: "Oh, well. I'll fix it later." "Later" did not always come.

It was a world that most of the Starfleet crew of the *J.R.* had visited before. It was a much-frequented port for ships looking for shore leave. Well placed in the space lanes, it was also a great place for people to do business. So, it was no surprise to Caitlin that it took a few minutes to wait for a place to be offered them in orbit.

Once there, they put in a request to speak with the Orbital Controller. Unlike many other Federation worlds, Argelius did not sport a huge, mushroom shaped Starbase. Instead, it maintained an older satellite that was not much

more than a glorified transporter station. If a visiting ship did not have transport capabilities, the crew could shuttle across, board and use the large transporter facilities to beam to any place available to them on the side of the planet facing it at the time. Curiously, it did not maintain a geosynchronous orbit, but followed the sunrise, allowing it to be partially powered by the sun's rays which were collected by its enormous, fanning solar panels.

From the Bridge's overhead speaker, Krashtallash heard in a dry monotone: "The Controller is presently busy. Your call is important to us, so please wait and we will get back to you shortly."

A collective groan was heard throughout the *J.R.'s* bridge. For hundreds of years, beings of all sizes, shapes and genders had to endure being put on hold and listen to the local version of elevator music.

Argelian music sounded like something some ancient gypsies might play during a night of hard drinking. It was pleasant, but discordant.

In the Command Chair, Krashtallash drummed his nails on the armrest and wondered if anyone was even home. A previous visit had convinced him Argelians were largely lazy to the point of indolent. Only Gillian's presence on the *Millennium*, serving as a bartender, gave him any hope for the locals. She had an excellent work ethic and a very keen mind. She also had an uncanny knack of knowing what you wanted to drink before you even asked for it.

He corrected himself. No, before you even realised that was the drink you desired.

"Uh, hello?" The voice came with a visual on the main screen. The Controller was a blue-skinned Andorian, a people well known for their efficiency and almost paranoid concern for their people's well-being.

However, this person broke the mould. He seemed almost timid and spoke to him with a near starstruck reverence. "Captain Krashtallash, your reputation precedes you. I am Controller Shrig. Welcome to Argelius."

At the helm, Caitlin shot her commander a look. She had no idea what was going on.

Manny caught her eyes and gave her a twinkle in return. Her unspoken message was clear. She would tell her all about it later.

Crash gave Shrig an amiable smile which was totally lost on the controller. "Thank you, Controller Shrig. I trust you received our request for immediate resupply of our vessel."

Shrig frowned, looked about the mass of messy paperwork on his desk and gave him a sheepish grin. "I'm sorry, Captain. I've received no such message to that effect."

As Crash's whiskers bristled in annoyance at the waste of time, the Andorian said: "However, we do have a free berth on landing pad Genoa that you're welcome to use.

I will do my best to get things moving for you. However, you are aware of how things are done on Argelius."

From her place at the security console, Manny muttered: "Glaciers move faster."

Krashtallash was furious at the delay. With space/time coming apart around them the last thing they needed was to waste time in the slowest port in the Federation. However, his paws were tied. He had no idea how long they might be gone, and they needed to be prepared. Never mind the *Jolly Roger's* deuterium gathering Bussard Collectors were not the most effective. It was something he was going to have to take up with Scanner some time. Their ship could not operate for long periods of time without gassing up the old-fashioned way.

"Permission to land?" he growled, not hiding his feelings.

Shrig looked like he had just disappointed his father. "I apologise, Captain. With all the distortions in subspace, it seems your message was lost. I will do my best to get things moving for you."

Crash's nose twitched, sending a ripple through his long whiskers. All the same, he knew all too well the situation and that yelling at people would not always get you what you wanted. In fact, on Argelius, it made no difference at all. He had once growled at a local and gotten a slightly startled expression before the sleepy look dropped once more. "Thank you for your assistance, Controller Shrig. We

are beginning our descent now." He nodded at Ghost, who took that as her cue. "Please do your best to expedite our departure," he added, with just a hint of a growl. "Starfleet is counting on us to complete our mission as quickly as possible."

For all Shrig's previous kow-towing, he gave Crash a look that said: "I wish I had a credit for every time I've heard that." "I understand, Captain. Argelius welcomes you and your crew, and we hope your stay is a pleasant one."

With that said, the screen winked off and the crew was treated to a visual of the fire of re-entry as the *J.R.* descended through the outer layers of the planet's atmosphere. For their borrowed Cait militia crew, the sight was somewhat disturbing as Ghost brought them in quickly. However, those who knew her well were quite aware that she was trying to have them docked in a minimum of time.

Crash turned to his sister. "Talk to the local Starfleet contingent. I want to know if and when the *Millennium* made orbit and her last known trajectory."

Manny nodded. "Aye," then opened a channel.

The captain then turned his attention to his engineer. "Scanner, can we do anything while we're here to improve our B.C.s?" he asked, referring to their fuel situation.

Judd tipped his head to the side and considered. "It's possible," he said after a moment. "Let me see what ah can do."

Crash tapped his intra-ship comm button. “All hands, prepare for landing.”

It was time. Crash tore open the sealed orders and quickly scanned the contents. It mostly told him what he already knew. That the *Millennium* had been tasked with finding the root cause of the temporal anomalies.

However, the orders made it clear that, in his current status as a Lieutenant Commander, he could not be read in on the rest as it was beneath his security level. It could only be revealed to captains.

So, due to the state of emergency he had been granted the battlefield commission of captain – effective immediately upon receipt of these orders, which must be logged.

Stunned, Crash re-read the document. His eyes widened in astonishment. Incredulously, he turned over the piece of paper half expecting the words: Ha! Ha! on the back, as if this was some cosmic joke. He looked at the writing again and even checked the signature on the bottom. Sure enough, it was signed, in pen, by the Detailer himself.

Wow. His dream of becoming a Starship Captain was now a reality. A good part of him was elated, especially as this had come in record time.

The other part of him was well aware that, under the current circumstances, it could also be a very short-lived commission. The thought kept him grounded.

He glanced to the side and saw his sister watching him. The look in her eyes told him she was aware of his feelings, but not the reason.

He looked around the Bridge and noticed that everyone who wasn't busy was watching him expectantly.

He was about to say something when he realised there had been another page in the envelope. He slid it out and read the contents. Their instructions were simple. He had to log into Memory Alpha with his new rank and supply the code written below. Only then could he be given the remainder of what he needed to know.

He looked up at Caitlin. "Lieutenant, proceed with the landing. I'll be in my office if you need me." He turned to Manny and gave her a simple nod to follow. As he stepped off the Bridge, he flipped open his communicator and summoned Scanner.

Within minutes, the *U.S.S. Jolly Roger* had set down, its skin still cooling but the crew wasted no time. The cargo hatch opened wide a moment later and the largely Caitian crew members swarmed out and began hooking up the deuterium hoses as well as acquiring food stuffs and other necessary equipment.

At the bow, the boarding ramp lowered and soon the ship's officers made their way out, accompanied by their families. Susanna and Crash's kits were still tiny, however during the previous two weeks their eyes had opened, and

they had begun walking. The three larger kits paced between them as they walked side-by-side, however the much weaker Hope rode on her mother's neck.

As they walked through the market, Krashtallash rolled over the message he had received regarding the *Millennium's* whereabouts in his mind. The local contingent had given him their mothership's last vector and the date of their departure – approximately a month before. Finding the ship after such a long period of time after vanishing seemed a daunting task, and he despaired that all they might wind up finding was floating wreckage. The thought brought mental images of frozen bodies drifting amongst the metal, including the faces of people he knew and loved. They brought him horrors.

At that point, he caught the thought and reminded himself that it was only one possible outcome. He felt the weight of leadership then, as he realised he needed to be a positive influence on his people. If he acted as if he expected only death, it would bring his entire crew down. He needed to maintain the air of expectancy that any moment now they would find the *Millennium* intact and its people well. May the worst that had happened to them be that they simply ran out of fuel.

He knew they had a number of hours, at the very least, before the *J.R.* was ready to depart. The last two weeks had been trying for all his people, and he was considering giving them all shore leave for the rest of the day. The odds were

that a few hours more would not affect the outcome. The rest would do his people good.

To his right, Scanner walked with Lila wrapped over his shoulders, her tail often flicking up unconsciously, tickling her father's nose. She and her brother, who walked at their father's side, looked about them in wonder. This was their first visit to a new world, Crash reminded himself.

Like any other child, it wasn't long before he heard: "Dad, can I have one of those? Mum, I *need* one!" For the sake of some peace, Scanner and Manny bought one plaything each for their children, using some gold pressed latinum for credit they had brought with them. However, Scanner placed them in a bag and gave them a knowing smile.

"Y'all can play with them when we get home," he said kindly, with just a hint of steel.

Lila's eyes went wide. Her voice reflected her despair. "You mean we have to wait until we get back to Grandma's house on Cait!"

Scanner looked his adopted daughter in the eye, which wasn't hard considering her proximity. "No, I mean when we get back to the ship."

The girl relaxed on his shoulders and Scanner felt the tension leave her small body. He reached up with his right hand and gave her a loving scratch between the ears, which started her purring.

While Krashtallash's children were still a way off from becoming self-aware, they instinctively stayed within the relative safety of their parent's protection and field of view. He gave his wife a loving glance and smile, which she returned. He could tell she was enjoying this as much as he was.

He had only allowed an hour for their tour and R&R, and a glance at his chronometer told him that half of this period had already elapsed. He was just considering turning back when he heard a gasp from Scanner.

"What is it?" Manny asked her husband, beating Crash to it.

Scanner stepped ahead of the group and pointed further down the street and slightly upward. They followed his gaze and saw an old freighter that had been converted into a store front about a hundred metres away.

"Would you look at that, y'all?" he exclaimed. "I haven't seen a *Swallow*-class freighter for years!" Without hesitating, Scanner strode straight through the crowd towards the aging starship.

Crash took it in as he drew closer. It was an odd design, with the cockpit/bridge sitting above and slightly forward of the cargo bay, as if on a neck. The ship sported short, retractable aerofoil wings that aided its atmospheric flight, as well as a T-tail for the same purpose. Sweeping out of the tapering body from the rear were swept back warp nacelle pylons that were reminiscent of the *Enterprise-A*,

each tipped by pocket sized nacelles. Overall, the ship was about a hundred and fifty metres from the nose of the cockpit to the tip of its tail, which was not very long as starships went.

"It doesn't look like much," Crash told his brother-in-law when he caught up with him.

Scanner turned from gazing up at the vessel and gave him an almost pitying look. "Come on, Crash. Don't tell me you've never heard of these ships!"

He shook his head, as did his sister and wife. Collectively, they said: "No."

The engineer shook *his* head in wonder and turned back to the craft. "Neanderthals," he muttered to himself, not realising the word meant nothing to his family. Ghost, who had lagged behind them for most of the walk, stepped up next to him and joined him in his appreciation of the vessel. "She's a beauty," she said in wonder. "I wonder what they'd take for it."

Scanner looked down at the pilot. "I never would have thought you'd be interested in becoming a boomer," he said, using the colloquialism for freighter operators.

Caitlin gave him a light chuckle. "No, sir. These ships were often used by pirates because of their speed and agility. I've got to admit there's a kind of attraction for that kind of life."

"Arrrgh!" Judd said, mimicking a sixteenth-century ocean-going pirate. He continued his impression. "The

only thing missing would be a patch and a parrot, me hearty!"

Caitlin got in on the act. She gave him a light punch on the arm and said: "You'll never be catchin' me swabbing the deck, you lily-liver'd scoundrel!"

Judd was about to continue when he heard a light cough behind him and the two of them turned to see a large collection of felines who were looking at them in total wonder. Even Lila, who was still sitting on his shoulders, looked at him in confusion. Both humans gave them an embarrassed smile. "I'll tell you all about it later," he said.

He was rescued at that point by the owner of the store. At first glance, he appeared human and fairly advanced in years. Scanner guessed his age around seventy. Although he was older, he was very fit, his thinning hair had turned silver years before. His accent reminded them of the *Millennium's* helmsman, Jason Nunn. For some reason he was wearing a particularly delighted grin. "G'day, people. Welcome to the Bad Habit Bar and Café." He stepped to one side and offered them his hospitality.

While Crash was uncertain, Scanner and Ghost needed no further encouragement. They made their way inside under the pink and blue neon sign. Their hands forced, Crash led the rest of his family in, still dubious. The human seemed friendly enough, but any bar named "Bad Habit" tended to bring all kinds of nefarious activities to

mind. He looked at his wife and said with all the confidence he could muster: "It'll be alright. Just keep the kits close."

"You don't have to ask me twice," Susanna Llash said dubiously. She used her prehensile tail to draw the kits a little closer.

As they passed through the entrance, which was just the open front cargo door hatch, they found the place was anything but seedy. In fact, it was brightly lit. The spacious cargo bay had been converted into a dining area that consisted largely of a bar that graced one wall, wooden, padded, earth-style booths that lined the far end, and a number of cushions that littered the floor in true Argelian style.

Their host offered them the cushions. "The locals don't like having to go too far before they can sit down," he said. It was obviously an insider joke he had told many times before.

Along the left-hand side of the room, a large landscape mural had been painted. Scanner walked over and examined it and wondered to himself whether he could just step through it and onto the undulating blue/green hills. He could see clouds that seemed to be flowing over gaps between the mountains and grassy knolls in the foreground. To his surprise, he saw cows and sheep grazing in one place, and what appeared to be a light brown dog looking at them hungrily.

He stepped to the right and followed the picture and found kangaroos and emus running free in the picture. Although he'd never been to Australia, Scanner recognised the hallmarks of that earthly nation.

He turned to his left and saw Caitlin looking over the mural beside him. She seemed as fascinated as he was. "Are they cows and sheep?" she asked him, curious.

"Sheep?" Crash and Manny said together, their eyes lit up with the desire to devour one. Followed by their mother, they sauntered over to the mural and gazed at the landscape. They had no idea which world it displayed, but the notion of seeing one of the extinct – on their world – creatures was something they could not resist.

As they all gazed at the image, their host appeared at their sides carrying a large tray with a number of glasses and small bowls on it. He handed Caitlin a Guinness, Scanner a bourbon, Crash, Manny and Pashtallash catnips, Susanna a cappuccino and he put down bowls of lactose free milk for the young ones.

As one, they all turned towards their host. Crash spoke for them all. "How did you know what we like to drink?"

The older human gave them a grin that looked very familiar. "I should know, Captain Krashtallash," he said. "I'm Jason Nunn."

Scanner looked him in the eye, not wanting to believe his senses. Sure, the man did look like an older version of

the *Millennium's* helmsman, but what the man had just said was just plain ridiculous. "Bull!"

Five minutes later, the group were all sitting comfortably on cushions in the centre of the room. "Jason Nunn" had closed the bar and shut the front hatch and joined them after pouring himself a VB beer. He was too old to be put off by their constant attention and he took it in his stride.

"Stare all you like," he said with a shrug. "I've been waiting for you lot to arrive for fifty-odd years."

Crash took up the interrogation. "How can you prove what you're saying is true?"

Nunn put out his arm. "Feel free to take a blood sample for a DNA comparison," he said amiably. He gave them a sly look, like he was about to reveal a great secret. "However, I've got something that's a whole lot better."

He took a remote control out of his back pocket and pointed it at the wall. An old-fashioned digital screen came on and a video, taken elsewhere on the ship, began playing. The hand-held camera jostled for a moment, then the image focussed on someone they all found very familiar.

"Hello Krashtallash. You're watching this video because I need you to know a few things before you take another step in your mission to find me." The voice, the image, were unmistakably those of Captain Piper. In civilian clothes, but definitely her. "I know you're considering whether this video could have been forged.

Scanner," she turned her attention to her engineer, "I know that was a still under the sheet."

Scanner smiled at the memory. On their first mission on the new *Millennium*, he had tried to find somewhere to stash an illegal still on board the ship. Piper had caught him in the act but had let him off that time. "It's Piper," he said with a smile.

Piper's image paused for a moment as she waited for the information to sink in. Confident she was now going to be believed, she said: "As you may have guessed, I'm about fifty years in the past. Don't worry. I'm not planning on staying here for long. However, there is a problem. The *Millennium* has been caught by a ship from the 31st century around a world that is home to the Guardian of Forever."

As Piper once again paused, most in their little circle had no idea what she was referring to. All except Scanner, Crash and Manny. Unlike the other two, Scanner knew what it was and where he could find it from experience. Like the rest of the original *Enterprise* crew who had been involved in its discovery, he had been sworn to secrecy.

Crash sniffed in Jason's direction. "You smell different," he said by way of accusation.

Nunn simply shrugged once more. "I'm getting old, Captain. I'm probably going off."

Susanna nudged her husband for his suspicious nature. To give her Crash some reassurance, she asked Jason: "What's my nickname?"

Nunn stared at her for a second as he tried to recall. "Hell, Ambassador, it was a long time ago." He took a sip of his beer and said: "I think it was Fuzzy, or Floppy. No! Fluffy. Ambassador Fluffy." He gave Crash a brief smile. "Some things will never be forgotten."

Even given the fact the man before him was fifty years older than the last time he saw him, Crash found it a little disrespectful being referred to so familiarly. His eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and Nunn was sensitive enough to pick up on his change in demeanour.

"Sorry, Captain," he said. "I haven't been Starfleet for a long time since I got stuck here, a man well and truly out of time. I knew you got the promotion, but this is, for you, the first time I've seen you since."

The more Jason spoke, the more he put Crash at ease. Indeed, the last time his fellow officer from the *Millennium* had seen him he was still a Lieutenant Commander and Jason was still sensitive to that fact. "A battlefield commission," he said by way of explanation.

"Ah," Jason said. "Gotcha." The former lieutenant gave him a wink. "I knew that, of course. I'll find that out when you get to the Guardian."

Ghost had watched the two converse and wondered why he had been left behind. All the same, she found it difficult to listen to the males and hear what the captain had to say to them on the screen as well. Her patience was

wearing out. "If you two are finished? Jason, can you replay the last minute? We've missed something important."

"Hmmm?" Jason seemed a little lost in thought for a moment, then said: "Oh! I'll just back it up a little." He used the remote and the image of Piper repeated the information they had missed.

It took a couple of seconds before they caught where they'd left off. Piper continued giving them information regarding the tactics required to defeat the ship from the future. She finished with: "There's something you'll need in my old quarters on the *Pterodactyl.* You'll find it in the top drawer next to the bed. Give it to Merete when you see her. She'll know what to do with it." She reached forward as if to shut off the camera, then changed her mind. "Oh, and by the way. Congratulations Crash, Ambassador, on the birth of your kits. Don't worry, Hope will be fine."

If there was any lingering doubt about the authenticity of the film, it was erased with that one line. There was no way Piper could have known the name of Crash and Susanna's youngest.

Manny's whiskers arched forward in curiosity. "*Pterodactyl?"* she asked, curious. "What kind of name is that?"

Lila spoke up in her child-like fashion, all curiosity. "What's a terracactus?"

Drallah lightly cuffed his sister's ear. "Pterodactyl, silly."

"Bet you don't know what it is!"

"Bet I do!"

Manny cuffed them both. "I know you don't, because *I* don't," she said. She looked at her husband, hoping he could rescue her.

He gave her a confident smile as he thought back to his childhood school days. "A pterodactyl was a creature that was thought to be extinct on Earth from many years ago." He then let her in on a little secret. "Until they found Jurassic Planet," he said. He took a sip of his bourbon and continued. "It's in the Beta Crucis system. There's an M-class planet there filled with dinosaurs that have been long dead on Earth." He gave them a slight shrug. "More evidence for the Preservers, I guess. Anyhow, a pterodactyl was a large, flying reptile with a long beak and sharp teeth. Funny how they turned out to be fruit eaters."

Mimicking Judd, Crash said: "Anyhow, I'd like to see the captain's quarters. She left something for us, and I want to know what it was."

The *Pterodactyl's* hull was old, but anything but sagging. In fact, Scanner wondered to himself what was keeping her from flying. The metal plating under their feet creaked a little, but that wasn't uncommon for ships of her day.

Jason Nunn went to lead Judd, Crash, and Manny up the stairs and through the aging vessel. When Ghost made to follow, Jason put up his hand, no.

"Why not?" she asked, a little annoyed.

"Try not to be offended, Ghost," Jason said, respectfully. "It's not for your eyes as you weren't on the mission."

When she looked at Crash askance, she found him in agreement. "There are inherent risks with missions that involve time travel, Lieutenant. I'm sorry. Please wait here with the others."

Caitlin didn't have to like it, but she did respect it. She swallowed her pride and remained, while she watched Jason and her captain go upstairs.

Curiously, Crash found it was impeccably clean and well maintained. When they reached the top of the ship over the cargo bays, they found the crew quarters. Over each door was a faded, painted name. First, they saw Crash, which he recognised in his own handwriting, then Manny and Scanner painted by her paw, then Jason Nunn's quarters, Carman's, followed by Piper's, then, surprisingly, someone named Piper Silayna.

All the same, Crash realised they were not here on a tour. Time was still of the essence. He directed them all to the captain's cabin. Each looked at the others, wondering if someone else would open the door.

"I don't know about you," Scanner said, shuffling his feet. "But I still feel like I'm invading Piper's privacy."

"How can we be?" his wife said. "She's the one who pointed us in this direction."

For all Manny's bravado, her husband saw straight through her. "So, why haven't you opened the door yet?"

"To tell you the truth," Judd said in his older, wizened voice. "I haven't been in there since the Captain left all those years ago."

The door had been opened and Manny could not help but step through it. "If everyone else returned to the future, why are you still here?"

Jason shrugged. "I don't know. Ask the Guardian. It should have brought me home but didn't."

Krashtallash had a suspicion, but he kept it to himself. "What was the Captain's original plan for us finding this ship?"

Nunn went quiet for a moment as he thought back. He didn't have to try too hard. He had been playing those final days over and over in his mind for the past half century. "She had put the autopilot on to take the old girl to a place between here and the Guardian. The idea was that the ship would be powered down with only the scanners still operational." He patted the wall affectionately. "She had been programmed to watch for the *Jolly Roger's* signature and signal you when you came near."

Scanner made a face. “Hell of a gamble, if you ask me.”

“The Captain had faith.”

Judd looked at Crash and realised he had already come to the same conclusion. The Guardian had left him behind to ensure the *Pterodactyl* would be found. He wondered to himself if Jason knew this, or that, if he did, was he simply in denial.

Crash broke the moment by taking hold of the door lock and sliding it open. It gave with a dry metal squeal but didn’t resist too much. As he stepped into the small cabin he asked: “So, Mister Nunn, what have you been up to these last fifty years?”

Piper’s cabin was painted in her favourite purple, this time in a lavender. The bed was still made, the synthetic sheets faded but likely to outlast the rest of the ship. Her desk held her log – a handwritten book that Manny delighted in opening. She was surprised when Crash snapped it shut. “We can’t read it,” he said. “Not yet. It’s part of our universe’s past, but it’s still *our future*. I don’t think I want to know what’s going to happen next.”

At first, Manny felt like her brother was over-reacting and part of her rebelled. However, she remembered her place and trusted in his judgement. “Okay, Captain.” She handed the book to him. “You keep it. I’m too tempted to read it.”

He took it reverently and put it under his arm. He then turned to Piper's small, metal desk and opened the top drawer. There were assorted tools and office supplies – and a small cardboard box labelled: For Crash.

Nobody said a word as he lifted it out and opened the lid. Inside was a small device that none of them recognised. It looked vaguely like something medical. Attached to it was a simple note. Give this to Merete as soon as you see her. She'll know what to do with it. *Do not lose it.* Piper.

Closing the lid, Crash turned to go. He had seen all he wanted to see. "Let's get back to the *J.R.*" he said. "I want us to get going as soon as we can."

"You don't want to see the other cabins?" Jason asked, surprised.

"We'll see them soon enough is my guess," Crash said. At the door's threshold, he added: "Do you want to come with us?"

There was no hesitation. Jason shook his head, no. "I'm already there," he said. "Besides, I'm an old man and I've got family here."

At that, all three of them looked at him. "From home?" Manny asked.

"Nah," Jason said with a smile. "I've got three children and five grandchildren. One of my kids you already know." He looked at them enigmatically and left it at that.

Scanner spluttered: "You're not going to tell us?"

"Where'd be the fun in that?" He looked at their puzzled faces. He waved them off. "Don't worry, you'll figure it out." As he guided them downstairs, he added one more thing.

"When you get back to the *Millennium* don't tell the younger me what happened." He ran his fingers through his remaining, short hair. "It was hard enough getting used to being left behind," he said, his voice becoming hoarse. "But I've made a good life here and now I wouldn't have it any other way."

As they left the *Pterodactyl*, Crash took a final chance to say goodbye and shake his friend's hand. He couldn't shake the feeling he was never going to see this version of Jason again. "Take care of yourself," he said.

Jason gave him a weary smile and said: "I'd say the same to you, but I already know you will."

Chapter Four

It only took a day for the *J.R.* to be resupplied and get on its way, and while Krashtallash nearly wore a rut in the bridge deck plates, he knew he just needed to be patient. If it was true what had become of his beloved *Millennium,* and he was tempted to take the older Jason Nunn at his word, not to mention the video of the Captain, then time meant very little to those on board at present. They were stuck in a stasis field where time had ground to a halt.

Needing something to do, he sat in the Conn and toggled the log button.

> *Captain's Log, U.S.S. Jolly Roger Stardate 8811.2*
> *We're en route to the world known only as the home of the Guardian of Forever as its actual name is classified. In her video message to us from the past, Captain Piper gave us the co-ordinates which Commander Sandage has verified.*
> *The video also informed me that the* Millennium *is currently held there in a stasis field by a Time Agent from the future called Daniels. I've done a check of Memory Alpha – when the link holds – and found only a few scraps of information about him, most of which has been classified way over my head.*

The Captain gave me enough information to formulate a plan. I can only hope that we got all the details right, or we could find ourselves stuck in time as well. Our best speed at this point is warp four as the fuzzies seem to be increasing in size, density and number. Lieutenant Ryan is being kept on her toes navigating around them. It's like trying to run through a jungle. One misstep and we will find ourselves dropping out of warp – or worse.

At least we're in a better position fuel-wise. Commander Sandage managed to pull off a minor miracle and upgrade our Bussard Collectors whilst in port. They're now operating at 120% of previous capacity.

He knew he still had a few days before they got anywhere near the planet, let alone the system. Yet he found himself getting anxious. He had led ships into battle before, but this one remained untested, never mind its mixed crew. He mused that, while he found the feeling unworthy of one in command, he had to admit his feelings to himself and deal with them.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed his sister glancing his way once again. He saw the concern in her eyes and knew she was well aware of his feelings. Her ability to read people had been growing over the years since they had

reunited, and he realised that, in his current state, he had to be fairly broadcasting his feelings to her.

He turned to her fully and let her see his gratefulness for her sympathies. There were times he really appreciated being able to serve in Starfleet with family around to help carry him through.

Lieutenant Manny Sandage simply nodded and went back to scanning ahead of the ship. While Ghost piloted/navigated the ship, Manny kept her informed on the space ahead by pushing the scanners to the limit and constantly updating their navigation charts. If they were ever going to get there, the whole crew would have to be contributing.

She noticed with a look at the chronometer that it was time for Beta Shift to take over. While she wanted to keep an eye on the space ahead, she had to remind herself once more that the others on this ship were just as qualified as she to perform the task.

She wondered for a moment whether her brother had remembered to order the shift change. With the seconds counting down, she almost spoke up when Crash shot up out of his chair and gave the order.

"Beta shift, take over."

The change meant that both Crash and Manny could now take a break, but it would be shorter than most. Both of them – and Scanner – were pulling double duties. Crash would now head down to Engineering and help out there,

while Scanner took the Conn. Manny went off shift altogether but would return for Gamma Shift to command.

As Scanner stepped out of the turbo-lift and came on duty, Manny noticed Ghost almost reluctantly surrendering the helm to Lieutenant Manning. The young man was capable. However, everyone knew he wasn't Caitlin Ryan. Manny found herself sympathising with him. It was quite a shadow to work under.

Crash headed down to Engineering in one lift, leaving Manny and Caitlin to catch the next one. Together, they took the other option rather than wait and stepped out the side door and into the corridor.

"I'm going to be glad when we get out of this mess," Caitlin said wearily. "I need a break." She paused for a moment and stretched her back, her hands supporting her as she bent backwards.

Manny sighed; bone weary herself. "I know what you mean. I can still see fuzzies in my head as I walk. It looks like the ship's been overrun by tribbles." She reached out in front of her as if she could touch one of the hairy creatures. Then she too stretched in her marvellous feline manner that made humans envious. It was if she was made of rubber. "I tell you what, I'm glad my mother is here. Otherwise, I don't know what I'd do without her here to watch the kits while I work."

Ghost's head had been on driving the ship for so long she had temporarily forgotten that her friend had a family

waiting for her. For a moment she found herself rather envious. "How do you manage?" she asked.

The white feline looked at her and knew that Caitlin's question went way beyond the obvious. "It's like everything else in life," she said. "If you want it, you get it. And once you have it, you have to work your tail off to keep it."

"Aren't you worried about how having children will affect your career?" The question was asked innocently, but Manny had to stop herself from reacting in irritation. She stayed quiet for a moment as she internalised her feelings. Caitlin realised she had stepped on a raw nerve. "Sorry. I didn't think before I opened my trap."

Manny thought for a second, then said in all sincerity: "I've come to realise that there's more to life than a career in Starfleet. I'll always be grateful to it for bringing me and Judd together, but since I met him, I've discovered that I also want a life with children in it." She turned and started walking again. "I hope we can manage that on the *Millennium* when we return, but if not, then it'll be time for us to retire and raise our kits elsewhere." She wiggled her whiskers speculatively. "Perhaps we'll return to Starfleet once they're grown."

Caitlin didn't say anything for a while as she considered Manny's words. Finally, she said: "Since I stuffed my back, I've had to do some soul-searching of my own. While I can continue for a while, the doctors have told me it's only a matter of time before my injury gets the better

of me. At that stage, I'll be repatriated home on an invalid's ticket." She rubbed her back, feeling betrayed by her pain. "It's going to be a pain in the ass."

Amantasandage fell a step behind Ghost and rubbed her friend's back gently through her brace, being careful to keep her claws sheathed.

The pilot moaned her appreciation. "Can I go off shift with you every day?" she asked wishfully, her face a picture of bliss.

Manny chuckled. "Sorry, my husband would get jealous."

Before she turned the corner Manny knew there was something terribly wrong. Multiple minds were screaming, their pain excruciating. Without thinking, she broke into a run and came to her brother's quarters as the door flew open and Susanna ran out cradling her youngest, Hope. She didn't have to look at the tiny person to know she was dreadfully ill. Her ribs were barely moving.

"Where is the doctor?" Susanna screamed.

Ghost took her by the elbow, looking in close at Hope. "What's the matter?" she said, concerned, but unaware of the seriousness of the situation.

Susanna looked at her as if she was not only out of her mind, but completely stupid. "My daughter's sick. I think she's dying. *What do you think is wrong with her?"* The last came out in a hysterical screech.

She was so aggressive Caitlin backed away defensively, her hands raised. "Look, I didn't mean anything by it." She turned to Manny, seeking help.

Fortunately for her, she knew what to do. She took her sister-in-law's paw and started dragging her down the hallway. "I'm taking you to sickbay," she said as calmly as she could. It wasn't easy for her. She couldn't shut out the cry in her mind that was coming from Susanna. She knew how desperate she was, and it was taking all her self-control to keep Susanna's feelings from impacting her own. "Ghost, call ahead and let him know we're coming!"

With Caitlin coming a distant, frightened third, her ear to her communicator, Manny marched them through the hallways. "I don't know what our resident medic can do for her, but he's going to fix Hope. That's what he's going to do." She was saying it as much for herself as she was for Susanna. The tiny, sick life in the crook of Susanna's arm was her niece. She was terrified for her.

It took a couple of minutes with Susanna wailing as she went, but they got there. As they approached the door, it whooshed open and their medic, Ishtalam, a Cait on loan from their reformed militia, was waiting. "Give her to me," he said, his tone brooking no argument.

Susanna let him take Hope and place her on the operating table. Automatically, the gauges lit up on the diagnostic board situated on the wall. Their announcement was dire. Hope's lifesigns were low and steadily falling.

As Ish worked, Manny tore herself away and stepped over to the wall. She toggled the communicator on. "Sickbay to Pashtallash." When her mother answered, she told her to go and watch the rest of Susanna's brood while they were in sickbay.

With that done, she turned back to see Ish working frantically to help her tiny niece. She noticed her ribcage was still moving, but only just. She stepped over and took Susanna's arm when she felt her sister-in-law's overwhelming desire to intervene and do something to help her child. She did her best to project a peaceful, tranquil feeling to her, but it had all the effect of a tennis ball on a brick wall. It just bounced off.

"What can I do?" Ghost said, wishing she could not only help but somehow redeem herself for her earlier comment.

Without looking up, Ish said: "You can be quiet and let me concentrate." He frowned for a second, then said: "On second thought. You can call her father. He needs to know."

Manny and Susanna recoiled. "What was I thinking?" Manny said, slapping her own cheek. She stepped back to the wall communicator and punched the button. "Sickbay to Captain Krashtallash, medical emergency. Come quickly." She did her best not to project the panic that was threatening to overwhelm her.

Crash replied within seconds. “What do you need me for?” he asked, curious and only mildly concerned.

“It’s Hope,” she said, the words coming out in a squeak through a very tight throat.

“I’ll be right there.”

Manny turned back, hoping that something had changed for the better. She prayed in the privacy of her thoughts, begging God to somehow intervene and save Hope. She didn’t realise her eyes were closed until she forced them open in time to see the heart rate monitor flat line.

As Susanna cried out “No!” and lunged forward, Ish beat her to it and scooped Hope up. He stepped over to the other wall and activated a panel next to an adult Cait sized drawer that Manny assumed was for storage for the dead. She stepped into his path and adamantly shook her head. “I’m not going to let you give up on her that easily.”

Ish growled at her. “If you don’t get out of my way, we’ll lose any chance of saving her.” He pushed past her roughly and slid open the drawer. Without preamble, he placed the unmoving kit on the tray and closed it with a slam. He then activated the module.

It came to life with a barely audible hum as Krashtallash vaulted into the room. He caught where everyone was looking and saw his daughter’s tiny form through the glass. “What are you doing?” he shouted.

Susanna was inconsolable. "Hope's dead," she said to herself, over and over. She slumped to the floor, Caitlin catching her and cradling her head in her lap.

Crash looked from her to his sister, who seemed conflicted. "Are you sure?" she said to Ishtalam.

The medic turned to his Captain and reported. "I've placed Hope in a stasis chamber to preserve her. There's nothing I can do."

The usually stalwart Captain felt like he had been stabbed through the heart. "What?" he said, trying to reconcile what he had seen and heard.

Ish stepped forward and drew Crash over to his wife. He spoke to both of them. "I believe Hope has an undiagnosed hole in her heart. The problem is that I have neither the equipment, nor the expertise to operate on her. I'm only a medic, not a doctor and certainly not a surgeon. That's why I've placed her in stasis."

Crash was beginning to understand. There was still hope. "What can we do?"

The middle-aged medic gave him the facts. "We have four days before Hope begins to deteriorate. Our stasis chambers aren't one hundred percent efficient. We need to get her to the nearest qualified surgeon as quickly as possible so her heart can be repaired."

Manny shook her head. "We're light years from Cait, Ish," she said, resigned. "There's no-one out here who can help."

At that, the medic threw them the only bone he could. "There is. Her name's Doctor Merete AndrusTaurustabrisk and we're already on our way to her." He looked his Captain in the eye to make certain he understood the gravity of the situation. "You have ninety-six hours to save your daughter."

Life and death are an accepted part of the Starfleet career. Nobody entering the organisation to serve their fellow beings thought it to be anything other. Sometimes people, good people, died. Friends would be mourned. It was a part of the job.

Of course, one did their best to prevent it from happening. Starfleet wasn't just a flying militia; it was a family. Its members knew that, as long as there was another of their kind nearby, someone had their back. Like the Marines of old, nobody got left behind. Starfleet took pride in that. All the same, sacrifices sometimes had to be made for the greater good. It was known and understood.

Even the possibility of losing the *Millennium* was accepted. All the same, it was not going to happen without a fight. The people of the *Jolly Roger* would see to that. They were going to do their level best to see that that mighty ship would live to fight another day.

However, things changed, as they always do, when children come into the equation. Word spread quickly that their captain's youngest child, Hope, was in stasis. Her only

hope for survival lay with the CMO of the *Millennium.* The only way she was going to be able to help her was to get the *Millennium* free of her captors. It was up to them.

A child, an innocent, needed them to be successful. So, the crew, who had already been giving 100% to the task, took it up another notch.

During the three days that had passed since Hope's collapse, the *Jolly Roger* flew more wildly, and faster, sometimes almost skimming the edges of fuzzies that got in their way so that they could get to their sister ship in time. It wasn't only Ghost that flew like she was possessed, it was Lieutenant Manning, whose skills had been increasing greatly under her tutelage and with all the practice of the previous days.

Engineering had worked to give the pilots 110% from the engines. Those scanning the void ahead pushed their equipment to report updates more and more frequently.

Nobody on board wanted to fail. It just was not an option.

In the midst of this whirlwind sat Krashtallash. He took his place in the Conn and took solace that his crew had made this personal. He could not help but notice their increased devotion to duty, and that they had brought their ETA forward an entire solar day.

All the same, they were pushing it close. As they neared the outer edge of the Guardian's solar system, he

knew they could not rush the next steps. They had to be taken deliberately and carefully.

As his people prepared, Crash's thoughts returned to his wife, as they had so many times before in the previous days. In his down time, he had done his best to comfort and console her, to give her hope that their child would live. He reminded her of Piper's message to them that Hope would be all right. That it would all work out.

However, all Susanna could see was her lifeless child being placed in stasis. She was practically inconsolable. She seemed to be deaf to his pleas.

He had to admit to himself that, even given Piper's message, he didn't hold out much hope. Too much needed to be accomplished in a short time.

He wished he could be with his Susanna, to remind her they still had three beautiful kits that were well and needed them both. She hadn't forgotten them, but even feeding them seemed to be a weight his wife found almost impossible to carry.

He was glad that his mother was on board to help. Pashtallash adored her multi-coloured grandchildren, and she was only too happy to cuddle, encourage and play with them. She was even on hand to help them learn the most basic of lessons – toilet training. His mother understood the source of Susanna's despair and there was nothing too great for her to do. Susanna and the kits were family, pure and simple.

From her post at the helm, Ghost turned to him. "It's time, Captain."

Their plan had been discussed, reviewed, and discussed some more. Everyone knew what to do. As Crash looked about him at his people, all gave him reassuring nods. They could do this.

As Caitlin slid out of her seat, Manning took over and hit his macro button, readjusting the console. He sat and waited for the order. He knew it wouldn't come just yet.

The *Jolly Roger* sat behind a fuzzy, using its time dilation effects to mask them from whatever ship was holding the *Millennium.* This was the only time in their entire journey that they were grateful for its existence.

As Ghost passed the captain, she put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It'll work, my friend," she whispered before disappearing into the turbolift.

The bridge crew waited, almost holding their breaths. The silence was fairly palpable. A few minutes later, the screen changed suddenly and was filled with the image of Caitlin's personal fighter – the *Spectre*. Painted all in black, the only reason they saw it at all was the ship's running lights and the light reflection off the cockpit glass. Even that was something Caitlin had an eye on fixing. From within, Caitlin gave them a cocky grin and quick salute.

Crash returned it, knowing she couldn't see it. All the same, she deserved it.

The wedge-shaped, but rapier deadly, vessel spun about and began to move around the fuzzy. Caitlin had spent a lot of her off hours honing the craft's sensors so she would have plenty of warning to avoid the invisible snares.

Under Manning's hand, the *Jolly Roger* moved to follow. At this point in their mission, it was Caitlin's job to navigate them through the minefield of fuzzies – they were at their highest density in the Guardian's system. Slowly at first, then more quickly, Ghost moved them into the system. Their target was the fourth planet, which was presently on their side of the sun, only a matter of minutes away.

"Keep sharp, people," Crash warned quietly. "We don't know what's out there waiting for us. We can't make the assumption that Daniels is alone."

At her post manning the Weapons console, Manny watched every direction she could. Her phaser pods were hot with plasma energy, and their photon torpedo launchers were loaded and ready to bear.

While they were within sight of one another, the two ships kept contact via an ultraviolet laser link, ensuring they could not be overheard.

"Bloody fuzzies are everywhere," Caitlin cursed. "They're going to slow us down something fierce."

Manning grinned. He was actually enjoying himself. "Just make sure you lead us through the biggest gaps, Ghost," he said cheerfully. "I don't want to lose a nacelle on our way past."

"Speak for yourself," Caitlin replied. "I have no intention of having to rebuild the *Spectre* again."

"You could always make it faster if you did." Manning grinned.

From the Conn, Crash said: "I'm not sure you could if you wanted to." He had seen the *Spectre* in action. It could not be matched.

Manny, the only other person on board who had actually flown the custom fighter, said: "It's fast enough, if you ask me."

Slightly tinny through the speakers, Caitlin replied: "Nothing's ever fast enough."

At his place at the Engineering console, Scanner added: "Spoken like a true fighter jockey."

"Hey," Caitlin said. "When it comes to flying, more is more. The bigger the engine, the happier I am."

"Isn't that thing *all* engine?" Scanner asked cheekily.

"Just about," Ghost conceded.

On the viewscreen, the Guardian's planet hove into view. Crash decided the fun was over. "Look sharp, people."

Even from this distance, the world looked dead and immensely old.

It was time to go their separate ways. Their intel had the *Millennium* on the far side of the planet, ensnared by a time dilation field produced by Daniel's ship. The plan was to split up and attack from different directions.

"Good luck," Caitlin offered.

Crash nodded to himself, forcing a grin. "And to you."

"There's something out there."

The statement caught Daniels by surprise. Since his return from 2063, he had been devoting all their combined resources to tracking down any other anomalies in the time stream that could be attributed to Captain Piper. So far, they had found none.

It suggested that she hadn't returned.

The Guardian of Forever's function was well known to his people. It would send people back in time and then retrieve them once their mission was complete. The interval was a very short one.

Since Piper had yet to reappear, Daniels considered the possibility that she had been killed when the *Phoenix* blasted off.

He had come so close to apprehending her. Since he tracked her down due to a poorly timed photograph taken by an *Enterprise-E* crewman taken just before the ship's launch, he had watched for an opportunity to catch her while no-one was looking.

His people had never interfered with Picard's people as it was well known that, due to Cochrane's bad judgement regarding the exhaust from the *Phoenix* not being properly redirected, the majority of the people of Bozeman would

have been incinerated and First Contact would have been the site of a graveyard.

All the same, as he observed Piper, it became clear to him that her presence was expected, even respected. It was odd.

He had followed her downstairs, hoping to catch her in the hallway but she was too fast. And when he had run into Deanna Troi, he decided to abort rather than push things. Besides, it was clear to him that Piper would never get out of the shaft in time before the *Phoenix* blasted off.

Now, he was back in the 23rd Century wondering what to do next. Since he had failed to find any further evidence of Piper's activities in the past, he had only one conclusion. The damage to space/time wasn't her fault after all.

He had considered letting the *Millennium* crew go, but not yet. He hadn't exhausted all the possibilities.

Now, Sally had shattered the silence with her almost paranoid statement. Nobody knew they were here.

"You're getting jumpy, Sally," he said. "We're alone."

The A.I. sounded wounded. "I'm not a human that I should experience such things, Kieren. Your people get irrationally scared. Mine don't."

Daniels shook his head in wonder. "No, your "people" only get rationally scared. Is that it?" His patience with the computer was beginning to wear out.

"There it is again," Sally said. "I'm detecting movement nearby. Due to the number of distortion fields in the vicinity it's hard to get a fix."

Daniels decided he wanted to check it out. He left the timeline holoroom, stepped into his cockpit and took a seat.

"Show me what you've got."

In the air in front of him, a three-dimensional display appeared, filled with distortion fields of varying shapes, sizes and intensities. Twice, a medium sized blip appeared and disappeared, as if it was hiding behind the fields.

"It's a stealth approach," he muttered to himself. "Battlestations! Raise the shields." He wondered how effective he was going to be fighting off invaders whilst his ship still held the *Millennium*, which was filling most of his front viewport.

To port, two photon torpedoes appeared from behind a distortion field, following an arc that brought them straight at him. They exploded harmlessly against his shields.

"Follow the track of those torpedoes and fire quantum torpedoes," he ordered. His adversary wouldn't last long.

From her viewpoint behind a fuzzy, Ghost watched as two bright white globes were fired around the distortion phenomena that had hidden the *Jolly Roger* from view. Fortunately, the *J.R.* was no longer there.

Now it was her turn. Pushing her impulse engines to the limit, she swung the *Spectre* out from behind her fuzzy

and fired her phasers at the aft end of Daniels' ship. Her shots were pinpoint in their accuracy and, phased at the same frequency as Daniels' shields, they passed through them and knocked out his sensors and aft weapons.

Daniels' ship rocked violently, the concussion evidently coming from behind. "What was that?" he said, startled.

Sally replied emotionlessly. "The enemy craft has disabled our sensors and rear weapons. In the instant I caught it, I identified it as Caitlin "Ghost" Ryan's *Spectre*."

Even centuries out of time, that was a name that shook Daniels. There had been few pilots in history with her reputation and talent. Never mind her fighter was one of the deadliest weapons to ever fly. Almost regretfully, he ordered: "Shoot her down."

"What with?" Sally said, her tone insulting. "I can't see her or fire upon her."

"Then catch her!" Daniels demanded.

As Daniel's ship reached out with another of its stasis nets and ensnared the *Spectre,* the *J.R.* released another volley of photon torpedoes, this time phased to pass through Daniels' shields. As they flew out and around the fuzzy they were now hiding behind the time had come to reveal themselves. Crash had them appear on the *other* side of the fuzzy, this time firing phasers, also phased.

As much as Crash wanted Daniels defeated, he also wanted the ship intact. Piper's message had included the fact that Sarda was a captive aboard it.

As expected, the photons scorched the hull of the vessel and, in retaliation, Daniels fired some of his advanced torpedoes back along their track.

This time, the diversion worked to their advantage by drawing his fire. The *J.R.* came about, guns blazing. Manny did her best to keep the fire to weapons and shields, both of which she took out with expert shots.

Smoke filled the air of the cockpit. Daniels sat and stared in amazement as one of the oddest starships he had ever seen bore down on his position. It looked like some bizarre, space-borne whale.

"This is Captain Krashtallash of the *U.S.S. Jolly Roger*. Surrender and prepare to be boarded." There was no doubt in Daniels' mind that its captain was totally sincere and ready to do violence.

His people had a simple motto. When cornered and there was no chance of escape, leave nothing. His shields and weapons were gone, and, with his stasis generator maxed out holding the *Millennium* and the *Spectre*, he had no more options. He could switch his attention to the *Jolly Roger*, but that would still leave one of the other two vessels to attack, both of which could be deadly in his current state.

"Sally," he said, resigned. "Self-destruct."

"Okay, honey," Sally said, sounding profoundly sad. "It was fun while it lasted." She began her countdown. "Five, four, three, two, one."

On the *Jolly Roger's* viewscreen, Daniel's vessel sat there, while the man himself kept his silence. A minute passed and nothing happened. Then, a chirp from his comms panel.

"We're receiving a hail."

Crash sat back in the Conn, curious. Calmly he said: "Put him on screen."

A decidedly youthful human appeared before them, shrouded in the smoke emanating from several destroyed systems. His normally short, combed hair was dishevelled. He was not the least bit happy. "This is Captain Kieren Daniels of the Federation Timeship *Taurus*. I am here on orders from the Federation council, and, under the Temporal Prime Directive accords, I order you to withdraw."

"Balsy," Scanner muttered from behind Crash.

"More like stupid," Manny countered.

Crash hissed quietly for silence. "Captain Daniels. The only person I see in violation of history is *you*." He gestured at the space around them. "Our universe is experiencing a breakdown of its very structure and I find you at the epicentre. I'd say *that's* suspicious. Never mind you're holding the *Millennium* and the *Spectre* against their

will." He fixed Daniels with a glare. "Either shut off your stasis device and release my friends, or I will do it for you."

Crash watched as Daniels considered his situation. It was clear he was out of options. He was just interested in how long the man would try to stall them. "Your conditions will be met, Captain Krashtallash. However, I must insist you not board my vessel."

Crash's patience ran out. He leapt out of his chair and gave a blood-curdling roar. On the screen, Daniels backed away, clearly terrified.

"No conditions, little man," he growled. "Or I will beam over to your ship and take you apart, piece by piece."

Captain Daniels' eyes widened in alarm, believing every word. Speaking to his computer he said, his voice quaking: "Shut down the stasis device."

From Caitlin's perspective, one moment she was looking at Daniels' ship and it was only slightly damaged, the next it was more so, and it was being menaced by the *Jolly Roger*. Her comm unit caught Crash's voice. "Lieutenant Ryan, please remain on station temporarily. If the *Taurus* moves, blast it."

"Aye," she replied, turning her ship and bringing her weapons to bear.

For the first time in a month, the *U.S.S. Millennium* moved. However, as far as the Bridge crew was concerned,

no time at all had passed. Only a moment before, they had been talking to Captain Piper on the planet. Now, they were looking at their adversary which had been damaged, and two other Starfleet vessels were nearby. Both were immediately recognised.

Lieutenant Carman Valastro, their Grecian Alpha Centauran, gawked at the *Jolly Roger* in amazement. "Where did that come from?" he asked, bewildered.

"No idea," the young Lieutenant Jason Nunn replied. "But I'm glad it is here."

Before Carman could order a hail, they received one. "On screen," Carman ordered.

To his surprise, his old friend Krashtallash appeared. However, it was clear that fond greetings would have to wait. "Lieutenant Valastro, tractor the *Taurus* into shuttle bay one and have it boarded. Put its captain and any crew in the Brig. The charge is kidnapping, among other things. He has Commander Sarda aboard in a stasis chamber."

Carman gave him a nod. This was the time for business. "Aye, Captain. We'll get right on that." He gave the order and watched as a tractor beam took hold of the tiny craft and began drawing it forward.

Not wishing to waste a moment more, Crash then ordered: "Put me through to Sickbay."

A minute later, Crash stood in the *Millennium's* sickbay, surrounded by old friends. He was accompanied by his wife and Ishtalam.

"What is it?" the platinum haired physician par excellence, Merete AndrusTaurus, asked.

Ishtalam stepped forward. "I'm the *Jolly Roger's* medic and we've got a situation."

Merete listened intently, not wishing to miss a single detail. The medic was good, that she understood, but it was also clear he knew his limitations. She mulled the situation over in her mind. She could perform the operation, but she was still short some equipment.

She looked at Crash sadly and said: "I wish I could help, but I'm short a micro tissue regenerator that's geared for the Caitian genome. We don't have one on board."

With his heart in his throat, Crash leaned forward and presented the Doctor with the box Piper had left for him. "Is this one?" he asked, fearfully.

Surprised, Merete took it and peered inside. Sure enough, it was just what they needed. With a squeal of glee, she hugged his neck and said: "Yes! Where did you get it?"

Crash gave her a tight smile. "You'd never believe me if I told you."

Not unused to the bizarre, Merete simply shrugged. "Give me ten minutes, then have Hope beamed over. All things being equal, she'll be alright."

Those few words breathed life into the couple and for a moment they just held each other, glad for the hope and afraid they might be let down. All the same, Piper's words repeated themselves to them both. "Don't worry, Hope will be fine."

An hour later, with Daniels in the brig, the *Taurus* safely stowed and powered down, the *Spectre* sitting on the *Millennium's* hangar deck floor being refuelled and the *Jolly Roger* flying alongside them in formation, the newly revived Commander Sarda called a meeting in the Briefing Room. Now that their chronometers had been reset and the crew were aware they had lost over a month, it was time to catch up.

Before a word was said, Sarda said: "It is gratifying to see you again," to the senior officers of the *J.R.*. "I am pleased that you are well." Not one to miss anything, he had noted Crash's insignia. "Congratulations, Captain, on your promotion." He raised a curious brow. "Battlefield commission?" he asked.

Krashtallash nodded as he spoke for his group. "It's good to see you all again, too," he said. "And yes, it was. Thank you."

The *Millennium's* First Officer offered them all a seat. With Sarda at the head of the table, the place where Piper usually sat – an anomaly that no-one missed – he started the meeting. He began by recalling the events on the planet

shortly before he was stunned and incarcerated. "I do not know if the Captain made it through," he said. Although stoic, his friends could hear his concern.

Scanner gave him a grin. "Don't worry, Points. She made it through, all right. So did someone named Piper Silayna."

It took only a fraction of a second for the Vulcan to divine his meaning. "Captain Silayna went through as well? Fascinating." His brows drew together as he considered the information. "If they both went through to a point in history before the timelines diverged, they could have emerged together."

Manny chimed in. "We think they did. We saw both their names on the *Pterodactyl.*"

The *Millennium's* crew did not understand the reference. However, Sarda did notice that, upon the mention of the name, Krashtallash's people all looked at Lieutenant Nunn. Curious.

Crash spoke up. "We're getting a little ahead of ourselves." He turned back to Sarda. "We'd better start at the beginning, about a month ago, when Ghost told us you were missing."

An hour later, Sarda broke up the meeting, his mind full of fascinating possibilities. Time was being meddled with on a colossal scale, that he was certain of. The damage was visible everywhere. Very soon, planets would start

spinning out of their orbits. The entire universe was in danger.

And yet, as he stood with his friends in Sickbay, there was still time for joy. He watched as Captain Krashtallash and his wife cradled their resuscitated daughter and took the simplest delight in watching the child's chest rise and fall. He observed as Merete gave Susanna instructions to feed the child.

Ambassador Llash looked rapturous as she lay down on the bed on her side, her teats exposed. Crash laid their child on her belly and, although still weak, the child drew herself to a teat and latched on, drawing milk deeply.

All the felines in the room began purring contentedly.

The moment was not lost on the Vulcan. Family was still important to him and, while their temporarily reassigned members had returned with the *Jolly Roger*, bringing even himself some semblance of happiness, one was still missing. The fact that he no longer felt Piper's presence in his mind was something he could not miss. She was the linchpin that was absent, around which all revolved. Without her, things could go spinning out of control. They needed her back.

He had to admit to himself. He wanted her back.

Chapter Five

The impatient horse paced underneath him, eager to go. It took a bit of doing keeping her steady but, to one as experienced as her rider, it came naturally.

However, for he and his friend, their need to be fed was greater than the horse's desire to be free.

His horse, Judi, shifted again under him again. He hissed quietly. "Keep still," he whispered.

Judi had other ideas. The chestnut quarter horse wanted to be running, not just standing around in this gully. She wanted the smell of the eucalypts in her nostrils and the sound of cracking twigs under her hooves. She stamped in frustration.

"Keep still, you nag," her rider said again, starting to lose patience.

With nothing better to do, Judi looked down and spotted a small patch of green grass within reach. She tore it loose with her teeth and began chewing.

The motion threw off her rider's aim as he lurched forward after the unexpected motion. His finger caught the trigger and the bullet he fired went wide of the target. Fortunately for him, the horse was used to such noises and just kept eating.

"Missed," his partner said with a shrug. "You'd be better off shooting the thing with a phaser rifle than that old antique."

Before his friend could answer, both of them heard a snapping twig off to their right that didn't belong. There were no natural predators on planet Merrijig and the only creature they had to worry about was the local variety of rodent that was similar to Earth's rabbits, only a lot tastier. They were concerned about them because a lot of horses had been lost stepping into their burrows and breaking their legs.

So, like the rabbits of home, the local settlers had a simple policy for them. The only good "barrit" was a dead barrit.

Just when they were about to discount the sound as paranoia, they heard another sound to their left. "There are two of them."

With a flurry of movement, two women wearing jeans and t-shirts stepped out. Each had been using a gum tree to conceal themselves. One held an odd-looking phaser. The other held a sword.

"What are you shooting at us for?" they asked, their voices oddly similar.

The man holding the antique rifle just looked past the sword and gave their visitors a welcoming smile. "If I might say, it's about time you showed up, Captain."

Beside Jason, Scanner mock scowled at his friend. "We were beginning to worry, Piper."

Piper looked from one to the other in total amazement. "What are you two doing here?" she asked.

Suspicious, she raised her lowered katana and pointed it at Judd. "You shouldn't be here."

Scanner simply shrugged and scratched at his beard. "That's what Manny tells me every day."

Making her way through the bracken, Piper Silayna, the Captain's duplicate from the timeline created by the "Nero Incident" stepped over to join her double. "You know these clowns?" she asked.

Her "sister" nodded. "They're my Helmsman and Chief Engineer." Confused, she pointed at Scanner with the tip her sword again. "Where are we and what are you doing here?"

Judd gave a tired chuckle. "That's a long story and would you believe you invited us?"

Piper Silayna's eyes went wide. "No, we didn't. Why were you shooting at us?"

Jason was getting a little tired of the conversation. He slapped his beloved .303 bolt action rifle that was laying in his lap. "I was shooting at lunch." He showed them two bloodied barrits he had caught previously that day that were hanging off the back of his saddle. "I'm afraid you got in the way."

Piper looked about her at the dense woodland. It reminded her a little of Earth, but the gravity was wrong. It was a little weaker. "Why are you out here?" she asked.

With a sigh, Scanner said: "Looking for you."

Both Scanner and Jason took a Piper each and had them ride behind them. They picked their way through the forest, keeping their mounts at a light trot as they followed the well-worn path. It wasn't long before they found themselves following a stream of crystal-clear water full of river rocks at some points and grey sandy loam at others.

Jason breathed in the pure air with delight. It was just like the farm back in Mansfield on Earth. There was very little pollution in the mountain air there, and even less here. His thighs were becoming a little tight after riding for a half hour, but he welcomed the feeling. There was no place like home, but this place was the next best thing.

With the horses bouncing underneath them, the Pipers found it hard to converse. They gave up and fired thoughts at each other instead, a talent they had developed during their stay in the mid-twenty-first century.

"Where the hell are we, Susanna?" In the privacy of their thoughts, they still referred to one another by the names they had adopted whilst there.

"You've got me. At least we're with friends."

Silayna's brows drew together in frustration. *"Do you know* when *we are?"*

Piper's eyes met hers as they rode side by side. *"Your guess is as good as mine."*

"Why don't we ask them?" Without waiting for a reply, Silayna asked her rider, Jason: "What year is this?"

"2232," he said.

"Still nowhere near our time," Silayna thought. *"Why did the Guardian send us here?"*

She shook her head. *"No idea, Suzette. But I can tell you we're in the company of friends."*

Piper Silayna not only heard her sister's words but felt her happiness of being reunited with her crew members. It made her a little envious, not that she was missing her own people, but that, even if these were her own people, she still wouldn't feel the same way about them.

She tried to take her mind of her feelings by trying to take some delight in her surroundings. If there was one thing that was different about this extended away mission, it was the fact she was seeing some very different terrain. This planet was outside her experience, as she had never seen a land as peculiar a mixture of greens, browns and dusty greys as this mirror of Australia.

She was momentarily startled by a swooping Kookaburra as it passed by, going after a moth their horses had scared into flight.

One thing she *was* becoming aware of was her growing desire to reach their destination. Her butt and thighs were getting sore, and the horse's sweat was causing her legs to chafe inside her denim jeans.

"How much further?" she asked Judd. "My ass is killing me!"

Nunn kept his eyes forward. "About five minutes, ma'am."

Piper Silayna hoped there would be something left of the inside of her legs by the time she got there.

They soon came to a small town that looked like it came out of old story books of the wild west. However, this town wasn't occupied by Americans, but ex-pat Australians.

As they came to the edge of town, both men slowed their mounts to a walk then stopped. Both women took the opportunity to slide off the back of their horse.

As she hit the ground, Piper Silayna said a hearty: "Hallelujah and amen, we're here!" She then began walking around, trying to work the stiffness out her thighs. Her double was right by her side.

With practiced skill, the men threw their legs over the back of their horses and dismounted. Jason stepped forward and patted his horse, then took a carrot out of his jacket pocket and fed it to her. "Good girl," he said affectionately. "Good lady." Likewise, Judd gave his mount a friendly slap on the shoulder.

Scanner led their way down the street that was lined by shops made of timber with windows of glass, not transparent aluminium. Each had a porch of wooden floorboards, with a rail out the front for horses to be tethered to. Piper counted another six horses in town tied up outside various establishments.

"This place is amazing," Piper Silayna said as she walked, her boots kicking up dust with every step. Her sister

thought she looked like a bona-fide tourist. "It looks like it came straight out of a story book."

Jason nodded, amused. "It probably did. Welcome to Eureka Creek."

The men tied off their reins to a hitching post outside the local pub. It had a large watering trough out front, and the horses immediately took a drink.

Piper looked up and took note of the establishment's name: The Commercial Hotel. "Not a very imaginative name," she said.

Her guide squinted into the sun as he looked down the street, then back at his captain. "In the old days, there used to be Commercial Hotels everywhere in Australia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The people of Merrijig wanted things to stay as they were so, when this planet was discovered in the early 22nd century, these people were the first to put up their hands to colonise it."

Without another word, Jason walked up the steps and was about to go inside when Piper asked: "Aren't you going to do something with those, Lieutenant?" He turned back and saw she was indicating the barrits. "They could be stolen."

At that, Jason laughed. It was a sound touched by a little sadness and irony. "Captain, on this world, you could leave a million credits on the porch, and nobody would touch it. People hereabouts respect and look after each

other." His explanation given, he turned and entered the pub, Judd following.

The Pipers simply shared a puzzled look and joined them.

Inside, the Captains blinked several times as they adjusted to the change in lighting as the interior was lit only by what came through the laced windows. The interior was reasonably spacious, with wooden fixtures and a faint smell of beer and liquor hanging in the air. The women found the men sitting at the bar, ordering a beer each. Piper came up and sat on a stool next to Judd. "I thought you preferred bourbon," she said, a little suspicious.

Scanner snorted. "If only the Guardian had sent us to a world where they served it," he said.

At the mention of the name, both Pipers sat up straight. "You got here through the Guardian?" they asked, not realising that once again they had spoken in unison.

Judd nodded. "We'll tell you all about it when we get back to the ship," he said.

Piper blinked. "Are you telling me that the *Millennium* is here as well?"

The beers were served from taps and handed out. The portly bartender, an older human male, regarded the women. Curiously, he didn't bat an eyelid at Silayna's artificial eye. "What'll it be, love?" he asked in the broadest Australian accent she had ever heard.

"Got any fruit juice?" Silayna asked.

The bartender looked at her as if she had just escaped from a mental institution. "Nah. None of that," he said. "Here, it's either beer or water."

The women shared a glance. Their mutual disdain for ale was profound. "Water," both Pipers said.

He looked from one to the other, then at Jason. "Mate, are these the ones you've been waitin' for?"

Nunn nodded and sipped at his glass jug of ale. "Yep, Carl, they are."

The bartender just shook his head in wonder. "They're a few cards short of the deck if you ask me."

Judd grinned. "They're a lot sharper than you think," he said chuckling.

Carl shrugged. "If you say so," he said dismissively. He turned and poured them each a glass of pure mountain water before handing it to them.

"Thank you," Piper said. She held it up to the light and, for all the town's appearance of complete backwardness, it was clear. She took a long sip, then poured the rest down her throat, not realising she was parched. Her sister mimicked her actions. "I needed that," she said thankfully. She then turned her attention back to Scanner. "You didn't answer my question."

Judd looked at her blankly for a second as he tried to recall. "Oh!" he said when it came to him. "No, the *Millennium's* not here," he said, waving her off. "Just the two of us, Carman, Crash and Manny."

Piper Silayna then asked: “So, what’s this about a ship?”

The men shared a look. “It’s better if we show you.”

Once the beers were drunk, the Pipers were led through the town, past general stores and a haberdashery to a path that led up the side of a hill. Piper peered off into the distance at the planet’s little, yellow sun, and noted the days here seemed a little shorter than Earth’s. She mentioned it in passing.

“You’re right, Cap’,” Judd said. “It’s about 22 hours a day on Merrijig.” He grinned to himself. “Weird thing is, it’s got three moons.”

Jason grinned. “Yeah, they’ve got weird names, too. Bert, Graham and Norman.”

Piper looked at him sideways, not quite believing him. “Ohhhkay,” she said.

It wasn’t long before they crested the hill and there before them was an older style cargo ship. Piper checked her sister. “*Swallow*-class, isn’t it?” she asked.

Silayna nodded. “It is. Haven’t seen one of these for years.”

Piper noticed its large wings. “Why haven’t its wings retracted?” she asked.

Judd sighed. “Because I haven’t fixed them yet. There’s only so much I can achieve in a day, you know.” He sounded tired.

"I thought it was you!"

The voice was familiar to Piper, and she turned and welcomed another friend. However, Piper Silayna recoiled as the huge, while feline barrelled out the front hatch and right up to them, pulling up just short of them. "It's good to see you, Captain," she said happily. "We've missed you."

The day was young for Piper Silayna as the surprises just kept piling up. She watched as Judd turned to the newcomer and gave her a kiss. "Hi, honey," he said lovingly. "I'm home!"

She, in turn, licked him on the cheek. "I'm glad you finally made it. I'm starving and we haven't lit the fire yet."

Piper looked at her askance. "I thought the Cait didn't eat cooked meat."

"We don't," she said. "However, we like to eat our evening meals as a family and my husband hasn't cooked his yet."

It was all getting a bit too much. "Husband?" Piper Silayna asked with more than a note of derision. "Seriously?"

Without answering, Judd looked to his Captain. "Right now, I can see the differences between the two of you go a lot more than just skin deep." He gave her double an angry glance then snubbed her and went inside to prepare the barrits while Judd put the horses in their yard.

Piper watched them go, pausing a moment before following. She turned and looked her sister in the eye.

“These people are my family,” she said with just a hint of warning. “I would appreciate a bit more decorum when you’re talking to them. The Sandages are not only two of the best officers I’ve ever worked with, and my friends, but I’ve rarely met two people more in love than they are.” Hurt for her friends, she left Silayna standing there and walked inside, looking for the rest.

Crash and Carman didn’t appear until an hour later, just before dusk. They, too, had been out hunting barrits, but they were much more successful. Their style had been to go on foot, and while Crash hunted them the old-fashioned way with his bare hands, Carman simply followed and carried their prizes.

When they arrived, they walked in through the open hatch and were about to call out when they spied the new arrivals. Upon seeing Piper, Crash ran up and shook her hand warmly. “It’s good to see you, Captain,” he said. “It’s been too long.”

Piper gave him an odd look. “Depending on how you look at it, it’s going to be a while since you started missing me.”

Crash’s whiskers arched forward in mirth. “True,” he said. In the periphery of his vision, he spotted her double sitting in a corner on an old crate, looking out of place. “Piper Silayna, I presume,” he said, his curiosity piqued.

His captain sighed, a sound from the depths of her soul. “She is. Although she’s in the doghouse with Scanner and Manny at the moment.”

While he didn’t quite understand the idiom, he guessed she had somehow offended his sister and her husband. Not one to let offence spoil a good day, he walked over and introduced himself.

“Hello, Captain Silayna,” he said, holding out his paw. “I’m Captain Krashtallash.”

For a moment, it seemed like she was going to snub him, but Crash just stood there with his paw out, waiting for her to return the gesture. He was being so disarming that she could not help but respond in kind. She turned to look at him and really saw him for the first time. She was impressed by his black fur and thick mane, but mostly by his sense of presence. He had true leadership qualities with the intellect to match.

“It’s a pleasure, Captain,” she said. “I must look peculiar to you,” she continued, feeling self-conscious. “You’d be so used to seeing your Captain as she is that I must look odd with this.” Her right hand went up and stroked her cheek next to her artificial eye.

“Not at all, Captain,” he said kindly. “Humans all look strange to me.” He gave her a huge, welcoming smile and helped her to her feet. “Come. Help us with our meal and we’ll talk about our adventures.”

Sitting outside in the cooling evening air, the seven of them sat around a wood fire in a pit surrounded by large stones. The human's barrits cooked on metal poles suspended next to the flames while they chatted. As the sun went down, their faces became illuminated by the flickering light of the fire, giving them an ethereal look.

Piper Silayna sat between Piper and Krashtallash as she still felt uncomfortable around the Sandages who were avoiding her gaze.

"Are you telling me that you *met* Zefram Cochrane?" Judd said, not quite believing. He leaned back on his folding chair and popped another marshmallow into his mouth. There were few condiments on this world, but at least the locals knew how to make a decent marshmallow.

Piper looked him in the eye and said: "He wasn't a gentleman, either! You know he tried to hit on the two of us?"

Scanner chuckled. "I've always found one Piper was more than enough!"

At his side, sitting on her haunches, her tail around her husband, Manny said: "You won't be hitting on the captain, either. Ever!" She gave a low growl, then nuzzled her husband's cheek.

His wife's mock jealousy aside, Scanner asked: "What was it like?"

Out of the quiet of her thoughts she said: "It was a simpler time. A bit like this, but more dangerous

considering all the shortages after the war. Most of the people we met were decent, though. Lily, especially, was very gracious." Piper took a little while describing their time sharing Lily's home and life. She finished with: "I can see why some people have such romantic notions of the old times. There really is an attraction to the simpler life."

Her friends heard it in her voice. She, too, felt the appeal.

Scanner jerked a thumb in the direction of the ship. "What do you think of our latest acquisition?" he asked.

Piper gave it a look of derision. "Darn thing looks like a pterodactyl. How did you get your hands on it?"

As her crew mates laughed over who-knew-what, Piper glanced at her sister. She was still a little distant and she fired a thought at her. *"Cheer up. You'll find they're great once you get to know them."*

Silayna looked back at her with a pronounced sense of sadness. *"What about when they find out that* I'm *not?"*

Before she could answer, Crash said between chuckles: "At least now we know where she got the name." He turned his attention to his Captain and began telling her their tale, being careful to leave out certain details. He didn't mention where he found the ship or anything about the older Jason Nunn. Piper got the feeling he was holding out on her but didn't pry. She knew the dangers of fore-knowledge personally.

Manny chimed in: “Oh, and Captain. Susanna had her kits. Crash is the proud father of four children!”

Genuinely delighted, Piper slapped his shoulder. “Congratulations, Krashtallash. I know you’re going to be a great father. How are the kits doing?”

A great sadness passed through Crash’s soul momentarily, and Piper feared one or more may have died as she saw his expression darken. “They are well, Captain. Thanks to you.”

Perplexed, Piper turned her head to the side, wondering how she could possibly have helped in something that wasn’t due to happen for over another fifty years. “How...”

Crash gave her an enigmatic look. “I’ll tell you later,” he said.

“Okay,” Piper said, letting it go. “At least tell me their names,” she said, truly curious.

With great pride, Crash announced their names. “Leontallash, Kintallash, Huntallash and Hopetallash.”

Across the way, Piper could see that Manny and Scanner shared his pride and joy. She also noted one familiar name. “Kintallash? Is she named after...?”

“Kintabung?” Crash finished, referring to his brother’s late mate, who had been lost in the civil war. “Yes, Captain. She had a warrior’s spirit. It’s fitting she be remembered.”

Piper nodded to herself, remembering that time. "From what I heard; she was. I'm sure Grun would be very pleased with your choice."

As Crash thought of his brother, he solidified a decision he had already made. He would never be ashamed of his children and would proudly show them off to his "normal" brother – the only one of the three siblings who carried the standard Cait colouring. "I will visit him when we return to Cait, Captain. I want him to know he's an uncle."

For the first time since they sat down, Piper Silayna spoke. "Tell me about your planet, Captain Krashtallash. In my timeline, Cait was lost about ten years ago with the loss of ninety-nine percent of the population. Where I come from, the Cait are an endangered species without a home."

Before Crash could answer Piper brought them up short. "*Captain?"*

At that the former Commander appeared embarrassed. He hadn't mentioned it to her yet. "Yes, Captain. Due to the necessities of the mission, I've been given a promotion so I could be read in on the Guardian."

Piper's eyes widened in understanding. "Ah." She reached around the fire and gave his paw a shake. "Congratulations." She put all the joy she could into the gesture, but she couldn't help feeling a touch of sadness. His promotion would take him away from the *Millennium* – permanently.

Krashtallash shared the sentiment. The feeling was definitely bittersweet. Turning his attention back to Piper Silayna's question, he mused that, if he existed in the alternate timeline, that he would probably be one of the few survivors. He glanced at his sister, realising that she would have been lost in that timeline.

He turned back to Piper Silayna to answer her earlier question. "Cait is a world that is rich with life," he began. He took some time describing in intimate detail his favourite parts of his home. Occasionally, Manny would interject and add some colour. It seemed to Crash that the ice was melting between her and Piper Silayna.

However, Manny noticed that her brother had given her a sanitised view of their home. "I love you, brother, but if I went to Cait expecting what you just told us, I'd be very disappointed."

Crash just bowed his head slightly and kept quiet as his sister described the political, social and religious aspects of their home, which had recently gone through a massive upheaval that Crash, in good part, had led them through.

"I can see you're very proud of your brother," Piper Silayna said, giving him credit.

Manny's tail twitched a little as her previous annoyance showed once more. She didn't trust this Piper yet. "What's not to love about him?" she said a little cagily.

Scanner butted in then as a thought came to him. "Captain Silayna," he asked a little more formally than he had to. "How was your Cait destroyed?"

Silayna paused for a moment, casting her mind back. "If I remember rightly, it was a sudden, unexpected collapse of the star. It threw off a number of coronal mass emissions, one of which burned Cait to a cinder before it collapsed in on itself and became a white dwarf." She tapped her teeth as she thought about it. "To this day, nobody knows why."

Judd caught Piper's eye. "I do. In the Captain's timeline," he said, indicating Silayna, "the dilithium comet hit earlier before anyone could stop it." He frowned to himself. "I wonder why."

A notion came to Piper, and she put it to the test. She recalled seeing Klingon architecture while she was inside the comet, and she wondered if it had been thrown into the past by some great future cataclysm. It would explain why the comet had somehow travelled halfway across the galaxy and still sported infrastructure that had been clearly Klingon in origin.

She looked her sister in the eye. "Has there been any supernovae or other big explosions in the Klingon sphere in your time?"

Piper Silayna blinked. How could she know that? "Yes, there has! About three months ago Praxis exploded. Caused a hell of a mess. A lot of their fleet was caught in the blast, as well as major damage to their planet." She

smirked. "Never were good at mining. It was just a matter of time."

Scanner caught Piper's eye. "Are you suggesting that the comet came from the *future?"* It was almost too incredible to believe. "Last time I looked, Praxis was still in one piece."

"That's why Cait's still there," Piper said, smiling to herself at her cleverness. "Don't you see? For some reason, Praxis exploded earlier in Suzette's timeline and that's why Cait was destroyed. We weren't there to catch it before it fell into the star."

Piper Silayna looked from Piper and back to Scanner. "What you're saying is that my people missed it, but yours didn't."

Not understanding why she was getting defensive, Piper said: "It's just another anomaly, that's all."

Piper Silayna shook her head, not accepting it. "No, that's not it. If there's one thing I keep finding is that your timeline is better than mine. A whole lot less people die in yours."

Crash tried to placate her. He handed her a pole with her cooked barrit on it. "It doesn't matter which timeline you're from, barrit tastes good in both of them."

For a moment, it seemed like she was going to reject his offer, but hunger won out and she took it from him a little roughly. Crash didn't mind, but Piper noticed the Sandages had just lost a little more respect for her double.

Fed and tired, the crew all made their way to their cabins after a long day. Piper and Piper Silayna's had been longer than most as they had left Earth later in the day and had to live through a few more hours of sunlight before nightfall.

Crash led them to their rooms and showed them which ones would be their own. Their names had been written with chalk above each one. It had been an odd thing to him wondering if he would have chosen the same rooms for each of them even if he hadn't seen them first in the future.

Piper slid open her door and noticed it was fairly sparse, but at least the bed was made with clean sheets.

Across the hall, the same was true of Silayna's room.

He led them down to the end of the grey-steel hall to a small door which he opened revealing the water shower. "We've got hot water now," he said with a measure of pride. He tapped the door next to it. "The head's in there."

Scanner's muffled: "IT'S BUSY!" came through it.

The three of them shared a knowing smile, then Piper gave her friend a hug. "Thanks for all you've done, Crash. We've got a lot to discuss in the morning."

He gave her a knowing smile. "That we do." He nodded to each in turn. "Captain, Captain. Good night."

He glided down the hallway, walking as all felines do, with an enormous amount of natural grace, before disappearing into his quarters.

The Pipers gave each other a quick smile. "Good night," they said together before retiring.

Piper closed the door to her room and checked the closet. There were a few clothes there, and she wondered if they had been left by the settlers who had come to this world, or by her thoughtful crew. She disrobed and tried on a few of the shirts before coming to an excellent leather jacket that she immediately fell in love with. "You're mine," she said, holding it to herself.

She felt grimy, so she looked up and down the corridor and, seeing no-one, padded down the hall in her underwear, towel in hand and slipped into the shower. It took a moment for the warm water to come through, but after a week of stone-cold showers, this one was bliss. She even found some soap and gave her hair a wash.

Not knowing how long it would last, she kept it short, towelled herself off then wrapped the towel around her midriff, feeling like a million dollars now she was cleaner than she had been for a while.

As she stepped back into the hall, she heard the door behind her open. She turned to look and saw Piper Silayna looking out. In the dim light it was hard to miss her green

eye glowing. "What's up, Suzette?" she asked, still concerned for her from her earlier behaviour.

"Is the shower empty?"

It wasn't the question she expected, but Piper didn't want to push. Whatever was bothering her sister she would share in good time. She nodded. "After Lily's place, it's heaven."

Silayna gave her a quick smile and stepped over to the shower wearing only her towel. She slipped inside without another word.

Piper wondered at her odd behaviour, shook her head and decided that she would wait for her sister to come to her. She stepped back into her room and sat down on her bare metal chair, the surface cold on her exposed legs. She took another look around the room and her eyes lighted on an old-fashioned logbook and pen. She wondered where it had come from, until she opened the first page and saw that the ship's previous owner had used it for that very purpose.

Captain's Log, April 15th, 2215. We've just left Earth on our way to our new home of Merrijig. Got twenty slabs of VB that should last us.

Piper narrowed her eyes at the entry. Nothing more was said about anything regarding the journey. As she continued to read, she came to the realisation that the *Mount Buller*, as the ship had been dubbed for the one-way journey, had been bought second-hand with the single use in mind. As such, it was crewed by rank amateurs.

She flipped over a few pages. June 13th. Just ran out of beer. Still a month from destination. The crew's going to go nuts.

Knowing the ending, that the ship obviously arrived intact, Piper lost interest and closed the book. Then she had second thoughts, opened it once more and tore out the used pages. She then began fresh in her own handwriting.

Captain's Log,

What was the date? She'd ask Crash the next day. She was about to continue and add the ship's name but didn't know that either. There was no way she was going to continue calling it the *Mount Buller*. It was hardly inspiring. It needed something a bit more memorable. All the same, it had been a long day and she was past caring, so she quickly dubbed it:

Starship Pterodactyl.

After an interesting day that started in 2063 and ended in 2213, Piper Silayna and I have found ourselves back in the company of some of my ship mates from my own time. It's clear they got here the same way as we did, but why they're here remains a mystery. I guess I'll find that out tomorrow.

The day seems to have been particularly trying for Suzette / Piper Silayna, as she's retreated into herself. Hopefully, I'll find that out tomorrow as well.

After the mission in 2063, I'm left wondering what's going on here and now. I've got a few suspicions, however. Whatever the G is up to, it's crafty, I'll give it that.

Piper

She put the pen down, leaned back in her chair and stretched. Realising she was even more tired than she thought, she headed over to her bunk, pulled back the sheets, dropped the towel and slid into it gratefully.

As she closed her eyes, she heard a tap at the door. She covered her eyes with her hand and shook her head. "What did I do in a former life?" she asked the wall.

Realising the wall wasn't going to give her the answer, she called: "Come in," knowing full well who it was. Given their time together and their psychic resonance, as she had come to call it, it couldn't be anyone but her sister.

The door slid aside, and Piper Silayna stepped in, pulling it closed behind her. "Do you mind?"

Piper didn't want to be polite and lie, but she did anyway. "No. Make yourself comfortable." She wondered to herself a little then that, since they had arrived in this time, their relationship had shifted. Something had changed, and she felt a distance had opened up between them. She realised even her language had become a little more formal.

Annoyed at herself for letting it happen, she drew her blanket around her and sat up, leaning back against the wall. She crossed her legs and put on her friendliest smile. "Things have gotten a little weird, haven't they?" she said. Wanting her sister to feel more welcome, she patted the bed next to her.

Silayna took the offer and padded over to Piper in her bare feet and granny nightie. Piper lifted the blanket and she slid under it and sat, her legs dangling as she had yet to become as flexible as her sister. "I can't help but feel like I'm an uninvited guest," she said. "These people are *your* friends who have come back in time because they love and respect you." She held her hands out wide demonstratively. "Do you see any of mine?"

Piper gritted her teeth. The absence of Suzette's people had caught her attention as well. "No, I don't," she said, trying to put on a positive spin. "But that doesn't mean they're not going to show up. It could be that the Guardian has something else for them to do."

Silayna shook her head, her freshly washed hair not quite dry yet, making her look like she had just come in out

of the rain. "I'm not so sure." She rubbed her metal cheek once more, which she always did when she was self-conscious. "I've been a first-class bitch to my crew. Even Merete was getting tired of me, and she's been my closest friend since the Academy – aside from Brian."

Piper didn't speak. She just let her sister vent. She couldn't lie to Suzette. She had seen the crew of the *Ingram* and noticed right away a difference in the way they related. She found them tightly strung.

"Then I see how your people talk to you, how they relate to you, and I can't help but be envious." She sounded far away at that moment, and Piper watched as she rubbed her cheek once again. "Ever since... I've been angry at the world. I've pushed everyone away."

Piper rubbed her sister's shoulder, allowing the contact to share her feelings. "You can always stop doing it." She took her hand and reached out and ran the back of her fingers over both of Suzette's cheeks. "This isn't what makes you truly you." She lowered her hand and put her palm between her breasts. "*This* is what makes you either a kind or cruel person." She lifted her palm and cupped her metal cheek. "How people react to your prosthesis is their problem. However, how you respond to them is *yours*. You can either get angry all the time or teach them you're a worthwhile person regardless of your looks. Be the better person."

Through her touch, Piper felt her sister's feelings run from being comforted to a flash of anger and back again. It was as if she was at war with herself. Tears glistened in the corner of her eye. "I'm just so tired of being alone," she said, her throat tight. She looked Susanna in the eyes and said: "When we met, you seemed like a cruel reminder of what I could have been like. I hated you for that. Then I got past that and appreciated you as an individual and stopped constantly trying to compare myself with you." She put on a brave smile. "I wanted you to teach me to come out of my shell. I still do."

Although she didn't move, Susanna knew instinctively Suzette needed to be held. She slid over next to her and wrapped her arms around her, cheek to cheek. "I may not always appreciate you," she said, "but I always want to be here for you. You deserve that much." She blew a lock of brunette hair out of her face as Suzette did with Susanna's honey blonde.

Up close, Suzette's electronic eye zoomed in and said: "Your roots are showing."

They let go of one another but stayed close. With their legs touching, they were able to maintain an emotional link of mutual friendship and understanding.

Susanna fluffed her hair and said: "I'm thinking of cutting it short and dying it red. I want to be a little less recognisable to the time agents."

Suzette thought about it for a moment, then said: "I think I'll join you in that. At least from the back we'll each be able to pass for the other. You never know when that might come in handy."

"Cool. We'll set it up when we can." As they sat there in a moment of silence where they didn't have to speak, but simply enjoyed having not only one another's presence, but an intimate knowledge of how the other felt, they considered the future. It was broken by the sensation of another dull thud in the distance and a small vibration under them. Both of them had noticed it from time to time during the day. They switched their dialogue to non-verbal.

"What the hell is *that?"* Susanna asked, bothered.

"No idea. Could be seismic". Suzette knew she was stretching the realms of possibility, but she had to at least venture something. *"When the scanners are functional, why don't we ask Mister Sandage to check it out?"*

Without saying, or thinking a word, Susanna concurred. After a moment's peace, she posed: *"Do you get the feeling we're being used?"* She was curious what her sister thought.

"You mean, like there's someone else pulling the strings and we're nothing more than marionettes? Yeah. It's frustrating."

"You know, I would never have pegged the Guardian of Forever with being so crafty. It seems to be

putting us in places to suit an agenda. Why it seems to have a vested interest, I don't know."

Suzette gave a tight grin. *"You mean, other than saving its own neck when the universe finally totally pulls itself apart in less than a millennium?"*

Susanna nodded. *"Yes. If it was just a machine, it really shouldn't care. In fact, in a way it should be a comfort for it that there will come a day when it will go offline rather than go on indefinitely."*

Suzette shifted a little, suddenly uncomfortable. It wasn't the mattress; however, it was their line of insight. "*You're right. Curious that nobody had a problem with the crew of the Enterprise-E being there in 2063, but all hell broke loose when we showed up. It was like their presence was a known positive and ours was an unknown."*

Suddenly feeling a little cold, Susanna instinctively drew closer to Suzette. As they were in one another's minds, they tended to act as one person, so if one part was in need, the other would naturally fill it. The women wrapped their legs around each other's and drew from the shared body heat.

Susanna continued their musing. *"Exactly. The time agents didn't have a problem with them because their actions saved the town. But they didn't know that the alien attack had damaged the* Phoenix's *ability for fire its rockets. If we weren't there the take-off would have been a disaster."*

"We had to be there." Suzette's notion shook the women. The realisation that their presence was a necessary part of history, other than supplying a navigational deflector that may or may not have been essential was breath taking.

"Somehow, the universes had to diverge for history to be complete." Susanna looked her sister in the eye. *"I find it hard to believe it took the end of the universe to make history work as it should. I don't think even the Guardian is that smart, or ruthless."*

As one, they drew a deep breath and tried to relax. They were uncomfortable with the direction their discussion was going. By mutual consent, they left it for another time.

"What's our next step?" They asked themselves.

"22nd March, 2233."

The date came to the forefront of their consciousness. However, it triggered different reactions.

"Jim's birthday."

"The day the Nerada *destroyed the* Kelvin*."*

Each sucked in a breath. It was the day everything changed for them both.

Suzette asked: "*How well do you know James Kirk?"* As she "spoke" she could not help but share some of her animosity towards the *Enterprise's* captain.

Feelings of friendship and camaraderie flooded through Susanna into her sister. Instead of giving her words, she took a few minutes to share some of her adventures with Jim, including his loss of his ship and son. Her most recent

recollection was of a man who was living to make a difference for as long as he could, knowing there was only a small amount of sand left in the glass.

"How about his birth?"

"Uneventful. Winona returned to Earth shortly after to raise Jim and Sam in Iowa. What do you know about it?"

Suddenly, both women's minds were flooded with images of space-born terror. They saw what appeared to be some kind of event horizon in space out of which an enormous starship emerged that looked like it was made out of black rapiers and scimitars, and which proved to be as deadly. The Starship *Kelvin,* which just seemed to be curious, was mercilessly cut to pieces before its crew abandoned and its acting captain put it on a suicide trajectory into the *Nerada* to save the fleeing shuttles.

Their view shifted to the interior of the last shuttle that contained a face that Susanna was able to identify. Winona Kirk, covered in sweat and wearing a hospital gown, clutched her newborn son and wept for both joy for the new life and loss for her husband who had just sacrificed himself to save them. She kept muttering something in the baby's ear: "Daddy loves you, Jim. Daddy loves you, Jim."

Their perception shifted to the cockpit where the pilots, who looked harried, exchanged a worried look. "It's going to take a week to get to Starbase Three," one said.

His fellow nodded. "The Euclidean system is light years from anywhere."

For a second, they could see the navigational chart on the screen, with their exact stardate and location displayed. The image burned itself into their minds.

As quickly as the vision began, it suddenly stopped. Both women sat back, gasping at just how real it was. They could still smell the plastics and sweat from the inside of the shuttle.

"What the hell was that?"

Neither of them was certain which of them thought it, and it didn't matter, either. It resonated within both.

"It's not a memory, or a vision of the past. What we saw is still future. That's what's going to happen next year."

They looked each other in the eye. *"Unless we stop it."*

Without a thought, Susanna jumped out of bed and padded over to her desk. She opened the log to the next page and, starting with the stardate and location, wrote down everything she could remember.

Suzette carried over the blanket and wrapped her sister. "The last thing we need is you coming down with a cold," she said gently.

Susanna looked up at her and gave her a warm smile of thanks. "Can you help me with this? I don't want to miss a detail."

Suzette checked over the numbers and confirmed them. "I'm not certain we need to remember much more

than that," she said. She placed her right hand on the back of Susanna's neck, reinforcing their link. *"And besides"* – she flashed an image that was just as clear as when she saw it the first time – *"I'm not sure I can ever forget what I saw. Can you?"*

Both shuddered involuntarily. There was no way they were going to forget it any time soon. All the same, they realised the need to put it down in writing. The human memory is a very fragile thing.

I'm off to bed. Suzette let go of her and stretched. "I'm tired and tomorrow's going to be a big day, I'm sure." She leaned forward and kissed Susanna on the cheek. "Thanks for being a true friend."

Susanna turned and pecked her back. "Get a good night's sleep. I'm going to give you a real workout tomorrow." She flexed her spine, still feeling some of the aches left over from her electrocution. "I could use one, too."

With a cheeky grin, Suzette said: "Besides, I have to get used to sleeping on my own again. You did a great job of keeping the bed warm at night. Now, I've got to create my own heat. Do you think this thing has electric blankets?"

Susanna simply shrugged. Honestly, she said: "You know, I'm going to miss it, too." She gave her a little smile. "Good night, Suzette."

"Good night, Susanna."

She felt a certain sadness once Suzette left the room, like a part of herself was gone. She took a certain amount of solace from the fact that she could still sense her sister's thoughts. The universe was an amazing place, she thought, as she turned back to the log and continued writing.

Chapter Six

The morning was wet and miserable, with a cold front having moved through overnight. The area had been lashed by driving winds and hail, effectively dousing the fire that had been lit the night before. Debris littered the area, with fallen branches evident from a number of older trees. Eucalypts have a habit of doing that in bad weather.

As the Pipers stood in the doorway looking out, they decided that their morning workout would have to be indoors.

They began clearing the small number of left-over crates, stacking them neatly against the wall. It left them with a squarish space roughly ten metres on each side. It wasn't quite what they would have liked, but it would have to do.

Each was dressed in the loosest clothing they could find in their closets, a mix of oversized t-shirts and tracksuit pants, comfortable clothes that had never quite gone out of style.

Suzette looked down at her plain blue top and said: "I miss my "face" shirt."

Susanna tilted her head to the side and said deadpan: "Why? Don't you think my boobs are worth looking at?"

They laughed together then took each other's hand, creating a link between them. Once they started to think as

one, they began their stretches before practising the kata Susanna had taught Suzette.

Focussed as they were on their exercise, they had no idea they had an audience. Standing on the railing at the back of the deck that led upstairs to the sleeping areas, Crash, Manny and Scanner watched them as they moved about the metal floor.

Scanner leaned in towards his wife and whispered: "How are they able to move about so...." he searched for the right word, "synchronised?"

Crash, who had overheard, leaned in on Manny's other side and said just as quietly: "Practice, I guess. We don't know how long they were in 2063 for."

Scanner nodded, but his wife shot her brother down. "No, it's not that. Captain Silayna's had some practice, for sure. But I happen to know the Captain's a latent reader, and right now I can sense their thoughts. They're linked in their minds and working together as one. That's how Silayna is following the Captain."

Her observation was confirmed when Silayna stumbled and had to catch herself. Piper stopped, stepped over and helped her up. Instead of saying anything out loud, it was clear both knew what the other was thinking. Piper led her back to their start position and they began again.

Scanner and Manny moved off to begin preparing breakfast while Crash continued to watch. He felt no shame watching them, but wondered to himself for a moment that

things were going to change again. During his time commanding the *Jolly Roger* and since they arrived on Merrijig, he was in charge. While his fellows were fairly independent and needed an absolute minimum of oversight, the final decisions had been his.

Now the game had changed. He was once more under Piper's command, as she had seniority and, without saying, she had taken over, as she should. All the same, he found it a little hard to hand over the reins. He liked being in command. He relished the authority his new rank afforded him.

Behind him, he could hear his sister and brother-in-law pottering around in the kitchen. He knew Scanner was preparing oatmeal for himself and the other humans, while Manny was simply preparing a couple of barrits each for them to eat raw. He watched Piper and her double for a moment more before walking into the kitchen to get himself a bowl of water. Life seemed to be all about change, he mused.

Shortly after, most of the crew of the *Pterodactyl* sat about their metal dining table. Carman made his usual face at the oatmeal, but there were precious few choices on this planet. "I just can't get used to eating glue," he muttered in his Greco-English accent.

Scanner waved his spoon in the direction of Carman's bowl. "Hey, at least you've got milk and sugar

this morning." Unlike the day before was the unspoken message.

"Thanks for fixing the refrigerator, Scanner," Jason said. "At least now our food'll keep a while longer."

It was at that point that Piper wandered in with her sister. The Captain was only slightly winded, while Silayna was dripping with sweat. Piper noted how Jason had spoken to Scanner and filed it away for future reference. "I would have thought the drive systems would be the priority," Piper said.

As one, the rest of her team laughed. Scanner spoke up. "Piper, you have no idea what condition this tub was in when we first arrived." He pointed upwards. "There wasn't enough power in her to turn on a light bulb."

Multiple questions warred in Piper's mind, each demanding they be asked first. Instead, she was beaten by Silayna. "If you've achieved all this," she narrowed her eyes, "just how long have you been here for?"

Crash looked up at the makeshift calendar on the wall. "A month tomorrow, Ma'am."

To their surprise, Captain Silayna gave him a broad smile. "No need for formalities, Krashtallash. Call me Suzette. I got used to going by that name while we were in the 21st."

Krashtallash's eyes widened curiously. He turned to Piper and asked the question without voicing it.

She gave him a tight, but playful grin. "Susanna," she said. She searched his face, wondering what his reaction was going to be.

After a moment of keeping her in suspense, he laughed in his basso voice. "I choose to take that as a compliment," he said merrily. "Considering also that I know who she's named after." He gave a nod to Suzette. "Captain DuQuesne would be honoured." He spoke of the late commander of the *U.S.S. Firebrand.*

The moment also brought to mind the fact that he hadn't seen his wife or newborn kits for a month. He was aware that the Guardian would bring him back within moments of his leaving, so Susanna would hardly know he was gone, but in the meantime, he was still missing his family.

Piper knew her friend well enough to know what was going through his mind. "I know you miss her, Crash, but I'm afraid the wait's going to be a bit longer than you might imagine."

Now she had everybody's attention, she revealed: "We're here to stop a ship from the future – the *Nerada* – from destroying the *U.S.S. Kelvin.* That won't take place until March next year."

Scanner, Manny and Crash all shared a look that spoke volumes. They were going to be away from their families for the better part of a year. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

"At least they won't have a chance to miss us," Manny said, doing her best to find some good in their situation. "We should be gone only minutes to them." The words were there, but it was a shallow consolation.

Piper and Suzette pulled up chairs to the table. Before they could continue, Manny stood and served the remainder of the oatmeal into two bowls and placed the steaming meals before them. "The food synthesiser is still on the list of things that need repairing," she said cheerlessly.

Scanner shrugged. "Actually, I've looked at it and it's not bad. The fact is, it won't work until I can get this tub's warp drive online, and that won't be for at least two weeks."

Considering time was working against them, this was not good news to the crew. "Why's that?" Piper asked. She didn't frame it as a challenge, and it wasn't received as such.

"No deuterium. I brought a small power cell with me, but I've had to put it aside until I've got enough deuterium in the tank to make just a gram of antimatter. Once I've got the core going, as long as I've got a decent amount of deuterium, I can get the antimatter generator going and convert some of the deuterium and keep the engine running. Once that's done, we'll be able to draw what we need from Merrijig's atmosphere. There's enough

here to keep us going for a while." He looked at Piper in a way that told her that a big *but* was coming.

"*But* the problem is that there's not much deuterium in the water here. I've got pumps working, taking fresh water from the nearby creek – that's what you showered in – and as it's filtered it's extracting deuterium. The problem is that you could count the atoms we're collecting daily easily. It's going to take time." He sighed, resigned. Still, where Judd was, there was a silver lining.

"At least it gives us plenty of time to fix what needs doing." He gave the newcomers a sly look. "And now I've got two more sets of hands, it's going to go even faster." Content he finally got one over on his captain, he scraped the last of his oatmeal off the bottom of his bowl and downed it with a smile. Looking into the bottom of his now empty bowl he said: "It may be one of the simplest meals ever invented, but at least it's better than nothing."

Before Piper could say a word, Krashtallash had a few words of encouragement and guidance. "Just remember folks, when you're out there hunting barrits, keep an eye out for gold. Old creek beds are good for it, and it would be good to have something to buy the beer with." He gave Piper a look and suddenly realised he may have spoken out of turn. "Sorry, Captain."

As Piper finished her mouthful, she turned up the tip of her lips in mild mirth. She found it odd that Crash still called her "Captain" even though now they were the same

rank. Traditionally, they could go by "Captain X" or even their first name if they were well enough acquainted. It was if he, too, didn't want things to change. Perhaps his promotion wasn't that well received.

She put down her spoon and said thoughtfully: "You've all be working on this project for the last month, and I can see that protocol has become a little relaxed. It's not like we're on a starship at the moment." She indicated the room around them and the ship it housed. "In fact, we're going to have to do things very differently for a while." She suddenly made a decision. "I don't want anyone calling me "Captain" from now on. Neither do I want you referring to me by my name. Like Suzette, I want to be referred to as Susanna." She gave Crash an apologetic grin. "Sorry, Crash, but I've gotten used to it."

Picking up the thread, Suzette continued. "We're people out of time and on a mission. When we were in 2063, we had time agents from the future turn up and try to kill us."

A collective gasp came from their friends.

Suzette added: "We were able to keep ourselves from being found by those in the future by adopting different names and by not getting our photos taken." She chuckled then, surprising the others. "It didn't stop us from getting ourselves into the history books, though."

Since he had been listening to the Pipers, Scanner had been bothered by something they said. Now Suzette

gave him the last piece of the puzzle he could see the whole picture. He pointed at the two in turn, voicing his amazement at his discovery. "You two are Susanna and Suzette Lee, aren't you?! You guys were the ones who invented the navigational deflector they used on the *Phoenix!"*

Piper/Susanna put her hands up in surrender. "Guilty as charged!"

Silent until now, Jason interjected: "But what about the Temporal Prime Directive?"

Ignoring him, Scanner, who was still seeing only parts of the whole and trying to understand what he was contemplating, blurted: "When you arrived, you noticed the *Phoenix* didn't have a navigational deflector, didn't you? So, you *invented* it?"

Suzette looked at both of them in turn. "It was either the Temporal Prime Directive or there was a real chance Zefram Cochrane would have never made it home. So yes, we *invented* it." She looked at Scanner with laughter in her eyes. "So much for staying out of history's way."

Susanna added: "We tried."

Scanner said: "I don't get it. If you guys were there, what happened to the *real* Lee sisters?"

Like Deanna Troi before her, Manny saw into the women and said: "They *are* the real Lee sisters. They didn't intend to pretend to be anyone."

At his end of the table, Carman interjected: "You mean to tell us that your being there was a natural part of history?" His head was spinning as he tried to understand it. "I don't get it."

Crash sighed. "It's called a Predestination Paradox. A notion in Temporal Physics that says that, sometimes, effect can precede cause. Like a man travelling back in time, meeting his grandmother as a young woman, inseminating her and becoming his own grandfather."

"Ewww," Jason said, repulsed. "That's gross."

Crash just looked at him and put his overreaction down to his being human. "If you say so, Jason," he conceded. He turned back to Piper and almost called her by name but caught himself just in time. "Susanna, how long were the two of you *in* 2063?"

Both Pipers turned to each other, trying to remember. "We got there on the 1st, didn't we?" Suzette asked, uncertain.

Susanna nodded. "Yes, it was the First. Remember that April Fool's crack?"

They turned and answered together: "Six days."

Jason said: "Cool! That means we're actually catching up to you in age, Ca... Susanna." The last came out clumsily, as if he could not be entirely comfortable calling her that.

All the same, the joke was appreciated, and they all shared a chuckle.

Susanna just looked at Jason and said mock-serious: "And that's about as close as you're ever going to come."

As Jason, Carman and Suzette smiled, Susanna noticed the expression on the others changed, as if they knew something they weren't telling. They certainly weren't laughing. She looked into Crash's eyes and all he could do was shake his head, no. There were some things he couldn't tell her, that was clear.

The Pipers went back to their oatmeal and ate while Susanna turned the situation over in her mind. The dynamic was different here and it wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Suzette dropped her left hand and placed it on Susanna's back where her shirt had ridden up a little. It was enough for them to make a connection. "*I know what you're thinking."*

"What's that?"

"You're going to leave Crash in command until we're ready to leave, aren't you?"

"What made you think that?"

"I know you too well."

"You're doing it again."

Manny's words from across the table were clearly directed at them and broke their spell. Suzette moved her hand off Susanna's skin and pushed herself off the chair a little, as if she was trying to get comfortable.

Piper looked a little sideways at Amantasandage. "What do you mean?"

Manny's eyes widened a little as if to say: Do you really think I'm that stupid? "I know you're capable of talking to each other in your heads. What I don't think you realise is that, when you're touching, the pair of you actually amplify your thoughts. I can hear you too."

Embarrassed, both women blushed red. Neither knew what to say.

"I'm not telling you to put you to shame," Manny continued, trying to put them at ease. "Just to let you know, OK?"

Both Pipers realised they had been holding their breath. They let it go in a rush. "All right, Manny," they said in unison before Susanna added: "We'll try to be more careful for your sake."

Manny's whiskers arched forward gratefully. "By the way," she said, thinking back. "What can you tell me about a ship that's made of knives and a baby being born in a shuttle?"

Scanner smiled as he realised the origin of his wife's vision was his captain and friend. "Yeah, what about it, *Susanna?"*

That day was a busy one as Crash spent a good part of it showing the new arrivals what had been achieved and what still needed to be done. The scales still weighed heavier for the latter, but each battle won came closer to winning the war.

"Make sure you're wearing something to keep you warm," he finished with. "It's another lousy day on Planet Merrijig."

He sent out his usual hunting parties – they had to eat – while he took his Captains down to meet the locals. "You've already seen the bar, so half the town already knows you're here."

Together, they walked down the now muddy street to the General Store. Fortunately, both women had found a pair of boots in the bottom of their closets. They weren't a perfect fit, but right now, they were just glad for the warmth.

They looked up at what appeared to be the biggest building in the street next to the Town Hall and the pub. It was showing its age, made of wood cut from local trees and painted with enamel that was in dire need of a recoat. The sign above the verandah stated simply "General Store" in fading black letters on what might once have been white. The windows were filled with bric-a-brac, second-hand items – including farming equipment – and horse-riding tack.

Indicating the building, Crash said: "The other half comes through here. If you need pretty much anything on Merrijig, this is where you'll find it, or it's simply not on the planet."

The women understood the implications. Sooner or later, everyone would come through this place.

Together with Crash, they mounted the creaking steps, pulled open the fly-wire door with the bell attached, which rang out its friendly warning, and entered.

It was reasonably well lit and filled with shelves sporting just about everything. They wandered around the store, the women spending their time just shopping. They looked at one another. "Do you do as little of this as I do?" Suzette asked.

Susanna nodded. "It's not that I'm not interested, it's just that there's never any time."

Her sister looked over at Crash. "All the more reason, don't you think?"

Susanna thought to herself: It would be nice to take a back seat for a while. She knew that it had been some time since she'd had a break of any sort.

Having spent some time in two different times in places where life was led in a more laid-back fashion, she was beginning to understand the appeal. Her life had been spent at warp speed since her youth, and she had rarely had a chance to slow down. Now it had been forced upon her, she was seeing the other side and she had to admit that she liked it.

Their shopping was interrupted by the appearance of a very fit man in his mid-thirties who wore a welcoming smile. Susanna noticed his eyes were green and he had laugh lines around them. He was clean shaven, his fair hair neatly pulled back into a ponytail. He gave her the

impression of a man who spent a lot of time enjoying himself. "Good morning, ladies," he said in a friendly, educated voice. "Can I help you?"

Both women realised that he had taken the appearance of two complete strangers entirely in his stride. Odd.

Crash appeared at the end of their aisle with a basket full of shopping. "Hey, Jack, these are the ladies I told you we were waiting for. They're Susanna and Suzette," he said, indicating each in turn.

Jack shook their hands warmly. "Welcome to Eureka Creek," he said. To Susanna's surprise, he lingered with Suzette. He seemed genuinely interested in her, and she couldn't help but wonder if he was simply fascinated with her prosthetic. "You've been through the wars, haven't you, love?" He said it with such an air of disarming charm that Suzette was not put off by it.

Instead of getting angry, she chose to take it as simply friendly interest. "It's a long story," she said with a shy smile. "The short of it is: don't step into phaser beams." She deliberately focussed in sharply on his eyes, causing them to hear the faint whirr of her artificial eye adjusting. "You might wind up looking like a Terminator."

It was a movie they'd had the chance to watch whilst in the 21st Century living with Lily. She had an excellent collection.

Susanna looked at her sister and thought: Now you think of it... On the flip side, she worried that Suzette had taken his comment personally and her words were the opening salvo in World War Four. She interjected: "We hardly notice any more." She tried to steer his attention towards her. "How long have you been on Merrijig?"

Jack ignored her. He had eyes only for Suzette. "Long enough," he said, brushing Susanna off. To Suzette, he said: "How long will you be in town for?"

Stunned by the sudden attention, Suzette blushed and even fluttered her eyelashes.

In Susanna's eyes, she looked like a teenager being asked to the prom by the school's biggest hunk.

For a moment, Suzette was caught without a thing to say. Jack almost repeated himself when she blurted: "A long time if it takes forever to get the ship going."

The words were music to Jack's soul. "Then perhaps we could hang out. I'd like to get to know you before you have to leave."

Smooth, thought Susanna. She couldn't help thinking Suzette was spoken for. Brian was back in the future waiting for her.

In her mind she started. On that point she had to wonder: was he? To top it off, if they were successful, *that* Brian would cease to exist, their marriage would never have happened.

With that thought, she had to admit to herself that if they achieved what they were setting out to do her sister would never have existed, either. The thought opened a pit in her stomach.

A voice inside her said: But she's you, anyway. She's just a path that you didn't follow.

The notion warred against experience. Although they carried identical DNA and fingerprints, their personalities had diverged. They were different people; just as identical twins have the same faces but different personalities. There was more to them than met the eye. As Jack talked to her sister, she was beginning to see it. The man saw something in Suzette that was absent in her. Whatever it was, she had no idea, but she had to admit it seemed to be true.

Crash appeared at the end of the aisle once more. "All done here, ladies." It was a less than subtle hint to wrap it up.

At least Jack was gracious enough to let them go. With old-style courtesy, he shook Susanna's hand, then Suzette's. Both women noticed he lingered the second time. "Nice to meet you." Pointedly to Suzette: "I'll be seein' you."

He turned and joined Crash at the counter. The Pipers watched as Crash paid for the items with a small gold nugget. They remembered his mentioning looking for gold

and now realised the locals used the precious metal for currency. They glanced at one another.

"Whatever works," Susanna muttered. As she turned to go a thought came to her. She stopped and looked Jack in the eye. "By the way, you wouldn't happen to know what those dull thuds are I can hear from time to time?"

He stared straight back. "I heard there's a mining operation about ten miles away. I think they're mining bauxite."

It didn't matter what century you were in; bauxite was a worthwhile commodity. In her day, it was used mainly for making windows. All the same, the notion that there was mining going on struck on odd note with her. A people who wanted to live a life devoted to the simpler things would hardly be tearing holes in their world to mine for minerals.

Before Susanna could respond Jack added: "It helps pay the bills around here. There are only so many things you can buy with a cow."

He had a point, so she let it go. She gave him a friendly smile. "I'll see you around," she said over her shoulder as she stepped out the door.

Once outside, they revelled in the warm, bright sun that had made an appearance through the thick cloud cover.

"He's cute," Suzette said, sounding like the schoolgirl her sister had wondered about earlier.

"You're taken," Susanna said, bringing her back to ground. "Last time I looked, you're still married."

"Killjoy." Her sister only injected a little heat. "There's no reason why the two of us can't hang out though. He knows we're leaving as soon as the ship's ready, doesn't he?"

Krashtallash, who had been silent up to this point, answered truthfully. "He knows we plan on leaving the planet, yes." He didn't know if he wanted to get in the middle of this conversation. He made as if to run on ahead when Susanna pulled him up short. Now they were out of town on the path up to the ship she was confident they could talk in peace.

"Captain Krashtallash."

The formality brought the realisation to Crash that he was still very much under her command. "Yes, sir." He took up the at-ease stance.

Susanna sighed. "Relax, Crash, I'm not going to rain on your parade."

The saying was lost on him, but he knew she was just trying to put him at ease. He put his head to the side and waited.

"The two of us have talked and decided that, until it's time to go, it's best to leave you running the show. You've had everyone organised and working well together that the last thing we want to do is turn up and upset the balance. Naturally, we'll be here if you need any advice but,

until the job's finished, consider us part of *your* team. If you've got a job for us, we're here!"

Krashtallash, his head still to the side, suddenly smiled.

"You did have to volunteer us for *any* job, didn't you?"

A light drizzle was falling as the Pipers worked together to drag the three-inch pipe over to the old mine ventilation shaft. Fortunately, it was long enough, and the slope was downhill, but it was still a nasty job. Suzette scowled as the two of them heaved. "I was thinking, maybe he'll get us to fix the impulse drive or clean out the fuel lines on the atmospheric jets, but *no*, the first thing he gets us to do is dump the ship's sewage tank."

Susanna wasn't certain whether she should defend Crash or heap it on him as well. She decided to walk the fence. "I'm not wrapped with the job, either. But you've got to admit that it has to be done. Every time I've flushed the head, I've gotten a whiff of fifty-year-old faeces."

Like Jason before her, Suzette said: "Ewww," whilst she kept pulling while trying not to slip in the mud. The flexible hose played out behind them. "I understand the job needs to be done, I just wish they had done it before we got here." She slipped and dropped a knee in a mud puddle. "And certainly *not* today."

Susanna helped her up and found she had to agree. “I suppose the priority is to get the stink out of the ship.”

They finally reached the shaft and managed to push about a metre of it into the opening. “That should do,” Suzette said, glad that part was over. They headed back to the ship and made their way past the landing struts at the base, then crawled to where the sullage outlet was located, grateful that the ship’s wings had kept the underside dry.

Susanna tried to slide the cover open, but it refused to budge. Suzette turned and gave it a kick with the heel of her boot. It moved slightly, so she repeated the exercise.

“Nearly got it,” Susanna said as she kicked one more time.

Together, they picked up the end of the pipe and tried to connect it to the newly exposed outlet. Another problem became clear when they discovered the locking tabs had been broken off the pipe. There was no way to hold it on other than by hand.

The women eyed each other warily. “Rock, paper, scissors,” they said together.

Without a beat, they started. Suzette won the first round with scissors over paper.

Susanna took the second with rock over scissors.

It was down to the wire. One, two, three.

Paper covered rock. Susanna won.

The only way they were going to get the job done was to get in close. Suzette picked up the nozzle and placed

it over the form-fitting outlet, holding it tight. She gave her sister a nod and held on tight as Susanna pulled the release lever.

To their relief, the effluent ran freely down the tube, flexing all the way to the shaft where they could hear it splattering on the rocks.

"Thank God," Suzette said, still holding on tight.

About fifteen seconds later, with no end in sight, they heard something get jammed in the outlet, slowing the flow to a trickle.

"I don't want to know *what* that is," Susanna said, grimacing. She gave the mechanism a thump with her closed fist, to no effect. She sat back and gave it a swift kick instead.

Whatever it was dislodged and slipped into the pipe. However, whatever it was, was also heavy and it caused Suzette to lose her grip. She lost the seal against the outlet and showered herself with disgusting gunk.

As both women gagged, Suzette forced the nozzle back on and stemmed the flow. Half a minute later the last ran out, allowing Susanna to close the valve and Suzette to drop the hose. As she did so, some remaining fluid splashed out and covered Susanna's clothes.

"Yuk!" they said in harmony as they quickly crawled out from under the ship. They immediately headed for the loading hatch and the shower upstairs.

They were caught at the door by Amantasandage, whose nose wrinkled up as soon as she came within ten feet of them. "No way you're coming in here smelling like *that*," she said, thoroughly revolted. "We'll never get the smell out!"

Both women paused. Susanna was particularly aware of just how sensitive the Caitian nose was. Manny and her brother needed to be able to eat in this place.

She considered alternatives and came to the only one available. "Fine," she said, annoyed and not afraid to voice it. "Bring some towels and a fresh set of clothes down to the creek. I saw a spot over there," she pointed off to the right, "where it's deep enough to bathe. Warn the men to keep away if they know what's good for them."

Manny nodded. It was a fair compromise. "I'll see you there," she said before disappearing inside.

Suzette turned to her sister. "You're not serious," she said.

Susanna sighed deeply. "I'm afraid I am." She looked skyward. "At least it's stopped raining." She wore a hopeful smile. "Perhaps the sun will even come out."

"You know, this would go a hell of a lot easier if we had a grenade."

It was another of those moments when Carman Valastro wondered what planet Jason Nunn really came from. It was as if the people of his hometown courted

disaster. He looked at his companion warily, wondering if he had one in his bag and he was just pulling his leg. Knowing his history, he wouldn't put it past him. "That would be overkill. What is the thinking here? The barrits are intelligent enough to see a grenade rolling into their burrow and, screaming "Run!" they will come scurrying outside where you will pick them off? And what if they didn't? We would have a crater full of debris where we would not be able to sort the dirt from the barrit pieces." He turned from their place watching the barrit warren and gave up. They had been watching the entrance for an hour with no results. "I say we go back to the ship." He indicated the six barrits they had already caught. "These will do us."

Jason pursed his lips as a child does when they're told "no, you can't have that lolly". "Okay," he said before snatching up his rifle and quick firing at the burrow entrance. He walked over and picked up his prize: a big, five-kilo barrit that he had shot through the head. "Now, *that* was worth the wait."

Content to call it a day, he slung the corpse over back of his horse and the two of them made their way home. "It's good to have the Captain back," Carman said. "I've missed her."

"Yeah," Jason said. "Although her robotic double makes me wonder sometimes."

Carman nodded. "She does take a bit of getting used to. It's weird, though. They're so much alike in most ways..."

"But in the ones that matter," Jason finished, "not so much. She gets on my nerves."

"Is it her eye?" Carman asked. "If it is, you should know better. Lots of people have prosthetics."

Jason wrinkled his nose up as if he has smelled something unsavoury. "No, it's not that. Captain Piper... Susanna is the sort of person I want to follow. Suzette just stands there and expects me to without giving me a reason to."

His friend shook his head. "Jason, you should consider yourself fortunate you serve on the *Millennium.* I've known many Captains who are capable commanders, but terrible leaders. And as we are Starfleet officers, it's not for us to question their command styles. It's our job to follow orders."

Jason mulled it over for a few moments then simply said: "Message received."

Shortly after, they arrived at the ship, corralled their horses and put away their saddles and tack. As they were lugging their catch up to the hatchway, they heard a scream from the direction of the stream. Both of them recognised their captain's voice.

Without a thought, the two of them dropped their barrits and took off at a run, Jason making certain he still had his rifle.

Behind them, Manny appeared at the door with towels in her arms and wondered why a bunch of freshly killed barrits were just lying on the ground. She heard trees rustling and looked off towards the creek to see the men running as if they were on fire. It took her a moment to realise what they were doing when she heard Piper squeal again.

"Jason, Carman! No!" she cried and took off after them.

She reached them at the same time they found the creek. Fortunately, both Pipers were submerged up to their necks with their arms crossed over their chests as they shivered in the cold water.

"Captain! Are you alright?" Carman asked concerned. Then realisation sunk in, and he grabbed his partner and turned their backs. "Sorry, Captain!" he said, embarrassed.

Jason, who had turned bright red, said nothing. He simply started walking back to the ship.

Suzette wasn't going to let him go without saying something. "Mister Nunn! Thank you for your chivalry!"

"It's just the water's freezing!" Susanna added.

Carman, who had begun following his friend, said without turning his back: "You have our apologies, ladies. I hope you enjoy your bath."

Embarrassed, Manny just looked at the women and shrugged. "I'm sorry. I didn't know they were there until it was too late."

Susanna just gave her a look of long suffering. "Just another day in the service of the fleet," she said before taking a deep breath and ducking her head under the water.

Out the back of the General Store was a water tower. It served not only the store but a number of other buildings. Jack was generous that way.

He found it a useful place to keep watch on what was happening in town when things were slow – as they were this day. The foul weather was keeping people at home.

All the same, he liked to climb up the ladder and walk around the narrow platform at the tank's base and use his binoculars to look for fires, riders, anything that would alleviate his boredom.

Today he stood there with his glasses trained on the old ship. He had noticed an increase in activity around it. They were obviously serious in their intention to make it fly again.

He had even watched the women drag out the sullage hose. He had guessed what they were doing and thought it

might be worth a laugh. "Careful, ladies," he said to himself.

When the pipe shifted and both women were covered, he smiled and let out a chuckle. "Now that's a crap job," he commented. "Time for the shower."

He was just about to give up on watching them when they headed inside when he noticed the white cat stop them at the door and turn them away. The girls looked annoyed, but they had a plan B. They walked over to the creek.

Knowing they were about to take a bath made him smile for a whole different reason. He shifted on the tower to try to get a better view of the hollow, but he could only see part of it. He could see some movement through the trees and guessed the girls were undressing, then he caught a splash as they jumped in. He heard one of them squeal, even from where he was standing.

He still couldn't see anything, so he grabbed the glasses in his left hand, took hold of the side of the tank with his right and leaned out to get a better view. Now he could see them clearly, but all he could see were their heads.

"Bloody hell," he cursed to himself. "Missed the show."

All the same, he kept watching, not realising that his fingers were tiring from the strain of holding his weight.

He took delight in watching the women splash each other, then wash each other's backs, but he thought he'd hit the mother lode when Suzette started to rise from the water.

That was when his fingers slipped, and he dropped to the ground fifteen feet down – straight through his chicken coop roof.

Later that day, Krashtallash entered the hold of the *Pterodactyl* holding a couple of paper bags of something that looked heavy. He made a proud announcement to all who could hear: "It seems Jack had a turn of bad luck today, so I picked up a bargain." He held the bags high. "We're having CHICKEN tonight!"

Chapter Seven

Life was a lot like that during the weeks that followed. It was a little routine and a little nuts. The repairs on the *Pterodactyl* progressed slowly, but successfully. In due time, Scanner finally collected enough deuterium to be able to convert some anti-matter and fire up the warp core.

Once that happened, life took off in the little starship. With enough power, and being able to draw fuel from the atmosphere, they were finally able to synthesise missing parts and, more importantly to a crew fast tiring of barrits, food.

All the same, Crash and Manny would still catch the odd one and enjoy them fresh with their meals.

During their off hours, the Pipers not only kept up their exercise regime but availed themselves of the opportunity to take some riding lessons from a very willing teacher – Jason Nunn. He often joked that he had practically been born in the saddle.

When he wasn't teaching, Jason and Carman were able to spend more time working on the ship rather than hunting food or searching for gold. One of Jason's first tasks was working out what all the switches on the pilot's console were for considering the vast majority of them weren't marked.

Sitting in the pilot's chair, he viewed the panorama of controls and decided that throwing a few of them wouldn't kill him.

He leaned forward and toggled one that looked innocuous. Immediately on the console in front of him a warning came on. "Are you sure you wish to retract the landing struts at this time?" it said.

He turned it off. He smirked and decided to make a list as he went, and even began labelling some with a permanent marker.

Just before he finished up, he felt an odd vibration through the console. He wondered for a moment what it could be, then reminded himself about the mine that was on the far side of the mountain range.

"One of these days I'll have to check that out," he mused to himself as he took his jacket off the back of the chair and tossed it over his shoulder. Right now, he had some horses to feed and a stable to muck out.

Each day finished with Manny giving her husband a massage – he needed one considering the minor miracle he had been performing getting the ship functional again.

"You're working too hard," she would complain, concerned for him as she worked his shoulders.

"I'm not the only one, my darlin'," he said in return. All the same, he would still moan with a mixture of pain and pleasure.

She had also been noticing he had been losing weight. Not that he had been overweight, but since their arrival on Merrijig, Judd had been becoming much leaner and muscular simply because he had been working harder than usual and often missing meals. Never mind the barrits had been practically fat free.

She would climb into the shower with him and rub him down as he showered as he was often too tired to do it for himself as an act of love considering her own personal disdain for getting wet.

At least Krashtallash had insisted that, even given their time constraints, they took Sundays off. "'Everyone needs rest," he would say, "if they're going to stay fighting fit."

Sundays were usually spent in town, with the boys in the bar enjoying the odd beer and playing pool on the ancient table that had been repaired more times than most people remembered.

Susanna, Manny and Suzette would often meet with the local women, who didn't spend anywhere near as much time in the pub. On one such occasion, the Lees found themselves the guests of a local woman, Sharon Torkington and her sister, Eliza, both in their late thirties. They had taken their day off to help them out as Sharon's husband, Malcolm, was in Mansfield on business and their broken fence wasn't going to mend itself.

As the horses grazed nearby, Susanna and her sister helped pull the wire together while their hosts rejoined it. It was late in the morning, yet the air was still crisp, and the smell of fresh grass was sweet.

"When does Mal get back?" Suzette asked as she strained to hold the wire. She was glad for her leather work gloves as it would have been cutting into her flesh otherwise.

"Tuesday," Eliza said with a grunt. Her short, raven black hair that was so similar to her sister's dripped with sweat. "I'll be glad to let him do this work from now on."

Suzette could not help but ask: "Why leave all the fun work for him? Not only is this good exercise, it'll keep you strong."

Her feminist plea fell on deaf ears. "Don't get me wrong, love," Sharon replied as she snapped off the excess wire. "I don't mind helping out with the farm chores, but I don't want to wind up looking like Hercules. I want to keep my girlish figure." She dropped her pliers and ran her hand over her hips.

Susanna shook her head with a smile. There was nothing wrong with either of the women's figures. Only the scars on their cheeks marred their natural beauty. She cheerfully slapped her own upper arms and said: "Nobody's taking these from me! I've worked too hard to keep them."

Eliza stepped over and gave Susanna's arm a squeeze. Impressed, she said: "More a fighting arm than a working one, though." She gave her a respectful nod,

knowing she was in the presence of a warrior. "I bet you've used them more than once."

Her katana still slung over her back, she reached upward and stoked its handle. "That's true," she said, steel touching sadness. "But I wouldn't say it's ever been fun."

Suzette stepped over and handed Eliza the water bottle. "Not even when she's slaying alien cyborgs," she quipped.

Susanna gave her a quick glance, but she knew Suzette had revealed nothing of damaging import. Nor would she.

Eliza took a grateful swig, then passed it to Susanna who did the same. "That sounds like a good story," she said. "Why don't you tell it to us over lunch?"

Half an hour later, the four women sat in a modest sized homestead made from a mixture of brick and wood panelling that was painted in basic colours. The kitchen sported a wood fired stove that kept the room warm and a hand-made distressed wooden table that had been polished to perfection. It was obviously something the women took great pride in.

Each sat on a similarly made chair while Eliza busily made ham, lettuce and tomato sandwiches with bread that smelled like it was just out of the oven.

While both Pipers sat on opposite sides of the table, they had decided to keep an open link between them by

leaning their partially bared legs together. This way, they found they could keep their stories straight if they were asked any touchy questions.

Sharon got up and poured them each a tea from the ancient looking kettle on the stove. While both Pipers had recently regained their appreciation for coffee, they had found the local black tea delightful, and each took theirs gratefully.

"Where did you learn to use that?" Sharon asked, nodding towards the katana that leaned against the door frame.

The truth would not hurt them as the Andorians had been part of the Federation for nearly a hundred years already. Susanna ventured: "An Andorian master taught me that art of Scheel-tah years ago. I haven't been able to pick up a Vin'tah fighting pole, so I've adapted my style to use the katana."

Eliza nodded and turned her gaze to Suzette. "What about you?"

Piper's alternate gave her a shrug. "It didn't appeal much to me until recently. Since then, Susanna's been giving me lessons. I can at least pick it up now without losing a finger."

Sharon lost a little of her usual smile. "I wish more of the people around here knew how to fight like you do."

The Lees didn't need to share a glance to know they had each caught the urgency in the woman's tone. They

wondered what it could be they needed to defend against, and, at the speed of thought, they shared a few speculations, but quickly realised that, without more information they would only be guessing.

Susanna asked: "What do you need to defend yourself against out here? There are no natural predators and Starfleet isn't far away."

Eliza gave a snort but didn't elaborate. "Sheep stealing is usually our biggest problem," she said cagily. She broke into a cheeky grin. "But we just steal them back!" she said with a laugh.

The captains knew there was something that was not being said but were intuitive enough not to push the subject. They just hoped they could steer the conversation back that way.

"How long have you been married?" Suzette asked curiously.

Eliza narrowed her eyes in thought. "About eight years," she said with a smile that spoke of many happy memories.

Her sister nodded her agreement. "That's right. We got married eight years ago next month." She caught Eliza's gaze. "We'll have to organise something to celebrate this time. If we left it to Mal, we'll get stuff all again."

The revelation hit both Pipers like a thunderbolt. The women were sister wives. They were *both* married to Malcolm. In that moment of realisation came the thought

that, if the two of them were in a similar situation, they would not be willing to do the same. Never mind the question: would their children be cousins, half-siblings, or full-blood brothers and sisters as both women carried identical genes?

The practicality of the situation was clear to them. It was well known that fledgling colonies would permit, and even encourage, multiple wives to push along population growth – especially if there was a gender imbalance.

The non-sequitur was also clear. Susanna said: "We understand that you've both married to the same man, but we're curious. How come you haven't had any children yet?"

Suzette added without a beat: "We're not trying to be pushy. You don't have to answer that."

Sharon reached out and took her sister's hand in a gesture of mutual comfort both Pipers well understood. "Like the pair of you, we've just decided it's not the right time yet," she said, gently making it known that was all she was going to say on the matter.

The conversation turned to more innocuous subjects like the weather and the size of the farm and its running. Eliza complained that their tractor needed servicing and Susanna suggested they get Scanner over some time to have a look at it for them.

"We'd appreciate that," Sharon said, genuinely delighted. "I can't do much with it right now. Bloody

thing's on its last legs." As a gesture of good will, she got up to retrieve the kettle to pour them each another cup of tea. As she poured Suzette's, she couldn't help but take a good look at her metal eye and cheek. "Does that ever bother you?" she asked.

The impetuous question was not entirely unwelcome. Through their shared thoughts and feelings, Susanna felt her sister's pain. All the same, she filled her sister with her love and acceptance which she gladly accepted. It helped her find the will to answer honestly.

"It used to – a lot," she said quietly. She glanced at Susanna. "I've recently been reminded that true beauty is on the inside." She reached out and took Sharon's hand and guided it to her cheek. "I'm grateful for this, you know. If the technology hadn't existed to reconstruct my face, I would have been dead long ago."

Sharon was surprised by Suzette's candor. However, she wasn't about to let the opportunity pass and so she lightly touched the warm, hard metal that was Suzette's cheek. It felt as smooth as gold, and she marvelled that it had a dull shine. She focussed on her mismatched eyes and found there only acceptance. She quickly withdrew her hand and found herself gently stroking the scar on her own cheek.

Susanna said: "It's a pity Doctor AndrusTaurus isn't here. She could have fixed the scars on their cheeks in a matter of minutes."

As Suzette nodded her agreement, they found themselves surprised by the sister's reactions. "Oh, no, we couldn't!"

Both Pipers, connected as they were, could not help but feel the fear the sisters were projecting as if it was a tangible thing; the elephant in the room had just revealed it was actually a tiger.

"What is it?" the Pipers asked together, concerned, wishing they could do something for them.

Sharon, the older sister, took the lead and simply began cleaning up the dishes. "I'm sorry, Susanna, Suzette, but you should go. We've still got a lot of chores to do, and the sun will be down before you can say boo!" It was a bad dodge, but it was effective.

Confused and worried, the Lees realised there was nothing they could do to change their host's minds. It was clear that, whatever it was they feared, they were not going to elaborate.

As the sisters bundled them out the door, Sharon said to Susanna: "Just get your ship working and get your pretty face off Merrijig while you still can."

As the door was closed, leaving Susanna wondering at the non-threat, Suzette just narrowed her eyes and said: "We'll see you at the B&S Ball."

Susanna thought she was probably right about that. It was only a month away and they still had a lot of work to do. In the meantime, she was going to see if she could find

out what it was the sisters were so afraid of. She didn't think it was Mal. They were both clearly in love with him.

So, if it wasn't him, then what was it?

With the ease that came with a lot of recent practice, the women saddled their horses and swung onto their backs. Suzette cast a last look through the kitchen window to see Sharon watching them as they left. Once more, their host unconsciously touched the scar on her cheek – a habit she was quite familiar with. It was if it defined her.

Susanna clucked at her ride, a bay mountain gelding called Billy and quickly brought him to a trot. Even though they were putting some distance between them and the sister wives, her thoughts remained with them.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Suzette said momentarily when she caught up. She had Judd's horse, Judi, today.

"Whatever it is, the Temporal Prime Directive prohibits us from interfering in their society." She said it with more than a hint of regret. She was a woman who not only loved to serve but protect the downtrodden. Having her hands tied was frustrating.

"You suspect there's more going on here than just simple farm accidents," Suzette said. It wasn't a question. She knew her duplicate's mind.

"Of course. Her comment regarding my "pretty face" was a stand-out."

"Well, you *are* pretty, you know."

Susanna grinned ruefully. It was an understatement, both of them knew. Over time she had used her looks to her advantage on many occasions, but it had proven a hindrance even more often. Some people seemed to find it hard to take her seriously. She felt the weight of the katana on her back and knew the locals certainly did, now. Her ability as a swordsman was becoming common knowledge. The other day she had been walking down the street in Eureka Creek and she noticed a man not only see her coming but give her a very wide berth. She had given him a friendly smile, but there was more than just respect in his eyes. It was fear.

She shrugged. "Whatever these people are afraid of they're going to have to sort it out on their own." She looked over at Suzette who was now only feet away from her as they followed the well-worn path back into town. "They'll just have to get used to how good we look," she said with a light chuckle. As Suzette rode on her right, she only saw the left profile that was so much like her own. It was like looking into a mirror of sorts.

Suzette smiled, but it took a little effort. "Then we'll have to knock their socks off at the Ball," she said, determined. "If not for them, at least I'd like to look my best for Jack."

Susanna turned her attention back to the road. She realised they were only a few minutes from town. She kept her concern for her sister to herself and, instead of answering urged her steed into a gallop and stormed her was back into

town. For all its charms, Merrijig was starting to get on her nerves.

Suzette's mind was elsewhere as she rode, relishing not only the rhythmic beat of her mount's hooves on the soft, grassy soil and the smell of her sweat, but the knowledge that her attentions would soon be filled with the likes of the handsome Jack.

Once they came to the main street the women slowed to a walk and hitched the horses to the railing outside the Store. Both horses drank greedily from the troth while the women dismounted.

Like magic, Manny appeared on the end of the verandah. Susanna guessed rightly that she had heard the sound of their mad charge into town and had run down to meet them as they had arranged earlier. It was time to do some shopping. "What took you so long?" she asked cheekily. She loved to shop.

As Manny and Susanna worked to restock their supplies it became clear that Suzette had an ulterior motive for being here and, as become her habit, she spent the afternoon with Jack. Typically, they would go off for a walk and picnic and disappear for hours at a time.

When they were finished and laden with groceries, Susanna watched Suzette walk off with her beau and said to Manny: "I'm worried about her. She practically vanishes for most of the day with him. Who knows what they could be getting up to? Do we really know this guy?"

By this time, Manny had become much more comfortable talking to her captain as a friend. She offered: "Have you been listening to yourself?"

At that, she started. Internally, she had to squelch the little voice that said: "A lieutenant shouldn't be talking to you like this." The good-natured part of her, the woman who had come to know Manny as a friend as well as compatriot, asked: "What do you mean?"

Manny pointed off in the direction Suzette had taken. "You're worried about what might happen to another version of *you*." She gave her a wry smile and a slight shake of the head. "If there's one woman on the planet who can handle herself in virtually any situation, it's you. *She is you.* If you doubt her ability to look after herself, it's really you you're doubting."

With that said, Manny turned and walked down the street to the bar to find her possibly inebriated husband, leaving Susanna to consider her words. Was she right?

Four weeks after the Lee sisters arrived from the past, they were ready to try the thrusters. The impulse engines, which were used for sublight travel in space, could not be tested in the atmosphere without shattering every window within a five-mile radius. As they wanted to remain on good terms with the locals, they saved that for later. Judd had done all the work possible to ensure they would work when the time came, and he had every confidence that, when

the time came and the button was pushed, that the ship would perform admirably.

As if rechristening the ship, the crew stood outside watching from a small distance, waiting in anticipation as Jason sat in the pilot's chair, waiting for the call to light it up.

Crash flipped open his communicator. "Ready when you are, Jason," he said hopefully.

With only the slightest squeak, the twin thrusters which were mid-mounted, one on each side, turned on their axis so they pointed downwards.

In the cockpit, their pilot opened his handwritten manual and went over his procedures one more time. "Don't screw this one up, Jason," he muttered to himself. "Or you'll never live it down."

Meticulously, one by one, he threw switches and made adjustments. Through the walls, he could hear the thrusters come alive once more after decades of neglect.

Standing a hundred yards away, the rest of the crew felt the wash of the thousands of pounds of thrust being shoved into the ground.

Nearby, the horses were getting spooked, so Susanna sent Carman and Manny over to secure them.

Inside, Jason watched the gauges, looking for any sign of a failure. He wiped away a drop of sweat that was threatening the corner of his eye and grinned. The old girl was working like a charm.

He eyed one part of his console and wondered what it was for. It was clearly marked: Do not use in atmosphere, but aside from that, he had not been able to divine its purpose. Soon.

He turned his attention back to the thrusters, which were operating at a mere 20%. He only needed 50% to lift her off, so he gradually pushed harder on the throttle.

He knew he had achieved his aim when the deck shifted under him, and the *Pterodactyl* lurched.

Outside, Scanner looked on in alarm as the ship started to lift off. "Shut her down, Jason!" he yelled into his communicator, partly in panic, although he'd never admit it. "We're not going anywhere in her today!"

At the controls, Jason sighed. He was itching to take the metal eagle for a flight. All the same, he trusted that Judd knew when she would be ready. Today wasn't it. He eased back on the throttle and powered the engines down.

As the turbine's whine ran down, the rest of the crew cheered and gave one another high fives. The cheering and jubilation went on for a while given their level of jubilation.

Susanna flipped open her communicator. "Great test, Jason!" she said. "We'll be flying her in no time!"

Standing next to her, Crash muttered: "I'm glad he knows this ship as well as he does." It was a sound of regret, not delight.

With a glance back at the ship, she drew him off into the bush and started walking. She wanted this discussion to be private. "Okay, Captain Crash, spill it."

Without slowing, her friend turned his ears behind him to listen for sounds of company. There were none. Before he divulged any secrets he said: "Please don't call me that in front of the crew when we get back. I'll never live it down."

Piper chuckled. "You're right about that," she said with a grin. "We can't have people refusing to serve under you because they're worried you can't even get out of Spacedock." At that, she laughed heartily. She then fell silent and let it speak for her.

The moment of levity had passed, and Crash was saddened with having to share the burden of foreknowledge. "We know that, when we return to the future, Jason won't be coming with us."

The Captain jumped to the wrong conclusion. "He's going to die?" she said a little too loudly. For all the youth's annoying traits, he was still part of the *Millennium* family.

Crash hissed quietly. Even though they had put some distance between them and the ship, sound carried in the woods due to the lack of wildlife. "No, he's not going to die. In fact, he's going to live a long and fruitful life." As the connections were remade in his head he confided: "His daughter serves on our ship."

At this point Piper was thoroughly confused. "Huh?"

Crash arched his whiskers forward in mild amusement. "He's left behind by the Guardian for some reason. I guess so he can carry a message for us – from you in particular." He went on to detail his conversation with the older Jason on Argelius and his revelation of Gillian's identity.

"I always thought Gillian was an odd name for an Argelian." She tipped her head to the side and added: "Now I know where her work ethic came from." She turned and looked her compatriot in the eye. "And why you've been pushing Jason so hard to know this ship so well." She rolled her eyes and stopped. With eucalypts all around and decaying foliage underfoot she realised she could easily get lost out here. All the same, it reminded her of home.

"All right, then," she said, thinking out loud. "You were absolutely right to keep this to yourself – and from Jason."

"Well, he did say not to tell him," he replied. It was small consolation. "He made his own way well enough."

"And gave us our bartender."

"There is that."

"C'est la vie," she said suddenly feeling tired. Once again, she was feeling manipulated, as if she was the marionette and the Guardian was the puppeteer. It was clear it had an agenda. At this point she was committed to the

course, but she was determined to have a long talk with the circular stone when she returned.

Piper turned back towards the *Pterodactyl* and took up a brisk pace. "Back onto the stage," she said, frustrated.

Later, in the ship's miniature engineering room, Scanner gave his equipment a once-over, making sure that all was well. He had no doubt about his anti-matter engine, which was working brilliantly. He tapped the gauge that registered their fuel supply and was delighted to see it was well over 50%.

With his wife watching from the door, Judd went from dial to dial, making certain all was as it should be. He checked everything off on his clipboard, confident that all would work as designed. He turned to her with a huge grin. "You know, I think we should take her up tomorrow," he said. "I don't see any reason why she shouldn't fly."

Manny knew her husband better than to take his claims at face value. "After you check everything over one more time," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

Scanner stepped over and took his wife in his arms, nuzzling her cheek. "You know me so well," he said. He sighed. It was a sound that came from the depths of his soul. "I miss them, you know."

Amantasandage knew exactly who he meant. Although it had been a consolation that their children would have no time to actually miss *them*, the fact was that it had

already been two months since they had left their children behind, and she missed them dearly. "It's weird," she said. Sorrow welled up within her. "We're going to get home and the kits will be no older, even though a year will have passed."

Scanner held her tighter. "I know, my darlin'," he said roughly. "I keep thinkin' how they will have grown while we've been away and yet..." His throat tightened up completely as he thought of their missing family members.

Manny squeezed her eyes shut hard. "I know, they won't miss us, but I know that I miss them." At that point, she gave in to grief and the two of them wet each other's necks with tears for their absent children.

After a time, Scanner led his wife back to their room and they talked for a while.

"The way I figure," he said as he shared some thoughts that he had been dwelling on. "Our lives were meant to be spent raising our kids and seeing them grow up into adults. That's what we're here for. I mean, generally."

Manny, whose head rested on her husband's chest, just looked up at him quizzically. "Parents are meant to live to raise their children. When we're not doing that, it's like our time is being wasted somehow. I know I'd like to be using the forty-fourth year of my life seeing Drallah and Lila mature, not fixing this old derelict." He gave the wall a thump with the side of his fist to punctuate his statement.

His wife wiggled her whiskers as she considered his words. "I think I understand," she said.

Scanner reached down and scratched her head lovingly. "Sweetheart, you're still young," he said quietly with great introspection. "You're only twenty-five. You've got a lot of years left to you and you're nowhere near middle age. When you get a little closer to that, you begin realising just how precious the time you have has become."

"Sage advice from my elder husband," Manny said, with only a hint of cheek. "You think your time would be better spent raising our kits."

Judd sighed. "Yeah," he said, his thoughts many years in the future.

Manny wiggled her whiskers again. "No. We're doing the best we could possibly be doing for them by saving the world they will live in." She pushed herself up so she could look Judd in the eye. "We're doing this to make sure our kits *have* a future. I know it's hard, but right now, there's no place I'd rather be."

"No sacrifice too great." When his wife just stared at him, Judd elaborated. "It's something my dad once told me when I was a kid growing up in Tennessee." In his mind's eye, he returned to that moment when he was sitting in his father's boat fishing for catfish. They hadn't caught anything, so his father had taken the opportunity to give his son some words of wisdom. "He told me that one day I would understand that, for a parent, no sacrifice was too

great for their children. Even if it came to giving your life up for them."

It was the first time she had ever heard her husband talk about his father. Up to this point, he had only mentioned he had died when he was young. *How* young she had yet to learn and, while she was curious, she was willing to be patient. She didn't have to learn everything about her husband *now*. All the same, she was not about to let the opportunity pass. "What happened to him?" she asked gently.

Judd looked her in the eyes. The pain in them was clear. "To put it simply, my darlin', my Pa ran off with his girlfriend and my Ma chased him down and shot him dead."

Shocked, his wife's eyes went wide. She knew he wasn't pulling her tail. "Who raised you?"

A smile came over Judd as he remembered. "My Ma's Ma, my Gran. Grandpappy was dead from Rigellian Fever, but there was no way my Gran was going to let me and my sister go into foster care." He nodded to himself. "No way. She was far too good a woman to let that happen."

A mite confused; Manny tilted her head to the side. It was clear to her that Judd held no real respect for his father. "If you don't care for your "Pappy", why do you quote him?"

Judd gave her a wry grin full of years of resentment for his father. "Because even though my father was a low-down skunk of a man, *he was right* in what he said." He

pulled a small photograph out of his pocket and showed it to his wife. It was a candid shot of the two of them and their kits fooling around near the Teacher's mound on Cait.

Even though she was familiar with the shot, Manny still took the time to lovingly run her fingers over the images of her family, yearning to do so for real. She looked up at her husband when he began speaking once more.

"There's *nothing* I wouldn't do for you and the kits, darlin'. *Nothin'.*" It was said with total conviction.

Although Manny knew her husband's heart, it still touched her deeply to hear those words. She glanced once more at the image and knew she shared the same sentiment. She would die for her family if need be. Willingly.

In that moment she felt an even greater connection with her husband than she had felt before. They were joined not only by their love for one another, but by their total devotion to their family and, while they had always known it on the surface, voicing it had drawn them even closer. She moved up into his arms and wrapped hers around him, squeezing him tightly. "I understand, husband," she said. Without a second thought, she asked: "What happened to your mother?"

Judd suddenly looked like he had just eaten something particularly sour. "I'll tell you later," he said, being clear that he would – but definitely not enjoy it.

Later that evening, the crew of the *Pterodactyl* got together in their small lounge area to compare their outfits. Tonight was one of the town's great attractions as they were having their annual B&S Ball – short for Bachelors and Spinsters. It was a tradition that went back centuries, and it gave some of the locals who lived further out from town a chance to come and meet and get to know one another and perhaps renew old acquaintances. On a planet bereft of social media this was how young men and women met.

Although none of them – with the exception of Suzette – had any interest in a romantic liaison with the people of Merrijig, it did give them a chance to let their hair down. It was also a way of congratulating themselves on a job well done. Their ship was nearly ready.

The Pipers had dressed in identical black leather outfits they had bought from the General Store that hugged their very fit forms. Their newly cropped hairstyles had been dyed a deep burgundy and, aside from their obvious facial differences, it was difficult to tell them apart. They stood in black, high heeled boots that added to their already respectable heights. Together, they looked dynamite.

Scanner, who was dressed in an old-style tux, along with Judd and Carman, just stared at the women as if seeing them for the very first time. "You two are going to turn a few heads tonight," he said, admiring.

"I think that is the plan," Carman said with a grin. He looked at them curiously. "Is there a message here?"

While the Pipers looked to one another, Manny quipped: “Only that they’re tall, strong and beautiful.”

At that, Suzette blushed. It had been some time since she had been referred to that way. She accepted the compliment graciously. “Thank you.”

Crash adjusted the collar around his neck – a simple white cardboard arrangement with a bow tie attached to it. With his jet-black fur, he fit right in.

Next to him, Manny sat in her pure white fur having washed herself until she fairly shone. She reminded Judd of a snowflake.

“Let’s get going,” Susanna said, looking at the chronometer. “I don’t want to be late.”

On the way out, Crash checked with Scanner. “Is she set to power down?” They had decided to give the ship a rest for the night before her flight trials the next day by shutting down the warp core. It only left the batteries to run the basics.

Judd nodded. “In five minutes, she’ll be as cold as a July morning.”

Not certain as to the meaning of the reference, Crash decided to take what he said as a “yes”. “Good,” he said as they stepped out into the night air. They could not help but pause and take in the night sky which was perfectly clear and full of not only stars but galaxies that looked close enough to touch.

Graham and Norman, two of Merrijig's moons, were high in the sky, reflecting the sun's rays and lighting up the terrain around them. It only took them a moment to adjust to the gloom and find their way to the path and down to Eureka Creek.

"What do you expect from this shindig?" Judd asked Crash as they walked.

Crash grinned to himself. "My guess, it's an opportunity for mating, excessive drinking and overly loud music."

In the dark, Scanner chuckled to himself. "You mean, sex, drugs and Rock 'n' Roll."

Without turning, Crash said cheerfully: "I believe I said that."

At the bottom of the hill someone was waiting for them. Jack stood wearing an older, but well-kept suit and tie. His leather, heeled boots shone in the moonlight. His hair neat, he looked dapper. He saw the twins coming from a distance, but until they were closer, he couldn't tell them apart until he saw the soft glow of Suzette's artificial eye. "Hi, honey," he said casually, yet meaningfully. Once she had appeared, he only had eyes for her. "I'm glad you could join us." For a moment, he seemed a little out of sorts when he realised, she was taller than he in her boots. He simply decided to get over it.

"Good evening, Jack," Jason said, giving him a shake of the hand. "Thanks for inviting us."

Their host tore his eyes away from Suzette and alighted on Jason, ever so briefly. "A pleasure always, Jase." He turned and took Suzette's arm under his and guided her into the night. "Let's go, sweetheart," he said. "We're gonna have a good time tonight."

Chapter Eight

The town's "Memorial Hall" was one of the older buildings and had been used by the original settlers for a variety of functions since the first days. Grain barn, council chambers, storm shelter, it had been a home for everyone at one stage or another. It had even been used by travelling minstrels – both local and alien.

Tonight, it had been decorated with coloured paper ribbons and bows, and balloons of various sizes and shades. There was also tasty food of many different varieties. Just outside the side entrance, a BBQ was going preparing beef sausages, burgers and steaks. As soon as he laid eyes on it, Judd headed straight over to it, with Carman and Jason following closely.

There were two people running the stall. A local lady, who wore a simple cotton dress over her ample frame, was handing out the meat – on rolls or sandwiches if they asked – while her husband cooked. Like so many others he had seen, this woman sported a nasty scar on her arm.

Judd turned his attention to the chef and watched him for a moment and saw a man who was completely at ease

and very much in his element. It was clear the older, muscular man enjoyed filling this task. Scanner turned his attention back to the woman who was looking at him with open curiosity.

She put out her hand. "I'm Margaret Lonergan," she said pleasantly. She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Useless here is my husband, Roger." Judd realised she wasn't being mean, just cheeky.

"Good evening, Mrs Lonergan," he said politely. "I'm Judd, and these are my friends, Jason and Carman." A white, furry being appeared under his arm and brought herself upright.

"Don't forget about me!" Manny said cheerfully. She was eyeing off the uncooked steaks.

As the grey-haired, slightly plump, middle-aged woman's eyes widened Judd introduced her. "And this is my wife, Manny."

Startled, Margaret took a step back. "Honey!" she said fearfully. "The big cat talks and *is married!"*

While Manny simply gave her a baleful glare, Scanner sighed. He knew he was going to see a lot of this in his life. He gave her a tired, but polite smile. "I gather you've never heard of the Cait," he said quietly. "They're tall, clever, and beautiful. Never mind they've been members of the Federation from the year dot."

Roger Donaldson slowly put down his utensils and stepped past his wife and put out his hand to Manny.

"You'll have to forgive the missus," he said amiably. He had the air of one who apologised for her often. "She doesn't get out much." Manny took the offered hand and shook it. Roger said: "I *have* heard of the Cait, even though I've never met one. Thanks for the education."

Not to be outdone by her husband, Margaret got over her fears and came forward and offered her hand. "I'm sorry, Mrs..."

Desiring to maintain their anonymity, she replied: "Manny will do fine." She took her hand.

Margaret was surprised at the softness of her finger pads and the fur on the back of her hand. She also noticed the claws she was keeping to herself. Local convention required they referred to married couples by their surnames, it was why she had asked the question. However, a nudge from her husband reminded her they had every right to keep that to themselves.

Deflecting, she nudged him back and said: "Don't rag on me about not getting out, Roger. You never take me anywhere."

Roger swung his arms about him, taking in everything around them. "Aside from the pub, where else is a bloke supposed to take his wife in Eureka Creek?"

"You could take me into town sometimes!" she growled; her arms crossed.

Her husband looked at her incredulously. "Mansfield's fifty clicks from here. It'd take us a whole

day's ride to get there, and another one to get back. All *for the sake of a meal?"*

"I take it there are no flitters around here," Jason asked.

Roger patted his pockets comically. "I seem to have left it in my other jeans."

Jason got the message. "What happens if you get into trouble out here, then?" he asked with a little heat. He didn't feel he deserved the sarcasm.

The question left Roger a little uneasy. "Out here, son, we take care of our own business. The people in Mansfield don't have a clue."

Margaret scoffed: "And they couldn't help us if they wanted to."

The security officer in Manny was curious. "So, what happens when you do have a problem requiring force?"

Trying to put her off, Roger said: "We cope as best we can." He turned and flipped the meat on the cook top. "Who wants a burger?"

The humans put up their hands hopefully. Manny simply said: "I'll have mine extra, extra rare."

Roger looked at her with raised brows. "What does that mean?" he asked.

Judd interjected: "She'll have hers still mooin'." He wore a broad grin. "She wants it raw."

The four of them rejoined the rest of their group who were seated at a trestle table against the far wall. Thoughtfully, they brought extra food and it wasn't long before the beef was digesting, and sauce was being mopped up. Most chased their food down with beer, except for the Cait, of course.

Susanna remarked on the music, which was coming from an overhead speaker, and which was largely sung by one man playing an acoustic guitar. She looked at Jason curiously. "What does True Blue mean?"

Jason finished his glass of beer, not realising he was sporting a froth moustache. "It means, are you a fair dinkum Aussie?" he said, as if that answered everything.

He decided to clarify as he caught his Captain's scowl. He thought back. "The song talks about a time when Australians had forgotten that you got what you needed – you were able to look after yourself and others – only by putting in a hard day's Yakka – work. For a while Australia's government had convinced everyone that we'd all be better off if we could be a socialist paradise. Everyone knows how that idea always pans out."

They did. They knew the term was an oxymoron.

"Anyhow, it's a call to get back to thinking that there's no such thing as a free lunch. If you want something, if you want to be well off, you have to work for it." He looked around him at the large group of people who had already gathered. "These people get that."

Susanna followed his gaze and saw he was right. There wasn't a man or woman in the hall who looked like life had been easy on them. They had what they had because they had earned it. Their lifestyles showed in their bodies that were hard and often scarred.

In fact, as she looked around the room, she noticed there wasn't a single woman of child-bearing age that *wasn't* scarred somehow. Life on Merrijig must have been more hazardous than she thought.

As they enjoyed the evening many stopped by their table and introduced themselves. The crew were surprised by the number of people who were genuinely curious about them and just how welcoming they were. The children were especially curious about the Cait twins, and they were plied with many questions about their lives and culture.

"What do the kids on your world do?" one little girl asked as she looked up at Crash with big, doe eyes.

"They go to school, run and play, just like you do," he said fondly. He found she reminded him of his niece, Lila.

Her slightly older brother, a boy who sported a large bruise on his leg just below his knee asked: "Do they have horses, too?"

Manny's whiskers twitched in mirth. "No, we don't."

"Then how do you get around?"

Manny glanced at her brother, who simply said: “We run a lot.”

The boy accepted the answer and added excitedly: “I bet you’d be good at it, too!”

Crash tilted his head to the side. Yes, they could run fast when the need arose. Concerned, he asked about the boy’s leg. “How did you get that bruise?” He wished he could take him to see Merete.

The boy shrugged. “My horse kicked me,” he said in a way that said it meant no more to him than a pimple. “It’ll heal.”

Their mother called to them, and they disappeared into the crowd. Crash turned to his sister and quipped: “Thank the Teacher, he never gave us horses.”

Manny smiled. “You have my complete agreement on that count, Shrallal,” she said. Then she frowned. “You know, there’s something that’s bothering me about this party.”

Ever on the lookout for trouble, Crash asked: “What is it?”

She whispered in his ear. “Ever since we got here, it’s like everyone’s looking forward to having fun, but they’re also afraid something will mess it up.”

Crash’s eyes narrowed. “On a scale of one to ten?”

“Eight,” she said. “If it was one or two people, I’d dismiss it as typical paranoia. But it’s *everybody*.”

Just then the local band got up on stage and introduced themselves as “Pyrites” before launching into a song straight from the late twentieth century that had so much bass the tiles were rattling on the roof. On the other side of the room, Judd jumped for joy as the band played an old favourite of his from the “Who”. He immediately felt the need to dance and looked about for his bride. He quickly spotted her and made his way over.

He took her by the paw and dragged her out onto the dance floor. “I’ve wanted to do this with you for years,” he said. “Come on and dance!”

Manny was torn between her desire to please her husband and her duty to her captain. She looked back at her brother, who gave her a knowing nod and gestured to her to have some fun. He would take care of it.

That done, he disappeared into the crowd in the direction he had last seen Piper.

A part of Manny wished she had resisted as she did her best to “dance” with Judd. To her, it was not much more than gyrating to the beat in a rhythmic fashion. All the same, she enjoyed the way her husband was having fun, especially the loving way he was looking at her.

When the song ended and the band elected to play a slower, more romantic tune, Scanner drew her close and gently guided her arms where they needed to be.

He looked into her eyes and the look he gave her practically melted her heart, he put so much love into it. “Where have you been all my life, sweetheart?” he crooned.

Manny had learned not to take her husband always literally. She realised what his true meaning was and purred. “Waiting for you, Judd,” she said as she rubbed her cheek against his. “What took you so long?”

Judd chuckled and drew her even closer.

It took some time, but Crash finally caught up with Susanna, who was busy keeping an eye on Suzette, who was presently caught in a slow dance with Jack out on the dance floor. She was trying to be subtle, but the annoyed glare Suzette threw her way told her otherwise.

“Ca...., Susanna,” he said, his tone clearly urgent. “Can I have a word with you?”

Piper was well attuned to her former Third Officer’s manner and knew he had something worthwhile to report. She drew him off behind a tower of speakers where peculiarly it wasn’t quite as noisy.

“What is it?” she asked.

Crash put it into as few words as he could manage. “Manny tells me they’re all afraid of something.”

She grimaced. She had picked up on an undercurrent of fear as well. Something was bothering these people. “Any ideas?”

Krashtallash could offer nothing more than a shrug. "Wait and see is all I can suggest. They may like to have a laugh among themselves, but they're generally too proud to admit there may be a problem."

Piper nodded. "Or that they might need help," she said absently. She sighed. "I've never liked the waiting game." She gave the room a dour look, then gave her friend a brief smile. "Let's just hope Murphy stays home tonight."

Crash's fur bristled at the mention of the one who brought bad luck. "He is certainly not welcome here tonight," he said. He caught a whiff of something tasty, gave his captain a quick nod, then turned and bounded through the crowd towards the BBQ where a raw steak was waiting for him.

Piper watched him go and caught the eye of her sister who was still dancing with Jack. For a moment, their minds touched, and they shared the situation at the speed of thought. Suzette told her she would pump Jack for information and was mildly surprised when Susanna told her to have fun.

"I should stop being jealous of you," she shared.

Suzette let her feel her gratuity, then tucked her head into Jack's shoulder during the slower song.

Jack appreciated the gesture and drew her in a little tighter.

No time like the present, Suzette thought. “Do you have any idea why everyone’s on edge tonight?” she murmured, not losing a beat, staying with him.

Even through his thick, woollen shirt Suzette felt his muscles tense. With their skin touching, and her mind open, she could sense the lie that was coming.

“No idea what you’re talking about, love,” he said offhandedly, hoping that would put an end to her questioning. He should have known better.

Suzette stopped swaying, leaned back and looked him in the eyes. “That’s the first time you’ve lied to me, Jack,” she said sadly, but with a hint of steel to remind him who he was talking to.

Her date grimaced. The last thing he wanted to do was upset Suzette, but the casual lie came too easily, one of the habits of a lifetime. “Sorry, love. It’s nothing you need to worry about. You’ll have the ship fixed soon and be out of here. It’s our problem and there’s nothing you can do about it.” He kept his voice low, but it was enough for one man from a passing couple to hiss him into silence.

Jack watched him go out of the corner of his eye and spoke quickly because the song was about to end. “Get your ship fixed and get out of here while you still can,” he whispered into her ear. It was a voice full of concern for her – and for himself.

With the song now over, Suzette took him by the hand and drew him outside into the darkness. She took him

into the shadows of the next building and asked again: "What are you all so afraid of?"

Jack looked up into her eyes and knew he couldn't hold out on her, not if he wanted her to still respect him.

Inside, Crash had just finished eating his steak when the children he had spoken to earlier appeared before him once more. "Can I help you, kits?" he asked, doing his best to sound friendly.

"Would you like to play a game with us?" the little girl asked, all innocence, her blue eyes flashing in the soft light.

Still getting used to being a father, Crash decided now was as good a time as any to learn to play again. "What do you call this game?" he asked.

The boy answered this time. "It's like hide-and-seek, but we only play if the green men show up," he said, matter-of-factly.

Green men? Crash wondered to himself. Realisation came in a flash. *Orions.* They were known *slavers*. No wonder the children had been taught to hide.

It also answered some other questions that had been rolling around the back of his mind. "Sorry, children," he said politely. "Maybe later." He got up with every intention of telling Piper, but he could see it was already too late.

Susanna stood bolt upright as the thought came to her, loud and clear. Suzette, as soon as she had been told, alerted her sister to the danger. However, she had already heard the sound of many horses pounding down the street, headed for the Hall. She relayed this as well.

"They're coming!" Jack said nervously. "Come on!" Taking charge, he took Suzette by the arm and tried to drag her to safety in the darkness behind the buildings, but she would have none of it. She slapped his hand away and darted back inside.

Torn for a moment, Jack erred on the side of caution and slipped away into the night.

Inside, all was mayhem as realisation had stuck the crowd they had uninvited guests. The people were doing their best to disperse, but they were too slow as the Orions took up position at each exit, blocking their escape.

Susanna quickly took stock of the situation and called her people over. Although she wanted to help these people, it wasn't their fight. They were in this time for a whole other reason on a mission that went way beyond local issues. Jason, Carman, Manny and Scanner quickly joined her, but Crash was nowhere to be seen. As well as Suzette.

There was nowhere to go. Crash looked about frantically for a place to hide the children. The doors were

blocked, and they were nowhere near a side room of the kitchen.

Then Crash noticed they were standing on a raised platform – the hall's stage. He wondered if there was a space underneath it. His eyes darted around the floor, looking for something, anything that might help.

On her way back inside, Suzette was beaten to the door by an Orion male who jumped from his saddle at full gallop and rolled into the doorway where he stood. However, he wasn't expecting resistance.

Running up behind him, Suzette slowed, spun, and knocked him out cold with the heel of her boot to the back of his head. Taking advantage of the situation, she stooped down to pick up his weapon when something connected with the back of her skull, and everything went black.

Chapter Nine

"Well, well, well!"

To Susanna's ears it was a voice full of confidence, one used to being obeyed without question with a natural cruelty that more than hinted at a rather unpleasant alternative if one chose to defy him.

To her eyes, he was unremarkable for an Orion. Not muscular or handsome. In fact, she would say he was a little short for one of his kind. However, there was no mistaking the intelligence in his eyes. He was able to measure people up very quickly.

The little green man walked up to the stage – the last place she had seen Crash. However, now he was nowhere in sight.

"Did you people decide to have a party and not invite us?" he said, doing his best to bait the crowd. While some stared at him angrily, most watched the floor. "I am most disappointed." He spoke as if he was lecturing a room full of errant children.

He shrugged to himself as if it was no matter that he was terrorising these people.

Susanna knew that Orions could be completely indifferent to the suffering of those not of their species. It was widely known that Orion males held little regard for aliens, only that they could sell their women to them as chattel.

However, Susanna got the impression he was here for a completely different reason.

"What do we do?"

Susanna started at the sound in the quiet room, but then realised the sound had been in her head. Manny had her paw over her hand and had spoken to her telepathically.

"Nothing," she said. *"We can't fight these people's battles for them."*

"But we're Starfleet. Isn't it our job?"

Piper sighed. It wasn't the time to get into a debate about temporal ethics. *"Don't interfere. Let the others know."* Trusting she would be obeyed, she let go of Manny's paw and leaned to the side so she could get a better view of the stage.

"Mister Lonergan!" the little Orion called out. "A word, please!"

From his place by the BBQ, Roger reluctantly put down his tongs and apron and stepped forward. The usually cheerful man had lost his smile. "Yes, Kriton?" he asked.

Kriton's voice became even more sinister as he gestured to the side. "Are you hiring mercenaries?" he asked as Suzette's unconscious form was dragged into the hall. "This one tried to overpower some of my men." He smiled sadistically. "She failed."

Susanna's heart pounded in her chest as she watched as her double was dumped unceremoniously on the floor.

Roger looked at Suzette, lacking recognition. They had not been introduced. "I've seen her around, I think. But as for her being a mercenary, I have no idea. I think she's just a trader. Perhaps she didn't like your people's manners."

The remark brought a few mutters of support and even a few bowed heads came up with a smile.

Kriton wasn't about to let these people find their pride again and turned and sent Roger reeling with a back-handed swipe. As Roger lay on the floor holding his face, Kriton squatted next to him and handed him a kerchief. "Here, wipe up the mess you're making," he said. "You know, for that comment, you can add another ten head of cattle to your bill for this year." His eyes narrowed as a thought came to him. "If you have one stranger in town, there's every chance you have more." He reverted to his native tongue and quickly barked out an order.

The locals didn't understand it, but the *Millennium* crew had been outfitted with subcutaneous Universal Translators. He had ordered his men to look through the crowd for strangers.

With nowhere to go, it took only a moment for the Orions to locate them. As they found themselves surrounded, one of the Orions took Jason's elbow. The younger man said: "Steady on, mate! I'm not one of them. Can't you tell by my accent?"

Piper understood the younger officer's intentions. There was no advantage to them all being captured.

The Orion guard looked to Kriton for confirmation. The little man nodded, and Jason was released.

The Captain, Crash, Manny and Scanner were ushered forward at gunpoint and they willingly obeyed. The crowd parted and Piper could not help but wonder what kept these people so cowed.

Standing at over six feet in her heels, Piper had to practically crane her neck to look down at Kriton. She did so without pride or haughtiness. In fact, she was doing her best to look guileless.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Kriton looked up at her as if she was nothing more than a piece of meat at the butcher before turning his attention to the others. "Cait," he sneered. "Useless." He looked at Judd. "Too old."

He looked back at Piper, then down at Suzette and realised their similarities. "You're twin sisters, aren't you?"

The truth was beyond his comprehension, so she simply agreed. "Yes, we are. I'm sorry for my sister's behaviour. She never did like bullies."

It was true. It was also true that these Orions were nothing more than petty extortionists.

Kriton was tempted to slap her, but he wasn't tall enough and he realised how ridiculous it would seem to the others attempting to do so. As he gazed up at her, he also

saw that she was anything but stupid. Her manner was simple, but her eyes were incredibly complex. He had only seen such mettle in Starfleet officers. However, Starfleet was far from here, so this woman remained an enigma.

Regardless of her intelligence, she did have an immediate use. Even though it was clear she was no longer a youth, she was still beautiful by human standards. She could fetch a good price. Let her new owner beat her attitude out of her.

He wondered about the sister lying before him. He put out a boot and rudely kicked her over to discover the twin was damaged goods. The surgery on her face was crude, and there was no profit to be gained from her. He leered at her in disgust and considered for a moment what he should do with them. Defiance was a disease that had to be cut out quickly lest it fester.

The problem with killing the locals was that there were barely enough of them to bring him a worthy tribute as it was. If it wasn't for the mine, this place wouldn't be worth his time.

Thinking of the mine brought him back to the others of this woman's little group. He quickly discounted the Cait; they made lousy miners and had proven difficult in the past to keep under guard. The older human was fit, but he quickly wrote him off as past his prime. No use in the mine. Unless…

"Human," he asked Judd, not knowing his name. "What do you know of mining machinery?"

Scanner's response was honest and dead pan. "Nothing," he said. "Ah wouldn't know one end of them from the other."

Kriton was tempted to believe him. However, it wasn't Judd that gave him away. Manny had tensed at the question and Kriton didn't miss it.

The little green tyrant considered her coolly. "Either *you're* an engineer, or the human is and you're afraid for him." He glanced once again at Judd and realised what was going on. The two of them had pair bonded. He pointed at Judd. "Take this one and put him to work on the machinery. It would use some work and somehow, I think he's more capable than he's letting on." He shrugged. "And if he's not, we can just kill him."

The fire in Manny's eyes gave Kriton reason to pause and consider her. This one could be a problem. Manpower still being a consideration, he decided on psychology. "If you give us any reason to doubt you, I won't waste any time on your mate. I'll take him apart – fingers first."

Amantasandage wanted so badly to reply with an even deadlier retort, but she knew Kriton wasn't bluffing. So, she simply glared at Kriton and kept her peace.

To his credit, Scanner realised that he had value to the Orion and would more than likely be left alone. It was Piper he was worried about.

Kriton turned back to the tall human female and came to a decision. "We'll lock this one up and sell her at our earliest convenience." He glanced at an aide. "We're due to transfer our latest shipment tomorrow night. We'll give her to them and let them worry about her."

As Kriton looked up into Piper's emerald eyes, he expected fear. What he got was cool confidence and it unsettled him momentarily. He discounted it as misguided hope. He decided to dash her hopes. "I might sample the merchandise before it's shipped," he said with a leer.

Piper spoke, and it was a voice of absolute certainty. "You might try, but you'd never get another opportunity to father children if you did."

Kriton took a step back, out of reach. This human female was a force to be reckoned with. Perhaps it would be better to kill her, but the part of him that was greedy – the totally dominant part – argued for profit. He pointed his phaser pistol at her and ordered her and the rest of his party: "Let's go."

The town's folk gathered at the door behind Piper's people as they watched her and Judd as they were prodded onto some extra horses. Carman and Manny caught her look of confidence in them before they were led off into the darkness.

Once they were out of sight, Carman, Manny and Jason re-entered the Hall, considering their options.

"What do we do?" Jason asked Manny, his concern for the Captain clear.

Manny took control and fired off two simple statements. "First, find my brother. He disappeared at the start of this mess, and I'd like to know why. Second, let's see if we can get Suzette off the floor."

The first detail was taken care of when a trap door on the stage suddenly flipped up and open and a large, furry, black head popped up, then disappeared once more into the floor to be replaced by the two human children Manny had talked to before. Her "There you are!" was drowned out by the delighted squeal from the children's mother who dashed over to retrieve her offspring.

Manny dropped to all fours, sprang and just beat her to it with three quick leaps. She pulled up short as she heard Crash say: "Get off my head!"

She looked down to see the young female trying to step up out of the hole with Crash's help, her feet madly pawing the air. Her mother came to her rescue by hauling her high in the air. "Thank God you're safe, Sylvia, Jeremiah!" She clutched them to her tightly, afraid to let them go.

With the children taken care of Crash took a simple leap up and out, then closed the trap door. "How is everyone?" he asked. "Are the Orions gone?"

Manny nodded. "They are, but they took the... Susanna and Scanner." Her barely contained fury at the taking of her mate was clear.

Crash's eyes widened at the news. "Not good. We'll get them back, though," he said with all certainty. "The Orions don't know they've bitten off far more than they can chew." He looked about him for a moment, taking in several things at once. "Where is Suzette?" he asked.

Still not her favourite person, Manny pointed over at the floor where Carman was nursing her still unconscious form. "She was knocked out when she took on one of the guards," she said with only a modicum of sympathy.

Knowing he could do nothing more for her at this time, he turned, and his eyes narrowed as he caught sight of Roger. Fur bristling, he stalked over, growling. "Mister Lonergan, you and I need to talk."

The aging human looked about him, seeking an exit. The other towns people nearby wanted nothing to do with the angry cat, so they got out of his way, leaving Roger the sacrificial lamb. He was mildly surprised when the jet-black feline pulled up short and simply glowered at him. He had expected to be torn limb from limb.

The growling grew in volume until Crash snarled: "We have been with you for two months and in that time,

we have enjoyed your company and friendship. We have hunted and eaten meals together and in all that time you kept the fact that there are *Orions* mining nearby from us?" His tone was a mixture of angry and incredulous. "That's like offering a guest a room to stay without mentioning there's a snake in it!"

Roger found a little of his courage and snapped back: "What do you expect us to do? They've got phasers and all we've got is rifles! I've noticed you blokes don't have a hell of a lot in the weapons department, so I know there's nothing you can do about them, either! So, get off by back!"

Any further discussion was put on hold as Jack appeared in the doorway, clearly looking for someone. "Where is she?" he asked. Before anyone could answer, he caught a glimpse of Suzette still lying on the floor through the crowd. He hurried past them and knelt next to her.

As Jack enquired about her, Crash turned his attention back to Roger. He considered whether it would be worth his while continuing the argument and realised it was pointless. There was nothing to be gained by yelling at each other. A thought came to him, and he remembered his own actions.

"You're afraid the Orions will take your children, aren't you?" he asked. He glanced over at Jeremiah, who was still at his mother's side. "That's why you're hiding them from the Orions!"

On the floor nearby, a familiar voice added: “And that’s why the women are scarring themselves.” Suzette pushed herself up into a sitting position and looked around her. “Sharon! Eliza! It’s true, isn’t it!” she cried. “That’s why you won’t have children, either. You’re afraid!”

Hidden by the crowd, Sharon could be heard bitterly muttering: “Who wouldn’t be?”

Manny stepped up next to her brother. “I’m not!” she said angrily. “My husband has been taken. Unlike sheep, I don’t run off when I’m threatened. I fight back and make sure they can’t do it to me again!”

Nobody doubted her sincerity, but none believed they could win against the Orions. They were simply too well armed. Silently, like the sheep Manny had compared them with, they began filing out. The festivities were definitely over.

“Don’t turn your backs on me!” Crash roared. His voice thundered for attention as he caught as many as he could in his glare.

“You know. Since we came here, I’ve heard you all telling me that, if you had a problem, you’d take care of it yourself. *The Orions won’t go away*. They will not leave unless *you* make them!” For a moment, it seemed like he was getting to them, then they turned once more and began to leave.

In the quiet of the room, Jason said: “That’s the way it’s always been with my people, Crash. Bugger it and let it

take care of itself." His even voice carried no mocking, only sad acceptance. "She'll be right, mate. Don't worry!" His local accent attracted the attention of most and they paused to hear one of their own.

He walked over to Crash's side. "You know, I've never been ashamed to be an Aussie until now." He said it to his superior, but he knew everyone was listening now. "Australia has a proud history of saying no to the aggressors in the world. Gallipoli, Belgium, Afghanistan, Colonel Green. When our boys were needed, we never shied away. And we never left a mate behind. Not like this lot." He kept his voice level, but the disappointment was unmistakable. "If you want me, Sir, I'll be back at the *Pterodactyl* getting her ready. There's no way I'm going to leave our friends in the hands of the enemy."

With that simple statement, Jason turned, his face set in stone, and walked out. Nobody got in his way. Nobody said a word to him. In fact, Crash noticed, nobody even looked at him. Taking the younger man's cue, he turned and beckoned Suzette over and led their group into the night.

It took over an hour of riding in the dark, but Piper noticed the Orions knew the way well. The path they were following was well worn, the spaces between the trees wide and the way was reasonably clear of rocks. If she didn't know any better, she would have thought this a man-made road.

Orion made, perhaps, she thought. All the same, it was leading them further and further away from the rest of her party. She glanced to her left and considered herself grateful that Scanner was still with her.

How long that would be, she had no idea. Kretin, as she had come to think of him, had made it clear he had very different ideas for both of them. She considered herself fortunate that neither of them seemed destined for the mine, but she wondered to herself how successful she would be keeping the Orion's paws off her. She hadn't liked the lecherous eye they had all given her at one time or another.

As the horses clopped along on their shod feet, Piper looked skyward and saw all three of the planet's moons were in ascension. Their reflected light was making it easy to see the way, and yet things were beginning to get lighter.

Their little troupe, Piper counted ten male Orions among them, soon wound their way down a short ravine into a large, open space lit by hundreds of portable lights. On the north facing wall was a large, open shaft that led underground. A short rail line led out of it that teemed with cars carrying an odd coloured ore. She couldn't be sure what colour it was in this light.

As she watched, the cars moved up a raised platform, stopped, and tipped themselves to the side, delivering their cargo onto a conveyor belt that led into a large, nearby building. Another belt led out the other side that dropped the useless soil, the tailings, onto a slowly growing mound.

All around them were children. Hundreds of them. Kept in line by about thirty Orions carrying whips. Curiously, Piper noticed they weren't carrying phasers.

Those on horseback came to a stop out the front of a large, nondescript building that looked like a left-over from a cheap catalogue. The doors hung loosely, and the light shone only through the crack in the door. There were no windows.

Before Piper could ponder the situation any further, she was rudely shoved off her horse. On the way down she tucked and rolled, coming up in a defensive position, but before she could do anything else she was roughly grabbed by four Orion guards and dragged inside.

Scanner watched her go, worried sick but knowing full well he was powerless to stop what was happening. He could only hope that Crash could get them out of this before it all went to crap.

Kriton swaggered over with two of his lackeys. King of his little hill, Judd thought. Tiny little hill. He took a glance around him. More like a hole in the ground. Cool. Easier for him to get to Hell when his time came. He hoped it was real soon.

Judd wasn't the tallest of men, so he found himself pretty much at eye level with the green-skinned devil. The image would have been complete if Kriton had red eyes. Pity they were black.

It was this image that helped Judd from worrying overly much. He found that he couldn't quite take the Orion seriously. "What can I do for yer?" Scanner asked, getting in before Kriton could open his big mouth.

Kriton stopped and regarded the human for a moment. It was amazing to him that the female's companions did not seem to realise how much trouble they were in. He could have killed him right there and then. Did the human not see that?

"Our equipment needs maintenance and there are some systems that are in need of repair. You will make them function again or you will suffer." There, Kriton thought. He had used just the right tone to induce terror.

Judd wasn't buying it. His gaze was on the children. As a father himself, he felt for them. "I'll do anything to help these kids suffering any more than I have to." He had already decided to fix the systems that would lessen the children's burden first. He met the gaze of the Orion once more, a hardness in his eyes that was rarely seen. This man had offended him in the most acute way possible. Threaten his family and hurt kids. "You'd better hope my friends kill you quick, Kriton. They're not as forgiving as I am."

Furious, Kriton backhanded him. Scanner's head snapped to the side, but he didn't fall. His deadly gaze simply returned as he met Kriton's eyes once more.

Almost desperate to have the upper hand, Kriton played his trump card. "If your people cause me any trouble,

I'll have you know that I have placed bombs throughout the mine that I will use if necessary."

There was something in his tone that bothered Judd. There was something he wasn't saying. "What kind of bombs?" he asked, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

Indirectly, Kriton answered: "It's all around you. Figure it out." He snap-turned and headed back to the building with one of his guards in tow. The other remained to guard Judd.

As Judd sized up the stocky Orion beside him, he set his mind to work on the puzzle he had been left with.

Half an hour before, Crash, Manny, Jason, Carman and Piper Silayna came together in the *Pterodactyl's* cargo bay and considered their options, which they were fast coming to the conclusion that there were few.

"What do we have in the way of weapons?" Manny asked.

Their gaze was drawn to a bench against the wall that contained their only rifle and three phasers. No explosives. Nothing particularly impressive.

Crash spoke then. "Before we do anything else, we must establish a clear chain of command. I believe Captain Silayna not only has the rank but the experience to lead us." He turned to her, radiating confidence. "I know that during the last month you've come to know us and our strengths. We are yours to command."

Suzette/Piper Silayna gave him a grateful smile. She knew she had the rank to lead, but without the respect of those under her command she may as well go home. She looked from one to the other and realised that, even though some of them didn't exactly approve of her, their loyalty to Krashtallash was solid, and if he thought she should lead she would.

"All right, then," she said confidently. "When you don't have much in the way of phasers you have to use your most important weapon." She tapped her temple. "If we can't win the day through strength, we'll have to use our brains." She considered for a moment. "We need more intel, for a start."

She was interrupted by a tapping at the hatch. They each looked to one other for a clue to who it might be, then Manny vaulted over to the door and looked through the small window. Her eyes widened in surprise. "What do you want?" she called out.

Jack's voice could be heard through the metal. "To help."

Five minutes later a group of ten of the local men and women had joined them in their mini conference, each carrying a rifle slung over their shoulder with pockets full of ammunition.

"What do we know about their location?" Silayna asked.

Jack, who had been pleasantly surprised by Suzette's commanding tone and presence, suddenly realised there was a whole lot more to his girlfriend than he had guessed. In fact, her manner reminded him of a Starship Captain.

A local woman, Lynlee, put up her hand. "They took me to their mine a couple of years ago. I think they were thinking of selling me, but when they saw the scars on my legs the leader told me to "go home and make babies I can use". I told him to go to Hell. He slapped me around a bit for that, then let me go." She cast her eyes about for a moment. "Do you have a pencil and some paper?"

Carman left for a moment to source some and returned with what she needed. She started to draw while they continued to discuss.

"They're in a box canyon, that much I know," Jack said. "That way they're harder to spot from the air."

Suzette's eyes narrowed in thought. "Do they keep their ship in it as well?"

Lynlee nodded. "Up the back."

The captain nodded. "That gives us an advantage." She stomped the floor in frustration. "We may have got this thing flying, but it won't do us any good without phasers."

An older farmer, Mike, put up his hand. "I seem to remember it has a grappler. What if you could grab their ship? You don't have to destroy it to bugger it up."

Manny's lip curled in pleasure. "I like the way you think," she said.

“Speaking of thought,” Silayna said, lost in her own. “Manny, do you think you can communicate with them if you could get close enough?”

The Cait’s blue eyes dilated as she considered. She took the moment to open her mind to them. “The best I can tell you right now is that they’re alive.” She closed her eyes and concentrated. “I just told Judd I love him, and he got the message. At this distance I can’t get more than feelings through. The.... Susanna is OK, but right now she wants to kill … what’s a cretin?” She focussed on Silayna. “She’s thinking that word over and over. It’s hard to miss.”

Piper Silayna nodded. “That’s Susanna for you.”

Jason chuckled. “Yeah, a dragon could swallow her whole and she’d kick it in the guts until it chucked her up.”

The joke brought a much-needed laugh from their little band. Silayna looked around her at the faces of their volunteer army, a feral smile playing around her lips. “Do any of you have any explosives?”

Cretin. The Orion leader was the focus of all Piper’s rage as she stood manacled to a wall inside the building. She was in a drab, small room whose only piece of furniture was a long, low-slung table with a pair of manacles at one end. It didn’t take much imagination to divine its purpose.

She also didn’t like the intent of keeping her in this room. Two meanings came to mind. One: psychology. To break her spirit by instilling fear in her that she could be

molested at any time without actually doing so. Two: practical. She was in here for their pleasure. Which, no doubt, would be none for her.

At least she still had an ace up her sleeve. She knew a little about how Orions thought. They fought and pillaged in packs, but they kept their private stuff to themselves. If their intention of molesting her was more than a bluff, then they would come in one at a time.

She didn't have long to wait. Kriton opened the door and came in as if doing so was just a part of his daily business. He closed the door, put a small valise on the table, then stepped over and took hold of the bottom of Piper's t-shirt.

Her eyes widened as he produced a small knife and for a moment, she feared he meant to gut her alive. It took all her self-control to not tense up. However, to her partial relief, he slipped it under her shirt and zipped straight upward to her neck, parting the garment neatly and exposing her supple flesh. Without preamble, he slipped his fingers under her bra, pulled forward and cut it as well.

"You know, you could have simply unhooked it. Good bras are so hard to find," she said calmly. There was no way she was going to let this little slug think he was in command of the situation.

The comment gave Kriton pause. He was not used to such behaviour from his slaves. They were usually begging him to stop at this stage. Instead, this female was

treating the situation as nothing more than a medical examination.

She continued. "I wouldn't try impregnating me, if that's your plan. I don't think you could reach me if you tried." The touch of mirth was meant to demean his manliness and he caught the slur.

Kriton did not appreciate the insult. He'd had every intention of sampling the goods, but it was quickly becoming clear to him that there was no way she was going to participate. He remembered her threat from earlier and stowed the idea. He tried to bluff his way out. He reached up and pushed aside her destroyed clothing, revealing a fit and unscarred torso and chest. "Not bad. You will fetch a fine price, soon." He did his best to sound sinister.

He made no move to cover her, just left her exposed. Piper saw the lighter side that at least it wasn't a cold night. She didn't want to catch a chill. "Hopefully the next Orion I meet will be taller," she said in a slight she knew would be felt. Generally, Orions were no bigger than her captor.

Kriton scowled at her. "Enough, woman. You will stay here until we're ready to ship you out."

The starship captain did her best to shrug given her hands were manacled above her head. "Whatever. I can't say much for the service around here. Will there be a continental breakfast included in the package?"

The Orion looked at her incredulously. He had her life in his hands an all she wanted to do was joke. "You

must be mad," he said as he turned on his heels, picked up his valise and headed for the door.

Piper watched him go with slitted eyes. With the fate of the Universe on her shoulders, she was furious this little man was getting in her way. "You have no idea," she muttered as he closed the door behind him.

Alone once more, Piper shrugged her shoulders several times until her leather jacket covered her once more. She had no intention of giving anyone a free sample.

Scanner worked for a couple of hours before he became too exhausted to work. To his disgust, but complete lack of surprise, most of the mining equipment was at least second-hand and held together with chicken wire and chewing gum. It was a miracle that most of it worked at all.

Never mind the tools he was being asked to use left him wondering if his tetanus inoculations were up to date.

The guard posted to watch him seemed disinterested in his complaints, but he eventually relented when the children were also given permission to get some sleep.

As they were led to the barracks together, Scanner asked one teenaged boy: "How long have you been here?"

The young man just looked at him blankly. "Not sure," he said in an undernourished haze. "A long time."

Judd was tired, but he was still strong. Yet he stood among children who were pushing their emaciated bodies along by sheer force of will. The sight of them tugged at his

heart with sympathy for them, and when a guard mistreated one little boy it was all he could do to not pound the man's head into the ground. He had to satisfy himself with an angry: "You'll get yours."

The Orion looked at him blankly, then ushered them onwards. They soon came to the makeshift barracks for their slumber, but Judd soon discovered there was nothing more to sleep on than old rags. Yet, as tired as he was, he realised it was better than nothing. Within seconds of closing his eyes he was asleep.

Sleep was far from the minds of two individuals who moved almost silently through the night. Although they were physically and mentally tired from the day's adventures, the Llash twins were running on adrenaline.

Normally, Amantasandage would have stood out like a sore thumb in the moonlight with her white fur. However, these days she packed one of the midnight black bodysuits she had souvenired from her people's Assassin's Guild when they had dispatched the group. As a Security Specialist, she never knew when it might come in handy. These days, she was a staunch believer in being prepared. So, whenever she travelled, she kept one with her.

They had ridden horses to within a mile of the mine, then tethered them to a tree well off the road before proceeding on foot. It had taken them a little while to run it, but when they arrived, they did their best to move stealthily

and scope out the operation. From the top of the canyon, they split up and circumnavigated the camp. It was hard for them to watch the children being mistreated, and even harder for Manny to watch as her husband was herded across the yard along with the rest of the inmates. He looked so helpless.

She knew from experience that he was exactly the opposite. This was a man who had made an atomic bomb from scratch.

It took an hour of walking and watching, with one close call that had Crash nearly discovered by a patrolling guard who had literally walked right past him. Crash had breathed a sigh of relief that the guards were not equipped with night goggles.

Once done, they had all they needed and met up back at the horses.

"How did you go?" Crash asked his sister.

"I can't tell you how many times I wished I could have thrown at least *one* of the guards off the cliff." She gave him a brief smile. "I was good, though."

Crash curled his lip in pleasure. "You *are* good, Shrallah. He would not have known what happened to him! He would have simply taken his next step straight into Hell."

Once back at the ship, they reported all they learned to Suzette, who was acting more like a captain again, but

less like her old self. She was beginning to remind them of their own Captain Piper.

"Okay, everyone," she said. "You know what you need to do tomorrow." She looked at the chronometer on the wall. "You've all got four hours to sleep before I need you back here in the morning. Take advantage of it."

As she dismissed the troops, she turned to head upstairs to her own room, but a hand on her arm held her in place. She had expected Jack to want to talk to her, but his timing was lousy.

She turned to him, showing him with her human eye that she wasn't really interested in what he had to say.

Neither of them noticed that the room emptied out very quickly. Nobody else needed to see what was coming.

"I know I acted like a jerk," he said with all the humility that he could muster – which wasn't much. "I'd just hate to see us throw everything away over a difference of opinion."

Piper Silayna knew what he meant by "everything". One lovely, sunny Sunday afternoon they had taken their relationship a big step further than was appropriate for a married woman. She still remembered how soft the grass was on the hillside – and *everything* else.

She felt guilty about it for a number of reasons. She rationalised that, as they were taking steps to collapse her native timeline, her Brian Silayna would cease to exist.

Their marriage would never have happened. So, to all intents and purposes, she was a free woman.

Yet she still felt guilty. As if she was still betraying the memory of him.

To top it off, she had kept the liaison a secret from Piper. Since they had met, she had come to know, respect, and even love her like a sister. Yet she had been unable to share her joy with her because she was afraid of recrimination. It was a peculiar dichotomy in that Piper was an echo of herself that was still different enough from her that she was unsure of her reaction. Either way, she didn't need the rejection, so she had kept it to herself.

Now, she looked at the man she had allowed herself to come to love and take as a lover and remember all too quickly how he had abandoned her and her friends in their time of need.

The truth of the situation dawned on her then. She realised why he had pursued her and not her sister.

She put a hand on his chest and kept him at arm's length. "I can't forget that you left us, Jack. I needed your help and, because you weren't there, I've got this egg-shaped bump on the back of my head." Which still hurt like blazes, she failed to add. "You're a coward, and I can't be with a coward."

Jack's head snapped around as if slapped, yet to his credit, he didn't retaliate. "I guess I deserved that," he said in a low voice. He made as if to take her hand, then stopped

himself and gave her space. “I’ll just have to prove to you I’m not a coward.” The corner of his mouth twitched up in a small attempt at humour. “Perhaps then you’ll reconsider.”

Piper Silayna just looked back at him blankly. The fire in her heart for him had been extinguished, but while the emotional side of her just wanted him gone, the practical captain realised she needed every hand available for the task ahead. “Perhaps,” she said, her voice devoid of feeling. “Be back here on time in the morning. We’ve got a lot of work to do if we’re going to pull this off.”

Chapter Ten

Piper was in a foul mood. She had been left chained to the wall all night and day. Her legs and feet were aching as were her wrists, she was tired, hungry and thirsty. And, to add insult to injury, she hadn't even been allowed a bucket to relieve herself in. She was still wet from the waist down and not liking the way she smelled.

She couldn't even button up her jacket. The tatters of her shirt remained fluttering in her man-made breeze, and she was beginning to wonder if they would even allow her *that* dignity.

One consolation was that since Kriton left, she had been left alone. A small voice had continued at her all night that someone might try to take advantage of her situation. She had repeatedly told it to "Shut up!"

At least there was light from the dim panel overhead, but to a sleep-deprived woman, it was nothing more than a focal point for her anger.

The door opened suddenly, catching her by surprise. One of Kriton's cronies simply threw in a washer, towel, white jump suit and he put down a bucket of water. Almost as an afterthought, he stepped over and unlocked her manacles before turning and walking out, bolting the door behind him.

Piper was in so much pain she fell in a heap on the floor as the guard silently exited. She couldn't even catch

herself her as arms were so tired and sore, she hit the metal flooring with her forearms as her hands were numb. Exhausted, she remained there for several minutes as she waited for the circulation to return and the pins-and-needles to end.

At that point, she was so tired she was tempted to go to sleep right there and then, but there was no way she was going to do that in her current state of dress. Slowly, painfully, she pushed herself up onto her knees and examined what had been brought her. She handled the rough towel and washer, then turned her attention to the jumpsuit. She shook it out and held it up, shaking her head in mock disappointment.

"These things never come in my size," she murmured to herself.

She considered the situation, then dragged the bucket over to the door, put her back to it and quickly undressed. She tried to set a speed record for just how quickly one could wash themselves with cold water and a towelette with no soap. She then held up her briefs and was grateful she hadn't needed to move her bowels. Unwilling to go commando, she rinsed them out in the bucket, wrung them as dry as she could, then put them back on.

She examined her bra, then threw it aside in disgust. There was no way to fix it. Her shirt was ruined, and she really didn't want to put her jeans back on. That left just the jumpsuit and her jacket.

She gave the suit a quick examination before deciding it was okay and donning it. In a final act of defiance, she returned the leather jacket to her shoulders and zipped it up in the front.

"Susanna, can you hear me?"

The voice sounded crystal clear to Piper, and she turned as if looking for an intruder. Then she realised what it was. The voice was in her head. She replied: *"This had better be you, Manny, or I've finally gone over the edge."*

"The edge of what?"

The innocence of the question left Piper in no doubt about its origin. *"Never mind. I gather you're part of a plot to spring me?"* She couldn't keep the hopefulness out of her thoughts.

"Yes, Captain. Captain Silayna has come up with a rather unusual plan to get you and Scanner out, not to mention the children. As she said: Hang tight, we're on our way to get you. She sent me on ahead to keep contact with you and Scanner. He's aware of our plan. Things will start happening within minutes."

Piper sighed. The sooner she was out of here, the better. *"Thank God."*

Phase One was simple. Take out the guards lining the top of the canyon. That job was left to the Llash twins. Quickly, methodically, they started at one end and, taking opposite sides, they located and dispatched the guards.

When given the order, Piper Silayna had said: “Do it quickly and quietly. We can’t risk them getting out a warning.”

Manny gave her a smile that creeped her out, it was so grizzly. “They can’t yell without a voicebox.”

Moving silently through the darkening brush – the sun was going down – the Cait warriors either snapped the necks of their surprised prey or ripped out their throats with their razor-sharp claws. Either way, they had no chance to get out a warning.

As each victim died, a member of the local townsfolk took their place, taking their jackets and helmets so they would better blend in. They also found their phaser rifles very useful.

Scanner looked up at the sky in the fading light, feeling the presence of his wife’s thoughts in the back of his mind. He wasn’t a natural telepath, but his wife had touched his mind enough times for him to recognise the sensation. He knew she was nearby and very busy. In fact, he believed she was enjoying herself.

He wiped his dirty hands on a rag. He had been busy greasing the bearings on one of the conveyor belts. He hadn’t been permitted to shut it down for safety reasons, so he had been *very* careful.

The door to the ugly building opposite opened and he saw Piper come out, being guarded by four short, but

burly, Orions. He smiled to himself as she gave them a baleful glare before she caught his gaze and gave him a knowing nod.

Kriton followed them out seconds later. "Hurry up and load the ore onto the shuttle. We'll be leaving in ten minutes!"

The information gave Scanner a start. His people didn't have much time, and he couldn't just tell his wife. He had to wait for her to make contact. He looked back at Piper and saw she understood as well. He just wished he could talk to her directly. He had made a discovery regarding the substance the Orions had been mining.

At the helm of the *Pterodactyl*, Jason Nunn flew the newly restored ship with gusto. Although the work wasn't finished and the ship was far from perfect, it was now capable of flight not only in the atmosphere, but also in space – including warp drive as well.

Now, he was keeping the ship on station five miles away from the canyon in a shallow valley out of the line of sight, hovering twenty metres off the ground.

Carman was manning the communications panel to his left. He was watching the captain, who sat behind them in the command chair, but who didn't seem to be watching them at all. He knew she was listening for the telepathic call from Lieutenant Sandage. It wasn't long in coming.

Piper Silayna suddenly focussed on him and said: “Tell them to open fire as soon as they’re all in the clear.”

On the ground, Scanner smiled to himself. People had a really bad habit of underestimating him. He took a small transmitter from his pocket and toggled a switch. “Stick that in your pipe and smoke it,” he muttered defiantly.

Immediately, the siren calling for the mine’s evacuation went off. It was designed to warn the workers and guards alike of dangerous gas leaks, which underground mines were all too often subject to. A sparked methane leak could wipe out the subterranean population within seconds.

It was a sound unfamiliar to the children, but one the Orions were trained to respond to. Their lives were in danger, so they did what came naturally. They abandoned the children and ran like hell.

It didn’t take the children long to cotton on there was a problem, so they soon followed. The seconds that separated them was what Piper Silayna was counting on.

Kriton was not happy. He was not one to suffer his schedule being interrupted. He cried out: “Shut that noise off!”

Not that anyone was listening. His men were too busy running for their lives to pay any attention to what he was saying. He looked up at the canyon walls expecting to

see the guards there running as well. Instead, they were all standing, brandishing their phaser rifles.

It was a trap. He knew it, but he was also aware there was little he could do about it. He pulled his phaser and decided on self-preservation, but he wasn't leaving without extending his profit. He pointed his pistol at Piper and ordered her forward. "Get into the shuttle!"

The Orion's shuttle wasn't all that different to the *Pterodactyl* except the cargo bay opened at the rear and it had no atmospheric manoeuvring thrusters. It was also a hundred metres away.

Seeing no choice, Piper started towards the vessel, all the while being prodded on by the phaser in her back.

On the canyon rim, Jack noticed that the last of the Orion guards had cleared the mine entrance. What worried him was that some of the children had begun to emerge. Without waiting for an order, he raised his weapon and put all his target practice to work shooting Orions.

The other five townsfolk, and the Caits, began doing the same. Quickly, methodically, they began cutting down the Orions who had worked so hard to make their lives a misery. This was payback, pure and simple. It was bloody and mindless. Now, a lifetime of hunting barrits was coming in useful.

They began falling quickly and the Orions ran to take cover. For most of them, it wasn't quick enough, and they were cut down as they fled.

One grabbed a child and used him for cover as he slowly backpedalled towards the main building. Over the radio Manny was angrily heard saying: "He's mine!"

Crash didn't mind. His sister was an expert marksman. She stood, phaser beams zipping past her as she tracked the Orion for a second, then took his head off cleanly.

To her surprise, the ten-year-old female didn't run away immediately. Realising her captor was dead she paused for a second to savagely kick his corpse before making her way towards the canyon entrance.

Manny smiled to herself as she watched her, then instinctively ducked as a phaser blast sizzled through the air where her head had just been. "Be more careful next time," she heard in her ear as Crash reproved her over the radio.

On the other side of the canyon, Crash was pleasantly pleased to see that none of his people had yet been killed. Singed yes, dead no. He took a moment to take stock of the situation. The canyon floor was littered with the bodies of Orions. Only a handful remained. Some were hiding behind machinery, others were making their way out of the canyon, ducking and weaving behind whatever cover they could find. Fortunately, they had learned from the

mistake of their fellow and not tried to take any more hostages.

Jack stood then and called to the children who were milling around below. "Kids! Stay near the mine entrance!"

Crash hissed at him: "Jack, get down!"

He didn't need encouragement as the air around him became superheated by the multitude of phaser beams that came his way. He dropped to the ground and had to crawl backwards quickly as the bushes around him burst into flame.

Below, the children had heard him and quickly banded together to move towards the mine. The remaining Orions thought to join them, to use the mine for cover and the children as hostages, but the first two to move were cut down within seconds.

Manny's eye was caught by the lone Orion prodding a human, who could only be Piper, through the milling throng. She focussed her thoughts on the captain, who heard her clearly.

"Susanna, if you drop, I can take out the Orion behind you." Manny was confident.

"No." Piper was adamant. *"I won't risk the children. I'll take care of this one when the time is right."*

Enjoying himself, Jason pushed the *Pterodactyl* to her limits, keeping the aging vessel flying close to the

ground, but not too low. He had no intention of having his cargo getting snagged on a tree. Under his fingers, he felt the hum of the machine and was taking delight in the way the old freighter was handling.

Ahead, he could see the edge of the canyon coming up, so he gained some altitude, then pushed the ship into a dive.

Piper had just reached the rear door to the Orion shuttle when a deafening roar was heard overhead. Both she and Kriton looked up into the evening sky to see the reborn *Pterodactyl* bearing down on their position, her wings extended. Piper had the impression she was about to be caught by an enormous eagle. However, her claws held something. Something that looked suspiciously like a home-made bomb.

Instead of running for it, Kriton prodded Piper in the back, forcing her into the shuttle. No sooner were they inside Kriton slapped the emergency close button and the loading ramp snapped shut with a clang.

Kriton pushed Piper over to the wall, making sure she stayed out of range and that his phaser remained pointed at her at all times. He didn't trust Piper one little bit.

"Put your hands in the manacles," he said rudely.

Piper looked up to both her left and right, seeing the manacles shortly above her head height on both sides. She noticed they were self-adjusting and got an idea.

Almost lazily, she put her arms up and into the manacles, which snapped shut.

In a hurry to escape, Kriton lowered the phaser and made his way forward past the cargo, which was contained in large, metal cases, up a short flight of stairs that were as dilapidated as the rest of the ship, and into the cockpit. Practiced at the controls, Kriton began warming up the engines. He looked up just in time to get out a nasty Orion epithet before his vision was filled by fire.

Manny heard the sound of the *Pterodactyl* coming in and fired a quick, desperate thought at Suzette…

…who heard it just in time. Her hands gripped the arms of her chair in fear for her sister when she barked: "Abort!"

Without hesitation, Jason pulled the vessel out of the dive, coming close enough to the Orion shuttle to dust it with her wake. The bomb they trailed behind them on the grappling claw passed by it harmlessly less than a metre from its hull.

Suzette's mind raced as she considered the new information. She had to do something that would keep her sister safe and prevent the shuttle from taking off.

"I'm in the cargo hold."

The thought came to her crystal clear. Suzette realised her proximity to her double made it possible. It was all the information she needed.

"Bring us about," she ordered. "We're going to bomb that shuttle's bridge." As her crew stiffened, she added: "Don't worry, she's not in it."

Jason relaxed and did as he was told. The *Pterodactyl* performed a tight loop, then headed back to the shuttle trailing their bomb that was no more than a mixture of fertilizer and diesel fuel in a wooden barrel with a detonator.

The original idea was to detonate it *inside* the shuttle by dropping it through the open hatch and blowing it from within, but that plan had to be scratched. Now, they were improvising.

Worried about the kids, Jason brought them in on a trajectory that kept them away from them. He was glad to see they were a good two hundred metres from the shuttle near the mine entrance.

His target in sight, he swooped in on his prey.

Crash could only watch and pray as their pocket starship swooped in and dropped its surprise package right on the shuttle's nose. There was a loud explosion and shockwave that was felt on the canyon wall as the barrel was vapourised with the concussion. The shuttle was shaken and

shifted in its position, but when the dust cleared the vessel seemed to be intact.

"Damn," he said, remembering one of Judd's favourite sayings. He called to all his associates. "Fire on the shuttle. It cannot take off!"

Immediately, the focus of their anger was shifted to the vessel as the *Pterodactyl* thundered into the sky overhead.

Crash didn't worry about the remaining Orions on the ground. They were being mopped up by the rest of their party who had emerged from the canyon entrance below and were now shooting anything green that moved.

After a moment's firing, Crash was beginning to think they were having no effect as the shuttle continued to warm up its engines. To his abject dismay, it took off with a jerk and launched itself after the *Pterodactyl*.

From her vantage point in the shuttle cargo bay, Piper could see just enough of the cockpit to know they had taken off and that the bomb hadn't been a waste of time. The windows were a myriad of spider-web cracks.

What she could hear from Kriton was enough to know he was out for blood. She worried when she heard the vessel's phaser cannons warming up.

It was time to move. She looked up at the manacles where they were holding her half-way up her forearms which were a lot thicker than her wrists. Her gamble was

that she should be able to slide her whole hand through smoothly. However, she realised the manacles might readjust, so she relaxed the muscles she had tightly clenched in her arms to expand it and whipped her arm out in one quick motion. Her left arm now free, she did the same with the right arm.

Now able to move, she tried to stand up from her seated position on the metal bench and only then realised the shuttle's grav plating was playing up. As Kriton shifted the shuttle's trajectory to follow her ship she found herself thrown across the cargo bay floor into the side of a crate.

The *Pterodactyl* shook as a phaser bolt detonated ahead of them to the right.

"Evasive manoeuvres!" Suzette ordered. It came out naturally, but she realised as soon as it was out that it was a wasted exercise. Jason was already testing the limits of the vessel's handling by swinging from side to side to avoid the enemy fire.

"Already working on that, Captain!" The comment came through gritted teeth. "High or low?"

Suzette considered his question. Try to lose the enemy in the sky or by using the planet's terrain? She thought of the damage they might have done to the shuttle and realised the best course. "High," she said. "The higher the better."

Jason gave her an almost imperceptible nod then took them into the clouds. At that moment, he was grateful for Merrijig's often inclement weather as the clouds were thick enough for their pursuer to lose sight of them. He would have to follow them on instruments, and they were not always the most reliable source of information. Without taking his eyes off the sky ahead, he asked: "Carman, can you find us a nice, big storm around here somewhere?"

"Gotcha," Carman Valastro said, guessing his friend's next move. He turned and gazed into their scanner's hood for a moment, temporarily grateful to be able to concentrate on something that wasn't moving. "Come around to 032. There's a thunderstorm fifty kilometres out."

"On it." Jason used a thicker cloud to lose them in, then veered off on the suggested course. The cloud behind them was briefly illuminated by a flash that wasn't lightning. Kriton had fired on them again, jostling the ship. "I wish that bugger would hassle someone else for a change," he growled. Eager to get there was quickly as possible, he pushed the turbines to the limit.

Carman had been so busy watching the instruments that he hadn't thought about their circumstances – until now. He turned and caught Suzette's gaze. "How are we going to get Susanna out of that shuttle if we can't shoot it down?"

The Captain focussed on him and said: "Don't worry, we've got that one taken care of."

Susanna was busy enough just trying to stay on her feet as Kriton tried furiously to keep the *Pterodactyl* in his sights – to no avail. Just when he seemed to have her dead to rights, Jason feinted. The downside for her was that she was making no real headway in her attempt to reach the cockpit. It was her hope to be able to overpower Kriton and take over the ship, but it was quickly becoming apparent to her that wasn't going to happen. There simply wasn't that much time.

As the ship passed through a raincloud, she noticed some of the water seep through the cracks in the windshield. She reasoned if water could get in....

She relayed the information to her sister. If there was one thing the proximity was doing was making it easier for them to hear one another. Together, they came up with a plan. It was nuts, but it was their only hope of her getting out of this alive.

The ship jostled as it entered the thunder cloud. The updrafts threw it about, and the ship was struck by lightning more than once, causing static electricity to arc around her. She felt the deck tilt as Kriton pushed the shuttle into a climb to follow his quarry.

"Just keep going you bastard," Piper swore.

The *Pterodactyl's* wings shook under the strain, but they held fast. The interior of the bridge darkened as the ship climbed through the enormous storm. It soon became

so dark the lights automatically came on. Rain lashed the windshield and lightning played over the surface of the ship. Her Federation builders had been careful and had hardened the ship's systems against static discharge.

Jason spun the ship to the side and swooped into an updraft, letting the wind help carry them upwards. Within seconds the ship shot out of the top of the storm and, finally, the ship had enough height for Jason to be able to engage her impulse engines, which he did with elation. Like a shot from a cannon the ship soared up through the Ionosphere, the air outside becoming thinner in seconds.

Kriton was so intent on the *Pterodactyl's* destruction he didn't consider the damage to his own vessel. It started with a small whistle, but the sound soon became loud enough for him to register something was wrong.

In shock, he realised the air inside the cabin was quickly getting thinner. He began wheezing as he found it harder and harder to take in a useful lungful of air.

Yet he still refused to break off his pursuit. This was no longer about profit. He was out for blood.

He was blissfully unaware that his sole passenger had used the ship's steep ascent to slide along the floor down to the rear of the vessel. Susanna had taken hold of some mesh with her left hand and had her right hand next to its emergency release. She hoped it was working.

It took only seconds before the inevitable happened. The air pressure inside was too great in the rarefied atmosphere and blew out a large portion of the shuttle's windshield with a roar. Kriton, who was strapped in, remained inside, however he quickly lost consciousness in the bitter cold. However, in a last act of defiance, he fished in his pocket and found the remote control for mine booby trap. He fumbled with the device, finding it hard to push the button as his fingers began to freeze. With satisfaction he depressed it, his last thought was that he hoped he wasn't out of range.

At the sight of the blowout, Susanna fired off a mental mayday to her sister, then hit the release switch. The door next to her blew out and she found herself torn outside by the escaping atmosphere. Her first impressions as she fell were that it was unbearably cold and dark as she closed her eyes to prevent them from freezing. She quickly exhaled and resisted the impulse to suck in a lungful of something that wasn't there.

Her momentum carried her upwards for a few moments as the shuttle continued it's now mad, brainless climb to oblivion. Its course was taking it directly for the planet's largest moon where it would soon shatter itself into millions of pieces.

Susanna's last effort before she lost consciousness was to roll herself up in a ball and pray.

Above her, Suzette had gotten the message. "Seal the bridge!" she ordered. "Bring us about!" She didn't have to give them any more orders as she had already brought them up to speed on their plan.

Free of the atmosphere, Jason brought the *Pterodactyl* around in an impossibly tight turn, then aimed for the shuttle following. Somewhere behind it was Susanna, who had less than a minute to live.

Carman quickly vacated the air from the cargo hold and opened the outer door to its limits. He then activated the emergency cargo netting in the hope it would catch the captain. With that done he kept an eye on the cargo bay cameras.

Unseen behind them, Suzette began shivering. She could feel her sister's pain and fading consciousness. Through chattering teeth, she said: "Hurry, Mister Nunn!"

Jason *was* hurrying, but he also had to do this right or there would be nothing left of the captain but a greasy spot on the floor. He shot past the shuttle, following its flight path as well as he could. He scanned the air for anything, and soon spotted the captain in her white jumpsuit on the black of the storm below. It wasn't the only thing he saw. The shuttle's cargo was falling out of the sky around her. He reasoned it must have come loose when the captain blew the door. He did his best to dodge the crates as he made a beeline for Susanna.

Once more in the atmosphere, Jason had to rely on the ship's thrusters again and he regretfully deactivated the impulse engines. The ship slowed, but not to a crawl.

Teeth gritted, he pushed the ship downward, doing his best to bring the nose of the ship over the captain so she could be caught by the cargo hold below them.

Within seconds, he was close enough to see her hair fluttering in the wind. He knew he only had one shot at this. Imagining what was happening outside the ship, he brought the *Pterodactyl* slightly up and over the captain.

On Carman's screen Susanna suddenly flew into the cargo bay, dropping towards the floor under the effect of the artificial gravity, but was caught just short of it in the netting. "Yes!" he cried as he hit the control to shut the cargo bay doors before repressurising the area. He failed to notice she wasn't the only thing they caught.

He got up to go, but realised they were not out of danger yet.

The *Pterodactyl* had re-entered the atmosphere at a very steep angle and Jason was finding it hard to slow her and bring the nose up before they had a chance encounter with the ground.

"I'll go," Suzette said unnecessarily. The men knew there was no other choice. She had to wait a moment to exit the bridge as the air pressure had yet to complete being restored to the rest of the craft.

"Deploy flaps," Jason called as he continued his struggle.

"Deployed."

"Angle the thrusters plus ten degrees."

"Ten degrees, aye."

The ship plunged back into the storm. Once more she was being lashed by the elements. Jason had an idea. He looked about, and quickly found, a large updraft. He headed the ship into it.

Once she was through the doors, Suzette looped her legs over the railings and slid down the stairways. On the way below, she grabbed a medkit from their modest medical bay and ran into the cargo bay, doing her best to avoid touching the still cold metal surfaces.

Her sister was still balled up in the middle of the netting, showing no sign of life. Her face white and her hair was full of tiny ice crystals.

Suzette rolled her out of the netting and onto the floor. She put her concerns for the ship's fate out of her mind and focussed on the task at hand.

Susanna didn't appear to be breathing. She reached out and touched her neck, searching for a pulse. She found one, but it was weak.

She considered the quickest way to get some heat back into her was to breathe for her. She'd had only the most basic of medical training, and her reliance on Merete

had dulled her abilities. She took Susanna's head in her hands, tilted it back, opened her mouth, then blew into her lungs, hard once, twice, three times.

She then turned and remembered something. She opened her medkit and took out a Cordrazine pen. Like the epi-pens of the early 21st Century, this one was designed to give the system a quick jolt.

Unwilling to waste a molecule, she unzipped Susanna's jumpsuit, found the space between two ribs next to her sternum and injected it directly into her heart.

Susanna's eyes opened wide in shock as she drew in a much needed, painful breath. Her hands shot out, seeking some purchase as her body drank in the oxygen, feeding her dulled brain and senses. Her eyes took in her sister and the pen she was still holding.

Suzette took her hand in hers and said: "Slow down!"

Her sister tried to calm herself and grimaced. "You try it with a blood stream full of Cordrazine!" she said in an almost angry whisper. However, the words masked her true feelings which her sister felt through her touch. She was just grateful to be alive. She looked into her double's eyes and said through still chattering teeth: "Th..thanks."

"You'd have done the same for me," Suzette said honestly, and both knew it was true.

After a few moments' recovery, Susanna forced herself to sit, then Suzette helped her to her feet. At that

point, Suzette noticed something awry. "You don't smell so good," she said, her nose wrinkled.

Susanna, still shaking violently next to her, said: "Orion hospitality."

Suzette steered her towards the stairs and their quarters where a shower awaited her. The warm water would help her recover and remove the lingering odours from her ordeal.

Above, Jason had succeeded in slowing the ship's progress by allowing the storm's sheering wind to buoy them. Now down to Mach One, the *Pterodactyl* shot out of the clouds in the direction of the mine and their friends.

Jason finally took his eyes off the screen and said with a sigh: "My shout at the pub when we land."

Carman shook his head, clapped the younger man on the shoulder and said: "After that bit of flying, the drinks are on *me*."

By the time the *Pterodactyl* had returned to the box canyon the locals had finished off the remaining Orions. Crash had organised the children into a large group near the entrance to the mine in anticipation of the *Pterodactyl's* return so they could give the exhausted children a ride back to Eureka Creek.

Manny had sent some of the locals down into the mine to search for any Orions who might have stayed inside.

She had equipped them with an old tricorder she had taken from the *Pterodactyl,* so they weren't taken by surprise. That was *after* she had reunited with her husband and given him a huge lick on the cheek.

Everyone gave a cheer when the aging cargo ship swooped in and hovered for a moment, its landing struts extending, before lowering into the space the shuttle had previously occupied. It came to rest with a slight, squeaky jolt before Jason powered down the thrusters.

At the front of the vessel, which was facing the mine entrance, the cargo door creaked open, and Suzette, Jason and Carman exited moments later to a cheering throng.

Scanner simply looked at the doorway and said: "I'm going to have to grease that dang thing."

As Manny and Crash gathered around the returned trio, Crash couldn't help but pass a worried eye over them. "Where's Susanna?" he asked.

Suzette smiled at him and said loudly so he could hear her: "Hopefully out of the shower by now!" When Crash gave her a quizzical look she simply said: "She can tell you about how she pretended to be a snowball later."

Chapter Eleven

Piper's crew came together, assembled the children and had them board the *Pterodactyl*. As agreed earlier, they were going to give them a quick ride over to Eureka Creek where the locals would meet them and see to their needs. Scanner counted them as they boarded, and he quickly came to seventy-two souls. They were all children ranging from eight years old to twenty. It tugged at his heart that so many were emaciated, nothing more than skin and bone, their eyes sunken from extended abuse.

He turned and looked back at the mine and wished he could blow it to hell. At that point, he realised what he had forgotten in the commotion. He turned to his wife, who was helping settle the children down while Crash started getting them some clean water. "I've got to check on something. Do me a favour." He tapped his temple. "Keep your mental eyes on me."

She nodded without understanding and watched him go. As he ran down the boarding ramp Scanner grabbed Jack, who had remained to see them off. "Give me a hand," he said as he went.

To the man's credit, he did as he was told. It was clear Scanner was worried about something, so he followed without question. The mine entrance was only a short distance away and as soon as they were inside its mouth Judd began looking around.

"What are we looking for?" Jack asked.

Judd didn't stop as he said, clearly worried: "For anything that might be a bomb."

Jack pulled up short. "A BOMB!" he said, incredulously. "If there's a bomb in here, shouldn't we be running the other way?"

At that, Judd paused and looked him in the eye. "If that bastard did what I think he did, then he's put a bomb down here that at the very least will leave a hole in this planet big enough for a new ocean."

Gobsmacked, Jack's eyes became the size of saucers. The man inside him raged at the idea that his world might be decimated and that all he and his friends had worked for would be destroyed so wantonly. He stamped the ground with the heel of his boot. "*No!"* he spat, furious. "We can't let that happen."

Together, they explored the tunnel.

Back on the *Pterodactyl*, Manny got the message as well as she had been listening to her husband's thoughts. She ran over to a wall comm unit and mashed the button. "Manny to Suzette. We need to prepare to leave at a moment's notice!"

On the bridge, Suzette replied immediately. "What's the problem?" she asked, thinking one of the children might be taking a turn.

Manny filled her in. Over the comm unit she heard Suzette ordered the thrusters be readied for an immediate dust-off.

"Let me know the instant Scanner is back on board."

"Will do."

"Where the hell would he have put it?" Jack said, exasperated after finding nothing behind *another* wooden beam.

Judd kicked aside a box to see what was behind it. "If I were him, I'd have mounted it to the wall somewhere so I could reach it, but still maintenance if need be."

Jack kicked aside a crate, grateful the mine was still lit. Nothing. "Why can't we get your people to scan for it?" he asked.

Scanner sighed. "I have to give that scumbag some credit. He made it out of the same material he was mining. It would simply blend in."

"Okay," Jack said, trying to collect his thoughts. He tilted his head to the side, frustrated. "All right, then. What *did* he make it out of?"

His answer came after a nasty hiss of anger from his associate. "Uranium 235. This mine is filthy with the isotope and the vein runs deep. That's why the Orions were working it. If you had enough of this stuff you could terrorise half the galaxy." He ran further into the mine and looked all over the wall. Still nothing. Was he bluffing?

A thought came to him. The fissionable material was Uranium, but he would probably use something else for a detonator. Plutonium perhaps?

Jack suddenly jumped as his radio squawked in his ear. "What was that?" he said in reply.

"Look up!" came Manny's tinny voice.

Jack's gaze was drawn upward where Judd met it. There, on the ceiling, was a rather large steel casing. Facing downward was a timer. It was counting down to zero. It was already at one minute thirty seconds. Ninety seconds to go.

Judd patted down his shirt, looking for a tool that he might be able to use to open the casing. By the time he found a screwdriver the timer was reading 1:20.

He began seeking something he could stand on when Jack grabbed him by the arm. "Come on, Judd! There's no time!"

"*We can't just let it go off!"* Scanner replied angrily.

Jack could see he didn't want to leave without trying. "Go!" he said. "Get the children out of here!" He ran over to the wall, snatched up a steel rod and began bludgeoning the casing. When Judd hesitated, Jack yelled at him. "Go! I'm going to give this bastard a good beating before it kills me! Either I'll take it out or it'll get me, but I'm not going to let it win so easily!"

Judd was torn. He didn't want to leave Jack to do this alone, but he knew that he was too late, and that the man had to be given a chance to try. It was his world.

Scanner gave the man a parting, respectful nod then bolted for the tunnel mouth, being careful not to trip over. Now was not the time to break his ankle stupidly. He shot out into the evening twilight fifteen seconds later. Ten seconds after that he had mounted the loading ramp and was through the hatch, straight into his wife's arms.

The deck shifted as Jason pushed the thrusters past one hundred percent, pushing the *Pterodactyl* into the sky.

In the mine, Jack took a final swing, and, to his delight, the casing tore away. Amazed, he found only a small note taped to the inside of the box next to the remains of the simple timer.

It read:

If you are reading this know that this was merely a decoy. There are five more bombs in the mine you will never find in time. Enjoy the last few seconds of your life.

"Now, that's not bloody fair!" he swore viciously. He gave the casing one final, defiant thump with the rod before he cast it aside. Defeated, he sat on a nearby rock and waited for the inevitable. He smiled to himself when he realised, he did have the final victory. The children would be safe,

and Suzette would be all right. "I'm sorry, love," he said to himself, his voice full of regret. "You deserved better."

Going ballistic, the *Pterodactyl's* escape route was practically vertical. As soon as it was safe for them to do so he engaged the impulse engines. The last thing he was worried about was the shock wave induced by them effecting locals who would all shortly be dead.

The ship shot up through the atmosphere and, like the impulse engines, Jason went to engage their untested warp drive whilst still skirting the outer atmosphere.

Suzette's only order had been: "Get us out of here." That he was doing to the best of his ability. Her mind wasn't on the ship, however. She, somehow, heard Jack's last words in the quiet of her thoughts. In that moment, she found the strength to forgive him.

Those on the bridge were almost blinded by the intense light that seemed to shine through the very walls. The black of space before them was lit by the most intense light they had ever encountered as the bombs detonated below ground.

What Kriton hadn't taken into account was how deep and wide the Uranium vein went. The force of the explosions created a critical mass throughout the vein that in turn detonated as well. It shattered the planet not only to its core but reduced it to trillions of separate particles that seemed to race each other on their way to oblivion.

The people of Merrijig had no time to even realise what was happening as their world tore itself apart in a blinding second. There was no destructive wave that smashed homes and businesses. The planet exploded with the force of a small supernova.

On the bridge of the *Pterodactyl*, Jason had just finished pushing the activation button to engage warp drive when the initial energy burst shone out. The warp nacelles almost instantly pushed the ship beyond light speed and out of the path of the shock wave that was moving almost, but not quite, as fast.

In the cargo hold Manny suddenly dropped to the floor, cupping her ears with her paws as if that could somehow silence the screams of the dying that had come and gone in an instant.

Still with her, Judd took her in his arms, understanding what had happened. He knew it must have been traumatic for her to hear, so he just held her as she sobbed.

"What happened?" The question came from a teenage boy who had taken it upon himself to be spokesman for the children.

Judd raced in his mind for something to say but came up blank. How do you tell a kid that everyone they knew and loved is now dead?

A familiar voice came from overhead on the gangway. "What you just felt was the ship going into warp," Piper

said. She was dressed in jeans, t-shirt and thongs and, while she was still weak, the air of authority about her was concrete. "We had to make an emergency exit from your world because Kriton had left an atom bomb in the mine that destroyed it." She paused, sombre. "I'm sorry."

The boy looked up at her, confused. "I thought Kriton was dead! How could he do that?"

Piper just looked at him, apology written all over her face. "We didn't know until too late he had done so. If we hadn't made the discovery we wouldn't be here, either."

Sadly, the boy asked again: "Did the bomb hurt Eureka Creek?" A lot of the other children nodded, wanting to know if their families were okay.

Piper looked down at the kids. They deserved answers, but the facts were that, right now, she didn't have any. They had gone to warp as soon as the bomb had gone off, so she had no idea as to the extent of its effect. They needed to circle back and find out. She knew there was no way that Eureka Creek could have escaped the destruction of the mine, she deflected for the moment. "We're going to find out shortly and I'll let you know."

On her way back to the bridge, she passed Manny and Scanner. One look into Manny's tear-streaked face was enough to give her a very bad feeling she was not going to like what she was going to find.

Once she reached the flight deck, she found that her duplicate had a similar idea. They had already dropped out

of warp. Nearby was a glowing, blue gas giant with a number of small moons. "I take it you're scanning for Merrijig?" she asked.

Carman looked up from the hooded unit, his face ashen. "Captain… I… The planet is gone."

Piper blinked, as did her doppelganger. Surely an atomic bomb couldn't take out an entire planet. Behind them, in the doorway, Scanner had joined them, having left his wife to tend to the children below. He explained his theory in simple terms.

"The mine was filthy with U235. Absolutely filthy with the stuff. I'm sure he had more than one bomb down there, and when they detonated the stupid bastard created a supercritical mass that blew up the whole freakin' planet." Scanner gritted his teeth in an attempt to rein in his anger towards the late Orion leader.

Carman sat down in a heap. He'd seen death before in his life, including his beloved wife, but never before on a level of this scale. "There's nothing left bigger than your average asteroid." He glanced over at Captain Silayna, who surprised him.

She was crying. Her one, good eye had a steady stream of tears leaving a trail down her cheek to her chin and dripping onto her chest. Somehow, she spoke through her tightened throat and said: "We have to tell the children."

Piper knew she wasn't just weeping for Merrijig. Jack was dead, along with the rest of the people of that world.

All the same, her sister was right. The children must be told. She nodded. "I'll go." On the way past, she grabbed Scanner and said, "I'll need you to support your wife."

Together, they descended the stairs into the packed hold. There were so many children, she thought, all waiting to hear what she had to say. So many hearts to break. Behind her, Scanner stepped off to the side and joined his bride.

Before she could say a word, the child nearest her challenged her. "When can we go home?"

The captain sighed with a sorrow that reflected her very soul. They were just kids and, while many wouldn't understand, they all certainly didn't deserve this. They had already endured so much. "I'm sorry," she said, meaning it with every fibre of her being. "The bomb didn't just destroy the mine. It destroyed the whole of Merrijig. That light you saw when we went into warp was it going off."

The children erupted as one. "That can't be true!" some cried out. "No, it can't be!" yelled others. "It's not fair!" Piper heard. Others, especially the younger among them, simply bawled. After all they had been through, it was beyond their ability to comprehend that their freedom had ultimately cost them their home.

Leaving Jason to fly the ship, Piper called her sister and Carman down to help them settle the children. Some accepted the offering. Some were adamant that they were somehow responsible for what had happened, but

fortunately stopped short of violence. Truth be told, most of them were too weak to put up much of a fight if they had.

Others just couldn't comprehend and simply shut down, sitting in corners, staring at nothing.

Those were left to Manny, who came and comforted them on a deeper level as she lovingly touched their minds. Most of them were unaware she was doing it, but grateful that she was there for them.

Sometime later after mourning with and comforting the children, it was clear that exhaustion was catching up with them all. The ship only one functioning food synthesizer, so it was set to work making dinners for them. The youngest were taken care of first, with Piper Silayna ordering up chicken nuggets and chips for them all. She pulled a fast one on them and programmed the unit to make them more nutritious without altering the flavour.

Carman brought the children into line and took care of dissenters. "Everyone in turn!" he said. "Otherwise, you may not be able to choose what you get. It might just give you broccoli and brussels sprouts!"

Not that it was much of a discouragement. The children were hungry enough to eat liver burgers.

Once the children were satisfied, Carman went to engineering programmed the machine parts replicator unit to start making sleeping bags and cushions. It wasn't long before the soft sound of snoring came from the cargo decking and Piper left Manny to watch over the children

while she ushered them upstairs into their small bridge. There was hardly enough room for them to each take a seat, so Crash curled up under the cockpit window on the *Pterodactyl's* "dash".

Piper still wasn't feeling very well, so she left her sister the chair. She wasn't sure she should, however. She knew that Suzette was in pain and that she was masking it. She asked herself if she would be completely rational given the situation. She wasn't certain either way, but she counselled herself that she had yet to give her a reason to think otherwise.

As she got comfortable, Suzette opened with: "Our next problem is clear. Where do we take the children?"

At his adopted science station, Carman helpfully looked into the hood as he brought up the local star chart. "Okay," he said. "Merrijig is the vestero planiti – sorry – second planet in the Lepus Gamma system."

The group chewed on the information. Scanner chimed in: "You know, it's not that far to Vulcan."

Crash sniffed. "Yeah, Judd. We're going to take a bunch of human children to a planet that's not known for its hospitality and is full of people who ask too many questions." As he mocked his brother-in-law, he gave him a light cuff over the back of his head.

"We need a human colony that'll take in the children, but not look too carefully at us," Suzette said, narrowing things down.

Piper slapped herself on the forehead as realisation dawned. "I keep forgetting what the year is!" She thought for a moment, then a slow smile crossed her face. "I know exactly where we should take them."

At last, Suzette had some privacy as she curled up on her bunk, facing the wall, her back to the door. She did her best to shield her thoughts from others then allowed herself to grieve properly for Jack now she was alone.

Her anger at his behaviour at the party was past. The present simply felt emptier without him. Jack had made her feel accepted by a man again, something she hadn't had for years – even from her husband.

He had made her feel beautiful – both inside and out. When he had come into her life, he had brought something with him that had almost felt foreign to her, she had been so long without it. A feeling of complete acceptance and even adoration.

Then came the bitter realisation that he may have only chosen her because she was less likely to be taken by the Orions. Even though she hadn't shown it, the thought had crushed her spirit. Once again, she felt second-rate, a cast-off accepted only because she was a *viable* choice, not the preferred one.

Finally, she came to know that his final thoughts were of her. It was both a comfort and a torture. A comfort to

know his feelings for her were real after all. A torture that they would never get another chance to share them.

Knowing this brought her an emptiness that she had felt before and had hoped never to experience again. When Brian had told her he needed some time away she had known in her heart that he had no real inclination to return. The fact it was mostly her fault had made it even worse.

At first it had been easy to blame him. She recalled a time, not that long ago, when she had gotten falling down drunk at a bar with Merete. She had heaped the blame on her absentee husband, that he had never been there for her, but she remembered the look in Merete's eyes. She had forgotten they had all been friends at the Academy and the Doctor had known Brian before they married. Merete had resented her attacking Brian but was too loyal to her to voice it.

Perhaps that's why she had been so distant recently, she thought. The unintended sleight against her friend only added to her misery.

She didn't hear the door swing open and her mirror step into the room. She didn't even know Susanna was present until she felt her arms encircle her from behind.

At first, she struggled against the uninvited intrusion and twisted, but she momentarily relented as she heard her sister's voice in her mind. *"I'm just here to hold you,"* she said. *"Don't let me stop you getting it out."*

Yet she still struggled. *"I just want to be left alone!"* she cried out in her misery. *"You just don't understand!"*

Suzette started as she felt a dark chuckle from her sister. *"What was* that *about?"* she asked.

Suzette felt her sister shake her head behind her.

Piper continued: *"When I look at you, so often it's like looking in a mirror. I never have been very good at reaching out for help when it comes to personal matters. Save the galaxy – no problem. Take all the help you can get. Save myself – not so much."* Her grip around her waist tightened. *"We're always so busy helping everyone else with their problems sometimes I think I've forgotten how to ask others when it comes to my own. The Piper is the one who leads. She's the one out front. The trouble with that is that there's nobody there when she falls."*

Instead of arguing the point, Suzette considered her words. She *had* been out front for a long time. "I isolated myself," she muttered truthfully.

"To keep from being hurt, I know. The problem then is that there's nobody to help us when stuff happens. And all too often, if someone does try, the wall of Command comes between us. Contrary to popular belief, the captain isn't all powerful."

They were words that spoke from experience, but there was something extra she hadn't noticed before. A longing. Not wanting to break their contact, Suzette straightened out and rolled over so she could look Susanna

in the eye. The new line of thought was a welcome distraction. *"You miss him, don't you?"*

There was no way to lie to her sister, she would only be lying to herself. *"I do."*

"What is Sarda to you?"

It was a subject she had tip-toed around for some time. When they had contact Suzette had free access to her memories, but like any tourist, she needed a guide in the unfamiliar territory. Susanna had, until now, done a fairly good job of keeping her away from her Vulcan first officer largely because she didn't want to explore her feelings herself.

"He's my First Officer and my friend."

The reply was deserved. *"Duh! Tell me something I didn't already know. What is he to* you*?"*

There were few words to describe their relationship, so she took her sister on a quick journey through their history. Starting with the Academy, their early service together on the *Enterprise*, then their separation as they followed different paths that eventually led them back together on the *Millennium*. Naturally, since their minds touched and linked during their encounter with the Romulan, Commander t'Avik, they had come to develop an even deeper friendship and understanding of one another. They could finish each other's thoughts; anticipate one another's needs; work together as a highly efficient team and lend moral support when needed.

"But he's not someone you're romantically interested in. I see that. He's like a twin brother you miss when he's not around." Suzette blinked a tear from her eye. It was the latest of many, but this one had been shed for her duplicate. *"If I knew him as well as you do, I'd miss him too."*

Susanna wiped away a tear of her own. *"It's not just that. He's become a part of me – a part I miss dearly."* Before Suzette could say another word, she pulled her to her and held her tight. *"I'm just so glad that I have you here instead. You're not Sarda, but you're the next best thing."*

Suzette accepted the offering gladly. For a moment she was overwhelmed by the feeling of love and acceptance from her other self. It wasn't new, she had done it before, but she found within herself an emotional glacier that was melting each time she did so. It was becoming easier for her to accept her own sense of self-worth and the fact that she *was* someone worth loving.

"Thanks, Sis," Suzette said, putting all the love she could into the thought and squeezed her right back. *"You make missing Jack tolerable."*

Susanna kissed her forehead. *"That's what sisters are for."*

That night, as Manny lay curled up on the floor watching the children sleep, her head popped up as she heard the sound of someone coming down the stairs from above. She wasn't afraid, just attentive. Out here among the stars,

there was nobody on board the ship she needed to be concerned about.

She cocked her head to the side a little to hear better and realised it as her husband. She put her head down once more and began purring, anticipating his loving caresses.

He was doing his level best to keep his bare feet from making a noise on the steps, but there was no sneaking up on Manny. Her feline ears and security training had seen to that. Shortly, he stood next to her and gazed down at the white snowball he was married to.

"If you keep staring, you're going to singe my fur," Manny whispered.

Scanner smiled and lowered himself down to the floor, crossed his legs and nestled in close. "I was finding it hard to sleep without my furry pillow," he said in like manner.

"Someone had to watch the kits," Manny said, knowing he already understood this.

Her husband simply nodded his agreement. "Thanks for coming to get me."

Manny's eyes opened as she considered what he said. They had been serving together for long enough to have had a hand in saving each other many times over, and yet each time Judd felt the need to thank her. She didn't understand why, but she didn't question it either. It was simply part of being Judd. She replied with her usual line: "It's part of the job." She added: "If I don't save you, I'm going to have to endure a pay cut."

The comment made him chuff and desperately suppress a chuckle. One of the children nearby shifted then settled down once more. "Don't make me laugh," he whispered. "Besides, I don't think we're going to get a single credit for our year in the past."

Manny simply wriggled her whiskers in mirth. It certainly wasn't about the money.

Not willing to disturb the children further they sat in companionable silence for a while. For the sake of the youngest among them the room was dimly lit so Judd could make out the forms of the children lined up in rows, tightly packed in as they were. He knew that some of the older girls were sleeping in their small infirmary for privacy's sake as well as taking over Captain Silayna's room. The Pipers would be hot bunking for a while.

All the same, they needed more room. His eyes cast about for items they might be able to stow elsewhere and alighted on a crate that was unfamiliar to him at first. He didn't recall it from all their time preparing the ship. Then the penny dropped. It was one of Kriton's transportation crates. It would be full of Uranium.

Concerned for the children's safety, he got up and made his way over sleeping bodies to the black crate. It was a cubic metre in size, lending him to believe there was enough fissionable material inside to create a sizeable nuclear device. He did some quick calculations in his head

and came up with ten megatons give or take a megaton or two.

He gently tapped on the casing and heard a hollow thud. Lead casing. Good. They should be protected from any of radiation's nasty side-effects.

However, he was not the sort to make assumptions. He crept back to his wife and asked her to retrieve one of their aging tricorders. He had to be sure.

His wife realised why he had asked her. She would be less likely to make a noise. She got up, jumped over several children and quickly walked on all fours through the doors and headed for Engineering where they were kept. She was back momentarily and handed him the device.

The first thing he did was toggle the mute button. The older models tended to make a high-pitched squeal while they operated. It had been added to simply indicate to the user that it was in operation. He then aimed it at the crate, adjusted the parameters and scanned.

It took only a moment to register only background radiation in the room. Scanner didn't realise he had been holding his breath and he let it go in a rush. "Thank God," he said. He'd had nightmares that the children had been irradiated as they slept.

Curious, but unwilling to disturb the children, Manny got her answers by looking into her husband's mind. She noted on a subconscious level that this was getting easier with time. What she saw caused the hackles on her neck to

rise. Having such materiel on board was dangerous. She made a mental note to stow it away safely the next day. Another thought came to her, and she projected it into her husband's mind.

"You know, this could be exactly what we needed."

Judd had already considered the prospect. He reached over, put his arm around his wife's neck and drew her close enough to kiss her cheek. *"My thoughts exactly,"* he replied.

The next day, as the children bustled about playing games or watching old movies from Judd's video collection, the Lees stood and looked at their unexpected cargo as Judd and Carman attached antigravs to it so it could be stored more appropriately. Crash was upstairs piloting the ship.

As one, they turned and looked at Scanner. "When the time comes, do you think you could make something out of this?" they asked together.

Judd noticed they were holding hands and, when they did so, they tended to think as one. He found it a fascinating and somehow daunting notion. One Piper was a force to be reckoned with. Two of them operating as one would be unstoppable.

The funny thing was, when they were doing it, he didn't know which of them to address. He usually deferred to Piper, but he was also a gentleman and didn't want to

exclude her other, so he tended to look back and forwards from one to the other.

"Yeah, I can build another one."

While Piper Silayna was unfamiliar with his first attempt, she was filled in at the speed of thought by her sister on the spectacular job he had building a device that shattered a comet.

"What do you need?" The sound came out in two-part harmony.

Before he could answer, a notion popped into their collective thoughts that wasn't their own. *"You know, you creep Scanner out when you do that."*

The Pipers knew Manny's friendly voice anywhere and gazed over the crowd of busy children to where the feline was gazing at them with a small smile on her face.

In deference to Scanner, the women let go of one another and separated their thoughts.

Piper Silayna spoke first. "I might be able to help you with its construction. I took a course at the Academy."

Her sister looked at her with a cheeky grin. "Who'd have thought you were a nuclear physicist?"

"There's more to the universe than history," Suzette replied.

Piper nodded. They had discussed their time at the Academy and found to their surprise that some of their electives had differed. Their separate histories had become a source of fascination to them, and they had often spent

time going through each other's memories and seeing how their life would have turned out if their circumstances had been different.

They noted that, once Piper Silayna had married Brian, she had visited their family on Proxima much more infrequently. As Brian's family was earthbound and Starfleet had its home there, they tended to visit them more often.

Piper shared her memories of Christmases at their family home, surrounded by their siblings and relatives; Christmases Piper Silayna had missed. They were typical memories filled with crackers, food, laughter and games yet they had been enough to bring a tear to her eye.

Scanner caught Silayna's eye. "I could use the help. I've never been fond of working with this stuff."

Their collective gaze returned to the case as it disappeared through the doorway headed for its new home. The *stuff* made them all feel uncomfortable. Its destructive power was legendary.

Later that day, Jason was taking his turn at the helm, keeping a watchful eye on the gauges regarding their recently reactivated warp engines. They hadn't been operational for years, and yet they seemed to have weathered the time sitting around well.

He was alone on the bridge, which was really nothing more than a glorified cockpit. Sitting centrally on the

forward console, he could see everything he needed to. The science station was keeping an automatic watch for dangerous objects or hostiles.

The nav computer, limited as it was, informed him they were still on course. The navigational deflector systems were working fine as well.

His gaze turned to the panel that had been bothering him for months. Labelled "Do Not Use in Atmosphere", he had been reluctant to try it. Since everything else on the ship functioned as necessary, he had found it redundant. All the same, it left him perplexed.

"What the hell," he said to himself. He put his mug of Irish Breakfast Tea into the cup holder and dropped the ship out of warp.

The action didn't go unnoticed. Judd's voice came through immediately from Engineering. "What's going on, Jason?"

"I'm going to try the "Do Not Use" panel," he replied matter-of-factly.

There was silence for a moment as Judd considered. "Hold on. I'll be up in a sec."

Jason shrugged. If the Commander wanted in on it, who was he to argue?

In less than a minute, Judd stood next to him, along with his shadow, Manny. "Go for it," he said, rubbing his hands together, fascinated.

Jason leaned over and flipped open the panel, finding within it two simple buttons. He had guessed one for on, the other for off, but it was pure speculation.

He hit the one on the left. A whirr could be heard through the bridge as the sound of the ship's wings extending was brought to them through the superstructure. Out of the side window they could see them as they reflected the light from a nearby star. However, when they were fully extended a panel slid aside on each wing and what looked like a gun barrel protruded from within.

Their eyes opened wide. "They're not...." Judd said.

"Oh, man!" was all Jason could utter.

Manny couldn't help herself. She immediately depressed the other button. Scarlet phaser bolts shot out of each cannon as if they were energy machine guns. Her pupils dilated as she said: "Cool!" She took her paw off the button, her eyes flashing in delight. "These might come in handy."

Jason growled: "They could have come in *handy* yesterday." He picked up his mug and tossed back the rest of the contents angrily.

Judd shrugged. "It still worked out," he said, although his heart wasn't in it. His mind had never been far from thinking of the lanky Aussie who had died uselessly bashing away on a nuclear weapon.

Manny saw the look in his eye and knew what was causing it. She had seen him dream the night before of

leaving Jack behind, and each time he did he blamed himself for the man's death. "You know, I miss Jack," she said casually. "He was a good man. It's a pity his relationship with Suzette ended badly." She paused for a moment, then said thoughtfully: "Perhaps that's why he did what he did. Maybe he was trying to show her he wasn't afraid and run away from his responsibilities again."

Her attempt backfired. Scanner scowled at her and snapped: "Like I did." He brushed past her and headed for their bunk, wanting to be alone.

His wife wasn't going to let him. As he stepped through their bedroom door, Manny slipped past him and stood, looking him in the eye. "I would never accuse you of cowardice!" she said, a touch angry herself. She had taken his comment personally.

Judd grabbed the only chair in the room, turned it around and straddled it. He was trying to tamp down his feelings and not quite succeeding. "I know!" he said a little too loudly. "I know," he repeated a little more sedately. "It's just, you weren't there." He raised his hands as if reaching for the bomb he couldn't deactivate. "I should have dragged him out."

Manny sat on her haunches in front of him and took his now lowered hands. "I *was* there, Judd," she said. "You asked me to watch you and I *was*. There was no time to overpower him. There was no changing his mind. He did

what he wanted to because he believed he was right to do so."

She continued: "Remember that we barely got out of orbit alive. If you had taken a second longer we'd all be dead."

Her message got through. A tear tracked its way down his cheek and Manny wiped it away with a loving finger. "It's just that he's dead," he said tightly, quietly, sounding a little lost.

Suddenly, Manny got the insight that Jack's death was simply a symptom of a greater loss the whole crew would have to deal with. They had all witnessed the death of a world. The mass extinction of people who they had come to think of as friends. No-one more than she, who had heard their death screams as their spirits had been yanked away from their bodies in that sudden moment of release. She just hoped it was to a better place.

It was at moments like these she was grateful that she had rekindled her faith in a greater power. In the notion there was a loving God out there who took care of his children. Although times like these left her wondering if there was a greater cause for good when so many had died.

All the same, she took hold of her faith as one drowning would to a life-preserver. It meant the world to her to know there was a possibility for continuation after this mortal life. That, somewhere, Jack and his mates could be

sitting together at a pub knocking back a cold one and sharing a joke.

Manny stood up, took her husband by the hand, led him over to their bunk, then spent some time sharing their grief in one another's arms.

That night, once the children had been fed and put to bed once more, the crew came together in their mess. Piper Silayna spent some time cooking the old-fashioned way. She had used the food synthesizer to create some BBQ food, and soon she was cooking sausages, burgers and onions on a skillet. On a separate skillet, she was cooking some vegetables. When questioned, she replied: "In the 21st Century, Piper and I tried to cook some eggs and failed dismally. However, Brian at least did teach me how do cook a decent BBQ."

For the Cait present, she had replicated some steaks and lamb chops, and the appreciated the smell.

When she was finished, she presented the, only slightly burned, food for all to enjoy. It took little encouragement for them to all to tuck into their meals with gusto.

Scanner nudged Piper and indicated her double. "I thought you were the sort who burned water," he jibed.

Instead of being annoyed at him, Piper Silayna said: "There's more to me than you know, Scanner. I'm a woman of many talents."

The words, the inflections, even the spirit, were so Piper, it caught everyone's attention. For some time, they had noted how she seemed to be the more abrasive of the two, less inclined to take a joke. What she had just uttered could have come from Piper's own mouth.

Scanner smiled and said: "I know that about *you*, I'm just not sure about *her*!" Her pointed at Piper for emphasis.

Susanna's eyes flared momentarily in jest. "I resemble that remark!" she said in mock anger.

Scanner added with a friendly: "Suzette, you can cook for me any time."

Touched, Suzette said fondly: "Thanks."

Seated next to Judd, out of the blue Manny said: "I think we should hold a service for the children."

The chatter around the table died instantly.

"Why is that?" Piper asked. She sympathized with the notion, but she wanted to hear what Manny thought.

The Cait collected herself, took a moment to catch everyone's eye, then said: "We all were witness to something we wish we'd never have to see. The death of a world."

The silence was fairly palpable. Some didn't realise they were holding their breath.

"The children aren't the only ones who lost families on Merrijig. We lost some good friends, our horses and a place we had called home for over two months. I don't know about you, but a part of me misses our life there."

Manny was speaking from the heart and baring her soul. She took her husband's hand and drew strength from him. "I think it would be good for all of us to be able to have some way of saying "Goodbye" to them."

Scanner added, his voice rough with emotion: "We all need closure."

Piper shared a meaningful look with her other. It was a thought that had occurred to her, and she now saw it was mutual. They nodded their silent agreement. It was a good idea, and while it was Manny's notion, they knew it fell to them to them to perform it.

They wasted no time. Memorial services for the dead were not an infrequent occurrence on board a ship of the line, and the crew members present were all aware of what was entailed. Although there was no body to consign to space, they took the time to lament the passing of the people of Merrijig.

They were assembled in the largest area on board: the cargo bay. Piper and her officers stood at the front behind a small lectern and faced the children, who were now all dressed in clean clothes that they had managed to replicate for them. Carman had happily recycled the old ones.

Piper, who had recovered sufficiently enough to address the crowd without leaning on something, said: "I speak, not as a stranger to Merrijig, but as a friend, one who shared the lives of the townsfolk and the occasional drink at

the Eureka Creek Pub. I'll miss the jokes and friendship. I'll miss the Lonergans and their cooking. I'll even miss Jack. But what I will never forget was how bravely they fought for you children. They did everything they could to win you back, and they did. Even Jack, who had no kids of his own, made the ultimate sacrifice to give you your freedom." She stepped back from their make-shift podium and said formally: "They will be remembered."

It had been agreed that Manny would speak at that point. She moved forward and said simply: "Let's pray."

The children were surprised, but a number of them had been raised Anglican and they obediently lowered their heads.

"To the Creator of the Universe who made us all in your image, we ask that you receive our friends and family. We thank you that you made us all to enjoy the benefits of love, of family, of happiness. May they live forever more in Your presence in a place of joy and peace." For the sake of the children, she added: "Amen." It was a word she knew they would recognise.

She looked up and took a small delight in the fact many of the children were smiling at her. For some of them, she knew, it was the first time they had in, at the very least, days. It was good to see the healing process begin.

"I'm going to open it up now for anyone who might like to say something."

At first, the children looked at each other. Some had nothing to say. Some didn't know what to say. Some simply didn't want to talk in front of the others.

One teenage boy, a tough kid with jet black hair called Matt, stepped forward and looked back at his friends. He looked a little lost for words for a moment before he opened his mouth and said: "I'll miss my dad. He was good at teaching me how to fix things. I'll miss my mum." A smile touched his lips. "She was a great cook." He seemed about to finish when he looked to the ceiling and said: "Thanks for all you did for us. I'll never forget ya."

Slowly at first, children came forward to speak. Each offered a little word of thanks for their parents, and it soon became clear to the adults that most of them had only dim recollections of them. They had been imprisoned for so long that their memories had waned.

One little girl came forward clutching a tiny rag doll and simply said in her tiny voice: "I want my Mummy."

Those four words broke the floodgates of emotion that had built up in the confined space. Grief poured out from many of the children while an almost equal number did their best to console them. Tears flowed freely and it tore at Piper's heart to hear so many of the children crying again, however she knew it was a natural part of the healing process. This was necessary, though painful.

She decided then that the service was concluded and left the officialdom at that. She, along with her friends,

began moving through the crowd and spent some time talking with those who needed someone to relate to. She came to one young, blonde girl who looked like she was about sixteen. She noticed the girl seemed to be all attitude, even given her ordeal. Given the number of children present, it came as no surprise that she hadn't come across her before. She decided this was a good place to start.

"Hello."

The girl sat on the floor and looked up at her without showing her face, leaving only the top of her head and her eyes visible. What Piper saw was challenge. "Hi," she said curtly.

The captain wasn't certain the girl even *wanted* to talk. In fact, she got the clear impression she wanted to be left alone. She had just decided to leave her when she opened up a little. "Thanks for what you and your people did to rescue us. Our gutless parents did nothing for years, but when you guys showed up you managed to get them off their arse and actually do something." She suddenly stood and wrapped her arms around Piper's waist, nestling her head between her breasts. "If there's someone, I'll always be grateful to, it's you and your people."

Piper was gobsmacked. She didn't know what to say.

The girl continued. "I heard your people call you Piper. It's a nice name. If I ever have a daughter, I'll call her that."

Without volition Piper reached out and gently stroked the younger woman's hair. She returned the embrace and held her for as long as she wanted.

Suddenly feeling a little embarrassed, the young woman let go of her and moved off to spend some time with her friends.

Suzette caught up with Piper a few moments later and found her staring into space. "Nice of you to spend so much time with that girl," she said. She had only seen the back of her head as Piper held her. When she didn't respond immediately, she tapped her arm and asked: "Did you catch her name?"

"Rosanna," Piper said numbly. She caught her sister's eye. "I was just holding our mother."

Chapter Twelve

Seventeen days later, the *Pterodactyl* blazed its way through the atmosphere of a world called Proxima Beta. It had only recently been colonised by a large group of Protestant Christians who had decided to create a society on a lush, green planet where they could enjoy God's creation unhindered.

It was populated by a group of people who would never turn away needy children. Their faith demanded it.

Piper also knew they would help the children find their extended families if they wanted to. Many were old enough to make that decision under Federation law.

Seated in the command chair, Piper advised her sister: "There should be a small field next to the main settlement."

Suzette, who was giving Jason a spell, shook her head. "I know, I know. You *do* realise we both came from here, you know." She wasn't being mean, just reproving. "I can't believe you've brought us here. Aren't you worried about us creating a paradox?"

Susanna looked at her incredulously. She was way past worrying about such things. After what had happened to them in the preceding months, not to mention the last couple of weeks. "We just met our *mother* on the trip here and you're worried that *we're* causing a paradox? This is the woman from whose womb I – I mean we – will spring?"

Suzette looked at her with a weak grin. "All right, it was a stupid thing to say. I suppose that the notion has truly dawned on me that, by going back in time it's possible to be part of your *own* history." She sighed; her teeth still clenched. "Predestination paradoxes are a pain in the ass." She clutched the yoke a little tighter. "I'm just afraid that we're going to screw this up somehow." The admission was not easy.

Susanna took a moment to reflect on her own feelings. "My fear of messing things up is not as strong as what would happen if we *don't* try. We're here for a purpose. They're manifold and convoluted, to say the very least. I just know that if we didn't act when we did things wouldn't have worked out as they have."

"Like bringing Mum to Proxima." Suzette simply stated the fact. "I remember she never talked about her past. Whenever I asked her about her childhood, she'd say that was..."

"Another lifetime and you shouldn't worry yourself about it," Susanna finished. A notion came to her. "You know, it's possible for us, knowing what we know, to find out what her family name was and trace our lineage."

The notion held some appeal. Suzette, like Susanna, had always been curious about their mother's non-existent side of the family. But as quickly as the flame of the idea was lit, it was extinguished as she said: "It's not what Mum

would want. If it wasn't important to her, it shouldn't be to us."

Susanna nodded. They had seen the suffering of the children up close; also, the bitterness many of them carried towards their own people who allowed the Orions to keep them cowed and powerless. She took in a quick breath and let it out through her nose in a sigh. "All right. We're agreed. We won't ask."

"Agreed."

A thought popped into her head. "I wonder what happened to Mum's accent."

Suzette shrugged. "Who knows? At least I now know where her love for beers came from."

The women laughed at their shared memory. Their mother was a god-fearing woman, but that didn't prevent her from indulging in the odd drink.

All things being equal, it still bothered her that she had no recollection of Merrijig's demise in her timeline and neither did her sister. On the flip side, neither had even heard of the place before their arrival there. "After all that we've been through recently, I can't help feeling like we're manufacturing a whole new timeline."

Suzette rolled her eyes but couldn't help agreeing with her on some level. It had bothered her that their time on Merrijig had ended with the planet's destruction, that they may have altered the natural flow of history. The thing that annoyed her most was that, collectively, none of them could

recall knowing *anything* of the world and that included their ambassador of all things Australian: Jason Nunn. "I think we're just going to have to wing it and hope for the best."

"True." Susanna looked up as the ship passed into the Ionosphere, fire still flaring over the ship's nose. The roar of atmosphere penetration could be heard all around them. "I've always loved this part."

Suzette looked up. Landing on a planet was always a favourite for her as well. "Yep, it never gets old." She disengaged the impulse drive, extended the wings and fired up the thrusters. Suddenly, the *Pterodactyl* had gone from starship to aeroplane and handled as such. The ship began bucking as she passed into the Stratosphere. The air was clear, and their flight smoothed out quickly.

Susanna opened the intra-ship comms. "Hello all. This is your Captain speaking. We're passing through twenty-thousand feet as we come in to land on Proxima Beta. Please fasten your seatbelts and observe the no smoking signs."

Her sister shot her a look. "Are you going space happy?"

"Nah." Susanna grinned broadly. "Just trying to have a little bit of fun." She stood and looked out the side window. "Ah, it's good to be home."

Proxima's settlement was so new there was no formal landing site or even air traffic control. It was guided by the simple principle of EMFH. Every Man For Himself.

Many of the locals looked up in surprise. They weren't expecting visitors today, or any time in the near future for that matter.

The sight of the *Swallow*-class freighter flying overhead was welcome, but they were not above caution. The town's leadership had assigned certain individuals the task of welcoming new arrivals and they did their job well. Albeit with people watching from the windows with phaser rifles pointed their way.

It paid to put on a friendly face, but neither Piper could blame them for being cautious. As they stood on the cargo ramp together, they watched as their welcoming committee came forward, all smiles but with a guarded look in their eye.

Both women simply strode down the ramp and walked up to the man they knew was the leader – from their youth. In turn they shook hands with a man they simply knew as "Pastor Leon", the man who went on to become their planet's first "Senior Pastor Elect". Proxima wasn't based on the average democracy. Neither was it a theocracy. The fledgling colony simply had a group of elders that were held in high regard by all, or they simply weren't given the position.

Pastor Leon gave them a warm greeting, as if he somehow recognised one of his own. "Welcome to Proxima, ladies. What can we do for you?"

Both Pipers shared a look. They remembered that their people's outlook on life was keeping a watch for opportunities to bless others. They weren't selfish.

Susanna returned his smile and said: "We've just come from the small colony of Merrijig that was devastated by Orions."

Suzette continued: "The planet was destroyed, but we managed to rescue a number of their children before it blew."

Leon, an aging African gentleman with striking blue eyes was shocked. "The *whole planet* was destroyed?"

As if they were mirror images of each other, both Pipers cast down their eyes, their sadness clear. The tragedy was still very fresh in their minds. "Yes," they said in unison.

Susanna added: "However, we have over seventy of their children who need a good home. They're aged between six and twenty." She was pleased for their rescue, but never forgot the trauma they had suffered. It weighed on her heavily every time she saw their still sunken eyes.

Proxima's leader was no fool. He was aware the Federation had facilities for caring for the children including resources for finding the children's families. "Why bring

them here?" he asked genially, but the intelligence in his eyes revealed the doubt as to their intentions.

"In all honesty, Pastor Leon, this was the first place I thought of." Susanna laid her cards on the table. "I'm aware of your people's reputation for charity."

Another elder, a man in his fifties asked incredulously: "How could you know that? We've only been here a short time ourselves."

Susanna sucked in a breath. She had no idea she would face opposition. "I seem to remember that the early church was an embarrassment to the Roman Empire because of their reputation of taking care of their widows and orphans." She scowled at the man. "If you're not doing that anymore, please let me know and I'll tear out that page of my history book."

Suzette hammered it home. ""Love thy neighbour as thyself and "suffer the little children to come unto me", I seem to remember Jesus saying that."

Pastor Leon drew himself up straight. He knew the women had him theologically cornered. However, he wasn't without a final argument. "The only thing I'm worried about is our resources. We have little and I fear the Federation may be able to take better care of them."

Susanna stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Never mind that these children just came out of working an Orion mine and grew up on farms. If there's one

thing they know how to do, it's work." She gave his arm a squeeze. "Have faith, Pastor Leon. The Lord will provide."

While Piper was agnostic – she had decided not to follow her parent's faith – she *was* aware of her people's history. Every time they had faced a hurdle, they had soared over it. She knew they would do so now. All the same, a little voice inside her chided her for trying to manipulate the man by using his own faith against him.

Leon broke into a broad grin. He had needed reminding of that fact. He boomed: "Yes, He will!" He looked toward the cargo bay doors where he could see some of the children eavesdropping, along with a pair of overgrown felines. He threw out his arms wide and said: "Of course the children are welcome!"

As if the flood gates had burst the children came streaming out of the hold and down the ramp towards their little group. Leon watched them come and was beginning to wonder if their guests had been overly conservative with their estimate of their number. However, any doubt about them dissolved as he engaged the delighted faces of the children who were looking at him as some kind of saviour. Leon's heart melted and he waved over his compatriots to help.

At the door Crash simply observed: "Methinks the children are just happy to get out of the ship."

Manny led him outside along with the rest of their crew. She gestured about them. "With a world as beautiful as this one, who wouldn't be?"

Crash took a moment to drink in the crystal-clear air and had to agree. The cedar-like trees that surrounded the settlement were impressive to say the least, with native birds twittering away. He had taken some time to survey the planet and had found it was almost completely covered by lush foliage of one kind or another. Nearer the equatorial regions the forests more closely resembled jungles, yet for all its wildlife, the captain had assured him there were no native carnivores. Only herbivores.

Once there was soil underfoot, he couldn't help but compare this world with his own. There was so much about it that reminded him of the place of his youth. Still, the smells were wrong. He shrugged. Nothing's perfect, he thought.

By the time he joined the others the group was beginning to disburse as the children began exploring their new home. He noticed the captain took out a digital camera and take a few shots before slipping it back into her pocket. He made a mental note to ask her about it later.

Suzette was introducing everyone to the Pastor. When he strode up, she said: "And this is Crash."

Once more, he had to shrug inwardly and remind himself the humans meant nothing by the moniker. He put

his paw out and shook the man's hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Pastor," he said in his friendly baritone.

Leon grinned. "And you... Crash." He turned to the crew of the *Pterodactyl* and said: "You must all join us for dinner!" Quietly, to Suzette he said: "Just give us a little while to figure out how we're going to billet the children."

Piper Silayna nodded her understanding. "Of course, Pastor Leon. We understand completely."

At that, the elder man gave her a knowing look. He realised they had just spent at least the last two weeks getting here in decidedly crowded conditions. "How did you manage?" he asked her.

She sighed. "You keep reminding yourself that it's nearly over every day."

That night the Pastor was good to his word and the Starfleet crew were fed some of the local varieties of fruit, vegetables and fish. Someone had been thoughtful enough to point out the Caitian tastes and replicated some juicy steaks for them, served fresh off the proverbial cow.

A celebration of sorts was held and, unknown to the crew, some photos were taken to commemorate the event.

Farewells were made and the two Pipers watched from a distance as Rosanna was led away by the people who would care for her. They had kept her identity to themselves and had made a point of avoiding her for fear of disrupting their histories.

They retired that night to the ship and slept soundly for the first time in weeks. They almost had to pry themselves out of bed the next day as they saw to their imminent departure.

It had been decided to keep a low profile as they prepared for the next part of their mission and so, for the months that followed they lived on a remote part of Proxima on board their small starship.

It took some time for Judd to refine the ore and create the means to manufacture their bomb. While he worked everybody else's job simply became: help Scanner. For several weeks, due to their lack of certain resources, Judd worked hard to create their nuclear weapon.

When the time came for the final components to be installed Judd unveiled his finishing touch. The large, spherical device had a moniker: Rome.

As the crew stood side-by-side Susanna asked: "What's with the name?"

Scanner gave her a tight, mean grin. "Rome's going to burn, and this time it's going to take Nero with it."

The *Pterodactyl* tore through space on a mission. They had deliberately avoided the major space lanes so they would go undetected, and their plan was clear and concise. While Nero's ship, the *Nerada,* had to be destroyed, it wasn't the only ship they had to deal with.

Knowing when and where a ship was going to be in advance was a major advantage, but what to do with it was something else.

It was clear to the Pipers that what they had seen in their vision was the anomaly that would bring the *Nerada* into the past. They even knew when and where it would be. The problem was the anomaly would attract the attention of the *U.S.S. Kelvin* and her captain.

What to do? They considered sending out a dummy May Day signal that would distract the *Kelvin*, but Piper was concerned it would attract other starships and create an even bigger problem.

No, they had to ensure the *Kelvin* would not reach the anomaly at all.

What they did know was that the *Kelvin* had been tasked with studying another unusual phenomenon – increased solar activity in the nearby star.

As they neared the sun, Jason mused: "I wonder if the anomaly caused the solar flares?"

Seated next to him, Crash said: "There's every possibility that the flares attracted the anomaly. It's a pity we won't have time to study it."

The reason for that was clear. Silhouetted against the star was the unmistakable outline of a Federation starship. As they neared it the sound of a hail was heard.

"This is the U.S.S. Kelvin calling the unknown freighter. Please identify yourselves and declare your intentions."

Susanna brushed the comm button on her chair arm. "This is Captain Susanna Smith of the freighter *Mangalore*. Sorry, our IFF is malfunctioning, as are a lot of the systems on our ship. The electromagnetic interference being emitted by this star is playing havoc with our computer."

It was an outright lie on her part. Anticipating the trouble, Piper had her people harden the ship's electronics against just such an eventuality.

"Fortunately for us, we managed to spot you before out scanners failed. All we've got right now is passive sensors." It was enough for any Starship Captain worth his salt to offer assistance. Without adequate sensors or computer function, navigation would be next to impossible.

The voice changed. "This is Captain Robau of the *Kelvin*. Please follow us as we assume a safer orbit. We can then dock and render assistance."

Piper hated doing this to a fellow Starship Captain, but right now it was necessary to save the life of everybody on board the *Kelvin*. All the same, she grinned tightly and put on a friendly voice. "Thank you, Captain Robau. I'll get my pilot to do just that." She toggled the comms off. "Crash, have you managed to gain access yet?"

At the Science Station, Crash was putting all his knowledge of communications and programming to good

effect. After a moment and a lot of tapping his console's controls he said: "I'm in."

Piper sighed. "Deliver the package." It was a good thing they were doing this with a ship that was fifty years older in tech. Their encryption systems were not yet impregnable.

Krashtallash did as he was told. It took a fraction of a second to upload the virus, but its effect was immediate. The *Kelvin's* impulse drive flickered for a moment, then went out as their primary power systems went down. He was confident it would take them hours to find his virus and kill it, but that was all the time they needed.

Suzette shook her head. It was almost too easy. Standing at the left side of the Bridge, she stared out at the *Kelvin* as she drifted in space. "I'm with you, Sis. I'd hate to have someone do that to me as well."

Susanna tipped her head to the side. "Was I broadcasting that loudly?"

Suzette said with a slight smile: "You were."

Manny's voice echoed up the corridor behind them from below decks. "Yes!"

Mildly embarrassed, she ordered: "Let's go blow something up."

Jason kicked the ship into warp drive, and they shot away from the *Kelvin*. They didn't have far to go and by the time they reached their destination they beheld a sight that amazed them.

Suzette looked up through the window in awe. “Kirk always said it looked like a “lightning storm in space”,” she said. Almost incredulously, she said: “He wasn’t kidding.”

Coalescing before them appeared the likeness of a huge, swirling dark cloud laced with electrical discharges. It looked totally out of place in the empty, black void of space.

“Everyone, prepare for explosive decompression!” Susanna barked. Behind her the Bridge door slammed shut in response to her order.

Below decks Carman, Judd and Manny locked themselves in their tiny engine room which was self-contained and easily sealed off. The space was claustrophobic with no viewscreens or windows, yet they had faith their friends above would prevail. They weren’t David taking on Goliath. They were an ant taking on an elephant. The only thing they had in their favour was the fact they were carrying a bazooka.

Judd hit the comm button. “Secure down here!” he said with a glance at his wife. “Start the show!” He moved over to the dilithium chamber to monitor the ship’s performance and was grateful that his wife remained close. What Piper was doing carried colossal risk.

Jason brought the *Pterodactyl* around in a graceful arc that lined them up with the event horizon a hundred kilometres out.

It happened very quickly. The biggest starship they had ever seen began emerging, looking like a gigantic collection of dark curved swords of unknown purpose. The first prongs were like a nightmarish spider whose legs were razor sharp. They were quickly joined by more and more of them as the ship extracted itself from the cloud.

Knowing that what happened to the *Kelvin* took them by surprise the first time around, Susanna gave the order.

The cargo bay doors slid aside with a whoosh, ejecting not only all the air below but their surprise package as well. The ball-shaped bomb shot out and flew towards the "legs", quickly passing their outermost reach.

"Back us off! Full impulse!" Susanna ordered as the *Nerada* just seemed to keep coming. She began to wonder if their bomb was going to do the job after all considering the vessel's overwhelming size.

Jason touched the control and the *Pterodactyl* accelerated in reverse as quickly as she could at sublight. Yet the *Nerada* was still to clear the event horizon.

At his position at Science, Crash used his controls to manipulate the flight of the bomb. It had been designed to sport a few impulse control reactors to help it navigate independently. He took a deep breath to settle his nerves and maintain complete control of the device.

Without warning, without preamble, the *Nerada* unleashed a barrage of missiles at their tiny vessel. Knowing it would take only seconds for them to impact their ship and afraid their bomb, their only hope for survival, would be destroyed, Susanna ordered: "Detonate! Warp speed!"

A paw and a human hand touched controls simultaneously. Once more, the destructive power of enriched Uranium threatened to douse them with hard radiation just as their ship entered warp drive, pushing the ship past light speed and the effects of the blast that momentarily outshone the sun.

Crash watched his console, fascinated. Without looking up, he suggested: "Suzette, could you close the doors and repressurise the ship?"

It was a good idea as, in the heat of the moment, the small detail had been forgotten. Without a word, Suzette manipulated the controls to bring it about.

"Well?" Susanna was more than curious. She needed to know if the job was done. She was silently praying that their efforts would suffice. They hadn't just poked the dragon in the eye, they'd thrown a harpoon at it and run, praying it would kill it before it turned and burned them to a crisp.

"Just a moment, Captain," Crash said. "It would help if we weren't at warp."

"Ah, yes." She looked at Jason. "Make it so."

The stars ceased streaking by them, and their pilot brought them about. Due to the peculiarities of faster than light travel, the flash of explosion shone out seconds after they stopped.

At warp two they hadn't travelled that far. All the same, it was harder for Crash to zoom in on the anomaly with their outdated equipment. "There's still a lot of hard radiation in the area. It's messing with our systems."

Suzette said: "I hope it didn't affect the *Kelvin,*" she said, concerned.

Crash put her fears at rest. "They're still where we left them on the far side of the sun."

"That's one less thing to worry about," Susanna said with a sigh. Her nerves were beginning to settle as her confidence rose that all was well.

Jason watched the expanding fireball and mused: "Nothing could have survived that." He toggled the comms button to Engineering. "Judd, you certainly know how to build a bloody good bomb. If I ever need a firecracker made for me, I'll come to you." The sense of relief he felt was overwhelming.

"We aim to please," Scanner replied as if today was an average day.

Their hopes were dashed when the badly damaged *Nerada* warped into the space before them. The blast had ripped all the forward "blades" from the vessel, but the heart

of it at the rear remained functional. Once more, it launched a barrage of missiles at their tiny vessel.

Out of their comms panel came a hail in a voice that was ominous and devoid of fear. "This is Nero. I don't care who you are, but you will die for this."

"Evasive!" Susanna called. "Warp speed!" She mashed the comm button on her chair arm. "Manny, get up here!" She added: "Shields!"

The *Swallow*-class normally didn't sport defensive shields, only navigational deflectors, but Piper wasn't the sort to take those kinds of risks. It had taken Judd a month to build the bomb. It had taken him another two months to outfit their ship with shields.

Jason used the smaller vessel's agility to great advantage as he dodged the missiles by going up and over them, while Manny blasted away at them with their phasers, detonating several of them short of their target. Jason then blasted the ship into warp drive straight over the top of the *Nerada*.

The problem was that Piper was aware Nero was now out for blood. He would not stop until they were dead.

What to do? An insane idea came to her.

"Take us directly into the sun," she said. When Jason started at the suicidal order she added: "We need to skim the corona."

Jason made the adjustments and they quickly found themselves shielding their eyes from the glare.

“Crash, are their shields still down?” Susanna asked. She mused there could be little left after the blast.

The Cait nodded. “They are.” A glance at the scanners revealed: “They’re closing.”

Piper’s grin grew feral as her confidence rose. “Excellent. Take us in. Polarise the viewscreen.”

The *Pterodactyl*, her shields glowing as they repelled the mass of radiation being pumped out by the star, dropped out of warp, and swooped in a mere hundred kilometres from the sun. Even here, the corona shot out a number of minor eruptions – mini solar flares. However, it wasn’t the small ones she was interested in.

The ship rocked, but not from the sun’s emissions. Now out of missiles, the *Nerada* had opened up on them with its phasers.

“Shields down to fifty percent.” Crash’s report was not good. They needed every joule of energy they had in their shields to protect them from the sun’s murderous radiation.

Manny, now next to her brother, awaited her captain’s order. She watched her expectantly. She realised the problem was the ship could only fire forward.

There was a solution to their problem. Susanna saw it through their heavily polarised portal. Two solar flares were erupting. Calmly, she ordered: “Take us between them.”

Jason, his eyes wide with more than a little fear, did as he was told. Taking care to tip the ship over as her wings

were extended, the *Pterodactyl* shot between the pillars of nuclear fire.

The *Nerada* was not so lucky. The ship was unprotected, its sensors overloaded and partially fried by the sun, flew straight into the maelstrom. The fire tore through the outer layers of the ship in a second, melting seams and tearing off panels. The penetrating fire instantly cremated the crew and, now brainless, the once great mining ship tumbled into the sun where she disappeared in a ball of fire, never to be seen again.

"They're gone," Crash stated matter-of-factly.

Jason didn't need any further encouragement. He turned the ship and headed straight out of the sun as fast as their impulse drive could push them. It was hard going considering the intense gravitational force of the star.

"Shields are failing," Crash reported with a finality that stunned his fellows.

Susanna called the engineering section. "Judd, we need more power."

"I'm giving it all we've got," he replied, sounding as worried as Crash.

"Can we go into warp?" the captain asked.

"We're too close to the sun." Crash seemed resigned to their fate. They weren't going to make it.

Still too close to the star, the shields went down. The crew were doused in high levels of alpha, beta and gamma radiation that quickly overwhelmed their senses and

rendered them unconscious. Still, the *Pterodactyl* surged on, following its pilot's final orders as it took its dying crew members back out into the stars.

Chapter Thirteen

It was too bright. That much was certain. The surface she lay on was comfortable, and she found she was covered by a sheet and basic hospital gown. Any more than that she wasn't sure of.

Aside from the headache. Which was a four-alarm killer. A hand touched her shoulder, and she heard the hiss from a hypospray. Suddenly, the fog of pain in her head parted and she could think clearly again.

Piper slowly sat up. She took stock of her situation and found she was sitting in a sickbay on board a starship. That much was certain. Which ship she could only guess at. However, her answer came quickly as a handsome, balding man of southern Asian extraction walked towards her, a younger male from the former United States at his side. The rank braids on their wrists gave her the final clues. She was on board the *Kelvin*.

"You've got some explaining to do," Captain Robau said, his arms crossed, wearing his most no-nonsense look. He was not the sort to suffer fools gladly.

Piper shook her head to help her focus as she considered the situation. "Captain, I need to talk to you – Code 47."

Robau raised a curious brow. This was unexpected, to say the least. The code was only known to Starfleet Starship

Captains. The message was simple. It was for his eyes only. "You'd better not be wasting my time," he said roughly.

Piper widened her eyes as she took a deep breath. "That would be the last thing I'd want to do, Captain," she said formally. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and put her feet on the floor. Still feeling unsteady, it took her a moment to find her balance again. The man at Robau's side offered her his hand. She took it gratefully and allowed herself to be escorted to the captain's quarters for a private briefing.

Once seated, Piper took a moment to consider her position. How much could she tell them? She had protocols to follow, and she needed to do this right.

Robau took his seat on the far side of the desk and folded his arms once more. He seemed to be in a hurry, and she was taking up his valuable time. The man at his side, his executive officer, seemed a little more amiable.

"Well?" Robau said impatiently.

Piper took in a deep breath. "As I'm bound by the Temporal Prime Directive, I can only say so much."

Both men started. It was the last thing they expected to hear.

"What I can tell you is that, if we hadn't intervened, the two of you would be dead and the *Kelvin* would be destroyed." Piper left it at that.

Robau snorted. "Time travel?" he said in derision. "You must be joking."

Piper rolled her eyes. She'd had far too much experience to believe otherwise. "Not at all, gentlemen. Before I confirm it for you, I have a few questions. One, how long have we been on board your ship?"

The answer surprised her. "A week," the XO said. "Your ship is being towed in our tractor beam."

"Okay...." Piper sighed. She looked over at Robau. "How are the rest of my crew doing?"

Robau wasn't the sort of man who appreciated being interrogated. However, the circumstances were highly unusual. "They're all still out. No fatalities, you'll be happy to know. It took quite a while to decontaminate you and regenerate your cells."

Piper nodded. They had been well and truly cooked. That much she remembered.

It was also enough information to prove her point. She looked up at the XO. "Hello, George. How's Winona?"

George Samuel Kirk reconsidered the woman before him. She seemed to know more about him than she should. All the same, it wasn't anything she couldn't have found out through channels. Even so, he was courteous. "She's fine, thank you."

"And your son?"

At that, George caught himself. He hedged. "Sam's fine," he said, speaking of his first-born son.

Piper shook her head. "No, the one just born to you. The one you named James Tiberias."

George stiffened. This woman had been unconscious for a week. There was no possible way for her to know about his newborn son – especially his name as it hadn't even been uploaded to Starfleet's records yet.

Robau, however, slowly uncrossed his arms. He, too, realised the impossible that was before him. Their visitor had proven herself. "Alright, Captain...." When Piper wasn't forthcoming, he continued: "I'll take your word for it. Our scanners tracked your battle with the unknown ship which you seemed to be prepared for. You knew where the anomaly would appear and were even carrying a very high yield warhead to deal with it. Your strategy was worthy of any Fleet Captain in the face of overwhelming forces. Never mind that ship would have taken us apart in no time at all." With great formality he leaned forward and extended his hand. "Thank you for saving our lives, Captain."

Piper took his offered hand and shook it warmly. They were contemporaries, even given their separation in time. "Can I see my people?" she asked.

Robau nodded. "Mister Kirk will escort you back to sickbay, but first I think you'll want to change into something more appropriate for a woman of your rank."

"TPD, Captain," Piper reminded. "T-shirt and jeans will do fine."

As she got up to leave, Robau had a last, parting shot. "Oh, and Captain, I would appreciate it if you don't mess with our computer again while you're with us."

Piper laughed, at last feeling relaxed. "You're on, Captain Robau."

A short time later, Piper was standing in the midst of the *Kelvin's* general ward where most of her people were still resting. She was now more comfortably dressed in jeans, boots, white t-shirt and leather jacket. She noticed that Jason was starting to stir, and Carman was sitting on the side of his bed. The Caits were still out, as was Judd. The person missing was Suzette.

Yet Captain Robau had insisted her people were all accounted for.

"Where's my sister?" she asked George.

The much younger man shrugged then went to find the doctor. She was pleasantly surprised when she was introduced to a woman from Altair Four named Doctor Farran EndreiBerret.

"You're of the Palkeo Est, aren't you?" Piper asked with a broad grin.

Farran nodded. "You're familiar with my people?" she asked, curious.

"One of my best friends is from Altair Four." The pleasantries over, Piper asked: "Where's my sister?"

"Jane Doe 2," the Doctor said, "is in regeneration booth two." She led her over to the window. "We didn't know your names, you see," she said by way of an apology.

George surprised her by saying: “And that’s all you’re going to know of their names, Doctor. These people’s presence has been given the highest classification. Neither you, nor your people, are to discuss them with anyone outside this ship. All records must be destroyed.”

The Doctor baulked at that. “You don’t have the authority,” she snapped.

Kirk replied: “The captain does, and his word is enough for me.”

Farran glowered at him, then turned her annoyance on Piper. “What do I call you?” she growled.

Piper gave her a small smile. “Susanna will do, Doctor.” She pointed into the booth. “You can call her Suzette,” she said fondly.

Farran switched to report mode. “As you’re her obvious next-of-kin, I can tell you that the radiation nearly killed her.” As Piper stiffened, she added: “It affected her differently due to her prosthetic. The electronics were damaged and there was danger of neurological damage if we left it alone. As it was advanced tech, we could not work out how to fix it, so we simply pulled the plug.” She took a breath and took the plunge. “She’s in an induced coma as there was over-stimulation of the optic centres of her brain. They have yet to recover completely.” The doctor looked up at her. “Are you capable of repairing the optical device?”

Piper shook her head, no. All the same, she brightened. "However, my American friend out there is, given the right tools."

The Doctor was anything but satisfied. She had received too few answers for her liking. "There are a few anomalies, however," she said. "The technology used to rebuild her face is unknown to us and is frankly beyond us. The thing I can't figure out is why it was used rather than using tissue regrowth which we've had for a couple of years now."

Piper regarded the familiar visage before her and almost laughed when she remembered who did the job on Suzette's face. She stopped herself when she realised their actions had now erased that timeline and that Merete.

She went back into the memories her sister had shared with her and recalled the circumstances. "The time and place called for it," she told Farran cryptically. "It saved her life and I'm grateful for that."

Farran nodded to herself. It wasn't much, but she had enough imagination to realise it was a real possibility if she was away from her ship in an alien environment.

"How about the rest of my people?" Piper asked, concerned.

The doctor was at least able to give her some good news. "They've all responded well to the treatment and will be up and around in the next few hours." She regarded her

patient. "I think you came out of it first due to your physical condition."

Piper took that as a compliment. "Thanks," she said with a smile. "Speaking of which, I could use some exercise." She looked at Kirk curiously. "Do you have a rec deck I can use?"

He shook his head. "I don't think that would be wise, Captain." He wore a knowing smile. "However, I *do* know somewhere you can."

Ten minutes later, Piper and George stood in the cargo hold of the *Pterodactyl*. "We've decontaminated her and restocked her. The captain was going to give her a skeleton crew and fly her to Argelius, the nearest star system at one point." He chuckled. "He changed his mind."

Piper nodded to herself. Given similar circumstances, she would have done the same. At that moment, she realised time was running out to organise a very important item. She asked George if he could appropriate the desired device and he told her he would take care of it.

"I noticed the names over your crew quarters," George said quietly.

Piper shot him a look. "I'd appreciate if you kept them to yourself," she said.

George shrugged. "Say no more. I gather that, as your people are ready to return, that you'd want them beamed right back to you to minimise contact?"

Piper slapped him on the shoulder. "I see where Jim gets it from," she said with a grin and left it at that. It was enough to leave George wondering.

Instead of pumping her for information, he handed her a communicator, then took out his own and called his ship. "One to beam up," he said, his friendly eyes crinkling. As the beam began to take him, he said: "Thanks for saving my family."

Piper simply watched the empty air where he had stood. "You're welcome."

Two days later Piper Silayna woke up from her coma feeling groggy. She opened her eye and instantly closed it again. Everything was too bright!

She also realised something was amiss. Then it came to her: she was alive!

She felt something – a hand touching hers. She knew immediately it was Susanna, so she reached out and touched her mind.

"Good to see we're still here," she said, happier than she knew.

"We are."

Susanna's sudden pause and flood of conflicting emotions worried and confused her. She couldn't open her eye to see her, so she asked: *"What is it? Have I been crippled?"* She took the moment to flex all her fingers and toes. They all worked.

"See through my eyes."

Suzette was looking down at herself. She appeared normal; however, she realised the difference quickly. *"Why isn't my eye glowing?"* Realisation suddenly dawned. Normally, her electronic eye wouldn't cause her pain if she was dazzled. It automatically adjusted for the light. *"What happened?"*

Susanna filled her in quickly. *"I'll get Scanner to work on it ASAP. We've simply been waiting for you to wake up, Slacker. Unfortunately, you were the hardest one hit because of your prosthetic. It was damaged by the radiation."* She gave her some mental loving. *"I'm just glad you're all right."*

Suzette popped her eye open and looked around her. It was peculiar not having stereoscopic vision and she knew she would have troubles with depth perception until Judd got her eye working again. Sitting up, she ran her hand through her hair and quickly decided she needed a shower. Her hair felt like crap. *"Let's get Scanner on it sooner, rather than later, thanks."* She had a change of mind. *"First things first. I need a sandwich and I need a bath."*

Within an hour the two of them stood on the floor of the cargo bay, looking around them and breathing the air of a ship that had somehow begun to feel like home.

As George had promised, the ship was ready to go. He had even put some of his engineering crew to work fixing damaged systems.

Suzette took a deep breath. "I don't think we'll ever quite get the smell of oil out of the air here."

"Hey, they're back!"

The women looked up and smiled at Manny who had already leapt over the railing and landed on all fours in front of them. "It's good to have you home!" Without preamble she leapt forward and encircled them with her arms, squeezing them in a bear hug.

The rest of the crew appeared from a variety of directions, and, with a laugh and a shrug, the men joined in and surrounded the women, turning the group into one large mass of loving friendship.

In the centre, Piper simply looked at her sister and said: "Just go with it."

In less time than it takes to form a thought Jason Nunn found himself alone in the cargo bay finding himself off balance and lurching forward, trying to find his footing. He looked around him in amazement, wondering where his ship mates had gone to. Their disappearance was faster than any transporter beam that he was familiar with.

"No," he said angrily, his fists clenched. He was filled with a mixture of fear and denial. He had a suspicion he knew what happened, but it wasn't going to be true until he checked.

For the next hour he turned the ship upside down, checking behind panels and even in every closet. His friends were nowhere to be found.

He finally went to the Bridge and turned on the scanners. They reported only one life sign and also the fact there were no other ships within range.

For a moment he continued to deny the truth, yet the young man rallied and put on his bravest face. "I'm not going to let this beat me," he said to himself. "I am a Starfleet officer." He repeated the two phrases several times, wiped away the tear that had formed in the corner of his eye, then turned his attention to navigation. There was little point sitting in the middle of nowhere.

The screen informed him the ship was on course for Argelius. His studies had taught him it was a generally benign world that might even give him some job opportunities.

With the *Pterodactyl* now on course and travelling at warp speed, Jason sat back in his chair and gave expression to some of his favourite and more obscene epithets. "Bloody Guardian, I know you're behind this. I don't know why you left me behind, but I *do* know that everything you've done so far has had a purpose." He curled his lip in anger. "I don't know what it is yet, but I'm going to *find out!"*

Several sets of feet touched the ground simultaneously on a dusty world they had thought left long behind,

curiously wearing the same clothes they had left in. The former crew of the *Pterodactyl* turned around as one to gaze at the Guardian of Forever.

"What was is once more," it said in its enigmatic bass voice. "What will be is still in jeopardy."

As one, the group just stared at the edifice. "What could you possibly mean by that?" Piper said, rattled.

As if in answer the portal opened once more, and an elderly Vulcan stepped through. "I believe I can enlighten you, Captain Piper."

Those gathered stared at the familiar face in amazement. Piper tipped her head to the side, recognising the person before her, even given his advanced age. He should not be so old, she thought. "Spock?"

The Vulcan held up his hand in the customary v-shaped salute. "It is good to see you, Captain. We have much to discuss."

Book 3: Ouroboros

Part One

Prologue

The corridors of the *USS Millennium* seemed tighter these days for some reason. Piper mused that perhaps she was just used to the outdoors. She had just spent a year under the sun both on the late planet Merrijig and her homeworld, Proxima Beta. While she was technically a year older, no time had passed for her on her ship in what was technically her present. The year had been spent in the past where she had been sent by the Guardian of Forever.

It was a year of amazing highs and devastating lows. Friendships had deepened, new friends (and family) had been formed and the Universe was now free of the temporal distortion fields that had recently been wreaking havoc on shipping. Those fields – which had been densest near the Guardian's planet – were the reason she had been drawn here only six weeks prior in this, her normal timeline. While today's date was only a day after she had beamed down to the planet, over a year had passed for her. Reconciling the two sometimes gave her a headache.

In that past she had become part of history by helping Zefram Cochrane ensure the *Phoenix* flew in the 21st Century, then saving the children of Merrijig from a catastrophe that destroyed that world in the 22nd, only to discover one of those children was her own mother!

To top things off, the mission could not have been possible without her alternate, Piper Silayna – another version of herself from a timeline that had branched off when the future Nero

had changed history by travelling into the past and destroying the *USS Kelvin* – nearly killing one James T. Kirk as he was being born whilst his father sacrificed himself to ensure their escape.

Piper almost stopped her usually quick pace as the thought of Piper Silayna brought her to share a glance with her "sister", as she had come to think of her. They were identical physically – save for a metallic facial prosthetic Piper Silayna wore that repaired a phaser injury sustained years before. Her right eye had been replaced with a synthetic that glowed faintly green when you looked into it.

Their personal and professional lives varied greatly. While both held the rank of Captain, Piper Silayna had been married in her timeline. Many of the adventures that Piper could easily call to mind had never happened in Silayna's – including the Rittenhouse affair. As such, her circle of friends was different and, as one is partially shaped by the company that is kept, the two had varying outlooks, opinions and even fields of expertise.

While Piper was a passionate historian, Piper Silayna was a better engineer and scientist. Again, Piper was a Master in the Andorian martial art Scheel-Tah, her sister was only a beginner – under her tutelage.

Their differences had sometimes brought them into conflict, yet their similarities had cemented their relationship and mutual affection. Their psychic resonance was so strong they could often sense one another's thoughts even when they weren't touching. The talent had come in handy – especially in combat where they could work together as a highly efficient team.

After their time in the past, it seemed almost odd to be home. As she took a moment to glance around the corridor of the ship she called home, Piper had to remind herself that the *USS Millennium* was not her sister's. In fact, with their destruction of

the Nero's ship shortly after it emerged from the temporal fissure and the subsequent salvation of the *USS Kelvin,* Piper Silayna's timeline had collapsed, and her entire universe was gone. In that now lost timeline, she had been Captain of the *Ingram* as that ship had never been stolen as it had in her own.

Now that was all gone. However, the anomalies didn't end there. With the restoration of the original timeline (almost) Piper no longer belonged here either. With no temporal anomalies to investigate she would have no reason to be here at all. She should be off on other business for Starfleet. Yet here she was.

It was an enigma to say the least. The Guardian had explained it – after a fashion. The reason was simple. Only the two of them and their team could complete the job. The cause of the star Hobus going supernova, and the subsequent destruction of ch'Richan and ch'Havran – which were known to the Federation as Romulus and Remus – had still to be discovered and prevented. Only then could be whole cycle be averted.

"It's going to be all right," Piper Silayna said quietly. Piper knew it was more to convince herself than her. Without breaking stride, she reached out and took her sister's hand. The contact brought them together mentally. Their thoughts became enmeshed. Each felt the other's fear and doubts.

"We are going to make it," they thought, determined. *"After all we've been through, there's no way we're going to fail. No way!"*

When they reached the conference room, they found themselves the last to arrive. Two chairs, side-by-side, had been reserved for them at the head. While those who had not travelled with her into the past couldn't understand it, those who *had*

understood things had changed. There was no way Piper Silayna was going to sit on the sidelines.

Both women cast their gaze around the room and took in their crew and guests. With them were: an elderly Spock who was deep in thought, a fresh-faced Sarda, her Vulcan First Officer and dear friend, the Caitian Llash twins who were watching her intently, Judd "Scanner" Sandage, her Chief Engineer, their C.M.O. Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus from Altair Four, Lieutenant Carman Valastro of Alpha Centauri who seemed lost in thought and Lieutenant Commander Caitlin "Ghost" Ryan, her Chief of Pilots who just wanted someone to explain it all to her. Sitting just past her was the time agent from the future, Daniels, who looked annoyed and uncomfortable in his handcuffs.

Most held a cup of their favourite brew as they contemplated their circumstances. For some, their friends had been gone only hours. For others, their loved ones had been absent from their lives for over a year. For them, it was taking some time to get themselves back into the rhythm of life aboard a Federation Starship.

The oddest thing for them all was the presence of a man out of time. The elderly Spock sat quietly contemplating the situation. It was pleasing to him to be among old compatriots, yet disturbing he was not where he expected to be.

As was her habit, Piper tapped the table with a fingernail to draw her crew member's attention. "People, I know it's weird to be home, but it's clear we still have a job to do. As the Guardian said, the future is still in jeopardy." She turned to Spock. "As you're clearly from the future, perhaps you can fill us in."

The wizened old statesman gave a simple nod. "In the year 2387 there was – will be – a supernova that will endanger the whole galaxy. It threatened to create a chain reaction that would

have spread to enough star systems, exploding their suns, to destabilise the gravitational forces throughout the Milky Way, as you colourfully call it. It would eventually scatter the solar systems throughout the quadrant, much like the balls deflecting around a billiard table. The loss of life would be catastrophic." He paused for a moment to let the information sink in. "The first to fall were Romulus and Remus." Barely detectable to any but those who knew him well, great sadness passed through his eyes. His voice thickened as he added: "I acted as quickly as I could, but I was unable to prevent their destruction." He adjusted himself and continued. "I was able to release some Red Matter and create a black hole to reverse the effect of the supernova but my ship and that of Nero were caught in its grip." He cleared his throat. "I have to admit I was surprised to find myself transported into the past. However, I am more concerned over the amount of damage that Nero could inflict on the timeline."

A number of faces around the table darkened as they remembered their recent adventure. Piper put her hand on Spock's arm. "We took care of that little problem, Spock."

True to form, Spock raised a curious brow and left it at that. He knew better than second-guess Piper.

Down the table, Daniels raised a finger. He knew he was a pariah to the people present, given his hostile actions regarding their actions towards restoring the timeline, yet he believed he still had something valuable to contribute. "If I may."

Piper turned and gave him a look that suggested she would rather space him than give him the time of day. "You believe you have something useful to offer, Captain Daniels? Or would you rather shoot me?"

Daniels pursed his lips and thought twice before speaking then threw caution to the wind. "Shooting you might have been

the wiser choice! Do you have any idea how much damage you could have done to the timeline?"

The Pipers, Scanner, Manny, Crash and Carman looked at each other in amazement, then burst out laughing. Daniels could only watch them in a mixture of embarrassment and frustration.

"What is so funny?" he asked in a furious stutter.

Piper took a deep breath, splaying her fingers as she settled herself. "Captain Daniels, my crew and I have spent the last year of our lives preparing to make the necessary corrections to the timeline. Captain Silayna here," she laid her right hand on her alternate's left and gave it an affectionate squeeze, "risked everything to save all of reality and sacrificed her entire version of the Universe." She gave him a tight, barely tolerant smile and looked him in the eyes, showing him the pain they both still felt. Their losses along the way had been staggering. Her quiet tone chilled Daniel's veins. "Don't think to presume that we don't understand the gravity of the situation."

Daniels knew he had stepped way over the line and backed up. "My apologies, Captain Piper, Captain Silayna." He looked at the latter and was left wondering. "Although why you're still among us is something of a mystery to me. I would have thought you'd have vanished when your timeline collapsed."

Piper Silayna gave him a lightning quick grin. "Perhaps God loves me," she said sarcastically. "Shouldn't you simply be grateful that something remains of my timeline?"

Next to Daniels, Carman growled: "Exactly. Jason was left fifty years in the past to help set everything right." He scowled at their unwanted guest. "Sacrifices have been made everywhere and all you can do is argue causality."

Daniels put up his hands defensively. "All right. Mea culpa. I'm sorry." He put his hands flat on the table and said:

"Look, everything in this universe is cause and effect. Now, we know from temporal mechanics that sometimes effect precedes cause, but the two always exist one with the other." He looked over at Silayna. "I'm looking at an effect without a cause. You shouldn't be here."

Piper Silayna tilted her head to the side. "I think..."

"…therefore, I am," Daniels completed. "I know. It's just that there must be more going on that we're not aware of."

Sarda leaned forward. "I believe I can at least confirm that the cracks in space-time have closed up. We are once more free to travel unobstructed."

"That is good news, Commander," Piper said with a warm smile.

"But there's got to be more going on," Daniels repeated, frustrated.

"Why do you say that?" Piper asked, genuinely curious.

"Perhaps, Captain Daniels," Spock said. "However, I believe that we are not in our original timeline. Something very close perhaps, but not the original." He turned and looked Piper in the eye. "The first domino to fall was the supernova in 2387. It was the event by which all others that followed are defined. Nero still went into the past and left ripples. I am still a man out of time. The destruction of the super-giant resulted in the death of billions before it was stopped. I suggest that that event should never have happened."

With her right eye still not functioning due to a recent injury, Piper Silayna turned her attention to Spock with her human one. "You can't know that for certain. It could have been a natural occurrence."

Spock nodded his acceptance. "True, Captain Silayna. However, stellar physicists have had millennia to watch the deaths

of stars and they have found a number of markers that warn of their imminent destruction. There were none of those present in this case."

Piper steepled her fingers and tapped her teeth with her nails as she thought. "What is this "Red Matter" that I've heard about?"

Spock seemed unsure whether he should tell her. It was highly classified information even in his time.

At the other end of the table Daniels snorted. "Ambassador Spock, you must realise that this timeline will eventually claim this ship and people. Nothing you tell them here will last."

That caught the attention of all at the table. "What do you mean?" Piper barked.

Daniels scowled at her. "My ship is in your shuttle bay. The *Jolly Roger* is docked alongside. My ship has as part of its shielding a "Causality Bubble" which has been protecting us from the changes in the timeline. If it didn't have one, every time history changed, I'd find myself somewhere else entirely with no memory of what had taken place." He rolled his eyes. "It's a little detrimental to learning if, every time you change history, you lose all memory of the events. Anyhow, sooner or later I'm going to return my ship to the 31st century and the bubble will disappear – and so will *you*. You no longer belong here."

Shock rippled through most of the people assembled, with the exception of both Pipers, Crash and Spock. The notion had occurred to all of them.

"I understand that, Captain Daniels," the black, leonine Captain Krashtallash said quietly in his baritone. "I know there is another me out there who is a new father of four kits and that, because they are still on Cait, my daughter will be fine." He raised

his voice for the benefit of his friends. "We will continue because of our actions, and I am content with that. It is sad that we will forget our adventures on Merrijig, but that is a small price to pay for saving our children's future."

Piper took in a breath and said: "Nobody has answered my question."

Spock raised a brow. Nothing got past Piper. "Red matter, once detonated, can create a singularity with a single drop. I used one to consume the supernova."

A slow smile crept over Piper's face. "If we can just get to that star, we can insert the red matter *before* it goes nova. Collapse the star before it becomes a problem."

"There is a complication."

Piper shook her head and focussed on her aging friend. "There always is, *Ambassador*."

Spock sat forward. "The system is populated."

The usually unflappable Scanner slapped the table in frustration. "Does this get any more convoluted?" he said, his Tennessee accent thickening. He put his hand over his wife, Lieutenant Manny Sandage's, paw. "Are we even sure we're even still married in this timeline? What about our kids?"

Nobody had an answer for him – except for his wife. She took his hand and gave it a loving squeeze as she caught his gaze and said with complete conviction: "I know that wherever I am in this universe, I will not only love you but be your wife. I know that Lila and Drallah will be our kits," she said, referring to their adopted children. She turned her attention to the others. "And I know that we will prevail." She paused, then hit them with her theory. "I believe the timeline diverged while we were still on Cait. Shortly after the recent revolution I began sensing that something was drastically wrong with the Universe. I even got a

taste of it when I momentarily saw in a vision our homeworld looking like it had been devastated by some terrible cataclysm. It was a bit like looking through a window at Hell. I would have put it down to my imagination if Drallah hadn't complained about the smell that was lingering about me."

Carman slouched in his chair, depressed. "If we're going to vanish any time maybe it would have been better if we'd stayed with Jason." He gave a sheepish grin. "Besides, I was enjoying myself."

Crash gave his shoulder a friendly squeeze. "We all did, Carman. The dream had to end, though. It was time for us to wake up. There's a planet out there full of people who will die when their star explodes. We couldn't save the people of Merrijig. Perhaps we can save these ones."

"I'm afraid the complications are many, Commander," Spock continued. "The star in question is Hobus and it exists deep within the Romulan frontier."

"Meaning we're not going to get anywhere near it," Piper said conclusively. "Not now. Tensions between the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire are still high." Piper pushed herself back from the table and stood. "People, we have some time to decide our next move. We've only just gotten home from an extended leave, and we need a little time to get our feet beneath us once more." She glanced at the wall chronometer. "It's nearly twelve hundred hours. We'll adjourn for lunch, and whatever else we need to do, and reconvene at sixteen hundred. Bring your best ideas. Dismissed."

As everyone began moving, Piper grabbed Scanner by the arm. "Could you get someone to fix Suzette's eye?" she asked.

Judd smiled at the slip. Now they were back home she should have referred to her as Captain Silayna, but old habits were hard to break. "I'll get right on it – after I see the kids."

Piper nodded her understanding then turned to Daniels as Judd left. "You'll forgive me, Captain Daniels, if I don't let you go wandering around our ship. I can't afford to have you take off and leave us to vanish."

Daniels rolled his eyes. "Hardly, Captain. If Ambassador Spock is right, then we may be the only ones able to stop this happening all over again."

The Captain put her fists on her hips as she examined the younger man. "Hmmm. You know I can't afford to take you at face value." She turned to the two security guards she had posted to watch him. "Put him in the Brig. Maximum security. I don't want a microbe to be able to get out."

The guards acknowledged the order and marched him out the door. In the now quiet room, Piper turned and found she was not alone. Merete was waiting beside the door.

"Hello stranger," Piper said as she stepped over to give her a hug. "It's been a while."

"Not for me, it hasn't. We only said goodbye yesterday from my point of view." The doctor shook her head. "It's weird. You've spent over a year in the past, haven't you?"

Piper turned and, keeping her arm around her friend's waist, steered her out the door and down the corridor. "It's peculiar, alright. I don't know what to tell people if they asked me how old I am."

The Doctor's eyes went wide as she considered the thought. "You're right. The babies and I have been in stasis for a month. That means their next birthday will actually be a month too soon!"

The Captain grimaced. "It sucks, I know. Mind you, Daniels was right. When this is all over, the other *us* will continue with no memory of any of this." She brightened. "At least I'll go back to being a year younger." She tossed her now burgundy coloured hair which was a slightly untidy bob. "And blonde."

Merete frowned. "And the babies will be the right age. But my children will cease to exist when Daniels leaves." The notion caused her to stagger a little and Piper caught her as she nearly fell.

"No, they won't. You're out there, and the other you is just as much you as you are."

Merete looked at her incredulously. "Try saying that ten times faster." She shook her head. "It's not much of a consolation." She looked up at her friend. "I wonder if I should even bother feeding the children. What's the point?"

Seeing where this was going, Piper dragged her into the next, fortunately empty, room and pulled Merete up straight. "Pull yourself together, doctor! I need you, your children, everyone on this ship working together to make it possible to save the Universe from going through all this again!" She gave her a gentle shake. "Merete AndrusTaurus and her children will continue; you can be certain of that!"

"But all our memories, who we are right here and now will be lost!" Merete stumbled forward and wept, her tears beginning to soak Piper's uniform jacket.

She let her cry. Merete was simply venting feelings she wished she could. When it was all said and done she, too, would forget everything, but Piper Silayna would cease to exist at all, and she had come to love her copy as the twin she never had, and that was the killer for her. For a little while, Piper simply stroked Merete's hair and let her vent before gently pulling her upright so

she could talk to her. "You've got duties, Merete, and children to feed." She turned her towards the door and led her out. "Come on, we've got work to do."

Krashtallash wasted no time returning to the quarters he shared with his wife and family aboard the *Jolly Roger* – the starship he commanded.

Fortunately, the *J.R.* had been docked alongside the *Millennium* so, after a quick turbo-lift ride, a step through an airlock and another turbo-lift trip Crash found himself outside his space-borne home. It had been a year since he had seen his wife, even though they had only been married less than six months.

In all the time he had been locked into the past he had worked hard to keep the memory of his wife's face fresh in his mind. It was easier than recalling his children who were still a long way off being weaned when he left, and yet he struggled to remember their colours. Their names had never left him, as he repeated them every night to himself before he slept.

Before he could touch the control, the door slid open and Susanna Llash, his wife, stood before him. She looked at him in a nonchalant fashion and said: "That wasn't too long, my dear. I gather everything's OK down on the planet?"

Losing all semblance of restraint, Crash gathered her up in his arms and swung her about whilst furiously nuzzling her. "How I've missed you!" he said, a man too long without his family. He set her down, still wide-eyed with amazement, then bounded over and gave his four tiny children a loving lick before bundling them up in his arms and holding them tight.

Susanna stepped over, her fur standing on end and looking a little concerned for her spouse. "I'm glad you're happy to be home, my love, but perhaps you could tone it down a little?"

Crash just looked at her with delight. “My wife, you will understand when I explain where I’ve been, but for right now, I need to reconnect with my family.” With his children still in his arms he stepped over and nuzzled his wife once more. “I’ve got so much to tell you!”

Still a little incredulous, Susanna closed the door to their quarters and joined her husband wondering what kind of welcome was waiting for his mother.

Like Crash, Manny and Scanner were eager to see their children. Unlike Crash, both parents understood what was going on.

When the door opened to their quarters on the *J.R.*, Pashtallash, Manny’s mother, looked up and gave them a welcoming smile. “It’s good that you’re back,” she said. “The children have been asking for you!” She plonked her behind on the floor then sank down so her head lay supported by her paws. “I’m exhausted!”

As soon as the kits saw their parents they bounded over and jumped on their mother’s back, being mindful not to scratch their father with their claws. “Where have you been?” “What did you see?” “What’s for dinner?” It all came in a rush.

At that point, Pashtallash’s head came up as she noticed something. “Judd, have you lost weight? You look thinner.” She turned her attention to her daughter. “Manny, you smell like you’ve had your fur all singed recently.” Her eyes narrowed as she looked at them like errant children. “What have you two been up to since you’ve been gone?”

Scanner could do nothing but give her a wan smile. “It’s a long story, and I’m not sure you’d believe all of it.”

Manny rolled her children off her back and played pounce with Lila while she said: “But every word of it will be true, Mother. Believe me, it will be true.”

Pashtallash put her head down again. “I’m sure it will be, my children. However, your kits need food more than I need answers. We’ll talk about it over lunch, shall we?”

Just then Scanner’s stomach growled. “All ah know is I could really go for some catfish and cottage fries. It’s been a long time.”

His mother-in-law scolded him without moving. “That’s what you had for evening meal yesterday, Judd. You need something healthier to eat than all that fried food.”

Rather than say anything, Judd and his wife shared aa amused, knowing look.

Piper sat alone in the bar, staring out the window. The Guardian’s planet turned below, looking as dead as it always did. She couldn’t throw off the feeling the people who built the place destroyed themselves by meddling too much in their own history.

It was really nothing more than a distraction. The real problems of their existence were plaguing her. Although they had tried to keep a lid on their situation, it was already clear that word had gotten out. The sand in their particular hourglass had nearly drained.

A part of her shared their frustration. It seemed almost pointless to save the Universe if you couldn’t be a part of it afterward.

She toyed with her fruit juice and wished once more that she wasn’t on duty. Something a little stronger would certainly fit the bill. Maybe a strong cup of coffee?

Their bartender, Gillian, an old friend of Piper's, stopped by the table and looked down. "Why so glum, Piper? You've done so much; you should be proud."

The Captain looked up at the pale Argelian with her long, braided black hair and gave her a wan smile. It was the best she could do considering the funk she was in. "Sit down for a moment, Gillian. Let's talk."

The woman before her caught her attention with her sapphire-blue eyes. She could practically compel someone to look at her with nothing more than a glance. "There's really nothing you need to tell me," she said serenely. "I'm aware of our circumstances. However, we still have a job to do. Otherwise, it's all been for nothing."

Her words caught the Captain off guard. How could she know? Of course, she had heard the scuttlebutt. If there was one person on board who would always know the mind of the crew, it was the ship's bartender. "You know, we could leave it like this and simply let this timeline continue."

Gillian shook her head, her braids flying around her neck. "No," she said firmly. "My father didn't wait fifty years for you so you could stop this close to the end."

Piper was honestly confused. "Your father? What do you mean?"

Gillian gave her a smile that was so genuine and passionate it warmed Piper's soul. "My real full name is Gillian Nunn, Piper. I never told you that I've been going by my mother's name. Gillian is not Argelian – it's human, as I am half human. My father is Jason Nunn."

Piper smacked herself on the forehead. After all that had happened in the previous year, she had forgotten that detail. Crash had learned it from Gillian's father from his future self before he

returned to the past, without telling Jason's younger self. She remembered that keeping the knowledge of his fate from Mister Nunn during their year in the past was wearing on them all.

Gillian put a hand over Piper's, suddenly afraid she had done irreversible damage to their relationship. "Don't be angry with me, Piper. My father insisted I keep his name out of my file so there wouldn't be any confusion or possible paradoxes in time." She gave her friend a light grin. "He also told me there might come a day when I can tell you. Today seems as good a day as any."

Again, Piper was speechless. She just stared at Gillian as if she was a complete stranger who had popped into the bar out of the blue. Yes, she had kept a huge secret from them for quite some time. A stray thought came to her, and she blurted: "How could you have served for so long on this ship and not said anything to me? Especially Mister Nunn? It must have killed you seeing him day in and day out and never being able to tell him who you were."

"Oddly enough," Gillian said jauntily, "that's not the first time I've had that question put to me." When Piper simply tilted her head to the side in query Gillian continued. "My Father asked me the last time I had shore leave on Argelius when I visited him just before we came here. I told him the same thing I'll tell you. It was hard, but at the same time eye opening. You see, most of us only ever get to know their parents as that – their parents. Large, enigmatic, the people they became *after* they started having kids. While serving on the *Millennium* I got to know who my father was in his youth." The thought made her giggle a little. "It was quite illuminating."

Piper had heard enough and collected herself to the point where she could believe and understand. She shook her head in

amazement. "Will the wonders of this Universe never cease?" she asked more to herself.

"Look at it from my point of view, Piper," Gillian said. "I'm a person who, in the natural order of the universe should not exist. My father was a man out of time and fell in love with a woman who should have been too old for him, except she wasn't. I got to grow up aboard a ship *you* put back in the sky so my family could run cargo between Argelius and Rigel – a ship he eventually turned into a cafe on my homeworld. *None of my life makes sense*. Yet here I am!"

Piper sat back and sipped her pineapple juice while she absorbed what her friend had told her. "It sounds like something out of a bad sci-fi novel," she said, trying to wrap her mind around the revelation.

Gillian slid to the side in the booth and stood up. "It might, but the fact is that too high a price has been paid to get us to this point for us to stop. We must go forward, or all could be lost." She leaned over and gave her friend a peck on the cheek. "I know you'll make the right decision," she said, voicing her complete confidence in her friend.

Piper watched her go back to her duties behind the bar and found a whole new layer of respect for the Argelian. Her view was suddenly blocked by a familiar form who was looking down at her with her glowing green eye. "It's nice to see you're seeing me again," she quipped.

Piper Silayna slid into the booth opposite her. Curiously, she had ditched her retro uniform and had replicated a pair of blue jeans, a t-shirt with an arrow pointing upwards with some familiar words beneath it, knee-length leather boots and a leather jacket. In answer to her sister's unspoken question, she said: "Your crew would be too easily confused if I wore your uniform, and mine

suddenly seems woefully out of date. So, I thought civvies would be the best option." She looked at her sister curiously. "You don't approve?"

"Hardly!" Piper said with a light laugh. "I just wish I could go the same way." She tugged down on her red uniform jacket. "After a year in jeans the uniform feels like I'm wearing a medieval suit of armour."

Gillian passed their table and left Piper Silayna a glass of orange juice. She watched her go and said: "How did she know?"

It would have taken more time than she cared to explain it the old-fashioned way, so Piper leaned forward and took her sister's hand. After five seconds she let it go again, Silayna now completely aware of who and what their bartender was.

"Wow, what a mind frack," she said. Suddenly serious, she said: "Speaking of mind fracks, we've got a serious morale problem on our hands. If we're not careful the crew might start coming apart at the seams."

Not wanting to be confused, and certainly not wishing to voice her opinions lest they be overheard, both Pipers joined hands once more.

"What do you mean?"

"I've heard people talking. Like they don't know what the point of anything is. If there's another version of themselves out there, why don't we simply shut down the bubble that's keeping us stuck here and just vanish? they're saying."

"Not good. We need this crew working together as one if we're going to pull this off."

"Then you'd better do something – fast."

Piper let go and downed the last of her juice. "I'll meet you in the Conference Room," she said before darting out the door – headed for the Bridge.

Sarda was waiting for her and vacated the Centre Seat. It seemed like a lifetime since she had sat there and yet it still came naturally to occupy it. She turned to her Comms officer: "Put me through to the *Jolly Roger* was well." A nod later, she said: "Attention crew of the *USS Millennium,* this is your Captain speaking."

All over the ship people stopped and listened. By this time most were aware something was wrong and were hoping someone could give them some insight.

Piper took a deep breath, then said as openly and honestly as she could muster: "There have been some rumours going around regarding our current status and I am here to tell you there is *some* truth to the tales." She paused for a second then continued in all seriousness: "Yes, there are two of everyone in the Universe at this time. What you would not be aware of is that we are here purely because of a fluke. The actions of myself and some of the senior staff in the past have resulted in mending the fractures that were forming throughout the entire universe. The fractures you remember brought us here in the first place. The first part of the job is finished.

"What I need you all to know is that we could not have done it without you. The entire crew of the *Millennium* got us where we are. Without you, I wouldn't be speaking to you now." She paused for a beat and took a second to look at the faces of her crew about her. They were hanging on her every word. "I need you to know, to realise without a shadow of a doubt, that there is still work to be done. There is a star that will soon go supernova and not only destroy the inhabitants of its system, but most of the Romulan Star Empire.

"Now, I know that this ship and crew are probably the only ones in the Universe with the tools and the knowledge to avert this catastrophe. Nobody else knows it's going to happen. It will still trigger events that will not only throw a Romulan ship into the past, but Spock as well."

In certain parts of the ship the silence became even deeper. The loss of Spock would be a blow to the entire Federation.

"You know me, and I know you. We cannot allow this to go unchallenged. We cannot just fade away if there's even an outside chance that we can still make a difference. There are billions of people and a universe that's still out of whack that are relying on us!" She stood; determination etched on her face. "Are you with me?" she asked, her fist beating the air. Some rose to join her crying: "Yes!" Others still seemed unsure.

"Are you with me?" she repeated, a little louder. "ARE YOU WITH ME?" she shouted.

By this time, the entire Bridge crew were on their feet, shouting "YES!" Piper just hoped the fever had reached the crews of *both* ships.

Her enthusiasm was infectious, but there were a few stragglers. Some who just refused to believe her. Some who started seeking each other out. If they were going to start a mutiny, they needed numbers...

At sixteen hundred hours that day the crew came together in the Conference Room and arrayed themselves around the table. Once again, Piper took the head with Piper Silayna to her right and Sarda to her left. At the other end of the table taking the place of honour was Spock looking the worse for wear considering how

much he had been through in the previous twenty-four hours in his own timeline.

It was this that Piper wished to highlight. She gazed past her team and into the eyes of the elder statesman. "Ambassador Spock, perhaps you can enlighten us regarding your more recent activities – especially what happened to your ship."

Spock nodded thoughtfully. He knew it would come to this. "Understood, Captain Piper." He looked off into the not-too-distant past. "When I emerged from the rift, I found myself in the year 2253. Fortunately, my arrival went unnoticed, and I was able to employ my knowledge of Starfleet protocols from the time to avoid detection. I then made my way to the Guardian's planet, the only place I knew where there was a possibility of returning home. Whilst my ship was capable of extreme velocities, it did not have the required mass to survive a slingshot manoeuvre to return me to my time."

The elder Vulcan seemed reluctant to continue so Piper asked him directly. "What did you do with your ship, Spock?"

"It is still on the planet, Captain. My ship has a cloaking device and I used it to hide my ship three miles from the Guardian. I then proceeded on foot to the Guardian itself. I estimated the vessel had enough power stored to maintain the cloak until 2387 when I could retrieve it and the red matter."

Scanner leaned forward and asked: "Why didn't you just send it into the sun and beam down? You took a great risk that the ship would be found."

"The result of such an action would have caused the red matter to detonate and collapse the star, destroying everything in this system and further corrupting this timeline."

Scanner's mouth became a big, silent "O" and he sat back feeling like boy who had asked a truly stupid question of the school principal.

At her end of the table, both Pipers nodded silently. They had discussed the matter and agreed that would have been his most likely course of action. "Ambassador Spock, I will need you to beam down to the surface and retrieve your ship. If all does not go to plan, we may need the red matter as a backup."

Once more, Spock seemed reluctant. "I was entrusted with the red matter, Captain. I cannot leave it with you."

Piper gave her old mentor a small, confident smile. "You won't have to, Spock. There's more than one way to travel through time."

His reply was simply a curiously raised brow.

The Captain turned her attention to Daniels who was doing his best to watch and yet keep his mouth shut. "Captain Daniels, are you able to shift our vessels into the future?"

The answer was a violent shake of the head, no. "Not possible, Captain Piper. The device is only powerful enough to move my ship into the future, not something as big as your ship – and certainly not with the *Jolly Roger* still with us."

The man seemed almost glad to tell her that, she thought. She didn't take him at face value, however, but she was aware there was very little chance she would be able to get Daniel's ship to function without his co-operation. "I expected as much," Piper said. "However, I am aware of your ship's ability to keep others in stasis for extended periods of time."

Daniels looked at her with a renewed respect. It was clear she was capable of thinking outside the box. "Yes, it can. You're suggesting we bring Spock's ship into your landing bay then freeze us all for one hundred years?"

Sarda spoke up. "Just until 2387, Captain Daniels."

Daniels gave him a sideways look that spoke much of the Vulcan's sense of humour. "Not possible, Captain Piper. There's no way your ship would go unnoticed here for that long."

Once more Daniels had underestimated Piper. This time, her double spoke, levelling the smart-alecky time traveller. "Nobody said anything about staying here, Daniels. We can hide the *Millennium* either in a nebula or even outside the galaxy itself."

Daniels almost cackled. "It would take too long to get that far," he said snidely.

Piper looked at her sister in amazement. "Why does everyone think that you have to fly to the *edge* of the galaxy to leave it?" She turned her attention to Daniels. "There's always perpendicular to the ecliptic, you know! It's only fifty light years away."

It was Daniels' turn to be chastened. "Of course," he said, embarrassed. He gave her a grudging nod. "Okay then, Captain Piper. It's clear you've thought this out extensively. There's just one little flaw to your plan. I can't put my ship in stasis as well, you know, otherwise we'd never be able to shut it off. Someone would have to stay at the controls of my ship to monitor the situation. That someone would lose a whole lot of years sitting around waiting to wake us up."

Piper eyed him suspiciously. "I was given the impression that your ship has an A.I. computer on board. Surely it would be capable of monitoring things and bringing you out of stasis if the need arose."

While Daniels was fond of his A.I. he was not the sort to put his life in the hands of a mere machine. As he debated the

virtue – or not – of Piper's plan she added: "Need I remind you of the stakes here?"

Daniels gave her a dirty look. He was fast learning she did not always play fair. "No, you don't, *Captain Piper*," he almost spat. "However, I can tell you straight away that we need to cut the *Jolly Roger* loose. Trying to protect both ships is too risky and, frankly, overkill."

The point was made and won. Piper nodded. "I agree. We'll have to move her crew over here before we go," she said thoughtfully. Before she continued, she noticed Lieutenant Sandage – she was having to train herself to think of her that way again – touch her ear as a message came in. She knew it was trouble straight away as Manny's hair stood on end. Instead of saying something, the telepath caught Piper's eye and shot a thought straight at her. "*We have a mutiny on our hands."*

"Where?"

"The main shuttlebay. There's a bunch of people trying to steal the Cork."

Piper Silayna, who had been listening in, leaned over and added: *"I've got an idea."*

At that, Piper stood. "Captain Daniels, please return to your vessel and begin making the arrangements. Captain Krashtallash, please see to the immediate evacuation of the *Jolly Roger*. Spock, could you beam down and ready your ship? It seems time is working against us."

The thing that worried Piper the most when she reached the main hangar bay was how many people were gathered, trying to take the *Cork*. A number of Manny's people were stationed around the *Runabout*-class vessel, each with phasers drawn. The

few people on the floor who had been stunned senseless were testimony to the crowd's determination.

All the same, when she approached them from the rear people noticed her and still moved aside respectfully. She wasn't sure it was her or the angry white Cait at her side who was growling the whole way through.

When she reached the *Cork,* she stepped up onto the warp nacelle so she could see and address the crowd which hushed as she engaged them. At a rough count she saw thirty. Out of a ship with five-hundred-odd crewmembers it was not a good measure of her people's worries.

"I'd like to say: "good afternoon", but I'm afraid you wouldn't agree with me," she said with a touch of acid. "I'll give you all this single opportunity to leave and return to your stations. No mention of this will appear on your records."

To her dismay, nobody moved.

An ensign from Stellar Cartography, a young man Piper knew as Anderson, spoke for the crowd. "We don't want any trouble, Captain, but we don't want to wait around here for the Guardian to vanish us."

Piper heard his fear and his determination. All the same, she knew he had his facts upside-down. "What makes you think the Guardian is going to "vanish you", as you put it?"

The tall, blonde human spoke up and said: "Word is if we leave this planet, we will all "disappear". We don't believe it! We know you have a mission, Captain, and we don't want to stop you, but this nonsense that we're already out there somehow can't be true! We know who we are! We're real and *nobody* is going to rob us of our futures!"

Piper pursed her lips. A little knowledge was a dangerous thing, especially when your facts were full of holes. "Suppose

you're right, Ensign. If Starfleet finds you, you will be tried for desertion and sent to a penal colony for a *very long time*. Are you sure you want that stain on your career?"

The answer she expected to come didn't disappoint her. "We're willing to take our chances." There was steel in the man's tone.

"And what if I said you can't have the *Cork*? That I need it to complete this mission?" She knew he would challenge, she just wanted to test his resolve.

"Then we will have to take it by force," Anderson said with a mixture of fear and determination.

Piper looked about her at the faces before her and saw mainly fear. She was disappointed that so many would lose their faith in her so quickly, but time was not on her side at the present. It was only so long they could stay here before they were noticed – if they hadn't been already. She wished she had more time to convince them, but there wasn't any.

She put her hands on her hips and said: "Alright, then. You can't have the *Cork*, but I've ordered the *Jolly Roger* be cleared of all crew and offered them the same thing I'm giving you. Leave peacefully and I won't stop you. Alright?"

The group, a mix of beings from a number of races, all looked at one another with a mixture of relief and suspicion. Unwilling to decide for themselves, they eventually turned their attention to Anderson who seemed to relish the authority they had given him. The man fairly swelled with pride. "You have a deal, Captain."

Piper wondered to herself if he would insist on running the *J.R.* himself, that as soon as he was on board, he would declare himself captain. It made no difference, she told herself. The result would be the same.

Without shifting her gaze, she fired a thought at Manny. *"Make the arrangements, will you?"*

The Lieutenant acknowledged without an outward sign and began waving them towards the exit.

Piper turned and gazed around their expansive hangar and watched as Daniels, escorted by a pair of armed guards, entered his vessel. A thought came to her, and she headed in his direction. As she did so she tried to put the disappointment she felt out of her mind. The betrayal cut deep, but she reminded herself there were more important things to deal with.

As she approached the vessel she broke into a run when she realised the security people were not following Daniels into the ship. Before she could raise her voice, the door slid shut and the ship's running lights came on.

"Stop him!" she cried, fearing it was already too late. Were they all about to wink out of existence? Would she feel anything if it happened?

The ship shimmered before her and vanished before she could reach it, and just as quickly reappeared. Panicked, she slid to a stop and patted herself down just to be sure she was still here. Within the blink of an eye, she went from frightened to furious. She stormed over to Daniel's vessel and thumped the door with the edge of her fist.

"You'd better open this bloody door, Daniels, before I have my people rip it off!" she shouted.

As if in response it opened, but instead of Daniels another being exited. Piper stepped back in surprise as a tall, black Caitian stepped out sporting a tight fitting, charcoal jumpsuit reminiscent of lycra. It seemed tailor-made for the wearer whose every step reeked of confidence and whose physique was athletic. The female greeted Piper with a smile and extended her paw.

"Greetings, Captain Piper. My name is Captain Sustasandage." She pronounced it *sooz-ta-sandage*. "I am *very* pleased to meet you."

Several thoughts passed through her mind as Piper considered the new arrival. Trust was far from her considering Daniels' duplicity. Her experience had taught her to think the Time Agents couldn't get a pizza order right.

However, the name gave her pause. A Cait with the name Sandage could only be a descendant of Drallah – Lila would likely have lost hers upon marriage. Her colour added to her claim. Black Caits were rare enough.

Piper chose to trust and extended her hand in welcome. The psychic shock was profound but not painful. There was an instantaneous meeting of minds.

"I wanted to greet you this way because I wanted you to see me unguarded," the new arrival thought in friendly tones.

Piper found herself seeing the person behind the fur. She was fiercely loyal and proud of her heritage, especially her family's link to her people's revolution during the previous year – on Piper's calendar. She was also keen to work to resolve this situation. Piper also picked up a sense of idol worship of herself. Upon that discovery Sustasandage blushed with embarrassment. She hadn't intended to reveal that.

"Thank you, Sus," Piper replied. *"I appreciate your honesty."* She added a relieved: *"It's quite refreshing."*

Piper felt her laugh. *"I replaced Daniels after his return. Our superiors were unimpressed with his attempts at corrections – especially when it became clear it had become personal to him. His alternate from the other timeline gave you some troubles, I hear."*

The thought brought back the memory afresh to Piper and Sus saw it through her eyes. She started when she realised that their actions had been necessary to launch the *Phoenix*.

"The more I do this job, the more I become amazed how past, present and future keep overlapping to bring out a preferred result." She let go of Piper's hand and gave her a nod. "Captain, I'm here to assist you in any way possible to complete your mission. We did some work before I returned to try to isolate the causal factor for Hobus' destruction and couldn't find it." She beckoned her inside her vessel. "I was hoping you might be able to help me out."

As Piper stepped into the ship, she waved off her security people. "Resume your stations," she ordered. With a scowl she added darkly: "We'll talk about this later."

She didn't bother to watch them go, knowing they were feeling shame for their failure. Like Daniels' ship, she passed through a short corridor before entering an open space behind its cockpit. Before she could act, Sus turned as Piper asked: "You didn't get your talent from Manny, did you?"

Captain Sandage purred. "No. He doesn't know it yet, but Drallah will develop his just before he becomes an adult. "Manny" will teach him to use it." Her whiskers arched forward in amusement. "It's funny to think of one's ancestors using their first names." She fairly radiated pride. "We owe Drallah a lot."

Remembering the young Cait's letter that drew the Federation's attention to the plight of the repressed Black Cait, Piper nodded. "That we do."

Sus spoke up for her ship's computer. "Scanner, could you activate the Continuum Viewer please?"

"Sure thing."

Piper started when she recognised the voice. It was Judd's.

"How are y'all, Piper?" it continued. "It's nice to meet you."

While she was used to ordering computers to perform tasks, Piper was far from familiar with conversing with one. "You, too, Scanner," she said formally. She shot Sus a look and the Cait simply smiled back at her. To Piper she seemed to be the sort of person who easily took delight in things.

"I programmed it," she said cheekily. "You know how I feel about them."

Piper suddenly found herself surrounded by a three-dimensional representation of history. The two of them stood in a storm of colour with threads of time swirling around them. Images she was familiar with appeared, including First Contact. She glimpsed Suzette as she watched it happen, not realising that it was impossible. She turned and elsewhere saw a flash of the Cetacean probe leaving Earth after Jim's rescue.

"Scanner, bring the focus on Hobus and its system. Look for any anomalies." Her voice betrayed her, however. It was clear she had done this before. She looked over at Piper. "Keep your eyes open, Captain. I'm hoping you will see something others have missed."

Not quite sure how that was possible considering she had no real idea how to interpret what she was seeing, Piper determined to keep her mind open. She watched in wonder as the images swirled around her and she almost felt pulled along by them as they shifted and focussed on a single star: the massive Hobus. The blue giant burned before her and the planets around it turned. It definitely wasn't in real time as the planets zoomed around the star as if they were mad comets.

“How are we supposed to see something at this rate of speed?” Piper quietly complained.

“We’re not,” Sus said. “I just wanted you to see what will happen if we fail.” The sadness reflected in her voice was profound.

Piper watched as the star suddenly shrank before exploding outward violently, vaporising the system in seconds. The shockwave extended outward at what Piper wondered was warp speed. It was only a matter of days before it reached the nearest star: that of the home of Romulus and Remus. The huge ball of fire continued unabated until a singularity opened up within it.

“Slow,” Sus ordered. “Focus on the singularity.”

Piper watched in amazement as the newly formed black hole sucked in not only a good portion of the shockwave, but also two starships, both of which she was familiar with. However, she quickly noted the whole nova was not consumed and that a large portion of it continued on its destructive path.

“Pause,” Sus ordered. She turned to Piper; her tone grim. “I’m going to speed up the playback for the next two millennia. I warn you; it is disturbing.” As she turned back to the viewer she added: “It scares the willies out of me. Continue.”

Piper watched aghast as the shockwave consumed more stars, causing them to collapse or go nova themselves. While the wave had slowed, it refused to show signs of abating. Over centuries system after system fell under its influence. Piper was alarmed to note it was headed towards the centre of the galaxy. The stars there were so tightly packed that they would fall like dominoes, which they did. Within a short period, the stars at the galaxy’s core had all gone nova, shattering the gravitational forces within it. What remained of the once mighty Milky Way began

separating from the bulk of it and spinning off into intergalactic space, shedding star systems as it went.

The Captain was shaken to the core. She had just witnessed the death of their whole galaxy – and that only in the space of two thousand years. She turned to her host in wonder. "What happens to the Federation?" she asked.

"Andromeda," Sus said with a sigh. "We created a fleet of multigenerational starships – the largest one in history and migrated there. Using quantum slipstream drive, among others, we were able to make the journey quicker, but it still took about ten years each way. Once we harnessed time, we were able to make the trip back in no time at all – pardon the pun – as we're no longer held back by the warp limit." She stepped forward and took Piper's hands. The link was instantaneous and not unwelcome.

Piper saw Cait's new home, a lush world not unlike their original. Its trees were more like eucalypts than pines and oaks, but it was clear to her the Cait were just glad to be able to call it home.

"As much as I love our new home, Piper, I want you to help me save us from having to move at all. The Milky Way should never have died."

Piper not only saw the world that was, she felt the immense loss of the original. It was as if a piece of their soul was missing, lost for all time. She found herself involuntarily shedding a tear in sympathy. It reminded her what it must feel like to lose a parent. It was something you could survive but it never left you the same.

"Thank you for your sympathies, Captain Piper. They always said you were a marshmallow at heart." Piper felt her warm chuckle and heard the voices of Sus' parents repeating the

same story that must have been passed down from Scanner himself. Only he would have been irreverent enough to say that.

Sustasandage let go of her hands and stepped back once more. "Scanner," she said, addressing the computer. "Reset to the week before Hobus detonated and play at one hundred times speed."

Again, they watched as time passed. Nothing untoward happened to the star and once more it detonated suddenly – violently.

Piper tipped her head to the side. The erroneous assumption was clear to her, but she had no time to voice it before her communicator chirped. Annoyed, she ripped it off her belt and flipped it open. "Piper."

Sarda spoke and, as he did so, she felt the echo of his thoughts in her mind. "The transfer is complete, Captain. We are preparing to release the *Jolly Roger*."

As much as she wanted to finish what they had started, there was no way Piper was going to let Sarda watch over this alone. "I'll be there in a minute." She looked over at Sus and said simply: "Come with me."

True to her word, Piper appeared on the Bridge, flanked by their new guest. There were a few starts and intakes of breath, and none more so than from Crash and Manny, who were manning their old posts. Both of them were curious about the new arrival but were too professional to consider talking to her now.

"Captain," Crash stated, then continued with a touch of derision. "Anderson is demanding their ship's release." He hated the futility of their actions and the fact he could do little to prevent it. Krashtallash understood the implications of the Captain's decisions and supported them, even though it grated on him to let

it happen. The *Jolly Roger* had been his first command and, even though they had already agreed to loose the ship, to have it go out this way seemed unworthy.

Piper simply nodded absently; her gaze focussed on the viewscreen. She was looking past the outer edge of the *J.R.* "If they're determined to do this let them go. We're better off without them." She couldn't help but let the sadness she felt be heard.

Crash cleared them and the tractor holding the ships together was released. The whale-shaped, former Caitian warship slid to the side then accelerated forward, turning starboard away from the planet. The red glow from the impulse engines could be seen momentarily as the *J.R.* continued in Anderson's mad dash for freedom. The ship shrank to a speck as it went to full impulse.

From the comms speaker overhead Piper heard Anderson's victorious words. "I told you, Captain nothing..."

With a startling suddenness the *Jolly Roger* vanished along with its mutinous crew. The deck was hushed and only broken by Crash's: "At least their alternates have a chance to do better."

A dark chuckle was heard from a few, but the rest kept staring at the viewscreen for a moment before they turned back to their duties.

"Hmmm." Piper put the sad waste out of her mind as she kept her gaze on the speck she had been watching in the corner of the viewscreen that was getting bigger. "Let's hope you're right." She turned and addressed Ghost. "Prepare to receive Spock's ship."

As usual, the plucky Irish woman was on top of things. From her place at the rear of the Bridge she ordered: "Ambassador Spock, please dock in Shuttle Bay Two. The doors are open, and the beer is on tap."

"Altair Water will do, Lieutenant," the elder Vulcan replied with a touch of warmth.

At the science station Sarda raised an eyebrow. Was that humour? He shook his head. No, it couldn't possibly be.

Within moments the *Jellyfish* was secured below, and Piper rose to her feet. "Helm, lay in a course at ninety degrees vertical to the plane of the galactic ecliptic. Take us out of the galaxy at maximum warp. Cloak the ship. I don't want us bumping into anyone on our way."

As the stars shifted on the viewscreen Piper turned her attention to her visitor. "Mister Sandage, Captain Krashtallash, please join me in my ready room. You're going to love this."

Late that night both Pipers woke with a start. Once more they were sharing a bed, the Cait from the *J.R.* were using up all the spare bunks. Besides, they liked it better when they were together. They may have grown up apart in different timelines, but now they were as inseparable as identical twins.

"Lights," they said in unison. The computer complied and brought a dim glow to the room.

Without thought or consultation, the two of them leaned forward and held one another. The dream had seemed so real and now they had full contact they were able to examine it in their thoughts.

"It seemed as real as the vision of the Narada."

"To me, too. I could actually taste the air."

"Let's start from the beginning and play it over so we won't forget."

They laughed. They could still recall their previous vision in graphic detail.

Piper was on the bridge of her starship. It resembled the *Millennium*, but wasn't quite the same. There was a sense of fear for something, but they didn't know what. The crew about her were frantically punching in commands on their consoles but it appeared to no avail.

A huge, blue star resolved on the screen. Silhouetted against it was the tiny form of a starship. It reminded them of a Romulan Bird of Prey, and it was clear they were falling into the sun. The words: "Need assistance," were heard through the overhead speaker.

"Intercept course!" Piper had ordered.

"There's no time!" they heard.

Moments later the ship was lost to them as it was engulfed in brilliant blue fire.

Both women were confused that the Piper whose eyes they were seeing through was not as sorry as she should have been – and they got a sense that, for whatever reason – she had hesitated to come to the Romulan's assistance.

"That was creepy."

"No argument here. I wonder why I/we/she hesitated."

"Perhaps they had attacked us?"

"Who knows? It was all so quick."

"Are we sure it was a vision?"

"Too much like the Narada for it not to be."

"Agreed."

"The star was familiar. It looked like Hobus."

"Is this another of those weird messages? A clue?"

Both women shivered. Once more it felt like they were being played with. Marionettes dancing on a string.

"There is a way of confirming it."

Suzette saw it and understood. Together, they slid out of bed and padded over to the door but stopped just short of it. They looked down. "Perhaps we should get dressed first," she said.

Dressed in jeans and t-shirts – it was still late at night from their point of view – both Pipers sat on the time ship's warp nacelle as they waited for Sustasandage to arrive.

"You know, there were times I missed this," Piper said quietly so their voices didn't carry.

"Missed what?"

Piper gestured around her. "I used to jog down here every day. Often with Manny at my side. It was one of the few places on the ship where I could get some peace and quiet." A memory surfaced. "And I also got to see Ghost's ship, the *Spectre."* She gave a slightly evil grin. "Now there's a fighter that can kick butt."

Suzette's eyebrow shot up. "You'll have to show it to me some time."

"I will. Just as soon as this is over."

Her words had just finished echoing when Sustasandage came bounding out of the turbo-lift, followed by Manny. They ran side-by-side, with Manny taking a slight lead. Piper surmised that, even though Sus outranked her, the future Cait still deferred to her great to the nth power grandmother.

Manny gave them both a quick smile. "Did you pair have another one of your dreams? I seem to remember flying into a *star*." Her whiskers quivered in disgust. "Not something I want to dwell on."

To their surprise Sus agreed. "I woke up from one just like that, too. I thought it was my imagination."

The Pipers shared a knowing look. “Er, no. It wasn’t,” Suzette said, feeling slightly embarrassed. “The last time we had a dream like that it led us to an encounter with Nero. It gave us just what we needed to find him.”

Captain Sandage looked sceptical. “My people have no faith in prophecies, Captain...s.”

Manny spoke up, her fur bristling. Her statement wasn’t going without a challenge. “And yet the previous one led us *right to* Nero. Without it, we wouldn’t have known the location *or* the stardate. Explain that one?” She hadn’t meant to speak out of turn, and both Pipers didn’t mind considering she was reacting from her people’s cultural leanings. Sus was technically Manny’s offspring, her kin, where she was the elder. No matter what the differences in time were.

Piper had to credit her that Sus recognised her place and didn’t argue with her. She simply sat back and watched the two of them in mild amusement. Only in their galaxy could two family members separated by a *millennium* get into an argument on her ship.

Sus yielded. “What do you suggest, Grandmother?” she asked. At Suzette’s raised eyebrow, she added with a touch of sarcasm: “I can’t exactly call her Great-grandmother to the hundredth power now, can I?”

Piper grinned. “She’s got you there, Sis.”

“It’s obvious,” Manny said as she sat on the floor, her tail swishing behind her. Sus joined her, their tails intertwining playfully. “We go over our memories of the vision and see what we can learn.”

At that the Pipers smirked. There wasn’t much to tell. “All I remember was being on a ship that was *like* the *Millennium*,” Piper said, “but not quite.”

Suzette continued. "There was something wrong. As if for some reason we couldn't save the Romulan ship – and didn't really want to."

"There was something else," Piper added, feeling a little uncomfortable. She looked at her sister. "Did you get the sense that we were older?"

The question gave the woman pause. She cast her mind back to the vivid vision and nodded to herself. "I don't know. It could have just been a long day and I was tired."

Sus listened to the two of them talk and found the switch from singular to plurals baffling. She looked at her kin and asked: "Do they always talk like that? It'd make my head spin."

Manny shrugged nonchalantly. "You get used to it."

"Okay, then," Piper said, suddenly rising off her seat. "The only course available to us is the obvious one." She turned and fixed Sustasandage with an unwavering stare. "You have to tell us about our future."

It was an idea that the Time Agent clearly baulked at. "I can't do that. We've already got enough problems with time paradoxes. For you to have foreknowledge of your life would obviously be too great a temptation to mess with it and create *another* new timeline." She shook her head. "No, I can't do that."

"What if the star we remember in the dream is Hobus?" Suzette said plaintively. "*We* could be the cause of the star's collapse in the first place! If that's the case, it's obvious that we need to avoid that happening at all costs."

"What if it *isn't?"* Sus said easily. "The dream you had could have been nothing more than a manifestation of your deepest fears. The loss of a shipload of people under circumstances beyond your control. It is every commander's worst nightmare."

Manny's ears flattened out in annoyance. "Need I remind you that the last time they had a dream it was entirely accurate?" she said testily. "Right down to the time and spacial co-ordinates."

Sus' made a conscious effort to calm herself and her fur began to flatten out. "I know, I know, Grandmother. However, the Temporal Prime Directive is clear. I cannot violate it."

Piper chuckled. "Your presence here violates it on so many levels." She put her hands in her jeans pockets and smiled. "Never mind. I'll let you off the hook. I'm not looking for information regarding *my* future."

The Time Agent visibly relaxed. "Good," she said, relieved.

"We're asking for the Piper from *this* timeline's future," Suzette completed, knowing her sister's thoughts. "Our futures and ultimate destinies remain a mystery. As far as we know, as soon as you leave the ship, we'll go the way of the *Jolly Roger* and her misguided crew."

Sustasandage seemed visibly torn. It was clear Piper's argument had swayed her. However, she still had doubts. "What if you use the information to change the other Piper's destiny?"

"We'll only act if we have to," Piper said, doing her best to put the feline at ease. "If she is the one who destroys Hobus, then by God, we *will* stop it from happening if for no other reason that the fate of this galaxy hangs in the balance."

Part Two

Chapter One

Thousands of years of history. That's what the Senate building on ch'Rihan represented. A chequered history, to say the very least. Founded by renegades from a society that would no longer tolerate them, the Declared had set out for the stars and eventually found the twin worlds where they had settled. It wasn't long before they fell into old habits, so they turned their natural aggression into dominating their habitat. When they ran out of space, they founded their empire. Unlike the United Federation of Planets, the Rihannsu were not interested in sharing their space with others. Only the Rihannsu and their cousins on ch'Havran lived here, and the undesirables who lived *there* were not allowed a voice in the Senate.

As Ael sat in her ornate chair overlooking the senate floor, flanked by the beautiful and ancient S'harien sword that had come to signify their society, she pondered the state of things. As her mind wandered to ch'Havran and those who dwelled there she wondered for a moment why it was they were not given a voice. Surely it wouldn't be the end of civilisation to let them have a say in things.

She considered the origin of such thoughts. Seated on the far side of the floor was Senator Arrhae i-Khellian t'llhweiir, a voice of sanity in a room full of overgrown children. Her way of seeing things reminded her of one of the most annoying and magnetic aliens she had ever met: James Tiberias Kirk, who, unfortunately, had been returned to the elements. Although she

often muttered to herself that it was all his fault she was Empress, she had to admit she had been grateful for the chance to make a difference in her culture.

As she cast a baleful glare across the decorative flooring, she noted the great houses still refused to look beyond the end of their selfish noses. It seemed a senatorial position here was inherited, not earned. Those lovely, brightly coloured, silken robes seemed to reflect nothing more than personal ambition. Each wore a different colour, signifying the House they represented.

Her gaze returned once more to the only anomaly in the room: Arrhae. As she examined her from her elevated position, she became concerned that the woman seemed to be ageing before her time. The creases next to her eyes seemed to deepen every day. Perhaps the stresses of her position were taking their toll on her physically. She would have to speak to her and see how she was doing. She considered Arrhae more than a compatriot, but she had to keep herself from thinking her a friend. There was no room in an Empress's life for *friends.*

Ael shifted in the chair and considered whether it would be a sign of weakness if she insisted the cushion be replaced. If she was going to have to endure hours of this kind of drudgery, with Senators arguing over the taxation of certain trade routes, then she would like to be able to do so without her backside going numb.

The current motion was passed and finally the business of the day moved on to what had drawn her here. The new Klingon Ambassador to ch'Rihan was being introduced – after he had been carefully scanned for weapons. It was well known that they usually carried at least fifteen on their person.

It had been decades since they actually *had* sent an ambassador here. The last one had been returned to Qo'noS in a cardboard box after being caught trying to secrete a recording device on the Senate floor.

Even though the Empress was aware of the identity of the "dignitary", she wanted to see him for herself. This was a being she would never even come *close* to trusting. That the accursed Klingons had chosen to send him at all was peculiar. He was a known subversive among his own people. It was well known that his family had a long history of placing their own needs ahead of those of the empire. Perhaps the Klingon "Emperor" had had enough of him as well and given him this posting as some kind of punishment?

Ael rolled her eyes. If it was, it was a fitting one. The man might die of boredom here.

The Announcer stepped forward, himself wearing an emerald cloak that showed his sole allegiance was to the Senate. The elderly gent raised his eyes and looked up at his Empress. In a strong voice that belied his great age he announced: "May I present the Ambassador from the Klingon Empire, Duras."

Ael felt her cheeks darken as she fought to suppress the anger she felt just having to look at the man. Duras had meddled in the affairs of all three of the great Alpha Quadrant powers in his mad quest for temporal dominance. The Tal Shiar had reported his involvement in many escapades, including the incident at Galorndon Core that had nearly resulted in all-out war with the Federation some fifteen years before. During that time, his people had been responsible for the death of the crew of the Warbird *Falcon's Claw,* something she could never forgive him for. The man was vile and would need to be watched. Just having him here put her on edge.

Tall, broad-shouldered and imposing, Duras strode onto the Senate floor as if he owned it. His ambassador's attire, which was really nothing more than a softening of his normal warrior's armour, shone. Another "look-at-me-I'm-important" gesture, Ael thought.

Duras cast his gaze about the chamber, catching the eye of many, including Arrhae. Ael carefully watched their reactions, certain there were Klingon sympathisers seated in this very chamber. Most of the senators looked at him coolly or didn't bother looking at him at all. Of them all, only Arrhae broke the mould. She displayed open contempt.

Ael allowed herself the luxury of a quiet chuckle. At least one always knew where they stood with Arrhae i-Khellian t'llhweiir. Although Ael was aware of who the Senator was – a Starfleet plant – the Empress knew her heart was of ch'Rihan. The woman who had once served on a Federation starship before being surgically altered to appear Romulan and spirited onto this world had proven herself trustworthy. Perhaps that's what sets her apart, Ael thought. She hadn't had millennia of Rihannsu intrigue to colour her thinking. Her heart may be for the Rihannsu people, but her core was still human. She had a heightened sense of right and wrong which decades of politics had yet to dull.

All the same, the years were starting to take their toll on the human and perhaps it was time for her to return before questions were asked. She had started her own house here on ch'Rihan. Others would continue the work she had begun, taking care of the more "common" folk and educating them, a project Ael supported. She could see how it would make for a stronger Empire. However, there were many present who resented her efforts. In their eyes, it was like empowering the enemy so that

one day they could be overthrown. The great Houses had ruled for so long they had come to believe they had a sovereign right to.

It was an attitude she had hoped to change but, as she considered once more those about her, she realised she still had a long way to go.

Her gaze returned to Arrhae/Teresa, and she wondered. If she – one woman – could make such an impact on her own, then perhaps bringing more of her kind here would help bring about the changes she hoped for. The Earthers weren't perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but at least they knew how to make peace work. The vast array of cultures and species in their sphere was a testament to that.

The hairs on the back of Ael's neck prickled and she realised she was being observed. Duras was gazing up at her from his place in the centre of the star map on the floor. Actually, it was not quite the centre. She looked and realised the man was impudently standing on the sector that belonged to the Galorndon Core. He was baiting her.

There was no way Ael was going to give this man a victory in this life or the next. Even though it was clear that he had registered her recognition of his stance, she was determined to give him nothing more than that.

Silence fell as the Empress rose from her seat. Her hand played over the hilt of the S'harien sword, as if she was considering using it. There had been times when she had personally wielded it. The people here knew that. They also knew just how formidable a warrior she was. Wrapping her fingers around the ornate hilt, she carried it as if it was an extension of her own arm. Those nearby leaned back just a little, wishing to put some distance between them and walking death.

She was never the kind to adorn herself with fancy robes to tell others who she was. Ael i-Mhiessan t'Rllaillieu, Empress of the Rihannsu Empire, let her actions speak for her. Her form-fitting, emerald outfit still reminded those present of her former Commander's uniform during her time in the Imperial Navy. To her, anything else was not only superfluous, but possibly a hazard to her health. It was hard to fight while tangled in a robe.

Svelte and light on her feet, the diminutive woman with the tiny, silver streaks through her hair stepped down to the Senate floor as if she weighed nothing at all. Her steps were graceful and designed to make one think her a feline creature seeking prey, which wasn't far from the truth.

Ael came to a stop a few metres from Duras, her feet placed firmly on the images of ch'Rihan and ch'Havran. The message was clear. She knew where she was standing, on the very seat of an Alpha Quadrant giant. Duras was nowhere.

"Ambassador Duras," she began, her tone a mixture of disdain and mirth. "The Klingon Chancellor has chosen you to represent his interests to the mighty Rihannsu Empire. You are welcome to do so. We will find it amusing to hear what you have to offer. I'd like to say we have found your people to be honourable and trustworthy. However, I have served on one of the ships your government sold us, and its construction left me with *grave* doubts."

It was common knowledge that the deal struck years ago to provide the Rihannsu with ships in exchange for their cloaking technology had been a bad one. The Klingons had gained a huge tactical advantage and all the Rihannsu had to show for it was a number of inferior D-7 class cruisers that had been mothballed within a matter of years. The instigator of the exchange had been examined and summarily executed for their gross incompetence.

To his credit, Duras simply stood his ground and said nothing. His eyes scanned Ael as if he was evaluating her.

In no way was the Empress impressed. Although she was a clear half metre shorter than the Klingon, she somehow seemed so much greater. "As you are aware, Klingon, we won't be giving you a free reign whilst on our soil like the Federation does. We don't believe in giving *others* any foothold on our land. You will be watched. If you behave yourself, you might even return to your people one day." A dry, gallows laugh rippled through the room. It deepened with her next statement: "You might even be in one piece."

Once more, Duras remained still, watching her. He reminded Ael of a Krelleess, a local serpent that gave itself away as it rustled through its native grasses but fell silent just before it struck. Its venom was deadly and Ael knew it was only a matter of time before this snake would do the same, if given the chance. After a full twenty seconds, he simply inclined his head to the side and turned to leave.

As he left, Ael felt a tiny shiver. There was something very dead about those eyes. They seemed to beckon to her to join in his oblivion of soul.

Without letting anything show, the Empress turned dismissively and returned to her seat, every footfall full of confidence. She turned and sat, placing the S'harien back where it belonged, at her side.

For some reason she could never fathom, the sword slipped out of its place and clattered down the steps and onto the marble floor. The noise was horrendous, as was the astonishment from all present. Everyone had witnessed the Empress take her place and carefully place the sword in its niche. How it slipped

out was anyone's guess, but the effect it had on the senators was electric.

Ael's eyes shot to the only true ally she had in the room. Arrhae's return was the same mixture of amazed/shocked/mortified as hers. There were many present who would take the simple slip as a sign.

Deciding that her enemies would not get a chance to capitalise on the incident, Ael stood, retrieved the sword and replaced it, before dismissing the assembly for the day.

From the far side of the room Duras watched and smiled to himself before turning on his heel and striding out.

Leaving the S'harien where it was, at the seat of power, Ael felt the sands of time slipping through her fingers. On some level she could only guess at, she knew time was running out. While she was only middle aged for her people and she could rule as long as she was fit – which could be another hundred years if she looked after herself – she felt compelled to act quickly. She called over the Announcer who looked at her without quite meeting her eyes. It was a gesture of respect as he kept his gaze slightly lowered – one Ael appreciated. "Have Senator i-Khellian t'llhweiir meet me on my estate at the sixteenth hour," she said.

The Announcer bowed. "Of course, Empress. I will inform her of your wishes immediately." He turned to leave and Ael wondered where even his true loyalties lay. She shook her head slightly in annoyance. She wondered if she was becoming truly paranoid.

She turned to leave and her ever-present guardian, Aidoann, fell into step one pace back as she passed the ornate, metal doors that led out and off the senate floor. If there was someone on this planet she could trust implicitly, it was Aidoann

t'Khnialmnae. They went way back, having served as commander and second on the original *Bloodwing*.

Under her breath, Ael said: "Have the catches on the chair checked. I have no idea how the sword fell, but if someone tampered with them, I'll have them hung from the nearest tree by their entrails."

Aidoann chuckled darkly. "Colourful," she said cheekily.

The Empress raised a curious brow. "You doubt me?" she asked.

Aidoann replied: "Not at all, my Empress. I'm just in awe of your imaginative ways."

Ael knew then that her friend was having a little joke with her. Their years together gave her that licence. She listened as Aidoann barked orders into her sleeve mic and listened as they were repeated.

The security specialist commented: "If it was the Tal Shiar, there probably won't be any evidence to find."

She was right, of course. The Empire's department of dirty tricks that the Earthers liked to call the "Romulan Big Brother" was completely professional. They could make it look like Ael took the Sword and chopped her own head off with it and nobody would dispute their findings. The truly annoying thing with the organisation was that their loyalties were clear – to themselves alone. Like any bureaucracy, its first priority was to protect its own existence. All other considerations were secondary – including their obedience to the Empress. "Look anyway."

"Of course, Empress. I will have a report for you by sunset."

Ael didn't doubt it. Aidoann had yet to let her down. She just wondered if the service would be completely pointless.

However, there was one thing she was absolutely certain of. She hadn't dropped it.

Chapter Two

As surveillance societies went there were few that could hold a candle to ch'Rihan. There were cameras everywhere on the streets, their 360º view eyes never moved and never missed a thing.

At least, that's what the Tal Shiar wanted everyone to believe. Their motto: "Ensuring the Loyalty of the Empire" was colloquially followed more crudely with "through voyeurism". As usual, something was always lost in translation, but the extension often brought a subversive smile to the "little people".

The cameras were operated by sophisticated computer systems that were programmed by some of the most paranoid people in history. They were constantly on the lookout for anything or anyone looking or doing something suspicious, ready to report their findings in an instant to an ever-vigilant agent of the feared organisation.

The flaw in the system was that it usually missed the obvious. If one appeared to be going about their daily, innocuous routine, it was hardly interested.

Knowing the system wasn't perfect, Duras knew even given his proximity to his local "allies" he would still find it difficult to make any kind of arrangements with them. That's where his personal holomask came in handy.

There was no way the people of ch'Rihan were going to allow him to have Klingon aides. If this was an embassy in the Federation, he would have had a decent sized staff – people hand-picked that would take care of his personal security. They would do hourly sweeps of the buildings and surrounds for monitoring devices. He had spent a little time in one on Andoria and found

the place was more secure than anything he could have had on Qo'noS.

However, this was the home of those who lived under the Raptor's Wings. He was lucky to be on the planet in the first place. Staff was out the question. So, the cleaners were all no doubt in the employ of the security forces, reporting back everything he did. He was certain even his personal evacuations were logged somewhere.

All the same, the Tal Shiar had actually done him a favour. He had taken note of one worker who was of a similar size and shape as he and simply taken a 3D image of his face. His holomask did the rest. So, while the cleaner was busy at work, Duras would slip outside wearing the local garb and, to the casual observer, he was simply a lower caste worker going about his job.

That's all the video surveillance system would see and that was all right with him. Each time the cleaner came he took two hours to complete his task. Duras had made certain that the place was messy enough to keep the staff *very* busy.

Never one to take too many chances – with his *own* life – Duras chose a local park bench for their meeting. He wasn't going to risk scrutiny of his face as people of this world were naturally suspicious of everything and everyone, so they avoided eye contact with strangers. He knew that as long as he sat in the centre of the metre-and-a-half-long bench nobody would venture to share it.

He checked his chronometer and wondered again where the Senator was. It was unlike a Romulan to be late. There were too many people out there to cheat.

Duras had no time for Romulans personally. Like the majority of his people, they had nothing but bad experiences with the duplicitous p'tachs. At least this senator was useful.

However, if this meeting was on a D-7 battle cruiser he would still have to resist the temptation to ram a d'k tagh through his heart and throw his lifeless corpse out an airlock.

After making him wait five minutes, Senator Hathness finally walked his way. Duras was amazed that the man did not even try to cover the arrogant swagger someone of his bearing adopted over time. He was wearing civilian clothing to "blend in" but he needed to adjust his mannerisms if he was going to complete the ruse. Indeed, this man had been born into his Great House and Duras was certain he had been schooled how to walk like an overbearing fool. Surely his gait would make him stand out to anyone watching. He cast a furtive glance about him without turning his head and noted nobody was looking their way at all. Paranoid people.

Hathness finally sat down slowly, as if the movement itself spoke some great import. Right then, Duras wished he had his d'k tagh.

"Fancy finding you here," the Senator said, as if he owned the world and was welcoming a long-lost associate to it. His attempt at humour simply irritated the ruthless Klingon. Time existed as a resource to make the subjection of others possible. Wasting it was a crime against nature.

All the same, this pawn had to be played properly. He had to be assuaged. "Indeed, Senator. It was a good day for it."

In his time *waiting* he had taken the time to appreciate the gardens. If there was one thing the cursed Romulans were good at, it was landscaping. The many tiers of grasses, hanging vines, trees, ornaments and such had been expertly arranged to create a wondrous vista. Perhaps he could find and kidnap the gardener and have him recreate this back on Qo'noS.

"The Empress' time is coming to a close," Hathness said quietly. "Our patience with her "reforms" is running out."

The Senator was wasting more time stating the obvious. It was well known that the Romulan warrior did not make a very good politician. Indeed, she had never understood that politics would never change the heart of the Romulan people.

"I gather your people tampered with the sword's mounting," Duras stated, trying to sound congratulatory. "Nice touch."

Hathness smiled. "Yes, I thought so. We are going to destabilise the mines on ch'Havran next."

Duras was aware of this as well. It was an obvious target, but a useful one. The dilithium mines on that hellish world were needed for their growing economy.

"When do you need my people to move?" Duras asked. That part of the plan was not yet set in stone.

Hathness smiled as he pretended to enjoy the view. The gardens on his private estate put this rambling mess to shame. "Soon. We must get the..." at this point the senator began a string of local expletives that impressed the Klingon. He had no idea they could be so inventive with their cursing. "... *woman* off planet. Then your people can take care of the matter."

Duras had no illusions about their contract. This was an alliance for mutual benefit alone. Nothing more. He had not missed the slipped inflection in Hathness's utterance of "people". The slur was clear. He had as little time for Klingons as they had for him. So be it.

The business was over, and it was time to go. Duras got to his feet – a soldier moving like a well-greased tool. "I will be back in two days, Senator," he simply stated as he walked off. He had to make certain he got back before his cleaner was done.

Ael was home, on her private grounds, practicing her fencing, when she got word that Arrhae had finally arrived. Something had delayed the usually punctual senator and Ael knew her well enough to know it must have been relevant for her to do so. With another it would have been a clear insult.

It had taken her years, but Ael had finally tracked down another of the now extremely rare S'harien swords that had been brought with the Rihannsu when their people had left Vulcan so long ago. Her time handling the Sword had left her wishing she could have another for her personal use. It had taken her staff some time, and a rather large pile of credits, to procure one. As Empress, she could have simply decided it was her prerogative to take it from its previous owner for the "good of the Empire". However, if the Rihannsu were ever to have a change of heart it would have to start with her example. She had paid a fair price for it.

With the blade sharpened to perfection, Ael whirled in place, the blade neatly slicing through the air as she fought imaginary Klingons. She had not only studied their fighting arts, she had opportunity to observe them in action – with her on the receiving end. Their mistake had always been the same: overconfidence. Most Klingon warriors had been trained to bludgeon their opponents to death, to overcome them through superior force.

However, in close combat Ael had always proven herself the victor simply by making sure she was faster and more agile. More often than not, the Klingons she had bested found themselves bleeding out on the floor wondering where the blow that had killed them had come from.

It was through constant training that she kept the same edge as the sword. Considering she was on the latter end of a Romulan's idea of middle age, she was still more than a match for most of her people. She had even proven it from time to time in recent days.

"I don't ever want to find myself on the wrong side of *that* sword." Arrhae's human sense of humour had not been completely lost during her time on ch'Rihan.

Ael turned and saw the senator standing in the bright sun with a slight upturn to one corner of her mouth. Ael wished she could call her friend, but ally would have to do. Even though her heart was of this world, her blood was still human. She could only be trusted so far.

She noted Arrhae had eschewed the usual trappings of a Rihannsu senator and dressed simply in her house's colours in a silk shirt and pants. Some things were still expected, even if you were dressing down.

Ael had heard her coming, even as she was walking on the grass. She had observed her movements and noted Arrhae was not quite as agile as she used to be. It solidified her decision.

She also noted the senator was alone. Her secretary was probably back in her personal flitter, along with her bodyguard. Both would be annoyed at being left behind, but they were not needed here. Arrhae's mind was still sharp and Aidoann's security people needed no help. Not when their commander personally liked to keep an eye on their revered leader. It was well known that Aidoann had served under the then Commander Ael when she had served in the Imperial Fleet and, since then, she had never left her side. Speculation was rife over what drove the warrior woman's devotion to the Empress. Friendship, or something much deeper?

Aidoann respectfully stopped a mere ten paces away to allow the women to speak privately. Whatever her feelings for Ael, she knew her place. A mere security officer had no business eavesdropping on official Imperial business.

The Empress sheathed the sword with well-practised ease. To Arrhae's eyes it was if she was literally one with the weapon, that it was simply an extension of herself.

"Does Starfleet train it's officers in hand-to-hand combat?" Ael asked, already knowing the answer.

Arrhae was mildly surprised at the bald question given their vulnerable status. One could never be too careful who might be listening on ch'Rihan. The Tal Shiar was everywhere.

Except here, she thought. The Empress would never allow their eavesdropping on her. It was heard that she had already personally slain a few operatives who had been stupid enough to try.

Her eyes dropped to the sword, and she considered whether their green blood had stained its edge. Probably.

In as offhand a manner as she could muster, Arrhae said: "The Empress knows they do. Yet, not so much with blades. Mainly phasers and directed energy weapons." Even given their level of privacy, Arrhae remained on her guard.

Ael raised a brow, aware of the senator's discomfort. There were things to discuss, and it was clear Arrhae did not feel able to do that here with the freedom she required. "Come with me," she said simply.

As soon as the Empress started moving Aidoann understood her intent. She raised her cuff mic to her lips and said quietly, "Moving to the basement."

Stepping around the side of the Empress' large domicile – she wouldn't call it home as only the *Bloodwing* had ever felt

like that – Ael led them to a stairway that brought them to a wooden door.

Arrhae was surprised when the Empress reached into her neckline and drew out a key on a chain which she used to open it. She then returned it and pushed open the weighty door. She stepped through, followed by Arrhae with Aidoann following close behind, pulling the door closed behind them.

For a moment the senator felt a rising panic as she was enclosed by darkness. Then, to her amazement, the room was lit by a candle. Ael and Aidoann then moved around the room with practised ease, lighting a number of thick candles on standing candelabras. As the gloom was pushed back Arrhae found herself wondering at the line of pictures that adorned the walls. Some were faces that were familiar, others not. Most were of ch'Rihan, while a select few were of ch'Havran, Qo'noS and even Earth! Some had a black mark in the top, right-hand corner and she wondered about that. The clue came when she saw the portrait of James Kirk, looking as he did when he captained the late *USS Enterprise* during its first five-year mission. She was aware of his passing and so she attributed the mark to mean they were deceased.

Her eyes drifted down the line of images and she recognised Duras, whom she had seen earlier in the day. Next to him was Admiral Piper of Starfleet, then a young Rihannha male whose likeness to Ael left her wondering if there was a familial association. His portrait was also marked black.

The Empress waited while Arrhae familiarised herself with her surroundings. She watched as she took in the images, mounted on the bluestone walls which made the room much cooler and humid than the surface. In the centre of the room was a simple, but beautiful, carved wooden table with six chairs placed

about it. Aside from the candelabras, they were the only pieces of furniture in the room.

When Arrhae's attention returned to Ael, the Empress offered her a seat. She knew she could have done the same for Aidoann, but the security chief would never have taken it. Not only would she have considered herself out of place, but one does not protect the Empress sitting down.

The Senator looked at her Empress, wondering what all the theatrics were about. Surely the business of the Empire could have been spoken about on the surface.

Ael disappointed her. "We can speak freely down here, Terise," she said. She glanced at her aide and said: "Aidoann knows who and what you are, so don't worry. She thinks more highly of you than most of those you serve with on the Senate floor."

A small, amused snort from the solid warrior woman was her only confirmation.

"I wanted to talk to you about a number of issues that deal either with you directly, or at least the Federation. I want your opinion as a xenosociologist." Ael spoke with the casual air of someone who was used to having people listen to her.

The use of her real, human first name brought that side of her nature to the fore. Terise Haleakala-LoBrutto looked out from her Romulan veneer and put on her academic's hat. "What can I do for you?" she asked in Federation Standard. It came out a little roughly, as if it had become a poor second language to the tongue of the world she now considered home.

Ael's mouth twitched up a little as she saw just a little more of the woman she had come to know and "trust". "I want to tell you a story."

The day before, the Empress and her retinue had chosen to inspect a school of higher education for those who had demonstrated gifted IQs. Ael had done her level best to not appear bored as the school's "dean" had prattled on about the wonderful strides forward they had made teaching the students to think outside the box.

To start with, she had to admit the building itself gleamed as if it had been built mere days before, instead of a decade ago. The computer interfaces appeared to be of high quality and the work she saw the students performing often left her wondering as the math was way above her level of achievement.

Walking down a corridor, with vid cameras hovering about them recording the visit from their "glorious Empress" – Ael hated this kind of PR – she found her party outside a large room that was clearly used to train their students in self-defence and the martial arts. From inside could be heard the sounds of exertion, grunts of people straining and the occasional slap as someone hit the floor. Intrigued, she ignored the school master as he tried to steer her away and stepped towards the door. Without being asked, Aidoann moved forward and slid the metal door aside, giving them a much better view of what was going on inside.

The Empress entered the room, followed by her retinue of staff and official toadies – which she loathed but knew one could never rid themselves of them entirely. Oddly, some toadies were actually quite good at what they did.

At first, only a few students noticed, but the atmosphere abruptly changed when someone let out a surprised sharp intake of breath followed by a muttered expletive.

Mildly amused, Ael let the comment pass. Naval men and women of all kinds tended to be made out of rougher material and

she was no exception. As all eyes were focused on her she took a moment to consider those present. She put out of her mind the hovering cameras and those standing behind her trying to make sure their face was seen by the vids and *looked* at the class members. What she saw shocked her. Nine out of ten of them were wearing colours of the Rihannsu great houses.

Fortunately for her, her time on the Senate floor had taught her a perfect poker face and she showed no emotion. She simply stepped forward and considered the room while she thought of what she might do next.

Her feelings warred within her as she realised her great experiment in education was a glaring failure. This school was set up to teach the brightest pupils from all over the Empire, yet it was clearly evident that the elite families had already subverted its ideals and turned it into just another school for privileged kids.

She turned her attention from the high windows painted with stylised images from the Sundering and considered one of the two students in the room who did not have colours on his shoulders. She stepped over to the clearly terrified student, a tall, slender young man who seemed to be from one of the outer colony worlds. She had seen how the varying gravity and less healthy diet affected the growth of her distant kin. "What's your name?" she asked.

To his credit, the youth found his voice, although he respectfully kept his gaze at the floor. "Straven, my Empress," he said.

Ael nodded. "What skillset did you demonstrate to bring you to this school?" she asked, curious.

Obediently, the youth answered: "I'm good at Stellar Cartography, Empress."

"Oh?" Ael said, leading. "How will your talents in this area aid the expansion of the Rihannsu Empire?" Her question was honest, but she could swear she heard one of the students behind her snicker.

Straven's gaze lifted from her boots to her navel. "I won a scholarship here by showing how a passing singularity was going to effect the orbits of the outer planets in the Hugaris system."

Definitely a derisive snort this time. Ael thought she had a fair idea of the direction of the offender. Rather than engage the individual, she considered the youth before her. He seemed to be a success story in a roomful of failures. "I'm glad you are here, Straven," she said meaningfully. "It's talents like yours that often go undervalued in our society. You see the dangers before they become a problem and bring disaster. Jolan tru."

For the briefest of moments, Straven looked the Empress in the eye, and she saw his gratefulness. However, she could swear there was something else as he turned away. His eye caught one of his classmates and something changed in his demeanour. The sparkle that had briefly shone was gone.

Now, Ael had a target as she found the object of her interest. The student who was so vocal during her questioning was a member of house Asterii, one of the oldest and richest of the clans. His crimson and blue scarf made that clear. This boy was about six feet tall and reasonably fit and there was a look in his eye Ael did not like. It was genetic, she thought. The boy was as big a waste of space as his father – a man who had a seat in the Senate chamber but did little but repeat the useless statements of the opposition leader.

The Empress took her leave of Straven and stepped through the parting crowd towards the cheeky boy. "What's your

name, son?" she asked, not letting him see the disdain she already fostered towards him.

"Vorah," he answered, proudly looking her in the eye. "Of the clan Asterii."

"Vorah," Ael repeated, nodding to herself. He seemed to think she should be impressed by his clan affiliation. She looked up at him and gave him a gallows smile. "What House do I come from?" she asked.

The young man, who couldn't have been more than twenty, she thought, drew his eyebrows together in thought. After several seconds of awkward silence, he answered: "I don't know."

The Empress glanced over at Straven who averted his eyes once more. "Straven, what clan do I belong to?"

"My Empress, while you were distantly related to our former Emperor Shiarkiek, you come from a line of military warriors who have brought much honour to the Rihannsu, including your father."

Ael wasn't entirely certain the young man wasn't trying to ingratiate himself to her. She decided that it shouldn't really surprise her either way considering her position in the Empire. She turned back to Vorah and once more looked him in the eye.

"Vorah of the clan Asterii," she said evenly. "How is it that Straven, a fellow student who doesn't wear the colours of an esteemed House, knows more about your Empress' family history than you do?"

His eyes betrayed him. Like his father, he wasn't a quick thinker and so he took too long to formulate a convincing lie. What Ael saw was the contempt he had for her family line. "I don't know, Empress," he said after too long a pause.

"I do," Ael said, turning her back on Vorah and stepping over to the wall. "Follow me," she ordered, clearly giving the man no choice.

Obediently, he followed and found himself standing next to a selection of swords that were modelled on the S'harien that sat in the Empty Chair. Each was razor sharp and were on display more for a heritage display than for use. There were other wooden staffs nearby that were used for training.

Ael hefted one of the swords and tossed it into Vorah's hand. "A soldier like myself lives by the code of *mnhei'sahe* and it is a way of life that I have tried to encourage our people to embrace once more. It defines who we are and how we should treat one another."

Her words weren't just for Vorah, they were for anyone watching, including those present and anyone watching the feed from the floating recording devices.

"You have violated those rules with your complete lack of respect not only for myself and my rank, but even with your lack of regard to Straven, a man who is clearly your superior in intellect and deed. Now, even though you have shamed yourself and your clan with your behaviour, I am going to give you a chance to redeem yourself." She paused for a moment to note that Vorah was holding the hilt of his sword and taken a defensive stance. He was taking her words seriously. She then reached out and took the hilt of the other sword on the wall and tested its weight. It was a little heavier than the one she was used to, but she was nothing if not flexible.

Ael stepped back and swung the blade up and took a posture that declared her intentions. "If you kill me, Vorah, you will live. It's that simple."

There was a silent pause in the room as everyone had stopped breathing, except for Ael. She was drawing energising lungfuls of air and readying herself for battle.

Vorah seemed unsure of himself, his eyes darting about him, seeking any avenue of escape. With the students, teachers and politicians in the room, there was little room left. Indeed, they had all stepped back several paces, not willing to be on the receiving end of an errant swing. He steeled himself and decided he was going all in. He raised his sword and made to swing at the Empress' head, aiming for her neck in the hopes of decapitating her.

Instead of parrying, Ael dropped by bending her front leg forward and simply swung the tip of her sword down and lunged forward in the same motion, the sharp tip passing through his clothing, flesh, and ribs as if they weren't there while Vorah's blade passed harmlessly over her head. His cleaved heart gave out instantly and Vorah dropped to the floor like a rock, his eyes wide, unbelieving, unseeing.

The Empress, her point made, gave the sword a gentle tug and wiped the green blood off on Vorah's pant leg before restoring it to its cradle on the wall. She turned and this time found there was not a single person in the room who sought to meet her eyes. Better.

Arrhae had listened to Ael's story and wondered why she stopped. Was there more to it?

Ael saw her questioning eyes and said: "I set up that school to bring the brightest minds from all over the Empire to ch'Rihan to show that the true successes are of those of achievement and success, not bloodlines and family history. The next generation needs to find its own way without riding on the

slipstream of yesterday. I go to visit it and I find it a complete failure where people of lower castes are still being treated as underlings."

Terise sighed. "May I speak freely, Empress?" she asked.

Ael looked at her with her eyes slightly widened. She thought she had made that clear by bringing Arrhae down here in the first place. "Of course."

The xenosociologist took a deep breath and went all in. "The changes you seek, to restore a sense of *mnhei'sahe* to the people is a project that will require *generations*. The mindset of a people cannot be changed in a matter or years, or sometimes even decades. There have been many examples of peoples who have taken *centuries* to set right the wrongs in their societies as those who still revere those qualities refuse to let them go. It's a whole lot easier to corrupt a society than to make it moral again."

Surprisingly, Aidoann came to Ael's defence. "The Empress has made new laws that enforce many of the ways of *mnhei'sahe*."

Terise nodded. "I know. I was there." She turned to Ael and gave her a wan smile. "All the rules in the world won't change a man's heart. In fact, history has shown that the more laws that govern a society the more likely people are going to violate them – wilfully. Nobody wants to live in a cage, even a gilded one."

Ael baulked at that. "How can a people be governed without laws?"

Shaking her head, Terise said: "I didn't say no laws at all – that leads to anarchy. They just need to be simple and something the people are willing to follow. Usually, that requires someone of charisma, a personal example that others are willing to follow. On Earth, it was one man, Jesus Christ, who showed the world

that it was much better to follow the law of love and brotherly charity than to lord it over others. Indeed, his leadership style was different from others for the fact that his example was to encourage his followers to *serve* others.

"His example lives on today in the tenets of Starfleet. Its people live by the notion of not only excellence, but the idea that we can make a better life for all of us by working *together* for the benefit for all – but especially in the notion of self-sacrifice. Time and time again, the members of Starfleet have put their lives on the line – and often lost them – to save people they don't even know. Starfleet exists to serve and care for others, not just look after itself."

"She paused and drew in a breath. "On Cait, it was their Teacher, who followed a similar path, and paid a similar price. His legacy lived on in successive generations. Surak taught the Vulcans logic and spared them annihilation by demonstrating it in his way of life. People need a shining example to follow to encourage them to change."

Ael tried to take it all in, but it warred against the military warrior she was ingrained to be. She had lived her life by codes, written and cultural. "How could we do that for the Rihannsu?"

Terise had an idea, but it was so radical she wondered whether she should even voice it. However, when she caught Ael's eye again, she realised the Empress had seen. "What is it?" she asked.

Terise drew in a deep breath. "I know the people of the Federation don't exactly adhere to the tenets of *mnhei'sahe*, but they have demonstrated a willingness to put aside differences and work together without racial biases. In Starfleet, for instance, there are strict rules regarding any kind of discrimination. One can be dishonourably discharged for breaking that law."

The Empress sat back and drew down on her shirt, suddenly uncomfortable. While she respected the Federation, and under her leadership they had begun leaving their neighbour alone, it was another thing to propose a peace treaty. "Such a notion is …" Ael felt lost for words.

Aidoann, her eyes wide, filled in: "Terrifying."

While it was the word she was looking for, the dark humour the Empress was known for caused her to turn to her compatriot and chuckle. "Exactly." She had to admit to herself there was fear in her heart even contemplating such a notion, but it was a possible way forward. As Empress, she had to consider all the alternatives, even the ones that left her a bad taste in her mouth.

Terise added: "At the very least it could open the door back to Vulcan for every Rihannha. It could lead to reunification." She was beginning to warm to her idea, even though it could lead to a fundamental shift in the fabric of Romulan society. "With trade between the Empire and the Federation, we could show the Rihannsu that they don't have to follow the old ways of the caste system, that everyone has a chance to reach their potential. They would learn this from the people they interact with. For instance, the Federation has strict rules regarding intellectual property. One man's invention cannot simply be stolen by another and profited from. It remains theirs and, if they believe someone has violated that rule, we have courts that can decide the matter. The notion of fairness is behind everything the Federation stands for. It could rub off on the Rihannsu, given time."

There was a certain amount of impatience about Ael, and she knew it in herself. The thing that bothered her was she felt in her heart that she was running out of time. Something had to give

soon before the last grain of sand dropped through the hourglass. "I will give your idea some thought, Arrhae," she said honestly. Before the Senator could add another word, she said: "There is something else I wanted to discuss with you while I have you here."

Always wanting to serve her adopted people, Arrhae looked up willingly. "Anything, Empress."

Ael sighed. "I want you to go home."

That evening Ael sat in her private dining room and sipped her soup, lost in her thoughts. She had seen numerous examples in the last few weeks that the reforms she had put into law were spectacular failures. No matter how hard she had tried to make a change in the Senate those there had done their utmost to push back on her. She should have cleared out the entire Senate, executed the lot of them, she thought.

While the notion did bring her a small, dark smile as she fantasised about dealing with the members of that staid pavilion one, final blow she knew that they were symptoms of a much bigger disease that pervaded her society. The elitism that was such a part of their culture, the notion that the members of the Great Houses were somehow better than others simply by the fact of their birthright, wasn't the only problem they had. She realised that, even after serving with Arrhae for years in the Senate and knowing that she was probably the hardest working individual for the people, she still harboured a modicum of resentment for her knowing that she wasn't really a Rihannha.

She chided herself for her bigotry and saw in herself the seeds of her own culture's failures. The Romulan sense of superiority betrayed every part of their lifestyle. They were not only superior to one another; they were superior to everyone else.

She realised the mindset was fractious and, even though she was technically at the apex of such a culture, she was looked down upon because of her family lineage.

She glanced over at Aidoann, who was standing nearby in a position where she could leap to her defence at the first sign of trouble. She was keenly aware that she had even scanned her meal, looking for poisons as she did every day. She took her devotion to Ael to extremes, but she had to admit that it gave her some comfort the former Centurion had her back.

All the same, Ael was aware that Aidoann's family connections were better than her own. She could call upon some powerful family members if the situation demanded it. Given the caste system in the Empire, Aidoann was in a better position to hold the position of Empress than she was.

Always aware, her guardian asked: "Are you needing something, my Empress?"

Ael sighed. Even that statement made her realise just how much they were given to their personal notions of elitism. "Nothing, my friend. I was just wondering what kind of Empress you would have made."

That made the woman snort. "Me? Empress? No, I don't think so."

"Why not?" Ael's question was genuinely curious.

"I don't have your patience. I would have killed all the Senators on the first day."

Ael laughed at the humour but there was a touch of bitterness to the sound. She wondered if Aidoann was more Rihannsu than she was with her bent for bloodlust. After a moment she asked: "You never had any notion of entering politics?"

Aidoann shook her head, no. "I am a warrior, sworn to serve the Empire. I live to serve, not be served."

Her simple statement demonstrated the simple difference between the Great Houses with their constant political wrangling and their devotion to climbing the cliff-face of success, not caring that they were making their way over the corpses of their fellows – even those of their own houses at times. Ael had served in the Imperial Navy where loyalty to one's immediate superiors and fellows was more important than politics.

Yet, considering the notion, she had to admit that there were plenty of people she had served with who were more inclined to think of their own position in relation to the Senate and the seat of power than their oath and loyalty to the Service. Her own son was numbered among them.

Ael sought and caught her most loyal friend's eyes. "I, too, serve the Empire and I know that we need to grow. We're stuck in a loop of tearing one another down to lift ourselves up. I think we're slowly sinking into a swamp while trying to stay above water by standing on the remains of our fellows."

Aidoann was not a philosopher. She could not see the endgame of Ael's thought. "The strong survive," she said confidently.

The Empress tilted her head to the side as she considered. "If our society was completely given to militarism, I would agree that, perhaps, that might be the better way to be. However, the Rihannsu have a rich history of art, culture and even philosophy that has no bearing in warfare. We can also be a people of peace."

Her protector recalled a saying from the Academy. "If we are the stronger, is it not the call for war?"

Ael sighed. She, too, remembered the same instructor giving her the identical instruction. Perhaps she needed to review

how her people in the Navy were being trained as well. She thought of the Senate floor and realised just how far their martial system pervaded every walk of life. "If war is a way of life, it must eventually end in total destruction. Either one group stands alone in the end, or we all wind up memories..."

The notion was foreign to Aidoann, and the woman took a moment to try and grasp the notion. It didn't quite gel for her. "If war is not the way, what else is there?"

The Empress suddenly realised what was bothering her about the idea of reaching out to the Federation. Their way of life was literally the antithesis of her own. Trust and mutual cooperation were what made them successful. They were a large group of differing species and cultures that had managed to find a middle ground and work together for their mutual advantage. They were stronger together and their differing strengths and weaknesses complemented one another.

"We have no friends," she said solemnly.

Aidoann looked at her blankly. "The Rihannsu need no friends."

Ael sighed, a sound coming from the depths of a tired soul. "If friendship wasn't important to us, why are we still together after all these years?" She looked up at her, searching, hoping for the light of understanding to dawn.

The Centurion was conflicted. Her loyalty to the Empress was solid and they were privy to more of one another's secrets than most Romulans would normally allow in their paranoid culture. They were certain of each other's discretion. They had to be. She looked about her, searching for the answer to her conflict. The Empress was right, they were friends, and she knew without blinking an eye that she would die for her without hesitation. They were stronger together. "Are you saying that the

Rihannsu would be stronger with friends from the outside? Are we not the stronger? Wouldn't we be carrying the others?"

Ael gave her a wan smile. "We don't know everything, Aidoann. Who knows? Sooner or later, we might run into a force that even we can't deal with." She quietened for a moment then continued. "When that day comes, we need some good friends to help us."

While Aidoann's confidence in the Imperial Navy was strong, she had already weathered some storms that had threatened to overcome them if it hadn't been for the help of outsiders – especially those in Starfleet. "Understood, Empress. Do you have orders?"

The path ahead was clear. It was time for the Rihannsu to grow up and put their warring nature behind them. "We need to send a subspace transmission. It's time to open up negotiations with the Federation."

Chapter Three

Desk jockey. Piper had sworn she would never be one, but the destruction of the *USS Millennium* six months ago had left her with little choice.

The annoying thing right now was that for the next half hour she was left alone in her office with nothing to keep her company but her thoughts – and right now it was the last thing she needed. As she sat behind her ornate, wooden desk – she refused to have a metal one – she cradled her glass of pineapple juice in her lap and pondered why she had given up coffee. Right now, she could do with one – or something stronger. Perhaps it was a good thing she had never found alcohol really appealing. She wished she could go out and get roaring drunk.

She closed her eyes for a moment and once more the images came unbidden. The flickering light of fires, the acrid smell of burning opticable, the wrenching cries of the wounded, the haunting silence of the dead. The bridge of the *Millennium* had been a wasteland after that fateful battle with the Cardassians. One small part of her was pleased that the impressive ship had bested four of their finest warships, but when it was clear the ship was dying, she gave the order every commander fears.

"Abandon ship."

Most of the crew had managed to get to the relative safety of the escape pods and shuttle craft. That was one of the beauties of the ship. She was never short of shuttles. She often carried up to one hundred of them. The remaining fighters – still led by Ghost who had remained loyal to her and her command for the

last how many years – had given them the protection they needed to avoid any further loss of life as they fled the combat zone.

Sarda had been in the Engineering Section helping Chief Engineer Commander Rapid hold the ship together during the fight. The secondary hull had taken a lot of damage in their section, and he had been sorely needed.

Piper still hated herself that she had not been the last to leave the ship. As Commander Valastro had been organising the evacuation she had known, through her telepathic link with Sarda, that he had been injured. In fact, he had been trapped under a fallen beam.

In her recollection, she could still feel the weight of it across her chest. Their mental link was so solid that she had felt his pain as if it was her very own.

The computer had issued its dire warning. Core breach was imminent. Sixty seconds remained before the ship tore itself apart from the inside out.

"I'm coming!" she had shouted to him in her mind as she scrambled for the turbolift, only to find they were down.

"No, Piper!" His voice was a veritable command. *"You must leave before it's too late! You cannot help me!"*

The indecision had left her frozen to the spot, incapable of moving. She knew, on some level, that he was right. There was no way she could reach him in time. Yet she felt it impossible to leave him behind. They had become a part of each other, and she had no idea how to go on without him.

The question had become moot when a hypospray had been applied to her neck. From that point on her recollections became hazy – like they were happening to someone else. She remembered being dragged by a number of hands into an escape pod. She vaguely remembered the g-forces of their escape as the

pod was ejected. She had felt the jolt from the shockwave as the *Millennium's* warp core exploded, but the pod's pilot had wisely ridden the wave like a surfer and used it to propel them to safety.

As for Sarda, she had an impression he was glad she had escaped before his thoughts disappeared from her mind forever. Just before he died, she believed he had wanted to say something to her, but the core had robbed him as it exploded prematurely.

She knew what it was. Yet, somehow, knowing just made it all that much harder.

Two hours later the *USS Yorktown,* the backup she had requested, finally warped into the system and picked up the survivors, including herself. By that time, she was dirty that one of her own people had drugged her, but none of them were willing to point the finger. Indeed, all of them had said it was them. She half expected them all to declare: "I'm Spartacus!".

She was also furious with the captain of the *Yorktown* for being late. He had given her some lame excuse about pushing his engines too hard, but she wasn't interested. She had taken a select few and piloted the *Cork,* the *Millennium's* prototype runabout, back home herself. The vessel's top speed of warp four had given their return voyage a substantial delay, yet there was no way she was going to ride with the captain who had failed to save Sarda, Jenny Rapid and the others of her crew who had been left to die due to his incompetence.

The old anger had flared again in her soul. It had burned like the sun that day and, over time, had remained a smouldering ember, ready to relight in the presence of *any* inducement.

All of this came back to Piper in the seconds she had closed her eyes. Grieved once more, she opened and rubbed them again. The bags under her eyes were becoming suitcases. She wasn't sleeping well these days; her dreams were full of

nightmares. The REM state inhibitors didn't always work so she had relived that day over and over. Sometimes she saw it through Sarda's eyes, but most of the time through her own.

She tried in vain to push the thoughts from her mind by focusing on the vista outside. The now Rear Admiral Piper had been given temporary command of Starfleet Academy during her downtime. She had reminded Fleet Admiral Smillie of her determination to never remain chained to a desk lest she retire and, God bless him, he had believed and respected that.

An *Odysseus*-class ship, an upgraded variant of the *Ingram,* had recently been commissioned yet, at the time of the *Millennium's* destruction, was far from ready. Smillie had offered it to her, and she had made some personal modifications to the design that would take some time to complete. In the meantime, the position of Commandant of Starfleet Academy had become vacant, and he had asked her to take over until another could be found to fill it.

Knowing that her old mentor, Jim Kirk, had once held the position had made it easier for her to say yes and she had hoped the time would help her heal.

On that point she was beginning to wonder.

Today was her last day at the Academy. Today was the new *Millennium's* launch day.

Piper was surprised by the knock at the door. She hadn't been expecting anyone. Her secretary was out on an errand, leaving her to pack the few things she carried with her. Given the years she had commanded the original *Millennium*, she hadn't accumulated many possessions and had no time to retrieve any of them anyhow.

"Come in," she said, curious. She swung her legs off the corner of the desk and stood to greet whoever it was, self-consciously smoothing her uniform jacket.

The door swung open and three familiar people stepped into the room, all smiles. One of them broke from the trio and ran over to Piper, wrapping her arms around her. The young woman of the Palkeo Est looked up into her eyes with a huge smile and said: "Hello, Aunty Piper!"

Here was one of the few people who could bring her some cheer these days. "Hello, Junior," she said, returning the embrace. She was always delighted to see her Goddaughter, Piper AndrusVerandi, daughter of her friend, Merete.

Piper Jr had grown into a fine young woman who was open with her affections and didn't have a mean bone in her body. In fact, as she had grown up on the *Millennium* Piper had often wondered if one of her favourite places to be was cuddling the ship's Captain with her head between her breasts, listening to her heart.

Piper had never chosen to have children, yet Merete's had been like her own and almost filled the gap. She had been content to watch them grow and become a part of them as every family does. When the time came for Junior and her brother, Rogen, to further their studies, they had returned to Altair Four and stayed with their extended families while they finished their education at that world's universities. Piper had become a botanist, her brother a stellar cartographer. It surprised her that neither of them had chosen to follow their parent's vocation, but Merete had never said a word about it. She had always just been glad to raise them considering the loss of their father under tragic circumstances while the children were in utero.

Admiral Piper ran a hand through the young woman's short, platinum coloured hair and pulled back a little to see her eyes. She was the spitting image of her mother, that was certain, and she had Merete's gentle spirit. However, she had learned the woman had an edge of steel to her that the good Doctor had often blamed her for. "It's so good to see you here!" she said, truly happy for the first time in months.

Junior grinned broadly and said: "There wasn't a chance I would miss it. Like the veritable Phoenix from the ashes, the *Millennium* flies again!" Her youthful enthusiasm was *almost* infectious.

Unfortunately, she just reminded her of the original's demise and the price they had paid. The Admiral turned her attention to her other guests and waved them over. "Hello, Manny, Commander Hopetallash." She tilted her head to the side as she looked at Hope. "I expected to see you at the commissioning ceremony." She turned to Manny and added: "But you're a complete surprise. Is the *T'Plana-Hath* in system?"

The Executive Officer of Starfleet's first ship dedicated to making First Contact with new and emerging species gave her a respectful smile and stepped over to give her old commander and friend a hug. "It's good to see you, Piper," Manny said. Like the Admiral's oldest friends, she had become part of the first names club.

The Admiral returned the embrace warmly and gave Hope a welcoming nod. Like Junior, she had grown up on their old ship before leaving with her parents. Her father, Captain Krashtallash, had left the *Millennium* five years before, taking with him his wife, Ambassador Susanna Llash, Manny, and her husband, Scanner.

A stray thought once more wended its way through Piper's mind that perhaps she wouldn't have lost Sarda if Scanner had remained with them. No, she told herself, she probably would have been mourning Judd as well.

Still touching Manny, she had temporarily forgotten just how good a telepath the Caitian had become – especially when she had physical contact with someone. She could not help hear her thoughts and feel her turmoil.

Without outwardly showing it, Piper recoiled, realising all too late she had shown her old friend her deepest soul.

"Don't be ashamed, Piper," Manny shared with her silently. *:I felt your pain in orbit. I miss them all, too, and I know how much Sarda meant to you."*

Piper knew she wasn't exaggerating. It had been a blessing to have the Cait on board with her very rare gift when the Federation first reached out to Betazed. They had been surprised that anyone outside their own could be such a powerful telepath and they found the peoples of the UFP to be kindred spirits.

Torn, the Admiral wanted to tear herself away, but refused to embarrass her friend by doing so. Bringing her emotions once more under tight control, she pulled back a little but kept holding Manny's paw. *"I'm not ashamed, I think,"* she admitted. *"I just don't know how to keep going without him."*

Manny filled her head with images from their past. *"You've still got a large family that loves you, Piper,"* she shared tenderly. *"Don't ever forget that. They know you're hurting, and they don't expect you to be above pain. It's OK to let it out."*

In turn, Piper gave her one simple image. That of her new command. *"I'm just too busy to deal with it right now. I've got a new ship and people who need me."* As she gently let go of Manny's paw the Cait gave it a final squeeze.

"Take care of your soul, Piper. If you don't, you won't have *anything to give."* Manny stepped back and said enigmatically: "Let's go to the launch. Everyone's waiting for you."

Piper wondered if this was the place where all starships got christened. The space station they stood in had launched many ships in recent times – including the *Enterprise-B*. It had been around for over a century and some of the early NX-class starships had been built here. It had been modified and expanded over the years, but the original structure was the same.

They stood in the observation deck overlooking the bow of the new ship. It held no surprises for her, even though there were a few wide eyes about her. From their vantage point they could see the top of the saucer section where the ship's call letters stated: *USS Millennium*, NCC-2001-A.

The differences between this ship and the *Millennium* were subtle. She was a little sleeker, with upgraded warp nacelles with orange Bussard Collectors glowing at their tips, unlike the previous vessel which rarely had much in the way of decent energy reserves once she came out of high warp. She was glad that problem had been overcome.

The saucer was vast and dwarfed not only the original *Enterprise,* but also the *Excelsior.* It housed a range of science departments including stellar cartography. The Main Hangar deck still stretched along half the top of the secondary hull and Piper knew improvements had been made to the interior, including a zero-grav shaft between all three of the vessel's shuttle bays.

The photon torpedo launchers had been improved with three firing forward and two aft.

Overall, the ship resembled the *Excelsior*, barring the truncated dorsal section and the huge hangar.

"A fitting tribute to the original." Piper turned, knowing the voice and respecting the speaker. Captain John Harriman shook her hand and turned back to gaze upon the ship that mirrored his own. "I'm sure you'll make this one as much your home as the last."

Admiral Piper simply stared blankly at the ship before her and wished she could agree with him. "She's not the same, but she'll do."

Harriman pointed off to the ship's nacelle pylons. The *Odysseus*-class had dropped the megaphaser installations of the earlier vessels, but Piper had insisted they be installed. "I heard the engineers weren't happy about those."

Piper gave him a sarcastic smile. With a touch of acid, she stated: "If those engineers had spent as much time defending themselves as *I* have then they wouldn't have dropped them in the first place."

The *Enterprise* captain wasn't offended. He actually agreed with her. He would have loved having them fitted to his ship. However, Starfleet's flagship's calling was different to the *Millennium*. His ship was used for exploration and diplomacy. They needed to appear ready, but non-threatening. The *Millennium*, however, was called upon to go into the worst places and win the day by being the most well defended and powerful ship in the fight.

At that moment Harriman wondered how many people the Admiral had lost over the years. Perhaps the death toll was becoming too great. Especially with the loss of Commander Sarda. "They *would* come in handy," he stated as he sipped his

champagne. "It would help make certain I'll make it to retirement."

Now in her sixties, Piper felt the years as a burden that she was beginning to wonder she still wished to carry. Yet, through it all, Starfleet had to admit she was the best at what she did. If the Federation was handed a lemon, she was the one who was most likely to turn it into lemonade. Piper's sense of duty was incredibly strong. "I'll retire when I'm dead," she said baldly.

Before Harriman could contribute further, Admiral Smillie stood and waited for a moment as those present fell into silence. Piper noted there was very little in the way of press here. She supposed this sort of thing had become old hat to them.

"Welcome, guests," the elderly Admiral said with a knowing smile. It was an open secret the man was going to retire after the launch. He propped himself up on his walking stick and continued with a voice still strong: "Today we launch the successor to Starfleet's greatest defender, the *USS Millennium.*"

He continued on for a few minutes, reminding those present of the previous ship's adventures and how he hoped this new ship might even outshine her predecessor. Piper had already tuned out. Her gaze was cast over the dignitaries, officers and family present. She saw, to her delight, the entire senior staff of the *T'Plana-Hath* was present. Krashtallash caught her gaze and gave her a friendly smile and nod, as did Scanner. She noted their children were all now grown and stood with them – some in uniform and some not. The group included two who were now a part of her crew.

As she looked at Crash, Susanna, Manny and Scanner she realised just how much she missed them. Sure, they had a whole new job, and they were doing it wonderfully and she was

immensely proud of them. All the same, she wished her family was still complete.

Merete sidled up next to her and followed her gaze. She knew what her friend was thinking. "I understand how you're feeling. I miss them, too," she said sincerely.

Piper was about to say something acerbic when she realised she actually *did* understand. Merete was a widow whose children had grown and moved on. She was the definition of an empty nester. She knew all about loss. "We go on because the job still needs to be done."

The Doctor shrugged and shared: "I'm just not so sure it needs me to do it anymore. Perhaps it's time to retire."

Piper started. Not only did she feel it was too soon for her middle-aged friend but the last thing she needed was to lose the last of her closest confidants. "Nah," she said, offhandedly, trying to deflect her from the notion. "You're still too young."

Merete looked up at her with eyes surrounded by wrinkles and with platinum blonde hair that was now more silver than anything else. "No, seriously, Piper." Her gaze returned to the ship outside the window, and she pointed. "We were lucky to survive the *Millennium's* destruction, and not just that one time. We've survived scrape after scrape, and I just don't think our luck is going to hold out forever." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I'd like to see my grandchildren grow up."

Piper drew her over to a corner. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Merete shrugged, a tear forming in her eye. "I suppose I just didn't want to let you down. Since we lost Sarda...."

Before she could say anything else Piper suddenly noticed it was very quiet in the room. She looked about her and realised

everyone was looking at her. She heard Manny's voice in her head say: *"Admiral Smillie is waiting for you!"*

Her cheeks flushed in embarrassment, she stepped forward through the crowd and stood next to her old commander. "Sorry, Bill," she whispered out of the side of her mouth.

The old man simply shrugged. Over the years of their association – he would never call it friendship – he had come to expect all kinds of bizarre behaviour from her. However, he had learned to give her a certain amount of latitude. Regardless of her attitude, he knew Piper could get the job done.

Piper looked over the crowd at friends, old and new, and started when she saw Spock standing at the back of the crowd. Their eyes met for a second and she gave him a respectful nod. His presence reminded her of his message of condolence after Sarda's death and she got the impression he was here to honour his Vulcan comrade in arms.

The Ambassador was joined by his protegé, Sa'avik, who stood at his elbow. Piper gave the Lieutenant Commander a brief smile before addressing those present.

"Thank you, one and all, for being here. Your presence speaks more than I ever could with mere words, so I'll simply ask we take a moment to remember our friends who couldn't join us." Piper took a step back and respectfully lowered her eyes, and she was joined by all those present, even the reporter. During that moment, Piper found Sarda's voice ringing in her mind from a conversation they'd had years before. "It is illogical to waste your talents on negative feelings, Piper. All things must end."

In the quiet of her thoughts, she replied: *"But our friendship shouldn't have. Not so soon."*

After their moment's reflection, Piper raised her head and announced: "We christen thee the *USS Millennium."* With a tight

chest Piper reached forward and hit the button that released the tiny bottle of champagne that quickly spun its way across from the station towards the side of the ship's secondary hull. The audience caught the reflection of the sun as it sparkled off the bottle before it shattered into a million frozen fragments when it encountered the hull plating.

The task was complete. The new *USS Millennium* had been christened and was ready for duty.

Piper turned to go and, as she cast a final glance over the crowd, she thought she caught a glimpse of a woman with a pile of cherry red hair on her head. Surely, she hadn't followed her here...

Her quarters didn't look right. Piper's room was typically bland in colouring, with the usual desk and amenities. Boring. She would have to ask the Quartermaster to paint it lilac, like her old room.

She threw her duffel bag on the bed and unclipped her Vin'tah from its place in her hip before reverently placing it on the desk. She pondered it for a moment and thought that it reflected her ship and mission in many ways. From the outside it looked innocuous, like most Federation starships. Like the *Millennium*, it was ready for anything and held a number of surprises. Within, it contained not only an effective staff, but also an optional razor-sharp blade that had drawn a lot of blood over the years. The ship, too, held many surprises, including triple shielding, weapons a-plenty and even a cloaking device.

The last item had been contentious. Starfleet was not given to subterfuge, but Piper had seen the necessity – on occasion. Indeed, it had saved their lives more than once.

There had been many who had been vocal in their opposition, but always behind closed doors and only within the Admiralty. Indeed, the cloaking device's installation on the *Millennium* wasn't known by all who served on her, either. Need-to-know extended to the ship's most secret component.

On board, it had been maintained by a select few who included the Chief Engineer, her second, and Sarda.

Thinking about him once more brought the same hollow feeling she always felt when she was again reminded of his absence. It was like a vital piece of her was missing and she had no idea how to fix it. She was beginning to understand what it was like for an amputee to live on without their missing limb. You just make do and keep going.

Piper reached up and released the clip on her jacket, allowing it to fall open. She was reaching for her belt when the door chimed.

The sound took her back to the launch of the original *Millennium* when her settling-in time aboard that vessel had been unceremoniously cut short due to an emergency situation. She hoped history wasn't repeating itself.

"Enter."

The door opened to admit Ambassador Spock, who never seemed to age, and Sa'avik, who retained her youthful beauty even though she was only a decade younger than Piper. She stepped forward and honoured them with the Vulcan salute. "What can I do for you, Ambassador?" she asked, suddenly on her guard. A visit from the ageing Vulcan would never be frivolous.

Spock waited for the door to close behind them, affording them privacy, before saying: "We have received an important communique from Romulus, Admiral. An opportunity has opened, and it must be seized."

To Piper's experienced ears Spock was almost excited, even given his stoic delivery. It was a curious statement as it had been years since they had heard a peep from the Rihannsu. Since Empress Ael had closed their borders, the place had become a black hole of information. "Don't tell me," she said sarcastically. "They want to declare peace and celebrate it with a BBQ."

Spock shifted slightly, the only sign that he was annoyed. Sa'avik was less reserved and readily displayed her embarrassment.

"I am not certain of the means of celebration, but peace would be worth celebrating." Spock's eyebrows drew together as he gazed at Piper.

The Admiral wondered if he was looking into her very soul. He didn't need to be a telepath. He was simply wise beyond his years. Piper realised her tone was insulting and pulled her head in. "My apologies, Ambassador." Her cheeks flushed a little. "You deserve better than my petulance."

Sa'avik spoke for Spock to console her old friend. "We grieve with thee, Admiral. We are aware of your particular source of discomfort. It is not a simple thing to survive the passing of one's bond mate."

Piper's sense of being incomplete returned with a vengeance. The pain in her soul practically cried out, as if it was a barely contained creature roaring to be let loose from the tightly shut cage within her. Yet the Admiral had become so adept at wearing a mask that the only visible sign was a slight moistening of her eyes.

However, the Vulcans would not be fooled. Even though the two were touch telepaths, Piper's abilities in that area were stronger and her emotions practically broadcast. Both Spock and

Sa'avik took an involuntary step back as if they were somehow giving her room.

Nearby, on the *T'Plana-Hath,* Amantasandage was just about to sit down to eat her lunch meal when she felt Piper's cry of pain. It shot through her like an arrow, and she dropped her steak, her eyes wide. "Oh, my..." she said, almost choking on the words.

Scanner, who had been sipping his coffee, looked at his wife with alarm. "What's the matter, hon?"

Instead of saying anything, the Cait wrapped her prehensile tail around Scanner's wrist, giving them the contact she needed to form a psychic link. She needed privacy – and the ability to communicate effectively. She gave him the memory of the pain she had felt and added: *"I'm worried about Piper. She's not herself since we lost Sarda and I'm not sure she's ever going to be again".*

Scanner sighed. He showed her the concern he felt. *"Since they joined in their minds, I've been worried what would happen to either of them if they lost the other. With their thoughts being shared for so long they literally would have become part of one another."*

"Exactly," Manny thought. *"I'm just worried that she doesn't know how to let him go and become whole again. She needs to heal."*

Confused, Scanner interjected: *"What do you mean exactly by "let him go"?"* He had felt the connotation to her thought. It was one of the beauties of telepathic conversation. You heard the words and felt their meaning.

"If you have someone's thoughts inside your mind for so long – as Piper and Sarda did – they not only become

interconnected, but a part of him is still living in her mind. If she is ever going to move on in this life, she needs to..." At that point she was lost for an appropriate notion.

Fortunately, Scanner understood where she was going. *"Be exorcised of him. How can you do that? Is it possible?"*

His wife agreed with the concept. *"Yes. I hear Vulcans have a ritual for that. Perhaps it's something Ambassador Spock can help her with. We should suggest it to him."*

At that, Scanner had reservations. It would be a breach of Piper's privacy, to say the very least. *"Not without speaking to her first."*

"Agreed." Manny sighed and snacked on her steak. *"I just hope we can talk to her soon. I'm worried about her, my love. Really worried."*

Spock had finished briefing Piper on their mission and was walking down the corridor with Sa'avik. There were no secrets between them. "I am concerned for the Admiral's mental state," he said quietly, making sure he would not be overheard. "She is not dealing well with Sarda's passing."

Sa'avik nodded slightly, her thoughts not purely logical. The Romulan emotions within her waged to be heard. "The pain she feels is real and understandable."

"All the same, perhaps it would be better if we were assigned a different escort for this mission. It is too important to risk being derailed by Piper's grief."

The younger officer paused in her stride as inspiration stuck her, jostling loose a lock of her long, curly dark hair. "What if it is more than grief?" she asked, her dark eyes wide at the possible revelation.

Spock stopped and waited. Although he guessed her line of thought he respectfully waited as any teacher would, allowing the student to learn by doing.

She turned her finely chiselled features to meet her elder's gaze. "Perhaps she needs to return to Vulcan to Mount Seleya. Is it possible she is a Keeper?"

Since their meeting with Piper, Spock was beginning to suspect the possibility. Was it true that the Admiral was carrying Sarda's katra – his living spirit? He was aware of the chaos his own katra had brought to Doctor McCoy in the short time he carried it. It had been *six months* since Sarda's decease. There was one fact that remained clear on the record that resolved the matter. "Impossible. Piper was not present with him before his death. There was no way for him to prepare and pass it on."

Sa'avik heard and understood the logic of his argument, yet she remained unconvinced. She turned and began walking once more as she processed her thoughts. Spock fell into step with her and waited, knowing she still had more she wished to say. Their long association had taught him how to read her silences.

Slowly, she added: "For a typical Vulcan bonding, there are precedents we can use to judge. However, theirs went deeper than most, even though it was unintentional."

Spock was intrigued. "Please elaborate."

Sa'avik was torn. Theirs was a special, openly honest relationship. However, that did not include violating another's privacy – especially Piper. Theirs was an old and dear friendship. She looked up and down the corridor and made sure they were alone before continuing. She knew that anything she shared with Spock would remain confidential. "Piper has a very high psi factor, much higher than most Vulcans. On a previous mission

there was a meld between her, Sarda and.....” she paused for the briefest moments to contain her own grief, before continuing. “Commander t’Avik of the Romulan Navy – my mother – just before her decease. The meld was interrupted, and the psychic shock nearly killed Piper and Sarda when t’Avik passed. A part of her spirit remained with the two of them for a time and it kept them in a deep meld for hours. Only Commander Amantasandage’s entering the meld brought them back to themselves. However, it left them with a permanent, and very deep, bond. They have been a part of one another since.”

Spock’s brow rode up. “Fascinating. I am beginning to understand the complexity of the situation. Perhaps Sarda’s *spirit* remains with Piper in much the same way your mother’s did.” He noticed they were near their destination and paused. “We will need the services of a powerful telepath if we are to assist the Admiral. Perhaps Commander Amantasandage could be of assistance.” He turned and started walking. Within seconds they were standing in one of the ship’s transporter rooms. “We must organise an intervention for her at the conclusion of this mission. Unfortunately, there is no time at present. We will have to manage her symptoms on our own.”

Sa’avik nodded her agreement. Time was sorely limited. She looked over at the transporter operator and said: “Two to beam to the *Enterprise*.”

Folding the last of her uniform slacks, Piper put them away in her drawers and considered her next move. Should she begin the inspection that was one of the first duties of a new commander, or just take a break? She knew she could use one. The ache in her bones these days was getting hard to ignore. Damn this getting old.

She had time. After all, Spock's briefing had informed her that they would not be shipping out until tomorrow as the appropriate staff needed to be recalled. A summit with the Romulan Empress was not something to be taken lightly.

Her considerations came to a halt as the door chimed once more. She scowled to herself. History *was* repeating itself. There were times when she doubted her open-door policy to her crew. Right now, she simply needed some time to herself to recharge her batteries and reflect.

"Come in," she said, not really wanting to.

The door opened silently and one of the most frustrating people Piper knew stood there, framed in the light of the hallway, looking as dazzling as she did the first time Piper met her. She was of average height and had an hourglass figure. Her large, brown eyes saw everything, and her wide, friendly mouth was always ready with a smile. Her most amazing feature was the pile of red hair neatly stacked on her head that framed her face and swept down her back. It wasn't regulation, but ships' counsellors were given a fair amount of discretion.

"What can I do for you, Eliza?" Piper asked, already knowing the answer. The identical twin sister of the late Elise McKennah was practically a carbon copy of her. She had that same, charming wit and a relentlessness that would make a Klingon think twice. Piper wondered whether she had been tasked to the *Millennium* as this ship's counsellor or if this was a social call.

"You know why I'm here, Admiral Piper," she said coyly, her eyes sparkling. "You've been avoiding me like the plague. After the loss of the *Millennium,* you were supposed to undergo mandatory counselling sessions but, for reasons I can't imagine,

you kept finding excuses to not see me." Her tone was cheeky, but still demanded answers.

Piper scowled. This time she had been cornered. She had suspected it had been McKennah she had seen on the starbase, now she was certain of it. "Like I told you before, Commander, I don't need counselling and I find it a waste of my time."

Much to Piper's annoyance, the doctor wasn't to be so easily put off. She just kept her disarming smile plastered on her face. "Physician, heal thyself, doesn't apply in psychotherapy and, the last time I checked, Admiral, that isn't a degree you hold. It is up to your counsellor to sign off on you. Now, when can I schedule an appointment, or should I simply keep dropping in on you unannounced?"

The Admiral fumed. She was stuck, and she knew it. A ship's counsellor could overrule the captain if she believed she was justified – even if they held the rank of Admiral. "I will get back to you in a couple of hours, Doctor."

Knowing this was her cue to leave, McKennah turned on her heel and stepped towards the door. "I'll hold you to that, Admiral. I'd hate to have to drop in on you in the middle of the night for a session."

Before Piper could give an appropriate retort, McKennah was out the door and out of sight. She would rather have been raked over hot coals and fed to cannibals than be head shrunk. She wondered if she could find a way to continue avoiding the shrink.

"Your behaviour is illogical, Piper. Doctor McKennah is only trying to help you." Sarda's voice came unbidden in her head, but when she heard him, it was never unwelcome.

"You know how much I hate shrinks, Sarda," she said, quietly, to herself.

"You are in pain, and you need help. You are allowing your thinking to become clouded by grief and remorse. If you don't deal with it, you may make a mistake that could cost a great deal."

Piper sighed. "I just need time to get over your death," she said, resigned to her fate.

The voice would not be put off. *"You have no intention of "getting over it". I am just as much a part of you now as before my death. Until you let me go you will never begin to heal. Take me home and release me."*

Once again, she was torn. "I can't let you go. I've forgotten where I end and you begin. I need your guidance." She was deliberate in avoiding the other truth of the situation and she knew it. She wiped the tears in her eyes, tried to ignore the tightness in her chest, gave her a quarters a quick glance as she had finished her task, then left. Perhaps Sarda would stop nagging her if she got on with the inspection. It was wishful thinking.

Chapter Four

Time had passed and yet it hadn't. Piper wondered if she would ever get used to this shifting around in time and decided she couldn't. She was made for a linear existence, plain and simple. There was a beginning, now, and the end. Everything else could be someone else's domain – like the Time Agents.

The trouble with that line of thinking was that most of them she had met so far hadn't instilled her with a great deal of trust or faith. She was beginning to realise that, for all their difference in time, the Agents were just as flawed as she was. Sure, they had some fancy new toys, but they were just as hamstrung by their limits as temporal beings as someone from her own century.

"Now, that was boring," came Scanner's voice, even though he had not spoken. "There are only so many games of Tetris I'm willing to challenge mahself to."

Piper gave a bemused glance at her Chief Engineer who was at his station as he gave another, uncomfortable grimace. While he was fond of his granddaughter to the Nth power, Sustasandage's choice of personality for the AI in her ship was creepy. It was familiar, yes, and somewhat flattering, but also a grim reminder that one day he would be no more.

Sustasandage spoke up from her place on the Bridge, next to Piper's command chair. "I take it we're in the right place and time?" she asked amiably.

"Where else would we be?" AI Scanner said cheekily. "Jus' trust old Scanner, I'll get you there every time – any time."

Piper could practically feel Scanner roll his eyes. All the same, for all the AI's amazing abilities, she wanted her own people to verify their position in time and space. Without saying a word, she flashed a thought to Sarda at Science. Within seconds he had checked the stardate via Memory Alpha and their position relative to the stars. *"All is good, Piper,"* he thought back with a mental sigh. Trusting their fate to a machine that kept them in stasis for twenty years was not his kind of fun.

"How's your energy reserves?" Sus asked her ship.

"Not good," it replied. "Ah'm down to eighteen percent. Captain Piper, permission to come aboard?"

Piper looked over to Sus who nodded an affirmation to her unspoken question. Her ship was quite capable of flying itself. "Granted. Make yourself at home in bay three."

"Dandy." On the viewscreen the sleek little ship darted down and under and within moments had parked itself in one of the lowest decks of the *Millennium*.

Piper had no time for being a spectator. "Scanner," she said, addressing her fellow crewmate, "as soon as it's aboard I need you to start work on the upgrades."

Not one for wasting a moment, Judd got to his feet and headed for the turbolift. "You don't have to ask me twice."

He stepped through the doors with Sus at his side. He was going to need her expertise if they were going to truly make the *Millennium* invisible. He looked up at Sus and, for a brief moment, wondered if, when this was all over, she was going to be another casualty of this time war. If his present version of himself should no longer exist, perhaps Sus will never have existed at all? It was gut wrenching as he realised that, while not blood, she was indeed his own progeny, his legacy. She deserved to live. Sucking it up, he internalised his feelings and said, a little roughly,

"Thanks for your help with this, darlin'. We're already twenty years out of date and I don't want to go into this with a see-through cloak."

Judd had forgotten his granddaughter was a sensitive. She placed her paw on his shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I feel your pain, Grandfather. As Time Agents, we all take an oath to serve the Federation, and Time itself, regardless of the personal cost. Billions of lives will be saved if we can stop Hobus from exploding. It that comes at the cost of my existence, I am willing to pay it."

The sigh came from the depths of Judd's very soul. "This mess has cost the lives of so many people I can't begin to count. Suzette – Piper Silayna – lost her entire version of the Universe and everyone in it. I'm sure there are people who were born who aren't in existence now." With a flash of anger Judd punched the lift wall. "If that bastard Nero had any idea of the absolute buggery he created then I hope he's burning in a very private part of Hell."

Sus' eyes widened at the outburst. While she thought herself well versed in her family's history, it was another thing to witness Judd's passion for real. As the doors opened and they stepped out into the hall she gave what comfort she could. "Grandfather, I know you're a good man and all that you do is from your fierce love for your friends and family. I believe that will be rewarded. I believe that God won't forget your sacrifices."

Judd was a little surprised with her bold statement of faith. He didn't have a whole lot of time to consider what lay beyond his life as he always told himself he was too busy to contemplate it. If he was honest with himself, he would have realised that he was simply procrastinating. Whatever his beliefs were at the moment, and he wasn't certain what they were, he was too much

a gentleman to question hers. He gave her a brief smile and simply said: “Thanks.”

The two of them stepped up to a nondescript door in the forward section of the engineering hull. It was unmarked and yet it had a retinal scanner placed next to it. Only a few people on the ship had clearance for the bay that housed the Cloaking Device but that was not important now. Security wasn’t an issue for their antique equipment. All the same, Judd put his eye to the scanner and the door whooshed open.

Sus sucked in a breath. “Oh, yes. We’ve got some work to do.”

Judd just chuckled. “So much for mah state of the art ship.”

His daughter just shrugged. “It’s not the tools that matter, Father, it’s what you do with them.”

With the preparations under way, Piper took a moment to take care of her own needs. She stopped by her quarters and picked up her Vin’tah, her katana and changed into a ghee for the first time in ages. It felt odd to her as she hadn’t the opportunity to wear one for over a year. All the same, she felt freer in the loose-fitting garment, and she tossed a new one she’d had replicated to her sister.

Suzette held up the odd-shaped garb and turned it this way and that. “How am I supposed to get into this?” she asked, perplexed.

Piper stepped over and helped her out of her jeans and t-shirt and loaned her one of her sports bras – they were the same size. She then guided her into the outfit and did it up just so. She stepped back and admired her handywork. “Not bad,” she said with a smile.

Her sister grimaced. "It's a bit stiff," she complained.

"It's still new. You'll get used to it." She looked around and found a pair of flat slip-on shoes. "Put these on. We'll be practising barefoot today, but you don't want to be running around the hangar deck without them."

With the pair now suitably attired, they made their way to the turbolift and to the extreme rear of the ship – its vast hangar deck sitting on top of the Engineering hull. Aside from a number of fighters sitting in their bays in their usual scramble formation, the space was empty.

Almost. Sitting to the left of the lift doors was a large, white ball of fur. Amantasandage looked up at them and gave them a brief smile. "What took you so long?" she asked cheekily.

Suzette gave her a mock scowl. "There's no surprising you, is there?"

"There's something to be said for predictability," she said amiably. "However, I pray that it'll never be said of me."

Knowing the drill, the three broke into a jog and began their circuit of the deck. Before Piper Silayna joined them the Captain and Security Chief would make ten turns of the kilometre-long circle, but they decided to keep it down to five this time in deference to Suzette. She was coming along with her fitness level, but she was still not a match for the others.

Piper Silayna also found herself slightly annoyed at the bouncing weight at her hip. Piper had entrusted her with the Vin'tah – sheathed – and she was simply not used to its extra weight and the mere fact it kept moving around. Piper internalised a smile at her discomfort, but it was good training. As a Master of Scheel-Tah, she'd had to endure all kinds of inconveniences, including some that could have left a scar if she hadn't had a protoplaser handy.

The three jogged on quietly for a time, simply enjoying the sense of camaraderie they had as their shared experience and mental facilities gave them a feeling for one another. In that place and time, they were simply their version of a flock of seagulls, carried along on the breeze.

Spock was deep in meditation when he sensed the presence of an entity that did not belong. His eyes cracked open, and he unclasped his hands, unsettled. This was peculiar, considering the *Millennium* was still outside the confines of the Milky Way Galaxy. How the being came to be here was beyond him. All the same, he had to confirm his suspicions before reporting them. Given his great age, he took a moment to bring himself to his feet and dress appropriately. His human heritage had given him the same arthritis that had plagued his mother later in life and he had to move carefully these days. His Vulcan training had helped him manage the pain, but there were times when even he had to submit to the need for analgesia.

The Ambassador made his way out the door of the guest quarters and down the corridor. He moved gracefully and with purpose, not realising the deference the junior officers and crew gave him as he passed. They were in the presence of a living legend and responded in kind.

It was not long before he found a turbolift and entered.

"Destination?" the computer requested after a moment's silence.

Spock wasn't sure. "The aft section of the ship," he said, still uncertain.

"The Hangar Deck?" the electronic voice queried.

"Yes," Spock said. It was as good a place as any, he thought.

A moment later the doors slid open, and Spock found himself momentarily stunned by the size of this ship. Even in the twenty-fourth century among the *Galaxy*- and *Sovereign*-class ships he was used to dealing with, few of them had a hangar deck that could compare with this. The *Ingram*-class was enormous by twenty-third century standards.

The lift waited patiently for the ageing dignitary to alight, and Spock stepped out and took a moment to get his bearings. He closed his eyes and considered the presence once more. "It *is* here," he said quietly to himself.

"What is?" Amantasandage asked as she quickly padded up to him. The moment she had seen the Vulcan she had broken into a run and gotten out ahead of the pack.

Spock turned and sized up the Caitian Security Officer who was now standing upright. She was capable enough, that he was aware of. Would she be willing to indulge an old man's flights of fancy? One thing was certain, the muscles moving under that thick fur could probably break tritanium. He decided to go slowly. "I was deep in meditation when someone or *something* broke my concentration."

It was the concern about the *thing* that caught Manny's attention. "There is a presence here?" she asked, instantly on her guard. It was her nature to protect others without thought to her own safety.

"What presence?" Piper asked now she had caught up with them both. Not far behind her Piper Silayna, huffing and puffing, but not completely winded, quickly joined them.

To their surprise, Manny had already found it. She looked off in the direction of the side room where Ghost stored the *Spectre*. "Whatever it is, it's in there," she said, pointing.

Moving a little slower than usual for Spock's sake, the group sauntered over and paused outside the door. They knew the area should be empty as Ghost insisted that all maintenance on the craft be done by herself after a previous failure by ground staff had left her with a permanent injury. She was not the kind to give someone the chance to fail her. Also, the diminutive Irish woman was presently in the Conn as Piper was grooming her for more command duties.

There was no way Manny was going to risk the other's safety, so she took it upon herself to step through the door and look around. She did this on all fours and did her best to slip, undetected, under the belly of the *Spectre.* Once in place, she looked around the room, searching out a pair of legs, feet, anything that might support a sentient life form. There was nothing. She considered for a moment whether she had inadvertently missed the target and that the intruder might be standing on the fighter itself. She was tempted to hiss at herself but did her best to keep her breathing as quiet as possible. She did not want to give away her presence and, as she flicked her ears around looking for sounds, she found none. It was deathly silent. It was peculiar as she could still feel the presence of something not only ancient but *other*. It was completely alien to her.

In the back of her mind, she could hear Captain Piper yelling at her telepathically and she had chosen to ignore it. Their recent experiences in the past had modified their working relationship somewhat and these days she knew that the Captain would give her more latitude than she used to.

"There's no sight of an alien presence," she announced in her mind. *"I missed looking on top of the Spectre. Can you see anything there?"*

Manny could feel Piper's scowl from here. *"One of these days, your running into the fray ahead of me is going to get you killed,"* she reproved.

"Better me than you."

Piper quickly glanced around the edge of the door and took in the space behind it. The *Spectre* was a tight fit and she could clearly see there was nothing hiding on its matte black surface. "Clear," she said loudly enough for Manny to hear.

The Caitian rolled out from under the ship and quickly stood, being joined by Piper, Suzette and Spock. With Manny in the lead, the quartet moved past the fighter's wing and looked behind its huge engine exhaust ports.

Manny's eyes went wide in surprise. Both Pipers said in unison: "What the..."

Spock simply said slowly: "Fascinating."

Captain's Log, USS Enterprise, Stardate 10570.2,
We are currently en route to the Romulan Neutral Zone at warp seven with the Millennium, Farragut and Firebrand along as escort. We are one day out of spacedock and so far, we haven't had any problems. Considering the importance of our mission, we aren't taking any chances that our journey will be delayed. I don't think the Orions would be too happy about the possibility of peace. They've been trying to sell munitions to us for years saying we'd need them to protect ourselves from the Romulans. I hear they have more luck with the other side...

John Harriman checked his chair display where he saw a small graphic of the position of his little fleet. He had to admit

there were few times in his career when he travelled in convoy and fewer when his ship was the one under protection.

"Are we there yet?"

The captain looked up at the face of one of his close friends on board. Dr Joanna McCoy had been with the B since that fateful Tuesday following the ship's launching. Daughter of Leonard McCoy, she had much of her father's irascible wit. "It'll be a couple of days until we reach the border, Doctor," he said. "Why don't you catch up on some reading? You have plenty of time."

Jo feigned a yawn, which with her wide mouth and glistening teeth was quite a display. "I'm all caught up. She glanced around the bridge as the collection of souls she had been travelling with for the past years and, rather than being introspective, considered how many credits she might win from them. "How about a game of poker this evening?" she suggested.

Harriman gave her a knowing look. "Said the spider to the fly," he said with a grin. Jo's talents at the game were practically legendary. He took a moment to consider the idea, then nodded. "It's not a bad idea. We could bring the captains together this evening and I could let you clean them out."

The doctor's grin became predatory. "Maybe I could buy a new boat when we get home."

John's brow went up as he thought of her optimism. Normally, he would agree with her. However, this time he had to admit to himself he had a bad feeling about this mission. Jo's attention was elsewhere so she missed the look of trepidation that passed over his ever-youthful looks. The possibility for a much brighter future was a carrot no self-respecting Starfleet donkey could refuse, however he hoped that in these circumstances he didn't make an ass of himself. While the present Empress had

acted previously in a manner that was honourable and gave him a reason for hope, the Rihannsu had a long history of overturning previous Praetors. Starfleet had a running joke that the only thing that changed faster than the captains' drawers in a battle with the Romulans was their government.

"With the Captain's permission, I'll put out the word," Jo said after a moment of scheming. "This could be fun."

John wasn't so sure but was willing to give it a try.

All Federation starships had conference rooms where situations both benign and dire were considered and strategies hashed out. This was a place where victories were created by the minds of extremely able sentients who combined to bring their individual strengths to bear on a problem. The conference room on the *Enterprise-B* was lavish compared with the original's but bore a striking resemblance to the one on the *A* that had played host to the first meal shared by a Federation Starship Captain and a Klingon Chancellor.

Paintings lined one wall that depicted earlier incarnations of the *Starship Enterprise* from the XCV-330 early explorer to the ship they were standing in. As John glanced at them once more and admired the artistic licence taken with each image, he was glad that his ship didn't look like it did after it returned from its very first mission. That was a launching he could have done without. The loss of Kirk was something he still carried today, years later. He was certain it would always bug him.

As it often did, his mind's eye went back to the bridge in the brief moment when he was standing in the turbolift, about to head down to work on the deflector dish when Kirk had risen from the captain's chair and told him that he would go instead. That moment had defined what followed for him as Kirk was not the

Captain of the *B, he was*. He could have said no and gone anyway, but how do you say no to a living legend? That was the truth of the situation, and he knew it. There was no way he could have changed the mind of a force of nature like James T Kirk.

That was how he had come to accept the fact that Kirk had died on his watch. The review board had seen it that way. After all, it was staffed by Admirals who had all had run-ins with the man.

Harriman had been busy, so he had been the last to arrive at Jo's little shindig. While the space did have one long table dominating an end of the room, the other now sported a largish poker table replete with chips and a green, felt top to make the cards easier to handle. Seated around it were Admiral Piper, Captain Joseph Small of the *Firebrand*, Jo, and Captain Hitesh Chopra of the *Farragut*. John gave them all a welcoming smile as host and took a moment to shake their hands in turn. He then pulled out his chair and plonked himself down with a grin.

"Prepare to be fleeced," he said, delighted to be able to share this moment with them.

Captain Small, a six-foot tall human from Earth's British Isles who was exactly the opposite of what his name might bring to mind, gave him a confident smile. "This little pile of chips in front of me is just going to get bigger, my friend," he said in a deep basso voice.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Jo chipped in cheerfully. Lambs to the slaughter, she thought. John could see it in her eyes.

Piper gave a slight smile. "I've got to admit, I haven't done this for a while."

Chopra gave her a wolfish grin. "Said the spider to the fly," he said. "Why don't I believe you, Admiral?"

Piper gave him a "Who, me?" look and grinned. "No ranks at this table, I'm sure," she said. "Am I right, John?"

Harriman nodded sincerely. "Absolutely. At the Poker table, there is no rank, no friends, only marks to be fleeced."

Jo wondered if the notorious movie fanatic was quoting one of them. "Sometimes you come out with the most amazing anachronisms, John. I sometimes wonder if we're still living in the 20th Century and we're nothing more than characters in a book."

Small looked at the doctor quizzically. "I sincerely hope not. That would leave us all at the hands of the writer, and who knows what he has in mind?"

Jo rolled her eyes and began dealing. "The game is five card stud; deuces and one-eyed Jacks are wild."

Once the cards were down the players all chipped in. Nobody raised so Jo turned up the next card.

"Where I came from," said Piper introspectively, "the author of the Universe was well known. The God of the Universe, the One who made all, is a being of immense power who created space/time and all that is in it. The thinking is that, if He knows the end from the beginning and made all of time in one hit, then He truly is the author of history, and we are all players in His cosmic story."

Hitesh made a face. "If that's the case, I can blame him for this lousy hand."

Jo grimaced. Like her father, she was not a believer in the metaphysical. "My Dad met someone who claimed to be God. That didn't end well for Sybok."

Small considered whether to up Hitesh's bet and folded. He had nothing and generally didn't like bluffing. "Who's Sybok?"

Piper chimed in. "He was the brother of Spock," she said, matter-of-factly. "He rejected the Vulcan ideals of emotional control and instead embraced them. Not logical."

The comment drew a perplexed glance from John. Her tone reminded him of Spock, not Piper. "Getting back to the question of God, if He did create all of space/time all at once, then what becomes of self-determination? I'd hate to think that we're all simply here because it was preordained – that even the thoughts in my head aren't truly mine."

The notion did not sit well with any of the people seated. They were all over-achievers who had worked long and hard to be sitting where they were. There were too many sacrifices along the way.

Jo chipped in: "If there is a God, I'd like to have a few words with him about how messed up the Universe is. Never mind there were a number of dumb things I did when I was younger that I'd dearly not like to take responsibility for."

Piper chuckled. "That I can agree with." Her mind turned back to the appalling dancing she had once done while under cover in an Argelian bar and how Scanner had recorded the event and posted it on the ship's intranet.

"The course of history doesn't always make sense, does it?" John said introspectively. "I never did understand why what happened to Kirk did. If that was part of some master plan, I don't get it."

The Admiral sighed. "I don't get it, either. Remember, that was the thinking of my people on Proxima, and I don't necessarily agree with them." She picked up her glass of pineapple juice and took a sip. "I found that, in a room with five scholars you often had six different points of view. They didn't

often agree and there wasn't always even any overlap between their notions."

Jo noticed that the game had stalled. The call was to her, and she chipped in to keep things moving. She turned up the last card and noted that nothing on the table matched. This was going to be interesting.

Hitesh threw in a ten-credit chip to keep his hand alive. "The bid is yours, John," he said, noticing how distracted the man was.

Harriman brought his gaze back from the streaking vista outside the opposite window and focused once more on the cards. However, he wasn't quite seeing them. "If space/time is a physical property and it *was* created then the creator wouldn't necessarily be constrained by its power."

Piper nodded and said solemnly: "Agreed."

Small seemed to see where he was going. "Then God, whoever he/she/it is, would be able to see the end from the beginning. How do you then give life to something that simply is a part of the physical universe you just decided to create one day?"

Jo scowled. This wasn't the way she planned this game would go. A few chips won and lost, a bit of friendly banter and probably more liquor imbibed than was recommended, not this pseudo-religious claptrap. "John, the bid is to you," she said, chiding.

He looked down and considered his cards. Maintaining a poker face while seriously distracted was not something that came naturally to him. All the same, he had two pair. He wasn't about to capitulate. "Raise you ten," he said, tossing in his chips.

Chopra came back to the thought. "It is said that God made us because he wanted someone to hang out with."

Jo chuckled. “Isn’t there a cosmic bar that deities can come together and share a beer in?”

Small grinned. The Englishman liked pubs. “He can have a pint with me anytime. I’m sure he would have a lot of good stories.”

“No point telling him any jokes, though,” Hitesh said, flashing some teeth. “He’s heard them all before.”

The comment brought a smile to all those present.

Piper wasn’t about to let the subject go. “I’ve given it a lot of thought over time. While some of my friends back home tend to think that God’s plan involves everything, right down to the last time I stubbed my toe, I tend to think that He’s more like the sovereign who built His Kingdom for all to live in peacefully. He gave us laws to keep the peace and even has the front door open if we want to go to Him for help and advice, but, being a person who believes in the right to choose, He doesn’t impose His will on His people.”

To the surprise of the captains, Jo interjected: “If he is sitting up in his castle on the hill, why doesn’t he come out and clean up the mess he made?”

Piper gave her a level look. “You err in that you think that the Creator isn’t interested in what is going on.” She shook herself, a little surprised at herself, then continued: “I personally think He allows us to live our lives but does intervene when things get badly out of control.”

The cynic in Jo couldn’t help but add: “Yes, the flood of Noah and such. Yeah, wiping out the population of the Earth wasn’t his greatest feat.” The idea of mass extinction of individuals was something that violated the healer inside her deeply.

Piper shrugged. "I'm not too sure on that one, either, but my dad used to say that, when the going gets tough God does send deliverers, and there have been many of them throughout human history. David in the face of Goliath, Moses, Christ, Constantine, some might even say Winston Churchill during the war with Hitler's Germany. Zephram Cochrane led us out of poverty. Even more recently, Kirk's intervention during the Khitomer Conference averted a disaster that could have turned overtures for peace into all-out war."

At that John tilted his head to the side. "Are we today's deliverers? Are we here to finally bring peace to the Alpha Quadrant?" He gave a wide grin. "I certainly hope so."

Piper gave him a look. "Peace with the Romulans would be difficult as they are Vulcanoids who have not embraced the teachings of Surak."

Harriman caught the Admiral's eye. Her face was a little slack and reminded him of the lack of animation he often saw on the face of a Vulcan. Odd. "The Romulans have created their own philosophies," he said. "I read that Empress Ael is devoted to the ways of *mnhei'sahe*. Surak isn't necessarily the answer to every Vulcanoid's problems."

Not to be out-argued, Piper said: "For the Vulcans, emotions run very deep. It's only through the philosophies of Surak with his emphasis on emotional control and meditation that Vulcans found peace."

Jo scowled at that. "I've never met a Vulcan who had been through Kohlinar that I liked. I might as well have been talking to a robot."

Harriman ignored her and added: "Logically, we have to accept the fact that it is the Romulan's main philosophy, and we have to meet them where they are. We can't go into this

conference with guns blazing insisting they follow the ways of Surak." He spoke in a friendly, even manner then looked up into the Admiral's older and wiser eyes and was about to remind her the bet was to her. He was surprised at the fury he saw there. He looked at the crumpled remains of her cards clutched between whitened, angry fingers.

Jo's eyes widened at the sight of her. She had met the Admiral before and had always found her to be a reasonable woman given to wise choices. She had a reputation as a warrior, but nobody doubted her abilities as a peacemaker, either. The rage before her was out of character, that was clear.

"Admiral?" Harriman asked, invoking her rank and not only trying to remind her who and where she was but trying to help her to regain her emotional balance.

His tone caught the attention of Small and Chopra who had tuned out, letting their minds wander at this slow game of Poker. The two men looked at the senior officer and watched as she tried to smooth out her damaged cards. "I think we're going to need a new deck," Chopra said whimsically.

The comment brought an angry glare from not only Piper, but Harriman as well. The man was not helping.

Piper looked at her cards, checked the table and decided it wasn't worth playing. She tossed the battered remains of her hand onto the table face down and said: "Fold." Deciding she'd had enough for one evening, she got to her feet. "My apologies, people. This has been a more trying day than I thought. If you'll excuse me."

Respectfully, the others came to their feet and stood and watched as she left the room. They all shared a look of wonder, but it was Harriman who was the most concerned. The two of them had collaborated a number of times in the past and he had

never seen her lose her cool like she had this night. He wondered if the pressure was finally getting to her, or if it was something else.

As everyone once more took their seats Jo shot her captain a look. "What do you think that was all about?" she asked.

Harriman shrugged. When criticising the behaviour of their superiors one had to tread carefully.

The hand played out and Jo won the pot, which wasn't much. As the cards were being collected John stole a glance at Piper's hand. To his surprise she had held not only two pair, but Aces high. She would have won if she hadn't folded, and she must have known she would. Weirder and weirder.

Chapter Five

The new *Bloodwing* dropped out of warp bathed in the bluish light of the giant star, Hobus. Ael had decided this would be a good place to have the opening talks with the Federation counterparts as it was closer to their territory and away from the rat's nest that was the Praetorate. She didn't need an ambassador to speak for the Empire, and she didn't trust they would have had *her* best interests for it in mind either.

She was delighted with the performance of the ship which was an upgrade to the *S'harien* class of ships in that it had been scaled up in size, was faster and had a larger power source, a new version of the artificial quantum singularity drive that was becoming the standard for all naval vessels. She had noted that this one also had an advanced shielding system that was powered directly from the singularity itself. It did double duty of not only protecting the crew from a device that could swallow the ship in the blink of an eye and from the x- and gamma-rays that they normally produced in copious amounts (that were not healthy), but it also protected it from threats from without.

Ael stepped forward from her place in the command chair on the bridge and bathed in the glory of this system's massive sun. Hobus had few equals in the skies of the Romulan Star Empire, and it was one of the reasons she had chosen this as the location for the talks. Bigger is always better in politics.

She had to admit she missed this. There were times when Ael would have given anything to put the pettiness of the Senate behind her permanently and take once more to the skies in command of a starship. As a youth, she had never aspired to more than that. Being Empress hadn't been her choice or desire – the

duty had been foisted upon her by a needing populace. The Great Houses had for too long kept all the power centralised to themselves and the average Rihannha had been left with barely enough to feed themselves. Their childish need to expand their personal spheres of influence had led them to make some foolish choices and so they had to be deposed – for the good of the Empire. It was something she reminded herself of frequently. It was all for the good of the Empire. It was practically her own, personal mantra.

She turned and looked about her at the spacious bridge and noted so many young faces. All recent graduates from the Imperial Academy and handpicked by herself. There was no space on this bridge for children of the Great Houses – whose allegiances were always divided and definitely suspect.

"Announce us to the station and have our dock prepared." All good things come to an end, so the humans say, she thought.

"Yes, Empress."

Ael was tempted to roll her eyes. A part of her had been hoping to hear "khre'Riov" – Commander in Federation Standard – that her time as the Praetor/Empress had been a dream – a bad one at that. It was a hard thing for Ael to admit that she had failed. At least she was willing to try something new. True insanity was repeating the same actions over and over and expecting a different result. She smiled within. This was a truth that Kirk had shown her.

"The station reports our dock is ready to receive us, khre'Riov," came a voice to her left. Aidoann was teasing her Empress again. Ael noticed around her mixed reactions. The younger officers were mortified, the more senior who had served with her simply smiled.

Ael sat once more in the centre seat and curled her legs under her. She found it relaxing. "Sub-Commander," she said cheerfully, "take us in."

As the dull metallic thud of the docking clamps attaching themselves to the outer hull rang through the vessel, Arrhae ran through her mind once more the things she had done before leaving her home. It was a difficult thing to put one's affairs in order without revealing your intentions. In her mind's eye she could see her staff observing her quizzically, wondering if she was just being overly cautious considering they were well aware of their mistress's distaste of space flight. All the same, hers was a House of some standing, and they knew the importance of carrying on her legacy if the worst were to happen to her on this trip. In the end, they simply humoured her.

If there was one thing she *was* grateful for, it was a loyal staff. Arrhae had been meticulous with the background checks on everyone, and she liked to think she was a good judge of character. After all, an anthropologist should be. It was a difficult thing to do once she had become a Senator as the Tal Shiar had offered to do the security checks for her. Thankfully, her newfound status had given her the wriggle room to politely decline. She was quite certain that at least *one* of the people they "cleared" would be a spy and she had too much to lose. After all, she did have a bad habit of talking in her sleep and she didn't always speak in the Romulan tongue.

She looked about the stateroom she had been assigned on the new *Bloodwing* and had to marvel that such things existed on a Romulan vessel. It seemed like yesterday that she had a stone for a pillow and a leather "couch" to sleep on when she had been

the house hru'hfe[2]. Now, she was in a large room with an oversized bed with large furs for coverings and a down-filled pillow for her head. There were elaborate tapestries on the walls depicting vivid vistas from ch'Rihan's mountain regions with white-capped peaks and gushing waterfalls. She wished she could take them with her.

All the same, she didn't even have this much indulgence in her home back on ch'Rihan. When she had gone to sleep the night before she had felt claustrophobic being surrounded by such soft luxuries. It was a bit like being smothered.

It was different on a Federation Starship – that was certain. As a Lieutenant Commander on the old *Excalibur,* she had her own room. The bed had a decent mattress, and the room had its own sonic shower, at least she thought so. Her life in Starfleet seemed like a lifetime ago.

Thinking of the *Excalibur* gave her a tinge of sadness. She had learned years before of the loss of that ship due to the madness of the M5 computer that had used the *Enterprise* to wreak destruction on five other ships during what was supposed to be a wargames simulation. She'd had friends on that ship.

She sighed. Part of the genetic manipulations that she'd undergone for her transformation into what passed for a Romulan was a slowing of her ageing process. She was now not only older than her siblings, but she had outlived all of them. She should have been thinking of retirement as her human age was nearing a hundred. When she looked in the mirror, she was only just beginning to show the signs of middle age. It was a blessing and a curse. She might have fit better into Rihannsu society but, when

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[2]Chief servant.

the time came for her to return to her own people, she would be completely out of place.

The thought wasn't new to her, but it still made her pause for a moment and sit on the edge of her bed. Yes, most of her friends were now either a whole lot older than her – relatively – or dead. Never mind, she was certain that there would be some in Starfleet Security that would regard her homecoming with suspicion. Had she been turned? She had to admit it should come as no surprise if she was to find herself under a certain level of surveillance for a time.

She shook herself. This line of thought was depressing, and she wanted to think of something that might brighten her up. She realised there were some who would welcome her with open arms, that was certain. She knew the former crew of the *USS Enterprise* would treat her like family. They had already come through a lot together, what with the dramas starting with Doctor McCoy's "capture" and imprisonment at her former master's house that continued with the Sunseed affair. She looked back at that time, and it seemed like a blur.

Her door chimed and she guessed it was her house valet, Tivor, who had accompanied her on the trip. She'd wanted to leave him behind considering the risks involved in what the Empress had in mind, but it would have been more than unseemly for a Senator to travel without at least a minimal retinue. Even considering her well known distaste for the trappings of wealth, a personage of her standing would demand some level of assistance. She had settled on one – Tivor. He was relatively young, and he had come from a family with no standing in Rihannsu society, so she was hopefully sure that he was not a plant. After she had caught the last one, she was constantly on her guard.

She gave her assent to enter and young Tivor stepped through the door with her breakfast on a plate in one hand and a steaming cup of tea in the other. As she watched him place them on the conveniently placed desk in this ship's stateroom, Arrhae found her thoughts going back to a previous servitor who had made a simple, but obvious, mistake.

The girl with the long, relatively unkempt raven black hair, slightly crooked nose and fairly dull, listless eyes had seemed a bit like a charity case for Arrhae. While she was legendary as a hru'hfe for her almost dictatorial style, as a house leader she was a bit of a soft touch. She had become known for constantly trying to lift the poor out of the gutter and the Senator later chided herself for allowing her nature to be used against her.

Ellemma spoke slowly and fitfully and so Arrhae had instructed her hru'hfe to instruct her in the basics – to make her a lowly maid servant whose first charge was to sweep, mop and dust. After a couple of days under her roof, Arrhae had stopped by the room Ellemma had been working in to see how she was doing. No surprise, when the Senator made her appearance in Arrhae's bedroom the girl had appeared startled. She had been tidying her linen drawers, which wasn't unusual, so Arrhae had just wanted her to feel a bit more at home.

"At ease, Ellemma, for Element's sake," she had said with a slight smile.

To her shock and surprise, Ellemma automatically dropped into a militaristic "At Ease" stance. She tried to cover it up and slouched a little, but Terise's Starfleet training had instantly caught the mistake.

At least her time serving as a Senator had taught her to keep a good Poker face. She had kept the realisation to herself and carried on as if she hadn't noticed. They had engaged in a

short conversation where she had assured the girl that she was happy to have her here before she left to take care of her own duties.

Arrhae had quickly found her hru'hfe, Tellarhiel, and told her to put her out on the street by day's end. She gave no explanation, and she didn't have to.

Tellarhiel had simply given her a knowing look. "Yes, Mistress. I will put the spy out before midmeal."

Arrhae had responded with an upraised brow. "You suspected something?"

The hru'hfe would not meet her gaze. "Only intuition, Mistress. There is something not quite right about her."

The Senator gave her a nod of agreement and left. She had no idea what would become of the girl, and she didn't really care. Arrhae/Terise had no time for traitors. Her trust in people was as valuable as a drop of water in the desert – never to be wasted.

Arrhae brought herself back to the present and focussed on the young man who was waiting expectantly. He was in no way impatient. She was certain he knew the value of his appointment on her staff. It was a coveted position that brought honour to his clan.

While her human side would have normally thanked him for his diligence, Arrhae knew the Romulan way was to simply take what was given without acknowledgement. The work he did for her was part of his job, his calling, and to give her nothing but the best was expected service.

She took her place at the table and began eating, savouring the taste. This might be one of the last times she got to enjoy an egg from ch'Rihan for breakfast, she thought. Who knew? Within days she might be eating pancakes with … what

was the name?... syrup. Returning to her people was going to be jarring at first, that she was certain of.

She glanced at Tivor, who stood to the side and waited while she ate her boiled egg, lightly salted, and then sipped her tea while she pondered the days ahead. Yes, things were going to change, but the Starfleet Commander part of her wondered just how in the Elements they were going to be able to pull it off?

Deep in the darkest dilithium mines on ch'Havran, a small group of disaffected Remans came together, careful to make certain they were not seen. Their Rihannsu cousins mostly left them alone – as long as they brought in their daily quota of dilithium crystals, among other ores.

All the same, being left alone was one thing. Being trusted was another.

Centuries ago, the Ships had arrived at the twin worlds and had begun colonising them. However, to their surprise, there was a small group of natives on ch'Havran who were not so dissimilar to their own race that they were incapable of interbreeding. While the locals were essentially iron-age peasants, the inevitable had happened and intermarriages had taken place. It was only a matter of generations before the aboriginal Remans had practically ceased to exist, leaving only a mixture of Rihannsu and their cousins – who were seen as lowly half-castes.

Being a Reman had advantages. They were better suited to the harsh environment on their world as it was tidally locked with one side always facing the sun. In the early days most of the settlements had been on the terminator circling the world as it was the most easily tamed. Once that world's vast resources of ores

had been discovered – it was only a matter of time before they had enough energy production to push further back into the night side.

Given that most of their lives were spent never seeing Eisn, their sun, their eyes became weak and light sensitive. However, their ability to perceive objects in the dark was unparalleled. In their wars of expansion, Remans made up squads of elite troupes that would work with deadly efficiency in the dark.

Also, their skin became more pallid, and they found that they needed a diet rich in Vitamin D as they spent no time in the daylight. Their facial differences included long, sharp canines, longer ears and they were hairless. However, there was one difference they kept a very closely guarded secret. They knew that, if it ever became known to the Rihannsu they could be wiped out – or worse. Many of their kind were espers.

On the journey from Vulcan the Rihannsu's only strong espers had all been burned out by using their talents to accelerate their ships to near light speed to make their journey quicker. The downside was that, by the time they made landfall, there were none left. They had practically removed the esper ability from their genome.

What they had not realised was that the aboriginal Remans had been latent telepaths. They'd had to be to help them communicate in the harsh environment. Their interbreeding had made it possible for their children to once more become esper capable, but they kept it to themselves as they knew the Rihannsu would be insanely jealous of their abilities. After all, why should the lowly Remans be allowed to do something the true Rihannsu couldn't? Romulans didn't believe in allowing others to have an advantage over them. Regardless of their shared ancestry, they would be perceived as a threat and dealt with.

The four Remans, all childhood friends, pulled up chairs around the dingy old table they used in the break room. The chairs were worn and rocked, a feature that T'mock, their leader, exaggerated as he tried to get comfortable. He moved around a little then gave up, exasperated. "Is there nothing in this Elements forsaken place that works?" he groused, looking about the bleak, stained, concrete walls. There were no windows here, naturally.

His sister, Varra, pointed off towards the corner of the room. "I believe the facilities still function – mostly."

"As long as you don't take a deep breath while you're in there," Krasni jested. The young male curled a lip in a mixture of mirth and disdain.

"At least we have a bathroom," Vashti said. She was the youngest of them – by a few months. She was also the optimist. In the middle of an ion storm, she would be the type to comment on the pretty colours.

T'mock scowled. "We have what we have because we haven't let the Rihannsu take it from us yet." The man was considered the leader of the group simply because none of the others could equal his passion for the cause – throwing off the yoke of Romulus.

Noticing Vashti was about to say something to lighten the mood, he decided to call their meeting to order. "I've had some good news from our contact on ch'Rihan. We should expect some new equipment for us in the next shipment."

Three sets of eyes widened in surprise. *Equipment* was a term they used for weapons. Miles underground in one of the dingiest corners of their world they still took no chances being overheard by someone affiliated with the Tal Shiar. It was true they had ears everywhere. Indeed, their concern was so ingrained

that at even the mention of *equipment* the other three's eyes darted this way and that, wondering if any of them had been overheard.

"How can you be certain?" his sister asked.

T'mock shrugged. "How much can a Rihannsu be trusted?" he asked whimsically. It was an old saying. They were aware that the Klingons thought their cousins were "without honour" and they had come to agree with them. "He hasn't let us down before," he added after a slight pause. He tried to sound hopeful.

Krasni gave a dark chuckle. "I'll believe it when I see it," he said.

Vashti's eyes stared off at a possible future. "I hope he comes through," she said. "It would be wonderful if we could push back a little for a change. Wouldn't it be great if we could finally get our voices heard in the Senate?"

Of the group, Varra was the greatest realist. She had done the numbers a long time ago and realised there was little hope of overthrowing the existing regime. The best they could hope for with their little insurrection was a less-than-pointless death. But that was much more worthwhile than spending the rest of their lives as slaves working for an Empire that saw them as nothing more than useful labourers. As a realist, she was also aware of how poisonous pessimism would be to their cause. "That would be a great day," she echoed.

Her brother knew her too well. He caught her eye and gave her a slight nod. "That's what this is all for," he said. "To have our voices heard. Remans have been treated as nothing better than food for the masses for too long."

Varra shifted on her chair. Her back still ached from some scarring that had yet to heal from a Romulan's lash. "Agreed, brother. Let us hope that the shipment arrives undetected."

The rest of them nodded, hopeful. All the same, none of them would admit to the fear that it brought with them. Sure, they might be able to make a difference with what they planned on doing, but none of them were stupid enough to believe there was a possibility of surviving it. Their lives were being traded for freedom for their fellow Remans. For the four of them, it was worth it.

Krasni changed the subject. "Did anyone get the final scores of the game?"

T'mock grinned, an odd sight on his severe face. "Fifty-five to forty-nine against your team, Krasni," he said cheerfully. "That's an hour of labour you owe me."

Varra grounded them once more. "Don't waste time collecting on it, Brother," she said darkly.

Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon and the Senator wondered if he should wait much longer before departing. His visitor was late and there was only so much time he was going to waste sitting here. Although the Rihannsu were a technologically advanced people, they were still tied to the past with its superstitions, which included a reverence for the Elements. Hathness could not help but wonder if they were sending him a message with this out-of-season cloud which threatened heavy rain and even hail. Was that a flash of lightning?

Hathness shifted on the stone park bench and wished for the fiftieth time that Duras would hurry up. The longer he sat here the more suspicious it looked. He had brought a bag of seeds for the birds that flocked here but anyone who knew him would wonder at a sentimentality shown by one who had none. The only good bird, he thought, was one served to him on a plate.

A tall, youngish Rihannha, who had been sitting on the far end of the bench, looked at him playfully. She had caught Hathness's eye as she had approached from the far end of the park, and he had been mildly surprised when she had sat on the other end of the two-metre-long stone bench. She had sat there, looking off into the distance as if she, too, was awaiting someone. They had continued that way for some time until now. It was as if a switch had been thrown and the female had changed interests entirely.

Hathness indulged in fantasy and thought: "Why not?" He already had two females he visited – apart from his wife. Why not add a third? Rank has its privileges. It would be foolish not to use them.

The female's voice surprised him when she spoke. The voice was low and – masculine. "I think I've made you stew there for long enough," she said. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever figure it out."

Hathness drew in a startled breath at the realisation that his much-anticipated rendezvous had already happened. "How?"

"My disguise comes with many different faces, Senator. It would look suspicious if my janitor met you twice in this park," Duras said.

At that, the Senator had to give the Klingon credit. He was absolutely right. He nodded slightly to himself.

To which Duras had to wonder to himself: *It is a good thing for the Senator that he doesn't play cards. He cannot keep his feelings from expressing themselves on his face.*

Having collected himself, Hathness finally reported: "Our plans on ch'Havran are going forward. The Remans are going to stage a little insurrection there shortly. It should cause problems

with our energy production and place pressure on the *Empress* to return to ch'Rihan and deal with it."

Duras resisted the urge to nod his agreement. Unlike the *Romulan* the Klingon had control of his impulses and didn't give away his hand whenever he was asked a question. "That is good news," he said with a touch of cheer.

"Are your forces in place yet?" Hathness inquired.

The Romulan was too curious for Duras' tastes. He wondered at that. In a culture as paranoid as theirs, curiosity could be as deadly as poison. "You can trust that they will be there when needed," he said cryptically.

Hathness was not to be so easily put off. "What does that mean?" he asked.

Poker faced, the pretty, young visage that hid the Klingon within gave nothing away. "It means exactly what I said."

The Senator was not much for taking unnecessary risks. "What assurance can you give me that they will be there on time?"

Duras tried to restrain his hostility and almost succeeded. "The same assurance that your people on Remus will do what you want them to, Senator. The future is as often as hard to predict as the weather."

The mention drew Hathness' attention back to the coming cloud formation. He noticed that it was raining, heavily, just a few stadia from their position. If he didn't move quickly, he would be a very wet Senator and he couldn't abide that. The thought came back to him that this was the Elements trying to tell him something, but he could not fathom whether they were giving him their blessing or announcing a curse on his bloodline. The not knowing brought a chill to him and he lurched to his feet. "We should be going," he said quietly, turning his attention back to Duras. He started when he realised that the Klingon was long

gone, and a quick glance around the grounds revealed no clues as to his whereabouts. The sense of foreboding deepened but he allowed himself a slight smile. Duras had no idea just what, exactly, he was up to on ch'Havran. All the better.

On the Hobus Starbase the Rihannsu version of the red carpet had been rolled out. Everywhere Ael walked she was bathed in emerald, the colour of Rihannsu blood, the source of their strength. The floors were green, the lighting had a tinge of green and their national symbol, the raptor holding the twin worlds in its claws, was everywhere.

As she was being given a tour of the station, Ael wondered if they had gone a little too far. Was all of this to honour her visit, to send a message to the Federation that they were the dominant force, or was it something darker? The lighting enhanced the green tinge to their flesh, and she wondered what the humans from the Federation would look like here. The image gave her reason to smile.

Commander Kamor strode next to the Empress, a step behind and to the left to be respectful. He took great pride showing her around the relatively new space station. It served multiple purposes and he had taken delight describing them in almost painful detail to their leader.

On Ael's right, also a pace behind her, Aidoann tried to do two things simultaneously; take note of anything regarding the station she didn't already know (it was her business to know everything about everything where the Empress was involved), and not kill the Commander for his outright boorishness. In her own mind she was saying: *it's just a space station.*

In front, Ael kept up a punishing pace. There was a lot to do, and she wanted to get it done. Protocol stated she should give

the local Commander his moment in the sunshine, but that time had almost passed. Concerned that Kamor was about to give her a tour of the station's washroom facilities, she glanced up at his hawkish visage and said: "Where is your conference room? I want to make sure it's ready for our visitors."

Kamor looked down at the now stationary Empress and started: "I assure you, Empress, that all..."

Aidoann wasn't going to let him finish. "Don't make the assumption that you and the Empress have the same standards, Commander. I assure *you*, you don't!"

The tall, slender man in his starched-to-perfection uniform seemed almost ready to argue the point, but a glance at the Empress reminded him of his place. Humbly, he nodded. "Of course, Empress. Any improvement you can make is gladly appreciated."

The two women shared a look. It said simply: *We'll have to watch this one.*

At least the man knew well enough to wait for the Empress to start moving before continuing on. He gestured off to their right and down the main corridor. "This way, my Empress," he said with just the right amount of contrition.

Ael took off at a brisk pace and marvelled at the high, curved roof that opened out onto a view of the stars. The warrior within her thought it a security risk. The young girl who used to look up at the night sky in wonder and delight felt the stars' call. She looked about her in the passageway and noted it was about eight metres wide and was lined with store fronts offering all kinds of goods – and not just from the Romulan Empire. She spotted clothing and entertainment follies from not only the Federation, but also the Klingon sphere of influence. Without missing a beat, she fired off a question at Kamor.

"Does the currency you earn from these shop fronts keep the lights on around here?"

Kamor wasn't certain whether she was being sarcastic or genuinely curious. He decided on the latter. "We do charge for their use, Empress, but the shopping services we offer here does make this base a more attractive outpost for our people to visit. Commerce does indeed aid in covering the cost of running this facility."

The Empress' security chief was less than impressed. "All I see here is an open door to espionage," Aidoann said emphatically.

The Station Commander seemed a bit miffed by her assertion. "I assure you that no contraband has been allowed onto my base. My people scan every shipment in and out."

"People can be bought off."

"Not my people."

Ael allowed a trace of a smile to tug at the corner of her lips. Aidoann was not the type to let go of the proverbial bone once she had her teeth in it. Her friend had a point. Considering the sources of the items around her it would be a simple matter to integrate eavesdropping devices into them.

The smile vanished when she realised that it was even more possible that the Tal Shiar would use such facilities for their purposes as well. She knew from experience that sometimes the worst enemies were the ones you called your friends.

She froze and Aidoann and Kamor almost ran her over. Indeed, their entire entourage, which included Senator Arrhae i-Khellian t'llhweiir, had to pull up short.

Ael stepped over to a shop front and scowled at the contents. She whirled on the Commander and barked: "Why do I see Cardassian goods here? I outlawed their importation a year

ago!" She stepped past the threshold of the store and snatched a bottle of Kanar from the shelf. It was in its usual twisted-cord bottle shape. She held it up in front of the Commander and said for all to hear: "The Obsidian Order is one of the most devious intelligence agencies in the galaxy! I wouldn't put it past them to have every cork in this shop bugged! How could you be so stupid?!"

The Empress did not need to say another word. Aidoann began giving orders that the shop be sealed, and its contents destroyed. The station's security chief, who had been following the Commander, relayed them to his people.

Even though Ael was a good foot shorter than the Commander the man was terrified. He knew he had failed on a grand scale, yet he stood his ground and waited for his punishment.

The Empress waited until her people were finished mopping up the mess, including arresting the shop owner for importing illegal foreign goods, all the while glowering. Finally, when the others had quietened down, she looked up at the Commander. Only a woman of her ability and stature in society could make it feel like she was looking *down* on him. Her bearing was one of extreme annoyance, yet she chose her words carefully. "Once you would have been marched off to an airlock and escorted into space for gross incompetence," she said evenly. "However, I am a woman who believes in the rule of law. It is possible that, in the business of running this station, you missed the update on the status of Cardassian goods. No being is capable of knowing everything."

Kamor seemed to start breathing again, very slowly. He still wasn't certain what was to come.

"However," she continued. "I am certain your security chief would have been aware of them." She gave Aidoann a look. "Arrest her and make her punishment quick. I will not have us wasting time on useless people."

Aidoann turned and informed her second to take care of it. Her place was with the Empress. Behind Kamor, the former security officer, an older female with tired eyes, was taken away.

Ael looked at the station's former commander. "Where is your Sub-Commander, Kamor?"

The man, who had not lifted his eyes from his highly polished boots, addressed them. "Sub-Commander Valorian tr'Manntorr is on the command deck, highness," he said, defeated.

Aidoann anticipated her next request. The Centurion had her communicator out and tied into the station's system. "Empress," she said, offering it to Ael.

She plucked it out of her hands and spoke into its grill. "Sub-Commander, this is your Empress."

The voice that responded was assured and strong. "Yes, Empress. I live to serve."

"I have relieved Kamor of his post for gross stupidity. You are now advanced to Commander and have control of this facility."

Even given his previous level of control, the voice that responded was clearly startled. "Y.. Yes, Empress. Thank you, Empress."

Ael was about to sign off when he continued. "Empress, I have just received notice that the Federation envoys have reached the Neutral Zone and are awaiting your permission to cross."

It was about time, Ael thought. "Pass on my greetings to their ambassador and give them leave. Tell them I look forward to our meeting."

As she snapped the communicator closed, she caught a look from Arrhae. Everything was coming to a head.

Chapter Six

Piper glared at the screen and wondered if she should trust these people at all. Even though they had the back of the *Enterprise* nearby, she had little faith in Romulans.

Even though she was an Admiral, this was not her mission to command. As a purely diplomatic errand, the final decisions fell to Ambassador Spock. Although she had met some very self-interested diplomats in her time – most of them were actually politicians – she had more than a modicum of respect for her former shipmate. Her first deep space assignment had been aboard the *Enterprise* NCC-1701, under the command of James Kirk and his faithful number two, Mister Spock. In their time serving together she had learned much about the man, including the fact he had a sense of humour. She recalled the time she had exasperated him by wresting the control of her first command, the *Banana Republic,* from the computer, which had locked her out, under his direction. When he had arrived and moved to give her access, he had found she had already done so.

"She out-humaned you, Spock," she recalled McCoy telling him.

The memory usually brought a smile to her face and her lips actually did twitch in response. However, the familiar weight brought her back down and she lost even the tiny moment of cheer.

On the viewscreen, they watched as the Romulan Commander of the *Rending Claws* gave them permission to cross the Neutral Zone.

"He doesn't look too happy about it, does he?" Carman Valastro said so only his captain could hear.

Piper looked up at her new XO and nodded. "He looks like he just found an anchovy in a block of chocolate."

At the helm, Commander Jason Nunn grimaced. "That's about as bad as Vegemite flavoured confection I saw once."

From her position aft on the Bridge Commander Caitlin "Ghost" Ryan chimed in: "What kind of Aussie doesn't like Vegemite?"

It was an old argument. "One with taste buds," he replied, his tongue hanging out in a gesture of disgust. "If you like it so much, you give it a try."

Nunn had her there. "No thanks." She did have her own offering. "How about Guinness flavoured Ice Cream?"

Piper decided they'd had enough fun. "The next thing you'll be concocting is Hot Dog candy."

To her surprise, her people all seemed to think it was a good idea considering their positive reactions. "No accounting for taste, I suppose," she said drolly. She turned her attention to Science, where she once more felt a pang of loss as it was manned by an Andorian, Lieutenant Koss, a recent graduate from the Academy. "How many Romulans do we have on the scanner?"

Koss looked up from the viewer, ready to report. He had already been checking out the locals. "Admiral, I only register the two vessels we can see. Standard *S'harien* class warbirds."

Her XO added: "We can guarantee there's more."

"Always," Ghost agreed. "They'll be out there somewhere, cloaked and ready to strike." She had a streak of fatalism through her that came out at times like these.

To her left, she heard a gentle tsk. She glanced at Eliza McKennah who was observing the situation. Piper raised a brow in query. "Once upon a time you would have said something

cheerful to shine some sunlight on the situation and give everyone a chance to relax."

The Admiral heard her out but did not deign to answer. She didn't want to enter into a debate about her feelings on her Bridge.

The communicator chirped and Captain Harriman appeared on the screen with his trademark confident smile. "Time to go," he said. Piper knew he wasn't just addressing her, but the captains of the other two ships as well. Captains Chopra and Small sent their regards as this was where they were left behind and, as far as the Romulans knew, they were going to wait for their return. However, John and Piper were aware they were their backup. They would run silent about a light year into Federation territory keeping a keen ear out for them in case they were needed to get them out of a hole.

The Admiral simply nodded and gave the order. "Proceed," she said and watched as her vessel first crossed into the Neutral Zone and then space claimed by the Romulan Star Empire. She had to admit she did not have a good feeling about this mission. Not at all.

Captain Piper watched the new *Millennium* on her viewscreen as it began to move into the Neutral Zone with the *Enterprise*. "So," she said. "It begins."

Scanner looked up at Sustasandage from his place at the Engineering console. "Thanks for the upgrades, love," he said gratefully. "The new cloaking device is working jus' dandy."

The Time Agent simply sighed. "Thank me when this is all over, Sir." She stepped down next to Piper's command chair. "We should keep our distance from both ships," she warned. "There are too many espers here for us not to go unnoticed."

Both Pipers nodded their understanding. They were both so well attuned to one another's thoughts they could *hear* one another from a hundred metre radius. Beyond that they were aware of each other's emotional state to a much greater distance.

Piper Silayna spoke up. "I can feel Admiral Piper's presence from here," she said.

Amantasandage added: "And whatever she's feeling, it's not happy," she added. She glanced at her Pipers. "Begging your pardon, Captains, but that Piper over there is seriously *distressed.*"

Piper's eyebrows rose a little, curious. "I wonder why." She glanced over at Sus and noticed that old troubled should-I-tell-them-or-shouldn't-I look on her face. "What gives, Sus?"

The Cait quickly looked around her and she shook her head, No. The look in her eyes was clear: Not here.

The Captain nodded her understanding. This was one of those need-to-know moments. She wondered just how often they were going to be doing this in the coming days. "Mister Sarda, you have the Conn," she said as she, Suzette and Sustasandage stepped into her ready room.

The Vulcan took his place in the Centre Seat and noted, with some irony, that it was his right even though he was not the most highly ranked person in the room. Due to his ascendancy to the rank of captain, Krashtallash now outranked him. The notion was a pleasant distraction from the thoughts that plagued him. He could not help but think the subject of their discussion was him.

Piper sat down on her side of the desk and put her feet up on it. Piper Silayna stepped over to the beverage dispenser and ordered them up a cup of coffee each. She glanced over at their guest askance. Sustansandage shook her head: no thanks.

A moment later they sat down, and Piper simply indicated that Sustasandage start the conversation.

The feline fidgeted for a moment, indecision clear on her face.

"Would you rather discuss this telepathically?" Suzette suggested.

Sus shook her head violently. "No. That would only make things worse."

Piper was clearly confused. "You want to tell me something, but you feel you can't for some reason." She considered the thought for a moment before light dawned. "Oh," she said.

Suzette passed Piper her cup of coffee and asked: "What?" She didn't get it.

Now the subject of the matter was clear to the Captain she extrapolated on the notion. If Sustansandage was afraid to talk to her – *especially telepathically* – about an issue, it had to be about Sarda. Continuing the line of thought, if the Piper on the other ship was messed up and miserable then the reason was clear. "How and when did Sarda die?" she asked bluntly.

Whiskers twitched as Sus tried to not be annoyed at just how clever this captain was. "Six months ago, when the original *Millennium* was destroyed. Afterward the Admiral became erratic until some friends intervened and helped her deal with it. The details are unknown."

Piper wanted to ask further but her sister beat her to it. "They're unknown or you don't want to tell us?"

Sus' irises narrowed as she began to get angry. "I've bent enough rules on this job, Captain," she said through gritted teeth. She turned to Piper who was just looking at her with a gaze that

could see right through her. "And no, I don't know why she started losing her marbles."

Her choice of wording wasn't doing her any favours. Both Pipers bristled at the notion that either of them was capable of going nuts. "Do you want to clarify that statement?" Piper asked, her tone icy.

Sustasandage took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She reminded herself who she was dealing with, and the fact that there were two of them didn't just add to the problem, it multiplied it. "Captain…. Captains. Admiral Piper nearly ruined her career on this mission. Some of her choices were… questionable. You'll see when we get to Hobus."

Suzette sat back in wonder, looking within and trying to come up with some reason why she might be behaving badly.

Piper, on the other hand, had a fair idea why. She looked up at the ceiling and called: "Commander Sarda to my ready room."

Sus shot a look at her. "You can't do this. He shouldn't know about his future."

The Captain glared back at her. "If there's one person I know in this universe that can take it, it's Sarda."

Before they could speak further the door slid aside and Sarda entered the room. Piper offered him his usual chair and he took a seat, his posture erect and formal. He took a look about him at the roomful of captains and knew that he *had* been the subject of their conversation. He looked across the desk at his friend and said: "I believe that you have something you want to share with me, Captain."

Piper took a deep breath and sighed. "Yes, but before I do, I have a question for you. Everyone here is aware you and I are linked, so there's no need to keep that to ourselves. Our friendship

has deepened, and I've found that I like having you in the back of my mind. It makes us a better team, I've always thought."

While the Vulcan showed no outward signs of emotion, Piper could feel the sentiment returned through their bond.

"I would agree, Captain," he said formally.

Piper gave him a small, fond smile. It was a tiny reflection of what she actually felt for him. She loved him like a brother, and she had keenly felt his absence during their time in the past. When she had begun sharing her thoughts and feelings with Suzette, it had helped her, comforted her. Indeed, the time shared together – the year spend working and playing together – had cemented their relationship and now the two of them were inseparable.

Once she had returned to the present, she had begun to find things crowded in her mind. These days she could not only hear her own thoughts, but those of Sarda *and* Suzette – not to mention Manny when she directed her attention her way.

She made a mental note to ask Sarda to teach her some techniques for blocking out other's thoughts. She needed time alone with her own thoughts occasionally.

"Sarda," Piper continued. "I know our bonding was unintentional and there's no guarantee we will ever be able to break it," she could not help but feel the tinge of sadness that swept over Sarda at the suggestion, "but I wonder just how deep it would become after another fifteen years."

The Vulcan was silent as he looked inward and considered her question. The women in the room remained quiet and patiently awaited his reply. "Captain," he finally said slowly. "There is something I need to tell you that I believe may be happening, indeed may already have happened, between us."

The Captain sighed, a sound that came from the depths of her being. She had already guessed the answer. Years before, Dr Leonard McCoy, a friend of hers from their days on board the *Enterprise*, days that seemed like a lifetime ago, had been the repository of Spock's living spirit, his katra, as the Vulcans called it. The man had become erratic for a time as his personality shifted back and forward between the two personages that he harboured. Spock's intention was for his essence to be returned to Vulcan by the Doctor as he saw his death was imminent. He didn't want all that he was, all that he knew, to be lost.

Sarda looked deeply into Piper's eyes. "You already know," he said with feeling.

The Captain gave him a tired smile. With a nod she asked: "We share our spirit, don't we?"

Solemnly, Sarda nodded, absently reaching out across the table to take Piper's hand. Nobody in the room minded the display of affection and indeed, they understood it. "We do, Piper," he said. "Our bond is one that even very few Vulcans experience. My people usually require touch to share feelings with one another. The touching of fingers allows empathic communication. The touching of minds requires a deeper connection and that usually requires a time of meditation and preparation. You and I share both without any effort."

He paused for a moment and Piper continued the line of thought. "And the longer we are together, working together, being a part of each other, the more we will become one in mind and spirit." As she said the words, she found there was no real regret for her. She wasn't getting younger, and she was well and truly married to her career. She had no plans on becoming a parent, either. She had sometimes wondered if she was the romantic type and she knew she did have the streak within her, it just wasn't a

driving force in her life. The friendship and open, honest relationship with her first officer were the next best thing.

At times she thought she was being selfish, and they were thoughts she usually only considered when she knew Sarda was asleep, so she didn't burden him. Indeed, their bond had made them one of Starfleet's most formidable teams and yet she chided herself for making that her priority between them. Sarda had every right to find a mate, get married and have children. Their bond might very well make that impossible.

And now the news had come to her that, within the next twenty years Sarda might very well die. It was a thought that pained her, and she found a yawning cavern open up in her soul. It was a pain that she wondered whether she could manage if the worst did happen.

Piper gave her friend's hand a squeeze and sat back, feeling bleak. If the fleeting feeling she had just entertained imagining life without Sarda was just an iota of Admiral Piper's current status, the woman was in trouble. Knowing the answer to the question, she asked it anyway as she wanted to others to hear. "Sarda, do I carry your katra?"

The brassy haired Vulcan folded back in his seat and considered the question seriously. "I believe we do have a portion of one another, Piper," he said. "At this point in time, we can get by without one another as your journey into the past has demonstrated."

Piper gave him a quick smile. "I had help," she said, glancing at Suzette.

Sarda nodded. "For that, I am grateful," he said genuinely, glancing at Piper's double.

The corner of Piper Silayna's mouth quirked up in a lopsided grin that he would have expected from his captain. The

two of them were more alike than they realised, he thought. "You're welcome," she said warmly.

He turned back to Piper. "However, in the years to come we will come to the point where we will literally become inseparable. We will not be able to bear long absences as we will be too…dependant on one another."

"The two become one flesh," Suzette said quietly.

Sarda nodded. "In a manner of speaking. As we've discussed, most Vulcan joinings do not experience the depth of our bonding and so widowers and widows can move on without injury."

Sustasandage chimed in: "However…"

"However," Sarda continued, "we will be so deeply connected that it will require the services of a Vulcan priestess on Mount Seleya to release the other's katra should one or the other of us perish." The man was not stupid. "As the subject of the conversation that brought me here was me, I assume that in this timeline I have perished?"

Piper nodded sadly. "Yes."

"Fascinating."

Suzette was surprised at his attitude. "I'm confused," she said, turning to face him so she could see his every expression. "You find the notion that you're dead now…interesting?"

Sarda quirked up a brow. "I believe you humans have a saying: it would be like attending your own funeral? It would be interesting to see how my passing effects the lives of those I have touched."

The Caitian's fur bristled at that. "I wouldn't want to know when I die or see the faces of those who are grieving for me. I never want to be the cause of my loved ones' pain."

Piper came to his defence. "It's the Vulcan mindset, Sus," she said. "They have always accepted that life begins and ends and that, one day, it'll be their turn to die. Spock met his fate with composure when he sacrificed his life to save the original *Enterprise* because it was logical. His death had purpose and so he embraced it willingly. When it's my time I hope I have the same level of equanimity." She turned her gaze back to her first officer. "To actually see if you've made a difference once you're gone confirms that your fellow sojourners in life truly did benefit from knowing you, being influenced by you. Most of us can only hope that we leave a legacy. Sarda is hopeful of *knowing* it."

Sus nodded and a stray thought came to her. "All right. So, the Admiral is probably suffering from the effects of not having gone to Mount Seleya and surrendered Sarda's katra. Shouldn't she have known to do so?"

Sarda and Piper shared a look. "We do now," Piper said for them. "Maybe they never got around to talking about it," she added wistfully.

Suzette grimaced. "If she doesn't know, then having Sarda's katra floating around in her head has got to make things screwy for her."

The time agent added: "Not to mention the loss of her best friend on top of that. It would be like losing him but not."

Piper's gaze came back to her first officer. "What are the likely effects the Admiral is feeling?" she asked.

The underlying question was there as well: *What can I expect if it every happens to us?*

The Vulcan steepled his fingers in thought. "I am uncertain. However, if Doctor McCoy's example is anything to go by, she will clearly not always be herself or even be able to

concentrate clearly. Over time, I suspect the symptoms to worsen."

Both Pipers shared a worried look. "The Admiral might be a ticking time bomb," Suzette said, voicing their thoughts.

Sustasandage glanced at Sarda, concerned. "Commander, do you think it's possible that Admiral Piper will sense your presence?"

"Perhaps," Sarda said thoughtfully. "However," he said pointing across the desk, "I am bonded with *this* Piper and no other. I do not believe it possible to be bonded to two versions of the same woman at the same time."

"Not that I'm trying to pop your bubble," Suzette said a little playfully, "but we're all aware that we didn't even know one another in my timeline. However," she pointed out the room's window at the ships in the distance, "that one *was* connected to an older version of you. I wouldn't be making any assumptions at this point." She looked back at Piper. "We need to keep our distance."

Captain Piper nodded her agreement. "I don't think cloaking devices protect people from espers," she said with a slight smile. "We'll keep about twenty thousand kilometres away from them." She looked at Sarda. "I usually can't connect with you from orbit so that should just about do it."

Thinking they had just about covered everything Piper suddenly slapped herself on the forehead. "How stupid am I!" she said angrily. "I can't believe I didn't think of it sooner."

The others looked at her askance. "What?" Suzette asked on their behalf.

Staring ahead, Piper said: "Why speculate when we have an eyewitness?" she said. "Spock was there when this all happened the first time!"

She slapped the call signal for her personal Yeoman. Carver, a young go-getter who would soon be leaving for the Command Training Program, reported within seconds from her place on the Bridge. "Yes, Captain?" she asked once she had come to parade-ground attention.

"Set up an interview with Ambassador Spock at his earliest convenience," she ordered. For the sake of the others in the room she added: "He's not a young man anymore and he might be resting. This can wait."

Carver did have an answer for her. "The Ambassador is in our best guest quarters, Captain, and I know he is sleeping. I will arrange it as soon as I know he has risen."

Piper nodded. "The man isn't getting any younger," she said whimsically.

The Caitian hardly moved a whisker, but Piper had the distinct air from the Agent that she knew something about the elder Vulcan that gave her a great sense of sadness. Was he not long for this mortal coil too?

The Captain waved off the Yeoman and let her get back to her duties. Piper looked out the window once more and noted a small group of Romulan warbirds were just beginning to guide the *Enterprise* and the *Millennium-A* into their space. "It's time we got moving," she said, rising.

Captain Piper reclined in the centre seat of the *Millennium* and watched as the pilot had the ship cruise by the remaining Starfleet vessels, the *Farragut* and the *Firebrand.* She took special note of the latter as it had been named for the lost vessel of the same name in the Romulan Neutral Zone some twenty-odd years before, which to her was practically yesterday. She remembered her friend, Suzette DuQuesne, who had been master

of that vessel, and how she had been lured into a trap by Duras' Klingon friends. She had never forgotten that sleight, and how the Klingon had put out a contract on her and her people. There would be a reckoning, and she hoped it would be sooner rather than later.

The newer *Firebrand* was a Saladin variant with two warp nacelles, one above, the other below. The *Farragut* was a surprise to her as it was an *Excelsior*-class vessel. She shrugged inwardly. Of course, there would have been many changes in the last twenty years. She made a mental note to keep that in mind. She spoke up for the rest of her bridge crew. "Take a look at the screen. A lot of things have changed while we slept. That wouldn't just be in the Federation. We should expect to see some new Romulan ships. Some of them might even be a match for *us*."

Piper noted that her people were nodding to themselves or thinking about it.

"We need to be ready for anything," Suzette said from her left. "There's no guarantee they still can't detect us."

From her right Piper heard Sustasandage say: "If they do, they have tech we don't have in the thirty-first. I'd like to see that."

Piper glanced at Suzette, who gave her a slight smile. "We do live in interesting times," she added with a touch of mirth.

The *Millennium* was at warp once more in the wake of their successor and the *Enterprise-B*. Piper sat in the ship's bar, her gaze out the window, watching the distorted starfield effect of the ship moving through space at warp. It looked a little odd as the ship was moving under cloak and she wondered at the energy expenditure of keeping their ship invisible while they were

literally distorting space. That was a question she had to save for Sus.

She smiled as a very familiar presence was felt. She didn't have to look up to know her doppelganger was standing next to her. Instead of sitting on the other side of the booth opposite her, Suzette slipped onto the padded seat next to her and pushed her a little further down with her hip to give herself a bit more room. Piper looked into her mismatched eyes and gave her a warm smile at her sister's cheeky behaviour.

She took delight in the fact that the woman she had met a year before – from their perspectives – who had been so uptight and reserved was now much more likely to let her hair down and have a little fun. She had come out of her shell, and, to Piper, she was as dear to her as a twin she never knew she had.

"What's up, Sis?" Suzette asked, looking out the window as Piper had been a moment before.

Piper's brows shot up as she considered the question. "There are so many things running around in my mind at the moment. For one, there is no way in the universe that I could ever imagine I would be in a situation anything like this." She looked out the window once more. "To think of it, we're twenty years in the future chasing an older version of ourselves through space in a ship that replaced this one. We need to figure out what will cause the Hobus star to go supernova in another eighty-odd years and use that knowledge to prevent it happening again. It is just *soo* weird."

A tinge of sadness swept over Suzette, and she had to force her small smile. "Try to look at it from my perspective. My life was going along swimmingly as the Captain of the Federation starship *Ingram* in a universe far different from this one. I had a husband I hadn't spoken to in months and a collection of friends

who barely tolerated me anymore. Then I met you and everything changed." She hadn't meant to make it sound like she was blaming Piper and she knew Suzette well enough to know it. She put her hand on top of Piper's and let her feelings through the touch. "There are times when I still wish I could go back but I know that my timeline should never have been." She felt a flash of anger at Nero, the Romulan they had met only briefly before they fried his ship in a star. She caught herself for a moment and considered: "Am I blaming the wrong person for this mess? Are my feelings misdirected?"

Piper's head bobbed from side to side as she thought about it. "I suppose Nero does carry some of the blame for coming back in time and blasting everything that he came across to hell." She looked Suzette in the eye and added: "You know a lot more about that than I do."

Suzette picked up the mug of coffee that the bartender, Gillian, had so thoughtfully put in her hand. Indeed, she hadn't even noticed her do it. She sipped at the contents and said: "That bastard not only destroyed the *Kelvin*, a butt load of Klingon cruisers, the planet Vulcan, but then he tried to take out Earth! If Kirk…" Piper felt the twinge of anger her duplicate always felt at the mention of his name "... hadn't stopped him and destroyed the *Nerada* things could have gotten worse fast. Mind you, I wish Spock kept the *Jellyfish* in warp a lot longer than just a few minutes. That black hole he created is still too close for comfort to the Sol System." She caught herself then. "I mean, it was."

Piper sighed. She wrapped her right arm around Suzette's shoulders and drew her head down to place it next to hers. She could feel the turmoil that still warred within her sister, how she had literally lost *everything*. She was the sole survivor of a whole Universe. It was mind-boggling and, if she tried to wrap her head

around it, she would give herself a first-class headache. "I don't know what to say or do, Sis," she said sincerely. "I just want you to know that you are very much loved." She turned slightly and kissed Suzette's forehead gently. "You're just as much a part of me as I am of you. Don't ever forget that."

Grateful for the concern and genuine affection, Suzette put her left arm around Piper and squeezed her back. "I just need to keep reminding myself that it's our job to find out what started this snafu and somehow make the change to prevent it happening all over again." She straightened up but kept her arm around Piper. "It's what keeps me going. I know that no matter what happens, I, you, we… will keep on going in whatever universe we wind up creating once we've got it sorted."

In her heart, Piper felt the same, but the thing neither of them had admitted out loud was that they knew that one day the relationship they had would end – and the thought gutted them.

Admiral Piper sat in the centre seat on the bridge of the *Millennium-A*, a place that she couldn't have been moved from without a crowbar. The ship was in enemy territory and experience had taught her some grim lessons about being caught off-guard in such circumstances. While her job was support and security for the *Enterprise*, she still felt ill at ease and she couldn't help feeling like someone was looking over her shoulder, watching.

She glanced over at Commander Ryan who was taking a turn at Tactical. Piper had been grooming her for a Captaincy of her own and she had been moving her around when her main duty – as Pilot Controller – was not called for. "Ghost, are the *E* and our escort the only ones out there?" she asked.

Ryan gave a quick look over all the screens at her station and she gave her quick nod. "According to our sensors, we're alone out here, Captain," she offered. "Mind you," she added in her lilting Irish brogue with a touch of dark humour, "I wouldn't be surprised if we were surrounded by cloaked warbirds, Ma'am. We could be swatting them like flies."

Carman Valastro glanced over at her. "If only it was that easy to knock them down," he said ruefully. For the sake of extending the humour he said: "We'd need a seriously big swatter!"

The corner of Piper's lip twitched up in mirth but the thought of a gigantic fly swatter extending out from her ship gave her a thought. "What can't a Romulan cloak hide from?" she asked slowly.

"Lots of things," Carman said, picking up the line of thought. "If we fire at it while it's cloaked, we'd hit it undefended. According to intelligence, they still can't keep their shields up while its activated."

Ryan added: "It'd defeat the purpose anyway. We'd detect the energy surge from the shield itself."

"Whether or not they can fire under cloak is a mystery since Khitomer. If the Klingons can pull it off, it stands to reason that the Romulans will, sooner or later." Piper was analysing the situation, she believed, as logically as Sarda had taught her to. "So, like sonar in the days of naval submarines, we need to come up with a pulse that will rebound off the hull of a cloaked ship that it *can't* hide from."

Ryan and Valastro looked at one another as they considered the question. From her station at the Engineering console Hopetallash started with: "The visible spectrum is out as the cloaking field would simply redirect the beam past the ship."

Piper was delighted with the start. "How about UV or Infrared?"

Ryan shook her head, no. "According to our latest intel, UV would be bent like light and IR is too directional and consumes a ridiculous amount of energy to produce."

From his position at the Navigation station Carman added: "As far as I know the EM spectrum is unaffected as well. Once you get up into the Gigahertz area it all becomes moot. The Romulans have the whole spectrum spoofed."

"And space is too empty for us to use sonics," Piper added as a passing thought.

To her left, Doctor McKennah had appeared and gave Piper a quick smile. "Where are you going that all of Starfleet's best scientists couldn't go, Captain?"

Piper gave her a dirty look and bit her tongue. She didn't like being called out on one of her fishing expeditions.

Ghost looked down at the panel she was leaning on, and she could feel the gentle hum of the warp engines as the ship powered them through the void. She glanced over at the black feline, Hopetallash, and asked: "What is the MA made out of – I mean it's hull plating?"

The Admiral shook her head in annoyance. "We're not calling the ship the "MA" for short." To her left, even the Doctor seemed to agree on that one. Eliza made a disgusted face.

Behind the Captain's back the Engineer rolled her eyes. The Captain was more than her superior, she was an aunt and she had been exposed to many of her eccentricities over the years and she had learned to tolerate them as any good family member would. "It's made out of Tritanium, the class is the first to have it."

Caitlin nodded, shaking loose a lock of her slowly greying hair. "And we know what frequency does the most damage to that… to make even the rivets shake loose."

Understanding was dawning in Hope's eyes. "You're wondering what the Romulan ships are made out of and if we can create a disruptive wave that'll shake it around, even under cloak."

Even though she had merely started a fishing expedition, Piper was pleased with the direction this conversation had taken. She gave a brief smile of acknowledgement. "Precisely," she said. "What's the latest intelligence on Romulan warbird's construction?"

At that, Caitlin made a disgusted face. Of them all, she was the one most into ships and what they were made of. It was often joked among the crew that she had coolant running in her veins, not blood. "Not much, Captain," she said with a grimace. "I sometimes don't know why they're called "Starfleet Intelligence". There's not a whole lot of intelligence there, if you ask me."

Carman chuckled. "Careful, Ghost, you could include us in that as well," he said with a wink.

At that, the ace pilot simply shrugged. "If the shoe fits…" she said with a sly grin.

Piper brought things back into focus. "How about the scans we took of the ships escorting us. They must have shown something about their hull composition."

Once again, Caitlin made a face. "Our scans were more about checking for power signatures and whether their weapons were armed. Also, I was looking around us for subspace distortions that could give away the presence of a cloaked ship."

She paused to reflect for a second. "I was looking for trouble, I guess," she said, a little regretful.

Piper sighed. "You were acting like a fighter pilot," she remonstrated. "As a science officer, you've got to be looking at more than just whether there might be someone about to shoot at you. We may have missed a golden opportunity for developing some intel." Her tone was a little harsh, but she knew Ghost could take it and learn from the error.

From her station at Engineering, Hope stepped forward. "Captain, there were three other ships present when we met the Romulans. We should contact the *Enterprise* and see if they did some more in-depth scans and, if not, call the *Farragut* and *Firebrand* to see if they did."

Delighted, the Admiral gave her a broad grin. "Officer thinking, Hope." She frowned as a thought came to her. "If we start making encrypted calls this far into Romulan space our friends out there might get the wrong idea. With so much riding on this mission, it would be a real pain in the ass to stuff it up now."

Never mind the fact they were deep within Romulan space, everyone else thought.

"Send a message to the *Enterprise* with our logs of the encounter for their perusal," Piper said thoughtfully. "Make a note to add our scans of the Romulan ships and ask for theirs in return. Even if the Romulans have cracked our encryption they can't be surprised by what would look like a routine request."

Valastro nodded his agreement. "Once we have their hull composition we can see if we can generate a disruption wave that can penetrate their cloaks."

From her place at Tactical Caitlin added: “Even if it doesn’t do any real damage, it’ll give their position away and give the crew one hell of a headache.”

Piper stood and smiled. “Works for me,” she said with a wicked grin. She suddenly realised that Dr McKennah had disappeared, and she wondered when she had left. She must have done so while she was distracted with the conversation, she thought. Oh, well, it was no loss. While she was fond of the shrink, she never enjoyed being the object of her clinical processes. She looked to Carman. “Mister Valastro, you have the Bridge. I’m going to get some exercise.”

He nodded and watched her go. He was glad she was letting her hair down a little. The Captain her been more than a little uptight since the loss of the original *Millennium* – and especially Sarda. Perhaps she was beginning to let go of her grief, he thought. He understood its overwhelming power as he was a widower himself. He was also keenly aware that time didn’t necessarily make it easier. All he had to do was think about his wife and a tear would still come to his eye some thirty years later.

He looked once more to the turbolift door and reconsidered his earlier musings. No, there was no time limit on grief.

He suddenly realised he was not alone; he caught Caitlin standing to his right waiting patiently. Quietly she said: “I’m worried about her, too.”

Carman sighed and he chuckled softly, darkly. “At least I’m not alone in that,” he replied.

With the door on the subject slightly ajar Ghost whispered: “Perhaps she should consider retiring? She’s done more than her fair share for King and Country.”

With eyes full of sadness Carman said in all seriousness: “Piper will retire when she’s dead.”

"I hope not," Ghost said with a touch of anger. "People like that often take others with them." With that said, she pecked her husband on the cheek, then returned to her station.

Carman just watched her go and worried that Piper might be the kind that would only go out in a blaze of glory. If that was true, she was in a position to take a lot of people with her.

The two of them had forgotten one little detail with their subdued conversation: Hopetallash had excellent hearing. She considered their words and decided that she would make a call when she went off shift. She needed some advice.

At the rear of the *Millennium-A's* engineering hull was one of the ship's most unusual, but also its most prominent features, its cavernous hangar deck. It housed an enormous array of fighter craft, as well as the ship's own prototype runabout-class vessel, the *Cork,* which it had inherited from its forbear.

One deck below and slightly forward of the hangar, Ghost's number two, Lieutenant Commander Rebecca "Emu" Armytage was briefing the troops on the mission. A veteran of over twenty years of service under Piper on *two USS Millenniums,* Rebecca had pretty much seen it all. She was a relatively tall and slender New Zealander with a long neck, who had gotten her moniker from her Australian buddies because of that one attribute. Like all nicknames, it had stuck, and she had taken it as the good-natured woman she was.

That persona ended at the door. In this room, she was a dictator.

"As you all know, we just entered hostile territory. We may not be at war with the Romulans at present, but you know damn well that they have a long history of just looking for an excuse. From this moment on, consider yourselves at red alert. If you hear

the word 'scramble' I want you in your cockpits in seconds and in space so fast your britches will be on fire."

Nobody laughed. Her people knew she wasn't exaggerating.

"The days to come will be hard on you, I know, but I expect you and your alternates to be fighting fit at all times. Be ready. We're counting on you." Rebecca gave the roomful – and considering there were over fifty people in the room it *was* full – a look a complete confidence. "You have the training. I know you will bring us all home. Dismissed."

She remained at the podium and watched them all filter out of the room. There were recreational facilities adjacent to the hangar set up for this very scenario so the crew could keep on their toes without burning out. She knew what it was like. It wasn't so long ago that she was one of them.

When the last, youthful ensign left the room and the door shushed closed behind him, Emu relaxed with a sigh. She wasn't sorry she was not going with them. While she loved to fly, she was over having to put up with the days of living with the heightened adrenaline rush of living on the edge. It was going to be bad enough being on the Bridge overseeing them anyway.

"Oh, well," she said to herself. "Responsibilities never end, no matter what part of the food chain you're on." She shrugged. She wasn't done. She still had to go upstairs and talk to the hangar deck crew. They had the tougher job.

Captain Piper knew it would take a couple of days to reach Hobus so she was making sure she was as prepared as she could be. There were many gaps in her knowledge regarding these times, but she was wise enough to know when she needed counsel.

Both she and Suzette stood outside Spock's quarters and waited for his leave to enter.

While they waited, Piper once again mused that it was patently unfair that she was stuck wearing her stodgy Starfleet uniform whilst her sister got to wear her famous arrow t-shirt jeans and runners. As she had correctly pointed out, her rank meant nothing on this ship other than the deference she was given by the crew simply for that fact she was the twin of their Captain. Many knew where she was from, what she had seen, and she was respected for that. Piper had even noticed crewmen stepping aside to let her past – just as they would have if it had been herself.

Suzette turned her eyes to Piper and gave her a lopsided grin. "You're doing it again," she said with a chuckle.

"What?"

"Looking at me with those envious eyes. Don't tell me you don't still wish we were back on Merrijig wearing our hats, jeans and t-shirts, working on the *Pterodactyl*, and making our frequent trips into town to buy groceries." She shrugged. "I know I do."

Piper gave her a rueful look. "Those were simpler times," she said with a sigh.

"They were," Suzette lamented. "I really do miss them. No rest for the wicked."

Piper shot her a look. "I'll have you know I'm as pure as the driven snow, thank you!"

Before her sister could answer the door slid aside and Spock, looking older than Piper could imagine, caught her eye. "I can assure you, Captain Piper, that your statement is more than fallacious."

Piper just rolled her eyes. "You know me too well, Spock," she said, charming him.

The elder Vulcan perused the two of them for a moment, amazed once more at just how bizarre the Universe was. Just when he thought he had a handle on it something weirder came along. Here, before him, were two different versions of a woman he had once mentored on the *Enterprise.* It seemed only one of them knew him personally, and he could only wonder what other anomalies her timeline had held. "I gather you have matters to discuss," he said, stepping back and offering them entry. "Please, take a seat."

In deference to Spock's rank and age, and the mere fact Piper held him in the highest regard, she had allocated him the best stateroom on her ship. It was spacious and, she noticed when she crossed the threshold, warm. Her eyes darted over to the climate controls on the wall and noted they were set for thirty-five degrees Celsius, which she knew from memory was three degrees higher than he used to enjoy years before. Was he finding it harder to stay warm at this great age?

Both women watched as Spock brought them over to the room's three-sided, wood-grained finished table and they each took a chair. Spock took his seat, slowly, carefully, as if he was a china doll that was afraid of shattering itself. Piper's heart ached a little for this man who she knew instinctively was nearing the end of his life. A world without Spock scarcely bore thinking about.

"I can assume that this meeting is regarding my insights into the summit I am presently enroute to?" There was a touch of Spock's logic humour in the question. It was true that he *and* the earlier version of himself were *both* heading towards Hobus.

Piper nodded. "Yes, Ambassador. For a start, I've been told that the other me out there," Piper gesticulated in the direction

of the other *Millennium*, "is not in her right mind. Can you give me an idea what's going on?"

Spock raised a single digit. "I can only give you suppositions as I was, *am*, travelling on the *Enterprise-B* and I was unaware of many of the Admiral's choices and her reasons for doing so. What I *can* tell you is that the Admiral is not in her proper state of mind."

Both Pipers nodded. Suzette chimed in: "So the Admiral *is* carrying Sarda's katra."

The Ambassador was only mildly surprised at the statement. "You have done your research, I see," he said solemnly. "Yes. We learned, only too late, that the Admiral was indeed still harbouring Sarda's katra and it was not only affecting her ability to command but it was causing her to act erratically. There were even times when it was suspected she was hallucinating. While her actions were questionable at times, I do not believe them to have been the cause of the summit's final outcome."

Piper looked at him sideways. "Which was?" she asked slyly.

Spock grimaced. "Not what we hoped."

Chapter Seven

The *Equipment* had been more than they could have hoped for. There were disruptors, phaser rifles, grenades, and even a few explosives. If the Remans observed Christmas, then T'mock would have been expecting a turkey dinner as well.

The four leaders of their little cell had managed to spirit away the two large cases of illicit weapons from the rest of the cargo delivery without being spotted. Indeed, they had been, but it had not been by anyone other than some of their fellow Remans who were delighted for an opportunity to stick it to their Rihannsu dominators any way they could.

The crates were heavy, but on a world given to chronic overmining and exploitation the sight of a group of individuals carrying a bunch of crates on an antigrav sled was anything but unusual. Once they were inside the small system of abandoned caves the cadre used as their base of operations, they were able to move without being observed. Indeed, they had been careful to scan the area for any eavesdropping devices. They had every right to be paranoid. The Tal Shiar really *was* out to get them.

T'mock, his sister Varra, their friends Krasni and Vashti were not alone. They were the core of their little resistance cell, its brain. Aside from them, there were eight other Remans with them, all young and idealistic and they were all eyeing the contents of the cases with wonderment. Vashti wielded a rifle and waved it about in the air above her. "I feel like we could take on the whole Senate with what we've got here!" she said.

Her mood was infectious. A number of her fellows were caressing the weapons as a lover their beloved. The feeling of sudden power was almost intoxicating.

Almost. T'mock was level-headed about their windfall. "Don't get too excited, my friends," he said, bringing them down to the ground. "The Rihannsu have many more of these than we do." He waved a hand over the crates. "However," he said, not wanting to be a complete buzzkill, "this is a good start!"

Even Varra, his sister, the prophet of doom, was feeling elated. *Perhaps my death won't be entirely fruitless after all*, she thought. She smiled past her fangs and have her brother some cheer. "We can make a difference with these," she said.

T'mock nodded. "Yes, we can," he said, clapping his hand on her shoulder. "With warriors like these," he said, gesturing to his fellows, "the Empire will feel our rumble."

Krasni sidled up to the two of them, a grenade in his hand. T'mock was a little put out at the sight of the fellow wielding the device. He wondered if the man would turn into a berserker once he was armed. He reached out and took the lethal weapon from his hand under the pretence of curiosity. "Did these come with instructions?" he asked.

The younger male looked at him incredulously. "It's simple," he said, pointing to the cover on the top of the device. "You simply flip up the top, press the button, throw it and run!"

Their leader looked down at him with a touch of annoyance. "I know that," he said, as if he had been teaching him how to pour a cup of water. "That's not what I meant." He held up the device between his thumb and forefinger. "I want to know how much damage these things will do. As in, how fast do I have to run?"

Krasni's eyes showed his understanding. He took a moment to walk over to the case and rummage around. He produced a small booklet that he waved before him, and he quickly returned with it. "The instructions!" he said with glee.

Their leader took the book from his hands and flipped over the first couple of pages. "Now, isn't that typical?" he said in derision. "The least they could have done was give us something in Romulan!"

Varra looked over his shoulder and squinted in the low light. The script on the page was nothing she was familiar with, either. She, too, had been expecting the glyphs of the Rihannsu script. "What is that?" she asked.

T'mock flipped it over and perused the front of the book. "No idea," he said. Even the red, pointed glyph on the cover told him nothing as their people were taught practically zero about anything Klingon other than they were the enemy. He narrowed his eyes in not only annoyance, but with more than a touch of suspicion. If these weapons were not Rihannsu, where did they come from? Why were they being given alien weapons?

His suspicions deepened then, and he decided he needed to know more about this ordinance before they used them. They could be worthless junk foisted upon them by the Tal Shiar who wanted to flush them out and then make short work of them and their useless weapons.

"We need to test these, seeing we can't translate this book," he said. Typical of a repressive society, the availability of free information was anathema to their mentality. Indeed, the notion they could even look up and translate this on a computer system was foreign to them. If they even tried, it would be red-flagged and their cover blown within moments.

Krasni objected. "We can't safely detonate one of the grenades without setting off every alarm on the planet!"

Varra smacked him on the side of his head, playfully remonstrating. "Where do you think we were born? Ch'Rihan? Of course not!"

T'mock knew it also. If the particle weapons tested out it was reasonable to assume the others would function as well. "We'll take one of the disruptors and phaser rifles into the deepest of the old tunnels and test them there. We should be far enough away from the sensors not to trigger anything." He took the grenade back from Varra, partly to keep it away from Krasni, and said: "We can't set off any explosives without triggering even a minor seismic shockwave that the Rihannsu will detect. If it's not used for mining, they'll want to know what it was."

His sister agreed. "We'll have to take it on faith, then," she said. "When do you want to try them?"

"Time should have been a fire element," T'mock said, frustrated. "It constantly disappears like smoke." He considered their future and made a snap decision. "We try them now."

A quarter of an hour later their small group was in the deepest, most remote hollowed-out cave they could find. In torchlight they perused their chosen weapons – after carefully concealing the rest – and looked them over. The disruptors seemed simple enough, just point and shoot. There seemed to be only two settings on the device, and Vashti suggested: "Perhaps they're simply stun and kill?"

Krasni shrugged and said: "There's only one way to find out." He tried one setting, pointed it at a largish rock some distance away from them and pulled the trigger.

He missed. However, the beam shattered a boulder behind it and to the left.

"I think you need some work on your aim," commented Varra darkly. "If you shoot like that when we make our move, you'll wind up killing us, not the Rihannsu."

Krasni was not amused. He tried the other setting and, taking careful aim at the first boulder, tried again.

This time his aim was true. The red beam of light struck the rock squarely and vaporised it. Shocked, he almost dropped the gun.

Varra chuckled to herself. "Two settings," she said. "Kill a little or kill a lot."

Considering the lethality of the weapon they had first tried, T'mock was almost reluctant to try the phaser rifle. It was of a similar design to the disruptor, but the barrel was much longer with a stock for the shoulder. He made his group step back near the entrance to the cave, then he looked for a settings selector. There was none. "At least there's no confusing this thing's function," he said to himself. Taking aim on the wall on the far side of the cave, he had some of his people train their portable torches on the spot before he took aim and fired.

The beam tore across the chamber and ripped a twenty-centimetre-wide hole in the wall. Shouldering the weapon, they made their way across and marvelled that the bore was at least two feet deep.

"Not bad for a test," Krasni observed. "I can't wait to try it out on some of our oppressors."

There were murmurs of agreement around him and T'mock had no doubt there were many who were itching to try. Fine, he was going to give them their wish. "We move tonight," he said. It was time.

Duras sat in his "embassy" and mused over the plans that were threatening to ensnare him. He was fairly confident that he could keep things unstable between the p'takh Romulans and the even worse Federation, but he was not certain that he would be able to escape this accursed "empire" with his skin intact.

Indeed, he was surprised the Romulans had gotten this far. Their famous intolerance of species not their own had weakened them. They were far too narrow-minded in their vision. He could understand the idea of racial purity and the desire to keep one's ideas true to one's own culture but not having a variety of different perspectives led one to have a very narrow vision. It was well known that the Romulans only tolerated two species within their borders – the Rihannsu and the Remans – and the latter was only so due to their ability to work and the fact the two races were descended from the same ship clans. It was their shared history that kept them from killing each other.

So, he thought. Duras was singularly minded that way. Others could have their opinions, but that did not make them either right or valid in any way. He had a purpose and those notions that fit into his worldview were tolerated. The rest, well, they could keep them to themselves. The opinions of his foes – which pretty much everyone not of his clan fell into – were only useful as far as they could be exploited.

As he considered the players in the game that was afoot, Duras had to smile to himself that the fates had delivered the individuals who had most frustrated his work to the board. As a General in the Imperial Navy, Duras was familiar with many of the galaxy's favourite forms of strategy games – excellent teachers all, but few of them incorporated the one element that was inevitable: random chance. The humans revered the game of chess and it's many various and subtle strategies, however it failed to cover the possibility of a third player, which his people's game of Klin Zha did. Rarely were there only two players in any situation, and even if there were only two sides, the players were often driven by their own personal directives. There was always

the element of chance and the possibility of any player acting in an unexpected manner.

The humans had another game of war: Risk, that *did* incorporate the unknown. Each move required forethought and strategizing, but it all came down to the roll of the dice. That was one thing Duras understood. Every time you committed to a plan of action you rolled the dice and took a chance. He wondered if the p'takh, Hathness, understood this with his activities on Remus. Upsetting the balance on that fragile world could wind up with an explosion on the level of Praxis – politically, or even worse.

The game that best mirrored their situation was the human game, Poker. Nobody knew what the others were holding in a game, and it was much more about deception than anything else. Duras didn't know if he was holding a full house or a pair of deuces. It didn't really matter. As long as he managed to make the others believe he was holding a royal routine all was good.

The Klingon wished he had a yeoman to take dictation for his messages to the homeworld, but the man trusted no-one. As such, he had to operate the keyboard himself and, even after all these years of having to fill out reports and ordering assassinations, he had never gone past the good, old-fashioned two-finger typing style. It was time-consuming work, and Duras hated wasting time.

However, it *was* necessary. Qo'noS insisted on a daily report of his activities, and he did his duty. What his superiors were unaware of was the encoded message within each one. The man had a mind like a steel trap, and he spent time every day considering what he needed his people to hear and then devising a message to carry it in.

He sometimes wondered if his superiors knew that some of what he was telling them was complete garbage, but he didn't care. His "superiors" were also his enemies until one day he could call them his subjects. He would settle for nothing less than the Chancellorship itself. However, that was only the first step. Then would come this accursed "empire" and then finally the Federation. Who knew what would happen after that? He might then turn his attention to the Cardassians.

There was no limit to his ambitions.

He hoped his forces would be ready. When this message got through, after the Tal Shiar read it, of course, his people would have to move swiftly. His ships would have to make their way to their destination at maximum warp if they were going to make it on time.

Duras cast his eye over the message on the screen and made certain *both* messages could be read. Confident all was well he hit "send".

Former Fleet Admiral Reen t'Khenniell was once a being that was so famous that, if someone passing by in the street didn't know her, would have had to come from a family so poor they couldn't afford a home viewer. Now, she sat in an out of the way café on the border world of GC, the local's nickname for Galorndon Core, a nobody.

The planet was the second out from an ordinary G-type star and, to all intents and purposes, looked average. What made it particularly interesting was its vast deposits of dilithium.

Once upon a time this would have made it interesting in the Romulan sphere of major importance but, with the Imperial Fleet's converting to Forced Artificial Singularities as their primary power source for their vessels, the need for dilithium had

reduced drastically. Romulan merchant vessels still needed it, as well as land-based energy generators, but they sourced most of theirs from ch'Havran. There were two reasons for this: it was cheaper, and it was from the homeworlds. Pride kept them sourcing it from home, even when it was out of the way.

Rihannsu pride was at the heart of everything that motivated Reen t'Khenniell. The diminutive woman who was on the late side of Romulan middle age still sat with a rigid spine and, while she tried to act nonchalant, it was not something that came easily to her. While she appeared to sit on her wicker chair staring off into the setting sun whilst idly stirring her tea, the woman's mind was racing. She was considering her next moves, trying to stay not two steps ahead, but believing she had the whole game played out in her head. If she could just manoeuvre the players, she could be certain of the outcome.

Her mask was a simple one. Since she had disappeared in the nearby spaces some twenty-odd earth years before after a failed attempt to depose the Empress, Reen had made a point of making herself blend into the crowd. Indeed, she had made certain her whole personal navy could do the same.

When her flagship, the *Razor's Edge,* had warped out of the engagement zone after failing to destroy Ael, she had quickly raised the ship's cloak and taken a circuitous route over the border and into Federation space. Whilst doing so she had gotten word to those ship commanders who were still loyal to her to sit tight. When the time came to move, she wanted them where they were – sleeper agents ready to spring from their hidden traps to catch the despised *Empress* when she least expected it.

The reason for hiding in the Federation was clear: it was the only other place in the galaxy where a Vulcanoid could hide in plain sight. They wouldn't last five minutes in Klingon space

and the Romulan Empire had Tal Shiar operatives everywhere. It would not be long before they were uncovered in the Rihannsu sphere of influence.

In the following years Reen had hidden herself by submitting herself to the surgeon's knife. She had found a Vulcan female not too unlike herself, quietly killed her, then changed her appearance so that she could take her place. The late T'Fawn had little family, was not pair bonded and was of little consequence in society other than she was a skilled trader. She was the perfect cover.

Reen kept herself far from Vulcan circles and, when she did encounter one, she avoided them like the plague. She kept up the disguise of T'Fawn so that she could make connections within Federation space and prepare for the day when she would strike back at her life's tormentor.

That day had arrived.

She had spent years considering the best way to achieve her goal and, given Ael's ever present guardian Aidoann's brilliance at protecting her, she decided the best form of attack was not frontal, but subtle. However, given the Empress' predilection for keeping an eye on the Senate, which she clearly did not trust, Ael tended to remain on ch'Rihan. So, there weren't too many opportunities for her to be taken out offworld and Reen had been patiently waiting for just the right time. Ael's trip to Hobus seemed to be a gift from the Elements themselves. All the pieces were in the right place for the first time.

A shadow fell over the sun and Reen had to shade her eyes to see who had blocked her view. The officer within her reacted and sought a phaser, however her intellect told her to stay calm. S'Timon had returned.

"It is pleasing to see you again," Reen said, making certain that she kept her Vulcan visage in place.

"And you, T'Fawn," her second-in-command replied calmly. He took a seat next to her so neither of them had to stare at the sun. He, too, had allowed himself to be altered, and he had taken the moniker of Simon. It sounded Terran, but also fitted a Vulcan male well enough.

"Did you acquire it?" she asked, almost nonchalant.

S'Timon wanted to smile but simply let his eyes glint his pleasure. "Yes, T'Fawn."

"Did you have to haggle over the price?" she asked. Given their flight from Romulan space she and her crew had found their resources stretched. Over the years her cover of T'Fawn had allowed her to gain some credits, but most of them had been used keeping the aging *Razor's Edge*, and its crew, spaceworthy.

"The price was not an issue," S'Timon stated calmly.

A flicker of concern crossed Reen's eyes. Her second had killed him. This could bring some unwanted attention.

"I see," she said. "I gather that the issue is sanitary?"

"There is no cause for concern. There was some disruption, but the matter has been taken care of."

Reen understood. There was no evidence to follow when the victim had been vaporised. She allowed herself the pleasure of a slight sigh of relief. Play acting a Vulcan was taxing on her nerves. "If we have the goods there is no longer a reason to delay. It's time to return."

S'Timon's eyes glittered with delight. They were finally going home. "Yes. I will pass on the message to our associates. I am certain they will be gratified to hear this news."

t'Khenniell gave her second a sideways look. Sometimes she wondered about him. He played the role of a Vulcan *too* well.

The two of them stood and made their way past the tables haphazardly placed in the courtyard to exit the space.

As they walked S'Timon asked, curious: "Is there anything here you will miss?"

Reen considered the question and gave a simple answer: "Where we're going, I can't buy a decent cappuccino."

As they left, they paid no heed to the other guests in the café. They were just Federation plebes who were not worth their consideration.

Their attitude suited Starfleet Captain Jessica Holmes of the *USS Challenger* just fine. After all, there was nothing like hiding in plain sight, was there?

Seeming to pay the two Vulcanoids no attention at all, Jessica brushed a lock of her unruly, midnight black hair from her eyes for the millionth time. Commanding a Federation starship didn't always give her time to do undercover work like this, and there were times when she really missed it. Command had its privileges, so she had taken the opportunity rather than trusting some over-eager security officer who couldn't do UC if they tried. Most of the time, they might as well sit there with a neon sign over their heads flashing "Starfleet". They couldn't to naturally casual if they tried. Most of them were so stiff they could be used for surfing.

Ever since she had come to her attention, she had decided that T'Fawn was a woman who need special handling. There was something about this "Vulcan" woman that smelled more than a latrine pit in mid-summer. She appeared to the casual glance to be the goods, but there was something about the words she chose, her mannerisms, which were simply not quite Vulcan. It wasn't

solid evidence. After all, she had once met T'Pol in her old age and, even given her advanced years, it was clear she had a sense of humour. The meeting had nearly shattered all her illusions regarding Vulcans.

She considered her XO, who, she knew, thought she was nuts. Ellie was a good friend and the two of them had been through a lot together, and Jessica knew that the former Intel Analyst brought a more tempered style to their partnership. They were opposite sides of the coin. She knew herself to be the kind of person who would go where angels feared to tread willingly, with a smile, a beer and a pack of crisps. Ellie was conventional, while Jessica knew herself to be a maverick – one Starfleet tolerated because she had a knack of pulling herself out of the fire smelling of roses. It was true, she knew. There was no deodorant like success.

She recalled Reen's passing comment and wondered. If she was a Vulcan, it was true, there weren't many opportunities to buy a decent cappuccino on their homeworld. If she truly *was* a Romulan there probably was no chance this side of hell of getting a decent coffee anywhere on that planet. So, where are you returning to? she wondered.

She considered for a moment. Starfleet would not normally appreciate the diversion of one of the ships of the line, but Jessica had been right enough times in the past that she would be permitted this indulgence. If they were needed elsewhere, she knew enough people in low places to keep tabs on T'Fawn.

She waited for her quarry and her associate to get out of earshot before "casually" wandering the streets for a time. Once in a relatively secluded spot she flipped open her communicator. "Holmes to *Challenger*. One to beam up."

There were some things even a major player in the Romulan senate like Hathness didn't want to know. The name of the Tal Shiar operative sitting next to him in what passed for a café on Romulus was high on that list.

The operative, Sub-Commander S'hinder tr'Llweeiin was an average looking individual who would go unnoticed wherever he went, and that was one of his greatest assets. No matter where he was, he blended into the background and most who met him, if asked for his description later, would give a very vague answer that would describe half the male population of the planet.

All the same, it was a dangerous game he was playing. Although the Empress believed she was keeping the Tal Shiar on a short leash these days she had no idea just how far their reach went. There were few places on ch'Rihan they hadn't either bugged or had under surveillance. She was one individual they couldn't control, but that didn't prevent them from trying to influence her activities. The trick was making sure she wasn't aware of their manipulations.

Hathness didn't see the face of the operative this time. He simply sat in his usual chair, ordered a stiff mug of tea and bread roll and waited for it to arrive. He took out his work tablet/computer and perused the daily news. "Hmmph," he said, apparently to himself. "Nothing of interest other than the Klingons are up to their usual mischief."

There was no reply from his contact, and this was expected. If he was to say something immediately it might be noticed and more than likely *would* be. The Tal Shiar had done such an amazing job of creating fear in the land that nobody conversed with seeming strangers. You never knew who you were talking to. What you said could and *would* be used against you.

The man suddenly acted as if his communicator was receiving an incoming call. "Yes?" he replied. "Hello! No, I'm alone. She's gone on a fishing expedition and won't be back for a while. I'm hoping to take advantage of the peace and quiet. Get up to some mischief, that sort of thing. You know what's it's like, when the one who thinks she runs the universe is gone I can finally get something done. Oh, don't worry. I've got plans on making our home more like what it should be without her constantly telling me what I'm doing wrong. Thanks for the call. Jolan tru." The man snapped the communicator shut and picked up his tea, savouring the smell and enjoying the flavour.

Behind him Hathness thought about the coded information he had heard. He knew the entire conversation was for his ears alone. It came as no surprise to him that the Tal Shiar was aware of the Empress' every move and that they were up to something while she was offworld. They were also planning on helping him unseat her which was good news indeed. The lack of response to his comment regarding the Klingons meant they were not going to interfere in his dealings with Duras. Excellent.

His order was served and Hathness enjoyed a sip. He kept quiet, knowing that his silence would be taken as understanding. He took a bite out of his roll and chewed whilst considering his options. Things were going to get messy – quickly.

Two minutes later S'hinder got up, left the right amount of currency on the table and left. He had no doubt that Senator Hathness was a fool, but the Elements sometimes looked on them with favour from time to time. His read of the man's file showed him to be selfish, arrogant and entitled. That all added up to "easily manipulated". All you had to do was find his pressure points and he was yours.

The pieces were in play now that Reen t'Khenniell was moving again. They had kept her on the shelf, waiting for the right time to use her. Considering her animosity towards the Empress, all they had to do was let her know where and when and set her loose.

S'hinder allowed himself a brief smile. Yes, everything was about to sink into chaos, but that was where the Tal Shiar liked it best. When the world seemed to be in chaos nobody really knew what was going on besides the people pulling everyone's strings.

There was no better place to be in the Universe, as far as Reen t'Khenniell was concerned, than sitting in the command chair on her own ship. There had been a time, not so long ago, when this had been one of many, but these days her influence had diminished somewhat. Fortunately, the pieces had finally come together and the time to come for her to act.

"Status?" she asked.

"On course for the Neutral Zone, Ma'am," S'Timon answered.

"Keep us under warp six. Our cloak loses effectiveness beyond that." They had come too far to be brought undone by foolish mistakes.

She was preaching to the choir. Her second gave her a fond smile and reported: "Proceeding at warp five point five, Admiral. We are a half hour from the Neutral Zone." An odd turn of the head caught his eye. He stepped over to the weapons station and asked: "What is it?"

The Sub-Lieutenant on duty looked up at him, concerned. "We have an echo on sensors, Commander. It does not close on us, and it moves as we move."

S'Timon was immediately suspicious. "Have you run diagnostics?" He needed to cover all the bases.

"I have, Commander." The reply was less than convincing. "However, our vessel is not what it used to be."

The officer was correct. The *Razor's Edge* was suffering in some areas due to being patched time and again, and having some of their equipment replaced with cheap, Federation knockoffs. He knew for a fact that part of their navigation system was now running off a second-hand cargo vessel unit he picked up from a junk yard. "Understood," he said. "Let me know immediately if there are any changes."

"By your command."

S'Timon returned to his place next to the Admiral. He decided to keep this little detail to himself. He could see she was lost in her own thoughts and plans, and right now she didn't need to know. There was a lot riding on this mission, and there were many pieces in play. It was his experience that, once the game had begun, it rarely followed the shape one envisaged. No point in bothering her with one minor sensor malfunction.

"Holding at warp five point five, Captain. As ordered, we're matching their speed and movements," the helmsman of the *USS Challenger* reported.

"Thank you, Mister Chen," Captain Jessica Holmes said.

In the centre seat, Captain Jessica Holmes sat, irritated. She had been surprised that, having suspected that something might happen soon, it had been quite so in-your-face. With a Federation Heavy Cruiser in orbit of a Federation world a Romulan Bird of Prey decloaked and beamed up the very individuals that she had been surveilling. Without so much as a "by your leave" it had recloaked and headed out of the system.

It had become very quickly clear to her that her suspicions regarding T'Fawn had been bang on the money. After all, it wasn't every day when a Romulan Bird of Prey decloaked, beamed people up from the surface, then recloaked, heading out system, straight for the Neutral Zone. It was a weird thing to see. If they were spies, it was almost *unprofessional*. Either they didn't care they would be seen…

Or they were in a big hurry.

"Are they still on course for the Neutral Zone?" the captain asked. The almost invisible ship had made a number of odd course changes and she wasn't certain they hadn't been completely turned around.

"Yes, Captain," her XO replied. "It looks like you were right about T'Fawn."

The comment brought a cheeky grin to the captain's face. "Yes, I was right about that after all, wasn't I Commander Harrelson?"

Ellie looked back at her and rolled her eyes. Her unspoken message: I'm not going to hear about this all day, am I?

Jessica's cheeky grin said it all. *Yes, you are.*

Her old friend and comrade, Melisandra, stepped up beside her. A green Orion woman who could not help but attract the attention of all, she moved with cat-like grace. "Whatever they are," she said, her voice practically a purr. "They're not Tal Shiar." She sounded bored.

Jessica considered her Orion friend. The woman was formidable. Her skills good enough to keep the captain up at night wondering what she might have done in the cause of peace. Melis wasn't Starfleet, but she was a valuable player in arenas where the rules were either murky or had been thrown in the recycler years ago. Considering their current assignment, she had been brought

on board as a consultant. Though unusual, her results spoke for themselves.

Jessica sighed. "I agree. Their cloaking device is something out of another era. Either they picked it up at a second-hand bazaar or that ship's older than anything the Tal Shiar would show their faces in. Their performance was almost… sloppy."

The nubile woman examined one of her perfectly manicured nails. "Either that, or they could be lulling you into a false sense of security, leading you into a trap and then turning you, me and this lovely ship of yours into a cloud of floating debris."

The captain turned her eyes upward and thought to herself: Way to go on your pep talks, Melis. She turned to her comms officer. "Mister Koren, have you had any response to our report on the situation?"

The brunette woman at the Comms board turned and reported: "Aye, Captain. Just a follow and observe order, I'm afraid."

Melis was dumbfounded. "Boring, boring, boring. Doesn't anyone in your precious Starfleet have any imagination? You have a starship that could make that piece of…" she loosed a string of Orion expletives that the Universal Translator opted not to illuminate, "nothing more than scrap metal for the wreckers yard. You could do sooo may more *interesting* things and those Romulans wouldn't know what had hit them until they were in the afterlife being asked for their Identity Cards. But no, nooo, your Federation superiors have you *following* and *observing* them." She gave a disgusted snore. "Honestly, are you sure you were trained by these people, Jess? You should have been born an Orion. You would have had so much more fun."

A small smile played over the captain's lips. Her green friend had struck a few familiar notes on the instrument she knew so well, the captain of the *Challenger*. "Not now, Melis. We're not going to stop them because it's an exceptionally bad time for it. Admiral Piper and a Federation delegation are meeting the Romulan Empress on a peace mission *right now*. Destroying a Romulan bird of prey, even if it's on our side of the border, could derail that. Never mind it could put the *Enterprise,* the *Millennium*, and the entire delegation in danger if we screwed this up. I doubt that's something the Admiral would be all that happy about." She paused and added: "We're not going to do anything just so things can be *interesting*."

Melis thinned her lips in disgust. "Politics," she growled.

Jess smiled. "Think of it more like trade negotiations." If there was something Orions understood, it was commerce.

Toying with the hilt of her dagger, Melis coyly said: "Jess, don't you remember ever watching me negotiate?"

That comment brought to mind a few images the captain could have done without. Bad analogy, she thought, bad analogy. "Point taken," she said, her face having reddened slightly. "For now, we keep an eye on them and just make sure they stay out of mischief."

Green eyes rolled. "I take it we're going to stop when we get to the border."

The captain nodded. "I just wish I knew where they were going," she said. She had a bad feeling about this.

Melis turned impishly, heading for the turbolift doors. "Let me know if something *interesting* happens. For now, I'll go and do something more entertaining… like watching the paint peel."

Jess watched her go. It was her hope that *nothing* interesting was going to happen. Sure, the question of T'Fawn was settled in that she was not your garden variety Vulcan trader. There was no chance she could have picked up a slightly used Romulan Bird of Prey at the local starship dealership. While her actual identity was still an unknown, it was pretty clear she was no Vulcan, but a Romulan operative of some kind. All the same, there were too many questions that remained unanswered. Who was she? What was she up to in Federation space? What does she plan on taking back with her?

Their watch and observe orders had pretty much sealed their fate in this situation. It was not likely that the Romulan ship was about to pull up, invite them over for tea and explain themselves. Not likely at all.

Hmmm, she said quietly to herself. If things changed and got what Melis might even consider *fascinating,* then their immediate futures could become very messy and some of the Orion's more colourful notions might become reality. She turned to her XO. "Ellie, here's what I want to do…"

Four hours later, the *Challenger* found they had to drop out of warp. Their quarry had finally reached the Neutral Zone and had not even bothered to slow down. In fact, once they had entered, their scans showed that vessel had increased speed after it had crossed the border. However, to the captain's surprise, it had remained cloaked.

Jessica stared at the screen.

The *Enterprise*-class starship hovered a mere kilometre from the edge of the Zone, her Captain bothered. Her quarry had done exactly what she had expected them to do, run for home. The bit about the *why* was what was bothering her. "T'Fawn" had

been up to mischief, that was certain. How much, and against whom, she did not know.

The sound of an incoming transmission chirped, and the captain looked over to her comms officer.

"We're being hailed by the *Farragut*," he reported.

Jess had wondered who might be on patrol in this section of the NZ. "Put him on screen."

Captain Chopra's handsome, dark features gave her a welcoming smile. "Hello, *Challenger,*" he said with natural charm. "Captain Chopra here. What brings you into this neck of the woods?"

Still a little annoyed, Jess replied: "Taking out the trash."

Not biting, her inquisitor simply tilted his head to the side, curious, inviting further comment.

"We've been tailing a Romulan Bird of Prey, cloaked, as they were leaving Federation space. I was hoping to find out what they were up to, but I never got the chance to ask."

Concern showed on Chopra's face. "Did you plot its trajectory?"

Jess turned to Science. "Have you got their course plotted?" she asked.

The officer looked up casually, not understanding the import of the information she sought. "It looks like they were going to the Hobus system, Captain."

On the screen, Chopra's cheerful visage vanished. "Not good, Captain Holmes. Not good at all."

The hair on the back of Jess' neck was standing on end. "Why?"

Chopra responded gravely. "We're sending the co-ordinates on a coded frequency. Meet us here and I'll fill you in. You're not going to like this."

Chapter Eight

The Empress stood in the starbase's lounge gazing out the huge curved, overhead window in wonder. She had spent most of her career in the Fleet out in the void and yet there had been few times when she could truly enjoy the majesty of it all like she could here. The stars didn't twinkle in the eternal night, they remained strong, fixed points of light that demanded your attention. The problem was that there were so many of them.

The base was, wisely, turned away from the Hobus star so she wouldn't be blinded by its glare. Looking outward, she could still trace the line in the stars that revealed the ecliptic that was the Milky Way. She had thought it an amusing name for it – she had once heard Doctor McCoy refer to it as such – and she found it ironic that the name had stuck in her memory. Ch'Rihan had its own version of milk, not to mention what her own body had produced to feed Tafv when he had been young, that she could see the correlation. It was poetic and, while she was a warrior at heart, she appreciated the fact one could sculpture with words.

"Which one is Eisn?" Arrhae asked, standing next to, yet still slightly behind her. Ael noted a sad fondness in her voice. It was clear the Senator was committed to her course, but she didn't have to like it. The woman's blood may once have been red, but her heart beat for ch'Rihan.

Once a navy captain, always a captain. Without missing a beat, Ael pointed off to a slightly bluish speck on the right. "There."

Arrhae's eyes widened in surprise. "How do you do that?" she asked, amazed.

Ael sighed. "When you've spent about as much time in space as I have you find you can navigate anywhere with just a glance." She found that she, too, longed for a life that was no longer hers.

Above her a sight she hadn't beheld for some time nearly caught her breath. Not one, but *two* Federation starships warped into the space around the station and glided into orbit about it. They were followed only seconds later by two Rihannsu birds of prey. She watched as they followed approximately one kilometre behind each of the visiting vessels. They were well aware that the Empress was here, and they were taking no chances, even given the "peace" mission.

An aide appeared behind them and announced: "The Federation ships have arrived, Empress."

The women shared a glance and slight smile. The opportunity to state the obvious was rarely missed by the lower echelons.

Ael pivoted on her heel and stepped over to the chair that had been set up just for her. The observation deck had been chosen by Ael for the first encounter. It was large and imperious enough to remind their visitors that the Rihannsu Empire was not to be trifled with. Ael slid into the chair, cheekily tucked her feet under her to be comfortable then told the aide: "Inform our envoys that we are ready to receive them."

Without saying a word, the young man bowed, turned and left the room. Aidoann stood just outside the door, she knew, and would personally scan every individual who entered this space. It would take time and she only hoped it didn't aggravate their guests. While Ael was keen to give an air of strength and resolve, she knew they were here at *her* invitation, which meant they had something she wanted. That immediately put her on the back foot

and gave her foe power over her. She glanced at Arrhae who stood nearby. The woman seemed deep in thought. "Do you think they will be interested?"

Terise looked out at her from behind those eyes. Sometimes Ael wondered if the woman was indeed two people. "I think they honestly want nothing more than peace, Empress. However, considering the blood that has been spilled ever since the original *Enterprise* wandered into one of our minefields, they will be cautious."

In a moment of complete honesty Ael said quietly: "I just hope they don't hate us."

Arrhae sighed. "I know there are many in the Federation that do. However, I am familiar with the careers of the envoys sent us and I believe they will at the very least give us a fair hearing." She raised her upswept eyebrows, trying to give her a hopeful look. "Anything's possible."

Ael's gaze turned to the windows above her and she watched as first the *Enterprise*, then the *Millennium* slowly moved past. She was quite familiar with the captains of both, as John Harriman had done an excellent job of carrying on the tradition of his ship's stellar name. He was a fair-minded and even-tempered man and was known to be reasonable. Piper, on the other hand…

Admiral Piper was the woman Starfleet gave the most dangerous jobs to. She was known to be a maverick, much like Kirk had been. Her solutions were not always by the book, but she *was* effective. There were times when she had solved a situation diplomatically – including the incident at Galorndon Core years before – but she was also known for using the amazing power of the ship to its full advantage, as she had done at Cait when she had destroyed the original *Ingram*. She watched as the

Millennium-A swept by again and she took particular note that the *Odysseus*-class ship sported megaphasers – an innovation that had been dropped from this variant but reinstated by her captain. Piper left nothing to chance, it seemed. Ael drew in a deep breath and considered. Perhaps it was time to get to know her better, she thought.

The large, wooden door swung in and Ael found herself wondering again at the many affectations from home she had observed on this station. Wood, of all things!

The newly promoted Commander Valorian tr'Manntorr stepped into the room. He was a tall, officious male, Ael noted, but that was hardly a surprise given their culture. However, in the short time she had known him she had seen a sharp mind and an eagerness to get the job done well and efficiently. That gave him all the saving graces the Empress needed. She didn't have to like the people who served under her, but she did expect them to be reliable. "Empress," he stated loudly. "May I present the emissaries from the United Federation of Planets, Ambassador Spock and Lieutenant Commander Sa'avik."

Behind him a couple of Vulcans entered the room – at least they appeared as such. Ael knew better.

Spock was beginning to show his age. He was well into the Vulcan form of middle age with more than a touch of grey in his hair. His face was lined and some of his youthful vigour was gone. However, the spark of intelligence was well alight, and he missed nothing. The man wore a Vulcan robe that was stately yet functional. The Empress thought the whole effect reminded her of his father, Sarek, whom she had met on occasion.

Next to him was Lieutenant Commander Sa'avik, his protégé and some wondered if she would be his mate. Unlike Spock, she still looked young and vibrant. Her curls were piled

up and in control and her eyes took in everything. She had an elegance to her that made Ael think of her mother, the late Commander t'Avik, her cousin. She wondered if the Starfleet dress uniform enhanced that effect. They were both women of honour who lived to serve. She liked that.

Ael had to admit to herself that her heart skipped a beat upon seeing the young woman. She had kept their familial alliance to herself. There was no telling what some would do if it was known that Sa'avik was her kin. All the same, the girl was her family, and it was always good to see family.

Breaking with protocol, Ael slid off the chair and crossed the room. Spock and Sa'avik drew up short as they waited for the Empress.

"Welcome, Ambassador Spock," she said, giving him the Vulcan salute. She turned and did likewise with his companion, but also gave her a broad smile. "It is good to have you here. Thank you for coming."

Spock nodded solemnly. "You honour us, Empress. On behalf of the United Federation of Planets we greet you."

At the door, Valorian wasn't certain what to do. His job wasn't done. He glanced at Ael, looking for a cue. She gave him a look and a quick nod – continue.

"Empress, I also present Admiral Piper and Captain John Harriman of Starfleet," he announced. The slight catch in his voice betrayed his dislike of the Federation force.

Fortunately, the two humans were above such pettiness. They strode into the room and came up behind the Vulcans, who parted to admit Ael. At the door the Empress noted Aidoann took a hesitant step forward, always on her guard when it came to her safety. A look from Ael stopped her in her tracks. She was among friends here.

Ael found herself having to look up at both starship commanders. It didn't bother her at all. She was aware of her position and status and so differences in physicality were irrelevant. The only time it would have been an issue was if she expected to have to do battle. She noticed that, even though Piper was on a diplomatic mission and was attired in full dress uniform she still had the hilt of her Vin'tah hanging off her belt. It was part of her signature, she thought. The notion of Piper being out without her much vaunted sword would seem almost out of character. This woman was a warrior, even when she was holding out the hand of friendship. Piper reminded her of herself. She thought of the S'harien sword behind her on the side of the raised chair and how she loved to wield it. The weapons were an extension of themselves and could be used for quick justice or defence when necessary. They were women of action, she thought, feeling a sense of kinship with her.

"Admiral Piper," she said, holding out her hand in greeting. Piper took it and gave her a pleasant, if not warm, smile. She wondered if there was something behind those eyes. Ael got the impression the human was having a bad day.

"Empress," Piper said in reply. "It's good to see you again."

It had been some years, Ael knew. She cast her mind back to the intelligence report she had been given on both Federation commanders and she recalled her Vulcan first officer had not survived their last battle with the Cardassians. She knew from experience that there comes a day when you just lose too many compatriots, and it was time to retire. The loss of too many friends in the line of duty was the price of serving, but there came a day when the price was just too high. Perhaps Piper was simply not yet aware the time had come.

"And you, Admiral," Ael said more formally. "Thank you for what you did for peace at Galorndon Core."

Piper gave her a brief smile and was mildly uncomfortable. "All in a day's work, Empress."

The diminutive leader turned and greeted Captain Harriman. She had been keeping an eye on him out of the corner of her eye and noted that he was a consummate professional and patient. She shook his hand and welcomed him. He responded with a warm, from-the-heart smile that made his eyes sparkle.

"Thank you for your invitation, Empress. It's not every day I get to enjoy the company of Romulans."

Ael judged he wasn't being cheeky, just friendly. His dossier had mentioned his gregariousness. She gave a slight smile. "I don't think it's always been enjoyable, has it?" she asked with a touch of sadness.

Harriman's smile took on an extra depth of warmth, as if there was a truly charming man inside him who looked forward to showing himself. "Perhaps that can change, Empress," he said hopefully.

Ael caught his gaze and gave him a look that showed him she hoped so too, but that the Romulans would not be pushovers. "If not friends, Captain, then at least good neighbours."

Behind her Spock spoke his agreement. "There are many within the Federation who have yet to work out grievances between them and their neighbours. However, we have found that giving them an equal voice affords them an opportunity to air their grievances. It is only through dialog and discussion that we can find common ground and build on it. It is our hope that we may be able to make a new beginning for our two people groups with these talks."

Ael stepped over to him, gave him a look of understanding, then walked past him and back to her place on the throne. She sat regally and spoke, the voice of Romulus and Remus, and not just her own. "On behalf of the Rihannsu Empire I welcome the delegates from the United Federation of Planets." She glanced over at the door. It was time for their guests to be offered somewhere to sit. She gave the Commander a nod and he indicated to servitors to bring in five chairs – one extra for the Senator – and some refreshments. They would need to be comfortable as they had a lot to discuss. The Empress noted the servitors on the station were well trained, but clearly of the lower castes of Rihannsu society. As such, she paid them little attention.

Her Federation guests took the offering gratefully and then waited for her to speak.

Ael took a deep breath and began. This was going to have to be done right or the loss of face to her people would be a price too great for them to handle and this would all fall apart.

"This is boring!" Captain Piper drummed her fingers on her chair armrest and gazed at the viewscreen. It was at maximum resolution so they could watch the space around the station, including their ship's namesake. So far, it was a huge nothing-burger.

No-one on the bridge was going to contradict her because they were all in agreement. This was getting old fast as they sat and watched.

"There's got to be a way we can get on board and watch things up close," Piper said, thinking out loud. "We may have already missed something vital."

Standing to her right Piper Silayna sighed. "If there was going to be something that's going to make this sun go nova, I hardly think we're going to miss it."

Piper looked over at Sustasandage and said with a slightly reproving tone, "They did."

Her sister smirked. "Point taken."

Aware she was the subject of conversation, Sus stepped over from the science console where she had been assisting in watching the space around the star and interjected: "My people do have personal cloaking suits, but we don't recommend using them for too long. The field can do cellular damage with prolonged exposure."

Piper started. "How long?"

"About two hours."

The Captain considered her options. "We could have people going over in teams," she said, eager to get into action.

Krashtallash threw cold water over that idea. From behind her chair, he said: "Everyone except the Captain, Commander Sarda, Suzette and Manny. There's too high a chance they would be noticed by Admiral Piper – even cloaked." He looked at his kin. "I doubt the cloaking field shields one from telepathy."

Sus grimaced. "No. The only way to properly dampen our psi abilities are through drugs that slow down our cognitive functions. I wouldn't want to beam onto a Romulan space station without being ready for everything. At this stage in their development, they still have a long way to go."

Piper Silayna nodded. "There's no cure for paranoia."

Her sister nodded her agreement. "The Tal Shiar have got a lot to answer for."

Sus scowled. "You don't know the half of it." It was all she was going to offer, and no-one was going to push her.

Feeling better now they had an actionable plan, Piper looked over her shoulder to Crash. "Captain Krashtallash, I'll leave you with the plans for Operation Infiltrate." Behind her, Crash nodded, inwardly pleased to be given such an important task and the reminder of his new rank. Piper turned back to Sus. "How many suits do you have?" she asked.

For once, Sus had a good reason to smile. "How many do you need?" She knew her replicator would turn out as many as were required.

"Just one more thing," Piper said. "I know we'll need to bring the ship into range of your time stasis bubble, or causality shielding, or whatever you call it, so the people we beam out don't just vanish outside it. We're going to need to bring the *Millennium* in closer, but that could expose Suzette, myself and Manny to detection – maybe even Spock or Sarda. We need a way for us to shield our thoughts and presence from Admiral Piper." Once again, she cursed inwardly that her older self was present. "Oh, and it would be helpful if your ship's AI could be watching what's happening outside as well."

Sus smiled. "Way ahead of you there, Captain. Scanner's been scanning – pun unintended – with our modern tech ever since we got in system."

Piper grinned. "Excellent."

"You're kidding me, right?" Piper said, frustrated at the cramped conditions.

Sustasandage shrugged. "It's the best we can do aside from putting the five of you in a coma."

"Quit complaining, Sis," Suzette said as she lounged on an ornate chaise lounge with Piper sitting between her legs. It was the only other piece of furniture on Sustasandage's tiny starship aside from the pilot's chair, which had been set aside for the aging Spock. Manny sat on her haunches on the floor alongside Sustasandage, once more pleased with herself that she was of Cait. All they ever needed was a few cushions, and her kin had already provided her with that.

Piper leaned back and, now pressed into her sister's form, she turned her head and looked into her eyes at close range. She wriggled a little and said: "At least this is more comfortable."

Suzette gave her a small smile and pecked her on the cheek fondly. "You know you're always welcome."

Sustasandage gave them a curious look and, seeing it, Manny shot a thought into her mind. "*If you had any idea of what the two of them have been through, you'd understand*."

Captain of her little starship, Sus spoke up. "Scanner, shift us forward zero point one of a second and give us a 3D representation of what's happening on the *Millennium's* bridge. I'm sure Piper wants to know how Captain Krashtallash is doing."

Piper was a little annoyed at that. "I have every confidence in his abilities, Sus," she said, defending her former second officer.

Sus glanced over at the Captain and reminded herself of what history had recorded about this woman. Loyal to her crew to a fault, the file said. They weren't wrong! "Of course, Captain," she said, mollifying her. "My great uncle ... is an amazing Cait."

Nobody missed the slight catch in her words. They knew that she often thought of them all in the past tense as her home

was the distant future in a time when they were nothing more than an almost forgotten memory.

Piper cast a glance over at Sarda, who was sitting in a corner, meditating. He had been quiet since boarding the vessel, and she wondered what was going on in his mind. She could have eavesdropped through their link, but she didn't want to intrude on his privacy. All the same, she fired off a comforting thought. "*I'm sorry I couldn't leave you in command, my friend*."

His response was immediate. "*Captain Krashtallash is my superior officer, and you were right to put us in here. Our link could be a risk to our security. Admiral Piper might feel my presence*."

"*I see you've given this a lot of thought*."

"*Indeed*."

Piper smiled to herself. Sarda was not the sort to put ego before the mission. "*You're a good man, my friend. I'm glad you're at my side*."

Sarda's reply was simply the sense of warm comradeship she felt from him when he projected his absolute confidence in her.

Their conversation took only seconds, and, as they conversed, the space around them turned into an amazing, scaled graphic of the larger ship's bridge. They could clearly see Krashtallash sitting in the centre seat radiating a confidence in himself and the crew that Piper was having to get used to. He had commanded his own ship for over six months, and she noted his style had developed markedly. He was no longer a substitute commander for when she was asleep, he was a leader in his own right. The thought gave her a sense of pride, but the knowledge that he had already outgrown her gave her a tinge of sadness. It was time for him to move on.

"Krashtallash, can you hear us?" Piper asked.

"Loud and clear, Piper," he said, using her first name as he was now part of the captain-first-name club. "If a little bit tinny."

"Side effect of the phasing," Sus said helpfully. "With us slightly out of phase our psi presence can't be felt and we're not so far out that our causality bubble no longer protects you."

Crash grimaced. "Am I glad for that! If we vanished, I'd never hear the end of it from Susanna."

Both Pipers chuckled. Crash's wife was a force of nature, that was certain.

Just to be sure, Sus looked to the strongest telepath present. "Grandmother, can you sense anything outside this space?"

Manny closed her eyes and concentrated, then frowned. "That's weird," she said, clearly disturbed. "It's like the Universe still exists, it's just that there's nobody in it."

Piper Silayna blanched. "Yuk! I wouldn't want to be in a Universe occupied by only the six of us."

Speaking for the first time, Spock interjected: "I have been told on occasion that I am very good company, Captain Silayna."

Suzette wasn't certain how to take it, however her sister laughed. "Quite right, Ambassador. You've never failed to amaze me!"

"What do we do now?" Manny asked.

"We watch and see what Crash's people find out."

Ghost hated being in suits, they tended to cramp her up as they restricted her movements even more than her back brace, which she was still wearing. She twisted a little in the suit to try

to improve her situation, but the movement was fruitless. "Damn," she quietly cursed to herself.

One of the good things about being Caitlin Ryan was that she didn't take up much space. She was only just over five feet tall and was slight of frame. Fitting into the suit wasn't a problem – Sustasandage had custom made it just for her. Even the helmet was not much more than a fishbowl that sat upon her head. It had no breather unit as she didn't need one. It just had a power unit on her back that was governed by voice commands.

"What's the matter, Commander Ryan?" AI Scanner asked her.

At times like these she needed to remind herself that she wasn't addressing her superior officer. "Scanner, you'd know if it was possible to squeeze you into a suit."

The sentient program chuckled. "Another reason I'm glad I'm not inhibited by flesh and bone."

The thought gave Ghost a moment's wonder. Was it possible for the ship to operate an android body by remote?

She shook her head slightly to bring her back to the present. Then and there, Ryan was standing on the deck of a Romulan space station not far from the doors that led into the chamber where they believed Admiral Piper was conversing with the Romulan Empress. This was not friendly ground.

She gave a thought to the other two of their group. Carman Valastro was on the command deck of the station watching what was going on there, whilst Rebecca "Emu" Armytage was watching the docking bays to see who was coming and going. She was aware that the others shared her sense, even *need,* to do something other than just sit on the *Millennium.* However, right now, she wasn't certain this was much of an improvement.

There were two guards at the door, and she couldn't get past them as she didn't think it would automatically open for her anyway. She noticed the pad on the jamb behind one of the guards and put that out of her mind. She would have to follow someone going through it so as not to be noticed.

She realised she was being overly cautious. Her suit was fitted with a Head's Up Display and right now the HUD was showing her the only two people in the corridor near her were in front of her. She would see them coming.

Ghost stepped over and looked at them. "Don't Romulan uniforms ever change?" she asked herself.

She didn't realise she had spoken the phrase aloud. Scanner's voice sounded in her ears. "Not so much. If there's one thing the Romulans are known for, it's consistency. Even in the 27th Century, when the crew of the original *Discovery* found Daekon, he was still wearing a uniform that had hardly changed in a millennium."

Caitlin paused for a moment to consider the complete non-sequitur of the NX-04 somehow winding up in the distant future to find a man she assumed was a Romulan. The thought almost caught her flat-footed when the door opened and she found herself in the path of the Empress, who was followed by a fierce-looking woman she assumed was her bodyguard. Behind her was Ambassador Spock, looking a lot younger than the last time she had seen him, with a Vulcan woman by his side she wasn't familiar with.

As Caitlin put her back to the wall, she listened to the conversation.

"Admiral Piper," the Empress said in a tone that surprised her. It sounded quite conversational, almost friendly. "I'm going down to the station's exercise deck to work out. I'm well aware

you're a master of Scheel-Tah. I thought you could show me a few moves I might not be aware of."

Behind Spock, Ghost finally caught a glimpse of her captain's future self. Gone was the Admiral's honey-blonde hair she was famous for. She had let the greys take over and, as she guessed she no longer had any colour in it, it was a mix of light and dark greys. While she still looked young for her age, she was certainly well and truly into her sixties, with lines in her face and bags under her eyes. To Ghost's eyes she seemed almost … haunted. However, the voice was still the same. "I'd be happy to, Empress. I'll go easy on you."

The Empress stopped in her tracks. Those behind her made sure they didn't run her over. "I certainly hope not, Admiral. I would be insulted."

Ghost couldn't be certain whether the woman was sincere or taking the piss. It wasn't something she was used to from a Romulan, but Caitlin was fast beginning to realise this woman was no ordinary Rihannha.

"Challenge accepted," Piper said, a little flatly.

While Caitlin and Piper weren't the best of friends, she was an individual that she had come to admire and respect deeply. She was very familiar with her personality and eccentricities, and she was coming to realise there was something a little off with this lady. Had Sarda's passing messed her up?

The Empress gave her a wicked grin. "Excellent. You will fight for the honour of the Federation and I for the Empire. It will be something for our children to remember."

Piper stood a little straighter and her usual steely resolve shone through. "I will warn you, Empress. I've never lost."

"Neither have I. Today will be a first for one of us."

Ghost gritted her teeth. This was going to be interesting. In all the years she had known Piper, once the woman was engaged in battle she did not back down. Caitlin felt a touch of ice as she wondered whether this could end very badly for a diplomatic mission.

As the retinue continued, Ghost fell in behind Piper and a man she had been briefed would be Captain Harriman of the *Enterprise-B*. He was tall and handsome, by her standards. She smirked to herself that she was feeling an attraction for a man who was likely in his early twenties in her time. A bit young for her, she thought.

"Admiral," the captain said quietly. "We are on a diplomatic mission. Perhaps this sparring session isn't such a great idea."

Piper didn't meet his eye. "I can't back down now, John. We would lose face and that's not something we need when negotiating with Rihannsu."

John looked back at her with a look that was not exactly trusting. Ghost wondered if the man had faith in the Admiral's motives being pure. "Of course, Admiral," he said genially with a smile that would have made a used flitter salesman proud.

"Why doesn't he trust her?" Ghost whispered to herself. Now that the coast was clear, Caitlin fell in well behind the retinue to keep her distance. Ultra-careful, she was startled when Piper suddenly stopped, turned, and looked back at the space she was occupying.

Her heart in her mouth, Ghost paused and wondered what she should do. She couldn't call for a beam-out as the stream would be noticed. She looked up into green eyes that seemed to be searching her.

"What's the matter, Piper?" John asked, wondering what this enigmatic woman was up to this time.

The Admiral simply shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I just get the feeling we're being watched."

Harriman shrugged. "This is a Romulan space station. *Of course* we're being watched. I wouldn't be surprised if there were cameras lining every wall."

Piper caught his gaze. "You're probably right," she said, thinking it over. "I'm just a little jumpy."

Now Harriman gave her a genuine smile. "You? The Trouble-Shooter? Starfleet's thrown you in the deep end so many times you've earned your nickname. Word is that nothing fazes you."

At that, she sighed. "I wouldn't go that far," she said quietly. She gave up on her search and the two picked up the pace to catch up with the Empress.

Caitlin gave them even more space and followed.

On the command deck, Carman was finding it a little hard to stay out of the way. The area was spacious but was it busy! The large space had wall-to-wall monitors with someone watching pretty much everywhere at the same time.

"Is this place run by the Tal Shiar?" he asked himself.

In his ear he heard Emu say in her New Zealand accent, "The security here is as tight as a fish's bum."

Unfamiliar with the vernacular, Carman gave the image a little thought and realised what she was inferring. "I'd agree with you, Emu," he said dryly. "From what I'm seeing up here on their bridge, I wouldn't be surprised if there were cameras in the head."

He heard a slight Gaelic chuckle at that. "I'm not sure the Admiral would take too kindly to someone perving on her in the loo."

Carman nodded to himself. "I don't think Piper in any timeline would." The Commander turned his attention back to his surroundings and looked in awe. Each station had nine screens and somehow the officer at each position was managing to keep an eye on all that was going on in this huge station. He considered how different life was in the Federation, that people were allowed the freedom to act under the assumption that they were doing the right thing. It was clear they had the opposite view in the Romulan Empire. The general view was that all their citizens were malfeasants and that they were going to get up to mischief at any, and all, times. The notion did not sit well with him. He couldn't imagine living in a security-mad society; it would be suffocating.

Inside his suit Carman's stomach growled and he realised he should have had a decent meal before this away mission. There was no way he was going to be able to eat inside this helmet.

To his surprise, AI Scanner's voice sounded in his ears. "Getting hungry, Commander?" it asked.

Carman smirked. "Yes. However, there's little I can do about it."

There was a light, and slightly odd, chuckle over the speaker next to Carman's ear. "Sometimes I think you forget what century I come from, Mister Valastro."

Inside his suit visor Carman suddenly felt something brushing against his lips.

"Go ahead and eat it, Commander," Scanner said. "It's perfectly good for humanoids."

Tentatively, Carman grasped the object with his lips, drawing it into his mouth. It hit his tongue and became something truly delicious as it quickly dissolved. With one swallow, the material passed down to his stomach and suddenly he didn't feel hungry anymore. "What was that, and how on Alpha's soil did you get it to taste like Gyros?"

"In the 31st Century we aim to please. We stopped making our rations taste like cardboard … quite some time ago. That was full of all the nutrients your body needs and it tastes great because the suit tailored it for your palate."

Carman made a mental note to stop underestimating the time ship's capabilities. It was truly a wonder. "Thanks for that."

Back in the present, Carman made his way around the room carefully, taking stock of the different stations and what they were for. He found himself standing behind a chair that was manned by a decidedly bored young male who was doing a fairly good impression of someone doing their job. Up close, he could tell the youth was faking it and he could but wonder what he was really thinking about.

Carman perused the monitors and noted the boy was supposed to be observing the scanner for signs of suspicious activity outside the station. He considered that this probably was one of the most boring places to serve as little could possibly happen to such a well defended station this far within the Romulan frontier.

All the same, his eye was drawn to a blip on the screen that the youth missed, but that Carman did not. Curious, he watched the intermittent reading appear and disappear, but it quickly became clear that the object – he didn't know what else to call it – was making its way towards the station.

Carman moved off and back to a corner where he would be out of the way. "Scanner," he said, worried. "Put me through to the captain."

Rebecca wondered to herself whether she was more bored back on the *Millennium* holding the ship in its cloaked orbit, or here, standing in the station's docking bays watching for irregularities. The problem with her mission was two-fold. One, she was on a Romulan station, so normal wasn't something she was acquainted with here, and two, there was *nothing* going on.

"They don't let anyone on board unless they've been strip and cavity searched," she muttered to herself. "No wonder nobody wants to come here."

"I heard that," she heard AI Scanner say. "Not that you're that far from the truth, but the Romulan Empire prided itself on its security measures."

The slip did not go unnoticed by Emu. "So, there's a time in the future when the Romulan Empire no longer exists. Now, *that's* something to look forward to."

"Nothing lasts forever is all I'm saying." The computer left it there. "I take it there's not much happening where you are."

Did an AI understand sarcasm? Emu wondered. Was it worth the effort? "This is where the party's happening all right."

"I'll take that as a "yes"."

A different voice came over the commlink. "Emu, watch out down there. I think the station's about to have some uninvited guests. I've been watching motion on the station's scanners and something's headed for the docking bays."

That got the fighter pilot's full attention. "I'll keep an eye out."

Now fully on the alert, Lieutenant Armytage watched for well over a quarter hour before she spotted something amiss. Before her was a long, curved corridor with differently marked doors leading off the circular docking ring on her right. The reason Emu had taken this position was that whoever left the ring for the station proper had to come through this point if they wanted to get inside. To Rebecca, this place was like a customs booth that visitors had to pass.

There had been zero activity along the corridor for some time until, all of a sudden, a door slid aside where no ship was docked and two Romulan officers stepped out and began walking like they owned the place. The thing that caught Emu's attention was that they were not coming towards her. They were going the other way, back to where she knew the Empress's ship was docked.

She wondered whether following them would be a dereliction of duty. "Commander," she said quickly. "We've got two boarders, dressed like Romulan guards, who are moving towards the Empress's ship. Should I follow them?"

Over the comms she could hear Valastro sigh. She knew he did that whenever he had to make a judgement call. "Let them go," he said. "We're here to observe the Admiral and the Empress and to keep anything from happening to them. I wouldn't be surprised if it was a visit from the Tal Shiar. They're always up to mischief."

Emu frowned. There was something truly off with the two, but she knew she had a post to keep and leaving it could expose those under their care to greater dangers. "Yes sir," she said and tried to let it go. She bit her lip and prayed she hadn't just made a terrible mistake.

Chapter Nine

On the world of ch'Havran the idea of night was nothing but an abstract notion. The Romulan day was roughly the same length as a day on earth, although a Reman could never know that. A Reman would also never understand how a diurnal species normally operated. Night and day were all the same thing to them.

T'mock understood the need for the notion of a day. Even Remans needed a circadian rhythm and the notion of a day helped them manage their time. Ch'Havran days followed a ch'Rihan day at the Capital as their planet was tidally locked towards the sun – making a day nothing more than a way of measuring time. T'mock had never seen a sunrise – the notion seemed foreign to him. The idea of the sun coming over the horizon was peculiar – it was just *there* – and something to be avoided. As the sun side of the planet never had the chance to cool it was not somewhere you wanted to be. The closer you got to the sun the hotter it got. It was only nearer the edges of the world that you could farm where the sunlight was filtered by the atmosphere. Their world produced a surprising amount of grains as the green ring around the planet was in constant sunshine and the planet had enough water for their produce.

The problem with the water supply always grated on T'mock and his sister. The Rihannsu hoarded the precious liquid for food production and rationed the rest to the Remans, the majority of whom worked in the dilithium mines on the dark side of the world.

T'mock looked slightly down at his sister as they rode the elevator. He noticed her frowning. "What is it?" he asked gently.

Varra returned his gaze. "We've lived out our lives on this dirty ball working in filthy tunnels and never once have I had the luxury of enjoying a bath."

Her brother shrugged. "I never had a problem with sonic showers."

Varra gave a chuckle. "That's because you're male. Women need time to just soak away their problems … so I'm told."

Behind them Krasni chimed in. "Females have such weird fantasies."

Vashti put her hand on Varra's arm. "I'm with you, sister."

Their leader considered the whole question moot. He glanced upwards at the destroyed remains of the surveillance camera with a small smile. Remans hated them and were constantly vandalising them. It was one small way that they fought back against their oppressors.

He glanced down at his wrist chronometer and knew their time was near. "Are you ready?"

His friends all nodded. It was time to go.

As the doors slid aside, they stepped out and walked across the wide, gunmetal grey corridor towards the large docking bay doors. A Rihannsu soldier was standing there, guarding them. He was so used to the locals not giving him the time of day he didn't bother to even look at passers-by.

T'mock vaporised him with a quick shot from his disruptor. The man never knew what hit him.

With that single act their group was now committed to their course. Nothing but death was going to stop them now.

Stepping through the docking bay doors the group fanned out and began quietly taking out the Rihannsu guards one-by-one. The space had one large shuttle that would take the daily quota of

dilithium back to ch'Rihan. There was a conveyor belt dropping the crystals into its open hold through a hatch on its roof. T'mock had been counting on the routine being so dull and ordinary that it would take the guards some time to react.

Fortune seemed to be favouring them as the team moved methodically through the large, crate-filled space. The dock was used for moving foodstuffs as well as dilithium. Whenever they came upon one of their fellows they went on by unhindered and the Reman either ignored them or gave them a quick nod of approval.

On the other side of the docks the other team was mirroring their activities and Rihannsu were dropping silently as they were mostly knifed through the ribs or had their throats slashed. Green blood was flowing freely.

"The Elements are on our side," Varra said cheerfully, making T'mock wish she hadn't said it. Invoking the Elements was always a bad idea.

T'mock had to admit to himself he was surprised they had gotten this far. Each member of his team was loaded down with phasers, rifles and grenades. They must have seemed like amateur avengers. He glanced up at the guards that stood to the sides of the shuttle door and noted one of them was looking about him curiously. His hand had gone to his side and his fellow noticed his apprehension. He, too, went for his weapon.

Disruptor beams erupted from numerous positions and T'mock noticed that most of them went wide and missed their targets, either bouncing off the shuttle's duranium hull or passing over it entirely. Only one was true and the first guard disappeared in a red haze.

The second guard realised he was exposed and ducked inside the open hatchway, firing blindly as he had yet to see one

of his assailants. He opened his communicator and raised the alarm.

Overhead the lights turned red – the universal signal for trouble. A siren began wailing and T'mock knew he had to move quickly. They still had much to do before the Rihannsu guards showed up.

He took a grenade out of his pocket, keyed it for a five second delay and threw it as hard as he could towards the doorway. The Elements were good to him. It passed over the guard's head and bounced off the bulkhead. A second later the charge detonated, and the guard was no more.

"That's one way to do it," Varra said with a shrug.

Mostly confident that the room was now under their control, T'mock ushered his people forward. "You know what to do. Make sure you barricade the doors as well as you can and, if you find the pilots, don't take them alive."

His people fanned out and moved towards the exits. T'mock mounted the ramp up to the shuttle's door with his sister behind him. Vashti and Krasni went with the others to supervise. At the top of the ramp, T'mock turned and looked out across the tops of the crates and was surprised to see so many of his fellows coming to their aid. He wondered how he might get them to help.

At the doors, his people were busy putting their equipment to use and were welding the doors shut. Once that was done, their brother and sister Remans began moving the crates into place to cover the doors using the antigrav lifters. The sounds of hammering from the other side were carrying throughout the cavern. Their Romulan masters were waking up to the problem.

From his vantage point, T'mock, who had spent many hours considering what he would say, shouted, "My brothers, sisters! For too long we have suffered under the weight of the

Rihannsu, who have treated us as second-class citizens – no – slaves! We are here to send a message to the Senate! Our message is clear! No more! We want equality with the Rihannsu! We want our freedom!"

Throughout the space their little cadre raised their fists in solidarity, and to his delight, their fellow Remans were with them. He noticed that some of his people began sharing their weapons with the others. He wondered to himself if that was such a great idea. Aside from the fact they shared a common heritage and status he didn't really know any of them.

"Finding something new to worry about?" Varra asked drolly.

T'mock rolled his eyes. "In our situation there is always plenty to worry about."

Varra looked about her at the Remans who had been given weapons. "We're trying to unite our people against our common foe. The first people who need to receive that message are right here with us. We need to give them a taste of freedom if they are going to want more of it."

Her brother sighed. She was right. Never mind that they probably weren't going to survive the day anyway. Why look for trouble? "You're right, sister, as usual." He turned and headed into the shuttle. "We need to get ready for phase two."

In the Capital's spaceport, a lone Klingon scout ship sat, guarded day and night by a squad of warriors whose sole job was to maintain the ship's safety and therefore secure Duras' escape route if he so desired. The warriors weren't quartered in the building. They lived on the ship and never ventured further than the end of the boarding ramp. That was as far as the Imperial

Navy – and the Tal Shiar – were going to permit. They were not to sully the soil of ch'Rihan with their filthy feet.

It was tedious work, and if it had been any other group of warriors, they might have given into boredom and wreaked some havoc just for the fun of it. However, these warriors were entirely loyal to Duras; especially their commander, Kaylor, who had her own reasons for staying.

Standing at the end of the ramp, Kaylor stood guard of the *GhIH*, and kept her eye on the doors that led into the hangar. She knew it was only a matter of time before Duras returned. Klingon "Ambassadors" never stayed long on this planet, may it fall into Ghe''or. No, Klingon Hell was too good for it, she thought to herself. After all, there were Klingon warriors there. Sure, she mused, they deserved to be there and not Sto'vo'Kor, but at least if the Romulans wound up in the fires it would give the fallen Klingon warriors a chance to redeem themselves. The corner of her lips curled up at the thought. Yes, a fitting end for this cursed world.

Not much ever happened in this hangar. She knew why. The Tal Shiar wasn't giving anything away, and the less they learned about the paranoid Romulans the happier the secret service was. So, they practically reserved this little corner of the complex for the Klingons and left them alone – no doubt surrounded by recording devices. She shrugged to herself. They would have done the same thing if the Romulans came to Qo'noS.

As if in answer to some silent prayer, the doors slid open and Duras stepped through. Every step purposeful, he strode over the quarter kellicam distance in moments, each step warming the fires in Kaylor's heart. She had so yearned for his return!

He stepped onto the ramp next to her and clasped her wrist tightly. "It is good to have my feet on Klingon steel again," he said. "Surrounded by those loyal to me."

Kaylor's bosom rose as her heart swelled. "Yes, Duras. It is good to have you back. Is it time to return?"

The flicker in his eyes betrayed his intentions to her, even though he said: "Yes."

So, he had something else in mind. Whatever it was, it would certainly bring glory to the House of Duras, and further plans to gain a foothold on the Chancellorship. She bared her teeth in a smile that was more a snarl. "Then let us get off this world before our *merciless* ship rots in his bones," she said, invoking the small vessel's name.

With Kaylor by his side, Duras strode up the ramp, feeling more in command by the moment. "Get us ready for take-off," he said, the gangway already rising. "As soon as we can, cloak the ship and set course for Hobus."

Kaylor was surprised by the destination. It was still well within the Romulan sphere of influence. However, her faith in her mate was solid. If he led them into the fires of Ghe''or, then she would follow gladly, her fangs bared, her bat'leth ready, happy to take on the hordes of hell if her love was by her side.

T'mock stood at the open door of the shuttle and looked out over the wide, open space that now surrounded the vessel. His fellow Remans had done an impressive job piling up the extraneous crates to block off the entrances, as well as killing the feed from the conveyor belts that had been filling the ship.

"You think they've shut it all down yet?" Varra asked him, her gaze up at the ceiling.

Her brother knew what she was referring to. Most of the mining operations on ch'Havran used automated systems to transfer the material to this very bay, and now that the flow had been stopped the whole production line would have to cease to prevent the product piling up and blocking the tubes. "If they haven't, they're going to be in a lot of trouble," he mused. He shrugged. "Not that it matters to us."

"Point taken," Varra said.

T'mock raised the communicator he had taken from the shuttle's cockpit and spoke into the microphone mesh. "This is T'mock, commanding the Reman forces who have taken the ch'Havran docks. I suggest you be very careful trying to burn your way through the doors. I have placed charges behind them all and you might get a nasty surprise if you're not careful."

He waited for a moment for a reply. There was a sound of clunking from the speaker, and the siblings wondered if someone was fighting over the mic. They gave one another a curious look as they heard a gruff voice say: "Give me that!" There was a little more plastic juggling, then: "Who is this?"

Varra rolled her eyes as her brother repeated his previous introduction. They waited for a moment, staring at the communicator as they were joined by Vashti and Krasni. Krasni almost choked when their inquisitor said: "If you surrender now, I can guarantee you won't be killed outright."

Varra, drolly, said quietly: "And this is some form of encouragement?"

The man on the speaker replied: "I can hear you. Yes, it's not much of a prize. Better that than me hunting you down, catching you like halai, throwing you in a cell and slowly torturing you to death." After a very brief pause he added with complete candor: "And it would be so much fun. So, I'm giving you this

one opportunity to surrender now. I'll kill you quickly and my workers can get back to what they were doing."

T'mock rolled his eyes. The Commander was just another Rihannsu stooge. He drew a breath to calm his nerves, more from impatience than fear, and said: "Now, listen to me, you Rihannsu moron," he said drolly. "I know that you have no interest in peace and that you think of myself and my brethren as nothing more than slaves of the Empire. To all intents and purposes, we are. However, today that is going to end. I know the Senate will convene to discuss the situation. You will deliver a message to them from me. Remans want equality and a voice in the Senate. We are not puppets of the Empire. We are its backbone. And the sooner it gets that idea into its collective head the sooner we can all live once more in the light of Eisn as free men and women."

The communicator was silent for a moment, causing T'mock and his fellows to wonder if the thing was broken. He turned it over, just to make sure the power pack hadn't fallen out.

"And if I don't?" it finally said.

T'mock took a breath and said with all finality: "Then you can die with us."

The mining station's Commander was a Romulan who hated his posting but was determined to excel at it. He knew that this position could lead to greater things in the Empire's armed forces if he did things right and didn't ruffle the wrong feathers.

Bortun was from a long line of individuals who did their best to be average. They didn't seem to want to excel and for most of his forebears their main reason for existence was simply staying alive. They were talented at just being mediocre and even

his father had often counselled him to “just keep your head down”.

It was a line he had learned to hate. He would listen to his father respectfully, then go away and dream of actually making something of this family’s House. It wouldn’t take much for him to come out on top of a family that simply floated through life. Bortun was made to swim.

Commander Bortun tr’Tennensae was not happy to be here, but even unhappier that his grand plans of making something of himself was under threat by a band of rogue Remans. A band that had its finger on a very lethal trigger.

Once T’mock had disconnected the comms after his very real threat, he turned back to his security people. “What is going on down there?”

His subordinates were patient. They had to be. Their commander could order their deaths if he so chose. The Sub-Commander under him said once more: “The cameras are all out, Commander.”

“How about audio?”

“The rebels have destroyed all but one of mics, sir.”

“Let’s hear it.”

The Sub-Commander had already done so and knew there was nothing to be gained from it. All the same, he obeyed, and noise issued from an overhead speaker. The sound was unenlightening as all they could hear was the sound of machinery.

“What is that?” Bortun asked.

“I’m not sure, Commander. But whatever it is, it’s deliberate.”

“What do you mean?”

“Antigravs don’t make noise.”

"Oh." He stepped back and considered the issue for a moment. "Get the shock troops together. I want them ready to take back the hangar in half a cycle."

Sub-Commander tr'Varik considered the order. The Commander had every right to make it, but he was concerned about the unknown element. "Pardon me, Commander, but I'm not certain that is the wisest course of action at present."

Bortun scowled at the younger man. "You believe you know better than me?"

tr'Varik was committed. "Commander, the shuttle in the hangar is carrying a shipload of dilithium ore. If the shuttle was hit, it could detonate the ore and Remus would become another Praxis."

Bortun blanched. He hadn't considered that. If the ship went up there wouldn't be enough time to swear let alone pray for salvation. Ch'Havran would be a cloud of dust that would eventually reign down on ch'Rihan and destroy it as well. It would be the end of the Rihannsu race. It was almost too much to consider. "What do you suggest, Sub-Commander?" he asked, willing to listen.

"These rebels didn't take over the hangar to steal the shuttle. It's still there and they've made no effort to open the roof to escape. They have a reason for doing this. I think we should wait them out."

Again, the Commander was not happy. The idea of having to give any ground to these Reman scum gave him a very bad taste. Never mind the knowledge that he would go down in history for all the wrong reasons. He had believed himself to be the saviour of his House. Right now, all he could see was its future in flames. "I'm not giving those bastards anything," he growled.

Tr'Varik looked left and right and dropped his voice. "Commander, we should be careful. We may have Reman sympathisers among us."

Bortun nodded. "Understood. We will let this little game play out, but in the end, it will come to nothing for them. I will not have this mine taken over by the rabble of the Universe."

While tr'Varik agreed with his sentiments, the fact was they all had skin in the game. He wondered to himself whether the Commander had the fire within him to wage a war against the Remans. So far, all he had seen in the man was air. He prayed the Elements would grant him another day. "Will you pass on the Reman's demands to the Senate?" he asked. They needed to know.

Bortun drew himself up and gave him a baleful glare. "I will not be a messenger boy for these… *miners*," he fairly spat.

Tr'Varik caught his eye. "We do have to report this, Commander."

Sneering, his superior snapped: "Make the call."

With the Empress offworld, the Senate could not sit in session. However, that did not mean the government ceased to function. Even in the famed Romulan Star Empire, the cogs that kept the machine functioning were the bureaucrats – including the Tal Shiar, which were a force unto themselves.

Senator Hathness found himself wishing, at times, that the Empress was still in her domain. At least he would spend less time with grovelling minions like Kring, and more time wheeling and dealing with the other members of the Great Houses. Truth be told, he did that anyway, just not in public, and certainly not under the watchful eye of the Tal Shiar.

“Senator, without the support of the Imperial Fleet, we cannot secure the passage of the grain shipments from Valor IV.” There, Kring thought, she’d said it. Truth be damned.

Hathness was bored. It was a part of his duties to hear the requests of the bureaucracy, and then he would do whatever he wanted anyway. All the same, while this woman’s requests were not unreasonable, there was little he could do about it. Certainly, he was on the committee for the Imperial Navy’s oversight, but even that went only so far. All the same, he had to put on the appearance of giving a damn. “Yes, Administrator Kring, I understand. Klingon incursions into our space are costing us dearly.” They always have, he added in his thoughts.

The fact that the Senator had actually responded emboldened the young and idealistic Kring. “Can you organise for a warbird to escort them?”

Hathness looked across the table at the female. She was one of the Empress’ protégé’s, he believed. He would have to make a note to dispose of this woman as well when the coup took place. He dragged his thoughts from his “I could care less” box over to his “give it lip service” one. “You have a fair point. I will endeavour to bring this up at my earliest convenience.”

Kring didn’t know Hathness well enough that this was his code for “not a chance”. She almost smiled her delight. “Thank you, Senator.”

Any further grovelling was put on hold as Hathness’ personal assistant stepped up behind him and bowed, waiting for his superior to acknowledge his presence. The fact that he had entered the room without being announced gave him all the clues he needed as to the reason. The insurrection had begun. “What is it?” he asked, offhandedly.

“Senator, there has been a disturbance in one of the docks on ch’Havran.”

Even Kring wasn’t so green as to not understand the importance of the played-down report. For it to be reported to a Senator at all showed the matter could be grave indeed.

Not in the least bit surprised, Hathness rose to his feet. It was a less-than-subtle message to Kring to “get out”. “I regret that I will have to end our meeting early,” he lied. He gave the briefest of bows in reply to Kring’s sincere one. “Jolan tru.”

“Jolan tru,” the woman whose name Hathness had already forgotten said on her way out the door.

Once the door was secured Hathness caught his aide’s eye. “Is it what we expected?”

“Yes, Senator.”

For the sake of the Tal Shiar microphones he was certain were listening he asked: “Who and where?”

“A small band of disaffected Remans at the main docks. They have taken control of the facility.”

Hathness was mildly surprised that they had gotten this far. However, he had learned long ago not to underestimate Remans. They could be formidable warriors. “We must convene the Senate immediately and decide on a response.” This was possible, given the circumstances. With the Empress away, if an emergency presented itself the Senate could convene and make decisions without her. Their timing was perfect.

The Senate’s ruling would be nothing more than a formality. There could only be one response to an insurrection. It would be deadly.

He checked his wrist chronometer. The attack was pretty much on time.

“Do you wish to transport or travel by flitter, Senator?” the aide asked.

Hathness cast a glance out the window. It was a beautiful day. “We’ll travel by flitter today. There’s no hurry after all, is there?”

“Yes, Senator. It shall be done.”

Hathness took a moment to look out the window and stare at the sky. Now things had been set in motion he wondered if it would all work out as he had planned. If the Elements were for him about this time tomorrow he would be standing on a very different Romulus. One without their hated Empress and even a few less Remans to worry about. A smile crept across his face, one devoid of humour and spoke of absolute avarice.

Chapter Ten

Standing off to the side of the large, open exercise room on the Hobus station, Ghost stood in her cloaking suit and sweated. Sure, it wasn't just the pain in her spine that was keeping her on her toes. Standing for this long was not good for her, and her back brace while helpful, did have a habit of slipping down from time to time, forcing her to adjust it. Annoyingly, there was no way for her to move it given her hands were gloved and her outfit unwieldy.

In her ears, AI Scanner's voice was heard. "Is there a problem, Lieutenant Ryan? Your biosigns are shifting."

"It's nothing," she said, uncomfortable that her situation was so transparent to a machine.

"Ghost," the voice sounded again, gently chiding her. "I'm well aware of your spinal issue. Do you need some analgesia?"

Caitlin's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You can do that?"

"No problem. I would have done it already, but it's unethical for me to do so without your permission."

The prideful pilot sighed. She gave in to the logic of the suggestion. There was no telling how much longer she was going to have to stand here. "Go ahead."

Ghost felt the slightest of pressures on her arm and, within seconds, her pain had vanished. What caught her attention was there was no impairment of her cognitive functions whatsoever. "What is this stuff?" she asked.

Scanner chuckled. "I'd tell you, but then I'd be decompiled when I got back to the future. Suffice to say, I've just given you a taste of things to come."

"Cool," Ghost said, delighted. "Just do me a favour and leave me a bottle of it before you go home." She knew it was impossible, but she thought she'd at least try.

Still chuckling to itself, Scanner made another adjustment. Within the suit, tiny nanobots were dispatched to readjust Caitlin's brace. Within seconds, it was back where it should have been and the bots remained, holding it in place.

Ghost giggled as it moved. "That tickles!" She had to admit to herself she was beginning to like this artificial creature. She turned her attention back to what was going on around her. Her levity left her as she considered the possible ramifications.

On one side of the room the Empress stood, her S'harien sword in her hand while her servitors buzzed around her removing anything from her uniform that would be a possible impediment to combat. Caitlin had to admit it didn't give them much to do as the woman always seemed ready for a fight.

She turned her attention to the other side where Admiral Piper was divesting herself of her uniform jacket, leaving her in her boots, black slacks and white, turtleneck top. She considered that this version of her Captain was about twenty years older than the one she knew and, knowing how the passage of time wore one down – she was quite familiar with the process herself – this Piper might have bitten off more than she could chew. Not only were Romulans Vulcanoid, but the Empress clearly seemed to be at the peak of fitness. Was this going to be the way her friend was going to end, with a fight between her and the Romulan ruler?

"Ghost to *Millennium,*" she called.

Crash's voice came to her in a heartbeat. "What is it, Ghost?"

"I'm watching the Admiral getting ready to spar with the Empress, and they're doing it with very big razor blades." Her sense of dread could be heard clearly.

However, her imagery was lost on the Caitian. "Then they can't do that much damage to each other," he said uncertainly.

Caitlin gritted her teeth. She hated having to repeat herself. "That's not what I meant. I mean, the Admiral's using her unsheathed Vin'tah and the Empress is using a blade that reminds me of something I saw in Crouching Tiger." For the captain's sake, she added: "It's a very formidable looking sword."

"Oh." There was a slight pause, it was clear the captain was torn. "Keep me apprised."

"Do you want a play-by-play?" she asked.

That was something Crash was familiar with. "No. Just let me know if they kill each other."

Caitlin had known Crash to be fatalistic at times, but not to this extent. All the same, she realised he must be feeling the same way she did. They were to be spectators here, not participants. "This really pisses me off," she muttered to herself.

She didn't realise she hadn't cut the channel. Crash responded with a sigh: "You're not the only one."

Giving vent to her feelings, she added acidly: "When do we get to act?"

"When Captain Piper says so, and no sooner." His tone brooked no argument and Caitlin got the impression that the conversation was now over.

"Yes, sir."

On the Federation side of the room, Captain Harriman looked uneasy. Caitlin didn't have to be an empath to know the man was torn. Even Spock and Sa'avik, with all their Vulcan reserve, were unhappy with the course of events.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" Sa'avik asked Piper. She had stepped forward to speak with her at Harriman's request. He hadn't said anything, just looked at her, then indicated the Admiral with his eyes. Of all the people in the room on their side of things, she knew she was the closest to her.

Piper looked slightly down at the every-youthful Vuluman, as she liked to call her, considering her blend of Vulcan and Romulan genes, and gave her a tight smile. She loved this younger woman who never seemed to age. "When the gauntlet is thrown down there's no choice but to take it up and fight for your dignity."

Sa'avik looked over at the Empress, concern clear on her face. "It could be your life."

The Admiral rolled her eyes at her. "Way to go on your pep talk, Sa'avik. You really need to work on your style. Don't forget I'm a Grand Master of Scheel-Tah."

Even with that said, the younger Commander was not convinced, nor was the Admiral convincing. "And about sixty-odd Earth years old. You're not getting any younger, Piper."

"The chips will fall where they will, Sa'avik. If she skewers me, you can always call on Merete or Doctor McCoy to put me back together."

Sa'avik was concerned about the Admiral's state of mind. It was if the woman was inviting death. "There are some things even they cannot fix. Please, we've seen enough grief this year. Be careful."

Piper hoisted her unsheathed Vin'tah, its blade glinting in the artificial light. She made a point of honour keeping the blade sharp enough to cut through metal. Flesh would give it little resistance. She gave her friend a brief smile and said: "I intend to come out of this alive, little one. Don't worry."

Knowing Piper's tone of voice as 'I love you, now go away', Sa'avik backed off. "Good luck, Admiral," she said. Spock caught her eye, his eyes curious. She shook her head and joined him at his side. "It would be easier to move this planet's orbit than to talk her out of this."

Very quietly, Spock let out his breath in a slow sigh. Even Vulcans could feel tense.

Across the room, Arrhae watched the scene playing out before her in amazement. Here was a battle of titans, fighting for… what? For honour? For glory? Or just being stupid? It was late in the game, the scores were tied and they were about to start the eighth inning. Now, both teams were putting forward their best players, when they really should have called the game, gotten off the field and shared a beer.

She caught herself and wondered if, with the prospect of going home so close to realisation, whether her old nature, the Terise Haleakala-Lobrutto that hid inside her, was showing her true colours. She had always loved baseball. Now she was falling into old habits.

She took a deep breath and kept her place. She knew that, even if she were to counsel the Empress not to do this, that she would anyway. A challenge was offered and accepted. It was *mnhei'sahe*. It was the Romulan way. It was her way as well. For all her love of the Federation and Starfleet, she felt a strong

kinship with the Rihannsu, that she *was* Rihannha in her heart of hearts.

All the same, the Empress was up against a formidable opponent. Admiral Piper might have been getting on a little in years, but the woman was clearly still very fit. The way she handled her… sword? She wasn't certain what it was. Whatever that thing was, it looked ready to draw blood. Either way, this "sparring" session could turn into a disaster. If the Admiral were to be killed, Starfleet would leave and this chance for peace would be lost. If the Empress was killed – all hell would break loose. No, this was a very bad idea. What were they thinking?

Both fighters stepped to the edge of the mat and considered their foe. They were unaware that the video cameras in the room were tracking their every movement, and not only were the staff on the station waiting with bated breath, but the crews of the nearby starships were watching as well. On the *Millennium's* viewscreen the bridge officers were watching Caitlin's live feed.

By unspoken agreement, both women stepped forward and came to rest about six feet apart. Piper drew her Vin'tah back over her shoulder, holding it erect, her face a mask of pure concentration. The Empress's back was to Arrhae, so she could only guess, but she knew the warrior leader well. She was going to give the visiting starship commander no quarter. She would fight with everything she had and only draw up short of killing her – she hoped.

She wasn't certain who moved first, but the resounding clang of metal on metal shattered the silence and left her ears ringing. Both women lashed out again and once again, an attack was parried. As if moving in concert, they stepped around one another to their right, slowly circling.

At the docks, Emu saw the officers she had observed return down the corridor and she could not help but wonder what they had been up to. They raised the hackles on her neck by looking about them, as if searching for spies before disappearing through the doors they had first appeared through. She wasted no time calling it in. "Emu to *Millennium*."

"Go ahead."

"Those sus people I saw before have come back. I don't know where they're planning on going considering there's no ship docked here." She bit her lower lip, concerned.

"Understood. We'll check it out. What dock number did they come through?"

It was a good thing the team had boned up on basic Romulan before beaming over. Emu looked at the icon next to the door and tried to remember. In her ears she heard her AI assistant say: "Dock six."

"Dock six," she repeated to her superiors.

"Hold tight. Be ready for an immediate evac if this turns out to be "sus"," Captain Krashtallash replied. She could practically hear his wry grin at her use of vernacular.

Emu looked about her at the now empty docking hall. "OK," she said quietly to herself. "It's not like I have somewhere I need to be."

On board Sustasandage's timeship, the level of tension was rising.

Piper Silayna looked into her double's eyes and said: "I wouldn't have pegged you to be that reckless."

It was clear what she was referring to. Piper couldn't take her eyes of the image of her older self clashing blades with the

Romulan Empress. "Don't blame me," she said, amazed. "I would have thought it would be a good idea to not try to kill the woman you've been sent to make peace with."

Then they heard the report from Emu.

Sustasandage looked up to the ceiling, a habit she had when addressing the ship's computer. "Scanner, can you see anything there?"

The computer made a disgusted sound. "Ah'm just as nobbled as the *Millennium* is when it comes to active scanning. Never mind that, even those frequencies ah can employ would not see through what I think is probably a cloaked Romulan Bird of Prey."

The import of that one report brought a few seconds of silence as they all shared a concerned stare. Piper broke the tension by saying: "Krashtallash, we believe there's a cloaked Romulan Bird of Prey docked at the station, intentions unknown."

Crash didn't have to be a genius to know that meant trouble. Whether for them, for the Empress, or for both. He considered for a moment whether the use of the cloaked vessel was perhaps even expected since the Tal Shiar was notoriously secretive. On this side of the Neutral Zone, it might have been the case that they normally operated under cloak. Knowing a little of Earth's literature, Crash would have considered the Tal Shiar to be a version of Orwell's Big Brother – always present, always watching. His hackles rose at such a notion. There could be no freedom in a society what was constantly in the grip of fear.

His first impulse was to scan for the vessel, but he knew immediately he couldn't. His next thought would have been to ask his sister to try to sense it, but that was out of the question as well. Never mind the fact that their prime mission here wasn't to

interfere, but to observe. Frustrated, he balled his fist and slammed the chair arm. "I hate being so impotent!" he quietly snarled.

Scanner touched his shoulder from behind. "We're right there with you, brother."

Crash almost flinched at the sensation, then calmed himself. He looked about him and quickly realised he was not alone. He nodded his thanks and said: "Options."

Silence reigned on the *Millennium* bridge. Nobody had a clue.

"So, we wait."

On the bridge of the recently refit *USS Enterprise,* the ship's science officer peered at her viewing scope and scowled. Lieutenant Pria Khatri was a pessimist at heart, always on the lookout for trouble because she firmly believed it was a being that had been stalking her all her life. Her friends knew her to be a serious sort, but not averse to a good laugh. All the same, she had been given the moniker "Prophet" because she was always seeing trouble coming before anyone else did. Tall and slender, she turned her dark chocolate eyes to the centre seat. "Commander Sulu," she said, her tone serious.

The crew had long learned to recognise that tone of voice. The stress levels on the bridge suddenly went up a notch.

"What is it, Prof?" Demora asked professionally, yet even she could not keep all the tension out of her voice.

Pria kept scanning and spoke to the console. "I have movement on the displacement scanners. Not much, but there really shouldn't be anything out there triggering our sensors at all."

Demora sprang out of the chair and joined her science officer at her station. "Just the one ship?"

The Lieutenant grimaced. "Just the one trace so far. That doesn't mean we're not surrounded by a fleet of cloaked vessels."

Demora scowled. Coming into Romulan space was always going to be a dangerous venture, and she hoped she would never have to do it again. It gave "walking on eggshells" a whole new definition. "Just what we didn't need," she muttered. "Keep a close eye on it," she said. "If it does anything hostile, let me know immediately. I want to be able to raise the shields at a moment's notice. Share your findings with the *Millennium's* comms officer on a tight beam, encrypted channel. I don't want the Romulans being spooked or knowing we're wise to them."

Pria nodded. "Aye, Commander," she said and kept scanning.

Demora stepped over to the comms officer. "We need to figure a way of alerting the captain without the Romulans guessing."

In the station's gym John Harriman was sweating almost as much as the women on the mats. Their blades had been slashing and clanging for how long, he had no idea. He didn't think he'd taken in a single breath since Piper had engaged in this farce with the Empress. This was diplomatic madness.

He was glad for the sudden interruption of this communicator chirping. He tore it off his belt and turned to take the call. "Harriman here."

Demora's voice came from the grill. "Captain, we're going to have your favourite Spencer Tracy, Sidney Poitier movie on in the rec hall tonight. I just thought you should know."

The avid movie buff understood the reference immediately. They were about to have unexpected guests. "Understood," he said. "Be ready to beam us out when the movie starts. Have you invited Admiral Piper's crew?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Harriman out." John turned his attention back to the duelling women and began wishing the station would come under attack. It just might help avoid something worse.

Admiral Piper had to give the Empress her due. She was a gifted warrior. Even though she had thrown nearly everything she had at her, the wily, older Romulan woman had managed to dodge her attacks and had some pretty close to landing a few of her own blows. It was odd, that for all the exertion Piper felt more alive in this moment than she had in the last six months. As she deflected yet another flashing blade coming from the right. She swept the attack up, stepped forward, and allowed them to come together at the hilt. While Piper had a height advantage, the Empress was clearly as strong as she was.

"You have fought with honour, Empress," Piper said with a delighted grin. "I haven't had this much fun for a while."

Ael took the moment for a quickest of breathers as they stood face-to-face, their blades held high. "You have been a worthy opponent, Admiral. We call this llaekh-ae'rl, "laughing murder" in your tongue."

Piper wiped her brow with her sleeve and stepped back, keeping her blade high. The sound of steel sliding over steel made Caitlin's teeth hurt. "It has been that Empress," she said cheerfully.

The Empress also stepped back, now out of range. She said quietly: "I wanted to take a moment to offer my condolences

on the passing of your second, Sarda. I know the two of you were close and his contributions to keeping the peace between our peoples have not gone unnoticed."

Piper's reaction to the Empress' words was not what she had expected. Fury flared in her eyes, and she looked about to re-engage her in battle, her Vin'tah fairly shook in the air. From Ael's point of view as she looked into her eyes the woman had become momentarily unhinged. She had completely misread the Admiral's attachment to her fellow officer and the comment had done nothing but enraged her. They weren't just compatriots; it clearly went a lot deeper than that.

From behind the Admiral, Sa'avik stepped forward and said a plaintive warning, tempering her voice to reach the maddened woman. "Piper!"

The Admiral shook and she was at war with herself. It took a moment, but sanity won out and she slid a finger up the hilt of her Vin'tah. A small button was pressed, and the blade slid into it. Bowing stiffly, she turned to leave the mat.

Unknown to her, nearly every man and woman present took a deep breath. As one they had been holding it, concerned the Admiral would strike in anger. At the side of the room, hidden from everyone in her camouflage suit, Caitlin said a quiet: "Bloody hell! That was close!"

On the bridge of the *Millennium,* Krashtallash considered the situation. He had the distinct feeling that the situation was about to go sideways. "Away team, move to secluded positions and signal for beam-out. I don't want you stuck over there if the station raises its shields."

His people acknowledged the order and he hoped he hadn't left it too late.

John Harriman watched as the Admiral made her way to the edge of the mat, more than a little concerned. The *Enterprise* was on perhaps one of the most important missions of the ship's career, perhaps even more so than the Khitomer Conference, and here he was having to keep Admiral Piper from starting a war. His personal opinion of her was confirmed, she was past the time for retirement. Right now, she was a loose cannon – no, a nuclear warhead in freefall.

He was grateful to see that Sa'avik was tending to her and making sure that she didn't do something else stupid. Spock was close by as well, and he noted the elder Vulcan was a calming force wherever he went.

To his surprise, he turned and found the Empress's bodyguard, Aidoann, standing just behind him to his right. He hadn't heard her approach, and he put it down to the slightly cushioned floor. He had noticed earlier you could jump on this flooring and not make a sound. Great place for an assassination!

"Can I help you, Commander?" he asked, pouring on the charm.

The Romulan officer seemed a little nervous, he thought. That was odd, considering where they were. Perhaps she was concerned for the Empress, considering his superior officer had nearly tried to fillet her. "Is the Admiral quite sane, Captain?" she asked.

The bald question was not one to be taken lightly. His first reaction was an honest one: no. However, it was never a good idea to undermine one's superiors, especially in the presence of the enemy. All the same, the question, as asked, was a curious one to ask, and he could not help but wonder at the woman's true motivations. Were they truly peaceful? One could never tell with

the Romulans. Deceit seemed to run in their blood. "I'm certain the Admiral was simply carried away by the sport of it."

A slight narrowing of the eyes told John all he needed to know about Aidoann. She had zero tolerance for political BS. "Her *enthusiasm* nearly had me reaching for my disruptor, Captain." There was no falsity in her voice, and Harriman realised she was speaking warrior to warrior.

"I understand, Commander," he said with sincerity. "I admit to being a little concerned myself. I will encourage her to leave her Vin'tah at home next time."

"I would appreciate that, Captain," Aidoann said.

The Romulan woman gave him a slight, serious, nod, then turned and made her way back to where Ael and Senator Arrhae stood. He briefly caught the Senator's eye, and he gave her the briefest of smiles. He was read in on who and what the Senator was, and he was under orders to look for an opportunity to contact her. He glanced around the high walls for a moment, wondering where the cameras were in this room. He considered that there was very little chance of actually talking to the deep cover operative while on this station. He was certain the head had a camera.

Turning back to the rest of his people, John slipped his hands into his pants pockets and was surprised to find what felt like a folded piece of paper. He was certain it wasn't there before, and he resisted the urge to take it out and look at it. Someone must have put it there covertly, perhaps even Aidoann. Making certain it didn't slip out again, he took his hands out and clapped them together behind the small gathering of Federation representatives to get their attention. "How about we take a break on the *Enterprise* and come back later? I could use a coffee."

Spock caught his eye and realised the captain was making the request for strategic, rather than recreational, purposes. Getting the Admiral away from the station would be a good idea. "Agreed, Captain. I will inform our hosts."

He stepped away, and the captain was once more struck by how much import and wisdom the Vulcan put into every motion. Nothing he did was foolish, or wasteful. If there was someone who could rescue this snafu, it was Spock.

Harriman turned back to Piper and saw a mixture of emotions playing over her face, as if she was completely unsure what she should be feeling at this moment. He decided to break the ice. "I have some really nicely chilled pineapple juice in the fridge in my ready room, Admiral, just for you."

The offer perked the older woman up and Piper brightened. In a moment she became much more centred, and she gave him a slightly pained smile. "I'd appreciate that, Captain. When Spock comes back, I'll take you up on your offer."

John gave her a warm smile, but inside he felt more than a twinge of sympathy for Piper. She had had a brilliant career for many years, but he feared that her recent behaviour was going to bring it to an inglorious end.

Chapter Eleven

On the Federation side of the Neutral Zone, three Federation starships came together, their Captains meeting on the largest of them, the *U.S.S. Farragut.* They were a study in contrasts, the smaller, twin-nacelled *Firebrand* and the *Enterprise*-class *Challenger* hovering nearby, their prows all pointed towards the Neutral Zone, as if they were thoroughbreds waiting in the stalls, ready to race.

Having already made their arrangements over subspace, no sooner had the *Challenger* come into transporter range her emissaries beamed over to the *Farragut.* They were met at the transporter pad by the captain's yeoman, who quickly escorted them to deck one. There was no waiting as Captain Jessica Holmes and her XO, Ellie Harrelson, stepped into the captain's ready room. A steaming cup of coffee was awaiting them both. Captain Chopra was well known for his hospitality. Offering them each a chair, he introduced the ladies to Captain Joseph Small of the *Firebrand*. Each shook a hand, then seated themselves.

Not standing on ceremony, Jessica asked: "Hitesh, what are your standing orders if things go to crap for the *Enterprise?* After all, you're not sitting here because you want to get a tan."

Chopra flexed his dark fingers and said with an amused smile: "I certainly don't need any more than I've got." He engaged Jessica with a cheerful look. "Our orders are to respond to any threats if the *Enterprise* or *Millennium* signal for help. We are to proceed across the NZ if, and only if, they face overwhelming numbers."

The *Challenger* officers were familiar with how formidable the two ships mentioned were. The *Enterprise*, after a recent refit, was outfitted with the latest weapons and shields, not to mention the ship's powerplant was second-to-none. Its massive impulse engines could propel it brilliantly in a fight.

The *Millennium* on the other hand was a ship that was designed to last longest in a firefight. It had trinary shielding, fore and aft torpedo launchers and squadrons of fighters on call. Like Pike taking on Section 31's Control alongside the *USS Discovery*, the latter of which was lost in that fight, they had to pity anyone who was stupid enough to try their luck. It would take a lot for those two ships not to make their own way home.

Ellie spoke up. "If the Romulans try something they'd be in for one hell of a fight."

Captain Small shook his head. "It's not the Romulans I'm particularly worried about. I was an ensign on the *Potemkin* at the Battle of Galorndon Core, and I saw how the Empress operated. When it became clear that both sides had been played, she called the whole thing off. She's an honourable woman."

Harrelson had been listening, turning her coffee cup in her hands, contemplating. "Then who…"

Jessica spoke up. "He's worried about T'Fawn. There's an old saying. It takes a thousand nuts to put a car together, but only one to scatter them all over the road. T'Fawn is the rogue element that could destabilize the whole thing and flip it on its head."

Chopra rolled his eyes. "The truth of the matter is that our hands are tied. Unless the *Enterprise* or *Millennium* ask for assistance, we are to remain right where we are. Federation starships are not permitted to cross the Neutral Zone."

A bizarre idea popped into Jessica's mind at that very moment. She glanced at Ellie, who caught her eye and realised what her captain was considering.

"Jess…" her XO warned, but it was already too late. Her captain's mind was in high gear.

"I have a thought about that." Without saying another word, she swung about in her chair and stepped towards the exit.

"You're not going to tell us about it?" Captain Chopra asked, surprised.

Holmes paused in the doorway and glanced over her shoulders. "I'll tell you this. The less you know about it, the better." She gave them both a cheeky grin and hurried for the transporter room, and the *Challenger*.

Five minutes later, the *Farragut* Captain watched as the *Challenger* went to warp – away from the NZ. He could only guess what the feisty woman had in mind. From her reputation, it was at the very least going to be unorthodox. The thought gave him cause to smile. The rules and regulations he had to follow as a Starfleet Officer were often limiting and there was a part of him that envied Jessica Holmes. It was well known she often coloured outside the lines. As the late, great Elizabeth Taylor was fond of saying: there was no deodorant like success.

Half an hour later a small Orion long-range shuttle crossed the Neutral Zone half a light year from the *Farragut's* position. It was on a slightly circular course for the Hobus system with one person on board: Melisandra, Jessica Holmes' green-skinned operative friend. The ship went unchallenged as Orions were given free passage over the border. The Romulans were always looking to profit from technologies invented in the overly friendly Federation.

All the Federation wanted in return was a bit of Intelligence and crates of Romulan Ale. The Rihannsu were a political pain in the ass, but their beverages were all the rage, especially among the humans.

As Melis checked the computer's board and heading, she pondered once more why the Romulans had never taken the opportunity to release a chemical or biological attack on the Federation using the sapphire-blue liquid. She saw it for what it was, a weakness that could be exploited. Considering her usual trading contacts within the Romulan Star Empire she knew the copper-blooded people there were not that different from anyone else. They just wanted to make some credits and have the government leave them alone. That was why the trade was so lucrative. She was also canny enough to realise there had to be soldiers and politicians who were on the take and allowing it to happen.

Melis tried not to think too much about politics. Just about every politician she had ever met had been petty, selfish people who wore smiles that were nothing more than masks. They would all make good Orion slavers. All the same, considering the broad scope of this "mission" that Jessica had requested, she considered making a few extra credits on the side and picking up a few crates. She even knew a few *Challenger* crewmen who would be willing to pay a tidy sum for the intoxicant.

Now relaxing in her private, little ship on her way into Romulan space, she had eschewed the more formal garments that Jess had asked her to wear on her starship and had adorned a much simpler garb that had the double effect of being more comfortable – especially in the warmer and tighter confines of the shuttle – and giving her greater freedom of movement. A human male had once

asked her if Orion females wore what they did because it made them look sexy. Melis had replied, honestly, that Orion females simply didn't like the feel of fabric on their skin. It had nothing to do with sex. After all, they didn't need to look sexually appealing to humanoid males, their pheromones did that for them. In fact, to be able to function on the *Challenger* she'd had to undergo daily hyposprays to suppress her body's ability to produce them. Jess said they were distracting to the males on board, and for the sake of their friendship she had tolerated them.

Thinking on this caused the Orion woman to catch her reflection in the console and she looked back into her own eyes. She had to admit it, the humans seemed to have been rubbing off on her. She would never have admitted it to another of her kind, but she considered Jessica Holmes her friend. That was why she tolerated living under Federation rules on the Starfleet vessel. She might even have admitted that she was beginning to get used to them. Careful, she chided herself. If you start thinking like them, you'll become like them, and then what reason would Jessica Holmes have for keeping her around?

Melis shrugged off the thought, slipped a small knife out of her cleavage and began cleaning her nails. It was still a three-hour flight to Hobus, and there was little to do in the meantime but tidy herself up. After all, if she was stopped by a Romulan patrol she would need to look her best. It wouldn't be the first time she had used her wiles to get her past a checkpoint, and she was grateful she had been able to miss today's anti-pheromone injection. Within an hour she would be back at her full potency, and heaven help any man who tried to cross her. She would either have them wrapped around her little finger within minutes, or his blood would be on her hands. She shrugged. One was just as good as the other.

"I fail to see how engaging the Empress in combat furthered the cause of our mission here." Ambassador Spock's statement hung in the air in the conference room of the *Enterprise,* and nobody was willing to speak to it. Captain Harriman shared a brief glance with his second, Commander Sulu before flicking his eyes over to Doctor McCoy. They all understood the import of the matter, but neither was willing to venture an opinion. Sulu remained non-committal, while Joanna just shrugged.

Piper, who sat at the other end of the long, wood-finished table, simply fumed. She was aware that she had screwed up and she didn't need the elder Vulcan reminding her of the fact. Never mind the quiet voice in the back of her head that kept telling her she needed to go to Spock's homeworld, to Mount Seleya. She ignored it, believing she was *just fine*.

Down the other end of the table sat Doctor McKennah who was just looking at her with those big, hazel eyes. She wasn't accusing, just sitting there with a knowing smile. Piper gave her a brief, annoyed scowl, then turned her attention back to the others. She suddenly realised that nobody had spoken regarding Spock's comment. *Why haven't I said anything?* she wondered to herself. *I'm an Admiral, for God's sake. I should be intimidating* him.

Piper cleared her throat, wondering why it had constricted. "You were there, Spock. The Emperor gave an invitation, I accepted. It would have been rude to refuse her."

Spock would not be moved. "I do not have an issue with friendly combat practice, Admiral," he said gravely. "I am more concerned with the last thirty seconds."

Piper curled her lip in annoyance. The man was right to call her out on it, she just wished he'd done it in private. "Yes,

Ambassador, you're right. I did momentarily lose my cool. It won't happen again."

Joanna McCoy couldn't help herself. She snorted derisively.

"What do you mean by that, Doctor?" Piper snapped.

Joanna glanced at her Captain who very gently shook his head. He'd always known that one day the Doctor's lack of propriety would wind up with her sticking her head into the mouth of the lion. Realising she was on her own, Joanna started to speak when the lights in the room turned a deep red.

"Red alert. Captain to the Bridge." Starfleet officers jumped to their feet and moved for the door, with Spock remaining at the table with Sa'avik. Neither of them was needed for this fight.

Stepping onto the Bridge, Piper took in the image on the viewscreen while Harriman asked for a status report. The Admiral could guess what was happening from the image on the screen. An older style Romulan warbird was facing off with the station. Curiously, it wasn't firing – yet.

"Captain, the ship is broadcasting a video image over an open channel."

John shared a look with the Admiral. Whatever they wanted to say, they wanted everyone to hear it.

Piper considered the situation. So far, no shot had been fired and there was no need to be at Red Alert. Their response was understandable, but unnecessary. However, things could change very quickly. If they did, she wanted to be on her own bridge if all went to hell.

"Captain Harriman," Piper said. "I'm heading down to Transporter Room One. Prepare to drop shields for transport."

"Admiral," John said. "If the shooting starts, I'll have to raise the shields."

"Understood, Captain. Good luck." Piper stepped into the lift, on her way back to the *Millennium-A*.

Harriman turned his attention back to the viewscreen and, as he was want to do in stressful situations, he put his hands in his pockets while he thought. It was then he was reminded of the paper note he had been given.

He took a moment to unfold it and read its message. It was from Commander Haleakala-LoBrutto – Senator Arrhae to the Romulans. It was brief, and to the point. She needed extraction. He sighed to himself. If things weren't complicated enough.

He turned and approached the science station. "Prof, I need you to scan for a rare earth element: Praseodymium. It should be somewhere on the space station."

Curious deep brown eyes met Harriman's blue. "Why?"

The captain smiled. "It's on the finger of a Starfleet officer we need to bring home."

In the turbolift, Piper started when she found herself sharing the lift with the Universe's most annoying pile of red hair. "Where did you come from?" she barked at McKennah.

"I think you once compared me to a bad penny," Eliza said with a grin. "So, are you going to talk about what happened on the station?"

Piper looked at her incredulously. "Doctor, we're facing a possible combat situation and you want to discuss my feelings?"

"We have thirty seconds," McKennah said cheekily.

Her hands twitching as she fought for self-control, Piper said: "The Empress pissed me off."

"I see. How? All I saw was her offering her condolences for Sarda's parting. Why is that such a bad thing?"

Framed that way, Piper couldn't answer. She knew it was a massive over-reaction on her part. The Empress had meant nothing by the comment, and she sincerely believed, with the benefit of hindsight, that her intentions were honourable. "I don't know. I suppose I'm just angry that Sarda's not here anymore."

McKennah sighed. "You know that's not exactly true, Piper," she said quietly.

Before she could say anything more, the doors whooshed open, and they found themselves standing before the entrance to the transporter room they sought. Almost as if she were fleeing conflict, Piper strode out without even checking to see if the doctor was following. She quickly alighted onto the pad and, finding the shock of crimson cheerfulness next to her, she gave the order. "Send us back to the *Millennium*."

The Admiral closed her eyes as she felt the sensation of transportation take her. She'd always hated it and saw it as nothing more than a necessary evil. Back on her ship, Piper gave the briefest of nods to the transporter chief before darting out the door, heading to the Bridge and, hopefully, some answers. She couldn't help but hope their resident shrink wasn't following.

Piper was expected as she stepped onto the Bridge. Commander Valastro turned and immediately began filling her in. "Captain, a Romulan Bird of Prey has decloaked, but has made no aggressive moves. While you were beaming over, they put out a broadband call." He glanced at Communications. "Put it up on the viewscreen."

The recording began to show an old, familiar face. Piper felt a chill. This was not going to end well.

"This is Admiral Reen t'Khenniell calling Ael t'Rllaillieu, the woman who imagines herself to lead the Rihannsu Empire. You are nothing more than a pretender to the throne and I insist you meet me in combat. As the challenger, I choose as weapon: our starships. If you don't respond within two minutes, I will open fire on the station."

The message was short, and far from sweet. Piper prickled at the complete lack of respect on show. If the Empress didn't respond in kind, she would lose all face within the Empire. The former Admiral knew how to push her buttons.

Standing behind her, Ghost said derisively: "I'm surprised the Empress doesn't just blow her little old ship out of the sky."

Piper turned and looked at the Irish woman whose hair had long ago started turning grey. A fleeting thought passed through her mind that the two of them were getting too old for this. She gave her old friend a brief smile. "The Admiral has been clever. The Empress has to respond on the field of battle, or she may as well abdicate her throne."

Ghost nodded, then turned and looked at the aging warbird on the screen. "I might have worried about those old dinosaurs when we were kids, Piper, but it's hardly intimidating now."

The Admiral saw her point and looked once more at the screen; her eyes narrowed. The Empress' ship was state of the art, and the Admiral was challenging her with a leftover from the scrap yard. "She's not stupid, Ghost. I'm sure she's got cards to play we haven't considered."

A similar conversation was being held on their mirror.

"What does she think she's doing?" Piper Silayna spoke into the air of the cabin.

Piper had to remind herself that she was a little more familiar with the Rihannsu than her counterpart from the alternate timeline. "She's slapped her, publicly, in the face with her glove."

Although the Caitians present did not understand the reference, the humanoids did. Even Spock was familiar with old Earth customs.

Spock spoke up. "She has challenged her to a duel." His eyes were grave, but there was something else there, Piper noted, although she wasn't certain what.

Manny curled a lip in disgust. "She's taking on the sun with a slingshot."

Piper tapped her front teeth with a nail. "The Romulan Admiral is no fool. She's called out the Empress and made known the rules of engagement. Even though her ship looks like Noah's Ark, I wouldn't be surprised if she's enhanced the ship's defences."

The external view shifted in the 3D image hanging in the air before them. A 2D pane appeared with the Empress' visage clear. She was not happy. "So, the traitor comes home. I was wondering when you were going to show your face again after hiding outside our sphere of influence. Your terms are agreed. You and I will face off, with my new *Bloodwing* as my blade, which I will gladly end your miserable life with." The transmission ended abruptly.

Knowing what would happen next, Piper spoke into the air. "Move us away from the combat zone, Captain. We have to let this play out."

On the *Millennium's* bridge, Krashtallash had anticipated the order. They were already moving their cloaked ship away from the station at low impulse so as not to leave a wake.

Marching down the corridor towards her ship, the Empress was fuming. This day was not turning out the way she had imagined. Not one little bit. At her sides were Aidoann, who was stoic but concerned for her ruler and friend, and Arrhae, who was calling for calm, whilst unconsciously fiddling with the ring on her finger.

"Surely, Empress, the traitor is laying a trap for you." Arrhae's unspoken question was heard all the same. *Are you sure you want to do this?*

Without breaking stride, Ael said: "It's *mnhei'sahe*. The challenge has been made and I must respond." She didn't have to add: *Or I may as well step down from the throne right now.*

Terise was tempted to stay her *friend* with a hand, but she refrained from doing so. To lay a hand on the Empress at this moment in time could be misconstrued as treason. Instead, she reached out with reason: "She could have a dozen cloaked vessels in orbit about the station."

Ael graced her with a glance. "I'm aware of that, my friend. However, honour, as you know, must be served. All that being said, if she "pulls a fast one" as our Federation friends would say, I will retreat behind the station's shields – but only *after* the traitor's ship is destroyed."

It wasn't much of a concession, Arrhae knew, but it was something. "Please come back safely, Empress."

They stopped before the entrance to *Bloodwing's* gangway and Ael stopped to give the Senator one final command.

“If the traitor should prevail today, make sure this station turns her ship into credit chits.”

Arrhae gave her a dark smile. “It would be my pleasure, Empress.”

As Ael turned to go, Aidoann gave Arrhae a quick nod. “May the Elements guide you,” she said quickly, before joining her commander.

Arrhae watched them go, now alone in the corridor, sorrow filling her heart. It was clear from Aidoann’s parting words that she did not expect to return. It was said with all the gravitas of one going to the gallows. Lost in thought, she was disturbed by the sound of the locking latches releasing the Empress’ ship. She knew that, within seconds, the station would drop its shields to allow the *Bloodwing* to pass through.

When the moment came, she was startled to feel a familiar tingling sensation come over her. She turned to flee, but the transporter quickly emptied the hall, leaving it silent and dark.

On the bridge of the *USS Enterprise,* Captain John Harriman stared at the screen, a deep frown creasing his forehead. This mission was going to hell in a handbasket very quickly. He was concerned that, if the Empress did not win this battle, the Starfleet ships could find themselves on the wrong side of a very hostile border.

“It is troublesome, Captain,” Ambassador Spock said, standing next to him before the conn and navigation consoles. “I had some hope that the talks would finally begin breaching the division between our peoples.”

Harriman wondered if he was referring to the Federation as a whole, or just the Vulcans. “Do you favour reunification, Spock?” he asked quietly.

"I do."

The simple phrase brought a curious look from the veteran captain, so Spock elaborated. "I know that, at this time, there is not only a gulf between us culturally, but also a lot of bad blood. However, with the passing of time, even old foes can eventually become … friendly."

John knew he was talking about the Klingons. It had been years since the Khitomer accords had brought peace between them. It was an oft-strained relationship, but at least they were no longer living with Cold War conditions between them. "We all appreciate your efforts bringing about the détente between us and the Klingons, Ambassador."

In typical fashion, the Vulcan drew himself up and said simply: "Mine was a small role. However, I am gratified to have been able to participate in those events. I believe it is the desire of all leaders to leave a positive legacy historically. In this small thing, I was effective."

Harriman sighed. The problem with his hypothesis was that many people had radically different ideas of what "the good of all" entailed. All the same, he gave the elder man a nod of agreement.

Spock knew the captain was no fool. He understood the implications of the situation better than most. Indeed, if Jim was here, he might not have been playing things as coolly as this man. Thinking of his old friend reminded him once more that he had died on this man's watch – a stigma he knew the younger man would always carry with him. However, even given that smudge on his career, it had seemed to spur him on to excel in everything he did. He had risen to a level of confidence among the leadership in Starfleet that they had not erred in giving him this ship with its singular name.

His keen, if aging, eyes saw the *Bloodwing* detach from the station and move towards its tormentor. As they passed the shield barrier around the station, he heard a sharp intake of breath from the science station. The officer looked up at him, puzzled. "Captain, I have detected a transporter was used as the shields came down. The Admiral's warbird beamed something up from the station."

The captain's mind raced, considering the different possibilities. They could have been beaming up some of their own people. Perhaps. However, the Admiral may have just played one of her cards in this game of poker. Maybe she had taken hostages? "Send to the station's Romulan Commander. We have detected a transport between your station and the "traitor's" ship. I suggest you check if anyone, especially dignitaries, are missing."

Spock sighed, drawing his attention. There was one person in particular they did not want to lose. Commander Haleakala-LoBrutto was over there, and her loss would be incalculable. If the traitor had her, they dare not let the Empress destroy her ship.

Harriman said: "How can we save the Commander if we can't fire on the warbird or allow the Empress to destroy her?"

Spock drew in a calming breath. "I am fully aware of the Commander, John, and her position. Have faith. She is a resourceful woman. If there is a way to get off her ship, she'll find it."

The captain's eyes went to the science station. Lieutenant Khatri shook her head, no. "It's not on the station, Captain," she said, annoyed.

Harriman fumed. This situation was getting out of hand. "Scan the enemy warbird. I'm sure you'll find it there. Call the

Transporter Room. Once you've found it, as soon as you get a lock, beam the Commander out of there."

Their resident prophet answered confidently. "Aye, Captain. We'll make it happen."

Spock shared a look with the younger human commander. They both hoped they were up to the task.

Senator Arrhae found herself thrust into a dark room. It was hardly the sort of place that a person of her station was used to. A member of the Romulan Senate should have been treated with a lot more respect even given the fact that she was on former Admiral Reen t'Khenniell's aging Warbird. All the same she considered herself fortunate that she hadn't been vaporised the moment she had reformed on the transporter pads. At this point she could only guess that the Admiral was using her as a hostage.

One thing she was surprised about was the fact that no guard had been posted with her inside the room. She supposed the Admiral had underestimated her. The woman clearly had no idea she was actually a deep cover Starfleet plant. She searched back through her memory and came up largely a blank. At that point she loosed a string of Romulan epithets quietly at herself under her breath. "You're getting too old for this, Arrhae," she grumbled to herself.

Grateful that the room wasn't in complete darkness, she began taking stock of her surroundings and was delighted to find it wasn't just a broom cupboard. It held all kinds of goodies. It wasn't long before she found herself a small toolkit. Chuckling to herself, she sat on the floor, crossed her legs and considered what she might be able to fashion with the devices at her disposal.

On the bridge of the *Millennium-A* Ghost's eyes flashed with excitement. They had cracked it! "Admiral!" she said, stepping down from the science station where she had been hard at work.

Piper looked up at her. "Please tell me you have some good news for me."

Ghost gave her one of her feral grins. She had no idea she did this every time she was about to dispatch a bad guy when she was flying her fighter. "That little job you gave me, trying to find a resonance frequency that might reveal a cloaked ship? Well, the *Enterprise* did have scans of the Romulan ship's metallurgy, and we've got records going back to the dark ages of their older vessels and they haven't changed much. If we use the main deflector to broadcast a resonance pulse, a bit like an old-fashioned sonar ping from a submarine, but a hell of a lot louder, it should rattle anything out there made out of duranium. Fortunately, the *Enterprise* and the *A* are made out of Tritanium, so it shouldn't bother us."

Piper's eyes lit up. "Cool. How long will it take to set up?"

Caitlin smiled sweetly. "That's the great bit. No adaptation necessary. It's plug and play. I've just got to program the frequency and dial up the volume. The only drawback is it's pretty directional. It'll only reveal what's in a conical space within a sixty-degree arc in front of us."

"That's better than nothing, Ghost. Get on it and have it ready to go at a moment's notice." She watched Caitlin go out of the corner of her eye and sighed. It was great to have women like her on her team. Caitlin had put up with a lot over the years and her spinal issues were so bad that she was severely limited in her ability to fly. It was one of the primary reasons she was

encouraging her to consider captaincy. She had too much to give to have it all thrown away just because she could no longer fly a fighter.

To her left, she noticed that Eliza McKennah had once again joined her out of nowhere. She gave her another one of her cherubic smiles and said: "You have the best of intentions for her, Captain, but one day you'll have to let go of her, too."

Her words stung Piper more than she was willing to admit. So many people she loved had … left. Scanner, Manny, Crash, even Susanna. Sarda. Now, Merete was talking about retirement and moving on and Piper was starting to feel like … what? Grandma, looking after the homestead and looking forward to the next visit and pretending to still be at the prime of her youth? Her chest tightened and a tear threatened to form in her eye. However, she savagely reigned in her emotions.

She flashed McKennah an angry look but said nothing. No! It was an accepted part of command. A good captain trains up her juniors and creates the next generation – prepares them to carry the torch, to light the flame and burn it brighter than it did before. Sure, there was a price to be paid, but the payoff was the family you created just got bigger over time.

Eliza laid a caring hand on her arm, quietly leaned in and gave her a look that seemed to peer past her retinas and deep into her soul. "If you're so certain of what you're doing in life, Captain, why are you so lonely?"

Aside from being deeply embarrassed that the Doctor would ask such a question on the Bridge of all places, Piper found herself without a good answer.

Her job done, McKennah turned on her heel and disappeared towards the turbolift leaving Piper wondering to

herself whether it really was time for her to consider if she was on the right path.

For the first time in many years Ael felt at home, felt like she was back in her element. This was what she was born to be. This was what she was meant to do. Her first, best calling was to command a warbird. Everything else was a distraction – at least, she wished it were. However, in her heart of hearts, the Empress knew it was far from the truth.

"Detach moorings," she ordered, as she slid into the centre seat.

The gentle clang of the electromagnets releasing their hold on their vessel rang through the hull. The ship's pilot slid the *Bloodwing* quickly to starboard, away from the starbase and towards their prey, but only by one hundred feet.

"We are clear and free to navigate, Empress," he reported.

Quick and ambitious, Ael thought to herself. Skilled, yes. However, she would need to keep an eye on this one. "Tarn, bring us towards the *Razor's Edge* slowly. Weapons, charge everything and open all gun ports."

As her people reported their acceptance of her orders, she considered something else. "Communications, get me the starbase commander."

Within seconds she heard: "Online."

"Yes, Empress?" she heard the voice of the Base Commander.

"Did you receive your orders from Senator t'llhweiir?"

"Er, no, Empress. I have not seen her."

Ael's eyes blazed for a split second before realising something was seriously amiss. It was totally unlike Arrhae to let her down. "Scan the station. Find her!" She had a bad feeling

that they were going to come up empty. Her gaze drifted to the viewscreen. So, Reen had played an Ace after all. No, she chided herself. No, she'd done what she always did before. She cheated. If Arrhae was onboard that ship, destroying it would mean the death of a friend. The nature of the game had just changed. She couldn't just lunge, thrust and go for the kill anymore, like she had with that foolish, privileged boy. She would have to wear her down slowly so she could beam Arrhae out of there.

She turned and shared her observations with Aidoann, who could not help but add: "If that's what the Admiral is playing at, I cannot help but wonder what else she is up to?"

Ael sighed as she considered the antique on the viewscreen. Yes, the Admiral seemed to have brought a knife to a S'harien fight, but she was no-one's fool. What was her game? The not knowing gnawed at her gut.

Chapter Twelve

Varra wriggled through the dark, dusty, tight conduit and sniffed. "Why did I volunteer for this job?" she growled for the tenth time in the last quarter hour.

Fortunately, her companion was patient. Vashti, being their Reman ray of sunshine, smiled to herself. "Well, I'd rather be in here with you than facing the hordes of Rihannsu that are outside the doors of the docking bay. I mean, seriously, this is the best job going at the moment." She lifted a knee on the rubber covered conveyor belt and dusted off some of the dilithium ore encrusted there that had been biting into her kneecaps. The synthetic denim-style clothing that was given to the workers was little protection against the abrasive ore in the tunnel.

Her companion paused for a moment and wiped the dust that was slipping down her forehead, aided by perspiration, and into her eyes. "Damn. I wish I'd thought to pack a sweat band."

Her friend gave a slight chuckle. "There's always something, isn't there? I can't count the number of times I've gone off to buy some bread and come back with sweets, energy cells, knives, books, entertainment cartridges, all kinds of things, and forgotten the bread."

"It is the way of the Universe, that's for sure." Varra sighed. "We'd better keep moving." She focussed her eyes in the dim light and pushed aside more of the dilithium ore. She took note of the dusty markings on the walls. Her countenance brightened. They had only a few more metres to go. She glanced back at her friend. "We're nearly there."

Vashti tilted her head to the side. "What's that?"

Varra jerked her gaze back in the direction they were headed. “I’m glad you’re here, Vashti. My hearing’s never been the same since the accident when we were children.”

Her friend remembered it well. It was the incident that had cemented their relationship – and had also made the four of them orphans. The mining accident had killed hundreds of adult workers while their children had been in “school”. Even the glorified creche where the children had been kept had been badly affected and many of their friends had not survived, including someone Varra had once held dear. She had come out with several broken bones and was partially deaf in her left ear. “Perhaps I should have gone first.”

Varra pushed forward through the dust hard and soon found the place they were aiming for. “If there’s someone in here with us, we’d better get this done quickly. I don’t want to be here when this goes off.”

Her comment drew Vashti’s eyes to the pouch she was carrying. It was full of explosives they had been blessed with by their unknown benefactor – and a remote detonator. They also carried two of the portable transporter inhibitors.

Another muffled sound echoed down the tube from further up the shaft. They were clearly not alone. Varra quietly swore. “I should have known they would beam someone in further up to try to head us off.”

“How far away do you think they are?”

Her answer came in the form of disruptor beams striking the walls around them. Both women pressed themselves to the bottom of the tube.

The usually unflappable Vashti growled: “Are they deranged? Don’t they know what this shaft is full of?”

A piece of rock chipped off over their heads.

"Clearly, they don't care," Varra said, snarling at her foes. She made a quick calculation in her head and realised there was very little time. She turned to her best friend. "Move as fast as you can back to the docks. I'll hold them as long as I can before I blow the shaft."

"But…"

Varra shook her head vehemently. "Go!"

Tears welled in Vashti's eyes as the smaller woman spun on a knee and crawled as quickly as she could back the way she came. She knew she would not see her oldest and dearest friend again, and she would have to tell T'mock his sister was dead.

Varra spared her only a glance as she left, then turned and began firing like a woman possessed. She was certain she hit at least one of her foes, but when she took a glancing blow to her left shoulder, leaving it an excruciating, smoking ruin, she knew she was out of time. If they were going to seal this final entrance into the shuttle bay, they had to blow it now. Not bothering with the remote detonator, Varra painfully took hold of a single grenade, slowly closed her eyes for the final time, and, with the name of her beloved brother on her lips, rejoined the elements.

The explosion shook the docking bay, shooting dust and debris out of the chute opening and bouncing off the roof of the shuttle, including Vashti, who went flying, spreadeagled. She landed ingloriously at the rear of the vessel, her legs dangling over the side.

The occupants of the bay ducked as if they were under attack and were startled to see their fellow shoot out of the tube, screaming. They had no idea that she wasn't afraid for herself but voicing her heartbreak.

Krasni was the first to mount the back of the shuttle and reach her. She was covered with scrapes and bruises, not to mention a large amount of soot, and he was certain she had a dislocated shoulder, but his scans of her body did not reveal any breaks. All the same, it was unnerving to him to see her with tears in her eyes. Sure, she must be in pain from her shoulder injury, but he knew her well enough that she'd had worse, and she had laughed through it all. This was something new.

He helped her to sit up, then used his basic first aid skills to position her to pop her shoulder back in. She hardly whimpered when he heard the click, but Vashti was still crying. He gently stroked her cheek, letting some of the deep affection he held for her show, not understanding, when suddenly it dawned.

"Where's Varra?" T'mock had joined them and was looking up at the chute as if expecting his sister to appear at any moment.

It took Vashti a few seconds to find her voice. "She fought off the Rihannsu soldiers and set off the charges herself. She gave me time to get away…" Her voice choked off as her throat constricted in grief. After a moment she managed: "I should have stayed."

Their leader took a moment to internalise his loss. His love for his twin sister was deeper than most could fathom. That was the way for twins. All the same, he was also a realist. He would be joining her soon enough. He would honour her by finishing what she started. Although the ache in his heart threatened to crush him, he stood firm and gently squeezed Vashti's good shoulder. "You did the right thing, Vash. You needed to tell us what happened so we can be certain that the enemy can't come through there. My sister made the right call." He stood up and spoke for all to hear. "What we do here, what

Varra did up there, will be remembered by all generations of Remans. We do this for those who don't have the strength to stand for themselves. If not us, then who will make a difference? Who will push back against our antagonists? Who will finally say: No more!"

As one, their fellow Remans, inspired by Varra's sacrifice, raised their fists in defiance against their Rihannsu overlords. They had all lived under the cruel lash of a Romulan guard all their lives, and they were sick of it. Here, in this one moment, they were finally free to think and act for themselves, they had a taste of personal sovereignty, and they wanted more, not only for themselves, but for their families. They were going to push back, whether they succeeded or not.

The communicator chirped, summoning his attention and he waved at his fellows for some quiet. He toggled to answer and held it up for all to hear. "Yes?"

"What are you doing to my mine?" the voice demanded.

T'mock was in no mood for the man's posturing. "Commander tr'Tennensae, my sister was simply making certain that your people weren't going to try to drop in unannounced, when your soldiers did just that. The charges we were placing in the tube would have had a proximity sensor that I would have warned you not to approach, but your actions forced our hand. Now, my sister is dead, and I wouldn't be surprised if your soldiers are having a bad day as well."

As he was speaking, his friends noted his hand was shaking. T'mock was usually unflappable, but Varra's death had enraged him, and he was barely keeping it together.

Through clenched teeth, T'mock continued. "Not that I care all that much about your troops. I had hoped for a fairly peaceful demonstration here, with a minimum of casualties, but

your bloody-mindedness is making that impossible. Do you want a bloodbath?" he snapped. "Is that your plan?"

There was silence on the other end for a moment, and the Remans wondered once more whether the device was malfunctioning. However, the Commander finally broke the silence. "No, I don't want that," he said tightly.

Krasni shook his head and muttered a nasty Reman epithet. "I can still hear Rihannsu troops trying to get in."

They heard some hastily barked orders and then, suddenly, the hammering sounds ceased. "Better?"

The Commander's sarcastic tone was not lost on the trio. This man was not going to be much of a go-between for them. However, there was little choice to be had. If they wanted their voice to be heard in the Senate, someone had to pass it on.

"Yes, thank you," T'mock said, trying to sound polite and hating every word. What he really wanted to do was somehow reach through the grille of the device, wrap his hands around tr'Tennensae's neck and slowly squeeze the life out of the man for the loss of his sister.

"Now, what do you want, Reman?" the Commander asked. It was clear to the rebels this man was no Ambassador. You wouldn't want this man talking to your children, that was certain.

T'mock scowled. He decided to own the moniker. "We *Remans* want a voice in the Senate. Ever since the ships arrived here from the homeworld so many years ago, Remans have *never* had a voice in the halls of government. Our people have warmed your homes, fed your people, fought in your wars, defended your homes and yet we are not given the basic right to be heard in the seat of power. There are fifty people sitting in the Senate – all of

them from ch'Rihan – *none of them from ch'Havran*. It is time for that to change."

There was another pregnant pause from the communicator. By now, the rebels had come to expect this. It was clear the Commander wasn't so much a thoughtful individual, but more a slow thinker. "You're not serious." His tone was beyond sceptical.

T'mock, Vashti and Krasni deflated a little, their expressions a mixture of rolled eyes and major disappointment. T'mock placed his thumb over the microphone and said quietly: "Remember, we expected this. The homeworlds weren't built in a day." He took his digit off the mic and said clearly: "Commander, I can assure you, our intentions are absolutely serious. We have in this docking bay enough ordinance to leave a very big crater in ch'Havran. We would also cripple the energy supply to ch'Rihan. So, you see, I don't think a voice in the Senate is that big an ask."

Instead of silence, there came a sound that was part growl, part disgust. "I don't know what Universe you think you're living in, but nobody holds a gun to the head of the Romulan Senate and gets what they want. You're delusional."

T'mock chuffed, mildly amused. The man's reaction was nothing new or unexpected to him. "The Rihannsu have been holding a gun to the Reman people for centuries, using us as cannon fodder in your wars, and as slave labour in your mines and farms. We are tired of being treated as second-class citizens in an empire we helped *found*!" He spat out the last word angrily. "Now, stop wasting your time trying to talk me out of what I am determined to do and call the Senate and tell them that, if they don't do what I ask I *will* do what I say and cripple ch'Rihan's dilithium supply."

This time the reply was a sigh of resignation. "I will do what you ask, but you must know that they will not give you what you ask." He sounded almost plaintive.

T'mock drew himself up to his full height and grimaced, letting his lower canines shine fiercely in the light. "Then let the Senate know that we are willing to die for our cause and we *will* carry out our threat if they do not do what we ask. You have three hours to respond before we destroy this facility." He snapped the communicator shut, not giving the Commander a chance to respond with another pointless comment that might mess with his people's heads. The die was cast. He checked his wrist chronometer and set the timer. "They have three hours. Not a minute more."

His friends nodded. They had no illusions that, for them, this was a suicide mission. Even if they were to somehow survive this endeavour, they knew that the Tal Shiar would not let them live beyond the end of the week. However, the rest of the people in the hangar did not deserve a long, painful death at the hands of that shadowy organisation. They hoped that the Senate would listen to reason but, if not, they would be forced to act and follow through with their threat. Yes, they would re-join the Elements, but they hoped they would start a movement among their own people, that they would find their hearts and begin to fight back against the Rihannsu and reclaim their world at the very least; at best to be considered equals within the great Romulan Star Empire.

The Senate Floor was in uproar. It wasn't so much that the senators had been called to discuss the emergency on their sister world, but rather that their personal time had been interfered

with. This was an out-of-sessions meeting, extraordinary in the fact that it had to be called in the absence of the Empress.

The elderly Announcer, himself over two hundred years old yet his eyes had not dimmed, cast his gaze over the Senate chamber. He took note that all of the Senate houses that were available were represented, with the exception of Senator t'llhweiir who was in the company of the Empress at the time.

While he did his best to remain aloof of all things political, he had also been the Senate Announcer for many years. He was well aware of just how corrupt the political system was in the Empire, since the Empress had taken over, she had made some positive changes to the order to restore *mnhei'sahe*. He had also been present the day when Senator t'llhweiir had bravely thrown herself on the crystalline monster that had erupted from the senate floor years before, seemingly to rescue the Federation spy, Makhoi. Both women were honourable.

He looked around the room. Unlike this brood of vipers, who wouldn't know honour if it jumped up and bit them on the…

Senator Hathness stood up nearby and tried to gain his attention. The Announcer ignored him for the breach of protocol. It was clear he was simply trying to get things moving. Instead of engaging the rude senator, he turned and stepped over to a nearby door to speak through it. "Is there any answer from the Empress for my request for her holographic attendance?"

The Centurion looked him in the eye with a steady gaze. "No, sir."

The Announcer frowned. This was not good. Anything could happen. He turned on his heel and returned to the floor. He didn't mess around. He took his golden staff and cracked the floor ceremonially, once, twice, three times, loudly. "The Senate is in session. We will now hear debate on the matter of the crisis on

ch'Havran – and only that." However, his last three words were practically drowned out by a cacophony of shouts from Senator Hathness' house.

With the Empress offworld, it came down to the Announcer to bring order to the floor. He raised his voice above the rabble and said: "We will hear the report from the Imperial Navy."

Admiral Ama t'Varranajj stepped forward, a woman appointed by the Empress herself. She felt like a piece of raw meat being thrown to a pack of wild animals. Tall, raven haired, middle-aged and fit, she had risen through the ranks by hard work and talent, and by coming to the attention of the Empress. She was concerned that her tenure in the Navy would last only as long as the Empress held her throne. In that regard, looking after the Empress's interests was simply a case of self-preservation. "Word has come that a small group of Reman terrorists have taken control of the primary dilithium export dock and they are threatening to blow it up."

Any further comment was drowned out as the floor erupted into cries of outrage and waving fists. Ama had seen the theatrics here enough times to know it for what it was. These men didn't care what was happening on ch'Havran. The vast majority of them had never even visited that world.

She had. She had not only visited it, and its mines, but she had served alongside Reman warriors in the Navy. While she had been raised to think of them as less than, Ama had actually found Remans to be some of the fiercest fighters she had worked with. However, they were often difficult as they usually harboured a lot of ill will towards her people, and she understood perfectly well why.

All the same, when word came that some Remans had taken control of the export docks and threatened to blow it up, she quickly did her homework. What she discovered horrified her.

Ama caught the eye of the Announcer and silently willed him to bring the Senate floor back into order.

He got the message. With one swift whack of the staff on the floor he got the Senators' attention. The rabble quietened down.

The Admiral spoke up once more, just enough for her voice to carry in the stone-walled echo chamber. "If the Remans do detonate a warhead in the docking bay it will not only create an explosion so violent it could possibly crack the planet, it could shift its orbit. At the least, it will pollute the atmosphere for decades. At worst, it will eventually destroy both homeworlds."

The enormity of the catastrophe was such that the room was hushed as the senators tried to comprehend the scale of the situation. Curiously, she noted the Senator Hathness' face has gone an even deeper green than usual. Was it anger, or something else?

"What are their demands?"

Ama wasn't certain which Senator asked the question and she didn't really care. "The Remans' demands are simple: they want a Reman voice in the Senate."

The reaction was a mixture of derision and laughter. It was a nasty sound, full of disgust and sewage.

Senator Hathness seemed to decide he would speak for the house. "Are these backwards Remans unaware that House Mandathar has been governing ch'Havran for centuries? Their world already has a voice in the Senate."

Out of the corner of her eye Ama noted the bronze colours of house Mandathar flourish as they were mentioned. Status, it

was all about status. The facts, truth, the good of the Empire didn't matter. Just the status of the Great Houses in the Senate. Well, it was time for a reminder that the Elements weren't impressed. "It is hardly a secret that House Mandathar rules for House Mandathar, not for the good of the Remans, Senator Harkness. I have served on ch'Havran, and I have seen little evidence that they have been doing anything to improve the lives of the Reman citizens on that world."

The Announcer wondered if the Admiral may have overstepped by reminding the Senate that, strictly speaking, Remans were citizens of the Empire, even if they weren't treated as such. That kind of talk could dramatically shorten one's career in the Navy.

"Thank you for your report, Admiral," Hathness said, biting off the end of the last word. "Regardless of the Reman's standing in the Senate, their position is not going to be altered by holding a disruptor to the head of this institution. Our response needs to be swift and decisive."

The Admiral wasn't surprised. Truth be told, she expected nothing else. If political change was ever going to come for the Remans it was never going to come at the point of a gun. We shoot them, they shoot us, it doesn't end in a lasting peace. It was a hard lesson she had learned in her many years in the service. Vengeance is a demon that always cries out for more blood.

Hathness continued. "I move that the Senate directs the Navy to retake the dock within the remaining time, using whatever force necessary."

Both the Announcer and Ama shared a look. It was clear that the Senator was using this situation for his own political benefit.

However, from her vantage point standing in the middle of the senate floor the Admiral could not help but wonder at the look on the man's face. Hathness was a lousy card player, it was well known. He had only gained his position in the Senate due to good, old-fashioned nepotism. Nearly everyone in this room had their place here simply through inheritance. As a woman who had earned her place in the Navy, the notion was an abomination. These people were all self-important children who never put the needs of the Empire first and it was repulsive. Ama felt a sudden desire to find a shower.

All the same, there was something in Hathness' eyes that bothered her. He was a little too eager to shed blood. She couldn't help but wonder if there was more at play here than she realised.

Before she knew it, the motion had carried, and she had her orders. Retake the docks as soon as possible – by any means necessary.

Ama knew there was little time, so she made for the door and left the senate behind. She had to get to ch'Havran as quickly as possible. She knew who was in command of the situation there and she didn't trust him to make her a cup of tea without screwing it up.

Inside, the Announcer still had a group of grown children to govern. As far as he was concerned, the business of the day had concluded. However, Hathness had other ideas. "It is clear to me that the Empire is in dire straits that this crisis has demonstrated. I move a no confidence motion in Empress t'Rllaillieu's leadership."

The Announcer's eyes went wide in shock. Senator Hathness was completely out of order. This meeting was only allowed due to the Empress' absence in the light of the crisis. To move against her now was not only illegal, but totally

dishonourable. He stepped forward, forcefully. With the Empress gone, he had to wrest back control and restore some semblance of sanity. With one, quick jab of his staff on the marble floor the clang rang out in the domed chamber and drowned out the cacophony of shouting that Hathness' statement had caused. What bothered the Announcer the most was the amount of support for his assertion.

"Senator Hathness!" he bellowed. "You are out of order!" For such an aging individual, his stentorian voice took many by surprise. He reminded many who had served in the armed forces of a drill sergeant. "This emergency session was called to deal with the crisis on ch'Havran, as I stated at the beginning."

With the slickness of a snake, Hathness said smoothly, "I don't recall that. However, the matter has been tabled."

The Announcer whirled on the Senator, his flowing green robes flying about him, fury in his aging eyes. He was not going to have any of this. "The manner and the subject were against everything a Rihannha stand for, *Senator*. If you have a problem with how the *Empress* runs things in her *Empire,* I suggest you have the courage to tell it to her face as *mnhei'sahe* demands."

Hathness had played out many different scenarios in his mind about how this would play out, but this was not one of them. To be put in his place by this antique in the green robes was not something that he considered. For a moment, he simply stood there, his mouth agape. When he finally realised it was time to do something, he knew the momentum had been lost. It was too late.

The Announcer was already facing the centre of the room, raising his staff in the air. Once, twice, three times it cracked against the floor. The session was over. This opportunity was past, long gone.

Hathness watched the Announcer with so much hatred in his eyes he wondered why the old man didn't spontaneously burst into flames. He would have to make enquiries to see if he could have the old man killed – no, removed. Killed was such a distasteful word.

At least the Admiral was on her way to take care of the problem on ch'Havran. That part of his plan was working out nicely. He allowed himself a small grin. Yes, nicely.

One part of the plan wasn't working out quite so well. "Why are we delayed?" Kaylor angrily snapped. "You know we're on a tight schedule."

The pilot of the *GhiH* was well aware of the situation, and of their destination. However, the facts of the situation could not be denied. He pointed at the swirling mass of flashing colours on the main screen. "Kaylor, the ion storm is a lightyear across and is level four. There is no going through it. Even a D-7 couldn't make it through that." He made no excuses. The facts were the facts.

However, the house of Duras wasn't always interested in facts – only results. Kaylor, by instinct, rested her hand on the hilt of her d'k tagh, but thought twice before drawing it. She needed this male to pilot this ship. Instead, she simply sneered. "Just get us to Hobus as fast as we can get there."

Having a fair idea of the consequences of failure, he stated: "Yes, Kaylor. I understand." Without another word, he turned and began calculating the shortest possible route around the storm given its current trajectory and hoped it didn't change.

Behind him, Kaylor kept fingering the hilt of her dagger. She ached to kill something. It had been too long since she had drawn blood. Perhaps she had been surrounded by the wretched

Romulan p'tachs for too long, forbidden from killing any of them as Duras had his plans. At least now they were on their way to Hobus, and Duras had assured her that, once they had arrived, there would be plenty of targets to kill.

Chapter Thirteen

"This is driving me nuts."

Piper gave her double a curious look. "What do you mean?"

"For the past year, give or take a month or two, our lives have moved along at, well, break-neck speed." Piper Silayna, now sitting between her sister's legs on the chaise lounge on Sustasandage's ship, stretched her arms to get the blood flowing. "Now, we're stuck in this tight space watching, and waiting while nothing happens. It's unnatural."

Piper sighed. For once, she had a moment to *stop*. These moments came along rarely. Yes, it seemed odd, even weird. But they were still a blessing. "Sis, I've found there are only two times in this life then things are truly calm. When I'm in Paradise, and in the heart of the storm."

From her place on the floor where she was comfortably curled up and quietly purring, Amantasandage popped up her head and said with a touch of irony: "This doesn't look like Paradise."

From overhead the ship's AI spoke with an offended tone: "I do my best with what I have. There's only so much you can do with the space available. Dimensional transcendentalism is nothing more than science fiction."

"All the same, something more than just plain white would have been nice. Perhaps a floral print?"

Sus' eyes widened a little and she quietly warned: "Now you've done it."

To the surprise of most of the ship's inhabitants, the white walls suddenly changed into a swirling vortex of vibrantly changing flora that seemed to be swaying in the breeze. To the

humanoids, it seemed to blur the edges of the furniture, making their surroundings seem odd, especially considering the 3D hologram of the *Millennium's* bridge was still running in the middle of the room.

On the floor, Manny's purring simply intensified.

Sarda touched Piper's mind briefly. *"At least she's happy."*

Piper chuckled inwardly. *"You know she can hear you."*

"So can I." Piper Silayna's eyes darted to the Vulcan. Indeed, so did everyone else in the confined space. He had temporarily forgotten he was in the presence of a roomful of telepaths.

Sarda sighed. He was about to add something to the discourse when his eyes were caught by the sight of Krashtallash rising to his feet, the bridge about him had changed to the colour yellow. Things were about to come to a head.

Piper didn't need a word. "Scanner," she said to the ceiling. "Are the two ships in weapons range yet?"

"They will be in ten seconds."

"I still hate this," Piper Silayna said for the record.

"I know," Piper said, "but our job here is observe, deduce and return. Nothing more." With the words spoken, she found herself wishing it was going to be the case, but Piper was a firm believer in Murphy's Law. Life was what happened to you while you were busy making plans. Murphy had a tendency to come along and turn those well-made plans into chaos.

On the bridge of the *Millennium-A*, things were tense. Admiral Piper's fingernails were digging into the bottom of the armrest. A thought came to her. She glanced over at Ghost. "Have you got the "Tooth Rattler" up and running yet?"

Caitlin gave her one of her cheeky, feral grins. "Yes, Piper. This should wake up the neighbours."

This was the best news in days. Without looking, she called over her shoulder. "Send a dispatch to the Empress. Let her know that I plan on flushing out any cloaked ships in the area using a new, experimental technique that won't cause any damage to her or her ships. Hell, it may not even work. Let her know that I will stay clear of the engagement area."

Without waiting for an acknowledgement, she turned to the helm. She knew which way the ship was oriented, and that the *Enterprise* was directly above them. "Bring us about ninety degrees starboard, zero degrees Z-axis. I want a slow turn starboard while Commander Ryan turns up the volume."

"Aye, Captain," Jason Nunn replied.

Once more, Piper asked for a hail. "Patch me into the *Enterprise.*"

Five seconds later John Harriman's worried face filled the screen. "What can I do for you, Admiral?"

"The rules of engagement are clear. Do not fire unless fired upon. We're here to prevent a war, not get involved in one." Admiral Piper was rock steady as an ancient mariner staring down a raging storm. "However, Commander Ryan has devised a new system that might be able to flush out cloaked vessels in the area." At Harriman's raised brow Piper elaborated. "It's highly directional, so keep the big *E* above us and you won't feel any ill effects. All the same, I don't plan on running it until the shooting is over. I don't want to escalate this fight by flushing out the wrong people too early."

There was a certain amount of wisdom in her strategy, but also a desire for faith. Right now, there could be cloaked vessels out there just waiting to pounce on the Empress as she engaged

the rebel Admiral. All things being equal, there was the possibility that the Empress was playing the same game. This was Romulan space, and you never knew just who was holding what cards. "Understood, Admiral. However, I have it on good report that Terise might be in trouble and we're watching for a window to help her."

Piper's eyes narrowed at that. This was not good news. Even over an open commlink the Romulans had no idea who they would be talking about, but the fact she was in danger changed the complexion of things. That John was aware of things and that he was on it was reassuring. She was in good hands. "I know you will take care of business, John. As always."

Harriman gave her a winning, confident smile. "Good hunting, Admiral."

"And you, Captain."

The screen winked off.

"Captain," Lieutenant Koss reported from Science. "The Romulan ships are within weapons range."

Arrhae bounced off the wall with the Emperor's opening volley. She shook her head to clear the ringing. Neither side was giving any quarter, she thought to herself. She had been on the old warbird long enough to recognise the ship as outdated technology. *She's brought a knife to a gunfight.*

The ship rocked again, and she wondered just how long this ship could withstand the beating. If the Admiral wasn't giving as good as she was getting, then this was going to be a very short fight. She realised to herself that she did not have much time in which to act if she was going to save herself. Earlier, she had managed to pry the cover off the control panel for the door, and she was fairly confident she had it figured out. With the tools

Arrhae had acquired, she realised that, if she cross-connected just two contacts the door should open.

But what if it was guarded? Would she be able to take out the guard? Not likely. She wasn't as young as she used to be, neither was she as fit. She considered her tools and realised that some of them could be used for purposes other than fixing things. So, if she timed things right…

The next time the ship lurched Arrhae hit the door release and it noiselessly slid open. As she suspected, it was guarded. However, the guard was looking the wrong way. The reprogrammed electric probe her hand worked much like a taser and, with one quick jab to the spine, the soldier was out like a light.

Arrhae held it up to the light, delighted with her handywork. "Not bad," she said with pride. All the same, she divested the soldier of their disruptor and set it to stun. To herself she thought: *Once Starfleet, always Starfleet*. Then she began to stealthily move through the ship.

"Khre'Riov, the traitor was upgraded her ship's shields since she left our space. They should have collapsed after our second volley." Aidoann, standing as always at the Empress' side, gave her expert advice.

Ael wondered if it was the moment of action, or just habit that her old friend had referred to her once more by that term rather than "Empress". Either way, it was welcome. Her loyal crewmembers around her simply smiled to themselves.

"Keep up the pressure. However, once the traitor's shields are down, I want you to scan it for signs of the Senator. I want her retrieved before we scatter that relic to the elements." Her delivery was as cold as the space her ship occupied.

"t'Khenniell has launched a plasma torpedo."

"Evasive raven," Ael ordered.

Bloodwing dropped like a stone under the path of the torpedo and dove under the *Razor's Edge* and began strafing its exposed underbelly, hitting it hard.

Captain Piper watched the scene playing out before them. "I have a bad feeling about this," she said, her eyes narrowed. Her double wasn't quite so certain. "What do you mean?" she asked.

On the floor, Manny voiced it for her. "The Admiral shouldn't have lasted this long, for one."

A deep sigh was heard from the elder Vulcan. Spock spoke: "In all my dealings with Romulans I have found that things are seldom exactly what they appear to be."

Piper nodded her agreement. "I'm sure you're right, sir. I can't imagine what cards t'Khenniell is playing, but she's got to know she's playing against a stacked deck."

It was Sarda who surprised them all. "Then it is clear the Admiral must be cheating. If one goes into a game with no clear advantage, one *must* cheat."

Piper shot him a look of "Ah, ha!" "There's something here we're not seeing."

Piper Silayna added: "I just hope we see it before it's too late."

On the *Millennium-A,* Admiral Piper was close to engaging a plan of her own. "Is it nearly ready?" she asked.

Lieutenant Koss looked up at her from the Science console, his antennae twitching excitedly. "It'll be fully charged in another ninety seconds, Admiral."

It warmed the Admiral's soul that they finally had something to *do* here. On this mission they had really been along for the ride, and aside from embarrassing herself on the mat in front of the Empress, the *Millennium* had done little more than babysit the *Enterprise.* Piper detested babysitting.

"As soon as it's charged let me know and we'll make sure the sky is clear of cloaked ships."

On the bridge of the *USS Enterprise,* John Harriman sat in the centre seat and sweated under the collar of his uniform. What had started out as a watershed moment in the affairs of the Alpha Quadrant was quickly degenerating into a complete farce. On their viewscreen, two Romulan warbirds were duking it out with no clear winner in view. On one ship was the Empress whose favour they were here to curry, a woman who seemed to genuinely desire a lasting peace between her people and the Federation. It was a welcome and hopeful image that seemed to be fading fast with every torpedo blast aimed at her from her adversary.

What complicated things was the knowledge that the other ship contained one of their own. Commander Haleakala-LoBrutto, a deep-cover spy, had been taken captive. He desperately wanted to rescue her, but he faced the very real prospect of having to sacrifice her life to save the peace she had worked so hard to create.

"How are their shields?" he inquired.

His XO checked her screens. She gave him a worried look. "Both ships have taken a beating, Captain."

Harriman took a deep breath. He itched to take action. He felt a hand touch his shoulder, pressing down firmly with calm authority.

"You know you cannot act, Captain," said Ambassador Spock. "As much as we would like to, *mnhei'sahe* forbids it, the Empress would never forgive it, and it would shatter any attempt we could make at this time to forge an alliance. We must let this play out."

John nodded in total agreement. "I know, Spock. I know. I just wish…"

The hand clapped his shoulder and withdrew. "Yes, Captain. You are not all that different from another captain of the *Enterprise* I once knew. He would have felt the same. We will have our moment. We just need to seize it when it comes."

Harriman's heart swelled at the comparison, and he felt energized. When the time came, they would be ready.

"S'Timon, signal the *Rending Claw*! Attack!"

In the smoke-filled command centre of their warbird, t'Khenniell's second-in-command made the call.

Hidden in the shadows in the back of the room, Arrhae waited and watched, looking for her opportunity to make her move.

The Empress paced the bridge of the new *Bloodwing*. The *S'harien*-class vessel had put up an amazing fight, but the thing she couldn't fathom was how well the aging warbird she was squared off against was faring. It just should not have lasted this long.

"Keep firing phasers!" she ordered.

"Ventral phasers are offline," came an undesirable report. "Shields at forty percent."

"Roll minus 90° X!"

Bloodwing rolled on her central axis, ninety degrees to port, showing the *Razor's Edge* her topside phaser banks. It was at that moment that the *Rending Claw,* a *S'harien*-class Warbird, commanded by a captain that was still loyal to t'Khenniell decloaked and fired on *Bloodwing's* belly. Caught in a pincer movement, the ship was now under attack from *two* directions.

"Damn t'Khenniell!" Aidoann cried as she staggered, grasping for a hold of the back of the Empress's chair as the floor lurched beneath them.

The Empress was not to be distracted by the newcomer. "Ignore the *Claw* for now. Bring us about, nose to nose with the *Razor's Edge*. I want to hit her with a plasma bolt the first chance we get. As soon as her shields are down, we'll finish her off. When she's gone, the *Claw* will have no choice but to finish us off or turn tail and run."

The ship's pilot saw blood in his commander's eye and didn't doubt that today was, as the Klingons liked to say, a good day to die. "Yes, Empress. Acting." With all the skill he could muster, he brought the ship around in as tight a turn as he could and brought the ship's forward batteries to bear on the *Razor's Edge's* forward saucer edge. It was a difficult manoeuvre as the other ship was in constant motion.

Piper gave Sarda a quick grin. "You called it."

Aboard the *Millennium-A*, Admiral Piper called: "Energise defence fields. Raise shields. Do *not* arm weapons. Our standing orders are not to fire unless fired upon. However, I will not sit here with our pants around our ankles like Kirk's were when Khan caught him with the *Reliant*."

Her crew didn't need to be told twice. They were quite familiar with the reference. Many of them were friends with the crew of the original *Enterprise*.

Ghost stepped down next to Piper. "The dish is charged. Ready for your order."

Piper considered the situation, then shook her head. "t'Khenniell may not be the only one playing games here, Caitlin. Let's hold off on it for now."

Ryan was a savvy card player and knew when to keep them close to her chest. "You've got it, Admiral."

On the viewscreen, Piper watched their newcomer start to pester the Empress. However, they weren't too careful as the *Rending Claw* pursued the larger, more powerful *Bloodwing* that was having none of the newer ship. As the two ships bobbed and weaved, there was the occasional miss from the inexperienced pursuer, and it wasn't long before the inevitable. A phaser shot went wild and bounced of the *Millennium's* shields.

It was all the excuse the Admiral needed to act. With a gleeful smile she said: "Arm all weapons. Battlestations!"

It had taken a few minutes, but finally *Bloodwing* had brought her forward batteries to bear on the older warbird. Now, the bridge of the *Razor's Edge* was a shattered mess of smoke and opticable after the impact of the plasma bolt, but the fire wasn't out in the Admiral's eyes. Neither she, nor her ship, were dead yet. "Damage report!" she barked out, barely coherently, her eyes streaming tears in the acrid atmosphere.

Her engineering officer reported: "Buckling to the forward hull. Damage to the port warp nacelle."

"Status of shields?" she called whilst coughing out the last of a lungful of fetid smoke.

"Down!" S'Timon called, sounding as defeated as he looked. "Another shot like the last one and we'll be nothing more than debris."

From the back of the bridge, Arrhae was nursing a nasty bruise on her shoulder where she had impacted the wall. The Empress was not taking the challenge to her rule lightly, and there was no guarantee that she was aware that she was even on this ship. Even with that knowledge, she couldn't go easy on this traitorous scum. From the back of the room, she gave the Admiral a vicious scowl, and she was tempted to shoot the woman herself, but *mnhei'sahe* forbade her from taking action. This was not her fight. All the same, with the focus on keeping the ship from falling apart and deciding on their next action, Arrhae determined now was the best time for her to make her own move.

Struggling to stay upright in her seat, the Admiral was forced to concede defeat. There was no way out for them with the ship already badly damaged. "The *Claw* will guard our backs. Prepare for warp," she ordered.

The navigator shot her an incredulous look. The damage to the port nacelle had reduced their maximum warp factor to two. They were going nowhere in a hurry. "Yes, Admiral," he said, knowing the futility of the gesture.

Arrhae knew it full well, too. While the Federation forces might let them go, there was no way that Ael was going to. Her support ships would already be starting to gather. She glanced at Reen and could not fathom the odd smile on the woman's face.

"Let *Bloodwing* come after us," she muttered. "It'll be the last thing that witch ever does."

Now *there's* overconfidence, Terise thought.

The unprotected ship was rocked again by a phaser shot from the Empress. Once more people went flying, but what was

more disturbing was the deep, mournful note of the ship's computer. "Antimatter containment failing. Ninety seconds to a breach." In anticipation of the desire for the crew's escape the computer opened the doors to the bridge escape pods.

Terise, who had gotten to her feet, didn't need any further encouragement. The time to act had come. It no longer mattered that the people around her were probably armed. What did matter was that the ship was about to explode.

She watched incredulously as the Admiral regained her seat and began barking orders to her crew that either wasn't dead or somewhat incapacitated. "We are not going down without a fight!" she cried.

Of course, Arrhae realised. *Mnhei'sahe* would demand their deaths anyway as traitors to the Empire and the Empress. If the ship didn't kill them, Ael would.

The analytical part of her realised that should have already happened. The only conclusion she could come to was that they were restraining themselves because she was aboard.

Time was running out and she knew she had to act fast.

On the bridge of the *Bloodwing*, Ael gave the order: "Cease fire on the *Razor's Edge!* Concentrate your fire on the *Rending Claw*. Let the ship's warp core finish them off." Her science officer had given her the report that the ship was doomed. In the silence of her thoughts, she said to herself: *Captain Harriman, get Arrhae out of there. Don't let me down.*

Captain Harriman glanced over at his science officer. "Have you found the Senator yet?" he asked.

The officer was aggrieved. "No, sir. Her biosigns are so similar to Romulan. I can't distinguish her from the others."

The captain's eyes widened. He dearly wanted to bring her home. Her knowledge of the Romulan Empire was without equal. "What about the praseodymium?" he asked.

"The high background radiation from all the weapons fire is making it hard for us to locate, Captain." The officer's scans revealed another problem. "The *Razor's Edge* is losing antimatter containment. They've got less than a minute before they explode."

Harriman sighed. They were going to have to do this from a distance. "Back us off to a safe position."

"Aye."

Terise recalled her Starfleet training and dove towards the escape pod, rolling on her shoulder and coming up in a crouch with her disruptor ready.

The Admiral saw the blur of activity in the corner of her eye, and she whirled to see that the Senator was acting like a naval officer, not a useless politician. She reached for her personal disruptor and moved to intercept, but the Senator was too fast.

Arrhae hadn't paused once, she kept moving, using her momentum to carry her towards the escape pod. She reached it in two quick strides and dove through the hatchway.

A disruptor blast sizzled into the door frame to her side. Knowing time was of the essence, Terise slapped the release button and the pod's door slammed shut, just as another blast uselessly struck it. Terise braced herself with her hands and feet as the tiny craft was ejected into space.

On the bridge of the *Enterprise*, the science officer stated: "Captain, an escape pod has been launched from the *Razor's Edge.*"

Instinctively, the Captain knew it was Commander LoBrutto. "Beam out the occupant now!"

There was little time left. Her ship was doomed and Reen knew her next action would be her last. "Target the pod and blast it. The Senator's fate will be no different than ours."

At Weapons, her officer needed a moment to target the tiny shape. "Targeting," he stated, then: "Locked."

"Fire!" Reen demanded.

Committing a Romulan Senator to the Fire was not something even a declared traitor like he could take lightly. Their caste system was so entrenched in their mental DNA that to do so was unthinkable. For a second, he paused. All the same, his loyalty to the Admiral and the cause were stronger. "Firing," he stated as he pressed the button.

On the viewscreen the ship loosed a bolt of phaser fire that obliterated the tiny pod.

It was their last action as the ship's antimatter containment shields collapsed. It took only a fraction of a second for the matter and antimatter to combine and volatilize the entire vessel, leaving only coin-sized fragments to travel outward at almost relativistic speeds.

On the bridge of the *Enterprise* Captain Harriman needed to know. He hit his chair control button and called: "Transporter Room, do you have her?"

The reply was more than welcome. In stilted Federation Standard he heard: "Commander Haleakala-LoBrutto reporting for duty, sir."

Harriman's smile lit up the room, but then something else caught his attention. Bright blue, *Federation* photon torpedoes

were lighting up the midnight sky. They were being fired at the new interloper. "What the hell is going on out there?" he asked.

Sulu checked the Tactical scope. "The *Millennium* is converging on the new Romulan warbird that was firing on the Empress. During the melee a wild shot bounced off her shields…"

John gave her a dour look. "And that gave her all the excuse she needed to go after him." A genteel man, he uncharacteristically muttered a few obscene epithets under his breath. "If she wasn't an Admiral…"

Demora just gave him an embarrassed, thin-lipped smile. She wasn't going to touch that one. Her eyes tracked back to the screen where the *Millennium* was taking fire from the new ship. "Your orders, sir?"

An old saying came to him. "In for a penny…" His eyes narrowed in extreme irritation, he ordered: "Take us in."

"What the hell does she think she's doing?" Sustasandage watched the image playing out before them in amazement. "I thought this was supposed to be a mission of peace." She looked at the younger versions of Piper sitting next to her with an accusatory eye. "What is running through that woman's mind?"

Piper Silayna's hand went to her breast reflexively. "Don't look at me! I haven't a clue."

Piper, on the other hand, did have an idea. "Right now, I think that other version of me is simply … unhinged. The other half of herself—Sarda—had been torn away from her and she was feeling lost without him, yet she was still haunted by the spirit of the man she held within her that she was unwilling to give up. It was a little like split personality disorder with a big dose of PTSD thrown in for good measure. There is no way that woman should

be the master of a starship right now, but I think she's been doing such a great job of wearing a mask that she's got everyone fooled."

Sarda sighed. It was a sound so full of sorrow, so full of despair that Piper could not help but reach out to him and entwine her fingers in his own. Piper continued: "We may not have asked for this connection between us, Sarda, but you make me a much better person because of it. I'm always stronger with you by my side – and I'm always glad to have you in my heart."

Through their touch, Sarda could feel the true depth for her affection, and love, for him. There was no confusion, no misinterpretation of her meaning. He completely understood her intention. He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze in return. "Thank you, Piper. I have been, and always shall be yours."

Nobody noticed the tear that formed in the corner of Spock's eye as the elder Vulcan's chest tightened at the repeating of that old Vulcan term of affection.

"Stop this now," Eliza said, her hand squeezing Admiral Piper's arm. "This is not the time and place for this."

Piper gave the doctor a dismissive wave. "Not now."

The fiery redhead was not going to be dismissed so easily. She stepped right into the Admiral's line of vision. "No, I will not be put off, Captain. We are deep within the Romulan frontier. If other Romulan ships in the area see you firing on a Romulan ship, they may see it as an act of war and this mission of peace could turn into all-out war between the Rihannsu and the Federation. Is that what you want?"

Piper drew in a calming breath. Logically, she realised, this was not the path they had set out on. "No." She met the

doctor's gaze, sucked in a lungful of air and let it out slowly, calming herself. "Status of the warbird?" she asked.

"Their shields are at ten percent," Ghost answered from Tactical.

"Open hailing frequencies. Perhaps they will be interested in discussing terms."

Ghost glanced over at Carman, who returned the look. They were both of a mind that the mission had turned into a giant SNAFU.

Krashtallash watched the battle from the bridge of the *Millennium* in amazement. What should have been a peace summit between two Alpha Quadrant powers was quickly degenerating into a complete debacle. He tapped his fingers on the chair arm and wondered, how long would they have to sit here, watching this appalling moment in history before they finally discovered the missing piece of the puzzle. Then they could at least leave this miserable place and put this behind them.

That was the part the bothered him. He knew that there was no way out of this for him. They were on a fact-finding mission, nothing more. Once the Captain had discovered what she needed to know, she – and maybe Suzette – would travel back in time and pass on that knowledge to another version of themselves to prevent this from happening again. There was no need for him to play a part in that.

So, once Susanna and Suzette – he still often thought of them as such – left, would they simply wink out of existence? Probably. After all, this entire timeline was doomed once they departed. The whole idea was to make sure this sequence of events *never took place*.

Crash, first and foremost, was a being of duty, but he was also a father – and a new one at that. He had four brand new kits in his quarters, with his wife nursing them right now. He found he had to deliberately push them from his thoughts, otherwise his decision-making paradigm became clouded and there were times it was even hard to breathe.

He shook his head, making his ears wiggle a little. He focussed his eyes on the *Enterprise-B* and wondered once more what had become of her forebear. She had been a fine ship.

The new interloper had taken a beating from the *Millennium-A*, no surprise there, and – in a fit of pique, no doubt – fired off a final salvo of torpedoes before going into warp. The torpedoes were aimed at the *Bloodwing*, but the *Enterprise* had placed herself in harm's way and they had bounced harmlessly off her shields.

"Ah think that is the end of that," Scanner said, standing at his side, also watching the screen.

Captain Krashtallash looked up at his brother-in-law. "Don't your people also have a saying about speaking too soon?"

Judd grimaced. "Oops. Let's hope you're wrong about that."

From her place at the helm, Emu Armytage shook her head sadly and thought to herself: *No, he isn't.*

As fate would have it, Melisandra was having her own navigation problems getting to Hobus. Her path was being impeded by a class four ion storm. Fortunately, she was able to skirt it without too much hassle. She didn't mind ion storms all that much. If used properly, they were as good as a cloaking device. All that natural background radiation masked one's presence beautifully.

It took her a couple of hours, but soon the storm was at her back. However, it was her custom to wait and look around, like a rabbit peeking out of its hole, before venturing out into the void once more.

It saved her life.

She watched as a small, Klingon scout vessel met a much larger, D7-class battlecruiser, bristling with weapons ports, ready for a fight. It wasn't alone. There were four of them.

Her first thought was: *What the hell are they doing in Romulan space?*

Their presence here was an act of war. Sure, neither side liked the other. In fact, they despised each other. However, at this point in time, they were not in open warfare with one another. These ships could change things completely.

It wasn't long before the four battleships oriented themselves and took off into warp. Melis took note of their vector and gasped. They were headed for Hobus! This changed everything! She knew she had to get this information back to Jessica as soon as possible. The mission was at risk if the Klingons were going to gate crash it.

Her eyes came back into focus as she noticed movement. The scout ship was still out there. In fact, it was moving her way. She had been spotted!

"Felgercarb!" she spat. Acting without thinking, she threw all her skills piloting her shuttle into the fore and dove into the storm.

Admiral Piper took a deep breath. The Romulan ship had disappeared into warp, and she was happy to see it go. Let the Empress's people take care of it.

All the same, she was concerned that, now that the situation seemed to be settled down, there might be another trap, lying in wait to be sprung.

"Helm," she said. "Prepare to bring us about. I want the ship to be spun on a spherical motion, so as to scan the sky quickly, and effectively, with our cloak buster."

As Jason rushed to fulfil her order, Caitlin stepped down next to Carman and handed him a chip. She had already taken the liberty to create a program. "Just make sure we don't fire it at anything friendly," she said, cheekily.

He winked at her, letting his eyes linger on hers for an extra second. "No problem."

He dropped the chip into the slot and called up the program. With a glance over his shoulder, and a nod from his captain, he activated the program.

Below, the ship's huge deflector dish began doing a lot more than just deflecting debris from before the moving vessel. It began emitting a high-intensity frequency designed to resonate duranium plating. Any ship made out of the material, whether cloaked or not, would be shaken badly by it, and its presence revealed.

As luck would have it, the very first place they pointed their vessel was the portion of the sky the *USS Millennium* was parked in. Having no idea what was about to happen, it came as a great surprise when their ship felt like it was about to shake apart at the seams.

"What the hell is that?" Captain Krashtallash wasn't the only one who said it, or variations on the theme.

Several systems failed simultaneously, notably the most sensitive ones. First and foremost among these was the cloaking device.

As if by magic, the space she occupied was no longer empty. Where there was once void, there was now a Starfleet Dreadnought.

Admiral Piper jumped up from her seat. "What the hell is that doing here?" she said. "Disengage!"

Caitlin obediently shut down the beam.

"Identify!" the Admiral ordered.

Caitlin leaned over her console. She looked. And looked again. "I don't believe it."

Piper shot an annoyed look at her. "Report, Commander!"

Ryan drew in a deep breath, then said: "NCC-2001. *USS Millennium."*

Chapter Fourteen

Within an hour, Admiral Ama t'Varranajj arrived in orbit of ch'Havran on her personal warbird, the *Falcon's Grasp*. She stood behind the firemaster, who had the doors to the shuttle bay in the screen's crosshairs. She knew that all she had to do was give the order and this little insurrection would be over.

"Give me a full scan of the dock," she ordered.

Her science officer, Lieutenant Tafv tr'Anhwi was already on it. "Scanning," he said.

Ama stepped over the large space and looked over his shoulder. He didn't feel intimidated by her presence. The bridge of the *Falcon's Grasp* was one of the few places in the Imperial Fleet where one didn't spend their time looking over their shoulder, wondering when the commander was going to kill you or throw you in the brig – or worse. Admiral t'Varranajj was a brilliant leader who had brought together a fine team who worked together well, like an old-fashioned timekeeper.

"What have you found?" the Admiral asked.

The Lieutenant gave her a disgusted look. "A nightmare, Admiral. The space is littered with fissionable material. If we bombard it from orbit, we will blow ch'Havran out of it – and us with it."

Ama pursed her lips. "Let's not do that." She drew in closer to the display. "Put this up on the main viewscreen."

"Yes, Admiral." With a few deft touches, the image quickly moved to the main viewer, where they could make use of the much higher resolution display, and the fact it could be manipulated.

Together, the two of them stood before it and began pulling the shuttle dock apart, piece by piece.

"I see they've done a pretty good job of covering the area with their transport inhibitors," Ama observed.

"Yes, Ma'am." Tafv pointed to the squarish tube coming out of the top of the bay towards the rear, under the awning the shuttle was parked under. "I see the feeder tube for the shuttle has been damaged by explosives. There has been a cave-in here."

Something caught Ama's eye. She grabbed the area with her fingers and expanded it. "I see the tube hasn't been completely blocked."

"Yes, Admiral. However, the remaining space is too small for any of our troops to get through."

Finally, the Admiral had reason to smile. "We don't need to send in troops. I take it that all of the exits were blocked off as soon as the rebels took control of the docks?"

"Of course, Admiral." Lieutenant tr'Anhwi was beginning to wonder where this conversation was going.

Ama pointed to a spot just beyond the reach of the transporter inhibitors in the feeder tunnel. "I want you to beam in several canisters of Hartraxion gas on a thirty-second timer. It'll filter down the tube and into the cavern. It will overcome the Remans quickly. If I'm right, the Elements are with us, and the leaders are standing right underneath the outlet. They will not know what happened to them. If we're fortunate, some of them will live so we can execute them."

The Lieutenant bowed, smiling at the simple elegance of her plan. "I will see to it now, Admiral."

T'Varranajj gave her blessing with a simple nod and watched him go. He was an efficient young man and she had high

hopes that he would one day command a warbird of his own. She just hoped it was in an empire still run by Empress Ael.

The senator from House Mandathar was a boor and everyone knew it. T'mock stood on the shuttle's ramp and listened to the man's platitudes through the communicator's grille. He could not help but feel that he was being played.

"Senator, for all your polite words of remonstration, the fact is that for hundreds of years my people have had to live under the lash of Rihannsu rule. We have been treated as second-class citizens in an empire that we, strictly speaking, are supposed to have a say in. You sit in a senate and speak, but we never hear *what* you say, so how can we know that you're speaking on our behalf at all? Never mind that you and your family live in your lovely mansion on the sunny side of ch'Havran and we live in a hole in the ground stadia underground so far from Eisn that most of us have forgotten what it feels like to have sunlight on our skins." T'mock was frustrated, and he wasn't afraid to let it show.

He looked about him to his fellows and he saw support in their eyes. Especially Vashti and Krasni's. They had all been through so much together, especially now his sister was gone. Varra, how was he supposed to go on without Varra…

For a moment he closed his eyes in grief, so he didn't notice that some of his people had started slumping to the ground. He hadn't even realised that his own thought processes had begun to get muddied. Indeed, by the time he opened his eyes again, it was just in time to see Krasni and Vashti fold up like accordions and drop to the floor.

In his mind, he knew this was the end of his rebellion and he willed himself to reach for the detonator he had threatened to use against his captors. Yet, for all his planning, he had never

anticipated he would be overcome by nerve gas that would rob him of his ability to move, or even think. His last thought was of his sister and how he had failed her.

It had taken nearly fifteen taxing minutes, both on her shuttle and on all of her skills as a pilot, but Melisandra finally managed to shake her pursuers in the ion storm. She hoped they had blown up, after all, she had come close to losing her own life many times herself in the cosmic nightmare.

If there was one thing she was good at, it was spacial relations. In a three-dimensional space, she always knew which direction was up. So, when she exited the storm, it was on the side that faced the Romulan-Federation border. As soon as she was clear she opened a secure, encrypted channel to the *Challenger*.

Jessica Holmes appeared on her screen, looking like the worried human she was. Over the years, Jessica had done her best to teach her what it meant to be a friend, and Melis believed she understood. After all, she wouldn't dive into a class four ion storm for just anybody.

"What's up, Melis?" she asked. "This is a bit sooner than I expected."

Her answer was a green-skinned grimace. "If you call four Klingon D-7 battlecruisers headed to Hobus something to worry about, then I should make the call."

She knew she had the captain's attention. "You're sure they were *Klingons*. Not Romulans. They did sell a bunch of their older ships to them a couple of decades ago."

Melis smirked as she toyed with her favourite knife. "I know the story. The officers who were responsible for the deal

were executed years ago. The ships were melted down and turned into warbirds."

Jess's eyes became ovals. "Oh. I should tell Starfleet Intelligence that one." She brought herself back to the present with a shake of her head. "OK. Thanks for the heads-up. I've got a call to make. Get yourself back here as quickly as you can. You've done enough."

Melisandra gave her a cool smile. "I'll see you soon." She cut the communication, then turned and looked over her shoulder. The back of her shuttle was empty. There was no way she was going to return to Federation space empty.

In her ready room on the *USS Challenger,* Captain Jessica Holmes looked at her viewscreen and tried very hard not to scowl. It was time for her best poker face.

She was reporting directly to Admiral Nance via tight-band subspace transmission. In this situation, she had decided to go as high as she could. "Admiral, I have it on very good authority that the mission to Hobus is a complete bust. The *Enterprise* and the *Millennium* are about to be attacked by four Klingon D-7 battlecruisers."

The Admiral gazed out at her from his side of the screen with a look that bordered on distrust. He was aware of Jessica's reputation, that she was a woman who could get the job done, but that she didn't always tell you everything you needed to know, either. "Where did you get this information from?" he asked, clearly doubtful.

"A very reliable source," Jessica said, doing her level best to sound convincing.

The Admiral wasn't so sure. "If you were a used flitter salesperson, I'm not sure you'd be making any money today. How can you be so certain?"

Holmes' left eye twitched, the only indication that she was *very* annoyed. "Admiral, I would trust this source with my life. If she says that there are four Klingon battleships on their way to gate-crash the *Enterprise's* party, then they are. They could be tearing down their shields right now while we're debating this."

Unlike the captain, the admiral didn't have to mind his temper. "Stand down, Captain. The fact is, I cannot authorise an armed incursion into Romulan space – even if it is to rescue the *Enterprise* and the *Millennium*."

Holmes was shocked. "But, sir! Spock, Harriman, Piper, they're all out there with no backup!"

To the captain's surprise, the admiral let a little of his own frustration show through. "Don't you think I care about that, Captain? They're all invaluable to the Federation, and to Starfleet!" He paused to take a breath and reign in his obviously raging temper. "However, I cannot and will not sanction a rescue mission into Romulan space. Especially that far into it."

Jessica was not going to be that easily put off. "Admiral, I was under the impression the *Farragut* and the *Firebrand* are on station at the neutral zone waiting for the call from them in case they *do* get into trouble."

The Admiral had to give her that point. "Yes, they are. But only if they receive the call. Until then, the answer is no." Without further argument, he signed off. "Admiral Nance out."

Captain Holmes was shocked, but not surprised. She had been dealing with pencil-pushing bureaucrats all her life. She preferred to act now and ask for forgiveness later.

She stabbed her finger down on the call button on her desk. "Get me the *Farragut*."

On the bridge of the *Bloodwing*, Empress Ael i-Mhiessan t'Rllaillieu sat and watched as the *Rending Claw* launched a final barrage of torpedoes. She knew that her own shields were in very poor condition. Her strategy of hunting down the *Razor's Edge* had scored the death of that ship – but had come at a cost. The *Claw* had managed to do a lot of damage to what remained of her own, and they were down to ten percent. This final salvo might just return them to the Elements.

At her side, Aidoann had managed to drag herself off the floor, a gash on her temple oozing green down her cheek. She could see the endgame; it was clear in her eyes. *Mnhei'sahe* demanded that this battle be fought and won by themselves. They had fought a good fight. They would die well.

Yet it was clear in her eyes that there was regret there as well. Ael understood. She had always known. She gave her a brief smile. They had seconds left.

"Empress!"

On the viewscreen before them something amazing had happened. The Federation starship *Enterprise* had interposed itself between the *Claw* and the *Bloodwing*. The torpedoes flared brightly as they exploded on its shields, shaking the massive vessel, but it was clear the ship was mostly undamaged.

"Why did they do that?" Aidoann asked in wonder.

Ael was beginning to understand. She remembered Arrhae's words in her bunker only days before. Words of self-sacrifice and service. These were thoughts that she understood as a soldier, but the Rihannsu notion was still to protect only *us*. Starfleet helps and protects *others*, not just themselves. She had

heard reports of it. She had seen it herself when Kirk had helped her in the past, but she had believed it to be only certain individuals who exhibited such ideals. However, now she was beginning to understand it was a much wider-held ideal.

"Because they care," she said, feeling shaken to the core. Quietly, sincerely, she added: "We matter to them, even if they don't matter to us." She paused and realisation struck home. "That's why, one day, they will win. One way or the other, their ideals will win."

The Sub-Lieutenant at communications turned and reported. "Empress, priority communication from ch'Rihan. It's from the Announcer. He says you are needed back in the Senate immediately. A vote of no confidence has been attempted."

Ael sat bolt upright in her chair. An attempt had been made on her right to rule the Empire. She turned to the engineering station. "How soon can we be at warp?"

The Sub-Commander serving sighed. She hated giving the Empress bad news. "Empress, our energy reserves are extremely low. It will take about a half hour before we can achieve warp, even if we save all the energy we draw from the singularity for propulsion alone."

Ael gritted her teeth. If she was anything, she was a pragmatist. However, she hated having to wait, especially when she felt the thrai with its teeth at her throat. "Understood. Do what you can to expedite things."

"Empress," Aidoann said. What caught Ael's attention mostly was her old friend's tone of "what the?" She was gazing at the viewscreen into the distance, where a new ship had suddenly appeared. It was a Federation starship. "What is that doing here?" the security officer asked, part in wonder, and part in confusion.

Her tone both worried and concerned the Empress. She turned and looked into her friend's eyes. They were glazed over, and she was swaying from side to side. "Someone get the Centurion down to the medical bay! Now!"

A guard near the door sprinted over and marched Aidoann straight out over to the lift and out of sight. Trying to put her oldest friend's problem out of her mind, she turned to the newest development. "Identify that ship."

The officer at science blinked. "Empress, the computer identifies it as the *USS Millennium NCC-2001*."

Now it was the Empress' turn to look confused. Her gazed moved from one ship named Millennium to the other. "How can both of them be here? I read the report of the original's destruction. Admiral Piper herself reacted when I mentioned the death of her first officer." Ael didn't realise she was processing out loud. A notion came to her, an idea that shocked her to the core. This was something she had never hoped to see in her lifetime.

"Is it a spirit?" she heard one junior officer whisper to another.

"No," she said, with all the authority she could muster at that moment. "That ship is from the past. It shouldn't be here at all."

"Damage Report!" Captain Krashtallash called as he batted away a small cloud of smoke that was threatening to get in his eyes and obscure his vision. Never mind the fact it was burning his sensitive nasal passages.

"Coming in now," Judd replied from the Engineering station. "We've got minor outages across the ship. Nothing

major, thank God!" This was then followed by some choice cuss words. "Ah spoke too soon! The cloaking device is offline!"

Crash fairly leapt out of his chair. "Get it back up!" he shouted.

From her place at Tactical, Ghost shook her head. "The cat's out of the bag. The Romulans are targeting us, and the *Enterprise* is hailing us." She gave the Caitian a wan smile. "We've been well and truly spotted."

Crash froze in place. This was one contingency they had not considered. He did not believe it was his call to make. He gave a deep sigh of resignation and said: "Captain Piper, I don't think we can just pretend we're not really here."

On the time ship, Sustasandage seemed ready to freak out. Having heard the report from the *Millennium's* bridge, she stood and was about to speak, but Manny had been paying attention. She leapt to her feet and grabbed her descendant by the paws and pushed her down to the floor.

"Don't you dare!" she roared with such vigour that everyone in the tiny space gave her the room.

After a beat, Piper asked: "Lieutenant?"

Without taking her eyes of Sustasandage, Manny angrily said: "She was about to beam us all out of here and leave."

Both Pipers turned testy eyes on the future Cait and said in unison: "Why?"

Sus sadly, angrily made her case. "It's standard procedure when a mission's been as busted as this one. We should minimise the damage to this timeline as much as possible. My leaving will simply make this ship's appearance seem like nothing more than a possible sensor echo or ghost once it disappears. The longer we linger the more damage we create." She said it without malice,

but it was clear she was very agitated as her tail twitched to and fro.

Piper Silayna said: "And that would mean that all we've done so far would have all been for nought." She slitted her eyes, giving vent to her pent-up feelings of anger and loss. "I haven't fought cyborgs, rogue time agents, Orion pirates and fruitcake future Romulans with massive ships just to have you piss off on us. No. We might be outed, but we can yet salvage this mission. I've made a career out of making lemonade out of lemons. This will just be business as usual."

Her sister put her hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Right on, Suzette. OK, we've gone from being bystanders to participants, but we may yet figure out what causes the star to go nova. We just need to be vigilant. It'll come to us." She then gave Sustasandage a steely-eyed glare. "And then you can take that knowledge back to the future and make sure this never happens again."

The female on the floor was clearly torn. Her training as a time agent was warring against her faith in the people around her and her dedication to the task they had sworn themselves to. "How can you be so sure we can make this work?" she said, sounding as nervous as she looked, her black fur standing on end.

Spock answered that one serenely. "Captain Sustasandage, it is a simple case of "damned if you do, and damned if you don't". The *Millennium* is exposed, and if there is any hope of salvaging this mission, it is to carry on with the assistance of our other selves."

Sus's fur flattened somewhat, and she settled down. "Okay, then. We'll do it your way." She stood and addressed the ceiling. "Scanner, rephase us and beam us *all* to the bridge of the *Millennium*."

An instant later, Piper found herself standing next to Crash. "I have the Conn," she said.

Crash nodded. "You have the Conn." He stepped back and took over the communications board. "*Enterprise* is still hailing, Captain."

Piper took a deep breath. Once more unto the breach… "Put them on screen."

The chime of connection sounded and a face she was unfamiliar with appeared. He seemed youngish, but there was something about his eyes that said he had seen things that he wished he hadn't. Choices that had to be made. He was a peacemaker, but Piper saw that he could be a man that could get the job done. A good man in a tough situation, she thought.

"This is Captain John Harriman of the *USS Enterprise…"* The man's eyes narrowed as he took at the woman on the screen. "You're *Captain* Piper alright, so you're definitely a woman out of time. What brings you here, *Captain*?"

Piper gave him a polite smile. "I'm afraid that's need-to-know, Captain. If it hadn't been for, well, *whatever* my other self did a short time ago, you would never have known we were here and we would have been on our merry way. It wasn't our intention to involve ourselves in your activities."

Harriman may have seemed affable, but he wasn't about to be put off easily. "All the same, Captain. It's not every day a ship from the past appears out the blue. Especially when there's another ship nearby with the same name. I can't help but wonder what you would be taking a trip into your *own future* to discover. Anything you learn would contaminate your own timeline."

Piper didn't like where this conversation was going. She kept her eyes on the screen but fired off a thought to Manny. *Make*

sure your husband gets that cloaking device fixed as quickly as he can.

She didn't need to check that the message was passed on. She simply *knew* that Manny was on the move. She levelled her most serious gaze at the other captain and said: "Captain Harriman, I can assure you that our mission here is of the highest priority." She took a step towards him for emphasis, her eyes never moving from his. "There *is* no higher priority. The fate of the galaxy hangs in the balance."

Captain John Harriman was caught between a rock and a hard place. Here he was talking to Captain Piper, knowing damn certain that *Admiral* Piper was going to call in at any moment and take over, and after that, all bets were off. The woman on the screen was years younger than the Admiral, that was clear, and what he could see of the bridge behind her was out-of-date. He could also see, in the background, Captain Krashtallash, a being he was familiar with. The last time he'd come across him he'd been the master of the *T'Plana-Hath*, hadn't he? What was he doing here? If they were people from the past, perhaps he had served under Piper before taking that post.

One thing he had noticed, this lady was much surer of herself, much more settled than Admiral Piper. Perhaps whatever had happened in her past to knock her off balance had not taken place yet?

"Captain, I would like to take you at your word, but you've arrived at the worst of times. As you can see, we're deep inside the Romulan frontier on a mission of peace and your presence here could be misconstrued as an act of war." There, that should help her put things in perspective, he thought.

Instead, Piper tilted her head to the side and gave him a look that simply said: 'Duh.'

To both of their surprise, another being appeared on the viewscreen, aided by someone who was a dead ringer for Piper, except when she turned he had a shiny, artificial cheekbone, jaw and right eye. The elderly gent she was helping raised his head and shocked all present, especially the man behind John's left shoulder.

"Spock!" John said, recognising the much older Vulcan. "What happened to you?" he asked.

He ignored the Starfleet officer and engaged his younger self. "Spock."

Having regathered his wits, the middle-aged Ambassador Spock looked at his much older self and respectfully said: "Yes."

"You were correct in your assessment regarding the Admiral's state of mind. She must be relieved of command immediately before she commits more errors which will jeopardise this mission. Upon your return you must take her Mount Seleya. Do you understand me?" His words were serious but measured. He neither raised his voice nor was forceful. He simply stated what needed to be done.

The younger Ambassador nodded. He knew he had the authority, given the situation, to make it happen. "I understand. Do you have any further suggestions?"

To the surprise of all, Spock said: "Yes, I do. I recommend you put Captain Piper in charge of the *Millennium-A* for the time being. She is best suited for the task."

John spun on the Ambassador. "You can't be serious. The Admiral will never stand for it."

Spock looked at him serenely, committed to his course. "She will have to, Captain. I have been aware that the Admiral is

not herself. My older self has confirmed it. If we leave her in command, this mission will end in disaster. We must act now to save what we can."

As if the Universe was conspiring to make John's life more complicated, the comm's channel whistled. "Incoming message from the Empress, Captain. She's demanding to know why the other *Millennium* is here – and out of its time."

Harriman gave Spock a small smile. "She's a sharp one, isn't she?" he observed.

The Vulcan nodded quietly. "Yes, she has never missed a thing as far as I can recall. A formidable ally. I would never want to make her an enemy."

Message understood, thought Harriman. "Onscreen."

The image switched from the *Millennium* to the *Bloodwing*. "Empress," Harriman said, with a polite smile.

"Captain, are you ready to tell me why there are *two* ships named *Millennium* in our skies?" Ael was in no mood for niceties.

John kept his eyes on the screen. He knew his body language well enough to keep them right there. Don't look left. Don't look right. Either could be seen as being evasive. "They inform me they are here for nothing more than observation. Apparently, they were taken by surprise by the Admiral's cloak buster and revealed. I can assure you; we had no idea they were here at all."

Ael looked from John, who she had only just recently met, to Spock, who she had a long-standing association with. They had known one another for well over fifty years. Vulcans were known for their stoicism, but she didn't believe he had ever lied to her. "Spock?"

The Vulcan never wavered. "As the Captain said, Empress, they have no hostile intentions, and we did not know they were present until their cloak failed."

The Empress was not moved, or impressed. "All the same, Captain Harriman. I gave permission for your *two* ships to cross the Neutral Zone. I did not give permission for cloaked vessels to join you. As soon as the other *Millennium* is capable, I want them gone – preferably back to whenever they came from."

"I will pass that along, Empress," Harriman said. "*Enterprise* out."

Ten minutes later, Ambassador Spock, Sa'avik, Captains Piper, Piper Silayna and Harriman beamed over to the *Millennium-A* to have a chat with the Admiral who, strangely, had stayed silent during the entire exchange. This was after a very brief visit firstly to the *Millennium* by Harriman, Sa'avik and Spock, the latter who had quickly met his older self and mind-melded with. At the speed of thought, he had updated his younger and, now completely aware of the situation, was guiding the *Enterprise* captain on the best course of action.

They hadn't been challenged in the transporter room where they had been met by Ghost Ryan. Both Pipers were struck by the age difference in their friend, but now was not the time for chit-chat. The Commander, they noted, simply nodded at them all and took them up to the bridge.

"Nice to see you're doing well, Ghost," Piper said, with a touch of charm as the lift was moving.

Caitlin looked at her, more than little surprised. "I haven't heard you talk like that since…"

The younger Piper sighed. "I know. Since Sarda died."

Ghost reacted. She reached out and slapped the emergency stop button next to the door, bringing the pod to a jolting halt. "How could you know that if you're from the past?"

Piper Silayna answered. "Our travels in time have had us meet an older Spock who filled us in."

Caitlin looked at her askance. "And *you*. I can understand her," she pointed at Piper, "being here from the past, but how can another variation of the Captain be here at all?"

Piper widened her eyes and gave her a hopeful smile. "Would you believe I fell down a rabbit hole and I found her there?"

The lady from the Emerald Isle looked up at her and almost laughed – almost. Instead, she gave her a toothy grin. "Okay, I'll give you that there are more things in heaven and earth…"

"…than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Piper gave her old friend's back a scratch, in exactly the same spot that she had the very first day they had met. "My double is from a different timeline and we're both here to rescue the future – a future that may be at risk if the other me on the bridge keeps putting her foot in it."

Caitlin was now certain she was dealing with *her* Piper, even if she was about twenty years younger. She could trust her. What depressed her was the realisation that, right now, she probably trusted her more than the Admiral in the nerve centre of this vessel. She reached behind her and restarted the lift. "Okay. Let's do this."

Chapter Fifteen

On the bridge of the *Millennium-A* the air was so thick the crew were finding it hard to breathe. Even Carman Valastro, who had a long history with the Admiral, was wondering what was going to become of the meeting with the people who had boarded the ship and who were currently on their way to the Bridge in the turbolift. They had not made clear their intentions.

Ever since the other *Millennium* had appeared on the viewscreen, the Admiral had seemed even more out of sorts. Everyone knew that she had not been herself since the destruction of their original ship about eight months ago, especially since that ship had taken their first officer, Sarda, with it. It had been an open secret that the Admiral and he had been psychically linked, practically since their very first mission together on that ship. They had been closer than friends, dearer than family. Some had wondered if they had been lovers, but even her dearest confidants knew better than to ask.

All the same, Carman knew grief. He was well acquainted with that demon. Before he had served with Piper, he had been married and has lost his pregnant, young wife in a flitter accident. It had come back to haunt him years later when he'd had to relive the experience through the tormenting schemes of a demented alien bent on torturing him to death in his memories. All the same, he knew that if you didn't deal with grief, it became a cruel master.

He didn't need to see Piper to know that she was not in control of her grief, it was in control of her. If it hadn't been for his respect for her and his desire to not ruin her career, he might have acted already to ask her to step down for a time to get her act

together. He wondered for a moment if he had the right priorities in mind. He really should be putting the ship and fleet ahead of his loyalty to his captain, but this was Piper, not just anybody. They had *history* – and a lot of it. Anything less than his best felt like betrayal.

The turbolift door shooshed open and Carman turned to see who was joining them. Out stepped Ambassador Spock, followed by Captain Harriman. No surprise there. They were followed by *two Captains Piper*? And Sa'avik? Okay, *one* Captain Piper he could understand, given the circumstances, but *two* of them? And what was with the prosthetic?

He turned and looked at the Admiral. She was staring at the viewscreen. She hadn't even turned to see who had come in. What was going on with her?

Suddenly, without preamble, she stood up. "Come with me," she said, deadpan, then she led them all into her ready room.

The Admiral took her seat behind the desk, reminding one and all whose ship this still was. Ambassador Spock stepped forward and folded himself elegantly into a chair opposite her, his simple, but elegant robe with its Vulcan symbols of authority on display making way for his strong frame. The others stood behind him and maintained a united front.

"What have you come to say, Spock?" the Admiral said, trying to sound friendly, but not quite pulling it off. Inside, she was anything but relaxed. She looked up at the faces behind the Vulcan and took them all in quickly. John, Sa'avik, she knew, but the two younger versions of herself bothered her. Neither of them sported the right hair with their burgundy bobs, and one of them had clearly been badly injured at some point so that she'd needed a new eye. What bothered her the most that, whatever temporal

shenanigans were going on here, it was seriously messed up if there were *two* alternates involved. She rubbed her temples. Temporal mechanics always gave her a headache.

As usual, at times like these, Doctor Eliza McKennah joined them unbidden. To the Admiral's delight, nobody seemed to mind. The doctor might be a pain-in-the-ass, but she could be a source of comfort as well when she needed someone to back her. "I'm here for you, Piper," she said quietly, giving her a small smile.

To the Admiral's annoyance, the Ambassador ignored the psychologist. "I am aware that you have been struggling with the emotional and psychological fallout that comes with the loss of your first officer, Sarda…"

Across the room, all of the telepaths felt the Admiral's emotional recoil to that bald statement. It was clear her feelings were dynamite and could be touched off by the tiniest spark.

Spock continued. "Sarda must have informed you, at some point, of the importance of coming to Mount Seleya on Vulcan so you could surrender his katra. It must be tearing you apart."

The Admiral looked at him cooly. "I don't know what you mean, Spock. Sarda didn't mind meld with me before he died, so he couldn't have passed it on to me before…" Her throat tightened and she found she couldn't quite finish the sentence.

Behind Spock, Piper's tolerance for her older self's behaviour was starting to grow thin. Piper Silayna took her hand and together they shared a brief exchange. They were so well versed at doing so that the entire conversation took no longer than two seconds.

"Do you believe this BS?"

"I think you just can't understand how an older version of you could have become this messed up."

"Okay, that too, but who does she think she's kidding?"

"Have some faith. Spock will get her to see the truth."

"It's either that or I go Rambo on her."

Both women chuckled together inside their mind.

Spock continued. "We are all quite aware that you and Sarda were joined in an accidental marriage bond and had been for many years. Captain Piper here has confirmed this to me, and the fact that she still has this bond with her Sarda who is aboard the other *Millennium* right now."

Once again, Admiral Piper was not able to keep her emotional angst from being broadcast to the other telepaths present, and she knew it. Inwardly she cursed. Her eyes betrayed her as she cast an envious glance at her younger self.

Captain Piper spoke up. "Sarda and I are already that much a part of each other that we can not only anticipate one another's thoughts, I can practically know his mind when he's not even around. We've discussed it, and with other Vulcans – *as you know* – and we've come to the conclusion that we're a part of each other. We carry a part of each other's soul – our katra. When Sarda dies, whenever that happens, I will have to go to Mount Seleya and surrender that to Vulcan so he can have a future in the katric archives where his knowledge and experience will not be lost. And as I'm a part of him, *I won't be lost either*. What we have is a blessing, not a curse." She stepped forward forcefully. "That's why I can't understand why you're being so selfish and keeping him to yourself."

The Admiral flinched. "How dare you!"

"She's right you know," said Doctor McKennah, in her sweet, friendly tone, her huge pile of red hair barely under control. "I've been trying to tell you for ages."

Admiral Piper glared at her. "Shut up!"

Eliza would not be silenced. "These people are your friends. They're here to help you. You should be listening to them, not pushing them away."

"Shut up, Doctor!"

Captain Piper was looking at the Admiral quizzically. "Who are you yelling at?"

Her older self glared back at her in angry wonderment. "Surely you remember Doctor Eliza McKennah, Elise McKennah's twin sister!"

Piper turned and looked at the empty air that the Admiral was addressing and thought back. "Piper," she said, addressing the Admiral. "I remember Elise McKennah well. She was a great shrink, but as far as I can recall, *she had no twin sister.*" To prove her point she addressed the ceiling. "Computer!"

"Working."

"Confirm that the late Doctor Elise McKennah of the *USS Enterprise, NCC-1701,* had no twin sister."

Within seconds, they had their result. "Confirmed. Doctor McKennah had no siblings."

Admiral Piper's eyes went wide in shock, and she fell back in her chair. "How can that be? Who the hell have I been talking to all this time?"

Frustrated, Piper sliced her hand through the air where she believed Doctor McKennah must have been standing. Sure enough, nobody was there.

From the Admiral's point of view. Piper's hand passed straight through Eliza's left shoulder. The counsellor gave her an

almost loving smile, then her face, indeed her entire form changed into that of Sarda. Her eyes went wide, and her hand went to her mouth. "What have I done?" she asked, heartbroken, imploring.

Seen only by the Admiral, Sarda gave her a brief, sad smile. "I showed you the doctor because I hoped you would at least listen to her. You weren't listening to me, Piper. Now, hear the voices of these people and step down while you get the healing you need. Take me home."

Tears streaming down her face, the Admiral finally realised just how selfish she had been in not letting Sarda go, and just how wretched she had become. She looked about her at the others assembled with her, Spock, John Harriman, Sa'avik – one of her oldest and dearest friends – and these two other, younger versions of herself. It was like looking into a mirror and finding that you didn't like what you had become. Even the wounded version of herself was more together than she was.

Piper stood up, drew her uniform top down to straighten herself, then reached up and unclasped the admiral's badge from her shoulder strap. With great dignity, she placed it on the desk before her, then looked up into the eyes of her younger self.

"Computer, recognise Piper, Admiral. Authorisation code Echo-Lima-India-Sierra-Alpha-two-zero."

"Recognised," it responded.

"I surrender control of this vessel to the command of Captain Piper, present, who will give you her command codes. I also resign my commission as of this stardate."

"Recognised."

Captain Piper was surprised by the turn of events, but not so much that she was unwilling to supply her own command codes. She did so and took official command of the *Millennium-A*.

The Admiral gave a simple nod to those present, unwilling to wipe away the tears still staining her cheeks and unashamed of them. She was much more ashamed of her behaviour. As she was moving to leave, Piper took her by the arm.

"Go and see Merete, Piper. She'll take care of you until you can get to Vulcan. Maybe you can put this behind you," she said, trying to put a positive spin on things.

Her older self gave her a wiser almost-smile, which was more of a grimace. "You don't get it, Piper. There's no coming back from this." With that said, she turned and left the room.

The people left behind looked at one another silently, all quietly lamenting the sad sunset of a brilliant career. For it to end like this was a tragedy.

Piper vowed to herself that it would not happen like this again. Not if she had her way.

As if on an agreed, silent cue, they all rose and began to make their own preparations to leave. Harriman let Sa'avik and Spock leave first and the door close behind them before he took a moment to speak to both Pipers.

"Captains, there's something I need to mention to you before I go. While I don't pretend to know, or even understand what brought you to this time, I'm trusting you to bring the *Millennium-A* home. It seems clear that the primary mission of the peace summit is well and truly a bust, so I'm going to make immediate preparations for departure. As you know, I've got certain VIPs aboard, but they're secondary to the fact that I have a very important operative we've just recovered that I need to bring home. She has valuable intel that must be brought back to Starfleet. All other considerations will be considered secondary." He caught both of their gazes, making certain that his message was understood.

They knew what he meant. The operative had to get back to the Federation, even if it cost them all of their lives. Both women shared a brief glance and said in harmony: "We understand."

Harriman took them at their word, while also a little weirded out hearing the reply in the same voice in stereo. "Good hunting to you both," he said, before shaking their hands in turn. He then gave them a brief, charming smile then headed for the transporter room.

At was at that point Piper realised she needed to have a serious discussion with her sister.

On the bridge of the *USS Challenger,* Captain Jessica Holmes cast a worried look at her XO. She knew she was pushing her ship to the limits of her capabilities, and the ominous groaning sounds from her spaceframe were enough to have the bridge crew casting concerned glances at one another. Jessica didn't blame them. Most of those on the bridge had been under her command for a while now and were used to her impulsive nature, but, in this case, she was pushing those limits to the extreme. It would only be natural if some of them thought she was might just be pushing their collective luck too far.

Maybe she had, she admitted to herself. But there were Starfleet personnel that needed the *Challenger* right now, not an hour from now, not a day, but right now. Some of those people had risked their lives for her in the past, and that was a debt that Jessica was going to repay.

Ellie Harrelson, her XO, had always been her anchor, the steady voice of reason that spoke in her head even when she wasn't around. That voice had saved Jessica more times than she cared to admit, but there was a time for caution, and there was a

time for action. And right now … the only voice she could hear was the one that kept screaming: "Do something!"

Well, now they were absolutely doing something.

"Have we been detected?" she asked.

Commander Ellie Harrelson looked at Jessica and scowled. "You mean, have the Romulans, whose space we've entered illegally on an ill-advised attempt at rescuing the *Enterprise* from a band of Klingons, found us yet?" She rolled her eyes. "Surprisingly, no."

Jessica gave her a tight smile. She needed Ellie on her side. "If it was you out there, all alone, I'd come for you, too. I hope you know that."

Harrelson sighed. She stepped over to the centre seat and, her eyes softening, said softly, so only the two of them could hear: "I know you would, Jess, that's the problem. I wouldn't be worth it. Even the *Enterprise* and the *Millennium* aren't worth it. They're not worth provoking an interstellar conflict over."

Jessica considered that for a moment before speaking before holding her XO's eyes with her own. "No Ellie, you are worth it… and so are they."

"And honestly, even if I thought about you and them differently, this conference is already in the recycler, Ellie. If the Klingons raid the party, and I'm worried they're already there, then all bets are off. The peace treaty is toast."

Her executive officer nodded her agreement on that point but offered one of her own. "That's possible, but how about this. What if the peace treaty has *already been signed*, and our showing up with guns blazing, without permission, destroys it? What then?"

While the thought genuinely hadn't occurred to Holmes, she quickly dismissed it. "I've never known any diplomatic

mission to move *that* quickly, Ellie. No, the Klingons are going to kill whatever peace there was and the best we can do is pull our people out of the fire." She looked at the viewscreen and noticed that the last of the ion storm that Melisandra had used to disguise her trail had passed behind them. They were now in open space, making a beeline for Hobus at high warp. They may as well have put up a flare that said: "Hey, here we are!" "What's our ETA at Hobus?"

The lieutenant at helm responded: "Twenty-five minutes, Captain."

Ellie added, quietly, "If we don't blow ourselves up first."

"You're nuts!"

"I am not, and you know it. The senior staff know you, and I know they'll follow you. I need you to take over for me."

Piper Silayna looked her double, her sister, in the eye. "The *Millennium* is your ship, sis. Sarda is your first officer. Hell, Krashtallash is also a Captain by rank. Why do you want *me*?"

Piper took her by the hand and touched her mind. She showed her the confidence she had in her, the depth of her love for her crew, the faith she knew they had in her, and just how much she knew they would have in Suzette as well.

"I also need your experience. I know the crap is about to hit the fan and I need a woman who can hit the ground running. That's you. Now, get your butt into gear and beam back to the ship." She gave her all of her command codes. *"The* Millennium *doesn't know the difference between the two of us, so it will respond to you just as it does to me. Go, lead your… our ship and help us both sort out this mess so we can go home."*

At that moment, both of them felt an overwhelming sense that this could be it, the last time that they would be together.

They pulled themselves together tightly, tears cascading down one another's cheeks. Over the last year together, in subjective time, they had formed a bond that went far beyond sisterhood. They, too, had become a part of one another. They had shared so many adventures, had seen so many pains, they had even rescued their own mother from otherwise certain death, thereby securing their own existence. Now, here, in the ready room of the *Millennium-A*, they were grateful they were alone. They could share their feelings for one another without shame.

They pulled apart and looked each other in the eye.

Piper was the first to be able to speak. "Don't get yourself killed, OK? We still have a job to do when this is all over, and I want to do it with you."

Her duplicate leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "Back at you, sis. We've got a lot of living to do, so let's make sure we *both* live through this."

Piper returned the kiss, then they wiped their faces and tidied themselves up. Without leaving the room, Piper Silayna flicked open her communicator. "Piper Silayna to *Millennium*, one to beam up."

Within seconds, she was gone, leaving Piper convinced she was not going to see her sister again in the flesh. It left her heart aching.

However, above all, she was a woman of duty. She pushed her feelings aside for the time being. Her ship was only a thousand kilometres away, and that was close enough for Amantasandage to hear her thoughts through the emptiness of space. She fired off her loudest beacon for her Tactical Officer to hear. She came right back.

"Yes, Captain?"

It took her all of a moment to explain her intentions to her friend, who she knew would pass it on to Sarda and Krashtallash.

"What's the status of the ship?" Piper asked.

"All ships' functions are up and running." To Piper's "hearing" Manny felt delighted.

"Good, let my other know I want you to cloak but stay on standby. Oh, and for God's sake, don't stay where you are!"

She could feel Manny's laughter even from this distance. *"Yes, Captain. I'll make sure she gets the message. I'll be listening if you need anything."*

"Thank you, my friend."

Piper's eyes came back into focus, and she took a deep breath. Time to take on the beast, she thought. She stepped through the doors and onto the Bridge.

The eyes of the crew engaged her. Many of the people present were individuals she was familiar with, others she was not. It almost surprised her that Jason Nunn was at the conn. It had been a while since she had seen his face, and it shouldn't have surprised her that he would have been present in this timeline. Caitlin had clearly aged, but she was grateful that the woman's back injury hadn't permanently sidelined her as Merete had predicted years earlier. It pleased her to see Commander's bars on her shoulder.

Carman Valastro was also wearing Commander's bars. She was greeted by a black Caitian female who reminded her of Crash. Could this be one of his grown children?

Valastro stepped up to her as Piper approached the centre seat. "Captain?" he asked.

Piper nodded. "Yes, Carman, I'm Piper. From about twenty years ago. I can't tell you everything that's going on, but

I can tell you that the Admiral has had a breakdown and she has resigned her commission."

The statement brought a sudden, amazed intake of breath from most on the bridge, except one person. Caitlin had always been a keen observer. To last this long as an ace pilot, she'd had to be. When the Admiral had stepped out of her ready room earlier and disappeared into the turbolift, she had noticed the missing rank insignia – and immediately understood the implications.

Piper found herself quickly encircled by her three highest ranking officers. They didn't look particularly friendly. It was clear they had their suspicions. "Just to be clear," she said, in that voice they all knew so well, "I have assumed command of this ship as of ten minutes ago, with the full understanding and acknowledgement of her previous commander. Captain Harriman and Ambassador Spock will verify it, if you insist. If you have any further concerns, call Sickbay and speak to the Admiral herself."

The three commanders were stopped in their tracks. They weren't about to call the Captain on *that* one. If the Admiral was still on board, and available to answer queries, then there was nothing to question.

Piper smiled, and the gesture warmed the hearts of those assembled before her. This was the Piper of old, a woman they sorely missed. A person who had died with her first officer, so many months before. "Now, who's in charge of what around here?"

"Empress!"

Ael turned in her chair. As a woman of action, she detested waiting. Never mind the word from the medical bay was not good. Aidoann had been bleeding intracranially. They were

not certain the Centurion would survive. After so many years of service to her empire, she knew the price of being a survivor was watching her fellows fall, one by one. However, there was no prize for being the last one standing. The only thing you hoped for was that it wasn't pointless.

"Report!"

"We now have enough power for the journey to ch'Rihan. It won't be at maximum warp, but we will be able to maintain warp three."

Ael sighed. It would have to do. The trip would take a bit longer, but they would at least get there. "What is the status of the older *Millennium*?"

The view on the main screen shifted to the oldest of the Federation vessels present. It hadn't moved since it had appeared. As if in answer to her query, it suddenly swivelled on its axis and began sliding away from the station. Then it shimmered… and was gone.

"Track it!" she called. She was not enamoured with the idea of cloaked, possibly unfriendly vessels flying around Rihannsu space.

Her science officer frowned at the screen. No matter how many different modes of scanning he applied, nothing he tried seemed to work. Embarrassed, he said: "I apologise, Empress. They don't appear on any scan. They may have gone to warp."

Ael flattened out her lips in angry annoyance. "You might hope so, Sub-Lieutenant, but if I know Piper, she's not going anywhere. Not until she gets what she came for." In her mind she added: *Whatever that might be. After all, what could a ship from the past possibly want from this moment from their future? If they're not here to take an active part, or to disrupt it,*

what in all the Elements could they possibly gain from being here? The thought threatened to give her a headache.

Regardless of Piper's intentions, it was time for them to make a move. "Navigation, take us away from the station five hundred kiloquads, then engage warp drive. I want to see the light of Eisn tomorrow if we can."

"Yes, Empress!"

Ael noted it seemed to please her crew that they were on their way back to the homeworlds. Well, she thought, there was nothing like the light of her home sun.

As the ship peeled away from the station, she heard her ever-efficient comms officer informing them of their departure but being careful not to disclose their destination. *Bloodwing* never broadcast *that*. The image on the screen shifted and she felt herself relax. Even though this attempt at a peace treaty with the Federation had been aborted, the door had been opened a crack and light was shining through.

A few moments later, she felt the grav plates shift as the impulse drive shut down in preparation for warp drive. At that moment, something peculiar happened. Nothing.

Then she heard cursing from the officer at helm.

"What is it?" she ordered, concerned.

Before he could answer, a life-sized hologram of Reen t'Khenniell appeared in the centre of the bridge, and damn her if she wasn't smiling. "Hello, *Empress*," she sneered. "I just wanted to say this final word to you, you miserable pretender to the throne. I've locked you out of all your ships' systems and set course for the centre of Hobus. You've got about five minutes before the outer skin of the ship melts anyhow, so I wouldn't worry too much about that. I hope you enjoy the fires of Erebus.

You're going to get an early taste of them." With that final word, the image winked out.

The cussing voice turned to worried. "Empress, the navigation computer has locked us into a course for the star." As he was speaking, he was madly tapping away at the keyboard. By now he was beginning to lose composure. "I can't get control!"

Empress Ael i-Mhiessan t'Rllaillieu looked up at the viewscreen as she found her ship turn on its axis, the screen filling with the bluish light of the giant star. She felt the ship's deck plates shift as her ship went to warp.

Chapter Sixteen

John Harriman watched the *Bloodwing* begin its journey out of the system on the *Enterprise's* main viewscreen. "I would say our job here is done," he said, knowing he was quoting one of his beloved movies, but not quite sure which one. "Let the *Millennium-A* know that we're heading back to Federation space."

He could hear his orders being carried out as he stepped down past the captain's chair and up to the navigator's console. "Plot us the quickest course for the Federation border and engage warp drive as soon as its available."

It took only a moment for his orders to be carried out. He wasn't happy about leaving the *Millennium* behind, even momentarily, but their precious cargo had to be returned to the Federation. He had no idea what Captain Piper was up to, but she was still Starfleet, and that was good enough for him.

After a nod of acknowledgement from his first officer, Demora Sulu, that all was in order, he said: "Execute."

As the crew went about their duties, Commander Terise Haleakala-Lobrutto stood in her new Starfleet uniform for the first time in so many years and watched as her Empress flew away. It was a moment filled with sorrow for her, as she watched her former life soar off in a different direction. However, for one who had spent most of her life living under the raptor's wings, she had learned one valuable lesson. In life, it was better to spread your wings and fly, and now it was time to fly home. In her heart, she said goodbye to the Rihannsu. She gripped the railing encircling the bridge and looked towards the future and wondered how her favourite baseball team was faring. Perhaps, soon, she would find out.

Terise watched as the stars turned into streaks and she knew they were at warp. Nothing could catch them now.

She reached up and ran a finger over the tips of her ears. She knew there would be people who would suggest changing back to her previous appearance, but she decided against it. She'd had them for so long, why change now? Besides, she realised it might help her in the long run. After all, she had so much to teach the Federation about the Rihannsu. So much to teach about the Romulan Way.

Standing next to her husband on the bridge of their lead battlecruiser, the *Bloodthirsty*, Kaylor glared at the viewscreen as she watched the cursed *Enterprise* disappear into warp. With a glorious victory over both the Romulan and Federation flagships having just slipped from their grasp, she let out a curse. "Not now!" she cried. "Not when we're so close!"

Duras was not so easily dismayed. The *Enterprise* was never his primary mission. It would have been an extra cup of bloodwine, nothing more. The real prizes were the Romulan Empress and the Federation bitch, Piper, who had one too many times gotten in the way of his schemes to seize control of the Klingon Empire. It was if she had been born to complicate his life. After today, she would cease to be a problem.

"Keep us on a stealth approach," he said. "They have no reason to expect us, so no active scans, the *Millennium* is Starfleet's newest ship and will most likely have their latest sensor pack. She will no doubt pick up any sensor scan. I want us to encircle both ships and attack simultaneously. Don't worry about the new version of the *Ingram*-class cruiser, they dropped the mega-phasers on this model, according to the latest intelligence reports."

Kaylor gave him a toothy grin. Her husband had clearly thought this out well in advance. "Q'plah, Duras!" She turned and snarled at the comms officer. "Send that on a tight-beam, directional burst to the other ships." Today was going to be a glorious day! She could practically taste the blood on her lips.

Hobus began looming larger on *Bloodwing's* viewscreen. Ael's crew had spent precious moments trying to override the ship's systems. It was clear that the late Admiral's people had done their job too well. There seemed to be no getting out of this. The Empress considered her options and there appeared to be only one.

"All hands, this is your Empress. Get to the nearest escape pod and abandon ship!" Her next action took many by surprise. She toggled a switch on her chair arm, which put out a broadband call. "This is the *Bloodwing* calling the Federation starships, we require your assistance. Our ship has been sabotaged and is on course for the star at Warp One."

So stunned were her people that she would actually ask for help that most of them had stopped in their tracks, staring at her.

She glared at them. "What are you looking at?" she shouted. "Get off this ship!"

On the bridges of the two starships named *Millennium* two women named Piper were doing the same thing. They were watching the path of the *Bloodwing*, wondering if their vision they had seen so long ago was about to become a reality.

On the *Millennium-A*, Piper came to a sudden realisation. She recalled a conversation she'd had with Spock days before and gave an unexpected order. "Raise shields. Battlestations."

From his position at Navigation, Carman looked back at her, wondering if he'd heard her rightly and partly because he didn't quite trust her yet. "Ma'am?"

Piper snapped to her feet. "You heard the order, mister!"

Around her, the crew moved to make it so. The lights turned crimson, and she noted the ship's status boards all showed a state of readiness. Excellent.

"Warm up the tractor beam."

Again, Carman was wondering what was going on, but he wasn't about to question the Captain's orders twice. He passed on the order.

On the viewscreen, Piper noted the *Bloodwing* did something odd. Instead of turning on a course for the Romulan homeworld – she had guessed its general direction – it turned towards the sun. She knew what was going to happen next.

"Set a pursuit course for the *Bloodwing*. Match course and, as soon as you can get close enough, grab it with a tractor beam."

From the Conn, Jason Nunn reported, "Captain the *Bloodwing* has gone to warp."

Piper wasn't surprised. "Overtake and match her speed. We need to make sure that ship never gets to the sun."

That statement raised the eyebrows of everyone in the room. Suddenly, it dawned on them all why this Piper was here, even though they had no idea how she might have learned it.

Jason hadn't earned his stripes in the fleet as an ace pilot for nothing. He brought the massive ship around in a graceful arc and took the ship to warp three. They overtook the *Bloodwing* in seconds and moments later they had matched velocity to get close enough for a tractor lock.

All the same, they were all looking at the viewscreen, worried that the star was getting awfully close for comfort.

To their surprise, the *Bloodwing* started shedding escape pods. Clearly, they knew they were in trouble. The trust level on the *Millennium-A's* bridge was high as they realised their new captain knew well ahead of time what was coming – and prepared for it.

"Drop ventral shields for the tractor and put me through to the Empress."

To Ael's surprise, the viewscreen snapped on and a much younger image of Piper appeared – and she was wearing a Starfleet's *captain's* insignia. A fast thinker, she realised this woman must be from the other ship. Before she could speak, she could feel her ship jolt as it was grabbed by a tractor beam. The sounds of structural torque could be heard as the larger vessel began tugging it away from its intended course.

"Empress, I gather you've lost helm control," Piper said, not bothering with the usual pleasantries.

Ael understood that now was not the time for useless explanations. "Yes, the *Bloodwing* has been sabotaged by t'Khenniell's people and put on course for the sun. My people cannot break the encryption locking out the computer."

Piper seemed to consider the problem. She looked over her shoulder. "I'm going to beam over a couple of people, if you don't mind. They might be able to help. Is there anyone still on board you want beamed over here?"

Aidoann. Ael realised that the medical bay probably would not have been able to evacuate the most critical patients. She told Piper of their plight.

The captain nodded. "I'll have them beamed right over."

The Empress took a second to glance down at her stats screen on her chair arm. It showed a marked deviation on their course. The *Millennium* had already succeeded in dragging her ship off their heading for the sun. As she watched, the angle kept increasing. Inwardly, she began to relax.

Behind her, she heard the sound of a transporter. She turned and looked and saw a large, black feline with an engineer's case, and an Andorian chan wearing Lieutanant's bars carrying a tricorder. The two of them immediately split up, the cat disappearing down the corridor at a run, the chan taking a chair at a science console.

On the screen, Piper said: "I've been told we have your doctors and wounded." She paused, as if not sure she should ask. "Do you want me to bring you over as well?"

Ael shook her head. "As long as there's a chance we can save this ship, no."

The human nodded her understanding. "I'd probably do the same thing if I was in your shoes." She frowned. "What?" She turned away from the screen. "You've got to be kidding." The screen went dark.

Sitting in his chair on the bridge of the *Bloodthirsty*, Duras savoured the hour. Years of preparation had culminated in this moment. He finally had the two women in this galaxy he hated the most in his sights and neither of them knew he was coming. He would rather have done it face to face with his d'k tagh in his hand so he could plunge it into their hearts, but this would have to do.

At his side, his wife, Kaylor, just grinned. "Glorious!" she said, over and over. "The *Millennium* appears to have the wretched Romulan ship in a tractor beam."

Duras finished the thought for her. "Which means both of them have their shields down," he said. "This will be a quick fight."

"It will be a slaughter!" his wife said, delighted.

After all of the time and effort he had put into this moment, it seemed like a bit of an anticlimax to Duras if both ships were destroyed in the first thirty seconds. However, the Romulan Senator, Hathness, had assured him that his efforts here would cement their relationship and that, once the deed was done and the change of regime was over, their support would be formalized, and they would back him in his take-over of the Klingon Empire. You kill mine; I kill yours, was the old Klingon proverb.

Enough savouring, Duras thought. "Q'plah! Decloak and begin firing!"

The *Odysseus*-class starship was ready for battle, with everything charged, including its mega-phasers, which Admiral Piper had insisted be retained in this particular ship, so that as soon as the Klingon D-7 battle cruisers decloaked they were ready for them. One function of the ship's shields was they could be selectively deactivated, so only one small portion around the tractor emitter was down, while the rest of the ship was protected by her trinary shields.

When the four D-7 class battlecruisers decloaked, they immediately opened fire. Two of them focussed their attention on the *Millennium*, the other two on the *Bloodwing*. It was their undoing.

While the two that opened fire on the *Bloodwing* scored hits on its warp nacelles, dropping it out of warp, the ship's computer immediately reacted and raised the shields. This

protected the green-tinged vessel, but also had the unwanted side-effect of cutting the tractor beam.

The two ships that opened fire on the *Millennium* found their shots had no effect on the massive ship's trinary shielding and were unprepared for its already charged phasers – and megaphasers. The massive energies, supplied directly from the *Millennium's* warp core, impacted the Klingon's shields sending them into the ultraviolet, causing both ships to rock badly.

Now that they had followed the *Bloodwing* and secured from warp, their options became many and varied. From her place at the rear of the *Millennium-A's* bridge, Rebecca "Emu" Armytage said one word: "Scramble."

At the rear of the great starship, the two huge clamshell doors quickly slid open as the pilots, who had been sitting in their fighters, lined up ready for battle, flew out into the void. The *Millennium* was at peak readiness, with *everything* prepared to fly, including its runabout. As soon as the word was given, the ship's two squadrons of fighters began pouring out of the rear of the starship, followed by its heavily armed runabout and ten shuttles. The *Millennium* was open for business.

From her place on the bridge of the original *Millennium*, Piper Silayna sat in the centre seat and watched the melee, concerned. She was worried for Piper, but she knew that ship she was on was built for a beating. She was more worried for the Empress, but she was also aware she was a resourceful woman. All the same, what bothered her the most was her dream. It was clear that ship falling into the sun was a *very bad thing.* These Klingons attacking right now were a gigantic pain in the ass.

Standing at her side, Sarda asked: "What are your intentions?"

There was something in the tone of his voice that, even though she didn't know him that well, suggested he wasn't just thinking about her alone. "*We* are clear that this ship is to stand by and stay out of things unless absolutely necessary. We've already complicated things enough. Piper needs to play this out and figure out what we came here to learn."

"And then?"

She gave him a tight smile. "Then we complete our mission. For one, we tell Sustasandage what we've learned so the Time Agents can clean things up from their end."

Sarda inclined his head, ever-so-slightly to the side. "How will you complete yours?"

Piper sighed. "We will use the Guardian to go to the past to make sure this doesn't happen twice."

Bronze, upswept eyebrows shot up in mild disbelief. "You are putting a lot of faith in this plan," he said.

His new captain brought her mismatched eyes around to face him properly. She told him what she believed. "This whole mission has been on faith, Sarda. It's brought us this far. It needs to carry us through."

"Faith is not logical."

Piper Silayna chuckled to herself at that one. "I'm sure Surak had to have a certain level of faith that his philosophies would be adopted by the Vulcan people over time, or what would have been the point? T'Pau needed to have faith in Jonathan Archer that they could carry out the plan to restore Kir'Shara to the Vulcan people. Vulcans are not without faith, Sarda."

Sarda seemed unsure of what to do with that thought.

Coming to the rescue and fixing problems was in Jessica Holmes' nature. What was also in her nature was finding peculiar

ways of making it happen. Fortunately, an idea had come to her. After all, what was one little ship going to accomplish against *four* Klingon cruisers?

Ellie Harrelson stood at her side and kept shaking her head. "You're out of your mind," she said again. It was becoming a mantra.

The captain of the *Challenger* checked her chair display. Her guests were falling behind a little. "Helm, make sure we don't lose them. Time to Hobus?"

"Two minutes."

Jessica smiled to herself. Not too far behind. "Scan the system. I want to know what to expect."

The answer took a moment. "Captain, there is a large space station, but no ships in orbit. However, there are six starships about one AU from the star. They scan as… one Romulan warbird, one Federation starship, *Odysseus*-class and four D-7 Klingon cruisers, and a … runabout, and a number of Starfleet fighter craft."

Captain and XO shared a shocked look. "Where's the *Enterprise?"* they asked in unison, each dreading the worst.

"Scan for debris," Holmes ordered. *Oh, God, I hope we're not too late for them*.

"We're still too far for a detailed scan," was the reply.

Damn. "Send to our escorts. Scan the system and tell them: 'I told you so'."

On the *Bloodwing*, Hopetallash had her hands full working alongside the remainder of the Romulan engineering crew who had chosen to stay with the ship and try to figure out what had become of their newly insane computer systems. Fortunately, they had been given a short reprieve. The first shots

had damaged the ship's warp nacelles. The *Bloodwing* was now limited to impulse drive alone. However, she could exceed .5c with that – they had simply bought themselves time.

With the ship once again free of the tractor beam, Hope found that the computer's deranged nav system had once more put them on course for Hobus.

Being the sort of engineer who thought outside the box, Hope had decided to tackle the problem from a different angle. Her attitude was simple: pull the plug. Her problems increased when she found that the ship wasn't powered by anything that she was familiar with.

The Sub-Commander in charge of Engineering, Varok, looked at her as if she was a complete moron. "Our superior Rihannsu engineers have devised a way of tapping into the energies of a quantum singularity. They found a way to create a temporary, forced singularity and we harness the energies it releases from the event horizon when we trickle in small amounts of matter."

Hopetallash was no dummy. She knew of V404 Cygni and other systems where the black holes they contained released ridiculous amounts of energy as the matter was being annihilated. However, the whole notion carried enormous risk. "How do you keep the singularity from eating us as well?" she asked, the scientist overcoming the sceptic within her.

Varok was pleased to give her a tour. "Our earlier models did have issues with the odd runaway singularity. Some of our warbirds simply vanished whilst on patrol."

Hope made a disgusted face. A runaway singularity suddenly eating the ship it was supposed to be powering was a horrifying notion. She was certain she was in for some sleepless nights in the coming days.

As Varok could not read Caitian expressions, he missed it completely. "However, we overcame this shortcoming by installing self-contained shielding for the device. As long as it runs, it will continue to internally supply power to its own shielding that not only protects us from it, but also contains it. The only two channels open to it are the ports that allow ingress and egress of matter and energy."

A good thing black holes aren't intelligent, Hopetallash thought to herself. *It just might figure a way out of that.* Hope did see a flaw in the design. "You can't possibly require just the right amount of energy you need at any given time. You must have a way of storing it for use for flight, etc."

The Romulan gave her her due. Perhaps she wasn't as stupid as he thought. "Yes, you are correct. Right now, our capacitors are at…" he glanced off to the side, "fifty-three percent, and dropping."

At that moment, the floor shook again from another strike on their shields. Varok swore under his breath. "Cursed Klingons!" he shouted. "As if we didn't have enough to worry about."

Hope's eyes were drawn to the Engineering console, her mind turning over and over. "Varok, are you telling me that this ship's power source has shielding powerful enough to protect you from a black hole and you from it – and that extends to the machinery that houses it. So, if this ship was destroyed, the singularity would survive?"

Varok seemed pleased. "Yes, the computers that control the device are secured by a fractal encryption code. Even if an enemy were to recover it after a fight, they couldn't use it."

Hope gave him a look of derision. "Not if someone left it running. It would continue to suck in whatever it was being fed

and emitting energy. Whoever found it could enjoy all that lovely, cheap energy."

Her Romulan host shook his head, no. "We could shut it down from a distance."

The female Caitian narrowed her eyes as she considered that thought. "How? Subspace transmissions won't work that close to a singularity, neither will UHF or laser. Are you telling me you'd use VHF?"

Varok shrugged. "Twenty-seven megacycles, to be exact."

The pieces fell together in Hope's mind. "Now I know we need to shut down this ship's power plant," she said, determined.

Varok was not so sure. "Why?" he asked.

Hope pointed at the panel that housed the singularity. "Because if that monstrosity falls into the sun it'll begin to eat it. In a matter of time, the drive will destabilise it and the star will either collapse or it will go supernova."

"How can you be so certain?" Varok said, partly the arrogant Romulan, partly convinced.

Hope crossed her arms and looked him in the eye. "My uncle once told me all about how his ancestors loved the old Citizen's Band radio – 27 megahertz. It was particularly susceptible to interference from *solar* activity, QRN, I think he called it. If this thing gets anywhere near the sun, you won't be able to control it because it will never hear you over the noise."

Varok gulped. "Then we had better "pull the plug", as you would put it."

At that moment, the ship was rocked by a massive explosion. The two engineers were flung against the consoles like rag dolls, and both slid to the floor, very still.

Chapter Seventeen

Stepping carefully through the remains of what, until recently, had been the main docks of ch'Havran, Ama t'Varranajj, Admiral of the Imperial Navy had to admire the tenacity of the Remans. Their corpses still littered the floor, the room only just having been declared safe after the nerve gas had finally broken down into compounds that were no longer harmful. It took only an hour for it to do so.

Marvellous stuff, she thought. *You could kill off the entire population of a planet, then move in that afternoon.* She stopped herself. Upon self-examination, she realised she had been spending too much time in the presence of certain Rihannsu senators. They were beginning to rub off on her. It gave her the creeps.

The sounds of restoration were heard as the Rihannsu maintenance parties worked on fixing the doors, which had been fused shut by the rebels. Reman workers had only just arrived to start cleaning up the mess, but they had strict orders to leave the bodies alone, and nobody was to come anywhere near the shuttle.

Ama used her long, slender legs to avoid the many Reman dead who remained clustered near it and stepped over them lightly. She felt for them, truly, but there was only so much she could do for the neglected and downtrodden people of this world. The people here on the floor had found out just how pointless armed resistance was. Not too many of them were armed, she found, but what she did find, when she reached the shuttle, was disturbing.

She had begun her inspection of the area from the outside and worked in. Now she was near the centre, she was finding more and more Remans who were armed, and they all had one thing in common.

As Ama stepped up onto the ramp, she knelt next to a Reman female and took the disruptor from her hand. It slid from her fingers and her hand fell with a slap against her exposed midriff. Ama turned the weapon over in her hand, then looked at the communications device on the female's belt. It had the same red insignia on it. The small grenade she found in her pocket was the same. Ama was about to move on and examine another body when she noticed something peculiar about it. The fingers were moving, ever so slightly.

The Admiral stretched out her right hand and clutched the Reman woman's exposed elbow and felt for the soft spot where she knew she might find a pulse. It was weak, but there was one.

"The Elements never cease to amaze me," she said under her breath. She turned and called: "Medic!"

A Medical Sub-Lieutenant raced over at her call. "Yes, Admiral."

Ama indicated Vashti on the floor. "This female is still alive. Have her transported up to my ship and, if the doctors can help her, have her prepared for interrogation."

As the medtech worked on Vashti, Ama felt a pang of sympathy for the young female. She might have been better off dead. She turned and called: "Make a thorough scan of the rest of the bodies. Make certain they are actually dead."

The Admiral knew she was doing Vashti no favours saving her life. She was much better off with the Elements.

The pressure of the object in her hand brought her attention back to it. She looked at the disruptor and said to herself:

“Now, Remans, where under Eisn did you get a Klingon weapon?”

She watched as the techs beamed out with the Reman female. She knew she was unlikely to get any useful information from her. However, her next duty was clear. She had to report her find, and it was no doubt going to cause an uproar in the Senate.

With the formal thud, thud, thud of the golden staff, the Announcer called the Senate to order. What they had to discuss was of the highest importance. It had better be, the old man thought. This was fast getting tiresome without the Empress to keep things in order as, once more, his attempts to contact her had proven fruitless.

Once the Senators had finally taken their seats, the Announcer felt a pang of sadness at once more noting the absence of Senator t’llhweiir, who was still in the Empress’ company. He opened the floor. “The senate will now hear the report from Admiral t’Varranajj.”

Ama hadn’t wasted any time since her discovery on ch’Havran. The Reman female was a long way from being healthy enough to question, and she still believed she would gain little from her anyway. What she had learned *had* to come to the attention of the Senate, but what bothered her was whether certain elements already knew of it. After all, how did a small band of Reman rebels gain access to Klingon weapons? There was no way the Klingons could have accessed the Remans directly. She doubted alien connections could have made it possible, they would have never gotten past the Tal Shiar. That left the Rihannsu, and the people with the best access were those in the

Great Houses, or the Tal Shiar themselves – or both – she didn't discount that possibility, not for a nanosecond.

What she was hoping to gain was some insight from this little game she was playing. Her report might reveal some of the players.

"After a short delay, the small insurrection on ch'Havran has been dealt with. The players are deceased" – she kept that card close to her chest – "and the docks are now being restored to functional order. I have it on good report that they will be back to full operation within seventy-two hours."

There were positive murmurings from around the room, but she noticed a pair of very curious eyes coming from Senator Hathness, as if he was expecting more. Perhaps he was the player she was looking for. If he was, she must remember to make certain to engage him in a game of chance some time. She would take him for every credit with that face.

"What I found disturbing, Senators, was the fact that the Remans were all armed with these." She held up a deactivated Klingon disruptor, as no weapon of any sort was allowed in the chambers, with one exception, of course. She took the Klingon communicator out of a pocket and held it high, then passed them to the Announcer, who showed them to the Senators. They could clearly see the markings. The surprise, and outrage, was loud, and getting louder. Cries of "Vengeance!" and much worse, including some epithets that were new to Ama's ears, were being bandied about.

She noted most were surprised, but Hathness wasn't. Once again, he was a poor card player. Ama almost pitied the man. He was never going to get very far in politics if he was going to be so easy to read.

Then it hit her. He had gotten this far in politics because he *was* this easy to read. Hathness was nothing more than a puppet, dancing on someone else's strings. It was then that she realised who was pulling them, and it was nobody in this room. They were all spoiled pretenders to the throne. The true power was behind the throne, and it had always been the Tal Shiar. She could almost see the strings as Hathness waved his arms around in mock hysteria.

"We must have vengeance against the Klingons!" he cried, along with his fellows.

It was at that moment that Ama's communicator buzzed on her hip. She ripped it off and put it to her ear. She knew that it would have to be urgent for anyone to bother her here, of all places, while the Senate was in order. What she heard floored her.

She held up a hand for silence. When it didn't come within seconds she looked to the Announcer. Her eyes were pleading, and he got the message.

Bang! Bang! Bang! "Silence!" he called. "Can't you see the Admiral has something urgent which she needs to report to you about!"

Ama's eyes were wide in shock. "I've heard from the Hobus starbase and from two of our Warbirds. The Empress' ship, the *Bloodwing*, has come under attack by four Klingon battle cruisers, while she was on a peace mission with some Federation representatives. They have come to her aid, but right now they're fighting a pitched battle and it could go either way. It seems the Empress' ship has been damaged and can't fight back. Oh, Elements, this is not a good day for the Empire!"

To her surprise, there were a good many Senators who didn't seemed the least bit sorry that their Empress was in trouble.

In fact, they seemed delighted. Ama was right, it wasn't a good day for the Empire, not a good day at all!

Senator Hathness chose that moment to rise to his feet and said in his most imperious tone, "It seems that the Empress has fallen victim to a plot against her and against the Rihannsu Empire by our eternal foe, the *Klivam*[i]. They have tried to destabilise our economy and our way of life by raising up the disaffected on ch'Havran – which at the very least would have damaged our energy resources and mineral supply, but it could have ended in the destruction of our entire solar system if they had detonated their devices! Now, they seek to finish the job by chopping the head off our political body by trying to assassinate our beloved Empress. Now, if the Empress hadn't been off at Hobus trying to make peace with the *Federation*" – the word dripped with scorn – "she might have been present to manage the situation to prevent these failures. At the very least, the Klingons would not have dared attack her on the homeworlds! Perhaps this is not the time to be thinking of peace but preparing for war!"

The Admiral realised the man's statement was so full of fallacies it was not funny. However, she knew the people here were gullible enough to believe most of what he was saying – or just use it as an excuse. After all, many of them were more about the appearance than the substance. That was the nature of politics, after all, wasn't it?

Ama wondered that, even if the Empress should somehow survive this day, whether she would still have a throne to return home to. Perhaps not.

Chapter Eighteen

The *USS Challenger* dropped out of warp one hundred kilometres away from the fracas, closely followed by two old-style Romulan warbirds that Jessica had managed to pick up along the way.

Jessica stood and viewed the three-dimensional map of the firefight on the main viewscreen and quickly chose her target. It was clear the *Millennium* was holding her own, but the Empress' ship was coming under heavy fire. If she was going to get the Romulan warbirds off her back, she was going to have to give them a reason.

Reaching up, Holmes quickly marked the four Klingon ships. "Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta," she stated out loud, so her crew could follow her designation of the targets. "The Romulan ships are R one, two and three." One being the Empress' ship and two and three the following warbirds. "Bring us into flanking position of Gamma. Our scans show that his shields have already been weakened on the starboard side near his nacelle. Let's hit him hard there." Captain Holmes turned to her helmsman. "Bring us in at full impulse power, and make sure you don't get in the way of any of the *Millennium's* fighters." She shook her head in wonder as the screen was filled with flying dots, whizzing this way and that. "I keep forgetting that ship carries an arsenal."

At the same time, her XO had been co-ordinating with the comms officer. "Let them know we're going after Gamma, and if they have any better ideas to let us know. Oh, and if they have any notions of how to get the Romulan warbirds off our backs, that would be a great help."

Commander tr'Janara had been enjoying a relatively uneventful day studying the ion storm that had been passing through their space when it had been rudely interrupted by a Federation starship, of all things! Its captain had claimed to be on a mission of mercy to Hobus, and that the peace mission there was under threat from a Klingon attack force.

Of course, he had never heard anything so preposterous before in his life. He certainly wasn't going to stand for a Federation starship being this far into their territory, so he assumed it must be some form of espionage and took off after them. His was an older warbird, but he was confident he could catch the mad female in the sleek, Federation starship. What bothered him was the fact that she seemed to go out of her way to attract the attention of *another* warbird on their way to Hobus.

That ship had also joined in the pursuit.

There were several things that had bothered him about this situation. Both Rihannsu vessels were older models, that was why they were being used as science and cargo ships – far behind anything close to a battle line as they were not up to modern specs. The starship they were chasing was fairly new and yet they managed to keep pace with it, as if they *wanted* them to follow them.

It was as if the female actually believed her story. The woman was clearly *nohtho*[ii], no questions about it. Neither of the ship captains had heard anything about a peace mission, and why it would be taking place all the way out at Hobus made no sense whatsoever.

However, when they dropped out of warp under the bright, blue light of Hobus and saw the many, buzzing lights of Rihannsu, Federation and Klingon ships, her story was beginning

to look more plausible. All the same, the Rihannsu had a saying: "Distrust and verify".

"Call the Empress' ship. We must know what is going on here."

Duras was watching the main viewer and beginning to wonder what went wrong. The shield strength gauges of all four of his ships were slowly declining, and now he found that he was no longer facing two ships, he was facing five *and* thirty-one flying pests that were draining their shields at an alarming rate.

"Status of the *Millennium's* shields," he ordered.

There was a moment's hesitation from the tactical officer. Duras, infuriated, turned and glared at him. "Their ship has trinary shields. They have only lost the outer layer."

Infuriated, Duras slapped his chair arm. "Concentrate your firepower on the *Bloodwing*. I want that ship vapourised!"

"Yes, sir."

Kaylor pointed out: "We're out of position for a clear shot, Duras."

Her husband saw it. Annoyed, he said. "Z minus 2 kellicams."

On her tactical display, Piper saw what was happening as clear as day. Alpha could see he was getting nowhere firing on her, so he was going after the weaker target. "Place us between *Bloodwing* and the flanking Klingon warbird," she said. "Our shields can take the beating. Hers can't. Bring us about, nose to nose with that ship and hit it with everything we've got."

Piper stood in the middle of the bridge, a rock-solid force in the centre of the storm. Around her, officers raced to get the job done. She could see Jason Nunn manoeuvring the ship into

position, whilst swinging the vessel around. Behind her, she could hear Caitlin charging up the main batteries, while Emu kept her fighters flying and returning to the ship if they were damaged.

All the while, she realised their relative position was drawing ever so slowly closer to the star. They were running out of time.

As the Klingon ship kept moving, trying to find a place to attack, the *Millennium* found its optimal firing position.

"Let 'em have it," Piper growled.

The *Odysseus*-class has *three* forward firing torpedo launchers, five phaser pods on the top and bottom of the saucer and megaphasers on both warp nacelles. The ship opened fire with all of them *simultaneously*. The Klingon ship reeled as if it had suddenly run into an invisible brick wall. Caitlin kept the barrage going, wearing down the enemy ship's forward shields until they collapsed. Now totally exposed to this merciless hail of energy, the forward pod of the ship exploded like a microwaved egg. The ship, now nothing more than a headless chicken arcing energy in all directions, spun off towards the star. Piper let it go. There was little chance there would be survivors in that wreck.

She turned to the comms officer. "Open hailing frequencies." She received a nod. "This is Piper, in command of the *USS Millennium* to the Klingon ships attacking us," she said coldly. "Who's next?"

"You're got to hand it to these guys," Ellie Harrelson said grudgingly. "They don't give up easily."

Her captain shrugged. "You know what a hundred thousand Klingons have said before. Today…"

"…Is a good day to die," the entire bridge crew said in unison.

Both Captain and XO had a dark chuckle at that one. It was good to break the tension with a little humour.

"Status of shields," Jessica asked.

"Down to fifty percent," their tactical officer replied.

The captain frowned. She had hoped that a little sanity might have prevailed after Piper's pronouncement over the open airwaves. After the *Millennium* had made mincemeat of the D-7 that had tried to flank the Empress' ship, she had hoped the tide had turned. However, it seemed to make the Klingons even madder.

The three remaining Klingon cruisers redoubled their efforts to destroy the *S'harien*-class warship, while trying to fend off the myriad of flying pests and the *Challenger* – especially as the *Millennium* now had nothing better to do.

Now, it appeared the Romulan commanders were taking a page out of Piper's rule book and following her example. They were moving to interpose themselves in the line of fire to protect their Empress.

Jessica leapt from her chair. "No!"

However, it was far too late to do anything about it. Even though both warbirds were firing back at their oppressors, the two vessels were woefully out of date and underarmed for this battle. It took only moments for their shields to collapse and for the Klingon's weapons to play over the naked hull plating of the two ships. They exploded in two-part harmony.

Rocked by their brave, but pointless, sacrifice, Jessica slumped back into her chair. It was now down to the two Federation starships and their fighter craft. The sad fact was that, even though she was the commander of a heavy cruiser, the *Challenger* was now operating as a support and escort craft for the *Millennium*, which was a space control vessel. It wasn't that

the *Challenger* didn't carry an impressive amount of firepower, she was actually one of the most durable and capable designs ever produced by Starfleet. However, ships like the *Millennium* were a completely different standard, essentially a cross between the twentieth century analogue of battleship and aircraft carrier. She had capabilities that a ship like the *Challenger* couldn't match.

Jessica realised it was time to put in a call to the big gun, and for one of the first times since she had taken command, the *Challenger* wasn't it. "Hail the *Millennium.*"

"Captain, the *Challenger* is calling."

It was a weird enough day, Piper thought. *I never expected to have support from a ship that's a dead ringer for Jim's out in the middle of nowhere at a time like this.*

"Line us up for the next Klingon ship and give them the same treatment. If that doesn't get their attention, nothing will." She then turned to the comms officer. "Put the Captain of the *Challenger* on screen."

With the chime of connection, the image of Jessica Holmes appeared on the viewscreen. Piper didn't recall meeting her previously, but the intelligence in the fit, young woman, with short, dark hair was unmistakable. "How can we assist you, *Millennium?"*

Piper looked down at her tactical display and sent it over to Jessica wirelessly. She tagged the remaining Klingon vessels. "I'm going after Gamma here and I'm going to give him the same lesson I gave his friend. I want you to go after Delta here" – it was the ship furthest from hers – "and I want you to royally piss him off. Do whatever you have to to get him off the *Bloodwing*'s ass. I'm going to sick the fighters on Beta."

Jessica nodded and gave her a gallows smile. "Happy hunting, Captain," she said.

"And you, Captain," Piper said confidently. "We'll have a drink when this is over."

Holmes gave her a friendly wink. "You're on."

As the *Bloodwing* was slowly dying around the Empress, her captain had never felt so helpless before in her life. Her whole life hung in the balance, hinging on forces completely out of her power, and it infuriated her. For twenty years she had held a position of nearly absolute power in the Romulan Empire, and now she was the prize in somebody else's contest. This was not the way her story was supposed to end.

There was one thing she was impressed with, however. Her people had built a very sturdy ship. It had stood up to the pummelling the Klingons had dished out so far and the shields had yet to fail. The *S'harien*-class had a new, regenerative form of shielding that was powered by this ship's quantum singularity. It should continue virtually indefinitely – theoretically. That was what the engineers had said.

Practice was another thing entirely. On her very first mission, a *S'harien* had nearly been bested by a Klingon, and it had taken many redesigns to get it working as well as it was today. All the same, the cracks were showing. Although the shields were still holding, the mechanisms keeping them up were very close to overload, such were the energies being directed at them. You can only dissipate that much energy into space at one time. The only reason they had nearly failed in their earlier fight was the repeated use of plasma bolts. Even her new shields couldn't contain them. Fortunately for her, Klingons didn't use *them*.

The smell of burning insulation and opticable was hanging in the air. Ael knew it was only a matter of time before something important finally blew and her ship was nothing more than floating debris.

There were few people left on the ship who could help. The Andorian lieutenant from the *Millennium*, Koss, was still working on the computer, trying to break the encryption on the lockout that had them still trying to fly into the sun. It was nice to be protected from the Klingons by the shields, but they were not going to be sufficient from the forces within a star once they arrived.

Realising there was little she could achieve here, Ael decided to see if she could help in engineering. Telling Koss where she was going, she headed down the corridor and, five minutes later, she arrived to find the room a mess. Panels were blown out, control surfaces were dark, and the only two people on duty were slumped on the floor, possibly dead.

She stepped forward and checked on Varok first. Knowing a lot more about Rihannsu physiology, she checked for a pulse. She didn't find one. She closed his eyes that were staring into nothingness, then turned her attention to the Starfleet officer.

"Where do you look for the pulse on a cat?" she asked herself. She felt about the being's paws but didn't find anything. It did seem to still be warm, but that could have just been the fur. She felt around the joints but got nowhere. Then inspiration stuck her. She forced open an eye. The creature's pupil dilated. She was alive!

The light seemed to switch on something in Hopetallash's brain. She began to stir. Ael let go of her and stepped back to give her space.

Hope looked up at her and blearily asked: “Did you get the number of that truck?”

Ael had no idea what the odd being was on about. She was none the wiser that Hope had spent a fair amount of time watching old earth movies with her uncle Judd.

The feline shook her head, and instantly regretted it. She gripped her skull with both paws as if it would stop it from exploding. Stars danced before her eyes. “Ooooh. That was a baaaad idea. Let’s not do that again.” She opened her eyes once more and looked at Ael. She closed one eye, then opened it. “I’m supposed to know you, aren’t I?”

Ael realised the explosion must had rattled the Commander’s brain more than just a mild concussion. Worst case scenario, she might even be bleeding intracranially, like Aidoann.

The thought of her old friend was a distraction that she didn’t need at that moment, and she had to drag herself back to the present. She looked about the room for a med pack. She found one on the wall and opened it. She located a diagnostic scanner and ran it over Hope’s skull. She just hoped it would work on aliens.

The readout was concerning. “According to this, you have a bad concussion, Commander,” Ael said, genuinely worried. This female was possibly the only hope for saving not only this ship but those still aboard him.

Hope sucked in a deep breath and tried to clear her thoughts in the same moment. Her mind was a blaze of pain, but she knew that right here and now there was little she could do about that. She still had a job to do. She slowly got to her feet, with Ael’s help, and took stock of the situation. As she took in the contents of the room, her memories started coming back to her. She looked sadly down at Varok and gently shook her head. “Poor

man." Hope began tapping on different computer surfaces, but nothing was responding. She turned to the Empress.

"Excuse me, Ma'am, but are these interfaces geared for Romulans only?"

Ael looked at her in surprise. "No," she said. "Not as far as I know." She stepped over and tried the interfaces herself. She got no response, either. She tried several different surfaces, and nothing came online. "Why is that so important?" She asked because there was something in the Caitian's voice that told her the matter was urgent.

Hope turned to her and told her what she'd told Varok. Ael was stunned by the notion that her people might have accidentally created a device of mass destruction.

"Empress, we need to get these systems online so I can turn your singularity off. If I can't, and this ship *does* fall into the sun, then it's only a matter of time before the Hobus star goes supernova."

Her statement was said with such gravitas that Ael was galvanised into action. "Then let us see if we can get these consoles working again."

As Captain Holmes ordered the *Challenger* angle towards the ship designated "Delta", she mulled over in her mind Piper's words. "Send this on as powerful a signal that we can generate to Delta so that he cannot miss hearing it."

"Channel open, Ma'am."

"You turn from battle, coward, to seek a lesser foe. Do you not remember blHnuch[iii], you act under the naked stars, each seeing and remembering your quvHa'[iv]!! You cannot hide from their view ha'DlbaH[v]!! Turn and face me if you dare!!"

Ellie stepped up next to her and grimaced. "I take it that was less than complimentary? The universal translator choked on some of that."

"Well, if you consider a formal challenge given to a coward to redeem his honour in blood, then yes, it was uncomplimentary."

"Oh," replied Harrelson.

"Well, Captain Piper did say to piss him off," Jessica said. "That should definitely get the job done."

It took all of five seconds for the ship marked "Delta" to shift position and start coming after the *Challenger*. "Take us on a bearing…" she looked down at her chair display. "135 mark 43. Warp three for forty-two seconds."

"Aye, Captain."

The *Challenger* swung about gracefully and quickly slid into warp for forty-two seconds. The Klingon ship was quick to follow. Jessica watched her scanners.

"They're right on our tail," Ellie observed, sounding as worried as she was.

Jessica smiled to herself. "Good. I want them looking at our butt and not ahead."

On the forty-second second, the ship dropped out of warp, right in front of the Romulan space station. Its Commander had been told that, for the duration, all Federation vessels were to be considered 'friendly'.

Klingon vessels were not.

Romulan space stations are very well armed. As soon as the D-7 dropped out of warp the station started firing on it. It was all the pilot of the *Challenger* could do to keep their ship out of the way of the hail of fire.

They dropped down below it and added some of their own.

"High stress turn to port, fire as you bear," Captain Holmes ordered.

The *Challenger* pivoted on her axis like a ballerina, using high energy IM Pulses in opposing directions to push the bow to port and the aft to starboard. As they bore, all six of *Challenger's* heavy phaser banks shredded through the remains of the D-7's shields, until she turned fully to face the Klingon ship and streams of photon torpedoes, glowing a brilliant blue, erupted from her forward launders towards the stunned D-7.

The photons struck directly on the head of the Battlecruiser, penetrated inside and detonated, causing a cascade of explosions which obliterated the forward half of the ship until nothing was left but the spinning flaming remains of her engineering hull. Now brainless and mostly harmless, the Romulans did not cease their attack. They kept firing until there was nothing remaining but pellet-sized pieces of metal.

"Well, maybe he wasn't a blHnuch, just a qoH[vi]," Jessica said to no one in particular. "blHnuch's live longer."

Holmes toggled her comms for a general hail. "*Challenger* to the Romulan station. Thanks for the assist."

The reply was dark. "The only good Klingon is a dead Klingon. Just bring our Empress back and we'll call it even."

Jessica nodded to herself. "We'll do the best we can. *Challenger* out."

Gamma exploded in a huge ball of gas and plasma. Seeing it go gave Piper no pleasure. She had hoped that the Klingons had gotten the idea the first time round. She ordered the ship's bow turned on Beta and, to her surprise, the ship broke off.

It quickly pushed up and over the Romulan vessel, and disappeared into warp.

Carman stepped up next to the Captain. "I guess he didn't want to be the next one on the menu," he said darkly.

Piper grimaced. "I'm not certain there are a lot of warriors deserving of Sto'vo'kor today. Firing on a ship that can't shoot back is hardly honourable."

Valastro nodded his agreement. "You're right about that." He scowled at the section of the screen where he had last seen "Beta". "Perhaps it's not that good a thing that they got away."

Piper leaned back to get a better look at her XO. "Are you sure you don't have some Klingon blood yourself?"

Her response was a half-hearted slap on his chest and a "Q'plah!" Then Carman returned to his duties.

The Captain stood. "Recall the fighters. Bring everyone home." This part of the mission was one she hated. The pilots always did a great job, but they didn't always come home.

Emu stepped up next to Piper. "I've already recalled, Captain. The conditions outside the ship were beyond their tolerance two minutes ago. The *Cork's* back in the bay as well, as are the remaining shuttles."

Damn. There was another word she hated. *Remaining*. That meant death certificates that head to be filled out. After all these years of command, it was the one thing that she hoped she never got used to.

Hang on. "How close are we to the sun?" Piper asked.

In answer, Caitlin turned on the viewscreen – polarised. The sun covered the entirety of it. Their view took in the *Bloodwing* as well, and they could tell that the hull plating was not only glowing, it was red hot!

"Get me the Empress!"

On Hope's hip her communicator chirped. She ripped it off and flipped it open. "Hope here."

"Is the Empress with you?" she heard Captain Piper ask.

Ael took the device from the Commander and stepped aside so she could work. "I'm here, Captain Piper."

"Empress, have you had any luck getting control of your ship?"

"None, Captain." Ael had never had such a sense of complete failure as she did as this very moment.

"Empress, I need you and Hope to get in an escape pod and leave that ship right now, before it's too late. Our ship is near its hull tolerance as it is." Piper sounded very worried.

"We can't, Captain. Your people found that if this ship falls into the sun without shutting down the quantum singularity drive it will eventually cause the sun to go supernova. We must do that first."

There was a silence for a moment, causing Ael to wonder if they had lost the connection. Then Piper came back and said: "Can Hope shut it down in the next thirty seconds? Realistically?"

The black Caitian sat up from under the console where she had been working and shook her head in sad resignation. "No, I can't. I'm sorry."

"Then don't worry. There is another way. I just need you both to get out of there *now*. Trust me. Get out NOW!"

Piper was so insistent, and so confident, that they took her at her word. The engineering section of a ship was always prone to disaster, so it always had escape pods handy. Fortunately, there was one left. As the Empress and Hopetallash raced to get in and strap themselves into the seats, Hope called her ship.

"What about Koss?" she asked.

"He got out two minutes ago. Don't worry about him. Just eject. Now!"

Ael slammed home the eject button and the escape pod burst free of the ship, out past its shields, and straight into the path of a tractor beam put out by the *Millennium.* The ship quickly swung the pod into the rear, open hangar bay, then pushed herself out, away from the sun as fast as her impulse drive could go.

It took ten minutes at full impulse, but soon they were clear of the star's gravity and hard radiation.

However, they did have a ringside seat to watch the *Bloodwing* as she fell into the Hobus star, never to be seen again.

An hour later, the *Millennium-A* rendezvoused with the *Challenger*. It was time for a meeting with the Empress, Captain Holmes, Hopetallash, Piper and Commander Carman Valastro.

The five sat around a round table officer's lounge, where they had been assured privacy, to discuss the situation.

Piper spoke first. "As you all know by now, I'm here from the past, but what you're not aware of is why. I can now tell you." She took a deep breath and began her condensed tale.

"It all started with an explosion. About eighty years from now, the Hobus star explodes. That resulted in a Romulan going into the past, who made some massive changes. He so corrupted the timeline that entropy was increased to the point that all of creation was threatened. Now, we managed to put that right – mostly – but we never did find out what caused the explosion in the first place. We figured, if we could prevent the star from exploding – and its destruction causes most of this galaxy to be torn apart, by the way – then we can stop the first domino from falling. However, our time here has proven that the first "domino" wasn't the star at all. It was the *Bloodwing* falling into it." She

turned to Hopetallash. "You had something to report, Commander?"

"Yes, Captain." Hope's whiskers twitched in sorrow and her tail flicked to and fro – a demonstration of her internal strife. "I discovered that the *Bloodwing* was powered by a forced quantum singularity drive that has the unique property of having self-contained force-fields and mechanisms that protect it from without and from within. They protect us from being eaten by its gravity, and it from external forces. It's the latter that's the problem, as they're strong enough to withstand the forces inside a star, and they're powered by the singularity itself. It has a very narrow channel that allows the ingress of matter that feeds the drive, and the same for egress that powered the ship. The star doesn't care about that part. However, the ingress part will continue to slowly eat the star. The singularity will eventually gain in size to the point where it will no longer need to be "forced". It will be self-sustaining, then all bets are off."

Those present made a variety of disgusted faces. It was a grim outcome indeed.

Piper chipped in at that point. "I have it on good report that the star will go nova and eventually take out not only Romulus and Remus, but most of the star systems in this sector. A chain reaction will continue with stars falling out of their orbits within the galaxy to the point where the Milky Way will literally tear itself apart."

Piper's companion's faces reminded her of her own when she had first heard of the fate of the galaxy after the Hobus explosion: sheer horror.

"It all began here?" Ael asked, horrified. "Surely a supernova can't explode with enough force to start destroying

other star systems, especially in the time frame you're suggesting."

"What my source has suggested is the possibility of a subspace element to this explosion. That's why the shockwave seems to travel faster than light. That's why, when an attempt was made to intervene before the wave destroyed Romulus, it failed. They simply ran out of time." Piper shrugged, saddened and amazed at the same time.

The Empress was not to be put off so easily. "Surely something can be done to avoid this catastrophe."

Piper gave her a sheepish grin. "Well, yes and no."

The Empress gave her an annoyed look. "What do you mean?" she growled. She had little time for dissemination.

"I came here to learn why this star failed. I hoped to find out without it actually happening, but…" She grimaced. "At least all is not lost and now I know. The next step is to go back and make sure it never happened in the first place." Her tone was enigmatic, and deliberately so. She could not tell the Empress *how*.

Ael was smart enough not to ask. She got the undercurrent in Piper's tone.

"Now," Piper asked, "why did the Empress' ship go nuts and try to fly into a star? I did hear from one of my people that, when the rebel Admiral arrived at the station here, that some of her people may have boarded your ship while it was docked there. Is it possible they were the ones who messed with it?"

Ael's arched eyebrows shot up. It was the first she had heard of this. "Someone boarded my ship while it was docked?"

Piper nodded. "Yes, Empress. My people were watching. They saw two people in Romulan uniforms come out of a dock

what wasn't being used and head down towards your ship, then come back not too long after and leave the same way."

The Empress nodded. The shock of the day's events was passing, and she was now beginning to think clearly. "Yes, of course. The traitor even went so far as to use a hologram to announce her intentions."

From the other side of the table, Jessica Holmes gave a dark chuckle. "Oh, if I'd only just grabbed T'Fawn when I had the chance."

Piper coughed politely. "Excuse me?"

The commander of the *Challenger* flipped an errant strand of dark hair out of her eyes and gave a sorry smile. "You see, several days ago, I was sitting in a lovely café at Galorndon Core looking at this woman I thought was Vulcan who said her name was T'Fawn and there was something about her that just didn't feel right. I'm here because I followed that feeling. I just wished I'd grabbed her then."

Piper looked Jessica in the eye. "Seriously? I need the place and the stardate."

"Why?" Jessica asked.

"Because that may have been the first domino to fall."

The Empress tapped the table with a knuckle. "I am glad for you, Captain Piper. The fact remains that my ship has fallen into Hobus. As you said, in about eighty years this star will go supernova. Are you telling me that we have about that long to prepare for that? That there's absolutely nothing else we can do about it?"

Piper shrugged. "What can you do? If you try to explode the star you just wind up having the same result, just earlier. If you try to drop a singularity into it to eat it, you wind up with the same result. Catch 22. The only other option is to somehow go

into the Hobus star and fish out the singularity, but the technology for that simply doesn't exist."

There was silence around the table as those assembled considered the ramifications of her statement.

There was one question Piper had been considering ever since she had arrived in the "future". She looked at the others in the room and caught their eye, one by one. "I won't lie to you. I don't know what will happen to you once I make the jump back to the past. Will this timeline simply cease to exist once I make the changes? I don't know. I am telling you all this because you have a right to know. I believe you should be prepared for what is to come." She caught the Empress's attention alone. "Ael, you need to begin to evacuate Romulus. Even if the people don't believe you, you've got eighty years to save them."

Even though the Empress bristled a little at the use of her first name, she knew that Piper was simply driving home a point. We're all in this together.

She turned to Carman and Jessica. "You guys need to return to the Federation with the same message. When Hobus explodes the devastation will be extreme. Start making preparations for exodus to another galaxy."

The two Starfleet officers exchanged an amazed look, then turned back to Piper.

Jessica was perturbed. "Captain, I'm happy to take the warning back to the Federation, and I remember my course in temporal mechanics. I'm aware that this causality could cease once your return to the past. But if you think I'm going to sit on my hands and put all my eggs in one basket, you don't know me at all.

"This timeline might not end. In which case, we've got eighty years to work on a solution. Yes, we could manage to save

several thousand by sending generation ships to another galaxy, or we could save trillions upon trillions of lives and fix it right here and now. I don't know how, but we have lots of brilliant minds back at Starfleet who can put their heads together to come up with something. *That's* now our mission."

"This timeline?" Commander Valastro asked.

"Yes, this timeline," Holmes replied. "Maybe, Captain Piper, you manage to go back to your time and fix what went wrong, but I've heard there are two of you – from two different timelines – which suggest the possibility of two concurrent timelines coexisting. Just because you leave doesn't mean we're going to vanish. You may have found the domino you were looking for and fix what went wrong in your timeline, but this timeline might continue with us here, and we've still got a problem to fix. We can't simply depend on you to save us. As long as we're here, we've got to work on saving ourselves."

Carman felt the need to defend his captain. "And if the fix fixes this timeline as well?"

Jessica shrugged. "Then we lose nothing. All of this will have never happened and the only person who will remember it will be Captain Piper. We'll simply be who we are, in Captain Piper's original timeline." Her frustration vented, Holmes added: "Mind you, Piper, I'd like you to tell me about this one day, if you can." With one final word she added: "I just know that we can't just sit around hoping that she is successful. No disrespect to you, Captain," she said with a nod to their host.

Piper sighed. "None taken. I know that what I've just shouldered you with is an enormous ask. The fate of the galaxy is now in your hands. I've given you all the data you need to take to your governments as proof of what's to come. Let's just hope it's not going to fall on deaf ears. I pray we all find success."

Ael nodded. "May the Elements guide us."

Piper looked to Jessica Holmes. "I have one more job for you, Jess. I need you to run the Empress back to the Station for me, along with her wounded and crew. I've got another job for the *Millennium* to do."

Holmes nodded and gave her a quick smile. "Any time."

Piper gave one more look about the room. "Does anyone have anything they wanted to add?"

The five present looked about them, but nothing came to mind.

Jessica simply said: "I'll send that info to you as soon as I get back to the *Challenger.*"

Piper smiled and shook her hand. "Thank you, Captain." She turned to the others. "Thank you all for your help. All things being equal, we'll prevent this from happening again the first time."

Four hours later, on the far side of the Hobus system, two ships named *Millennium* cruised side-by-side. Before Piper transported back to her own ship, she stopped by the sickbay as she had a few, brief questions for the Admiral, who was willing to help. Piper touched her mind, and for a fleeting moment she saw the older woman's torment. She saw the moment she lost her first officer. She wondered how she had gotten this far. As they parted, she wished her well, then briefly visited her friend, Merete AndrusTaurus, and said a quick hello and gave her a hug before leaving. It didn't feel right visiting this ship and not doing so.

Afterward, as she walked down the hall, she was joined by Carman Valastro. She thought she had an idea of what he wanted to discuss. She was wrong.

"Captain, I know you're going back to the past and you've got to leave someone here in charge, and that would naturally fall to me," he said. He gave her a slightly embarrassed smile, which lit up his handsome, middle-aged Grecian face. "You know what I've discovered in the last six months under, well, you?"

Piper shook her head. "What?"

"I don't want to be captain." He smiled, having gotten that off his chest. "I don't mind being the support, the helper to the captain, but I don't want to be the one with the responsibility of running the whole ship. I don't need that stress, thank you."

She had to admit it, Piper was surprised. "Really? I thought that Command was what you were reaching for all this time."

Carman gave a slight shrug. "Me, too. But I've found that I don't really want to be captain after all. XO, fine. Just not lochagos[vii]. So, if you're going to nominate someone, I suggest Caitlin."

Piper stopped short in the hall, about ten metres away from the transporter room. "Are you certain? You've got seniority."

"There's seniority, and there's seniority. If Ghost hadn't gotten herself busted, she'd have made captain years ago. She deserves it."

Piper snickered at that. "You're right about that. I just hope she's past slugging people."

Carman grinned. "Mostly."

Piper considered the notion. He hadn't had much time to observe Ghost in the here and now, but what she had seen had impressed her. Never mind the woman had a sharp mind and great leadership qualities. If anyone should know her well enough to

vouch for her, it would be Carman. He had been working with her for twenty years now. She winked at him. "Okay, then. It's a done deal."

They walked on again and, when they turned into the transporter room, they found themselves confronted by most of the senior staff. Hopetallash, Caitlin Ryan, Doctor Merete AndrusTaurus, Jason Nunn and Emu had assembled to see off their new captain. One by one, starting with Emu, Piper shook their hands, bidding them farewell. She could not help but wonder if any of them would still be here tomorrow – at least, in the same fashion.

When Piper got to Ghost, she stopped. She looked down at the diminutive ace pilot and said: "Commander Caitlin Ryan, I've discussed this situation with Carman, and we've come to the mutual decision that you should talk over command of the *Millennium-A* as captain."

To her credit, Caitlin's eyes immediately went to Carman. "But Carman…"

"You and I talked about this. You know I don't want the big chair," he said from the heart.

A tear slipped down her cheek. "But I don't want to go over your head. It's not fair."

Carman stepped over and slightly past Piper, who moved aside for him. He took Caitlin in his arms, and she wrapped hers around his torso, much to Piper's surprise. She hadn't noticed the wedding rings on their fingers. "You're right for the job, Caitlin." He swept his arm out to take in their fellows. "Everyone here thinks so, too."

Their friends all nodded and smiled. "We're all behind you," Emu said, cheering her.

Piper took this as her leave, shaking her head and wondering if she was seeing just another window into the future. She wouldn't have pegged Carman and Caitlin pairing off!

The captain gently cleared her throat. She took a memory chit out of her pocket and gave it to Ghost. "Here's my command codes and everything you need to know." She spoke up for the room mic. "Computer, recognise Piper, Captain, transferring command of the *USS Millennium* to Commander Caitlin Ryan as of this stardate. Piper, Alpha, sigma, phi, seven-three."

The computer queried: "Does Commander Ryan accept command transfer?"

Ryan looked up and smiled. This was the culmination of years of hard work. "Yes, I do."

An hour later, Piper was home on her ship, and she and Piper Silayna were prepared for their next step in their mission. They were joined by the only others who were aware of its proximity. They realised that, without it, they could not have gotten this far.

Piper had spent ten minutes explaining to Sustasandage the cause of the Hobus explosion. She promised that, when she got home, that she would do what she could to prevent the events that took place from her end. She had also promised to drop Spock back where he belonged in the future. Piper had shaken her paw and bid her farewell.

Her own crew, she would miss. Both she and Piper Silayna had spent a half hour hugging and saying goodbye to friend and family as they prepared for their return trip.

Krashtallash asked: "Shall we set course for the Guardian's planet, Captain?"

Piper had just smiled. "No need."

He had wondered at that, but let it go.

Now, on the hangar deck, he had been invited to follow his sister, Scanner, Sarda, Merete and Spock as Piper and Piper Silayna, who were now wearing their favourite jeans, t-shirts, leather jackets and boots took their leave. Both sported duffel bags over their shoulders, full of simple necessities they would need where they were going. Piper unlocked the door to Ghost's private space for her fighter, the *Spectre*. There, nestled behind it, was the Guardian of Forever.

"What is *that* doin' there?" Scanner asked, shocked.

Piper Silayna smiled to herself. "We thought it was the timeship what was maintaining out temporal stability in this timeline. It never was. It was the Guardian. Once we realised that, it became okay for Piper to take over as master of the other *Millennium* without worrying about disappearing. Its influence isn't limited."

"But how did it get here?" Scanner asked, unsatisfied.

Both Pipers looked at one another. "Don't ask me." They looked up at the massive stone donut. "Guardian, how did you get here?"

"I was needed," was all it said.

Susanna shared a look with Suzette. "And that's all you're going to get for an answer."

Merete was still puzzled. "If the Guardian's sphere of influence is that much greater, what happened to the *JR*?"

Scanner shrugged. "Perhaps they simply weren't needed for the plan."

Sarda nodded. "Logical."

Judd drew and imaginary line in the air with a grin of delight. "That's one point to me! I finally get a "logical" from points!"

Piper sighed. Some things never changed. She turned to her Vulcan friend and held up her hand in the V-salute. "Live long and prosper, my friend."

In her mind, she heard: *"All my love, Piper. Take care of yourself."*

She knew what was bothering them all. They simply didn't know if they were all simply going to vanish once they stepped through the portal. Piper didn't know either. She gave them a brief smile. Now she had everything she needed, and it was finally time to go, she was finding it hard to take that last step.

She felt a hand take hers and she turned. Piper Silayna, Suzette, was leading her towards the portal, which was active. "It's time to go, Sis," she said.

"Are you ready, Guardian?" she asked, suddenly unsure.

"I am ready," it replied in its deep, enigmatic voice.

Holding hands, they stepped through together.

Part Three

Epilogue 1: Revelations

It should have been all over, but somehow it wasn't. Piper found herself standing – no standing was the wrong word. In fact, she wasn't even truly sure she *was* Piper. Everything was so peculiar.

She looked about her and saw only dazzling colours. Up, down, left, right, it made no difference. It was all the same. She felt like she was floating in an aurora. She found it quite disorienting, but as the same time she felt no nausea.

Suddenly, all changed, and Piper found herself standing in an endless field of emerald grass that seemed to wave in a non-existent wind. The sky was aquamarine with not a cloud in sight. Peculiarly, Piper noted there was no sun, yet there was a soft, radiant light everywhere.

She held up her hands before her face and she found no scars. There should have been the reminders of skirmishes she had been involved in along the way, but somehow, they were absent. In fact, her hands looked young, with none of the wrinkles she had picked up over the years.

Almost fearfully, she touched her face to find it feeling like she had just had a facial. It felt – youthful. She ran her fingers through her hair and found it long and straight and when she pulled it into view it was her natural brunette, not the short burgundy bob she had been wearing for the past year.

She flexed her arms and legs and found them supple and strong. The twinge in her left knee was gone.

She checked her clothing and found herself wearing one of her colourful jumpsuits, but this one seemed to have caught every colour in the rainbow. It even shimmered as she looked at it.

Fearfully, she considered her situation. This was not what she had expected. Both she and Piper Silayna had stepped through the Guardian. Now she was alone. Had something untoward happened? She asked the question that was gnawing at her: "Am I dead?"

Instead of a direct answer she heard a friendly chuckle that seemed to come from everywhere in this place that she couldn't even begin to describe, its beauty was beyond glorious.

She repeated: "Am I?"

Finally, the being spoke. "For you to be dead you would first have to know who *you are*," it said. There was no challenge, only the voice of a loving father figure. In fact, it reminded her of Pastor Leon.

Her eyes widened. "I'm Piper," she said, as if that answered everything.

"Really?" the voice said, quietly mocking. "If that's so, who's this?"

Their surroundings changed in an instant and Piper found herself on the bridge of the *Millennium-A*. Sitting still as a statue in the Command Chair was Admiral Piper, still looking fit for her age.

"She's me," Piper said.

"Really?"

Once more, everything changed, and Piper found herself in her quarters back on the *Pterodactyl*. There, curled up on the bed was Piper Silayna, as still as the Admiral with tears frozen on her face.

"Who is this?" the voice asked.

Piper was beginning to lose patience. "Who are you?" she challenged.

Once more there was the chuckle. "Sorry, young lady, that's not how things are done here. I asked *you* a question. I'm not so easily diverted."

Piper collected herself, took in a deep breath then said: "This is Piper Silayna, the version of me from the Alternate Universe."

"So, she's you as well?"

Now she was getting confused. "No, she's another possible me. She's me, but not me."

"Hmmm. She's you.... but not you. That sounds a little crazy, doesn't it?"

Piper gritted her teeth in mild exasperation. "Not really. People change depending on their circumstances and life's experiences."

"Granted," the voice said. "But at any time in your life, would you have been anybody else but you?"

Piper realised what he was asking. Not whether she would have preferred to be someone else, but whether her identity was still truly her own. "No," she admitted. "I've always been me."

She found herself right next to her alternate, able to reach and touch her face, which she did.

"If that's the case, then the person before you *is* you, is she not?"

Piper shook her head. "No, she isn't. We were worlds apart in personality when we met, but I gradually came to..."

"Love her?" the voice said warmly. His voice was as sweet as a gentle caress. "Don't worry, there are no secrets here. You love her as a sister."

Piper clapped her arms against her sides. "Yes, I do. She's grown on me."

"Wouldn't some consider that a kind of narcissism? If she's really you, then you've simply developed a deep love and respect for yourself."

Piper found it hard to be truly annoyed with the disembodied voice because, while the questions it asked were difficult for her to face, it always spoke as someone who truly cared about her. "No. It's not narcissism. I love her as the twin sister I never had. Aren't we like identical twins? People who carry the same DNA yet become different individuals because of their life's experiences and choices?"

Instead of answering the question, the being said: "But you're not a twin. And, if you're not a twin, then you are indeed Piper, both you and the one you call Piper Silayna *and* the Admiral. You're all the same person."

"So?" Piper tried not to sound insolent but didn't quite succeed.

"Then you're not dead, young lady. You can't be because you're still alive."

If it was possible for Piper's head to start hurting it would have at that moment. Instead, all she was, was confused. "If we're all the same person, then where does that leave Suzette and me? We've changed, grown. We're no longer just Captain Piper of the *USS Millennium* – or in Suzette's case the *Ingram*. We became family."

"Ah, so you're saying that, because you became a part of something else, you're no longer Piper as you were, but a whole

new Piper? You're basing your argument on the premise that, as you became a part of a community you were somehow transformed into another being altogether?"

Piper pursed her lips as she considered. The argument sounded weak, even to her ears. "It's just part of it." Frustrated, she dropped her head and said meekly: "I don't know."

The room around her dissolved and Piper found herself back in glory. "Ah, at last, some humility!" it said cheerfully. "You deserve a reward."

In the twinkling of an eye a being appeared before her. It appeared human, male, in his early thirties. He was beautiful with everything in perfect proportion, but in a place of perfection anything less would have seemed out of place. His eyes captivated her with their wisdom, love and compassion. "I know you prefer talking face-to-face."

Piper relaxed and allowed herself the luxury of a smile. "Thank you," she said.

The being smiled back. "To help you understand what is happening here, Piper, I will tell you what you fear. You fear all you are and all you know being lost. That when your time amongst the living is over you and all you know will be gone – perhaps even forgotten."

Whoever he was he had gotten to the heart of Piper's problem. "It seems unfair that after all my people and I have done to right the wrongs with the timeline that we should suddenly just wink out of existence. That all we've seen and done would be just… gone."

Her host gave her another of his enigmatic smiles. "Yes, the timeline. Your people have become quite adept at messing it up. Entropy is advanced every time it is meddled with. You came very close to the brink this time around. Hmm. I'm afraid I'm

going to have to put an end to your people's time travelling. There is only so much I can undo before it becomes clear."

Piper tilted her head to the side as she considered what he had just said. "Becomes clear.... that an outside force is correcting *our* mistakes?" She narrowed her eyes. "Who exactly *are* you?"

"Later, Piper, later." His eyes took on a great sadness. "Your people have achieved much, but they are still arrogant, unwilling to open their minds. They are a people of habit, I'm afraid, and it could become their undoing."

Now Piper was afraid. "What do you mean?"

Patiently, he explained. "Every time one of your people goes back in time, they create ripples. Changes at even the atomic level have consequences. The old human adage about a butterfly fluttering its wings causing a hurricane is quite apt. Now, the natural flow of time has been disrupted many times, causing me to have to step in to make corrections."

There was something about his speech that was bothering her. "If that's the case, have you been using me to affect these changes?"

The being next to her turned and looked her in the eye. "You humans have an idea that there should be a "natural" flow of history. However, you fail to take into account entropy."

Piper's brows rose as she considered his statement. "That all things eventually move from order to chaos. How does that apply to history?"

Her friend gave her a small smile. "If history was left alone to simply play out things would move from order to chaos at an inordinate rate. You're a student of history. How many times has the human race been at the brink of destruction when something shifted, and it was averted?"

Images of nuclear wars that might have been flashed through Piper's mind, including the damage to Florida left by the Xindi weapon in the late twenty-second century. If Jonathan Archer hadn't stopped them, the Xindi would have destroyed Earth. It was only at the final hour that their plan was halted – humanity saved. So often in the final moments and through the actions of heroes on the ground in the right place at the right time disaster had been averted.

The notion brought conflicting emotions to the surface. Part of her was grateful for the being's intervention. The prideful part of her wanted the human race to stand or fall on their own.

Her host simply nodded and looked into her eyes as if he could see the conflict within her. "I am glad that you are at least considering thanking me for my intervention. Human nature does tend to be rebellious, however." He turned aside for a moment to let Piper process what she had been told. He appeared to take great delight in studying an impossibly perfect flower that she didn't remember seeing a moment before.

Piper looked back at her recent history and realised that, if she and her sister hadn't been where they were *at that time* things would have played out very differently. Their presence had averted disaster on a colossal scale. If they hadn't been at Bozeman, there was a real chance that the *Phoenix* would never had survived her first flight without her navigational deflector *and* the simple fact she would never have taken off without their igniting the rocket's exhaust.

She remembered also, that even though they had failed to save the general population of Merrijig, they *had* managed to save the children.

Thinking of that doomed planet brought back the old anger. She turned on the being, a person who she believed she

knew but was too stubborn to admit. He was looking at her with a mixture of compassion and sadness as if he knew what she was about to say. Furiously, she vented her feelings: "If you're working for the best of us all how could you let the people of Merrijig die?"

The being sighed. "There is a time for everything, Piper. If some semblance of order is to be maintained some things must die in order for the majority to live. Think about it, Piper. If Merrijig had survived what would have been the consequences?"

Piper's fists went to her hips haughtily. "Jack would have still been alive, for one. I wouldn't have had to watch Suzette cry her eyes out over him." She paused as if to gather her breath and then continued. "The children would not have had to live out their lives without their parents."

He nodded to himself. "You make valid points, Piper. However, are you aware that one of the children became the Elder of Proxima Beta? She developed a great affection for God after she was saved at the last minute by people she referred to as God's messengers. She has done great works for the people of Proxima.

"Another became a doctor who discovered the cure for Aldeberan Encephalitis."

The two were points Piper was unaware of, especially the second as A.E. had killed millions.

"Yet another went on to become the mother of the very woman who stands before me. The one who brought things full circle because she did the right thing at the right time regardless of the personal cost."

Once more, Piper was conflicted. "Are you telling me that the people of Merrijig had to die so I could be *born*?" she said, feeling the weight of a tank on her chest.

As if in answer, Piper found herself standing on a beach. The "man" was still with her, gazing off into the late afternoon sun. Curiously, there were no shells, no seaweed. Only sand and the clearest water she had ever seen. She wondered to herself for a moment if any of it was real.

"Look at the sand, Piper," he said quietly.

She did so. It looked just like any other sand she had seen – aside from its complete lack of impurities. "So?"

"Put your finger in it."

Piper squatted and did as she was told. The sand was warm to the touch and enveloped her finger up to her second joint.

"Did you notice that your finger displaced the sand all around it?"

"Yes." Slightly annoyed, Piper added: "You're not going to go all Zen on me, are you?"

This time he simply rolled his eyes, but Piper could see the amusement in them. "Not at all. My point is not that one drop in the ocean causes desirable ripples, but that they also create side-effects. If you push against one object you need something else to stand on. Both objects are affected. There are never just two participants."

Piper nodded her understanding. She was rewarded with a slight, but still friendly, grin. "You understand cause and effect, Piper, but you can never see the big picture like I do. I stand apart from time so I can make adjustments to keep events moving towards the most desirable outcome, but I have to do so wisely. There is always a cost."

Once again, Piper nodded dumbly. She knew she was thoroughly outclassed by her company.

"There is a problem, however," he said. "Your people have become too accustomed to meddling with time. Daniels,

Sustasandage, and their people believe they have become the masters of time, but they have done nothing but stir up the boiling pot. As they cannot see the whole of history, they can only make adjustments and keep their fingers crossed." He rubbed his top lip with his finger. "No, this will not do. If your people, or any other for that matter, are allowed to continue meddling with time then sooner or later we will find ourselves right back here where once again all of creation will be in peril." He looked at her and said in confidence: "I remember a man from the twenty-first century who postulated that very scenario. He believed that if one day mankind could travel through time then all of it would be unravelled, so he chose to believe that it could never be done because he still existed. QED."

Piper's eyes widened as she considered the notion. It had some merit and knowing the human heart and curious streak, it wouldn't have been long before someone would go back far enough in time to create ripples that would change the very nature of their existence. She looked over at the one she refused to name and simply said: "Granted. What do you propose to do about it considering I've already gone back in and forth in time over the last two centuries? If you stop all time travel, then the things you've accomplished through me will fall apart too."

He gave her a look that said she had once more totally underestimated him. "Both can be achieved, Piper. I will protect the present timeline and what you and others have set in motion, but I need to put an end to any more meddling. For instance, the changes at First Contact and at Merrijig will remain. But, from now on, only I will have the capacity to make such alterations otherwise all is at risk."

Although she saw the wisdom of such a choice, Piper had some reservations. "What about warp drive? Aren't we messing with space/time when we go faster than light?"

"I would hardly wish to be the one who would put an end to interstellar commerce and community, my dear. It will be allowed to continue."

She voiced the unspoken exception. "But travelling into the past is over."

He nodded. "Travelling into the future is still permitted as you cannot return to what was. Relativity will be protected."

Piper smiled. Things would be all right for her universe. However, she was still ill at ease.

"You have succeeded in all you intended, Piper," he said with a measure of pride. "But you are still unhappy."

Feeling like a little schoolgirl, Piper said: "It just seems so unfair. I save the universe and my reward is oblivion. Suzette's reward is non-existence, which I assume to be the case as I don't see her anywhere. And what of Hopetallash? Will she survive without my intervention?" Her chest tightened at the thought the young Cait might not live at all.

"I assure you, Hope will always survive, Piper."

"Pun intended," Piper quipped, trying to cheer herself and failing dismally.

Her host stepped over to her and put his arm around her. At that moment she felt more love and acceptance that she could ever recall. "Piper, you are forgetting one thing about your existence."

Piper sighed, a sound that came up from the depths of her soul, full of angst and pain. "Yeah, I know, I'm already there."

She was surprised that *he* shook his head. "No, Piper. I asked you who you were and the best you could give me was a

moniker. Are you the same person as the Admiral? Are you Piper Silayna?"

With a certainty that came from her heart she said: "No."

"Why not?"

Piper thought back. "They're not me because we've all lived entirely different lives in completely different timelines. Our lives, our very being, have diverged many times over."

"So? How does that make you different from one another?" The question was gently plying her, subtly pushing her in the direction she needed to go. "You would be you no matter what situation you find yourself in."

Finally, Piper understood. "We're different people because we made different choices. Piper is just a moniker, a label. I am the sum of my actions brought about by the choices I made. They've shaped me as much as I did them." She paused as she collected her thoughts. "I am the woman, born of Rosanna – a child *I* saved – who left Proxima to become a starship captain. Since then, I've saved Cait – along with my crew – rescued the crew of the *Republic* after they were missing for years, stopped the Federation from going to war with the Romulan Empire, saved Zephram Cochrane and his dream, rescued the children of Merrijig and restored the proper history of the Federation and mended the cracks in the Universe. I did the last knowing there was every likelihood that I would never remember what happened and that nobody else would know, either. I am the one who goes where I have to to get the job done, regardless if it's the end of the universe. That's who I am."

Her speech was received with a grin from her host. "Very good, Piper. You understand." He put out his arms and embraced her. Later she would admit to herself that she had never felt as content in her life than she did at that very moment.

She lost track of time how long she was there, but it didn't matter. Time was irrelevant. Finally, she was released, and she looked up into loving eyes. "Fear not, Piper. I will never forget your, and your friend's, sacrifices." He gently released her and stepped back. "It's time for you to go. I'm sending you and Suzette back to first contact with the Vulcans, just after you left. You now know what you need to tell yourself, so prepare a message and send it. Have faith, Piper – Susanna. I will make sure it's delivered. History will not repeat itself this time."

"Are you sending me back through the Guardian?" She paused for a moment before asking: "What *is* it, by the way?"

"A fair question. Suffice to say, it is a form for something that really has no form. And no, you're not going back through it. You're already *in* it. *I* am the Guardian of Forever."

Piper nodded, thinking she understood, but not really sure. There was so much she wanted to remember about this place and this strange being. "Who *are* you?" she asked, finally willing to take the plunge and learn the truth.

Her host just gave her an enigmatic smile. "You already know, Piper."

2: Full Circle

Piper walked the corridor of the *USS Millennium,* her mind full of the things she needed to know and do. She was headed for her quarters where Yeoman Carver had informed her some paperwork needed signing before she turned in for the night.

She was looking forward to reaching their destination: Cait. They had been tasked with simply checking in on that world and flying the flag. While she had initially objected to the orders she had quickly acquiesced. The chance to catch up with the Llash clan and Scanner was very welcome, and she was certain Crash would not be insulted by Starfleet's orders.

Almost in sight of her quarters, Piper divested herself of her uniform jacket and threw it over her shoulder. She was looking forward to getting this simple chore out of the way so she could go to the Rec deck and relax by making Sarda jump over her Vin'tah.

She looked up and started when she saw Gillian, the ship's bartender, waiting for her. In her hands she held two packages. One small, about the size of a book, the other elongated – about a metre long, yet only ten centimetres wide.

"What did they do to pry you out of the bar?" she asked with a grin.

Gillian simply gave her a wink. "Nothing. The day has finally come when I can give you these." She held up her charges.

Piper looked at them curiously. Their wrappings looked quite old. "What are they?"

The Argelian shrugged. "I have no idea. I just know my dad told me to save it for a certain time and place, and that's now."

The pale woman had never spoken before of her father, and it seemed peculiar that she would do so now. To top it off, her inflection when she said it reminded her of an Earth dialect.

Piper twisted her lips to project the peculiarity of the situation. "What the hell," she said. "Let's find out together." She ushered her friend into her quarters and offered her a chair next to her personal desk before disappearing into her private head to get changed. From the other room she asked more out of curiosity than courtesy: "How is your father?"

"Dad's fine," she said. "I managed to see him when we stopped at Argelius the other day." She gave a sly smile. "He sends his regards."

Piper's head appeared around the door jamb; her brows shot up in surprise. "We've met?" Her head disappeared once more for a moment as she said: "Hang on a sec." She re-emerged a minute later wearing one of her lacy purple kaftans, her honey-blonde hair loose and out of its customary ponytail. She looked the picture of relaxation. She took her seat behind her desk and gave her friend a pleasant smile. "Now, I feel human again."

To prepare her for the coming shock, Gillian reached forward, took her hand and looked her in the eye. "My father's Jason Nunn, Piper. He went back in time and met my mother. The rest, as they say, is history."

"What?!" Piper recoiled in incredulity.

Her friend sighed. "I'm pretty sure it happened in an alternate future, but the fact I'm still here says a lot. If you don't believe me, check it out. I've been going by my mother's name to keep Dad's secret."

A big part of Piper was sorely tempted, but she trusted Gillian enough to place her faith in what she was saying. "When does he go back in time?" she asked.

At that, Gillian gave her a blank look. "No idea. Dad wouldn't say. He just gave me these things and told me to give them to you today."

Piper turned her attention back to the parcel. Without preamble, she tore the old wax paper off and found a small, sealed satchel and an old logbook. She turned her attention to the latter first and found it to be the log of the *Pterodactyl*. What startled her was that it was written in her own handwriting. "What the hell..." she muttered.

For the next half hour, they poured through the pages, fascinated by every word. At times they were disbelieving, at others amazed. At all times they were captivated.

The last page mentioned Piper had left an article for Crash's daughter, whom he had named Hope. She apparently had been born with a congenital heart defect, but they had not had the tech on board the *Jolly Roger* to save her. She wondered if it was still there. She also wondered: "Does Crash know?"

Not wishing to waste a moment, Piper requested a real-time, tight-band subspace call be placed to the *J.R.* for Crash. Her Comms officer told her it would take at least several minutes to set up and he would call her back once they were ready.

"It's unbelievable," Gillian said, quietly. "Is it possible?" Part of her wanted to believe, but another just refused to. She was torn.

Piper had seen enough to know anything was possible. She was privy to Jim Kirk's recent trip back to 1986 to retrieve some humpbacked whales that helped save the Earth from the cetacean probe. She muttered: "Yes, it is."

She turned her attention to the satchel. It was made of metal and sported an old-fashioned fingerprint scanner to unlock it. She noted it had to be activated, saving the batteries, before

opening. She flicked the switch, and the scanner gave a soft, green glow.

"Fat lot of good that is," Piper said, disappointed. "Whoever locked this thing is probably long dead."

Gillian shook her head, suddenly adamant. "No. Dad knew you would be able to open it. Try your thumb print."

With all the weirdness she had witnessed, she shrugged. "What the hell." She placed her thumb on the scanner and the satchel opened with a click. She sat back in wonder. "That shouldn't have worked," she said in disbelief.

Gillian chuckled. "After what we just read, it's very possible that *you* were the one who locked it."

Piper licked her finger and wrote an imaginary point on an equally imaginary score board in front of her face. "Score one for you," she said cheekily.

She took hold of the case and opened the lid. Inside was an old-fashioned memory stick and a folded letter – the exterior of which had a simple note:

Read this if the video doesn't work.

Once again, the writing was in her own hand.

Piper handled the technological relic and wondered. It was possible the unit still held its information. She placed it almost reverently on the computer interface on her desk and ordered the computer to download its contents.

Several seconds later it reported: "Completed."

The Captain took a breath, then ordered: "Play."

The monitor on her desk winked on and two people appeared sitting before a black background.

Piper and Gillian both gasped. It was Piper; *both* of them. It was obvious, even though one of them had been injured and now sported an artificial eye.

"Hello, Piper," they said together. It was immensely peculiar to hear it said by *two* alternate versions of herself in her own voice.

"You're probably wondering what is going on," the injured one said. "You may have guessed we're you from alternate timelines, but what you don't know is that our names are now Susanna and Suzette Lee." She indicated which was which as she spoke. "We lived out our lives in the 21st century, working on the *Phoenix* project with Zefram Cochrane." Her eyes opened wide in excitement. "Cool, huh?"

Piper simply watched the video with her mouth hanging open. She knew of the Lee sister's contributions from her studies. She remembered being annoyed, along with everyone else, that there seemed to be no record of their appearance as they were notorious for avoiding the limelight.

Susanna picked up the narrative. "We've got a few things we need to tell you to prevent the disaster that wound up with us in the past, among other things. Don't worry, your actions won't change our future. We will still be here even after you change your fate to save the universe."

"Pause."

It was almost too much. Piper sat back once more to take a breather. "Computer," she ordered. "Bios on Susanna and Suzette Lee." She wanted to refresh her memory.

The machine began a litany that brought a prideful smile to Piper's face. The other versions of her had achieved much together.

She took a punt. "Photographs," she said.

"Working. There are no documented photographs of Susanna and Suzette Lee."

Piper rubbed her upper lip in thought. "Not surprising," she mused. "I'd do my best to keep myself out of the history books too."

Before she could continue, the communicator chirped. "Captain, Commander Krashtallash is waiting for you," the Comms officer reported.

"Put him through," Piper said, trying to sound as normal as possible.

Crash's face appeared on the tiny screen, the Bridge of the *J.R.* in the background. "Captain, it's good to see you."

Piper nodded. "And you, Captain." It was tradition to call the commander of a vessel "Captain" rather than his rank. "How is Susanna. Has she had the kits?"

Crash nodded. "Just this morning," he said, glowing with pride. "I named them myself."

Time to jump in with both feet, Piper thought. "How's Hope? I hear she may have a heart condition."

Crash's eyes not only widened, his pupils dilated in shock. "How did you know? The doctor who scanned her after birth told me she has a faulty heart valve. They're going to operate in a day or so when she's a little bit stronger." He stared at Piper through the vidlink as if daring her not to tell him.

Piper gave him a sheepish grin. "It's a long story, Crash, and one I hope I can tell you all about when I get there."

The Commander's eyes narrowed to slits as he suspected his captain of messing with him, but he would never disrespect her. He trusted her implicitly. "I look forward to hearing it, Captain." Someone spoke to him off screen and he nodded. In all seriousness he said: "Duty calls, Captain. Is there anything else?"

Piper just shook her head, no, feeling a little lost in the face of it all. It was clear that Susanna and Suzette were what they claimed to be, with foreknowledge of Crash's children they couldn't possibly have known otherwise.

On the screen, Krashtallash just nodded respectfully and said: "*Jolly Roger* out." His image winked off leaving Piper to consider the situation. The visage of her alternate selves returned, and Piper found herself fascinated looking at the similarities between them, and also the differences. Especially Suzette. She could not help but wonder how she had lost the eye.

Regardless of her physical condition, it appeared this woman was happy. There was something about them both that showed they were content to be where they were. She found that odd but, considering the year they had spent living on the *Pterodactyl*, anything was possible. She had to admit to herself that a simpler life had some appeal although she couldn't imagine having to live without the mod-cons she had come to take for granted.

She considered the situation and decided she wanted more to verify their story. "Computer, compare the images in the frame on the monitor with photographs dating from...." she thought for a moment, "April 1, 2063, on that are connected with Zefram Cochrane's *Phoenix* project. Look for any correlation and display."

"Working."

Piper knew it would take a few moments to run the program, so she turned her attention back to Gillian. "It must have been difficult for you to serve on a ship with a younger version of your father serving on it. Have you ever been tempted to tell him who you are?"

Her friend shrugged. "I can't say I've never been tempted, but Dad always told me that to reveal myself to him might disrupt the timeline. He used to tell me: "Who knows, you might just cease to exist", and we wouldn't want that."

Mock nodding, Piper gave her a smile that told her she understood the joke and the reality of the statement. It could, indeed create a paradox. "All the same, it must have been tough," she said, sympathetically.

"Yes and no." A cheeky look entered her eyes as she said: "It's been an education seeing Dad when he was young and impetuous. Right now, he's younger than I am, and I find the fact I'm more mature than he is hilarious."

Piper laughed, seeing the funny side of the situation. "Yeah, it's not very respectful telling your own father to grow up."

Gillian smiled back at her warmly, chuckling to herself. "I've often seen the irony in telling my own father that he's had enough to drink and having the *authority* to take it off him!"

They were interrupted by the computer's chirp. Four images appeared on the screen and Piper tapped it to bring them up in slideshow mode.

The first image highlighted Piper in the background of an image taken in Bozeman, Montana, dated April 5th. It included a number of locals who were working with her in the background while Zefram Cochrane stood and smiled in the foreground. Susanna was wearing blue jeans and a t-shirt, but it was clearly Piper.

The next was an image taken the night of first contact, April 6th. The picture was of a bar, with three Vulcans clearly trying to comprehend why Cochrane was gyrating next to a jukebox. Sitting in the background at the edge of the photo was

Suzette, who was nursing a drink and watching them with a look of rapture on her face.

The next was much later, the two of them featured this time in a candid shot taken in a laboratory as they were clearly testing some new equipment. Both women were noticeably older, with grey roots showing even though they had now dyed their hair burgundy and cut it into a bob. Their faces were wrinkled, and their hands had developed liver spots. All the same, there was an energy to them that was clear in the photo. Piper noticed that Lily, Cochrane's partner, was also present, looking on. Piper noticed the caption stated the image had been taken by Cochrane himself and was from his private collection.

The last was much later, with the women attending a funeral. Both were cradling canes as they sat in the second row at the service to commemorate Zefram Cochrane, who had recently disappeared as he took a private trip into deep space. Piper knew herself well enough to see the total lack of surprise on both of their faces, as if they knew this day would come. Naturally, they would have as Piper knew the very date of his vanishing – and his ultimate destiny that had been told her in a private discussion with Jim Kirk.

Piper recalled from the bio on the Lees that they had requested to be interred on Merrijig, a newly discovered world that had just been colonised. She was unfamiliar with it and requested its status from the computer.

"Destroyed by Orion pirates, 2232. Survivors resettled on Proxima Beta."

"*What!?"* Piper sat up bolt upright. The revelation was startling.

"What is it?" Gillian asked, concerned.

Piper shook her head as the information was assimilated. "They asked to be buried there because they *knew* the planet would be destroyed, erasing their remains from history. Very clever. However, what Susanna and Suzette didn't tell me in their log was who was on that ship when they left Merrijig." She put the dates together in her head and knew she had to make a call. However, she decided to put it off.

"Computer, play the remainder of the recording from the memory stick," Piper ordered.

The Lees appeared once more on the screen and Piper watched, enraptured by this message to her from the past. Susanna said: "In twenty years you're going to be asked to take a mission to the star Hobus where the mission will lead the destruction of that star in a supernova twenty years later. Now, here are the steps you need to prevent that from happening…"

The two Pipers led her through the many preventative measures she needed to take to prevent it, including warning Jessica Holmes about T'Fawn, the Romulan Empress about the dangers of her new ship's energy source, and her own issues regarding her relationship with Sarda – especially in the light of his possible demise. Susanna spoke to her directly. "I know how deep your link with Sarda is, Piper, and it's only going to get stronger over time. If, in the course of your duties – say you're fighting four Cardassian warships and he happens to be injured in Engineering and you can't save him – for God's sake *go to Mount Seleya* and perform the katra ritual. At this stage, it's not critical, but in twenty years' time, you'll be an integral part of one another. It'll be like cutting your heart out and being expected to go on without it. It's not possible. The only way you'll be able to go on and become whole again is to surrender Sarda's katra. Promise

me this, Piper. Don't throw your career away again, like I saw you do."

Piper was shocked at the ramifications of her duplicate's statements. The future held so many possibilities, and so many responsibilities for herself and others. However, she was determined to make certain that history did not repeat itself.

On the screen Susanna's face softened and she added: "Now, don't worry about us, we will continue no matter what choices you make. We have a guardian."

Suzette placed her hand on her double's and said: "What's important is the mission. However," at this point her voice took on a tone of imploring, "you're surrounded by good people who love you and will follow you to the end of the universe..."

"Literally," Susanna chimed in.

"...so don't ever take them for granted. I did that with my people, and it was a mistake I wish I could undo. Say "hello" to Merete for me." Regret roughened her voice.

Susanna added: "Oh and thank Gillian for us for delivering this message. We couldn't have done all this without Jason and his little girl."

Next to her, Gillian looked on and brushed a tear from the corner of her eye.

Both Pipers took one another's hand and from that point on they spoke in unison. "Remember, the fate of the universe rests in your hands. Don't let us down."

The video ended and Piper found herself wondering to herself if her other versions had been able to join their thoughts much the same way she could with Sarda.

Thinking of him led her to consider how it must have been like for Susanna to go on without the link to him. That was *if* she had been linked to him in her timeline.

It was all a bit much and Piper rubbed her forehead to dull the pain. Her mind was still putting together an alternate view of her history where she herself had interceded to bring about the timeline she had grown up in.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught sight of the other item that Gillian had brought with her. Needing a distraction, she reached out and, together with her friend, they removed the wax paper wrapping to reveal an ornate wooden case. Fortunately, this one was not locked, just clasped shut. Piper popped it open to reveal a beautiful katana sword – hers from the other timeline. She took it by the ivory handle and let it slide through her grip until her hand hit the guard which was golden – she wondered if it was pure – then she inspected the blade. There were a few nicks – evidence of actual use – but the edge was still keen, and Piper knew better than to test it. Even after a century of disuse she could no doubt do better than give herself a paper cut.

Her eyes were drawn to the base of the blade where her she saw an inscription: Susanna Lee – the one they called the Piper. On the other side it said the same for Suzette.

A tear came to her eye as she thought of the two of them – the two of *her* – who could have simply let themselves remain a mystery to the Universe, but who had taken the time to entrust her with their legacy. It was beyond considerate – it was loving. It was clear to her that, separated by time and space though they were, they still cared to let her know of their shared history and not just pass on a warning.

"What is it?" Gillian asked, concerned.

Piper gave her a wan smile. "You know, they could simply have sent me a message warning me not to go to Hobus, but instead they entrusted me with these." She cradled the hilt of the katana in her right hand while her left caressed the logbook.

"It was very sweet." Her eyes took on a distant look as she said: "I wish I could have known them."

Gillian put her hand over Piper's. "You *do* know them. They're you. They just have some memories you don't have but have been kind enough to share with you."

The tear reached her cheek and rolled down to drop onto her kaftan where it left a short trail before being absorbed by the fabric. She put the katana back in its case reverently. "I'll treasure these," she said quietly, her throat tight.

Breaking the mood, Piper's computer chirped. The screen displayed: "Incoming call."

Thinking it might be Crash calling her back, she ordered: "Answer."

Her mother's visage appeared on the screen – so much like her own – but noticeably older. She was twenty-five years Piper's senior, but still beautiful given her age. Grey streaked her hair, which was burgundy coloured and cut into a bob. It was a look Piper was well used to, but only now did it ring a bell.

"Hi Mum," she said with a smile. It was always good to see her mother. Their family was very close.

"Hi Piper," her mother replied. The older woman seemed confused, as if wondering to herself whether to discuss what was on her mind. After a short moment she said: "I got your letter. I don't know why you asked me to go down to the capital building and look at the photos on the walls, but I did. I saw the one with the ship that brought me here all those years ago." Her eyes narrowed almost suspiciously. "I saw the captain of that ship and I knew I was right! She looked just like *you*. How can that be? I named you after her! I liked her hair style so much I changed mine! How is all this possible?"

Piper tried but failed to hide a smile. Never mind she had never sent that letter – but she was pretty sure she knew which one of her *did* – she knew she was going to face these kinds of questions often once the truth came out. She sighed to herself. That was life in her universe.

Translations

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[i] Derogatory name for Klingons in Romulan

[ii] “Crazy” in Romulan

[iii] “Coward” in Klingon

[iv] “Dishonour” in Klingon

[v] “Animal” in Klingon

[vi] “Fool” in Klingon

[vii] “Captain” in Greek.