



Homecoming

by Sean O'Keefe© 2016

One thing that struck Merete as she walked through the market in her hometown on Altair Four was that wherever you were in the galaxy, they were colourful, noisy and *loud*. There was always someone shouting to be heard over the milling throng, a salesman desperately selling some wares that may or may not be useful. Either way, he seemed confident in his products.

Her companion on this day was her aunt, Faisa. There were many who said they were more like mother and daughter, and it was true. Since her parents had been killed

in an Orion raid on their transport ship when she was a child Merete had been raised by her nearest kin, Faisa. Some said it was madness for her aunt to take on her niece as she already had twelve children of her own. Her reply had been: “What's one more child in amongst so many?”

It had been four months since her children had been born and Merete was honouring a promise to her family to visit. The *Millennium* had been in the quadrant and Piper had loaned her a shuttle and one of the ship's fighter pilots, a plucky New Zealander whose call sign was “Emu”.

“You have three days,” she recalled the Captain, her best friend, saying with mock testiness. “Don't make me leave the sector without you. I'd hate to have to report you AWOL.”

No chance of that, she'd thought to herself then. However, she had to admit that it was nice to be home.

She was brought back to the here and now when a vendor thrust a local brand of melon under her nose that was large, solid and had a slightly pinkish colour to it. Merete might not have been home for a while, but she knew an over-ripe melon when she saw one. “What kind of crap are you pushing on me?” she snapped.

The vendor was undeterred. He tried again. “No, no, no. It's a great melon. Crossed with an Earth watermelon. That's what gives it it's colour.”

An image came to mind of their ship's helmsman, Jason Nunn, munching on a slice of watermelon – one of his

favourite snacks. The colours were vivid in her mind. Her eyes narrowed in aggravation. “I’ve *seen* Earth watermelons. Pink, they aren’t!” She reached out to push back the offending fruit, but the vendor managed to duck her hand.

His lie outed, he simply gave a shrug. “I must have been given the wrong information,” he said without a care in the world and turned to try his luck with another buyer.

Merete shared a knowing look with her aunt. As the humans would say: Caveat emptor. It was the name of the game in any market, but few more so than in the home of the Palkeo Est where all items on sale were subject to intense scrutiny. One could not afford to take *anything* for granted. Even the souvenirs that were sold to offworlders were usually made on Altair IV.

Faisa affectionately flicked a lock of Merete's platinum hair away from her slightly tilted eyes before giving the vendor a dirty look. “You think he would go easier on a new mother,” she said, disappointed at the sad state of the Universe.

Merete looked back over her shoulder at the salesman who was in danger of wearing one of his stocks as he was plying his trade with a very annoyed businessman who did not seem to take kindly to the interruption. The man was clearly an offworlder – from a humanoid race she was not quite familiar with. However, his outfit told enough of the story for the Doctor to fill in the blanks. He was some kind

of official, and he was *not* here to buy fruit. “I shouldn't worry too much, Mum. The way he's going he'll need an ambulance before long.”

Her aunt followed her gaze and had to agree. The man certainly didn't know how to choose his targets. “Someone needs to teach him how to read his clientele,” she said, satisfied that the Universe was setting the balance of life. She reached forward and tickled Merete's children each under the chin. Rogen loved the sensation and giggled but Piper Jr just wrinkled her nose and squirmed. The two of them couldn't have been more different if Merete had ordered them from opposing sides while they were engaged in a war.

The elderly Faisa once more felt guilty that Merete was carrying the burden alone on this fine day. Even though the elderly Palkeo Est was nearing the end of her time in this reality she was still spry and fit for her age. She had begged Merete to let her take one off her hands for a little while, but the fiercely independent Starfleet Doctor had politely declined the offer. “Are you sure you don't want me to take one of them?”

Merete's resolve was beginning to falter, and she had to admit her lower spine was beginning to ache. She gave her adoptive mother a smile. “You win,” she said without regret. She took a moment to unbuckle Rogen from her restraint vest before adjusting Piper. All the while, she kept a curious eye on the vendor who still hadn't given up on the

official who was barely tolerantly putting up with his badgering. It was odd.

The man gave a glance in their direction and seemed embarrassed that he had been observed doing so. He immediately looked away and walked off away from them.

“Curious,” Merete said to herself. Her diagnostic sense was never switched off and she had noted the slight quiver in the man's hand and how his feet dragged a little as he walked. There was even something in his eyes that just didn't seem right.

“What is?” Faisa asked. Standing in a busy market, her niece's attention could have been drawn by anything. She was always on the lookout for a bargain.

Drawn back to the present, Merete gave her a shrug as she put it out of her mind. There was little point dwelling on someone she would probably never lay eyes on again. “Nothing,” she said. “It's not important.” She tilted her head forward a little and pecked her daughter on the back of her head. “Let's get the shopping finished. I'm getting tired.”

Things don't always go to plan, and it took the two of them another hour to finish browsing. In the meantime, Rogen had filled his diaper and needed a change and Merete had decided the time was right to feed the children. The best laid plans once again went awry.

Eventually, they found themselves back in the grassy area serving as the flitter parking lot. Like many other Federation worlds, Altair IV used a kind of “flying car” for

private transportation purposes and this one had been outfitted with child restraints for the twins. It took the women a few minutes to stow the groceries before buckling the children into their seats.

Merete heard a rustling behind her on the green grass and she instinctively knew something was wrong. She caught sight of Faisa's terrified gaze over her shoulder and began to turn when she felt an iron grip on her right arm that was dragged up her back. Merete was naturally flexible, but not *that* much. "Ow!" she said but held still when her assailant put a knife to her exposed throat.

Not seeing the individual's face, she did recognise the suit sleeve. It was the official from earlier! The thing she didn't understand was that he didn't just slit her throat right there and then. What did he want?

She was tempted to ask when she realised, he was muttering under his breath. Merete's mind raced. Somehow, this was all familiar. It all came to her in a flash from one of her Captain's many lectures. This being was from a subspecies from Vega Three which was why he seemed familiar but not quite. The pieces all fell together in Merete's mind, and she realised that she had very little time to act if she was going to save her life.

"Excuse me," she said politely.

The man stopped muttering. He seemed annoyed that his ritual had been interrupted. He paused for a moment, then began muttering once more.

Faisa looked at Merete incredulously and she shot her aunt a warning look. She had to keep out of this if they were going to survive. To her credit, Faisa nodded slightly and kept silent.

Merete listened and recognised the pattern of his speech. He had restarted his ritual. "Excuse me," she repeated sweetly.

Again, he stopped. "What do you want, woman?" he asked rudely. It appeared he just wanted to get the job over and done with and be on his way.

Merete was more concerned that he wasn't going to be satisfied with just her life. "Why do you hold me captive?" she asked. She reminded herself to remain respectful. Anything less could be received by this Vegan very badly.

The man said: "It is nothing personal. It is business."

Merete chuckled. "Why do assassins tell themselves that?" she asked with irony. "Murder is a very personal business."

"Perhaps so, but it is necessary to feed one's family." The man sounded reasonable, but the Doctor was aware he was very serious in his intentions.

Merete also understood that the man's ethnic group were subject to prejudice on his world, and they often found it difficult to find work. That was why Piper had held the meeting. It had appeared that many of his people had turned to very unsavoury ways of making a living.

“I understand that,” Merete said. She knew it was important to keep him talking. He had to complete his ritual prayer before he could kill her to be absolved of her death. “However, I was wondering if your people believe in the notion of a debt if one saves the life of another.”

In spite of Merete's continued banter the man had begun muttering again but he paused once more at the completion of her inquiry. “What do you mean?”

While the Doctor's nerves were screaming – her helpless children were only a metre away and so close to dying – Merete reached down to her indomitable core and held her voice steady. “Are you aware of who I am?” she asked. It was important the man believe what she was about to tell him.

The man seemed a little annoyed she would question him on that point. “I would not be a very good assassin if I did not know who I was sent to kill.” He paused for a second to let that fact sink in. “You are Doctor Merete AndrusTaurustabrisk of the Starship *U.S.S. Millennium* and hold the rank of Commander. You are forty-two Earth years old, a widow and mother of two: Piper and Rogen.”

With her credentials established, Merete continued as calmly as she could. She imagined herself in her operating room and this man was her patient. It was a place where she was in control and the outcome was already determined. “As a surgeon, you must know that we are sworn to protect life – even if that individual is an enemy.”

The pressure on her neck did not change but she felt the man's body tighten a little. Their conversation was taking time and his fear of discovery was increasing with each passing breath. "Of course," he said tightly.

In her best, clinically detached voice Merete said: "Then you will understand that I have observed that you have a condition that, if left untreated, will result in your death within a month."

The man's muscles relaxed a little as the enormity of her words sunk in. The natural first response was: "You lie!"

Ever so gently, Merete slowly turned, forcing the man to let go of her arm and look his victim in the eye. Her almond-shaped, slightly tilted grey eyes met his and she could see the yellow in the sclera that should not be there, even in his alien physiology. She noted he was holding the knife in his left hand even though she could easily tell the man was right-handed. "I am a physician and, if this is going to be my last moments in this Universe, I want them to matter. It is my opinion that you have Rasperger syndrome. It is caused by a virus that attacks the liver and central nervous system. Once contracted, you have until the last two weeks of the infection to act before the damage is irreversible." What she didn't tell him was that the only way to contract it was through direct blood transmission. The likelihood was that he had gotten it from a previous victim.

"You are lying to save your life," he reiterated. However, his resolve was faltering.

Merete turned her face upward a little feeling the blade against her throat but making full eye contact. "I am not. Your right hand shakes, you are finding it harder and harder to walk properly and you are starting to have problems focussing your eyes. You cannot keep your breakfast down and your nausea is only going to get worse. You have only two weeks to seek the appropriate treatment which is simple and available at any Federation Hospital for free."

"How do you know this about me? You don't know me!"

The man steadfastly chose not to believe her. Typical man, she thought. "I may not know you, but I am one of the best doctors you will ever meet. I know on some level you believe me, and you really should listen to that voice, no matter how quiet it is. If you truly value your ability to provide for your family, you will listen to what I am saying and get help before you'll be no good to anyone."

The man was torn. He glanced around him at the car park, knowing that there was little time left to do this job and even less time left to perform the Prayer of Absolution. He made the only decision open to him and released his grip of the Doctor's upper arm with his right hand and quickly put his knife back in its scabbard contained in his suit's inner pocket. "You win, Doctor AndrusTaurus," he said, using her local name.

Merete didn't move from her place. She kept her gaze steady. "You will find my diagnosis to be accurate, sir. As

such, you owe me your life. You have made the right decision.”

The assassin stepped back and politely nodded. “You are right in that, Doctor. I do owe you my life so I will not fill this contract today.”

The unspoken threat was obvious. “Understood,” Merete said calmly. Fishing, she added: “I suggest you don't let Duras know that you have failed this assignment.”

The man had turned and was beginning to walk off when he paused and gave her a cunning smile. “Well played, Doctor, so I will give you this one card. The hit was an open contract he put out on all your ship's crew. We only need proof of death to collect. Good day.” With that said, the man disappeared into the parking lot.

Faisa finally let out her pent-up feelings and dropped into the car's front seat through the still open door. “Oh, my! How did you know how to do that?”

Merete gave her a wan smile and simply said: “Practice. Our Captain not only likes to train her staff, but she's a keen card player.”

Her aunt's eyes went wide. “You were bluffing?!” she said.

Cheekily, the Doctor chose not to answer and instead quickly checked her children's restraints. “We need to get out of here, Mum,” she said affectionately, but forcefully. She would not be argued with. Merete got behind the controls and took off as soon as Faisa was buckled in.

Before her aunt could say another word Merete spoke up. “Computer, open a channel to Emu.”

Keyed to the Doctor's voice and call list it had her connected to the pilot in seconds. “Hiya, Doc,” she said amiably. “Find any bargains?”

The Doctor, who would normally have indulged the friendly Kiwi, skipped the usual banter. “Red alert, Emu. Meet me at the shuttle ASAP. We need to get off this planet and back to the *Millennium* as fast as we can.”

“Roger,” was all the pilot ventured before she cut the transmission. Emu knew her stuff and would not question her order.

Merete programmed the flitter for the quickest route back to the shuttle and turned to her aunt, taking her hand. “I'm sorry, Faisa – Mum, but I'm going to have to cut this visit short.”

The elder woman seemed confused. “Why? Just report the attack to the authorities and let them deal with it.”

Faisa's faith in the local constabulary was misplaced, Merete feared. Better to give her the short version. “The assassin is probably already making his way off this planet, Mum. There is no chance they will find him in time. Take my word for it.” She tried to keep her pessimism from showing. The police on Altair IV's incompetence was legendary.

Her adoptive mother seemed hurt that her visit was going to be truncated even though she understood the reason

was totally valid. "I will miss you and the children. When do you think you will have a chance to visit again?"

Merete let out an angry sigh. She was beginning to see the stakes. "Not for a while, I think. A Klingon called Duras has put a price on all our heads, it seems. That includes Emu. While we're on this planet neither of us are safe. Not to mention the fact that Piper has to be told that all our crew is at risk. I have to get back to my ship and report." In her thoughts she realised that would include Ghost Ryan who was on Mars on assignment.

Faisa could see that she would not be swayed and the unselfish part of her told her to let her go. "Go with my blessing," she said, lovingly. "Take care of this Duras and come home soon."

A deep sadness opened in Merete's chest as she realised it was possible it could take years to deal with Duras and his mad quest for revenge. However, Merete had learned bullies needed to be fought and so she used her feelings to get angry at the sinister Klingon House leader. She looked her aunt square in the eye. "I'll be back," she said with certainty. In her mind she added: "Even if I have to pull the trigger on Duras myself."